

*“Las madres ya no lloran;  
ahora luchan”<sup>1</sup>*

Child custody removal among migratised  
women in Barcelona, Spain

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<sup>1</sup> The mothers don't cry anymore; now they fight

## Abstract

The present thesis develops around the topic of child custody removal among migratised families in Catalonia, Spain. Child custody removal is a common practice from Childcare: it takes place when the State assesses that the best interest of the minor is to remain a part of their family. In 2020, a group of mothers who currently live in Barcelona and have migrated from non-European countries started a new activist movement to complaint against the discriminatory practices of the Child Care institution, claiming that their cases were evidence of a prejudiced and biased approach to child and family wellbeing. From a feminist, decolonial and antiracist stance, this paper establishes a correlation between the neoliberalization of the Social Welfare in Catalonia and the growing phenomenon of judicialization of migratised motherhoods, a process of criminalization of the figure of the migratised mother and their maternal practices.

Keywords: child custody removal; Child Care services; migratisation; feminist studies; social anthropology

## Resumen

La presente tesis trata la cuestión de las quitas de custodia a familias migratizadas en Cataluña, España. Las quitas de custodia son una práctica común en la Atención a la Infancia: estas se producen cuando el Estado considera que el interés superior del menor radica en mantenerle alejado de su familia. En 2020, un grupo de madres residentes en Barcelona y migrantes de países no-europeos empezaron un movimiento activista para denunciar las prácticas discriminatorias desde la institución de cuidado de la infancia, reclamando que sus casos eran una evidencia de un enfoque sesgado del bienestar infantil y familiar. Desde una perspectiva feminista, decolonial y antirracista, ese trabajo establece una relación entre la neoliberalización del Estado del bienestar en Cataluña y el creciente fenómeno de la judicialización de la maternidad migrante, un proceso de criminalización de la figura de la madre migratizada y sus prácticas maternas.

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# 1. Foreword

*Paula and Manon have lived in Spain for more than 15 years: Paula migrated from Mexico and Manon left her beloved Peru when she was in her twenties. Manon and Paula have been friends for a long time: they have shared dreams, desires, artistic projects, activist spaces. The day Paula's daughter was taken away by Childcare services, her dear friend Manon was giving birth to her son. Paula went to pick up her daughter from school, but she was not there. Manon used to take care of Paula's daughter sometimes, she even stayed over, occasionally. That day, Manon had some clothes of Paula's daughter at her place.*

*The judicialization of motherhood never affects only one woman.*

Many families come across the Child Care institution in Catalonia, though the mothers' interviewed in this study claim their cases share a common ground, as one of the mothers affected, Ariadna, puts it: to be poor, migrant, dependent, and single mums. "To be a woman and to be a migrant is a price we must pay". These were the words Mercedes used to express the institutional violence she experienced as a migrant mother in Catalonia. Terms as 'stigma', 'oppression', 'criminalization', and 'contempt' are commonly used among the mothers to describe the judicialization of their motherhood by the Catalan public institutions. This paper develops around the story of migrant-racialised mothers, who are subjects of resistance to the patriarchal, Western-centric, capitalist, and racist/colonial world system. Their motherhoods take place outside the norm, the accepted. Why do they not fit in the normative motherhood model? What does it make them to exist and exercise their motherhood from the margins? Which are their claims, their stories? On the following pages I will share the voices of Ariadna, Mercedes, Paula, Manon and Laia, whose motherhoods have been destabilized by a State and a Welfare institution that instead of keeping them safe, renders their lives impossible.

## **1.1. Aim of the research and research questions**

In 2018 I joined the feminist collective in my hometown, back in Spain. It was a premeditated decision, mainly because as part of the group's routine, you follow a process of pre-activism where you educate yourself with some basic principles of feminism, critical thought and community organising. Alluding to Simone de Beauvoir: one is not borned a feminist, it becomes one. The collective was the space where I started developing as a feminist and to consider what that really meant for me. Collectively with

my companions I engaged in a political project that has remained with me ever since. In the collective, we embraced a revolutionary feminism, an approach to the feminist enterprise that entails changing our society structures from the roots; change becomes then a radical idea, hence, the revolution. Our feminist struggle was not focused solely on women's subordination within the patriarchal system: we wanted to also embrace an antiracist, socialist, ecologist and communitarian standpoint. I left Spain and my collective and I moved to Sweden: still, political activism had already become a very important part of my life.

Thus, when I decided to do an internship as part of my master program in Social Studies of Gender, I tried to find the way to incorporate my political self into my studies. I got in touch with a collective from Barcelona, the *Red de Migración, Género y Desarrollo*. The network is integrated by women from different parts of the world that currently reside in Barcelona; they aim is to work collectively for change from a decolonial, antiracist and feminist perspective. To this end, they use different strategies of action: on one hand, they develop an important role as community leaders, connecting feminist activist around the globe and creating spaces based on politics of resistance to the “capitalist/patriarchal, Western-centric, Christian-centric, modern/colonial world system” (Grosfoguel, 2012). On the other hand, it promotes non-hegemonic knowledges from an anti-racist, anti-colonial, and de-centralized epistemology as they conduct a decolonial feminist school, as well as their own research projects. The experience was very nurturing for me, as it allowed me to critically reflect on the convergence between activism and research, and the possibilities to use the knowledges and methodologies from the last for the benefit of the first.

That approach was my entry point when I started designing this master thesis. Thanks to my internship supervisor in the collective, Sara Cuentas, I was introduced to the events in Barcelona regarding the protests of migrant mothers in front of the Directorate-General for Child and Youth Care. I shared with Sara my concerns regarding my aim to conduct a research that could have an impact on the community, not necessarily to be applied but that it was conducted for and with them. She suggested that I got to know the mothers in Barcelona: “they just started organising now: they need support”, suggested Sara. Paula was my first contact and from there I started weaving this project, with the intention to develop a meaningful analysis that could support the mothers' struggle. On the following pages you will get to know five different stories, based in Catalonia (Spain), of women

who are not originally from the country and whose lives have been disrupted by a Welfare system that fails to assist them.

Getting to know their claims and complaints I wanted to understand why these women had been involved with the Child Care on the first place and why their experiences proved the discriminatory nature of the Social Welfare in Catalonia. Moreover, I wondered what made their experiences specific, particular, different, what was significant about their stories and how their narratives exposed a discriminatory and unjust system. Thus, this thesis is guided by the following research questions:

- How does Childcare services in Catalonia reinforce understandings of motherhood based on a White, Middle-Class normativity?
- How does this normative framework impact the experiences of Childcare-involved migratised mothers? Which are the outcomes and resistant responses of this specific experiences?

## **1.2. What would you find in the next pages: thesis layout**

Regarding the structure of this thesis, I will start with the theoretical concepts that have led my analysis, and the previous articles on the topic, so the reader will get familiarised with the state of the matter. Then, I will expose the methodological process I followed to gather my data, in addition to the ethical and political perspectives that have drive me through this project. In this chapter I will introduce you a new concept, “ally activist research”, and how I engage with it.

In chapter 4 I will get down to business and explain the contextual background of the Childcare system and the Social Welfare in Catalonia and Spain. Further on I will display the empirical material I gathered from February to March 2021. There you will find a brief introduction to each of the mothers interviewed, apart from two collaborators to their struggle and the three State workers.

Following that, I will describe these women stories, focusing on the features that characterize them as unfitting mothers. The next chapter is a critical appraisal on the previous description and the discriminatory and unjust nature of the Catalan Social Welfare. I will finish with an epilogue about the collectivisation of the struggle and a reflection on the figure of the mother as an agent of political change and activist action. The last chapter includes a wrap up of the main ideas exposed in this paper and some suggestions for further research on the subject.



## 2. Theoretical approach and epistemological foundations

### 2.1. Migratisation

Alyoska Tudor introduced the concept of ‘migratisation’ in her theoretical article on racism, migration and the possibilities that engaging with the postcolonial turn may offer to these complex and troubled topics. In her own words, migratisation is “the *ascription* of migration to certain bodies, and the construction of certain people as ‘at home’ while others are constructed as migrants” (Tudor, 2018: 1058). Therefore, the author invites us to engage with the concept of migration as a social construct and, furthermore, a power relation, based on inequality and discrimination. In previous publications<sup>2</sup>, Tudor suggested the term ‘migratism’ to describe the power relation that results from ascribing the experience of migration to certain individuals and which implies the assumption that non-migration is the norm, and consequently, part of European belonging and identity (Tudor, 2018). Henceforth, I will embrace the idea of ‘migratised bodies/identities’ to refer to the process of ascription of meaning, prejudices and stereotypes to certain individuals based on their migration experiences. Thinking about ‘migratised individuals’ rather than ‘migrants’ offers the possibility to engage with the phenomenon of migration (and its intersections with the social process of racialisation) through a wider angle. Following Tudor (2018) analysis: being read as a migrant does not entail that that person has been through an actual migration experience, and, more specifically, “that white privilege can manifest in supra-national border crossing that are precisely not seen as migrations” (Tudor, 2018: 1059-1060). That is to say that the fact that people is labelled as a migrant it is not so much a question of them crossing a border or living in a different country from the one they are born, but to be perceived as an outsider, as someone who does not belong.

Migratisation does not equal racialisation; both phenomena intersect but are not the same. The concept of racialisation will be addressed on the next chapter, but it is important to remark that understanding racism in Europe only in terms of national identity (and non-migration) it has the risk of portraying Europe as a homogeneous land or as intrinsically white.

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<sup>2</sup> Tudor, A. (2014). *From [al'manja] with love: Trans\_Feministische Positionierungen zu Rassismus und Migratismus*. Frankfurt a.M.: Brandes & Apsel; Tudor, A. (2017). “Queering Migration Discourse. Differentiating Racism and Migratism in Postcolonial Europe.” *Lambda Nordica*, 22 (2–3): 21–40.

## 2.2. Racialisation

Racialisation it is a widespread analytical term, and it describes the procedure by which social groups are constructed through the concept of 'race', and how the characteristics ascribed to each of them are classified hierarchically. As stated in the Salem Press Encyclopaedia, "these characteristics can be real or imagined and are shaped by history, prejudice, and the human tendency to assign abnormality to things that do not align with their own experience of the world" (Caffrey, 2020). Then, through the process of racialisation, certain categories based on cultural and/or biological criteria are naturalized, essentialized, and understood as unchangeable, definitive, and linked to specific stereotypes and prejudices (Olmos, 2020); the use of the process of racialisation as a discriminatory and oppressive tool, is what it might be identified as racism.

Racism is a triggering concept: it has been approached from different social disciplines from a wide variety of perspectives and epistemological standpoints. In the following pages, I will adhere to an understanding of racism as an ideological system that discriminates and subordinates people according to race-based criteria. The concept of race should not be limited to a matter of skin colour, as it includes a broad range of attributes, from phenotypical features to cultural customs. Racism implies a process of hierarchization and superiority that leads to a characterization of the Other [the racialised] as less-human or even non-human (Olmos, 2020).

As a sociohistorical process, racism has its contextual characteristics. In the case of Europe, it is significant to observe that there exists a common detachment from racism as a social problem. David Theo Goldberg suggested the concept 'racial Europeanization' to describe this denial of race as a category in Europe, which directly leads to the dismissal of racism itself.

Race has been rendered invisible, untouchable, as unnoticeably polluting as the toxic air we breathe. (...) There can be no response if the terms of recognition and response are unavailable. There is no possibility of saying the deleterious effects of racial application are even ethically wrong because there is nothing there by which to recognize the phenomena purportedly at issue (Goldberg, 2006: 339).

This phenomenon has occurred in most European countries since the Second World War, especially to disassociate themselves to the inhuman practices of Nazism and Fascism. In the last years, racism has recovered some space in public debate, regarding the unfair

treatment asylum seekers and refugees have received since 2015 and the establishment of Fortress Europe (Walia, 2013).

Racism and migration do not always go together, but in the specific case of Spain, the interconnection is notorious. According to Antonia Olmos (2020), Spanish racism is not anti-black (as it may be in the US), nor anti-Latino or even anti-Indigenous: instead, the main racialised subject is the immigrant. The immigrant (in Europe) is not just a foreigner, it is a social category that identifies the Other as an outsider, opposite to Western-European standards of civilization and even humanity. From the understanding of the immigrant as the antithesis of the 'European', Paola Contreras establishes a correlation between Migration and Coloniality as both processes "act on an Other-degraded, who, read in decolonial terms, occurs as a product of relations of power, violence and domination; first in the old colonial world and after, in the Global Coloniality, expressed through social, political and institutional dynamics that subordinate the migrant population" (Contreras, 2019: 84; translated by the author).

### **2.3. Coloniality**

During my interviews I realised that especially the Latin American mothers engaged with their experiences from a decolonial perspective. To comprehend their departing point, it is necessary to address the concept of 'coloniality' and 'coloniality of power', introduced by the Peruvian scholar Aníbal Quijano. In his article «Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality», the author elaborates on the terminology shift from the historical experience of *colonialism* (the process of political domination of Western European societies over the conquered territories) to *coloniality* (the pattern of domination and power that sustained colonialism). Coloniality, then, describes the epistemological and ontological basis for Eurocentrism (universalizing all experiences from the Western-European gaze), as well as for the logic of hierarchisation of differences, which is still used as a justification for the continuance of oppressive power relations and superior/inferior structures. According to Quijano (2007), 'race' is the key element of classification. Coloniality prompted new discursive logics based on racial identity and criteria, that give rise to hierarchical (and conflictive) dichotomies: Us vs Them, Modern vs Pre-modern, Subject vs Object. This conceptual framework sustains the exclusion and marginalization of the Others, in terms of subalterns, along with the disavowal of their knowledges, their experiences, their agential subjectivities, their autonomy and their right to exist (Contreras & Trujillo, 2017). The European colonial matrix establishes an

accepted reality that radically exempt any other way of living, understanding, knowing, and experiencing. To sum up, in Walter D. Mignolo's words: "coloniality is the darker side of Western modernity".

To dismantle these power structures, the decolonial turn has engaged with a radical critique of the logic foundation of Western civilization, with special attention on the knowledge production process and the intersections between modernity, capitalism and coloniality. Decolonial theories intersect directly with critical indigenous studies (Smith, 2012) that have been developed from the indigenous communities' standpoint on the Global North. Even though the contributions from these scholars are extremely meaningful for deconstructing the imperialist and colonial project of the West I will focus on the research done from the Global South on decolonial epistemologies and, more specifically, the work from Latino American scholars (Mignolo, Quijano, De Sousa, Anzaldúa). I decided to be based around this philosophical, political, and epistemological approach for two reasons: first I think it can resonate better with the participants' experiences (specifically when they were in their countries of origin)—concerning the language used to produce knowledge and the social, historical, and economical context of production itself. Besides, I am particularly interested in the epistemological proposal these authors are presenting and the possibilities it offers.

Furthermore, as this paper departs from a gendered and racialised reality, I find necessary to also include a brief presentation of decolonial feminists' contribution to decolonial theories. Decolonial feminism is directly influenced by black feminism (Crenshaw, hooks, Hill Collins) and its intersectional approach, together with postcolonial feminism (Spivak, Mohanty) and the notion of epistemic violence (Espinosa, 2012). From there it started a movement in dialogue with the thought and knowledge production of intellectuals and activists from afro-descendent, indigenous, mestiza, peasant, and communal communities from Latino America to build on a non-Eurocentric standpoint and epistemology (Espinosa, 2014).

## **2.4. Literature review**

Throughout this thesis I will refer to different studies that have been conducted concerning child custody loss among racialised and migratised families. In the following chapter I will briefly address them, so the reader gets familiarised with their work.

Darcey H. Merritt (2021) analyses the experiences of racism among Child Welfare-involved parents in the U.S, in particular, New York. These experiences are based on the factor that the Child Welfare System is racially disproportionated and departs from a coercive and unequal power relation between the Administration/State and its (vulnerabilised) citizens. Merritt focused specifically on the impact of the Child Care control and surveillance over racialised families and the family perceptions of race-based mistreatment from caseworkers. From her study, it becomes clear that in the US there is an urgent need to reassess Child Care services from an anti-racist thinking and to include racialised (in this specific context, Black and Latinx) parental voices in Child Welfare services research.

A similar approach was taken previously by Dorothy E. Roberts (2012) who reflected on the intersections of the U.S Foster Care system with the Prison complex, regarding the systemic criminalization of Black mothers; Roberts affirms that both institutions work to conserve a system of unequal social hierarchies. As for the Foster Care system, Roberts also pointed out the over presence of African American children in Child Care. Furthermore, the author addresses the neoliberal pitfalls of the Child Care system in America: low-income black mothers tend to receive child welfare support just when they have been already involved with Child Care, and possibly been accused of child mistreatment. The same system creates an endless loop where mothers need to renounce to their children in order to receive State care. Robert's standpoint on the matter is also very clear: there is a dire need to address the systemic injustice that racialised bodies are suffering from an over policing of their lives and experiences.

The last U.S. based study focus on sex workers rather than racialised and migratised individuals, although –as usual–, categories intersect. However, Susan Dewey, Treena Orchard and Kyria Brown (2018) concentrate on the lived experience of child custody loss among street-involved women and the maternal subjectivities that arise from it. They depart from the concept of 'precarity'<sup>3</sup> and 'shared precarities' to describe these embodied experiences that the Child Care-involved (sex workers) mothers have in common. They emphasised three main elements as constitutive of these maternal, precarious subjectivities: ambivalence, temporal ambiguity and the interconnectedness between family and state structures. On the one hand, mothers struggle with the tense relationship

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of precarity will be further discussed in this paper.

with Child Care and state workers, because of an unbalanced power dynamic, unfair custody arrangements, and demands by the caseworkers that are very hard to achieve. Furthermore, the uncertainty regarding the amount of time their cases will remain open/they will need Child Care assistance adds to their experiences an intense feeling of powerlessness. The last element refers to the phenomenon of intergenerational custody loss, where State's presence within family life has been a constant over the years.

Still, Child Care-involved mothers expressed some conflictive feelings with the Foster Care system because, as mentioned before, they are in need and necessitate the State's subsidy to support their families. Moreover, the authors identified as part of the Child Care-involved sex workers maternal subjectivities a resilient attitude towards difficulties and the persistent attempt to deny their identity as mothers.

To return to child custody removal, Sara C. Motta (2016) engages with a decolonial approach addressing the topic in Australia, where the intervention has affected mainly the indigenous and Black population. Motta traces back an old pattern of de-subjectification of racialised subaltern mothers, portraying them as no-good/fitting mothers, non-subjects, and non-citizens, with no-rights. These processes of dehumanization and de-subjectification are still present in the neoliberal area and have taken a new dimension: privatization of social reproduction and pathologisation of poor mothers, which annexes with the former colonial and racist discourses; Motta describes this intersection "a confluence of coloniality and contemporary disciplinary neoliberalism" (Motta, 2016: 113). Her analysis is specially centred on the Family Inclusion Strategy Hunter (FISH) project and her own involvement with it. FISH emerged as a group that wanted to prioritise marginalised families' voices in the out-of-home care process. From this initiative, the author draws a methodological and epistemological proposal based on decolonial politics and "new forms of individual and collective subject-tivity" (Motta, 2016: 126).

I will conclude with the study that has been more inspirational for my work, as it had been conducted in the same context: Iona Vrăbiescu's (2017) research in reference to child custody removal among Romani families in Catalonia as part of pay-to-go strategies. Vrăbiescu establishes a correlation between Child Care-involved Roma families and individual-based "voluntary" return practices. Voluntary return policies are bilateral agreements between two countries to contribute to the return of Roma immigrants that reside in Spain. Some of these practices may be government initiatives to help the

migrants arrange their travel documents or even pay their way back. The data gathered by the author shows how the voluntary return practice is used as part of the policing of childcare services. According to Vrăbiescu, when an EAIA takes a case with a migrant family, part of the study carried is to assess the economic situation of the family in Catalonia. If the caseworkers consider that this situation may not improve within the migration project, they will recommend the family to return to their country of origin. Therefore, to get their children back, the parents need to prove they can offer the child appropriate living standards in Romania. Then, the caseworkers may start negotiating a possible reunification and a resulting return to the country of origin. From her analysis, the author concludes that Child Care, instead of assisting vulnerable families, perpetuate a system of structural violence against migrant Roma families. A statement I will embrace throughout these pages.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Ethical-political perspectives on anthropological research

‘Research’, as Linda Tuhiw Smith puts it, is a dirty word (Smith, 2012). It evokes traumatic experiences of numerous communities (indigenous, afro-descendent, Native, and marginalised Others), embedded in Western colonial and imperial patterns of power. In this light, research can be understood as “a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (Smith, 2012: 2). The main epistemologies of Western thought are built upon a principle of epistemic privilege (Grosfoguel, 2011) – the ways of knowing of the Global North are the only ones that lead to Truth, Universality and Reason, and therefore, superior to other forms of knowledge– which lays a configuration of epistemic injustice, where not all knowers receive an equal treatment and recognition (McKinnon, 2016). As a result, “Western social theory is based on the sociohistorical experience of five countries (France, England, Germany, Italy, and the United States of America) which is not more than 12% of the World’s population” (Grosfoguel, 2011: 344-345); a body of knowledge that has been theorized exclusively by White European men, uncovering the epistemic racism and sexism intrinsic of the Western worldview.

Thus, ‘research’ is also a contested space, that in the last years has incorporated a more concerned attitude on ethical and transformative issues; nowadays, research is reinventing itself, constantly. It is from this understanding that I have addressed this study, with the intention to contribute to a more meaningful, socially engaged, and change-driving research.

The field of anthropology is also a very controversial body of knowledge. Its complicity with the colonial endeavour and its roots on the study of “primitive” cultures and rural societies has been a major dilemma for the specialists on the field, especially since “The Social Responsibilities Symposium” in 1967 (Stolcke, 2008). From then on, anthropology, apart from enriching our understanding of the human species, needed to cultivate a critical awareness, as well as social and community significance. In the next pages, I would like to embrace a feminist and socially committed anthropology (Hernández, 2018), meaning an anthropological praxis aimed to community development, connected to grassroots movements, and knowledges from “below and to



the left”<sup>4</sup>. The term ‘feminist’ touches upon an extensive body of knowledge that comes from activist experiences, the politization of subjects and social science academists. It is characterised by a highly critical approach, and a revolutionary projection. Broadly, feminism(s) pursues to overcome all forms of oppression and discrimination that exist in our society (and beyond it) nowadays, as a means to shape a world where we can all exist, diverse and free. Therefore, a feminist anthropology is one that engages with radical systemic change and strives for the decolonization, depatriarcalization and deracialisation of our ontological and epistemological realities, so we stand up for an anthropology responsible for the continuity of Life (Guerrero, 2010).

### **3.2. Ally activist research: where do I stand**

As Suann Huschke (2014) points out, the responsibility to ‘give back’ to our participants as anthropologists is included in many ethical codes. Many different trends in anthropological (and in general social science) research engage directly with the concern on the process of knowledge production and its complicity with oppressive structures of power. From ‘activist research’ to ‘community research’ and ‘participatory-action research’, the methodologies have become more diverse to include our political being as part of our researcher identity.

With the *Red de Migración, Género y Desarrollo*, which was my point of departure towards a more politically engaged academic praxis, we used an activist research methodology. They even incorporated a personal scope through the Decolonial Analysis for Change (ADC), an approach introduced by the member of the network Sara Cuentas Ramírez. ADC is still in process of development, but it is aimed to be applied in collective power management processes, analysis, research, and policy evaluations which intend to exceed oppressions. The methodology the network engages with it is politically aligned with a social group in struggle and it establishes a constant dialogue with them regarding the design of the research process (Hale, 2006). However, I had two impediments regarding the possibility to apply the same methodology to my thesis research: my positionality (Haraway, 1988) and the limitations on account of the ongoing global pandemic; I will address both hereafters.

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<sup>4</sup> *Abajo y a la izquierda* is an emblem from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN in Spanish), that alludes to another way of embodying political action: from below, for below and according to a leftist ideology.

Feminist research ethics problematizes unresolved complexities of the research process, especially regarding the role of the researcher, the subjects of research, and the potential to apply the research outcomes to build together a feminist project beyond written words: *who is researching? who is researched [counts as a knower]? why do we research?* Donna Haraway suggests the idea of “positioning” to critically reflect on our standpoint, that it is to say, which is our place within the social and cultural network we belong on. Identity politics are intrinsic to the research process and our multiple subjectivities must be reflected on, as well as recognised as part of our identity as researchers. As researchers we have the responsibility to do this exercise, to acknowledge ourselves and the possible power roles we may be exercising in our unjust and unequal world system. To honour this obligation, I will perform this practice myself and be transparent about the person behind these words.

My name is Griselda Ballester Tataret. I am a young, White, middle-class women from north-eastern Spain –Europe–, currently studying in Sweden. My parents have both studied at university and I grew up in a wealthy city, close to Barcelona. My father is a government worker, and my mother works at home. I consider myself an able-bodied person, although I am near-sighted. I have not experienced first-hand discrimination for my skin colour, my education, my legal situation, or my financial resources; even for my country of origin: even though I do not live in my home country currently, I have not been recognised as a foreigner or an immigrant in Sweden, mainly because of my European status. Therefore, I speak, write, and perceive the world from a privileged perspective, a privilege sustained by the lack of power of Others.

This thesis is an attempt to be accountable with my positionality, and engage with my responsibility towards social change, from words to action. My relationship with the mothers was not one of equal partners: their locus of enunciation differs utterly from mine. As a researcher, I could not identify with their motherhood neither with their migrant and racialisation experiences. *Who I was, to them? Who I wanted to be?* Departing from the conviction that I was not comfortable with the traditional role of the researcher –as a subject who upholds oppressive power–, I try to find myself outside the box.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995), as a result of her experiences during fieldwork in Northern Brazil, introduced the figure of the *anthropologist companheira*, a researcher role that balances the academic work with a political-activist commitment. “Witnessing,

the anthropologists as *companheira*, is in the active voice, and it positions the anthropologists inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will "take sides" and make judgments (...)" (Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 419). Although I identified with the willingness of being a *companheira*, unfortunately the research I conducted, and Scheper-Hughes' lack a very important element in common: fieldwork. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to engage with my participants physically and for a prolonged period of time. The distance ruled out my possibilities to develop as an activist, in particular, an anti-racist and feminist one. In my involvement with the participants, was missing embodiment, intimacy, it was not grounded, as it took place in a non-space– the online– craving materiality and humanity. To adapt myself to the circumstance, I personified another role, related to the activist one, but different at the same time: the ally.

There are multiple approaches to allyship, but I would like to engage with PhD Frances E. Kendall's proposal on 'how to be an ally if you are a person with privilege'. Kendall suggests that one of the best ways to use one's privilege is to be an ally to those who lack of it. "This type of alliance requires a great deal of self-examination on our part as well as the willingness to go against the people who share our privilege status and with whom we are expected to group ourselves" (Kendall, 2003). To be a (good) ally requires to accomplish certain standards that the author summarises in 13 points, which will be presented hereafter.

- 1) One of the tasks of an ally is to work persistently to build an understanding of the social structures that enables their privilege and the same time, suppresses the Other. A (good) ally tries to comprehend as much as possible the Other's oppression, and which is their role perpetuating it.
- 2) The alliance takes place in the public as well as in the private space. When one may take a step forward to support those who has aligned with, must be aware of the 'saviour complex' and that supporting should never mean rescuing them.
- 3) A (good) ally talks without problems about their privilege and their commitment to allyship. In Kendall's words, "choosing to make an issue of a situation".
- 4) The commitment of an ally is a never-ending process of personal growth and learning (and probably de-constructing) and should be genuinely embraced.

- 5) Allies make an intersectional analysis of reality, trying to acknowledge how different patterns of power and oppression work to maintain their privilege (even if that may be a highly uncomfortable exercise).
- 6) Allies make mistakes but they should not be used as an excuse to give up.
- 7) Within allyship, everyone is responsible for their own internal change. This specifically means that one is doing this task for themselves (and for a better world) but never to protect/look after the Other.
- 8) Being an ally with privilege signify taking risks and the initiative to initiate “the change toward personal, institutional and societal justice and equality (Kendall, 2003).
- 9) Allies actively collaborate to create an environment of inclusiveness, justice, and diversity, where everyone can feel safe and welcome.
- 10) Is the allies’ responsibility to share the lead with marginalised Others toward societal and organisational change.
- 11) Allies can laugh at themselves and use humour as tool of survival to this bizarre but very tangible system of supremacy we live in. However, allies must be very careful not to assume they can join freely in the humour of the Others.
- 12) Emotional safety is not a realistic expectation and allies must be aware of that: their commitment is a highly uncomfortable one, as privilege is a very cushiony position. Yet, it is through this un-comfort that we move toward change.
- 13) Finally, as an ally, is very important to be clear about the Other’s experiences. An ally must lead by example and educate their privileged peers.

As a socially engaged researcher, I identify as an ally with the target group of this study: migratised and racialised mothers. I acknowledge that my experiences differ from theirs and I cannot fully comprehend them. I am aware that my privilege position relays on them being the Other, the one living on the margins, the oppressed. In consequence, I am accountable to my role in this struggle, and I want to take action to change this world of unfairness and inequality. Therefore, I stand up for an *ally activist research*, that is to say, a research in the service of the needs of the marginalised Other. My intention is to use the means research offers to contribute to social revolution. Privilege is power and even if it

cannot be undone by an individual, it can be used for the benefit of those who are privilege-less and powerless.

Since the beginning of the research process, I have aligned myself with the collective of MADRES (also known as *Madrecitas*), as a collaborator and ally to their cause. I give them a hand, when possible, with social media management and Spanish to English translations. I also have undertaken to write a document –as a summary of my thesis work– where their voices will be gathered. This document will belong to them, so they can share it and spread the word about their oppressed experiences and the institutional violence they are victims of.

### **3.3. Online interviewing: description of an odyssey**

The method I used to elaborate my data has been in-depth interviewing. I conducted 9 interviews with 10 participants during the months of February and March 2021. I interviewed 4 women who have been involved with the Childcare system in Barcelona – 3 of them from a Latino American background and the other one migrated from Morocco–, 3 welfare workers, a legal expert who collaborates with the organized mothers, an intercultural mediator and activist who assists the mothers from the Moroccan community and, finally, a decolonial and art-activist whose work has focused, among other topics, on the institutional violence exercised by the Child welfare system towards migrant, racialised mothers.

Interviewing as a qualitative method has been widely used among social sciences, particularly in anthropology, as it opens to the possibility to investigate deeply into a subject's lived experiences. The sensitive nature of this study demanded a direct and intimate contact with the participants and the interview method offered such setting. I approached the interview methodology as a means to delve into the topic: therefore, I developed 3 models of semi-structured interviews that allow me to conduct the conversation towards specific topics, but without compromising the breakthrough of unexpected and undisclosed themes. The first model addressed the child welfare-involved mothers, the second, welfare workers and finally, the last interview outline tackled the activist and legal expert who collaborates with the mothers' collective.

Given the circumstances of the pandemic, I conducted my interviews online. I used the platform Zoom and Jitsy. This was not a strategic decision either it was part of the research design: it was an outcome of the need to adapt to difficult times. It was, in fact,

a hard choice, as I felt sceptical of conducting the interviews video calling. Just to name a few weak points I was unsure about online interviewing (Linebary & Hamel, 2017):

- the difficulty to create a safe environment for a triggering interview through a computer screen.
- the risk to falsely assume that internet access is universal.
- the subjection to good internet connection (for the interviewee as well as the interviewer) and the chance that connection problems may intercede on gathering valuable information or jeopardize the flow of the interview.

By extension, I did not have any experience on it, so I was building the bike while riding it, as Janet Salmons (2012) puts it. It turned out that video-interviewing can offer the possibility of the interviewee to choose a space where they find themselves comfortable and secure, e.g., their own homes. Furthermore, the fact to develop the interview through an online platform (Zoom) allowed the participants to gain some control of the situation: for instance, one of the interviewees decided not to connect her camera, so her face remain anonymous. In all certainty, the main obstacle was dealing with emotions, especially the pain the mothers felt as a consequence of their children's custody loss. Even if I steeled myself for the possibility of encountering highly moving moments, it was still unbearable to hear these women voices break when sharing their doleful stories. To witness someone's pain through a computer screen, feeling helpless and struggling on how to express empathy and warmth is very uncomfortable; for me, that was an intrinsic part of my research experience.

Even if the final result allowed me to gather meaningful data, I consider significant to mention that my intention was to gather more extensive data on the matter. If the circumstances had been different, I would have travelled to Barcelona, where I would have stayed for a prolonged period, in order to get to know the mothers more intimately. This proximity would have offered me the chance to carry participant observation, which would have enabled me to approach these women's stories more deeply and offer the reader of this paper a more detailed description of their experiences. Therefore, my analysis is mainly based on direct quotations rather than case descriptions.

## 4. Background

### 4.1. The Childhood Care System in Catalonia

In Spain, the competence regarding child protection policies depends on the different autonomous communities. Therefore, even if there is a shared framework concerning children's rights –the UN Convention on the Rights of Child–, each autonomous community has the power to establish its application. In the case of Catalonia this jurisdiction devolves upon the government agency: «Direcció General d'Atenció a la Infància i Adolescència»<sup>5</sup> (DGAIA). In their own words, the DGAIA *is the organism that fosters the wellbeing of children and teenagers at high risk for social marginalization, with the objective of contributing to their personal development. It is also responsible for the protection and tutelage of helpless children and adolescents*<sup>6</sup>. This organ is part of the Children, Adolescents and Youth Secretariat, that belongs to the Employment, Social Affairs and Families Department, one of the main sections of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia.

The DGAIA organization is based territorially, that is to say that the administrative body is divided in different functional areas (in Catalan, *vegueria*), which in the case of the Employment, Social Affairs and Families Department, are 5: Barcelona, Girona, Lleida, Tarragona and Terres de l'Ebre. Each area is managed by its own «Equip Funcional d'Infància» (EFI)<sup>7</sup>. Each EFI is responsible for handling the files and the data derived from the DGAIA activities, and for coordinating the different services: the *Infància Respon* –a telephone helpline to prevent and detect child abuse cases–, the Childhood Studies and Documentation Centre, and the Childhood and Adolescence Care Teams (EAIA<sup>8</sup>). For the purpose of this paper, I will delve into the functioning of the last one.

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<sup>5</sup> In English: Directorate-General for Child and Youth Care (Translated by the autor).

<sup>6</sup>Official webpage of the Directorate-General for Child and Youth Care:  
[https://treballiaferssocials.gencat.cat/ca/ambits\\_tematicos/infancia\\_i\\_adolescencia/proteccio\\_a\\_la\\_infancia\\_i\\_ladolecencia/el\\_sistema\\_catala\\_de\\_proteccio\\_a\\_la\\_infancia\\_i\\_ladolecencia/direccio\\_general\\_datencio\\_a\\_la\\_infancia\\_i\\_ladolecencia\\_dgaia/](https://treballiaferssocials.gencat.cat/ca/ambits_tematicos/infancia_i_adolescencia/proteccio_a_la_infancia_i_ladolecencia/el_sistema_catala_de_proteccio_a_la_infancia_i_ladolecencia/direccio_general_datencio_a_la_infancia_i_ladolecencia_dgaia/) (Translation by the author)

<sup>7</sup> The term could be translated as “Childhood Functional Teams” (Translated by the author).

<sup>8</sup> With the intention to reference to the original names more adequately, I am going to use the acronyms in Catalan. I considered that for a better understanding of the topic, the specific names of the different organizations mentioned should be translated to English, at least once throughout the whole text.

#### 4.1.1. *The Childhood and Adolescence Care Teams: an overview*

The EAIA are the working groups specialized on childhood and family care. When a case is open –due to a report by the police, the medical or school staff, and the service *Infància Respon*– because a child is in distress or in high risk of becoming, the EAIA carries out a diagnosis and suggests the best approach to assure the wellbeing of this child and their family.

To be in distress means that a child is missing the basic elements to fully develop his/her personality<sup>9</sup>, which leads to the necessity to separate them from the household. According to the current Catalan law that regulates the rights of the child<sup>10</sup>, a hardship case may be:

- abandonment
- physical or psychological abuse
- gender-based violence
- the inadequate performance of the guardianship duties, which involve a high risk for the child or the adolescent

The child can also be declared in a threatening situation, which means that, due to personal or family circumstances –or environmental influence–, the personal and social development of the minor may be affected so, without being as severe as a distress situation, the intervention of the public Administration is needed.

The assessment on declaring a child in distress or in a risk situation will depend on the severity of the case. Then, if the risk is rated as mild or moderate, this case is derived to basic Social Services and a coordinated working space (with Social Services and workers from an EAIA) is created. If the child is at high risk of danger, the case is carried by an EAIA and the professionals elaborate an agreement (COSE<sup>11</sup>), that the family must sign, which establishes the different steps [working plan] that must be taken to solve the conflicting situation. Finally, if the minor is considered to be defenceless, the EAIA takes the responsibility of the child's custody, and it takes place a process of family separation.

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<sup>9</sup> These elements are stated in the document “Els processos tècnics dels Equips d’Atenció a la Infància i l’Adolescència (EAIA)” drawn up by the Àrea de Drets Socials, under the heading “emotional and social needs” [of the child]: emotional security, personal identity, self-esteem, social network, participation and progressive autonomy, the need to establish conduct limits, to discover their own body and sexuality, risk protection and playful activities.

<sup>10</sup> Llei 14/2010 27 de maig, dels drets i les oportunitats en la infància i l’adolescència. Available on: <https://www.parlament.cat/document/nom/TL115.pdf> [in Catalan]

<sup>11</sup> This agreement is formally named socio-educational agreement (in Catalan, *compromís socioeducatiu*).



The child can be fostered by a new family (with strangers or members of the large family) or assigned to a foster centre. In Catalonia there are 3 types of facilities, depending on the psychosocial needs of the infant: Residential Centres of Educational Action (CRAE), Residential Centres of Intensive Education (CREI) or therapeutic centres. In addition, there is also the Accommodation Centres (CA), where children can be hosted if they need emergency care; for example, in a process of precautionary removal of parental guardianship<sup>12</sup>. In some of these cases, a plan of improvement could also be arranged, to set the course of action so the child can return with the biological family.

The EAIA were created in 1986 and started being operative since 1987. In 2005 the structure of the department was modified, and it was applied a decentralized model, led by the introduction of the EFI. This new organ received the direct influence of the fresh international regulation established by the Convention of the Rights of the Child, carried out in 1989 by the United Nations. The main change the convention implemented was regarding the conceptualization of children and adolescents, shifting from a highly patronising perspective –that conceived children as vulnerable subjects, which needed to be constantly protected–, to an acknowledgment of their agency and autonomy (Agustín, 2014).

In 2003 a new national law was implemented, regarding the State’s duty to economically support vulnerable family units. Finally, the organ is also regulated by the current Children’s Act, the law 14/2010 for the Rights and Opportunities of Children and Adolescents, approved in 2010. The new regalement introduced two main changes: on the one hand, it addressed all the child and adolescent population entirely, without focusing specifically on the ones at risk. On the other hand, the child is acknowledged as a subject of rights and opportunities, which led to the re-conceptualisation of the best interests of the minor, incorporating an integral and transversal perspective of child rights (Lázaro, 2017).

In recent years, one of the main issues discussed regarding Child Care it has been the handling of the growing arrival of unaccompanied minors in Catalonia. Unaccompanied minors are children and adolescents –under 18– who migrate to another country without

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<sup>12</sup> Precautionary removal of parental guardianship is an emergency intervention through which the minor is removed from their home on the grounds of urgency. The mothers refer to this specific practice as ‘express custody removal’, as it usually takes place in a short time, without giving the parents the opportunity to understand what is happening or to react.

their parents, guardians, or an adult caregiver. Even if the phenomenon has been a reality in the region since 1998, in the past 6 years, the coming of unaccompanied minors in Catalonia has risen considerably: according to the data gathered by DGAIA, in 2015, the number of cases regarding unaccompanied minors was 377; in 2018, the total had increased to the amount of 2.156. As a consequence, DGAIA created a specified protocol for these cases, and even specific centres to host the children<sup>13</sup>.

The normative framework sets the basis of the ethical and methodological approach that the Child and Adolescence Care System in Catalonia stands for: proximity, integral and global perspective, transversality, and a process engagement. Proximity denotes the territoriality-based model, while an integral and global perspective focuses on incorporating a holistic point of view, which implies a coordinated strategy with the different social agents –from the community, as well as the Social Services. Transversality also refers to the need of collaboration, but within the different services that work for the well-being of society (health, education, justice, police forces, etc.), to ensure a satisfactory outcome. Last but not least, social care has to be a continuum: from basic Social Services to more specialised (e.g., childhood services) where the care and support to vulnerable members of society must be fully covered (Àrea de Drets Socials, 2017).

## **4.2. A critical look at the Social Services institution**

Child Care services are integrated as part of a major institution, Social Services, or in the Catalan case, the Social Services and Public Care Network<sup>14</sup>. The institution of Social Services was an initiative within the project of democratisation of Europe after the Second World War. Unfortunately, during that time, Spain was being ruled by a dictator: consequently, official welfare services are introduced in Spain with the 1978 Constitution, more than 30 years later than the rest of Europe. However, Social Work has been present in the country for a while longer; furthermore, the origins and development of Social Work in Spain has been closely linked to the Catholic church and the Francoist policies based on developmentalist and technocratic principles (Gírela, 2017). During the

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<sup>13</sup> The case of unaccompanied minors in Catalonia has been a hot issue in the media: because of the neglect on the part of the State (there were multiple cases of adolescents living in the street or in police stations) or even racist attacks to Residential Centres.

<sup>14</sup> The network is constituted by three different areas: social care, child and adolescent care and gender violence.

second stage of Francoism in Spain (1959-1875), the government was commanded by scientific and technological experts (technocrats) who pursued the economic development of the country. Even though throughout these years the support of the Catholic Church to the dictatorship decreased –as some younger priests decided to collaborate with social organizations who clearly stand up with the working class– the ecclesiastic institution continue being an important assistance provider. Then, religious institutions have been the ones that, traditionally, have covered the social needs of Spanish population. The foundation of Social Services carried some advantages, especially concerning the professionalization of the discipline, but it also meant an over-bureaucratization of the field, implying that instead of being all about distributing social welfare, Social workers were more focused on the management of a social services catalogue. “The emphasis is on social resources, economic benefits and services. It appears a new relationship between citizenry and the public service based on patronage” (Gírela, 2017: 99; translated by the author). From such an unequal relationship, Blanca Gírela points out how the actual role that social workers play within the welfare state is a social containment task, to keep “everyone on their place”: helping the ones in power to maintain it and continuing benefiting from the lack of autonomy, resources, and empowerment of the rest. Nowadays, Social Services in Spain depends completely on the Administration, but, at the same time, is managed increasingly by private entities (Agustín, 2014).

This privatization of the Welfare system has been an ongoing discussion within the Catalan context. Families and other members of society have been claiming how unfair the amount of 4.000€/month in expenses per each child in State custody is, even more since 90% of the foster care is managed by external organizations. It is more scandalous when you compare it to the provision of 500€/month to foster families or the almost non-existent (it only covers education expenditures and the school meal) State’s economical support to the children who still lives with their families (Vrăbiescu, 2017). To sum up, the available financial data<sup>15</sup> shows how the amount spent in childcare under State’s custody is absolutely disproportional to the economic assistance the State grants to vulnerable families (children who are considered to be at risk).

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<sup>15</sup> Due to the global pandemic, I was unable to double check this information with someone from DGAIA. However, this is a highly problematize issue, especially among Childcare-involved families; it has also been addressed by the mass media. Unfortunately, any of these sources relate to official financial data of the Catalan Child Care institution.

### 4.3. Activist mothers: collectivizing the struggle

The Childhood Care System in Catalonia has been challenged by different sectors of civil society. Due to the following points,

- The amount of power in the administration to determine the futures of families and their children;
- The lack of judicial oversight over the above process;
- That many families involved with the Childhood Care System face economic vulnerability that should have been taken care of by Social Services such that the Childhood Care System would not have been involved;

some critical voices affirm that the flows are not only on the Childhood Care System but rather on the whole Social Services apparatus (Mariné, 2016).

In 2016, a nationwide association was founded, «Marea Turquesa», mainly comprised by mothers whose children are under the State's guardianship. These women denounce that the system is not working for the well-being of the families and that their rights to exercise parenthood have been violated. Furthermore, they call attention to the impact of the crisis<sup>16</sup> on this sort of cases and how financial vulnerability has become a risk factor for losing your child (Femenino Rural, 2017), making explicit the classist discrimination and prejudice that takes place within the setting of the Social Services system.

Although class is not the only aspect that intersects with gender on the Catalan-Spanish Child Care discriminatory model: according to a new group of mothers who started mobilizing in November 2020, racism also plays its role. At the beginning of November 2020, around 200 migrant women rallied



in front of the DGAIA headquarters in Barcelona, to protest for the right of Nour –a 3-year-old migrant child removed from her family with the argument that she was not fattening enough– to return with her parents (Papeles para todos, 2020). According to the child's mother, Loubna Ben Rahou, her 3-year-old had recurrent weight problems, so she

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<sup>16</sup> In 2008 a major economic crisis defeated Spain because of the Great Recession occurred in Europe between 2007 and 2012. Although from an economical perspective, the Spanish financial crisis concluded in 2013, after that year a debt crisis emerged, whose social, economic, and political impacts are still undergoing. In that sense, we can establish a parallelism with the current situation caused by the COVID-19 recession.

decided to take her to a Primary Attention and Health Care Centre. The paediatrician prescribed a blood analysis, to exclude malnutrition, rickets, or anaemia. The family did not show up to the appointment: the mother claimed she had the flu, and the father had an urgent medical arrangement. On the day after, the mother visited the centre again, but she did not have her Individual Health Card, so it was not possible to schedule another appointment for the blood analysis. Consequently, the paediatrician drew up a report to the Juvenile Prosecution Service, instancing to hospitalize the child, as a matter of urgency, to keep track of her health situation. DGAIA requested a report also and Mossos d'Esquadra (the national police) was sent to reach the family. Dismally, they could not find them, as 6 months ago they had moved out to another place, and they had not notified the authorities yet. That Saturday, the custody removal was instructed by the judge on call. On Monday, when Nour's father went to pick his children from school, his daughter was not there. After a long wait, two police officers informed him that Nour had been dictated in distress and, as a result, the custody of the child had been removed from her parents. Furthermore, there was a restraining order that prohibited the family to communicate with the minor. Nour was admitted in a medical centre: she was away from her family for 2 months (Redacció iSabadell, 2020). Loubna, Nour's mother, claimed that they [Child Care services] have taken her child out, without any evidence, and just suspicion. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated case: the mothers in the protest affirm that they have gone through similar situations within the context of social service care. In response to this injustice, they decided to appear in the public space and protest openly against the institutional racism they claim they are suffering (Ortiz, 2020).

Risques, G. (2020). Banner in the protest in front of the DGAIA headquarters. Available on: [https://fotomovimiento.org/10\\_11\\_2020\\_nour-necessita-a-a-la-seva-familia/](https://fotomovimiento.org/10_11_2020_nour-necessita-a-a-la-seva-familia/)

The case of Nour was the match that ignited the demonstrations, though the mothers have been organising together, in different settings, previously to the event. On the one hand, mothers who have migrated from North African countries –mostly Morocco– have been joining forces thanks to the intervention of an activist and intercultural mediator. She has been voicing out the experiences of different mothers who have experienced this form of institutional violence through her YouTube channel. As well, mothers from a Latino American background are creating a group (*Madrecitas*, now MADRES) based on collective care and mutual support between women who share this experience. The foundation of MADRES is a rather recent event and currently the activist mothers are

deciding the strategy for creating political incidence within their own communities and the whole Catalan society. The political projection of this collective is addressed in a further chapter (see Epilogue).

#### **4.4. Presenting the empirical material: the mothers, the allies, and the state workers**

Hereafter I will present the women<sup>17</sup> that were interviewed for this master thesis.

##### *4.4.1. The cases: fighting mothers*

###### Ariadna

Ariadna has Bolivian and Chilean origins. She migrated from Chile more than 6 years ago. She has a degree on physiotherapy and two children: an 18 years-old and a 3-year-old. Ariadna experienced abused by her previous partners; she is a single mother, now. She has been working with Social Services since she arrived in Spain, mainly to receive assistance with housing search. Social Services has assigned her to different accommodations: from state-subsided shared flats to hotels; she did not have a stable place to stay since her arrival. She got in contact with the mothers from the MADRES collective after her encountered with the child welfare institution, about November 2020. Her case will be addressed further on in the thesis.

###### Mercedes

Mercedes immigrated to Barcelona from Brazil in 1994. She works as an accountant and in her own words, she had a life “as expected, things worked out more or less well for me”<sup>18</sup>. She has an 8-year-old daughter. Shortly after she was borned, Mercedes and her partner parted. The separation was not friendly, and Mercedes returned to Brazil for some time with her daughter. When she was back to Spain, in 2016, her ex-partner filed a complaint for the custody of their child. After some legal disputes, he obtained the full custody. The sentence stated that, even if in this case it will be recommended a shared

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<sup>17</sup> The names of the interviewees have been anonymised. I have decided to mention the actual names of organisations as a political stance: to be clear about the institutions I am referring to and, in the case of the antiracist groups, to visibilise their work.

<sup>18</sup> The quotes from the interview have been translated by the author. See chapter 10 for the original quotes (in Catalan and Spanish).

guardianship, considered the precarious situation of Mercedes –she lives in a squattered flat–, the child’s best interest was to live with her father.

According to Mercedes, her ex-partner is not meeting his responsibilities as a father: he is not taking the kid to the psychologist, even if there is a report by the Child and Juvenile Mental Health Centre (CSMIJ), requested by the court, that her daughter should receive psychological support. Furthermore, she states that she experienced gender-based violence by her ex-partner. They also had an incident with the UFAM, as her daughter described some inappropriate touching. The paediatrics service wrote a report on it and, as Mercedes did not blame her ex-partner directly, she was the one penalized for an inappropriate behaviour –according to Social Services, bathing a 4-year-old had sexual connotations.

### Paula

Paula is a sex worker, artist, and activist. She has been living in Spain for 18 years; she came from Mexico. She has a teenage daughter who was in State custody around 5 years ago. She is a single mother. Her artistic work develops around the feminized body and how it intersects with sex work, feminism, migration, pornography, coloniality and art. She is a member of the union OTRAS (for sex workers) and APRO SEX (Association of Sex Professionals) and has been engaged with the feminist movement in Mexico, as well as in Spain. The experience with her daughter encouraged her to take action and organise from a decolonial and feminist perspective against the Catalan Child Welfare institution. “Then, it catches me a violence that I don’t know how to define, structure, I don’t know how to face it, and then, I started to investigate, investigate, investigate and I realised it’s a structural violence, that there is a structural violence regarding all this”<sup>i</sup>. Together with Manon, they settled the basis for the collective MADRES.

### Manon

Manon is a Peruvian artist and activist, who migrated to Barcelona when she was 21 years old, approximately 15 years ago. She came to study Fine Arts and has been very active in the ant-racist struggle in Spain. Last year, she returned to Peru as a political refugee, after her life have been threatened by far-right sympathizers. Her persona became highly public after she was invited in a very popular Spanish television channel to discuss about the presence of colonial monuments in the public space (e.g., the statue of Colon in the centre of Barcelona city) and she stated the necessity to turn them down.

Her motherhood has not been disturbed by child custody loss experiences per se but her migrant status and the legal dispute with her ex-partner have definitely conditioned her identity as a mother. It is from these experiences that she has built her identity as an activist and a critical member of society. Through her art, she expresses her unconformity with a system that is excluding instead of embracing people. Currently she is conducting some research on her own using the data available on the Child Abuse Index (RUMI) and the DGAIA, to report the unjust intersections between racialisation, migratisation, gender, and institutional violence.

#### Laia

Laia is a new mom, she just had her first daughter, approximately a year ago. She migrated from Morocco and has been living in Girona for 4 years. She has experienced abuses from her ex-partner, and they are currently separated: because of Laia precarious situation, she is domiciled in an illegally occupied flat. Because of the abuses, she asked for a restraining order: still, her ex-partner came back to her residence and, according to the report by Social Services, she opened the door to him; Laia denies it, she affirms that it was someone else from the squattered flat. Even so, under the law, she violated the restraining order, and DGAIA considered that her 1-month-daughter needed to be cared by the Child Care system, as Laia proved to be an unfit parent, regarding the protection of her daughter from the abuser. Laia's daughter is in temporary fostering for the moment.

Laia does not have good knowledge of the Catalan neither the Spanish language. That made it difficult for her to get to understand the system and the bureaucratic pitfalls of it. Child Welfare services is pending of a change from her side, something that proves that she can take care of her child. They do not have a specific working plan for her: is understood she needs to get its act together first.

#### *4.4.2. Collaborators to the cause: the allies*

#### Alexandra

Alexandra is not a resident in Barcelona, but she develops part of her activist work on the city. She defines herself as an activist and an intercultural and social mediator. She has working experience as a mediator with Social Services and as an assistant Advisor in the Immigration Office. Now, she is a Youtuber and runs a private program named "Identidades" [Identities] where she discusses topics as immigration and migrants' rights. Her activist activity is aimed to educate about undocumented migrants' struggles and



offer support and legal advice to migrant families, especially the ones coming from Northern Africa/Morocco.

She got entangled with the fight of the migrant mothers on account of Nour's incident. She used her channel to voice out the event and help to organise the following demonstrations. At the moment, she coordinates an informal group of Moroccan mothers who have been organising to assist the Child Welfare-involved families and protest collectively in the public space. This group of mothers works together with other anti-racist organizations as *Dignitat Migrant*<sup>19</sup> and the movement *Regularización Ya*<sup>20</sup>.

### Viviana

Viviana is also a migrant; she came from the Dominican Republic. She resides in Girona and works as a legal consultant. She is a member of the *Red de Migración, Género y Desarrollo*, in Barcelona, and collaborates with other activist spaces, related with the anti-racist, decolonial and feminist struggle. The support she is providing to the Child Welfare-involved mothers is mainly legal counselling on family, racism, and institutional violence matters. Her positionality is very clear – she is an ally: “(...) it's a struggle where you support, but you can't appropriate it. First, I'm not a mother, and then, I'm not a mother who has been affected by child custody loss. Then, in view of that, you can support, let's say, they want to do this or that, ok, let's find resources, or maybe you can give them some ideas. But at the end, it's up to them”<sup>ii</sup>. She has various work lines: on the one hand, she is interested on developing legal tools that may help the mothers while they are working to recover their children's custody, for example, extending visiting hours; in legal jargon this are named protective measures. Another issue she mentioned it was trying to assure parents presence in children's examinations with caseworkers. Now, the child is interviewed with the social workers alone and some parents question the reliability of these encounters. Finally, she is also figuring out how to call for the State's liability, especially on the cases that have been assessed misleadingly.

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<sup>19</sup> *Dignitat Migrant* is an association from the Catalan city of Mataró that works for migrants' rights, especially undocumented.

<sup>20</sup> *Regularización Ya* started in March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the State's management of undocumented migrants' rights. Their main claim is to perform urgent regularization of migrants to guarantee their access to health services and a decent living. This movement is also known as Papeles para Todxs.

#### 4.4.3. State workers

##### Irene

Irene is a physiologist who works in an EAIA in El Baix Llobregat, a region in Barcelona province. She had been working in the Child Welfare institution for over 20 years. Her professional focus is systemic therapy, which gives her tools to approach the cases from a holistic perspective. As she explained on her interview, systemic therapy –also known as family therapy– allows to comprehend an individual as part of a relational context, not as an isolated being. “At the end you must build an alternative story and a story full of possibilities. At the end, this is therapy: make them see a different world, because the world that you see is the one that encloses you. Then you have to build a different reality, one that is congruent with the family, that the family will believe in”<sup>iii</sup>.

##### Clara

Clara has studied Social Work and has worked in an EAIA in Barcelona city for many years. Now she works in a different department, called SIFE (Integration Service of Extended Families) which is responsible of child fostering with members of the large family. That it is to say, when a kid is taken away from his parents’ ward, they may go with another family member: then, the professionals on the SIFE are responsible of the follow-up of the reception process. She migrated from Chile in 1985, as she was running away from the dictatorship of Pinochet. She had Spanish origins, his father was from Castilla (a region in Spain, in the centre of the peninsula), so it was easier for her to move to Spain, as she had the Spanish nationality.

##### Martina

Martina is an educator in an EAIA in Barcelona city. She has worked in Child Care for over 13 years. Her education is in Pedagogy, and she has been working in social care since she graduated from university. In the EAIA, she works specifically in the study team, which is responsible of assessing the cases and conducting the previous investigation before any decision is made.

## 5. “This is not the family model they are expecting”: sociocultural normativity regarding motherhood and family

### 5.1. The Good Mother

The conception of the ‘good mother’ has been widely discussed and analysed from different disciplines, especially since the 1990s, when motherhood started being addressed as a philosophical and theoretical matter and, therefore, there was a mushrooming of academic research focusing on it (Fregoso, 2005). Cristina Palomar describes the imaginary of motherhood from the stereotype of The Mother “this ideal representation, abstract and generalised (...) which embodies the essence of motherhood: maternal instinct, maternal love, the motherly *savoir faire* and a cascade of virtues resulting from the following elements: patience, tolerance, ability to comfort, ability to heal, to care, to serve, to listen, to protect, to sacrifice herself, etc” (Palomar, 2004: 16; translated by the author). From this conceptual construction, it derives the dichotomy of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ mother, depending how much one accomplishes the normative model of The Mother. Then, the ideal mother, the ‘good’ one, gives rise to its reverse: “these women who don’t accomplish with the ideal expectations of this social role and they are stigmatized, pointed, criminalized, or diagnosed in different ways, depending on the seriousness of the instance of non-compliance” (Palomar, 2004: 17; translated by the author).

In the turn of the century, Sharon Hays<sup>21</sup> also contributed to the discussion about the ‘good’/’bad’ mother, neologising ‘intensive mothering’ to describe the social assumption that mothering entails an absolute commitment to children, in terms of time, energy, money, emotional burden, and knowledge required. Intensive mothering is still the predominant framework of understanding regarding the conceptualisation of motherhood in the Global North. A consequence of this is the de-subjectification of mothers: “child welfare policies and practices frequently regard women’s and children’s needs as interchangeable, with the focus on mothers only as direct caretakers of children, not as human beings in their own right, with needs, feelings, and experiences of their own” (Dunkerley, 2017: 251). Furthermore, the literature has focused on white and

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<sup>21</sup> Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

upper/middle-class mothers' experiences with the 'intensive mothering' model, disregarding the crossroads of gender, class, and race (Elliot, Powell & Brenton, 2013).

## 5.2. The Spanish family

The institution of motherhood –as described by Adrienne Rich in her book *Of woman born* (1986)<sup>22</sup> – interrelates with the institution of family, which has been object of theorization and academic reflection among different disciplines. In Spain –as well as in the rest of Europe–, the institution of family has changed substantially in the last 50 years. Before the dictatorship, at the beginning of the century, Spanish society was mainly rural and, therefore, it was common that the family unit organised in an extensive form; that is to say, an intergenerational household, beyond the parents and their children (e.g., grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc). This structure was replaced by the nuclear family, which, during the dictatorial regime (1939-1975) it developed in the basis of a highly patriarchal family model, with a gendered division of family roles [based on the figure of the male breadwinner and the housewife]. The family became an ideological pillar of Francoism, as a space to maintain and strength the traditional and national-catholic values (Moreno, 2017). With democracy and women's incorporation into the labour force, it began a transition from the strict breadwinner model to both parents economically supplying the household. This did not directly translated to the equality of gender roles within the family unit, as even nowadays, women in Spain continue to uphold the main part of the domestic and care work in their families (Ayuso, 2019).

The new century involved various changes on the configuration of the family, especially regarding new forms of families and co-habitation. Thanks to the influence of the feminist movement (Alberdi, 2006), marriage and parenthood became options for the Spanish population, rather than social obligations. Furthermore, the diversification of the acceptable forms of marriage (same-sex marriages) and parenthood (single parenthood, non-parenthood) lead to an expansion of the definition of the family. Yet, the 'new forms of family' conflicted with the old-fashioned family model, a tension that remains today. Moreover, research into the subject fails to include the effects of immigration and economic crisis and instability in the representation of the normative Spanish family.

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<sup>22</sup> Rich (1986) distinguishes two sides of the definition of motherhood: the experience, and the institution. One thing is what it is to be a mother, and another one, what it means in our society. Rich describes that last one as the 'institution of motherhood', which establishes the subordination of women to the role of mothers and to male control and power.

These elements also play a role into the conflictive battle between tradition and social development: even if the sociocultural reality in Spain shows a wide variety of forms of family, the social imaginary –and consequent normative framework– portrays the Spanish family as White, middle-class, heterosexual, and marriage-based.

### *5.2.1. The family in Catalonia: overall characteristics of a family-oriented society*

The Catalan case does not differ from the general trajectory in Spain. Even so, it is worth to include a brief comment about the Catalan family model. According to Roigé (2002), Catalan society is also characterized by a family-based approach: in other words, the institution of the family is central to community, social and individual development. That is due to sociohistorical patterns –addressed in the previous chapter– and a weak welfare system, which implied that the family had to provide a great part of the social deficiencies. That model clashes with a State that does not prioritise family welfare: as shown in the available data from 2014 regarding the economic assistance provided by the Catalan government, the percentage assigned to family support is less than 1%<sup>23</sup>.

In this context, where family has such a social, economic, and cultural responsibility, migratised, single motherhoods must exist in the margins, outside the norm and what is socially accepted. Without the needed support and persistently excluded, migratised mothers persevere to sustain their families. In the following section, I will describe their experiences and discuss the functioning of a Welfare system that fails to ensure the possibility of a dignified life for all.

### **5.3. “To be a migrant and a woman is a price you must pay”: experiences of Child Care-involved migratised women**

The interviewed women’s migration experiences have not been pleasant. Arriving in a new country, where you may not even speak the language, the bureaucratic difficulties you must face are multiple, where you may experience a cultural shock and where you are definitely not welcome, is a vicissitude. Obstacles to get a job, to find a place to live and to create social networks and be part of the community, are some of the hurdles the mothers had to go through. Furthermore, as it will be revealed along this paper, they do

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<sup>23</sup> See document for the data:

[https://dretssocials.gencat.cat/web/.content/03ambits\\_tematicos/15serveissocials/mapa\\_de\\_prestacions/Anex\\_Mapaprestacions.pdf](https://dretssocials.gencat.cat/web/.content/03ambits_tematicos/15serveissocials/mapa_de_prestacions/Anex_Mapaprestacions.pdf) [Only in Catalan]

not fit into a normative (Catalan, Spanish, European) model of the family: they are racialised and migratised woman, they are single-parents, and they struggle to economically sustain their households, instantly making them ‘bad’ and ‘unfitting’ mothers.

Spain is a host country: since the beginning of the century, immigration has been one of the most important demographic, social and economic phenomenon. Since the economic crisis in 2008, the Spanish migration policies have become more restrictive, aiming to control the migration flows; tendency that came to be even more aggressive after the over-securitization of Europe in 2015 (Oso, López-Sala & Muñoz-Comet, 2021). On a national level, that resulted in an increase of deportations and police controls based on ethnic profile –that is to say, especially targeting migratised and racialised populations (Contreras, 2019). As a consequence, migration emerges as a highly political and controversial topic in the ongoing public debate in Spain, particularly since the appearance of the extremist party VOX<sup>24</sup>, who enacts a drastically anti-immigrant discourse<sup>25</sup>.

Xenophobia –the fear and exclusion of the one considered a foreigner [a migrant] or a stranger– in Spain articulates multidimensionally: in the individual, social and institutional level. The discursive practices around the active discrimination of migrants are socially accepted and legitimized, which is source of segregation and othering. From the side of the migratised, one experiences incomprehension, faced with the impossibility to incorporate as a full member in the arriving society. As Ariadna attests, “how, at this point of my life, me, as a migrant, with all the characteristics that I have, I have certified my degree, I have the second card, my children are schooled, I take courses, I participate here, there, I give talks, I give my *maderoterapia* workshops, I try, I try, and I cannot find a place, I cannot have an apartment”<sup>iv</sup>.

Ariadna lacks the economic resources necessary to rent a place on her own: according to data from Barcelona municipality<sup>26</sup>, in 2020 the average rent price in the city was

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<sup>24</sup> VOX is a far-right political party in Spain. It was founded in 2013. In the current legislature, it is the third political force in the Spanish government.

<sup>25</sup> See Fernández, B. (2021) “Gender and Immigration in VOX. The discourse of the Radical Right in Spain”. *Migraciones*, 51: 241-268 for a detailed analysis on VOX’s anti-immigration discourse.

<sup>26</sup> Available on:

[https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/estadistica/catala/Estadistiques\\_per\\_territori/Barris/Habitatge\\_i\\_mercat\\_immobiliari/Mercat\\_immobiliari/Habitatges\\_lloguer/a2020/tbarris1.htm](https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/estadistica/catala/Estadistiques_per_territori/Barris/Habitatge_i_mercat_immobiliari/Mercat_immobiliari/Habitatges_lloguer/a2020/tbarris1.htm) [21/07/2021]

980€/month; the current minimum wage in Catalonia is 950€/month. Ariadna has spent the last years trying to certify her physiotherapist degree, which has invalidated her to find another qualified job during this time. Furthermore, and as it will be point out later, her encounter with Child Care has also hindered her possibilities to find a decent job, as to be assisted by Social Services is time and energy consuming for the individual in need, especially if behind the help there is the threat one may lose the custody of their children. The accumulation of these factors rules out Ariadna's chances to provide herself and her family with suitable housing. This is a common situation among the migratised population: unemployment for a prolonged period, low salaries and discriminatory practices from landlords complicate the access to decent housing for the migrant community (Contreras, 2019). According to the independent organization SOS Racisme<sup>27</sup>, from the data gathered about the complaints they receive in their Support and Report Service, 30% of the cases are about violations of the right of housing (SOS Racisme, 2021).

Job searching for an immigrant in Catalonia is also a constant fight: first, one needs a work permit, which is granted only in the case the person has already a fixed employment contract. Work demand is also visibly exclusionary: as one of the participants of a study conducted with Latin American migrant women in Barcelona (Contreras, 2019) expressed, employers sometimes state that their offers are "just for Spanish". Even if they manage to find a job, the working conditions of the migrant population are much worse than the autochthonous one: they overrepresent the lowest part of the occupational structure as they are employed mainly in underqualified jobs (Instituto Universitario de Estudios sobre Migraciones Comillas & Cáritas Española, 2020). This is partly because the average education level of the migrant labour force is lower (Consejo Económico y Social de España, 2019) but also many people face difficulties to certify their previous degrees, as Ariadna. In their interviews the mothers expressed this constant pressure to compensate the fact they are 'not from here', a label they cannot get rid of: it does not matter how many years they have lived in Catalonia or Spain, their connections with the autochthonous community or their endeavours to integrate in the arriving society; their

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<sup>27</sup> SOS Racisme is a grassroots organisation that works to guarantee human rights for all members of the Catalan society. They are a stand-alone entity, democratic (they organise on the base of a general assembly) and part of the antiracist activism in Catalonia.

origin, the colour of their skin, their phenotypic traits, their languages, their traditions, will always betray them.

Moreover, the reality of migration must be analysed through intersectional lens: migrant women's lived experiences are determined by their migratised identity, as well as by their gendered one. The crossroads between migration and gender is an ongoing topic of discussion and it has been analysed from a variety of angles, with a specific focus on the global care of chains (Mora & Piper, 2021). In Catalonia, there are 3 main elements that characterize the processes of exclusion and discrimination of migratised women:

- the migration policy
- the labour deregulation of feminized occupations (e.g., paid domestic work)
- and the political responses to the management of dependent care

(Parella, 2010).

#### **5.4. Economic precarity: a dead-end street**

“Children aren't removed because of dire poverty. When a child is removed it's because there is an accumulation of risk factors, and dire poverty, clearly, helps the risk factors to develop. As my supervisor will say: "if there is dire poverty, it's easier that a person with an aggressive tendency becomes more aggressive"”<sup>v</sup> (Clara, state worker).

Caseworkers affirm that poverty is not an argument for a child custody removal: alas, it cannot be said the same about precarity. In her article on Child custody loss among North American Sex-workers, Susan Dewey et al. define precarity as follows: “a state of being in which individuals suffer from long-term with respect to stable work that pays a living wage, opportunities for advancement, and the ability to represent their collective interests in the society of which they are part” (Dewey, Orchard & Brown, 2018: 30). Mercedes – even if she has been living in Catalonia for over 25 years and has a degree as an accountant– cannot find a place to live she can afford. She stays in a squatted apartment; “the fact that I am a squatter is not a political action, is a lack of resources, a complete absence of power...”<sup>vi</sup>. Laia has a similar situation, as she also shares a squattered flat. Ariadna, on the other hand, has been struggling to find a decent home since she arrived in Spain: Social Services has been accommodating her in different places. She has certified her studies, yet, she has not been able to find a job as a physiotherapist. Furthermore, her experiences with Child Care have muddled her chances to find



employment: “I can’t get a job. Five months without working, going here and there, they have offered me a job, but I couldn’t go because I needed to meet with the UFAM<sup>28</sup>, I had to go to the psychologists...”<sup>vii</sup>. Their precarious status derives from the racialisation and migratisation of their identities, “if you’re poor, you’re migrant”<sup>viii</sup> (Mercedes), and still, the mothers take the blame of impoverishing their children and not meeting their needs (Roberts, 2012); which is actually caused by the present system’s weaknesses, totally beyond the mothers’ control and action capacity.

This constant pressure for trying to survive within a system that operates to deprive you of your needs and rights, increases in times of crisis. The global economic crash of 2008 was addressed by the Spanish government from austerity and budget reductions, specially at the social welfare (Gírela, 2017). Because of incrementing the poverty rate, but not offering enough social care to cope with the situation, many families found themselves face to face not being able to pay their rent, water, and electricity. Evictions were the order of the day, and as Manon pointed out, the role of Social Services during those difficult times was more than questionable, as instead of assisting the endangered family, they redirected their cases to the DGAIA. In a context of general vulnerability, Jacob Lind’s statement sheds light to a cruel reality: “the state is the creator of the administrative routines and conditions that lead to increased experienced, situational vulnerability, and then it utilises children’s rights logics to respond to this vulnerability it has itself created” (Lind, 2019: 347). And that is why and how a migrant racialised women can loss her children into State custody.

With the current situation of an international pandemic that is generating economic, social, and political vulnerability and precarity around the world, the story repeats itself. Although the data has not been created yet and we can still not confirm how much it affected the ongoing crisis to childcare and children custody loss, it is already palpable that the migrant and racialised community is paying the consequences. On account of Manon’s insight: “while the living conditions, of migrant population mainly, are getting worse –either because of an economic crisis or a pandemic, like now– this is what’s going to enable that children custody removals take place because the legal basis for children custody removal based on classist, racist and misogynist motives have to do with the fact

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<sup>28</sup> Functional Unit of Abuse to Minors.

that you're meeting some requirements which are, precisely, conditioned by the economic, social and political situation"<sup>ix</sup>.

### **5.5. Marginalized motherhoods: excluded from society and their own communities**

Custody loss among migrant woman is lived as a lonely experience. "It's something very lonely, it's embarrassing to talk about this. At the beginning is difficult, it's truly *your* mourning" (Mercedes). The mothers face prejudice from their migrant communities and the "receiving" society –even sometimes from their own families. In her interview, Paula drew a parallel on the social rejection experienced by imprisoned women and women involved with the Childcare Welfare. Paula brought up how society marginalises criminalized individuals instead of supporting them in an act of solidarity. According to her, there is a higher acceptance of ex-prisoners as full members of society nowadays; however, there is no awareness towards the mothers who have gone through child custody loss experiences. "In the case of the mothers, there was no sensitivity, it was always like, "listen, if they have taken away your kid, it must be for something". (...) Like it is totally justifiable (...). And then it is not just society, or the State, but also your community, you are despised by your own community, and you are expelled from your community"<sup>x</sup>.

The marginalisation within the migrant society derives from various causes. For instance, Alexandra decided to sponsor Laia given the lack of support she received from other migrant mothers. Laia and her ex-partner were not married, something that was not accepted by the Moroccan community, and jeopardized Laia's credibility. As Alexandra stated, some of the mothers considered she may be lying and did not trust her version of the facts. The mothers exteriorized a deep sentiment of solitude, bittered by a constant fear of raising their voices, "it has always been an open secret, that they will take away your children: there is always a fear, as a mother, that suddenly something will go wrong in the performance of your maternity"<sup>xi</sup> (Paula). They encounter difficulties with sharing their stories, for fear of reprisals, for feeling misunderstood; even to protect their loved ones, as Mercedes voices: "to my mother I will not... I know she will be afflicted, so I don't tell her all that. And then you don't speak, or to protect yourself from a judgment or to protect the people that you love. At the end you live it in a very solitary manner"<sup>xii</sup>.

The isolation of the mothers is used as an argument against them in custody battles or to prove the vulnerability and risk of the household, so the child can be removed from their

family. Mercedes story gives an example of this: during the dispute for the custody of her daughter, the judge argued that Mercedes was not a suitable parent for the child because her ex-partner had a “structured family” and she lacked support. “She [the prosecutor] asked me about my support and I said, “I have friends who I can trust”. And she looked at me and said “dame, your friends are no good to me”<sup>xiii</sup>.

## **5.6. Experiences with Social Services: “it is like descent into the underworld”**

Every mother interviewed for this research has been assisted by Social Services in Catalonia. Mercedes described her experience with Social Services as “the descent into the underworld”<sup>xiv</sup>, drawing a parallel with Dante’s masterpiece, *Divina Commedia*. “They will do the impossible to break you down, they’re not there to help”<sup>xv</sup> (Mercedes). Ariadna has been involved with the Social Welfare institution since she arrived in Spain, 6 years ago. She also received assistance when she was living in Chile and that allowed her to make a comparison of both her experiences: she affirms that Social Care does not provide the help it is needed, as the social workers do not approach cases from trying to apprehend each specific context. “They see you as another number, from 1 to 10, you’re 9 and you meet these requirements: you’re immigrant, you don’t have papers, you have two children (...). But they don’t see beyond that person. Then, when you paint everyone with the same brush, you lose your ability to dissociate, to separate what this person really needs”<sup>xvi</sup>.

### *5.6.1. Stereotypization of racialised mothers*

The mothers have also to face a series of stereotypes and prejudices constructed around their racialised identities. For instance, the cliché of Latin American women as bearers of patriarchal values, passive, and dependents of their partners –apart from the stereotype of them using “a seductive look” for achieving their objectives–, interferes when they strive to mingle with the autochthonous community (Contreras, 2019). These prejudices are also present within the interactions between caseworkers and childcare-involved women: Paula told me her social worker accused her (and all Latin American women) to be lustful, to be always offering themselves and having sex with many men. Moreover, Paula affirmed that the worker was clearly upset for the fact that she was depending (economically) on a man.

Another common prejudice is the assumption that the migrant population is uneducated –or does not comply with Western-European educational standards. Mercedes shared how surprised some social workers were when she approached them in Catalan: “because, of course, a migrant will not be able to learn Catalan”<sup>xvii</sup>. It is the same story when migrant women do not work as cleaning women or are not willing to work on nursing homes. “They expect you to be as meek as a lamb”, she added.

From the other side of the coin, social workers express certain assumptions about migratised individuals based on prejudices about their way of living, beliefs, and knowledges. These preconceptions about the families they need to assist, even before investigating further, entails a high possibility of perpetrating malpractice. Ignoring the implicit biases in caseworkers’ judgments and assessments creates a false assumption that Social workers exercise their profession from a just approach (Merritt, 2021). When discussing domestic gender-based violence and the normalization of this violence in some households, Martina –who is currently a social worker in an EAIA– brought up that “many times, with migration processes, we assist families that come from *rural areas*, and they land in Barcelona, where we go all out, in a manner of speaking: ‘kids must go to school’, ‘you have to work’... And of course, to navigate on this isn’t easy. And then the tolerance with a lot of things, the shame, with the topic of abuse, the lack of limits among people. All this makes it complicated”<sup>xviii</sup>. From Martina’s words, it can be understood that the conflictive point she identifies derives more from the resistance by the migrant families to adapt to her criterion of a ‘good and acceptable family’, than an objective assessment of the family shortcomings. As Dorothy E. Roberts (2012) –addressing the penalization of Black mothers by the foster care and prison US systems– points out, the reproduction and strengthen of discriminative stereotypes assures the continuance of a system that instead of providing welfare, it unfairly punishes certain social groups.

### **5.7. Gender-based violence as a shared factor and single parenthood as a vulnerability**

Women are still the main caregivers in many societies, and, in some family units, the only ones. The stories of the child welfare-involved women of this study are diverse, but they share common topics; for instance, the root cause for becoming single-mother families: gender violence. “I broke up with the father of my oldest son for domestic issues, we

arrived at... there has been psychological and physical abuse: it has been a period of my life that has been very hard for me to get past”<sup>xxix</sup> (Ariadna). In Catalonia, most reported experiences of gender-based violence are Intimate Partner Violence (Institut Català de les Dones, 2020). In fact, this is also the case worldwide: according to the World Health Organization (2021), 27% of women aged 15-49 have been subjected to some form of physical or/and sexual violence by their partners.

Experiencing gender violence engenders high levels of vulnerability, which can be admitted as a risk factor for child custody loss: “to experience gender violence is also a factor of risk to enclose your children, and many *compañeras*<sup>29</sup> have lost them for reporting they were suffering gender violence, and perhaps the man was released, and she ended up without her kids”<sup>xxx</sup> (Manon). In interviews with child welfare workers, this assessment was also mentioned: Clara, who had been working in an EAIA for 20 years, explained how she perceived the usual pattern of intervention in cases of gender-based violence: “in many cases we had to adopt protection measures because the mothers were incapable of protecting their children from the abuse they [the mothers] were victims of”<sup>xxxi</sup> (Clara).

The relation between being involved with childcare services and gender-based violence is a phenomenon that has been observed in other contexts too: to give an example, according to a study conducted in United States –regarding the doble oppression that the Foster Care and the prison systems exercise against Black mothers–, there is a connection between the risk of losing your children to the childcare institution and the fact of have experienced gender-based violence. “The child welfare system blames and punishes battered mothers for exposing their children to violence, just as it blames and punishes mothers for other family problems caused by systemic deprivations beyond their control” (Roberts, 2012: 1489).

Furthermore, other studies (Meier, 2020; Sheely & Boyd, 2020) call attention to the improper use of the Parental Alienation (PA) theory as an argument of defence from the father’s side in custody battles. PA is the process through which a child becomes disaffected from one of their parents, as a result of emotional manipulation by the other parent. Joan S. Meier’s study on United States and Elisabeth Sheely & Susan B. Boyd’s on Canada show that “judges are more likely to focus on alienating behaviours than IPV

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<sup>29</sup> I decided not to translate the term *compañera* as I considered its equivalents in English (e.g., comrade or companion) do not denotate the same political meaning.

[Intimate Partner Violence] when determining custody and access” (Sheely & Boyd, 2020); according to the data used in Meier’s research, only 1 of 51 cases where the mother reported child sexual abuse, but the father alleged parental alienation, was the mother who won the case (Meier, 2020). Therefore, the allegation of PA is used as a mean to illegitimate the abuse and the IPV, and, even if the term PA is gender-neutral, its application in custody trials is absolutely gender-biased. This immodest use of PA in custody proceedings also takes place in Catalonia, as Manon claims: “this same institution is the one that, for example, is creating impunity for paedophiles in intra-family contexts, through the use of Parental Alienation syndrome. (...) And DGAIA has never challenged, for example, the systematic use of Parental Alienation syndrome, and is it assumed that their role is to protect the minors! But what they’re doing is creating impunity and even giving a child, in this case, to a suspected paedophile!”<sup>xxii</sup>. Manon was referring to a mediatic case, where the Spanish legal authorities grant the custody of the child to the father, even if he had been reported for sexual abuse. The mother, Maria, a migrant from Uruguay, shut herself and her daughter down into the Uruguayan consulate in Barcelona, refusing to give the little girl to her father (Reguero, 2019); she stayed there for a week, and finally surrendered. Even so, the child is under her father’s custody thus far.

### **5.8. Single-mother families**

The experience of being a single-parent family unit also entails challenges. First, a single mother with her children does not fit in the standard family model. “You can be a single mum and have certain financial resources, but you do not fulfil the ‘family image’ they’re expecting”<sup>xxiii</sup> (Manon). Add to that the pressure to fulfil the requirements to be a ‘good mother’, a role that has been imposed on women as an intrinsic part of their socially constructed identity.

The mothers interviewed in this study express the difficulties to attain the high standards of ‘good mothering’ as their social status and identity does not belong to the hegemonic framework: “they ask you to be a mother but without obligations. Or they ask you to work, but without having children: these two things can’t go separated because you’re a complex of many things, you’re a mother, sister, friend, lover (...) we all have different functions and they can’t tell you "divide this, from this", it can’t be. (...) Because if you don’t work, how do you eat? If you don’t see your children because you’re working all day, to give them the best, you miss to raise them, to see them, to create a bond with them (...). It has always been like this and here [in Catalonia] I’ve felt it more<sup>xxiv</sup>” (Ariadna).

Yet, how all these factors come together in a way that pave the way to child custody loss among the women interviewed in this study? What is not working within the Childcare system that instead of keeping families safe, it reproduces their vulnerabilities? How did child custody loss among migratised mothers in Barcelona became a collective experience? In the following chapter I will address critically the experiences described above from a feminist, decolonial and antiracist standpoint.

## 6. The judicialization of motherhood never affects only one woman

### 6.1. The repressive politics of child custody removal

In her interview, Manon brought up a relevant matter when analysing the political and ideological background of child custody removal: this has been a common practice of politics of repression in different sociohistorical contexts<sup>xxv</sup>. For instance, concerning Australia's childcare policies, Sara C. Motta affirms that child removal is part of "a biopolitical process of discipling and controlling the autonomous female subject and collective forms of social reproduction, and as a means of breaking Aboriginal and Afro-American resistance" (Motta, 2016: 103). That is also the case in the United States: the study of Dorothy E. Roberts shows how there is a shared presumption among welfare workers that African American children are better away from their parents and that the State is much more capable of granting the care they need. From there, the author establishes a link between child removal from black families and the campaigns to encourage black children adoption by white families (Roberts, 2012). Even in Canada, the country's "Indian" policy was focused on removing Indigenous children from their families as a colonial strategy of domination, and, still today, the number of Indigenous children within the Canadian child welfare is frightfully high; as Laura C. L. Landertinger upholds: "by continuing the practice of Indigenous child removal, the child welfare system sustains settler society's annihilative and accumulative impulses in the present, continuing to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land and sovereignty" (Landertinger, 2021: 141).

The Argentinian case is also a good example of child custody removal as a form of ideological repression: during the last dictatorship –also known as the National Reorganization Process–, it took place an illegal child abduction process, which gave rise to one of the most known movement of mothers: the *Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*. A similar situation occurred in Spain during Franco's dictatorship, when children from republican families were stolen by the totalitarian regime. The underlying intention was to annihilate the "red gene" (Souto, 2015). There are multiple differences between the cases, but it is worth pointing out that in the Spanish one, the removals occurred publicly and there was even a legal framework that covered them. In addition, there is little information about the exact number of children that were abducted, as well as the number



of children who have been able to recover their identity. The Spanish state, until today, has not shown a clear initiative to engage with politics of memory and restorative justice, which exemplifies how the country is turning a blind eye to the still present fascism.

It is from this gaze that child custody removal of migrant mothers is read by the interviewees as a weapon to dismantle anti-racist and decolonial resistance to the patriarchal, Western-centric, capitalist, and racist/colonial world system, and to maintain the political, ideological, and sociocultural hegemonic power of the West/Global North. Manon herself pointed it out: “child custody removal is also a way to cut the transmission channel of knowledge, ways of life and wisdoms of the people of the Global South with their children, so they are educated by institutions or White families”<sup>xxvi</sup>.

To describe the violence that repressive politics exert to the mothers lives I will engage with the concept ‘judicialization of motherhood’ which has been recently introduced by the activist-migratised mothers who denounce the violence they are suffering from the State and the Child Welfare institution. The first time I heard the term was during Manon’s interview: “I went through the judicialization of my motherhood, that it was not on the part of the State, but from the father of my child, but using the same legal mechanisms –parental power, to question me as a mother, all this. I think that the critical vision we acquired is precisely because of the knowledge we have about the function of the system, precisely because we have lived through it, we have experienced it”<sup>xxvii</sup>. Therefore, Manon uses the term to describe the experience of women whose mothering is questioned and compromised in a judicial process, usually on account of a parental guardianship dispute. For the mothers, these have been very violent experiences, as the legal system did not back them up and they felt they were not treated the same as their male counterparts. Manon gave a hypothetical example on that matter when discussing the accusation of ‘desertion’: “if I am away for a week, and they consider I have left the house [abandonment], they take him [her son] away from me and I am not seeing him anymore. I have seen this in specific cases, that they have taken minimal things, minimal errors of the mothers, or bad decisions, or whatever, and the punishment is resounding”<sup>xxviii</sup>.

Furthermore, the concept is also popular in the context of Chile where economically vulnerable families are being mistreated by the National Minor’s Service (SENAME). Their actions have been reported by a newly created association, *Madres desesperadas*

(Hopeless mothers) and the Facebook community of "Judicialized maternities"<sup>30</sup>. Hence, the term is employed from multiple perspectives and experiences and throughout these pages, I will attempt to reflect on it, coming from the voices of the mothers, who have the knowledge, because they have heard it up, close, and personal.

The judicialization of marginalised motherhoods is a process of transformation towards a criminalization of the figure of the migrant mother and their maternal practices. This process does not take place exclusively within the court room and it is expressed through a variety of mechanisms: legal, social, and political. Above all, it is an ideological apparatus of control and submission, based on politics of fear and colonial patterns of power. On the following chapters I will reflect on the State's institutions functioning from a critical perspective and especially considering racialised and migratised experiences as a crucial aspect of the analysis.

## **6.2. Institutionalization, de-subjectification, and mechanisms of control within the Welfare State**

Within a neoliberal society, Social Welfare is managed by different institutions which are responsible of the well-being of the State's citizens. This well-being is described based on the same neoliberal ideology: individualism, the commodification of all aspects of life, hyper-consumerism, privatization, competitiveness, and the legitimization of inequalities. Neoliberalism envisions a uniform society, where reality can be described only in its own terms. Consequently, people's social care has been homogenised, as if everyone had identical needs and departed from comparable experiences.

As Sara Motta explains when addressing the interaction between Childcare policies and the indigenous population in Australia, neoliberal interventions regarding social care are based on the principle of individualization of social ills. This predominant discourse holds oppressed bodies and identities (racialised, indigenised, and migratised) responsible for their own hardships when, in fact, they are caused by the privatization, outsourcing, and downsizing of the Social Welfare (Motta, 2016). Therefore, these institutions (Social Services, Child Care), instead of contributing to dismantling a system that abides on a large part of the population being denied fundamental rights, work as power devices for the continuance of a White-Middle Class normativity.

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<sup>30</sup> I was unable to verify the possible connections between Manon and the Chilean mothers so I cannot affirm if one received the influence of the other or vice versa.

The mechanisms to ensure the perpetuation of the establishment are multiple. The mothers especially highlighted the high levels of surveillance and absolute intrusion to their private spaces as one of the most traumatic experiences derived from their involvement with Social Services and the Child Care institution.

“They interfere with your personal life. And you say, imagine, sometimes I’ve said:

- "I'd like to have a kid because I want to, what's wrong if I want to?" [and the case worker has answered:]
- "What? With your situation, undocumented, immigrant, you have no roof over..."

Damn, you're not even free of your life! What's is going on with them? You enter into the system and your life is no longer your own"<sup>xxxix</sup> (Ariadna).

Darcey H. Merritt, who engaged with the experiences of Child Welfare-involved Black and Latinx families in the US, singles out the same pattern of oppressive and discriminatory supervision and surveillance from the welfare institutions towards vulnerabilised subjects (Merritt, 2021). Furthermore, Merritt assesses that the conflict may be deeply rooted within the functioning of the human service system, as “substantial power dynamics are intrinsic in these experiences, resulting from the imbalance between those in the power to judge and regularly scrutinize parents’ behaviours and parents very much at mercy of their child welfare workers” (Merritt, 2021: 64). This unequal power dynamic and the continuing surveillance generates to the mothers a high feeling of discomfort and incomprehension, as they do not understand what they have done to be constantly checked, as if they were a threat. “They came to control me, and that really bothered me, because they came every day, and I say ‘why they come to control me so much? They haven’t seen me drunk or high; there is no reason’"<sup>xxxx</sup> (Ariadna).

This unjustified mistrust is a constant in Child Welfare-involved mothers’ experiences. In the US case, when discussing the biased judgment of caseworkers, Merritt (2021) affirms that is a common and legitimate fear among racialised families that their cases will not be assessed fairly, due to biased prejudices. Ariadna’s experience gives evidence of that. On October 8<sup>th</sup>, Ariadna received a phone call from her youngest son’s school to communicate her that he had bleed from his anus. The school nurse explained that probably it was constipation. Ariadna offered to come to pick his son from school

immediately, but the nurse said it was not necessary, he was alright. At the end of the day, when Ariadna went to the school, she got a health report with some recommendations, for instance, taking her son to the doctor. That afternoon, Ariadna kept an eye on her son, checked that everything was alright and, as he had a good sleep and there were no symptoms for being worried about, she brought him to school next day. At noon, she was at the phone with the school principal who wanted to know why she did not take her son to the doctor the day before. She explained herself: the child did not present any signs of traumatism or serious injury, so she considered he did not need to see a doctor. Still, the principal insisted she should have an official medical report, thus, Ariadna guaranteed she was taking her son to the hospital that afternoon.

Around three o'clock after midday, she received another call, from the Mossos d'Esquadra –Catalan police– to inform her that a protocol for suspicion of child sexual abuse had been activated. She was shocked: sexual abuse? Where did that come from? She had always been very attentive with everything regarding her son, she had an open and regular communication with her son's teachers and any important incident had not been mentioned before. Ariadna went to the school to pick up her son and a report was handed in to her: *3-year-old and 10 months child is taken by Mossos d'Esquadra for suspected child abuse. He has been checked; he has nothing.* That afternoon, Ariadna brought her son to four different hospitals to get a medical report on his health status. She brought all the documentation to the police, as prove that there was nothing wrong with the little one. The police officer told her that she should be grateful the protocol was activated: you never know what may have happened, it could have even been her older son who did something to her youngest. She was infuriated: so, after putting her in that situation, now he dared to blame her other son?

Unfortunately, even if there was sufficient evidence that this was not a sexual abuse case, they needed to follow all the steps on the protocol. A meeting was set up, with her son's psychologist, the educator, Social Services, a rep of the educational psychology team (EAP) and the schooling consortium. They assessed the case and send it to the Functional Unit of Abuse to Minors (UFAM) who had the last word. During the whole process, it was stated to Ariadna repeatedly that she was lucky nothing happened, because there are many incidents of sexual abuse of children that are not reported. The UFAM did another examination of Ariadna's son –the sixth one– and finally, on January 29<sup>th</sup>, she received a report stating there was no sexual abuse indicators, so the case could be filed. After four

months and six anal examinations to a 3-year-old, Ariadna could breathe deeply and safely. “They have told me I should be happy nothing happened. That nothing happened? Everything happened, I said, because I have been hurt. Because here, in my head, they scared me. Even if things are solved, this has happened, and I got very hurt. Me, and my kids”<sup>xxxix</sup>.

From the welfare workers’ side, they do not acknowledge the discriminative background of their procedures. On one side, they reinforce this individualized vision of social deficiencies, explaining parents’ behaviours on account of lack of emotional resources: if a family model is deprived, it may be because the parents’ family model was also insufficient, explained Martina. That “deficit” is identified as a “disequilibrium”, a “bias” that need to be corrected and compensated. They also lacked critical awareness of the inequalities that characterize our current social, economic, and political system. During her interview, so as a result of our conversation, Clara noticed that, from the cases she was working on, the families who were more affected by the current socioeconomic crisis (COVID-19) were mainly migrant; still, she did not make a deeper reflection on the matter. The caseworkers affirm that through the years, professionals have normalized the severe lack of resources, as it has become the daily bread of many of the Childcare-involved families. Martina exemplified this circumstance with the case of eviction: she described how, before the economic crisis, an eviction was an oddity but after, that a family had impoverished in less than a year to the point they must be evicted from their house, it was not so rare. Martina confessed that it is very difficult to work with this families: they have lost their jobs, they do not have any income, maybe even have arrived the country illegally and do not have papers. They felt that this kind of cases surpassed their professional power: on the one hand, they do not have the actual necessary resources to assist these families; for instance, it is not in their hands to provide them with adequate housing—that is Social Services’ jurisdiction. Besides, they acknowledge the system lacks the required economic and political capacity to support these families, which makes them feel powerless in front of these unfair realities.

Even though if some of the State workers recognise the system failures –and even their own personal vulnerabilities (without getting to prejudice and biased perceptions of the cases) –, they sustain their work is performed in the best way possible: trying to identify the families’ potentials rather than their shortcomings. Unfortunately, turning a blind eye to the lacks of migratised families renders impossible the prospect of stopping this endless

loop of precarity that migratised and racialised communities find themselves on. The neoliberal character of Social Work and Services jeopardizes the possibilities to embrace institutional change, as they work towards preserving the establishment and maintaining their power. Prioritizing resources and welfare benefits over sensibilization, understanding, and defeating White and class privilege has transformed the Social Welfare into something it was not supposed to be (Gírela, 2017). Drove by economic gain and capital accumulation, the Child Care institution continues to reduce social assistance and services, at the same time as it sharpens its punitive functions against racialised and migratised families, in order to preserve its economical, institutional, and social privilege.

### **6.3. Vulnerable or vulnerabilised?**

Another conflicting point is the process of vulnerabilization of targeted populations: that is to say, those who do not fit in the White, Middle-Class, Westernized normativity framework. Jacob Lind, in his article about migrant children's rights in Sweden, suggests the term 'vulnerabilization' to describe the State's practice on generating vulnerability at the same time it addresses it through its social services institutions, as a strategy to govern the communities it has threatened in the first place (Lind, 2019). Vulnerabilization implies a contradiction where the government agencies who should be providing social assistance to those who suffer the consequences of an unequal economic, social, and political system, are actually taking advantage of this people to maintain structural power.

"Social Services is not the police: Social Services is an institution whereby families approach to ask for help and Social Services is an institution where families living in poverty, or close to it, go. Then we can see, according to the data, that most of the cases [from Child Care] have been open by an institution whom families approach voluntarily, seeking for support"<sup>xxxii</sup>, Manon attested.

In her interview, Manon referred repeatedly to the data gathered by the Childhood Observatory in Spain where, for instance, it is showed that state-wide, the bulk of notifications of suspicion of child abuse proceed from Social Services: in 2018, there were 6.704 notifications coming from Social Services, from a sum of 18. 801 reports<sup>31</sup> (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2018). The mothers claim they need to hide their own needs, so they are not transformed to vulnerabilities, and used against their wellbeing, instead of

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<sup>31</sup> It is important to remark, as stated by the Childhood Observatory, that the data available is not complete so it does not show fully accurate conclusions.

improving it. The feeling among them is that you need to run from Social Services: they should not be aware of your difficulties, your faults, because getting caught will mean to lose your children's custody or to submit to such a level of surveillance that your parenting will be absolutely disrupted.

Even when the aid is provided, it comes from an unfair power relation based on benevolent despotism and White/Western supremacy. The assumption that subaltern women are non-agential is very common among welfare workers in Europe. Ioana Vrăbiescu, who engaged with the discussion on Roma children rights as part of the migrant community in Catalonia, argues for benevolent politics as one of the main pillars for the normalization of violence against migratised people and structural racism. "Humanitarianism portrays people as victims, transforming them into passive objects of charity rather than subjects of law and also as active subjects able to cope with their everyday life circumstances" (Vrăbiescu, 2017: 1666). This problematic paternalism has its ramifications in various historical phenomena –in the following chapter it will be addressed the coloniality of those practices.

#### **6.4. Coloniality of Social Work**

The mothers condemn the colonial attitudes welfare workers have towards them, from the saviour complex to the de-humanization and de-subjectification of racialised people. "We also have noticed that many feminists, hegemonic as well as from grassroots movements, work there [Childcare institution]. And they work there with that complex of 'I am going to save the children', 'I do know how to take care of the children'... then they're a lot of people who doesn't even have children of their own. "We do know how to take care of the children; we will teach you how to take care of them". Is something very perverse, very violent, on a psychological, emotional and institutional level"<sup>xxxiii</sup> (Paula).

Therefore, although colonialism as a political system belongs to the past, coloniality is very present today. It defines our legal, political, and social structures, and it establishes the gaze which we perceive the world –and those who inhabited it. Hence, returning to the issue in hand, coloniality influences the functioning of the Welfare institution, thence, the Child Care system. Social workers, as members of the Western-European society, who have been educated, raised, and socialized from a Eurocentric/Colonial perspective, reproduce colonial patterns when assessing cases where racialised and migratised subjects

are involved. This biased appraisal undertakes discrimination, and “legitimizes a universalizing expert perspective that negates difference and diversity, and instead reproduces the representational absence of the racialised subaltern mother as knower and carer (Motta, 2016: 112).

For instance, Martina, who is a social worker in an EAIA in Barcelona city, when discussing about gender-based violence, affirmed: “regarding cultural patterns and the issue about patriarchy and violence, not all countries are in the same place. (...) And I remember, when I entered in the EAIA, there were cases with children abuse, physical, for example, and I believe that in almost all cultures physical violence is penalized. But of course, psychological abuse, to forbid, to decide over the others, the wife, the son, the daughter, it is shared by many cultures”<sup>xxxiv</sup>. Although she did not omit the fact that patriarchy is a reality in Catalonia too, her words implied certain superiority of Catalan (Spanish, European) culture and system of values above different ones.

The assumption of a superior status of Western-European ethics leads to the re-creation of the old strategy of the “civilizing mission”. As part of the colonization and Westernization of Indigenous population, the settlers develop a gigantic ideological project with the intention to help “developing” “non-modern” (native) societies. The civilizing enterprise was based in 4 main axes: Enlightenment ideals, Christian values, White superiority and racist beliefs, and Liberal paradigms (Pekanan, 2016). To put it another way, civilizing the colonized communities meant to impose on them a Western-European understandings of society, through a violent process of economic exploitation, cultural assimilation, and imperial governance. Although this political stratagem originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century –during the colonisation of non-European land and communities– it is still used as an analytical concept to dismantle colonial practices among humanitarian, welfare, and social workers. According to Ioana Vrăbiescu –who researched on Roma immigrants’ experiences with the Child Care institution in Catalonia and the interrelation between child custody loss and the practices of individual-based “voluntary” return– “Catalan civil servants and social workers perform the civilizing mission towards the migrants, [the Roma], acting to eradicate their allegedly “barbaric” social practices” (Vrăbiescu, 2017: 1667; brackets added by the author).

What are exactly these “barbaric” maternal practices, unacceptable for a Western-European understanding of motherhood? Vrăbiescu states further: “the yardstick of measurement is the children in school, the wage labour, the health insurance or



documents” (op. cit). In the Catalan Child Care system, these elements are included in the «factors of fragility, risk of abuse factors and protection factors regarding parents or people in charge of the child/adolescent wellbeing», the document that sets the possible circumstances that may entail child custody removal from his/her parents<sup>32</sup>. The risk factors are the most mentioned by the mothers interviewed –as this are the ones used by their caseworkers as argumentation for the child custody removal; some of them are:

- To be unemployed for 2 years or more
- To have a dirty and messy house
- To have been evicted
- That the family have unstable and undefined family roles
- Low capacity of restraint (limits and control)
- To be isolated for social/cultural/religious reasons

Mercedes talked about being judged for co-sleeping with her daughter and bathing her, Ariadna pointed out how the housing problem (which was indeed caused by the management of Social Services) was the root cause of the instability in her household, and Manon stressed the fact that being undocumented, a single-parent family, or being involved in sex-work are risk factors for considering a child is in a neglected situation. Furthermore, as Manon claimed, and Clara –who has worked in the Child Care institution for over 20 years– confirmed: the main indicator for child custody removal in Barcelona is *negligence*, a wide-open (and highly subjective) measure to assess if the child’s physical integrity is defended. According to the document that establishes the operational foundations of the EAIA<sup>33</sup>– written in 2010–, negligence is a form of mistreatment and some of its indicators may be:

- the disappearance of the parents
- dirtiness
- malnutrition or usual hunger
- inadequate clothing
- long periods under the sun

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<sup>32</sup>The document can be consulted (in Catalan) in the following link:

[https://bcnroc.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/jspui/bitstream/11703/91812/1/infancia%20estudi%20diagnostic%20\(1\).pdf](https://bcnroc.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/jspui/bitstream/11703/91812/1/infancia%20estudi%20diagnostic%20(1).pdf)

<sup>33</sup> The document can be consulted (in Catalan) in the following link: [http://www.bcn.cat/butlletins-sedac/CBAB/BASES\\_DGAIA\\_Maig2010A.pdf](http://www.bcn.cat/butlletins-sedac/CBAB/BASES_DGAIA_Maig2010A.pdf)

- frequent domestic accidents
- to not have the medical needs covered
- educational needs unattended
- to be undocumented
- or expose the child to physical hazards

These indicators do not come out of the blue: they are informed by stereotypes and prejudices towards Child Care-involved families. As Ioana Vrăbiescu pointed out, when analysing her material about the interaction between caseworkers and Romanian families, “a professional needs no more than just “to see” the Romani migrants and their living conditions in order to evaluate a child’s welfare situation” (Vrăbiescu, 2017: 1674). As indicated before, negligence is one of the most used arguments for a child custody removal: in 2018, it represented the 44% of the total amount of the declared reasons. In other words, negligence is used to discredit forms of childrearing that do not comply with the norm<sup>34</sup>. Through the judgment of negligent mothers, the Child Care institution perpetuates colonial patterns of ideological imposition, that undertakes at the same time the denial of Other ways of engaging with motherhood and community life. As Viviana stated in her interview: “you see how indicators are assessed with migrant mothers, how they exercise their motherhood, they question them, how they raise their children, they drill in their heads that all parenting must be done in the Western way. This coloniality in which you express the hegemonic, perfect, Eurocentric parenting, and then just because a mother may do that or this different... they get penalized”<sup>xxxv</sup>.

#### *6.4.1. Gendered islamophobia and the stereotype of the defenceless Muslim woman*

Manon touched upon another factor that makes child custody removals a feminist issue. Regarding the group of mothers from North African countries (especially Morocco), she pointed out how Social Services assumes that a Muslim woman –specifically if she wears a veil– is subordinated to her male partner, and possibly victim of gender-based violence/*machismo*. According to Manon, the Child Welfare institution makes use of this

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<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to gather data that attested this abusive use of the negligence accusation: still, this was an issue mentioned by the mothers in the interviews, so I considered it was important to bring it up during the discussion. I am aware that the lack of examples weakens my argumentation: however, the high number of cases of negligence and the subjective adjectives in the indicators (for instance, “inadequate”) seem to be connected to ideological beliefs rather than objective knowledge. Yet, I want to emphasise the importance to gather more significant data on the matter.

ontological framework to justify removals of custody from Moroccan women, arguing that, as they are not able to overcome patriarchal oppression, they endanger their children. Lila Abu-Lughod identified the basis of this cultural framing –that understands Middle Eastern women’s struggles from a “white saviour” perspective, or as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak will put it “white men saving brown women from brown men”<sup>35</sup>– as “an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which ladies give speech versus others in which women shuffle around silently in burqas” (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 31-32). This biased comprehension of Muslim women agential subjectivity has also its own term: gendered islamophobia. Jasmin Zine –in her study on experiences of veiling among Muslim girls in a Canadian school– defines the concept as follows: “specific forms of ethno-religious and racialised discrimination levelled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform individual and systemic forms of oppression” (Zine, 2006: 240). The main target of this oppressive discourse has been the practice of veiling/wearing a veil: “the presence of women with hijab become a central axis of the Islamophobic discourse which presents women who wear it as problematic persons, oppressed and subordinated, even extremists” (Khir, 2017: 29; translated by the author). In Europe, we have witnessed the presence of gendered Islamophobia in the numerous bans of wearing the veil in the public space: in Austria since 2017, as well as in France (2011), Belgium (2011), The Netherlands (2016), the Lombardi region in Italy (2016) and Denmark (2018).

### **6.5. Understanding motherhood from difference**

To continue with the decolonial analysis, another point of conflict described by the mothers is how they perceive a different understanding of motherhood from what they call “a White and hegemonic feminism”. This concept is also used in feminist academia to describe a part of the feminist movement that, through oppressive patterns of power, imposes its own ideological positions towards the feminist struggle, establishing its particular political leadership. Hegemonic feminism is context based and it depends on specific political configurations: for instance, when using the concept in the context of Sweden, de los Reyes & Mulinari (2020) are referring to a nationalist feminism, as gender equality is an intrinsic part of Swedish democratic values. In the Spanish case, this hegemonic feminism embraces a variety of perspectives, from liberal to populist

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<sup>35</sup> Spivak, G. (1988). “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Morris, R. (2010). *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press.

feminism<sup>36</sup>. Most of all, hegemonic feminism in Spain (and over Europe) is Eurocentric –based on European values and European experiences within the women’s rights movement– and White.

Manon considers that hegemonic feminism is distancing its discourse from the experience of motherhood, point also noticed by Mercedes: “sometimes it looks it’s an °attack to feminism to be a mother and wanting to exercise motherhood”<sup>xxxvi</sup>. The mothers affirm that *they* stand for alternative forms of child-rearing, non-normative and non-conforming with the capitalist system. “The suggestion of White feminism regarding, for example, childhood, is not to change the social organization model so parenting can be community-shared or mothers can spend more time with their children, but to have day care from the age of 0, to promote State-controlled child rearing, so you can go to work”<sup>xxxvii</sup> (Manon).

This trend is also common in feminist scholarship, as the feminist movement and theory has developed, historically, problematizing motherhood, and rejecting it as a feminist concern and an academic area of study. As Tatjana Takševa (2018) points out: “much of what we have come to accept as normative, liberal, or academic feminist scholarship in women and gender studies has a distinctly negative stance toward motherhood. Bypassing motherhood within larger, established feminist discourses reveals that feminist theory is still to a large extent determined by universalist and essentialist histories of motherhood that are the basis of much feminist theorising of gender, femininity, and motherhood” (Takševa, 2018: 179). In recent years, and thanks to non-hegemonic feminisms’ contributions, the scholarship about the topic has diversified and it started including intersectionality as an important element on the equation, in order to understand the specific context of the practice of motherhood, as well as the concrete women who enact this experience and knowledge (Palomar, 2005).

The mothers defend a deep ideological discord on how to really engage with the feminist struggle, establishing a division between *our* feminism and *theirs*.

“Still, their feminism is a feminism... very post-Francoist. They are people who don’t reach beyond the violence... that’s to say, they’re still this kind of feminists

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<sup>36</sup> Liberal feminism is focused on achieving gender equality (from a binary understanding of gender, female/male] within the framework of liberal democracies. Is influenced by the liberal value of freedom. Populist feminism refers to the popularisation of the feminist ideology, this image of massive protests in the name of feminism or the use of feminism as a political brand. As a consequence of the incorporation of feminism into populist politics, it is a recurrent phenomenon that many political parties integrate feminist ideas into their electoral programmes.

that need the State, that they see the State as a protective force of women, for example. Or a protective force of children, that's to say, there isn't an intersectional feminism where the State is criticized, as patriarchal, and all they're institutions as patriarchal, racist and misogynists. I see they're not there yet, and if they are, they oppose themselves to it"<sup>xxxviii</sup> (Paula).

To them, the welfare workers in the Child Care institution are "White woman, very class-biased, who are still obeying the model of the normative family"<sup>xxxix</sup> (Paula). And is through this lens the mothers are being judged.

## **6.6. Lack of solidarity: where are the feminists?**

The tension with hegemonic White feminism does not take place solely within academia. The mothers expose that the feminist activism in Barcelona remains silent regarding the institutional violence exercised against them: it is not an issue of discussion for them or a claim they enact. The lived experiences of the mothers give an account of this political disavowal: for example, Paula used to be a member of Marea Turquesa<sup>37</sup>, who also denounces the injustices that take place within the Child Care institution, but she decided to untangle herself from the organization because "it fully denied the structural racism that migrant families experience from DGAIA"<sup>xl</sup>.

The controversy of the oppression and conservatism still reproduced within the feminist movement is one of the main pillars of the postcolonial and decolonial feminist critique towards a dominant and hegemonic feminism, that has hold on to the political power with tooth and nail. Yuderkis Espinosa, one of the most influential figures of decolonial feminism in Abya Yala, introduced the concept "*racismo de género*" (Gendered racism) to describe "the inability of feminist theory to recognise their privileged position of enunciation within the modern-colonial gendered matrix, inability that comes from their denial to challenge and abandon this position, at the expense of "sacrificing", hiding diligently, the perspective of the "women" on a lower level of privilege, that is to say, the impoverished racialised within the heterosexual norm" (Espinosa, 2012: 154-155; translated by the author).

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<sup>37</sup> Marea Turquesa is an association of Child Care-involved mothers. It started in 2016 and it reunites different groups from all Spain: APNE (Andalucía), Familias del siglo XX (Madrid), Luchemos por ellos (Valencia) and Mamá Gorila (Catalonia). Its members are mainly economic vulnerable families and single mothers who have experienced gender-based violence.

The conflict derived from White feminism and leftist activists not engaging fully with the antiracist endeavour is a current topic of discussion in academia, particularly, the role that these “allies” have on politically excluding immigrant and anti-racist activists (Cappiali, 2016). To describe this phenomena, Teresa Cappiali –on her study about the mechanisms of exclusion used by the Italian Left towards migrant and ethnic minorities– introduced the concept ‘political racialisation’, to point out the “mechanisms whereby political actors have partially included immigrants in the political sphere, but in relationship of “ethnic” or “racial” subordination” (Cappiali, 2016: 972). That is to say that migrant voices may be included but under some parameters, which hinders the possibility to overcome White and class privilege in the activist and political arena. Political racialisation is also present in Barcelona where migrant communities have organised in parallel to the hegemonic feminist movement, in view of their exclusion –and of their demands and problem areas– of activist spaces in the city (Álvarez et al., 2020). In a presentation organised by Women’s and LGTBI Desk from the *Diputació de Barcelona*, the afro-descendent activist Desirée Bela-Lobedde denounced the inherent racism of the White feminist movement, as it continues to reproduce White privilege and oppression, and specifically it takes advantage of the antiracist struggle for personal gain. Bela-Lobedde states that White feminism instrumentalizes the fight against racism, using black bodies and the violence they experience to justify the feminist struggle; furthermore, when the antiracist activist call attention to the racism reproduced, White feminists react with a defensive stand, which recreates the violence against racialised individuals (Bela-Lobedde, 2019).

Manon also identified this instrumentalization of the anti-racist and migrant-rights struggle, which is biased by the own political interests of the Left and the feminist movement. “There is a sector of this Left and White feminism who criticizes DGAIA regarding unaccompanied migrant minors. Solely and exclusively for this. They don’t talk about custody removal, they just criticize DGAIA on this issue, and their argumentation is that they need more State control and extending the budget, and that is the solution. But there isn’t a critique of a profound ideological problem of DGAIA’s functioning”<sup>xli</sup>. According to the mothers, this lack of radical critical perspective towards the system and the State’s institutions is due to the fact that “these institutions are a working niche for the Left. Who manage and create the legal frameworks of these

institutions isn't the far right (...): DGAIA is a working niche for Esquerra Republicana<sup>38</sup>, where the last 3 directors have been Leftist, feminist, independentists women, well, they call themselves Leftist<sup>xliv</sup> (Manon). There we can observe where the political interests of the hegemonic Left dwell: the Child Care institution is part of the apparatus that upholds the political power and privilege of the White, middle-class Leftist feminists. Thus, "is important to remark that the critique from antiracism to White feminism is not only of symbolical significance: that is to say, is not that White feminism pretends to represent other women, who have other experiences, or because they universalize, is not just a critique on the field of ideas: it is a critique because White feminism and White women, specifically, in the Catalan and Spanish context, have a political power within institutional spaces"<sup>xlv</sup> (Manon). A privilege they refuse to let go.

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<sup>38</sup> Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya is the oldest political party in Catalonia; it was founded in 1931. It defines itself as a Social Democrat Leftist party, supporter of the independence of the Catalan Countries [the territories where the Catalan Language is spoken: Catalonia, the Valencian Community, the Balearic Islands, Andorra, and La Franja].

## 7. Epilogue. The mothers don't cry anymore; now, they fight

### 7.1. Activism of migrant women in Barcelona

The conflict with the questionable practices of DGAIA is not new: it has been all over the press for the last 6 years. Nevertheless, the experiences of migrant mothers have remained invisible: because of their own fear to voice out the discrimination, oppression, and violence they are exposed to, because of the difficulties they had to face to create a place of its own within the Spanish and Catalan political arena, and, definitely, because racism is still a topic that Europe turns it back on.

One year ago, a group of mothers who migrated from different Latin American countries and were residing in Barcelona city decided to say enough is enough. They started to try to reach other Childcare-involved migrant women via social media, to share their experiences and create a support network. Paula and Manon were the initiators as both were previously involved in activist spaces: Paula is part of Aprosex –an organization pro-sex work– and OTRAS –a sex worker union. She used to be implicated with Marea Turquesa but as specified earlier, she decided to disconnect herself for the lack of antiracist perspective in the association. Back in Mexico, where she lived before, she was part of the feminist movement: on her own words: “I have been an activist all my life”<sup>xliv</sup>. On the other hand, Manon has been more engaged with the antiracist movement. She got in touch with it based on her own experience with the Immigration Office and the Immigration Law in Spain. Her identity as an artist is highly politicized, and she develops an important task of raising awareness and critical thought regarding antiracism and decolonialisation through different social media platforms.

All the mothers interviewed express how their encounters with Social Welfare –and the Childcare institution– allowed them to, first, get to know the system close-up, to understand how it works and which are the hidden pitfalls you can come upon. Furthermore, their experiences were a kind of revelation, and explanation of the injustices they have been subjected to; through the judicialization of their motherhoods, they come to be politicized subjects. Interestingly, the politicization of their motherhoods also lead to the collectivization of their struggle.



The Latin American group started as a space focused on self-care and mutual support. The mothers described how positive it was the impact of such a comfort space: Ariadna affirmed that for her it was very important to have someone to talk with, it helped her heal, and Mercedes expressed how empowered she felt after applying her experience to give a hand to another mother. Paula described the mothers' group as an underground organization: among the child welfare-involved women, they knew they could contact Paula or Viviana for help, advice, or a friendly face. In July 2020, there was the start of a more consolidated group, who will meet frequently. They helped each other through their own cases with the Childcare institution and their work had some positive outcomes early: Mercedes shared with me the experience of one of the mothers of the group, whose children were going to be taken to an Accommodation Centre but thanks to the contribution of the other child welfare-involved mothers they could stay with her, and instead she was set to institutional surveillance for a year. "There were many possibilities that this [that the woman's children will be taken into State's custody] will happen but together we could prevent it. And that was... a rush"<sup>xlv</sup>.

The Latin American mothers group stayed in the shadow until November 2020 when, together with another group of mothers –mainly migrants from Morocco–, took the streets to protest against Nour's removal of her family. The family of Nour coordinated with a well-known activist from the Moroccan community, Alexandra, who helped to organise various protests in front of the DGAIA headquarters in Barcelona. Nour case reached the media and triggered a huge outcry, especially among the immigrant population of Barcelona, as the protests were supported by established migrant organizations of the city (Papeles Para Todxs and Dignitat Migrant). Migrant activism has been restless in Spain since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a consequence of the toughening of immigration policies. From the start the migrant movement developed in a newly created political space within the public sphere. However, this space was also highly masculine, so migrant women had to work extra hard to articulate their demands in an unwelcoming space for them (Álvarez et al., 2020). The migrant feminist activism in Barcelona focused on creating a network of collective empowerment –as Mujeres Pa'lante or the Red de Migración Género y Desarrollo does– and drawing attention to specific issues that affect migrant women: care and domestic work rights –the union Sindihogar is the main representative– or cleaning services workers' rights –wherein Las Kellys have developed a very important task of raising awareness about the working conditions of these women.

Is in this context, where “the coming together of women’s collectives and feminist organizations is a fundamental part of our memories in terms of our activist praxis” (Álvarez et al., 2020: 224), that the association MADRES (also known as *Madrecitas*) was created.

## **7.2. The Mother: agent of political change**

The figure of the mother as an active political agent has been quite prominent, especially in Latin American contexts. Probably the most known case is *the Abuelas y Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, in Argentina. During the last Argentinian dictatorship, the mothers, and grandmothers of the ‘disappeared’ organized to claim for the whereabouts of their loved ones. Her main protest strategy consisted in demonstrating in a historical political space, the Plaza de Mayo (May Square) in Buenos Aires. They became one of the main oppositional forces to the regime and they continued being very present in the political Argentinian arena, even after the dictatorial period. Furthermore, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* were the genesis of a new subjectivity, a collective identity that entailed a reconfiguration of the traditional sense of motherhood into a symbol of the resistance and the struggle (D’Antonio, 2007). A similar case occurred in Colombia where a group of mothers –*Asociación Caminos de Esperanza Madres de la Candelaria*– started a political space to outcry the enforced disappearances during the Colombian military conflict. Again, as the *Abuelas y Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the *Madres de la Candelaria* brought to the political space a silenced injustice. In both cases, is emphasized the importance of the collectivization of pain and trauma, as an expression of solidarity and a strategy to join forces against repressive governments (Shirley, 2013); an aspect shared with the migrant Child Care-involved mothers in Barcelona.

In Spain there is also a precedent of an organization of mothers: the *Madres contra la droga* (Mothers against drugs). This group appeared in Spain back in the eighties to bring the experiences of drug addicts to the public scene, so it stopped being a hidden and personal issue and became a social matter. The *Madres contra la droga* also emphasized the foundation of a collective identity as part of the organization process, an identity that defined itself opposite to the stigmatized and discriminative social construct of the ‘drug addict’ and the ‘mother of the drug addict’ (Valiente, 2001). The mothers of the MADRES collective also described this shift from a personal experience to a social problem that must be tackled from a common front. In fact, that was their departure point: to politized themselves, to collectivize their struggle – “this did not only happen to me”.

### 7.3. MADRES collective

At the beginning of July, *Madrecitas* formalized their group by the name of MADRES, ‘mothers fighting against patriarchal, racist and colonial violence’. Their activity develops mainly in social media, where they echo the experiences of Childcare-involved migrant mothers. Through setting up the group officially, the mothers intended to create the grassroots political organization that will support the mothers and will work together to recover their children. Therefore, MADRES pursues various purposes: on the one hand, it carries an internal commitment of empowering migrant women and establishing collectively an identity that offers them emotional resources and political strength. This networking will not confine to Childcare-involved families: the intention, as Manon expressed, is also to “water down the role that these institutions have in the lives of migrant and racialised families, who live complex economic situations, through strengthening community networks, so there will be no need to turn to these institutions”<sup>xlvi</sup>.

Moreover, MADRES works towards the Catalan society: to highlight and problematize child custody removals from migrant and racialised families and contributing to form a critical social consciousness that may allow to address injustices communally. Last but not least, MADRES aim not to remain in an idea-based level and to move forward as active members of the community who envision structural and societal change. The suggestions are multiple: from creating an international commission who will judge the democratic quality and will monitor the respect for civil and human rights within Catalan Welfare institutions, to start claiming state liability for the State’s malpractice and negligence. As a political horizon for the organization, Manon stated it clearly: maybe it is time to consider abolishing institutions as the DGAIA, because they are repressive institutions, and collectively engage on a critical reconsideration on how to handle Child Care.



Image from the Twitter account @madrecitas. [https://twitter.com/madrecitas1/status/1417121751977316359?s=20]

## 8. Concluding thoughts

I introduced this thesis with Paula's story, about the day her daughter was taken away by Child Care services. Even if it was 5 years ago, the experience was recorded in Paula's retina, and she remembers the events with clarity. Furthermore, she did not go through the experience alone: her friend Manon accompany her as they were already sharing another live-changing event: the newly motherhood of Manon. In consequence, a process of politization of their motherhoods started in each of the women's hearts, which prompt them to collectivise their experiences and find other migrant women who had been through the same. Together they aspired to reflect on the discriminative nature of the Social Welfare in Catalonia, Spain, and Europe, led by the one of the question it has driven this research: why migratised mothers get unjustly involved with Child Care services?

Throughout this pages I have reflected on the oppressive and overbearing nature of Social Services in Catalonia and how this inequitable structure affects specifically the experiences of migratised mothers, through the institution of Child Care. On behalf of children rights, the State, and its institutions, vulnerabilise racialised and migratised families so the status quo (White, Middle-class normativity) is sustained. This process takes place through a variety of mechanisms: the individualization of social problems that are caused by the neoliberalization of the Social Welfare, the practice of humanitarianism based on benevolent but despotic understandings of Social Work and a long-lasting colonial approach towards racialised subjects.

The discriminatory practices by the Social Welfare institution, and in particular Child Care services, is a common pattern in different Western countries. Earlier I have discussed the case of US, where the overrepresentation of Black and Latinx families within Foster Care proves the State's targeting of racialised population. In Canada and Australia, I observed similar standards in the assessment of indigenised families when parents are stereotyped as 'unfitted' per se. In Spain, this subject in the spotlight is the migrant, the foreigner, the Outsider. Migratised parents are the antithesis of the norm as a rule and are constantly under the pressure to fit into the normative model they are excluded from in the first place. Because of the patriarchal order that still rules the world nowadays, women are the main care givers in our society. They assume a huge load of child-rearing duties,

even some of them without any support from their partners, families, or communities; imagine adding this burden to the already challenging migrant experience.

The mothers interviewed in this study shared an emotional and discriminatory experience with the Child Care, which bring them together in an attempt to undermine and debunk the injustices they were sufferers of. They needed to join forces in their own space of feminist empowerment because the marginalisation of their struggle takes place on the part of society, their own migrant communities, and even feminist social movements. Therefore, their critique is not confined solely to the Child Care institution: they expose the unequal essence of the Social Welfare, the hardships of the migration experience in Europe and the excessive power that hegemonic feminism still upholds, which makes impossible revolutionary change towards overcoming all forms of oppression, discrimination, and injustice in our societies. Paula, Manon, Ariadna, Mercedes and Laia have turned their motherhoods into political identities, following the examples of other women from other times and places.

Child custody removal from migratised families could have been analysed from a variety of perspectives, which opens the door to further research on the topic. My approach has been focused on motherhood and the mothers experiences; still, this is a matter of childcare and successive investigations could reflect on the current trend of governmentalization of children rights among neoliberal states and its effects on children wellbeing. Furthermore, a deeper analysis of the Catalan Child Care institution is needed, with an extensive data collection –especially in the use of the ‘negligence’ factor for child custody removals– and the policing of racialised subjects within the Foster Care system. Finally, considering the short time the organisation of MADRES has been in the activist Catalan arena, it may be worth to keep track of its development and possible impact in the Catalan society. Above all, any further research on the subject, it should be carried out from an ally activist research perspective, aiming to support the struggle of MADRES and the other Childcare-involved migratised mothers.

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## 10. Original quotes

In Spanish and Catalan.

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<sup>i</sup> Entonces a mí me pilla en una violencia que no sé cómo definirla, estructurarla, no sé cómo afrontarla y, bueno, empiezo a investigar, investigar, investigar y, bueno, empiezo a darme cuenta de que es una violencia estructural, que hay una violencia estructural respecto a esto.

<sup>ii</sup> (...) es una lucha en la que tu apoyas, pero tu no te puedes apropiarse de la lucha. Yo, primero, no soy madre, y luego no soy una madre afectada porque me hayan tutelado a mi hijo o a mi hija. Entonces, ante esto, tú puedes apoyar, decir, quieren hacer tal o x cosa, pues, vale, vamos a buscar recursos así o podemos hacer esto o les puedes dar ideas. Pero luego ya al final, son ellas.

<sup>iii</sup> Al final tu has de construir sempre una història alternativa i una història plena de possibilitats. Al final la teràpia és això: és fer veure un món diferent, perquè el món que tu veus és el món que t'encapsala, que te encarcela, no sé com es diu, que t'empresona. Llavors tu has de construir una realitat diferent, que sigui congruent amb la família i que la família et compri.

<sup>iv</sup> Cómo, a estas alturas de mi vida, yo, como migrante, ponte tú, con todas las características que yo tengo, ponte tú de que he homologado un título, tengo la segunda tarjeta, mis hijos están escolarizados dentro de todo lo que cabe, hago cursos, participo aquí, participo allá, doy charlas también, hago mis talleres de madero-terapia, intento, cariño, intento, no pueda encontrar un lugar, no pueda tener un piso.

<sup>v</sup> O sea, un niño, cuando se retira, es porque hay un cúmulo de indicadores de riesgo y la extrema pobreza evidentemente ayuda a que se desarrollen, a lo mejor, otros, o sea, como nos decía un supervisor: “si hay extrema pobreza es más fácil que una persona que ya tiene una tendencia agresiva se ponga más agresivo”.

<sup>vi</sup> El fet de que sigui okupa no és una acció política, és falta de recursos, és una manca absoluta de poder...

<sup>vii</sup> Porque no puede conseguir trabajo. Cinco meses sin trabajar, haciendo por aquí, por allá, me han ofrecido trabajo, no he podido porque tenía que ir a la UFAM, tenía que ir al psicólogo...

<sup>viii</sup> Bueno, hi ha una diferència, si ets pobre, ets migrant.

<sup>ix</sup> conforme las condiciones vitales, de la población migrante principalmente, sean peores —ya sea por una crisis económica o por una pandemia, como es ahora—, eso es lo que va a facilitar que haya procesos de quita de custodia porque el sustento legal para una quita de custodia por un motivo clasista, racista o machista tiene que ver con que tú cumplas unos criterios que están, precisamente, condicionados por la situación económica, social y política.

<sup>x</sup> En el caso de las madres, no había esta sensibilidad, siempre era como, pues mira, si te han quitado al hijo es por algo. Como que es totalmente justificable y no se hacía un... y no solamente eso, el... cómo se dice esto, el arrojar piedras, ¿no?, el arrojarle piedras en la plaza. Y entonces que como toda esta... este, no solamente la sociedad, o no solamente el Estado sino tu propia comunidad, eres despreciado por tu propia comunidad y eres expulsada de tu comunidad.

<sup>xi</sup> Siempre ha sido como un secreto a voces, que te van a quitar a los niños, siempre que hay como un miedo como madre de que de repente algo no esté saliendo bien en el ejercicio de tu maternidad.

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<sup>xii</sup> Jo a la meua mare no... sé que pateix, pues no li estaré explicant tot això. I aleshores no parles, o per preservar-te, contra un judici, o també per preservar la gent que estimes. I al final ho acabes vivint d'una forma molt solitària.

<sup>xiii</sup> (...) ella preguntava el suport que tenia i li vaig dir, "tinc amics, persones en les que puc confiar". I ella em va mirar a la cara i em va dir: "*señora, a mi sus amigos no me sirven de nada*".

<sup>xiv</sup> (...) és com la baixada als inferns.

<sup>xv</sup> I faran l'impossible per desestructurar aquella persona, no estan per ajudar.

<sup>xvi</sup> Sino que te ven como un número más, del 1 al 10, tú eres el 9 y cumples estos requisitos, eres inmigrante, no tienes papeles, tienes dos hijos, uno así, uno asa, pum, esto sirve. Pero no ven atrás de esta persona. Entonces cuando tú ves a todos con la misma lupa, no puedes, te quita la capacidad de disociar, de dispersar lo que realmente necesita una persona.

<sup>xvii</sup> perquè clar, una migrant no està en condicions d'aprendre a parlar en català, no? (...) Has d'anar en pla com un bé, un xai.

<sup>xviii</sup> I clar, pensem que moltes vegades els processos de migració, tenim famílies que venen d'un món rural, amb un funcionament molt, molt... i aterren a Barcelona, on anem, tenim un funcionament, bueno, anem a pinyó, per dir-ho d'alguna manera: 'els nens han d'anar a l'escola', 'tu has d'anar a treballar'... I clar, moure't en tot això és complicat. I després molt la tolerància a moltes coses, la vergonya, en el tema d'abusos, la manca de límits entre les persones... Això complica.

<sup>xix</sup> Yo me he separado del papá de mi hijo mayor por problemas domésticos, hemos llegado a tener... ha habido maltrato psicológico, físico, entonces ha habido una etapa en que, bueno, ha sido muy difícil para mí superarla.

<sup>xx</sup> Vivir violencia de género es también un factor de riesgo para encerrar a tus hijos y a muchas compañeras se los han quitado por ir a denunciar que vivían violencia de género, e igual el tipo terminaba en libertad y ella terminaba sin los hijos.

<sup>xxi</sup> Y claro, en muchísimos casos teníamos que acabar adoptando medidas de protección porque las madres eran incapaces de proteger a estos niños del maltrato del que estaban siendo víctimas.

<sup>xxii</sup> (...)esa misma institución es la que, por ejemplo, viene generando la impunidad para los pederastas en contextos intrafamiliares, a través del uso del síndrome de alienación parental. (...) Y la DGAIA nunca ha entrado a cuestionar, por ejemplo, el uso del síndrome de alienación parental de manera sistemática, ¡porque se supone que su rol es de proteger a los menores! Pero lo que está haciendo es generar impunidad e incluso entregando una niña, por ejemplo, en este caso, ¡a un posible pederasta!

<sup>xxiii</sup> Tú puedes ser igual una madre soltera y tener ciertos medios económicos y tal, pero no eres la figura de familia que ellos esperan.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Te piden que seas madre, sin obligaciones. O te piden que trabajes, pero sin que tuvieras hijos: esas dos cosas no pueden ir separadas, no pueden, porque tú eres un complejo de muchas cosas, eres madre, eres hermana, eres amiga, eres amante. (...) todos tenemos tanta función que no te pueden decir divida esto de esto, no se puede. (...) Porque si tú no trabajas, ¿cómo comes? Si no ves a tus hijos y estás trabajando todo el día, todo el día, para darle todo lo mejor, te pierdes de criarlos, te pierdes de verlos, te pierdes de crear un lazo con ellos (...). Entonces siempre ha sido eso de que mira, y aquí lo he notado mucho más. (p. 3)

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<sup>xxv</sup> Entonces ahí también me pareció importante, más allá de mi caso individual, pensar que las quitas de custodia y los arrancamientos de menores también es una práctica, digamos, de política de represión (p. 4)

<sup>xxvi</sup> (...) las quitas de custodia también son una forma de cortar el canal de transmisión de conocimientos, de formas de vida y de saberes de la población del sur global para con sus hijos y para que estos sean educados por instituciones o por familias blancas.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Cuando yo viví la judicialización de mi maternidad, que no fue por parte del Estado sino por parte del padre de mi hijo, pero utilizando todos estos mismos mecanismos legales, la patria potestad, el cuestionarme a mí como madre, toda esta cuestión, o sea, yo creo que la visión crítica que tenemos es precisamente por el conocimiento que tenemos de cómo funciona, precisamente porque lo hemos vivido y lo hemos experimentado.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Si yo me voy una semana y ellos consideran que yo he hecho abandono hogar, así me lo quitan y ya no lo vuelvo a ver jamás. Y eso yo lo he visto en casos concretos, que han cogido como cosas mínimas, errores mínimos de las mamás o malas decisiones o lo que sea y el castigo es rotundo.

<sup>xxix</sup> (...) se meten en tu vida personal. Y tú dices, oye, ponte tú, yo a veces he dicho, me gustaría tener un hijo porque yo quiero, ¿qué pasa si quiero? Cómo, en tu situación, sin papeles, inmigrante, no tienes un techo... Carajo, ¡tú no eres ni libre de tu vida! ¿Pero que les está pasando? Tú entras en el sistema y tu vida ya no te pertenece.

<sup>xxx</sup> Entonces me venían a controlar y a mí eso me incomodaba, cariño, porque venían todos los días, y yo decía, ¿por qué me vienen a controlar tanto? Si a mí no me han visto borracha, no me han visto drogada, no hay un motivo.

<sup>xxxix</sup> (...) ellos me han dicho que no... que ellos han activado el protocolo, que debería estar contenta, porque el colegio lo ha activado, que no ha pasado nada... ¿Cómo que no ha pasado nada? Ha pasado todo, le he dicho, porque me han hecho daño. ¿Como que no ha pasado nada? Ha pasado todo, porque aquí en mi cabeza ya me han cagado. Aunque pase lo que pase, aunque se solucionen las cosas, esto que ha pasado, cariño, me ha hecho muchísimo daño. A mí y a mis hijos.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Servicios Sociales no es la policía: Servicios Sociales es una institución a la cual las familias se acercan, para pedir ayuda, y Servicios Sociales es una institución a donde van familias en situaciones de pobreza o cercanas a la pobreza. Entonces ahí también podemos ver, según estas cifras, que la mayoría de casos han sido abiertos por una institución a la cual las familias se acercan voluntariamente, a pedir apoyo.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> (...) nosotras también hemos detectado que muchas feministas, tanto hegemónicas como desde los mismos movimientos de base, trabajan ahí. Y trabajan ahí pues con este como complejo de voy a salvar a los niños, yo sí sé cuidar los niños... luego es un montón de gente que no tiene hijos, ¿no? “Nosotras sí sabemos cuidar a los niños, nosotras te vamos a enseñar a cuidar a los niños, es como... algo como muy perverso, muy violento a nivel psicológico y bueno, muy violento a nivel emocional e institucional.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> (...) els patrons culturals i el tema del *patriarcat* i de la violència, no a tots els països estem en el mateix punt. I no sé, moltes vegades arriben... no sé, jo recordo que quan vaig entrar a l'EAIA hi havia casos de maltractaments de cara als nens, que això també, el maltractament físic, per exemple, jo crec que gairebé en totes les cultures està com molt penalitzat, lo físic. Però clar, el maltractament psicològic, el prohibir, el decidir sobre la resta, la dona, el fill, la filla, això encara està bastant en l'ordre del dia, en moltes cultures.

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<sup>xxxv</sup> Tú ves los factores agravados y como se están llevando por el tema de la madre migrada, o también por el tema de como tu ejerces tu crianza, te cuestionan la crianza de la madre, se meten en su cabeza que todas las crianzas tienen que ser a la forma occidental. Esta colonialidad en la que tú detentas la crianza hegemónica, perfecta, eurocéntrica y porque la madre haga esto o lo otro diferente pues... por esto también te penalizan.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> (...) a vegades sembla que sigui un afront cap al feminisme ser mare i voler fer de mare.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> la propuesta del feminismo blanco en relación, por ejemplo, a la infancia, no es cambiar el modelo de organización social para que la crianza pueda ser comunitaria o para que las madres puedan tener más tiempo con sus hijos, sino es, la propuesta de Podemos era guarderías desde los 0 años, es estatizar la crianza para que tú puedas ir a trabajar.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> (...) todavía su feminismo es un feminismo, así como... cómo decirte, como muy postfranquista. Son como gente que no llega como más allá de las violencias, o sea no... o sea todavía son como de estas feministas que necesitan al Estado, que todo lo ven en el Estado, una fuerza protectora de las mujeres, por ejemplo. O en el Estado una fuerza protectora de los niños, o sea no hay como este feminismo más interseccional en el que se critica duramente al Estado como un estado patriarcal y todas sus instituciones como patriarcales, racistas y misóginas o sea que veo que por ahí no han llegado y si han llegado, se oponen a eso.

<sup>xxxix</sup> (...) mujeres blancas, muy clasistas, que siguen como obedeciendo el modelo de la familia normativa.

<sup>xl</sup> (...) negaba totalmente el racismo estructural que vivimos las familias migrantes por parte de la DGAIA.

<sup>xli</sup> Y hay un sector de esa izquierda y del feminismo blanco que sí critica a DGAIA en relación al tema de los menores migrantes no acompañados. Única y exclusivamente por eso. No habla de las quitas de custodia, solamente hace una crítica a DGAIA por ese tema y la argumentación es que necesitan estatizar y tener más presupuesto y que esa es la solución. Y no hace una crítica a un problema ideológico profundo del funcionamiento de la DGAIA.

<sup>xlii</sup> (...) estas instituciones son un nicho laboral para la izquierda. Y quienes dirigen y no solamente crean los marcos legales, sino que dirigen estas instituciones, quienes trabajan en estas instituciones, no es la extrema derecha, no es VOX, no es ni siquiera CIU o Junts x CAT o lo que sea, sino es Esquerra Republicana, por ejemplo: DGAIA es un nicho laboral de Esquerra Republicana en donde las tres últimas directoras han sido mujeres de izquierdas feministas independentistas o de izquierdas, bueno, que se denominan de izquierdas.

<sup>xliii</sup> (...) es importante entender que la crítica de los antirracismos al feminismo blanco no es solamente por una cuestión simbólica, de decir, “no, es que el feminismo blanco pretende representar a otras mujeres que tienen otras experiencias o porque universalizan”, no es solamente una crítica en el campo de las ideas: es una crítica porque el feminismo blanco y las mujeres blancas, en concreto, en el contexto catalán y español, tienen un poder político dentro de los espacios institucionales.

<sup>xliv</sup> (...) yo he sido activista toda mi vida, desde que tengo 13 años; yo pertenezco, soy trabajadora sexual, pertenezco al sindicato OTRAS y a Aproxex, entonces, bueno y siempre he militado en el feminismo y todo esto.

<sup>xlv</sup> I hi havia molts números que això passés però entre totes s'ha pogut evitar això. I això va ser... un *subidón*.



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<sup>xlvi</sup> (...) quitarles fuerte al rol que tienen estas instituciones en la vida de las familias migrantes y racializadas que viven situaciones muy complicadas a nivel económico, tiene que ser como que reforzar las redes colectivas comunitarias, para que no haya la necesidad de ir a estas instituciones.