



***THE ROLE OF INFORMAL SUPPORT IN CHILDCARE
FOR DIVORCED MOTHERS IN AZERBAIJAN***

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Abstract

Title: The Role of Informal Support in Childcare for Divorced Mothers in Azerbaijan

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The aim of this study was to explore the challenges that divorced mothers in Azerbaijan, experience in childcare and the emergence of informal support as a coping mechanism. This thesis tried to compare the experiences and perceptions of divorced mothers with informal support and the factors that affect the quality and quantity of this assistance. The qualitative research was designed and semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with seven divorced mothers, who raise children of five to fifteen years old. The interview data was analyzed using the Thematic Analysis method. The results were analyzed referring to the Theories of Resilience and The Forms of Capital. The study revealed that the main challenges of divorced mothers are safety concerns, financial shortage, unawareness about state support programs, emotional exhaustion, and work-parenting balance. To cope with these concerns, they use informal help in the form of material and emotional support, and parenting and assistance with the education of children. It has been observed that living with extended family members creates access to a broader network of people, and reliable, systematic, and available at any-time, support in childcare. Furthermore, the study revealed that mothers' educational background and professional status influence the quality and quantity of informal support.

Título: O papel do apoio informal no cuidado dos filhos de mães divorciadas no Azerbaijão

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Palavras-chave: Apoio Informal, Mães Divorciadas, Cuidados Infantis, Resiliência, Capital Social, Capital Cultural, Serviço social

O objectivo deste estudo foi explorar os desafios que as mães divorciadas no Azerbaijão enfrentam na prestação de cuidados aos filhos e a emergência do apoio informal como mecanismo de sobrevivência. Esta tese tentou comparar as experiências e percepções das mães divorciadas com o apoio informal e os factores que afectam a qualidade e a quantidade desta assistência. A investigação qualitativa foi desenhada e foram realizadas entrevistas semi-estruturadas em profundidade a sete mães divorciadas, que criam filhos dos cinco aos quinze anos de idade. Os dados das entrevistas foram analisados pelo método da Análise Temática. Os resultados foram analisados com base nas Teorias da Resiliência e das Formas de Capital. O estudo revelou que os principais desafios das mães divorciadas são as preocupações com a segurança, a escassez financeira, o desconhecimento dos programas de apoio do Estado, a exaustão emocional e o equilíbrio entre trabalho e parentalidade. Para fazer face a estas preocupações, recorrem à ajuda informal sob a forma de apoio material e emocional, e à parentalidade e assistência na educação dos filhos. Verificou-se que viver com membros da família alargada permite o acesso a uma rede mais ampla de pessoas e a um apoio fiável, sistemático e disponível a qualquer momento no que se refere aos cuidados infantis. Além disso, o estudo revelou que a formação académica e o estatuto profissional das mães influenciam a qualidade e a quantidade de apoio informal.

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Lastly, I want to dedicate this thesis to my mother and all mothers out there, who bravely raise their children and fight for their future!

Chapter I

Introduction

“I was very surprised when you contacted me regarding this topic! I would have never imagined that there could be anyone interested to hear us, our concerns, our life stories...”

Above is the excerpt from the interview with one of the divorced mothers, who agreed to participate in this study. She and pretty much every woman participant were hesitant in the beginning, yet pleasantly eager to share their experiences and have a conversation with me. Because this space has never been provided to them before.

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This Thesis study will be focusing on the experiences of divorced mothers in raising their children in Azerbaijan, and their perceptions of informal support in childcare, that they received in the past or continue to receive from their social networks and extended families.

According to the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the divorce rate reached its peak in 2021 with the number of divorces being 1719, while the number of marriages was 56314 (State Statistical Committee, 2021). That means every third family collapsed. Considering the statistical data, provided by the State Statistical Committee (2021), the average age of marriage in Azerbaijan is 25 and 30 respectively for women and men, and the highest number of babies are born to women of the age group 25-29, it can be assumed that the family may have at least one child in the time of separation.

As single-parent families are not officially recognized by the state and any family structure, that does not satisfy the normative image of a heterosexual couple with a child/ren rather called an “incomplete” family, the last census conducted in regard to the number of single-parent households in the country was in 2009. According to the last census, the number of single-parent households, where a mother is the only or primary parent was 137941, while the number of households with a father as a primary parent was 21235 in 2009 (State Statistical Committee, 2009). This data shows that the number of single-mother households exceeded the number of single-father households six times.

While the data on divorce rates continue to be rather high, no formal, state support programs and subsidies exist to assist divorced parents in childcare and improve their living conditions, which also affects their children to a great extent. The only available formal support is a subsidy for

low-income families, which is demanded by a high volume of applicants and, consequently, fails to be provided to everyone. A detailed overview of this state program will be given in the chapter on the contextual background.

Although both divorced mothers and divorced fathers go through a number of hardships raising their children alone, being separated from their partners, due to the patriarchal nature of society and the gendered structure of state institutions, mothers tend to experience additional challenges such as unequal access to the labor market, unequal wage payments, in addition to the stigma of being a divorced woman, and societal norms, which put divorced mothers in an extremely disadvantaged position (Azadi, 2020; Jabbarova&Dunyamaliyeva, 2021; Mahmudova, 2017; Sadikhov, 2021).

For the reasons mentioned above, informal help, provided by extended family members and social networks emerges as a support mechanism to assist mothers in raising their children after the divorce and improve their living conditions. This support system serves to fill in the gaps when the state welfare system falls short.

However, regardless of the scope of the problem, there has been no research study, conducted in Azerbaijan, exploring the challenges of divorced mothers in childcare and the informal support they use. Additionally, although informality is widely used in society in different aspects of the population in Azerbaijan, there is a significant gap in research on this topic as well. Consequently, this study is going to be the first attempt not only in the field of Social Work but also in other fields of Social Sciences, covering both, the experiences of divorced mothers and the phenomenon of informal support. Moreover, the study is an important contribution to the field of Social Work in general as the topic of divorced parents is extremely under researched globally and the families with this structure tend to experience more adversities in their lives, that affects all members, including children.

1.1 Purpose and Sub- Objectives of the Study

The particular interest of the study is to see the perceptions of divorced mothers about informal support in general, the main providers of it, the negative and positive outcomes, and the factors that influence the quality and quantity of informal support received by the women.

The main research question of this thesis is:

How divorced mothers perceive and experience the informal support they receive from extended family and social networks?

The sub-objectives of this study are:

- *The description of challenges that they face and informal support that divorced women with children of 5-15 y.o. receive/received in child-care*
- *The differences and similarities (comparison) between perceptions and experiences of divorced women regarding informal support*
- *The role of the social network and family of divorced mothers in the quantity/quality of informal support they receive/received*
- *The Role of the educational background of divorced mothers in the quantity/quality of informal support they receive/received*

1.2 Thesis Structure

This thesis study consists of seven chapters. In the following, second chapter, the Contextual Background of the historical events and socio-economic development in Azerbaijan will be presented. This chapter will particularly be helpful in order to understand the gaps in the current Welfare System of the country. The third chapter will discuss existing literature, written on the challenges of single parents, as well as informal support mechanisms used by them to overcome the hardships. The chapter of Literature Review will provide a broad picture of studies, conducted in different contextual settings. In the Theoretical Framework chapter, two theories will be presented that will be helpful to understand the key concepts such as Resilience, Social

and Cultural forms of Capital. Further in the fifth chapter, the main methodological tools that were used to obtain data will be discussed. Additionally, the information regarding participants, the analysis of the interviews, limitations, and reflections will be presented. The sixth chapter will provide a broad discussion, produced from the comprehensive analysis of the interviews with the participants, drawing references to existing literature and theoretical framework. Finally, the summary of the thesis study, policy recommendations, and implications for Social Work practice will be presented.

Chapter II

Contextual Background

To understand the current policies and discourses around the topic of informal support provided to divorced mothers, it is important to have a brief overview of the country's historical development.

Azerbaijan is a state that gained its independence not a very long time ago (Çıtak, 2021). It was one of the states that composed the Union of Soviet Republics and became independent once the Union was dissolved at the beginning of the 1990s (Çıtak, 2021). However, following the collapse of the Union, the country has undergone a series of economic and social crises in addition to a geopolitical conflict with a neighboring state (Çıtak, 2021). The transition from a socialist state to a market economy has also brought along social problems such as nepotism, corruption, and unequal distribution of resources in the country (Habibov, 2010). According to Habibov (2010), in the first decade of independence, the poverty rates increased to the extent that the government had to introduce several programs in the following years to tackle this issue. Falkingham (2004) mentions a significant increase in the number of people living under the poverty line in the country in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union (as cited in Habibov&Fan, 2006, p. 205).

One of the reasons for the economic and social instability in the country was the Soviet-modeled State Protection System (Aliyev et al., 2011). Social support in the socialist regime was provided to the workers of different industries and their family members (Aliyev et al., 2011). However, with the collapse of the Union, most of the industries were shut down and the workers, as well as their families, were left out with no insurance and monetary subsidies (Aliyev et al., 2011).

Habibov&Fan (2006) in a research study, analyzed the social assistance programs introduced by the state at the beginning of the 2000s that would support the vulnerable groups in the country. According to the authors, although the programs helped to reduce poverty to some degree and uplift disadvantaged groups, the inexperienced state institutions, insufficient state budget, and imbalanced distribution of monetary help affected the efficiency of social assistance (Habibov&Fan, 2006). One of the main reasons for the low efficiency of the programs was the failure in detecting families/ individuals in vulnerable situations (Habibov&Fan, 2008).

Consequently, the ones who actually needed social assistance did not receive it (Habibov&Fan, 2008).

The political instability, high rates of unemployment, and inequality discussed in the previous paragraphs have become the main pushing factors that resulted in the massive emigration of the male labor force (Golovataya & Askerova, 2019). The emigration of the male labor force, in its turn, has significantly altered the family structure in the country, resulting in emerging families with mothers as single parents (Hashimli, 2021). The number of left-behind women with children has started to increase as well as the divorce rates (Hashimli, 2021). Consequently, the number of single-parent families has increased as well. However, the demographic changes and large waves of male emigration have also helped women to gain authority over their lives, join the labor force, increase their participation in public matters, and change the norms of a patriarchal society, creating a new image of women as capable and independent (Hashimli, 2021).

Although women's rights have progressed since the country gained independence, the change in family structures continues to be the case in Azerbaijan, where divorced mothers tend to experience more challenges than men. According to the Human Development Index, released by the United Nations Development Programme, obtained from the comparison of gender inequality indexes, Azerbaijan was ranked 70th among 170 countries in 2021 (2022). This data reveals the unequal access of women to the labor market, education, public life, and other state resources (UNDP, 2022).

In support of the data provided by UNDP, Jabbarova&Dunyamaliyeva (2021) state, that the number of employed men in the country is significantly higher than employed women. The reason for that is the invisible domestic work that women are responsible for which is, in its turn, unpaid (Jabbarova&Dunyamaliyeva, 2021). Due to the extra burden of caregiving activities, in most cases, women are not able to join the labor force (Jabbarova&Dunyamaliyeva, 2021).

Christopher (2001), who analyzes the extent to which different welfare regimes are able to support working women with domestic chores, especially in childcare, argues that the "breadwinner" modeled regimes that expect only women to be involved in caregiving activities have insufficient social assistance to those mothers, who are willing to work. Similarly, in the well-known study by Esping-Andersen, which looks into modern family structures, the author

links the possibility to obtain full gender equality to the welfare state and the capability of a state to provide parental leaves as well as child-care support (2016).

Departing from these arguments it is important to evaluate the childcare support provided by the state in Azerbaijan. In the report evaluating the Child Protection System in Azerbaijan, Roccella mentions boarding schools as the only institutions that provide accommodation and schooling to children for longer periods of time apart from the institutions for children with specific needs (2005). Moreover, the Soviet-modeled institutions and the absence of social workers and skilled personnel in childcare emerge as the greatest obstacles to the support provision (Roccella, 2005). However, more than a decade later it is still possible to see the same system of Child Protection in the country. Huseynli (2018), who is assessing current conditions of child welfare in Azerbaijan, discusses the institutionalized care that is the only care model provided by the state. The author describes some of the problems that result in low efficiency of state programs to improve child care and security in the country such as the unwillingness of state agencies to put efforts into programs that do not bring financial benefits, weak control over the implementation of the programs, lack of well-established child protection system, and the absence of well-trained professionals (Huseynli, 2018).

The striking results of the study conducted by Claypool& Ismayilova (2019) show the tendency of single mothers in Azerbaijan, most of whom are divorced, to leave their children in care institutions due to a lack of economic and social support. The lone mothers express their challenges in providing proper education and care to their children alone while they are the primary income earners in the family and have to work (Claypool& Ismayilova, 2019). The authors of the study point out the importance of social assistance programs that would provide care support at different times of the day on top of the monetary subsidies for divorced mothers (Claypool& Ismayilova, 2019).

2.1 Social assistance programs

Although single parents have been experiencing a lack of state support in childcare and financial hardships since the independence of the country, the state support programs have not been increased in number and, currently, no assistance is provided particularly to divorced mothers. The only official support that divorced parents are entitled to is the alimony, paid by ex-partners

for children. However, there are significant problems with the alimony system, where ex-partners fail to fulfill the requirements of the court and make monthly payments (Zarbaliyeva, 2009). Although there is no official research discussing this problem as well, the prevalence of this issue up to this day was mentioned by the participants of this study and will be presented from real cases in the Analysis chapter of this thesis.

Another available social assistance that divorced mothers may apply for, is the *Targeted State Social Assistance* (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Azerbaijan, n.d.). This program is given to families with low monthly income and covers individuals, who are imposed to different life adversities (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Azerbaijan, n.d.). The divorced mothers may apply for this assistance due to the fact that they are the primary caregivers of children under 18 years old and/or have low monthly income (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Azerbaijan, n.d.).

Chapter III

Literature Review

Despite the complications and the scale of the labyrinth that divorced mothers are currently in, there has been no previous research found on this topic in the context of Azerbaijan. Consequently, this thesis study will be the first in the field of Social Work that looks into the importance of informal support in childcare for divorced mothers in Azerbaijan. Very little literature touches upon the challenges faced by left-behind women with children, and divorced women in general in Azerbaijani society, which will be discussed in the next section. Further in the chapter, the studies on the challenges that single mothers experience, the definition of informal support, experiences of single parents from different contexts, as well as the positive and negative influences of informal support will be presented.

3.1 Previous Literature on Azerbaijan

Marriage plays an important role in the lives of Azerbaijanis and it is wished for young men and women from an early age by older generations (Mahmudova, 2017). However, the superior position of men and a general perception that women should be obedient, makes divorce harder to accept by society and families, as well as stigmatize women who decide to end their marriages due to different reasons (Mahmudova, 2017, p.11.).

Several studies discuss how societal norms influence the law and the implementing institutions, and make it legally harder for women to seek a divorce, especially in cases of domestic violence (Alasgarova, 2019; Wilson, 2017). Once a woman is divorced, she is condemned and judged by society (Ismayilova, Claypool & Heidorn, 2023). According to the research, single mothers and their children experience an even higher degree of stigmatization in Azerbaijan due to a strong belief in society that a child should be raised by both parents (Ismayilova, Claypool & Heidorn, 2023).

Habibov (2011), who analyzes the socioeconomic inequalities in the South Caucasian region, which consists of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, also argues that divorced individuals tend to face many economic challenges, including poverty, and have poor access to resources in these

countries. In the report by Aliyev et al. (2011, pp.87-91), the authors argue that families with only one parent, experience financial deficiency and are among vulnerable groups.

The thesis study by Hashimli (2021), which mainly looks into the effects of outmigration from Azerbaijan on the left-behind population, discusses the hardships that left-behind women with their children go through. While mothers who have different marital statuses, whether legally divorced or separated as a result of male emigration, receive support from extended family members, their domestic responsibilities also increase (Hashimli, 2021).

Due to the absence of research studies based on the topic of divorced mothers in Azerbaijan and the informal support systems they are involved in, this thesis is going to contribute immensely to the literature concerning single parenthood.

3.2 Challenges Faced by Divorced Mothers in Different Contexts

While the context of divorced mothers in Azerbaijan and some relevant statistical information is described in the previous chapter, in this chapter the challenges of divorce as well as single due to different reasons mothers, the informal support they receive, and the observed outcomes of this support will be discussed based on the academic studies from different contexts.

One of the key studies, analyzing single parenthood from several perspectives is the book by Nieuwenhuis &Maldonado (2018). In the first place, the authors try to give a definition to the term “single parent”, describing it as a family structure with only one parent, regardless of the reasons for separation of partners, whether being single is a personal choice from the beginning, or an outcome of certain circumstances (Nieuwenhuis &Maldonado, 2018, p.2). Although the thesis is focused mainly on the experiences and perceptions of divorced mothers, single parenthood may be of importance for this study. While the statistical data mentioned in the previous chapter showed a significant prevalence of women-headed households in Azerbaijan, the book also stresses that most single-parent families have a mother as the only parent and primary caregiver (Nieuwenhuis &Maldonado, 2018, p.6). The women-headed households are mentioned as the ones who experience the risk of poverty, poor access to resources, and inequality to the greatest extent (Nieuwenhuis &Maldonado, 2018). Moreover, the lack of state

programs and policies that could support single-parent households leads to an extra burden for lone mothers (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

In the research conducted by Okanova (2016) among divorced mothers in Kazakhstan, it is possible to see the challenges that women experience in the post-divorce period. The study is important to mention as the socioeconomic development and current policies implemented in Kazakhstan are similar to the path of Azerbaijan for the shared history of being a part of the USSR. The author mentions the difficulties unrecognized by the government status of divorced women created in the reception of necessary state support in child care (Okanova, 2016, p. 2). Although one of the primary concerns of divorced mothers is a financial shortage and insufficient alimony paid by ex-partners, the participants of the study expressed the emotional burden of being a divorced mother they have to overcome alone (Okanova, 2016). Another interesting finding of the study shows the unawareness of divorced mothers of the existing social programs that may assist them in child care and help to develop their life conditions (Okanova, 2016).

In the study evaluating single-parent families in Russia, Churilova (2015) introduces a holistic picture of the socio-economic conditions of mother-headed families. The statistical data in the article shows that half of single mothers are having a hard time providing for their families in comparison to coupled families (Churilova, 2015). However, while similar to Kazakhstan, divorced mothers in Russia do not have legal status, and single-parent families are labeled as “incomplete families”, the number of divorced mothers that have their own housing and live only with their children is significantly high in comparison to those, sharing the house with the relatives (Churilova, 2015).

In contrast to post-Soviet geography, the studies from Türkiye show the awareness among divorced mothers about state support programs and the majority of women receive government subsidies (Kucur&Kelebek, 2021; Sancaklı, 2014). Kucur&Kelebek (2021), who interviewed divorced mothers on their challenges as single parents, particularly stress the safety concerns that women expressed in the interviews. Most women prefer not to disclaim their marriage status and lie about the absence of their ex-spouse in order to protect their children and themselves (Kucur&Kelebek, 2021). Moreover, in the study by Kavas& Gündüz-Hoşgör (2013), the authors

mention the societal stigma that divorced mothers face due to patriarchal expectations of a woman to keep her family together regardless of family problems that occur in the marriage.

Sancaklı (2014) in her Master's thesis discusses the vitality of "social parenthood" in the lives of divorced mothers. The author uses the term to identify the social support that mothers receive from family and friends in raising their children (Sancaklı, 2014).

In support of the previously mentioned book by Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado (2018), the article by Jahng & Song (2017), which is the result of a longitudinal study with eleven divorced mothers in South Korea, shows how the process of divorce and the post-divorce period affect the relationship of mothers with their children. The authors observe the influence of socioeconomic stability on the parenting capabilities of the mothers (Jahng & Song, 2017). Divorced mothers, who experience lack of financial support, have less communication with their ex-partners, and experience an emotional breakdown, caused by the stress of being a single parent, do not expect high academic performances and prospective future paths from their children (Jahng & Song, 2017). Moreover, Hetherington (1989) in his research on divorced families and children, mentions the differences detected in the relationship of divorced mothers with their sons from the ones with their daughters. While girls are more resilient and endure family crises such as the divorce of parents better, boys are observed to be highly affected by the reorganization of the family structure, which also causes hardships in their relationship with their mothers (Hetherington, 1989).

However, in the study of Ferraro et al. (2016), the authors stress the positive influence of co-parenting between the ex-spouses in parenting children after the divorce. The cooperation and shared custody over children lead to a healthy relationship between parents and children and relieve the burden of being a single parent (Ferraro et al., 2016). Divorced mothers that described their divorce experiences as "good" ones, also responded to the questions about their ex-husband's involvement in care, and other child-related concerns positively, showing a better pattern of adjustment to a new family structure (Ferraro et al., 2016).

Although a vast amount of literature focuses on the effects of divorce on the well-being of children, there also are studies that research the experiences of ex-spouses in the aftermath of a divorce. Mandell (1988, pp. 82-84), who particularly focuses on the emotional and mental states

of divorced mothers, stresses the extreme symptoms of depression, feelings of frustration, despair, and burn-out, that are observed among the aforementioned group of women.

One of the main challenges that single mothers face is child care. In the study of Moilanen et al. (2016), the authors compare the working hours of lone mothers and the ones who raise their children with a partner. The evaluation is made based on the data obtained from Finland, Netherlands, and the UK (Moilanen et al., 2016). Although all three countries are well-developed nations with a high provision of welfare services, single mothers experience long working hours and insufficient child-care support (Moilanen et al., 2016). In comparison to coupled families, in single-women households, the necessity to work extra hours is higher (Moilanen et al., 2016). Consequently, single mothers face problems with child services (Moilanen et al., 2016).

While Moilanen (2016) in the example of Finland, Netherlands, and the UK, discusses the complications of working single mothers with child care, Kröger (2010) in his comparative analysis of five countries in Europe, touches upon the importance of the welfare regimes for single mothers in balancing work and childcare. In the context of Nordic welfare regimes, where men and women are equally expected to join the labor force, state services support lone working mothers, providing universal, free, and accessible childcare (Kröger, 2010). However, in South European states such as Portugal and Italy, single mothers combine the use of the informal support of family and social networks and state services as the latter fall short (Kröger, 2010).

The argument of Kröger (2010) can be extended with the study of Christopher (2001), who evaluates the relationship between social policies and the poverty reduction of single mothers. According to the author, the welfare regimes that have adopted a “bread-winner society” model, are prone to perceive mothers as stay home, primary caregivers, ignoring the necessity of women to work and provide for their families (Christopher, 2001). In contrast to “bread-winner” regimes, the “individual” model policies emerge as a more effective way to support women with childcare and work participation (Christopher, 2001).

The article by Polese, Morris & Kovács (2015), which analyzes the policy implementations in post-socialist states and brings examples from the studies of scholars from different contexts such as Romania, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, and Hungary, argues that for the states with a socialist history, it is challenging to follow the Western path of policy production and implementation. Due to the cases of corruption, weak welfare, and bribery culture, these societies have more trust

in informal arrangements rather than state services (Polese, Morris & Kovács, 2015). Informal support for divorced mothers, which will be described later in the following chapters is a vivid example of the post-socialist mentality that exists in Azerbaijan to this day.

3.3 What is Informal Support

As it has been mentioned in the previous section, informality emerges as a coping mechanism for many societies when welfare services fall short. To understand what informal support is, its role for divorced mothers, and how it functions, several studies will be analyzed in the following section.

The study by Wall et al. (2001, p. 214) defines informal support as a type of social capital, consisting of the social networks of an individual, that provides help in different forms once it is needed. The authors evaluate the case of Portugal by drawing a big picture of who are the recipients of informal support, what type of support is most needed and who are the main providers (Wall et al., 2001). According to the study, mainly the individuals that are going through different life crises, and economic shortages, or are in adverse life situations need additional support that state assistance programs cannot fully provide (Wall et al., 2001). The data in the study also shows that parents and close relatives are the first individuals that the majority of respondents will seek help from if necessary (Wall et al., 2001).

The article by Cantor (1979, p. 441) describes informal support as well-functioning if it satisfies the main areas of an individual's life such as social life, everyday needs, and support in times of hardships. Additionally, the study shows that informal support could be received from different social networks, such as closest kin members, friends, neighbors, specific interest groups, etc. (Cantor, 1979).

However, in the study by Duffy et al. (1989), that analyzes the main providers of support to divorced mothers, it is possible to see that women tend to ask for help from their friend networks rather than family, for families may have old-fashioned views and impose them on the divorced mothers. Although women in the study perceive family members as a primary source of support, most of the relatively older divorced mothers prefer friendship relations that are based on trust, mutuality, encouragement, and understanding (Duffy et al., 1989).

Similarly, the research conducted by Meler (2015) with single Palestinian mothers in Israel, reveals the challenges of strict family control and extreme surveillance that single mothers living

with their families experience. Meler (2015) argues that the socioeconomic background of divorced mothers has a vital role in the informal support they receive and expectations reinforced by the family members; the lower the socioeconomic level is, the more restrictions are imposed. Consequently, according to the study, single mothers seek help outside of their close kin members (Meler, 2015).

However, in contrast to the participants in Meler's study, some of the divorced mothers in Australia revealed their not-so-good relationships with friends after the divorce (Webber& Boromeo, 2005). As it is expressed by the participants of the study, in some cases divorced women are seen as a "threat" to other families that could lead to abandonment and lack of support by their friend groups (Webber& Boromeo, 2005, p.274). Therefore, despite the challenges that informal support by the kin members may cause, the closest family, especially grandparents remains to be one of the primary support mechanisms for single mothers (Douglas& Ferguson, 2003; Ferguson, 2004; Webber& Boromeo, 2005). Additionally, the participants of the same studies prefer family support better as, according to them, in most cases, it requires no reciprocity (Douglas& Ferguson, 2003; Ferguson, 2004; Webber& Boromeo, 2005)

3.4 Influence of Informal Support

The study by Douglas & Ferguson (2003) that was conducted in the UK with divorced women, their children, and grandparents, reveals different forms of support provided by grandparents. The results of the research underline the importance of leisure time activities organized by grandparents to children while mothers are at work, help with child care, emotional and financial support, and a feeling of safety provided by grandparents to both mothers and grandchildren (Douglas & Ferguson, 2003). In support of the care provided by grandparents, Skinner & Finch (2006) propose the recognition of the benefits of informal support for the career paths of divorced mothers. The authors discuss whether a state should subsidize informal support, comparing the latter to "glue" that functions when state services are insufficient (Skinner & Finch, 2006, p. 821).

Referring to the article of Skinner&Finch (2006), Brady (2016) takes the "gluing" function of informal support further by pointing at the vital role it plays in the lives of working single mothers. As informal support is free, available at any time of the day, and is provided by trusted

individuals, it supports mothers to work full-time and progress financially (Brady, 2016). Therefore, one of the most beneficial outcomes of informal support in child care is the possibility for mothers to join the labor force (Brady, 2016). Apart from support in child care, friends and community members also may help women to access workplaces, and find jobs (Ward & Turner, 2007).

In addition to assistance in child care, social networks create a sense of safety for divorced mothers. In the study, Campo et al. (2020), where the researchers asked divorced mothers to define what is home for them, argue that connections with kin members, friends, neighbors, and community members are more important for divorced mothers than physical space. Especially for women, who experienced domestic violence in their marriages, the support provided by social networks is vital in the aftermath of divorce (Campo et al., 2020).

Another important contribution of informal support is the psycho-emotional help that it provides for divorced mothers. In the survey conducted with divorced mothers in the US, which evaluates the importance of social networks, the respondents agree on the emotional role of friend groups in the aftermath of divorce (Gladow & Ray, 1986). In general, divorced mothers who do not have access to professional help due to financial shortages, prefer to share their personal concerns with close friends rather than family members (Gladow & Ray, 1986). Consequently, those women, who have social support networks, develop resilience and cope with mental health problems more effectively, which also leads to healthier relationships with their children (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Moreover, the study by Radey et al. (2022), shows that informal support and healthy social relationships that are provided to single mothers, in the long run, contribute to better child development.

Despite the uplifting effects of informal support provided by kin members and social networks, it has its disadvantages as well. Although the support of family members may seem to be gratuitous, the study shows that single parents have obligations toward their kin members in return (Radey et al., 2022). In the case of single mothers, the women in most cases are responsible for domestic chores, care support to the elderly, and sometimes even financial contributions to a family budget (Radey et al., 2022). Consequently, accepting help involves the obligation to reciprocate and accept the domination of the provider (Offer, 2012). Families that do not have enough means and resources to reciprocate prefer to cope with hardships alone, rejecting any support from social networks (Offer, 2012).

In the study by Alsarve (2020), the author describes the friendship relations of lone mothers in the Swedish context. Although Sweden has effective assistance programs for single parents, some women participants in the study mentioned their inability to keep up their relationships with friends due to reciprocity expectations that they cannot fulfill (Alsarve, 2020).

Additionally, family support in patriarchal societies may cause extreme control and obstination of a woman from her personal life as an obligation in return to her kin members (Kavas, S., & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Meler, 2015). As women are held responsible for the “honor” of a family (Kavas, S., & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013, p. 59), once a divorced woman is moved back to her parent's house, she has obligations towards her extensive family that restrict her autonomy.

Another negative outcome of informal support is the inference that it can possibly carry along (Richardson et al., 1991). While family members and social networks are very helpful in childcare, the extreme involvement of third parties in the relationships of mothers with their children and their parenting styles can be disturbing for women (Richardson et al., 1991).

The study by Wall et al. (2001) points to another potential problem with support systems. In case the family members that provide help are from low-income backgrounds and have less access to resources, the phenomenon of “culture of poverty” that was described by Lewis in 1996, may slow down the socio-economic progress of a family (Wall et al., 2001). An example from Malaysia, where divorced mothers were interviewed about the informal support they receive from social networks, shows that, overall, the help from individuals does not contribute to the development of living conditions of mothers, rather it only provides daily coping strategies (Endut et al., 2015).

3.5 The Importance of Capital for Mothers after Divorce

One of the leading theories that this study will be based on is Bourdieu’s Theory of the Forms of Capital (1986). However, it will be discussed in the Theoretical Background Chapter. In this section, examples of how different levels of social and cultural capital may influence the living conditions of divorced mothers and define the level of informal support they need will be discussed.

From the study of Jahng&Song (2017), it is possible to see that mothers’ cultural capital, as well as social capital such as the educational level, background of the family they come from, the

neighborhood they live in, and social ties, play a great role in their development and child upbringing after the divorce. Those mothers that are from middle-class families, have a university education, and are working, in most cases feel independent and do not want any additional support from kin members or friends (Jahng&Song, 2017).

Similarly, Härkönen (2018) argues that in families with a mother as a lone caregiver, the educational level of the woman defines the general socio-economic situation of the family. In households where a divorced mother has low education and fewer job options, the provision of informal support by the rest of the kin members is necessary, however, do not develop life conditions in the long run (Härkönen, 2018). Kim&Kim (2020) who compared the life standards of married and single mothers concluded that mothers who do not have partners and have high educational levels, tend to experience poverty more than coupled parents.

The study by Oygard (2004) that analyzes how individual capital may affect the post-divorce life quality, interviews individuals that attend support groups. According to the data obtained from the study, women with higher cultural capital, such as education, gain stability and economic capital in a shorter time after the divorce (Oygard, 2004). Consequently, they tend to have better control of their lives and be more in touch with their social networks, than women with lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Oygard, 2004). Moreover, those with higher cultural and economic capital, are more confident to ask for help from social networks as they feel capable to return back when it is necessary (Oygard, 2004).

Wall et al. (2001) discuss another role of individual capital, that defines the level of informal support received in cases of emergency. According to the researchers, individuals who are situated in a lower position in society and have fewer resources, also have less access to informal support that would uplift their life quality (Wall et al., 2001). On the contrary, the only social network that individuals from disadvantaged households can access is their kin members, which does not significantly influence the socioeconomic development of the household (Wall et al., 2001).

Chapter IV

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, an analysis of the Theory of Resilience and the Theory of the Forms of Capital will be provided. Firstly, the theory of Resilience will be discussed from the Ecological Perspective elaborated by a well-known Resilience researcher and Social Worker- Michael Ungar. In his studies, published at different time periods, he touches upon a variety of topics related to the definition of Individual Resilience and Family Resilience from the Ecological perspective of Resilience in Social Work, which will be insightful to analyse the situation of divorced mothers while raising their children (Ungar, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016; Ungar et al., 2013).

Following, “*The Forms of Capital*” by French Sociologist and Cultural Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu will be discussed based on his classic study, published in 1986. Specifically, the two forms of Capital, which are Social and Cultural Capital will be crucial in order to interpret the collected from the interviews data.

The Theoretical Framework consisting of the two Theories mentioned above has specifically been chosen in order to understand the challenges of divorced mothers and informal support, emerging as a coping mechanism. While, the Theory of Resilience is crucial for the analysis of coping mechanisms that divorced mothers produce and the ones that are provided by the systems they are interconnected with, the Forms of Capital by Bourdieu (1986) will be important in the examination of their social networks and the influence of educational background on the quality/ quantity of informal support they receive. The link between the results and the theoretical framework will be elaborated further in the Discussion chapter of the thesis.

4.1 The Theory of Resilience

4.1.1 What is Resilience

The concept of Resilience has been discussed by many scholars in Social Work, Psychology, Sociology, Developmental studies, and many other disciplines. One of the well-known researchers in the field of Social Work Michael Ungar analyzes the earlier definition of Resilience as the way individuals produce certain coping mechanisms to reach the sources and opportunities in times of adversity (2012, p. 13). Ungar (2012, p. 13) describes the emergence of the term in the field of Psychology in 1980, which is used to describe the capability of an individual to return to a previous functioning state or even develop stronger in the post-trauma period, by initiating his/her own agency and skills. The traditional definition of Resilience puts stress on the internal, personal traits of an individual that help to recover from vulnerable situations (Ungar, 2012). The early research on Resilience is focused on different personality qualities such as emotional and mental strength, intellect, and psychological stability of an individual to reach the resources that are needed (Ungar, 2011, p. 1). However, this definition misses an important factor that may shape access to resources, and influence the personal strength of an individual, which is the environment (Ungar et al., 2013). Considering Resilience only as an inborn characteristic of an individual (Ungar et al., 2013, p. 352) leaves no room for the argument of the possibility to develop this quality later in life, which can be a limiting belief for Social Workers in the field.

Ungar, who tries to find an answer to the question of how the intervention should be made in times of adversity, describes the traditional view of Resilience as solely a personal trait, problematic (Ungar et al., 2013, p.257). In the person-focused approach, the external factors, such as economic instability, unsafe environment, societal pressure, stigmatization, and discrimination based on different backgrounds of an individual, that can influence and define the level of Resilience in a person are ignored, leaving the individual-oriented interventions less effective (Ungar, 2011 as cited in Ungar et al., 2013, p. 263). Ungar et al. (2013, p. 261) argues that the definition of Resilience as an individual asset is a Western-biased notion, that pre-assumes every society to be individualistic and every recovery from trauma- an accomplishment of a person. As a counter-argument, he brings examples from African and Aboriginal cultural contexts that value and practice collective action and solidarity to overcome

the adversities in the communities (Ungar et al., 2013, p. 355). Consequently, Ungar (2008, 2011) proposes an advanced perspective in order to include and better understand the external factors that affect Resilience which will be discussed in the following section.

4.1.2 The Ecological Perspective

Although Ungar does not reject the idea of Resilience being emerged as an internal asset of an individual, he proposes an Ecological perspective in order to consider the vital impact of social and physical environments on the ability to cope with misfortune (2012, p. 14). To be exact, the way the ecologies interact with an individual to pave the way and help to reach resources that will satisfy the needs and facilitate growth is significant in the definition of Resilience (2012, p. 14).

Ungar (2012, p. 15) brings an example from several studies that examine what criteria may be important in understanding why some people commit crimes and others don't. While personal qualities such as self-control, maturity, intelligence, etc. can be the factors that prevent deviance, ecological factors such as socioeconomic well-being, a stable workplace, and a safe environment can also be promoting Resilience against delinquent behavior (Ungar, 2012, p. 15). Therefore, on the way to growth, both individual capacity and environmental support, be it formal or informal, and the way these two interact with each other is equally essential (Ungar et al., 2013, p. 256).

In an attempt to explain the importance of Ecologies in Resilience, Ungar uses the Ecological Systems Model in the theory introduced by Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994, as cited in Ungar et al., 2013, pp. 351-356). Ungar tries to explain how Resilience is emerged, shaped, and influenced in each system of the Model (Ungar et al., 2013, pp. 351-356). In the *microsystem*, where the personal encounters of an individual in the center occur with the close circles such as family, friends, school, leisure time clubs, community, according to Ungar, the main trait of Resilience, that is considered to be personality, is largely and directly affected by these dynamics (Ungar et al., 2013, pp. 354). The particular importance of family and the level of solidarity, as well as the support provided by the close circles, have been shown to be crucial in the development of Resilience in individuals (Ungar et al., 2013, pp. 354). Similarly, in the *mesosystem*, where the interactions occur between the agents that are included in the *microsystem*, the quality and effectiveness of these interactions are equally essential for Resilience (Ungar et al., 2013, p.354).

Further, the *exosystem* is seen to be significant in many different, secondary ways (Ungar et al., 2013, p. 354). *Macrosystem* is particularly important to consider as it shapes the cultural context of Resilience (Ungar et al., 2013, p.355). Finally, the *chronosystem*, which includes any events happening in society, including socioeconomic and historical changes, has a great influence on Resilience (Ungar et al., 2013, pp. 355-356).

The reason Ungar draws an analogy to the Systems Model is to show that every layer of the model is equally essential and needs to be examined in the analysis of Resilience (Ungar et al., 2013, p.356).

4.1.3 The Assessment of Resilience

Ungar in different studies touches upon the assessment of Resilience and criticizes the ways it has been implemented. Firstly, he criticizes the knowledge of Resilience to be Western-produced (2008, p. 219). Consequently, the indigenous knowledge regarding different cultural definitions of Resilience needs to be included in the literature and there is a gap in understanding the individual features that are recognized as Resilience and factors that shape this process in diverse contexts (Ungar, 2008, p.219). Ungar (2008, p. 219) mentions that there is very little research on minority groups and Resilience in these communities. Secondly, previous research on individuals that experienced traumas shows that Resilience may occur in one aspect of their lives, but not in others (Ungar et al., 2013, p. 259).

Similarly, the time periods of individuals showcasing Resilience, as well as the factors that positively affect may differ (Ungar et al., 2013). This brings to the complexity of each case and the necessity to be aware of the heterogeneity of each situation (Ungar et al., 2013). The studies show that even in the same adverse cases, different individuals can offer different levels of Resilience and different factors can be influential (Ungar, 2008). Additionally, Ungar et al. (2013, p. 261) stresses the possible bias of a researcher based on his/her cultural background, which can lead to presumptions about the effectiveness and relatedness of any particular coping mechanism. Therefore, Ungar et al. (2013, p. 263) argues that there could be no universal assessment of Resilience and different variables should be taken into consideration by the researchers.

In order to understand and assess Resilience from an Ecological perspective, Ungar (2011, pp. 4-10) suggests analyzing it using four approaches that are *decentrality*, *complexity*, *atypicality*, and *cultural relativity*. According to Ungar (2011, p. 4), frequently, studies on Resilience try to encompass both the personal traits of an individual and his/her own individual coping with adversity as well as the process that leads to a particular coping mechanism. In this case, the main stress is made on the individual, rather than the ecology he/she is engaged with. However, Ungar (2011, pp. 4-6) offers the researchers to *decentralize* themselves from the focus on personal traits and focus both on the individual level and on the level of society, neighborhood, family, etc. By applying this approach, it will also be possible to detect the uplifting and, on the contrary, the risk factors in the environment (Ungar, 2011).

The second approach is *complexity* states that Resilience is complicated, that is mainly shaped by contextual and cultural factors (Ungar, 2011, pp. 6-7). By proposing the *complexity* approach, Ungar introduces the idea that no single model to evaluate Resilience can be applied to individuals in different contexts (Ungar, 2011, pp. 6-7). Instead, firstly, what is culturally acceptable and defined as Resilient behavior should be assessed to understand the *complexity* of the process (Ungar, 2011, pp. 6-7).

Departing from this argument, Ungar proposes not to use dichotomous categories to define the Resilience of the population under the study (2011, pp.7-8). On the other hand, it is important to understand that the decisions that individuals make are shaped by many cultural and contextual factors, as has been mentioned before, including personal situations (Ungar, 2011, pp.7-8). Consequently, each case of an individual is unique and needs an *atypical* evaluation. The last approach is seen to be extremely important to Ungar. According to him, *cultural relativism* can be a solution to a biased assessment of Resilience (2011, pp.8-10). The author argues that the definitions and assessment strategies are mainly structured by the representatives of the majority cultures, while the indigenous context is neglected (2011, pp.8-10). In order to avoid misinterpretation, a researcher must be aware of the existence of cultural influence on Resilience and willing to uncover the factors behind it (2011).

Combining all approaches, in his study, Ungar (2008, p. 225) gives a more comprehensive definition of Resilience, which is the ability of an individual in a vulnerable situation to *navigate* themselves to reach the opportunities as well as the ability of their ecologies to help them in a *culturally meaningful way*.

4.1.4 The Influence of Culture

Ungar throughout his studies attributes special importance to the cultural context in the formation of Resilience. According to him and his colleagues, the perception of certain characteristics, and expression of these through actions in the form of Resilience should be evaluated within the cultural context in which it is produced (Ungar et al., 2013). Equally, from the Ecological Perspective, the opportunities, and support given to an individual from the environment in adverse situations are effective in case it is also valuable within a particular cultural framework (Ungar et al., 2013, p.256).

Ungar (2008, p.221) elaborates on the defining feature of cultural context, using an example of an individual who decides to be part of an armed group, protecting the rights of his community. Through this process, he is able to show many manly strengths and capabilities that would be considered Resilience by his community members (Ungar, 2008). The group, in fact, is involved in a deviant activity that is not approved by the legal framework (Ungar, 2008). However, this path chosen by an individual can be seen by his microsystems as a successful option (Ungar, 2008). Therefore, Ungar (2008, p.233) proposes to produce literature, involving indigenous knowledge and information on Resilience, as well as what features are considered as a positive development for different contexts in order to escape the ethnocentric stand.

4.1.5 Family Resilience

Family Resilience is a relatively new concept that is being studied by researchers in the field of Social Work. Ungar (2016) stresses the gap in understanding different coping mechanisms that families implement in adverse life situations. Ungar (2016, pp. 19-20) draws similarities between the Resilience of a family to the Resilience showcased by an individual. As in the case of an individual, the response of an environment and the resources provided are significant, the way ecologies are able to adjust to new realities and support a family can shape the Resilience level of a family and its capability to overcome adversity (Ungar, 2016).

In order to assess the Resilience level of a family Ungar proposes several factors that are needed to take into account (2016, p.20). According to studies on family development, the important role informal and formal support systems from close circles play in the maintenance of the family in

times of misfortune (Ungar, 2016). Because the resources provided by the environment are vital in the Resilience of a family, in some cases, even the strategies that are not traditionally and culturally accepted can have an uplifting effect when the ecologies are not able to support them with meaningful opportunities (Ungar, 2016).

In an attempt to introduce a clearer picture of the Resilience patterns that families, depending on different factors tend to experience, Ungar tries to explain the reason behind the differences in the Resilience levels (2016, pp. 21-27). According to the author the factors such as the degree of the adversity that a family is experiencing, the time period that it has been taking place, and the position of a family as well as the ability to decide on the coping mechanisms that would be effective, shape the levels of Resilience among the families (Ungar, 2016, p. 26-27).

4.2 The Theory of the Forms of Capital

4.2.1 The Definition of Capital

At a time in history when the economy and financial gains used to be identified as the main driving forces of humanity, Bourdieu (1986, pp.46-58), wrote a piece that would shed light on the different forms of Capital. In the first place, he defines Capital as an “Accumulated Labor”, which functions as an uplifting mechanism for an individual or a group of people in gaining material wealth as well as social status in a relatively rapid and convenient manner (1986, p. 46). With the Theory of Capital, Bourdieu undermines the utopian idea of the world, which is believed to be an egalitarian place, where every individual has equal access to resources, that can be used to achieve success and material wealth, and no “hereditary” or “acquired properties” play roles in these processes (Bourdieu, 1986, p.46). In his piece, on the contrary, he brings into the scene the effect of different capital on the life quality and achievements of an individual (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.46-58).

Bourdieu starts his argument with a criticism of the Economic Theory, which puts social and cultural accumulations in a backward position, and claims that those have no material value (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 46-47). The rational, calculative manner that the science of economy tended to achieve, misses to acknowledge the importance of other forms of capital and their potential to be converted into material benefits in the long run (Bourdieu, 1986).

With the purpose to give a broader sense of the mechanisms that are significant in shaping the status as well as the material well-being of an individual in society, Bourdieu differentiates three

different forms of Capital that are *Economic*, *Social*, and *Cultural* (Bourdieu, 1986). However, as Cultural and Social forms of Capital are important in order to understand the interpretations in the Analysis Chapter of the Thesis, in the following section, only these two forms will be discussed.

4.2.2 Cultural Capital

Bourdieu raises the question of Cultural Capital while researching if there is a relationship between the academic success of pupils in schools and their socioeconomic background, referring to the class positions and capital of their families (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 47-48). According to him, the field of Economy considers individual efforts and financial expenses, spent on education as the deciding feature of academic accomplishments (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 47-48). However, Bourdieu introduces the additional factor, missed in the scene and influencing these educational developments, Cultural Capital, which is largely inherited from the family of an individual (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 48). He differentiates three states of this form of Capital: *embodied*, *objectified*, and *institutionalized* states (Bourdieu, 1986, p.47).

The *embodied* state of Cultural capital is inherent, it passes not in the form of material objects, or monetary wealth, but rather as internal features of an individual, such as taste in music, interest in particular hobbies, expression of manners, the ways one talks, walks, behaves, or as Bourdieu puts it, it is the overall “habitus” of a person (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.48-49). Although it can be developed later in life, depending on the merits and cultural activities of an individual, according to Bourdieu, the ones who already have some capital transmitted from the family, have a significant advantage in making progress in life in a short time and using fewer efforts (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 49).

Following, Bourdieu describes the *objectified* state, which expresses itself in the form of material objects, inherited from the family, such as valuable items, pieces of art, and particular profession-related objects. He draws an example of the usage of a specific item. To have a specific item, in itself, is a material wealth, the *objectified* state of Cultural capital, passed from a previous generation. However, the capability to use it is embedded in an individual and is an *embodied state* of Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p.50).

Lastly, the *institutionalized* state appears as academic acquaintances of an individual, obtained from different institutions. Bourdieu identifies this state as the most convertible into Economic Capital. The official titles and qualifications, provided by state agencies, allow them to gain social status, and respect as well as accumulate wealth (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 50-51).

4.2.3 Social Capital

Social Capital is another form of Capital that is significant for Bourdieu in the interpretation of individual achievements. In the first place, he defines it as a network of people, the social ties that a person is interconnected with. This network may be owned as a result of hereditary social status, belonging to a specific professional or kinship entity, being established based on mutually-beneficial relationships, as well as being expressed in formal and informal manners. According to Bourdieu, in comparison to the two other forms of Capital, the conversion of Social Capital into material wealth may take more time and indirect ways to achieve. However, it also largely depends on the ownership of Economic and Cultural forms of Capital, due to the reciprocity and mutuality that every relationship requires in order to persist (Bourdieu, 1986, p.51)

Social ties, even in the cases when transferred from family, are not solid and lasting by their nature. The establishment of relationships and networks, as well as the capability to keep them in the long run, depends on an individual's capacity and potential to maintain them. Every relationship requires some sort of exchange, depending on the status of it and agents involved on different sides. Consequently, Bourdieu argues, that every entity is established with the aim to engage individuals with similar Capital, and social status in order to ensure his/her efficient involvement in the mutually-reciprocal relationships. This mechanism makes it possible to create a network, the members of which will hold continuous power due to their membership in the network, have a sense of belonging, and be represented by the leading member. These networks and memberships can also be utilized in gaining access to material wealth, but not in immediate action (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 51-54).

In the way to understand how different forms of capital function, Bourdieu proposes an approach that will recognize the two perspectives of Economic Theory and that of Semiotics, and acknowledge their equal importance. While Social and Cultural forms are reducible to Economic

Capital and utilized in that respect, the importance and influence of the former two forms should not be ignored. As much as Economic Capital serves as a material well-being of an individual, Social and Cultural forms are equally essential in the regeneration of that well-being. Every form of capital functions as an uplifting mechanism in varying degrees and different ways, depending on its convertibility, duration, and durability (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 54-55).

Chapter V

Methodology

5.1 Qualitative Research

This Thesis Study has been conducted based on qualitative research methods. Mason (2002) describes qualitative research techniques as vital tools to understand any phenomenon in-depth in a comprehensive and holistic manner. Although these techniques may seem very superficial and easy to implement, to produce reliable and high-quality data a researcher must have sharp skills in active listening, critical thinking, and active engagement with the topic of the study (Mason, 2002). One of the main challenges and simultaneously strengths of qualitative research is its ability to uncover the hidden meanings and understand the scope and internal structure of the problem from the eyes of its informants (Mason, 2002). To be able to do that Bryman (2016, pp. 199-200) discusses the importance of interpretation and the ability to read through the words of participants, reveal the sentences that are not said but implied, and link them to a theory.

Particular importance qualitative research methods play for this study as the main focus of the study is to understand the perceptions and experiences of divorced mothers about informal support from their own perspectives. Mixed methods such as the implementation of surveys and collection of statistical data, along with the interview method could be used to observe the bigger picture regarding the attitudes of divorced mothers around the topic and gain a more holistic view. However, due to a shortage of time and resources and a specific interest of the researcher in first-hand personal experiences and stories narrated by the divorced mothers themselves, only qualitative data collection techniques were applied. In-depth conversations with women were vital in order to see the actual practical usage of informal support in their lives if there is any, and

the influence of it, as well as to understand the complex network of people involved in the provision of this support.

Qualitative research has been criticized by scholars of natural sciences for its incapability to test the results and provide objective data (Bryman, 2016). However, a variety of techniques are used by qualitative study researchers in order to provide transparency, and reliability such as reaching back to participants with produced data and asking for “respondent validation” (Bryman, 2016, p.205), making sure that the descriptions produced are “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Bryman, 2016) that include wide, scrutinized narrations of any social phenomenon in a detailed style, and active reflexivity that involves asking “difficult questions” (Mason, 2002) to yourself about your positionality, power, ideology, and standpoint as a researcher for not being caught in your personal judgments.

In every step from the interview guide creation to data collection and analysis the techniques to preserve transparency and credibility were taken into consideration and will be discussed in detail in the following sections of this chapter.

5.2 Interviews

In this research, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted as the primary method for data collection. For most social science researchers including sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists interviewing alone without using the participant observation method, can be insufficient (Hockey&Forsey, 2020). However, the strength of the interview technique should not be underestimated as it is a significant tool to give meaning to the observed actions of individuals and to understand in-depth their values, rationalities, and reasons behind these actions through their own interpretations (Hockey&Forsey, 2020).

As a Social Work student with an Anthropology background, I had my doubts if it will be possible to gain comprehensive information without conducting fieldwork and spending time with the mothers to observe their life routines with children. Surprisingly, in long enough conversations with the participants in the interviews, the mothers have made me see the hidden parts of the story that would be hard for me to realize otherwise. To refer to Goffman’s ([1959]1990, as cited in Giddens, 2009) idea that individuals may showcase different roles and identities depending on the interaction and contextual setting, in the in-depth interviews it was

possible to experience different roles and identities that the women have or even wish to have. Moreover, as informal help from extended family is always perceived as a positive contribution in absolute terms by the society in Azerbaijan, it was extremely important to hear women's thoughts regarding this support rather than follow their movements.

As the first step, the guiding interview template was created and approved by the supervisors based on the sub-objectives that the thesis is interested in. Mainly the questions were divided into five sub-topics: warming-up questions, the characterization of informal support by the divorced mothers, the perceptions of divorced mothers about informal support they receive or received before, the effects of informal support, and the role of socio-cultural capital in the provision of informal support. As the interviews were going to be conducted in the capital of Azerbaijan, Baku, the interview questions were translated into the native language, Azerbaijani. Later, as it was possible to reach one more divorced mother that agreed to participate in the study, who is ethnically Russian, the interview guide was translated into the Russian language as well.

In the process of conducting interviews, Mason (2002, pp. 62-63) proposes to have a more casual, natural approach with participants and allow them to have a space to express themselves without being too formal. He brings into the notion the phrase used by Burgess "conversation with a purpose" to describe the interview setting that is recommended to have (1984, as cited in Mason, 2002, p.62). This was my first and foremost aim in the interviews with the participants. As the topic itself is quite sensitive it was vital for me to make the women comfortable both in the setting and with me. The first time contacting the participants I stated that they are free to choose the location where the interview will be held. As a result, I traveled several times to remote locations, the peripheral regions of Baku to have interviews in the houses of some women per their requests. Having a friendly and flexible attitude was also essential in order to gain the women's trust. As Bryman (2016, p.54) puts it, any formal approaches could have created hesitancy in respondents and resulted in their withdrawal from the study. Additionally, to assure the participants that the privacy and confidentiality of the information shared during an interview will be fully preserved was key to a sincere and trust-based interview (Bryman, 2016, p.66). Departing from these references, I tried to make women feel safe regarding confidentiality and create an environment where they are "the experts of their lives" as Salmon (2007, p.983) describes it and I am the one who is interested to learn about their experiences.

In total, seven interviews have been conducted. The selection process of the respondents will be described in the following section of this chapter. The length of every interview varied depending on the participant, however, on average the interviews lasted for an hour or longer. At the beginning of each interview, the information about myself, the name of the university that I am attached to, the department of my study, and the country that the university is located were introduced to the participant. Following, the information on the thesis study, its purpose, and where the data obtained from the interviews will be used were explained.

In the study by Salmon (2007, pp. 982-984), the author discusses the idea of reciprocity and “giving back” to participants in scientific research studies. Although the question of compensation to the informants is a long-disputed one in academia, Salmon brings an example from her own research study with Aboriginal mothers in Canada, who live in financially vulnerable conditions and consider the compensation as a sign of respect for the time spent on interviews (Salmon, 2007).

From the beginning of the research process, I intended to compensate in return to mothers who would agree to participate. Depending on my personal relationship with a participant, all of the mothers were compensated either with a small amount of money or gifts, such as sweets and/or toys for their children. However, the total amount for each compensation was distributed equally. The locations for the interviews were negotiated based on the preferences and comfort of the participants. Three interviews were conducted in the houses of the participants, two in a cafe, and two at the workplaces of the participants. Most of the interviews were conducted on weekends or on days when the mothers did not have to work. Particular importance was given to have a quiet environment when children are at school or napping, and no external factors to disturb exist.

5.3 Selection of Participants

The target group for this research is divorced working mothers, living in the capital, who have children between five to fifteen years old. A specific age range was chosen based on the schooling system in Azerbaijan, which begins at the age of 5-6 with elementary school and ends at the age of 16-17 with the completion of high school. Children in the range from 5 to 15 in Azerbaijan require attention and care as they experience several transitional periods, including

entrance to the schooling system, passage from elementary school to high school, transition to teenagerhood, and preparation for the university entrance exam phase. Consequently, having to take care of children in this age group alone and being a working mother can particularly be challenging for divorced mothers. Particular interest in the target group emerged as mothers who have children in this age group need support the most.

Initially, I assumed reaching my target group will not create any challenges. However, after a few attempts, I realized that there are more obstacles than I could think of and during several interviews, the reasons behind these barriers were revealed by the women themselves.

Wilson (2020) in her article discusses the hardships that a researcher may face in reaching the excluded, vulnerable communities or groups of individuals for a study. The author explains that people from disadvantaged backgrounds, that hold less power, tend to hide, and try to be less visible within a community for different legal, safety, and societal reasons (Wilson, 2020). This is the case for divorced mothers in Azerbaijan as well. As they are imposed with different vulnerabilities, most of them prefer to stay invisible in society. Several mothers even mentioned in the interviews that they do not reveal their marital status and no one, except very close family members, knows that they are officially divorced.

As it has been discussed in the previous section, the first and foremost criterion for reaching participants is the ability to build a trust-based relationship. Trust plays a key role, especially in contacting vulnerable groups. To be able to build those relationships, however, a researcher must spend a significant period of time in the community, join their daily life routine, and gain recognition from people (Emmel et al., 2007). Although in this research study, no participant observation or ethnography methods were intended to be used, my positionality as a “local stranger” who has spent the last decade of her life abroad, will be elaborated on further in the Reflexivity part of this Chapter, and a limited amount of time created hardships in finding the participants willing to be interviewed for the study.

In situations when access to the population that is of interest to a researcher is hard to get, gatekeepers play an important role (Wilson, 2020; Emmel et al., 2007). Wilson (2020, p.469) defines gatekeepers as individuals who are familiar with and have close contact with the community either through their work position, spatial location, or personal ties. Gatekeeper connections are vital, especially in the work with groups that are not easily reachable (Emmel et al., 2007). However, there can be potential problems in the work with gatekeepers. While

reaching particular groups may be feasible only through making contacts with gatekeepers, the power that the latter possess may also create a hindrance to research (Lamprianou, 2022; Pittaway et al., 2010). Depending on different factors such as the focus of the research, an institution that a researcher is tied to, the aims behind conducting a study as well as personal perceptions of gatekeepers regarding the research study, willingness to provide access to the target population, and the level of the access provision can change (Lamprianou, 2022; Pittaway et al., 2010).

Departing from the abovementioned arguments, the most practical way for me was to reach people that could play a role of a potential gatekeeper first. Initially, I contacted individuals from my friend groups working for different women's organizations and NGOs in Baku. Although they knew many women that would fit the criteria of the research, most of the women rejected the participation. However, two of my friends introduced me to two mothers, whom they knew from personal networks, that agreed to be interviewed. My mother played a role of a second gatekeeper as she has been working as a doctor for a state hospital for over fifteen years and is trusted by the local community. She asked three co-workers that are divorced mothers, raising their children alone if I can contact them and introduce my study. After providing them with comprehensive information regarding the study, luckily, they agreed and I managed to conduct interviews with these women.

The rest two participants were reached using the snowball technique. The snowball technique, which is getting to more people through the participants, can be very helpful in reaching the relevant people for a study, especially because of common life situations or personal characteristics that they share with the referees (Petersen & Valdez, 2005). In this study as well, every participant was asked whether they know someone who can be interviewed.

In conclusion to this section, it is also important to mention that the participants were chosen in the way that the diversity in educational, economic, and social backgrounds, as well as in the current work activities are preserved in order to obtain more representative data. Detailed information regarding the participants will be given in the Analysis chapter.

5.4 Thematic Analysis

The interviews, which were recorded with the permission of the participants, were transcribed manually by the researcher herself. Due to the fact, that the interviews were conducted in two different languages, that are Azerbaijani and Russian, for the sake of not losing the cultural and linguistic interpretations, that only holders of the languages may understand, the manual transcription method was applied. For further analysis, the chapter on Thematic Analysis by Bryman was referred to (Bryman, 2012, pp. 564-590). In order to create a Matrix of the themes, first, the transcripts of the interviews were categorized into groups and coded, based on the frequently appeared responses. Following, the codes were grouped based on the sub-objectives of the study. In total, five themes emerged based on the sub-objectives, which are *challenges in childcare, types of informal support received, perceptions and experiences of informal support, the role of social networks and family in the quantity/ quality of informal support received, the role of educational background in the informal support received*. Although the number of codes was high in the beginning, later some of them were merged together and added as sub-themes in the main themes. Due to the extensive narrations by the participants, the sub-objective of challenges and types of informal support that they receive was separated into two different themes. Also, the initial sub-objective regarding the possible influence of informal support on the socio-economic development of the families in focus was removed after extensive analysis of the section on the experiences of divorced mothers, as the later touched upon very broad issues and the inclusion of both sections would repeat the information provided by the participants.

5.5 Reflections

Bryman (2016, pp. 17-18) describes reflexivity as an integral part of a qualitative study, which allows a researcher to produce more reliable, free of personal bias and judgments data. Reflexivity has played a great role in this study as well. After every interview, I used to spend some time going over my notes, and the conversations that I had in my mind and understand the emotions, gestures, and phrases of my respondents. Simultaneously, I questioned my positionality and personal values and the way I interpret the data collected during the interviews. My first and foremost concern was whether I am producing reliable knowledge and whether this knowledge may benefit the target population in the future. Finlay (2006, pp. 319-320) in her

study, which tries to elaborate on the trustworthiness degree of qualitative research, argues that knowledge production is contextual and individual-specific. The same interview, conducted with the same participant but a different researcher may have pretty different results, depending on the interaction, the relationship between the parties, and the willingness of a respondent to open up (Finlay, 2006). Although, in the first interview, I had hesitations regarding the validity of the data I am about to produce, the more I talked to women the more I realized that each interview and experiences are unique. Neither there is “right” or “wrong” information, nor a universal knowledge that the data gained from these interviews can be tested against. These are the experiences and perceptions of the mothers that I contacted and of no one else.

In the study by Kristensen&Ravn (2015), the authors also draw our attention to the fact that every selection process of study participants is shaped by pre-determined categories that the researchers define before reaching the potential participants. Consequently, some people are heard and some are left out (Kristensen&Ravn, 2015). This brings another question of whether any qualitative study is representative enough. By interviewing a small sample of women in the urban city, that fit into the criteria determined by me and my supervisors beforehand, will it be possible to project these findings into the whole population of divorced mothers in Azerbaijan? However, generalization has never been my motive behind conducting this study. My main aim was to bring recognition to these mothers, to draw attention to the existence of such a group of women, who are largely neglected in most parts of the world, particularly in my home country, and as Finlay (2006, p.320) puts it, to produce a study that, hopefully, will be the first ring in the chain of research studies on this population in Azerbaijan.

Another significant concern that I had before reaching the participants and in the interviews, was the risk of retraumatizing the women by asking them to verbally go through experiences that may not be very pleasant for them. Although the questions were well-established, guided by the ethical considerations, that will be described in the next section, I was worried about how the participants will perceive the research study itself and the fact that I am labeling them as a group that is possibly facing challenges. However, surprisingly enough, all feedback I personally received from the women by the end of the interviews and from what I heard later from the gatekeepers, the participants felt very motivated and pleased sharing their stories. In one of the interviews, after answering a few questions, I heard my respondent reflecting on her own

experiences by saying “I am a very strong woman, I am realizing it only now while talking to you!”.

Hiller & DiLuzio (2004), in the study that asked the feelings and thoughts of participants from migrant groups in Canada about giving an interview to researchers, came up with the results stating that participants felt very proud and motivated about sharing their stories. Providing them with a space to tell their concerns and experiences, means giving them recognition and acknowledging their challenges as immigrants (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004).

In the case of the interviewees of this thesis study, I received similar commentaries regarding participation. The topic of the study in general and an interview invitation gave courage to women and a chance to say out loud what they are feeling and going through. It has given them the recognition they have never received before. If for a society they are just mothers implementing their natural duties and responsibilities, in the space of interviews they were human beings, imposed to several vulnerabilities, however, recognized as very resilient and strong to cope with their life crises.

5.5.1 Positionality

Reflecting on the positionality of a researcher in the qualitative study and the power imbalances it may cause between the interviewer and an interviewee is essential in order to preserve the transparency and credibility of the data obtained (Finlay, 2006). It is equally important to discuss the positionality of a researcher as an insider or an outsider to a research field (Kahuna, 2000). As it is described by Kahuna (2000), the pros and cons of being a native researcher as well as the different dynamics in relationships with participants that it can carry along should be questioned more in the field of Social Work. In the following part of this section, I will try to reflect on my positionality as a Social Work student, conducting research in my home country.

As an Azerbaijani myself, doing my research in Azerbaijan, I had many advantages. Firstly, the absence of barriers in understanding the language, cultural codes, and societal norms made access to my “field” of study relatively easier. The cultural competence that I have, allowed me to approach my gatekeepers and potential participants in a way that will not be offensive or traumatizing. Equally, being a member of that society created an apriori sense of trust in the

relationship with participants before even getting to know each other. To put it in Bryman's words, I had the capacity to "see through the eyes" of my participants (2016, p.207).

Along with being identified as an insider due to natural factors such as language, and cultural competence, that I have gained by being born into that society, a normatively different structure of my family that I gained later by life circumstances, was another important feature that helped me to feel related to my study population. As I was brought up by a divorced mother, I also had some personal stories that paved the way to feel deeply what my participants go through. In the study by Kahuna (2000), she also describes the challenges of being a native or an insider, whether based on one's ethnic background, social identity, or similar life trajectory, which at times makes it harder for a researcher to distance him/herself from the study population and be objective.

As much as I was an insider, there were times when I felt an outsider as well. The fact that I am single, relatively or significantly younger, have no children, acquired more educational qualifications, and have been living abroad for a long time, created some power imbalances between me and the study participants. One of the women, while describing their experiences during the interview said "I am sorry if I am putting everything well. I did not study as much as you did!". However, as a sign of symbolic reciprocity, at the beginning of each interview, I mentioned why my academic curiosity has emerged specifically around this topic referring to my mother's experiences, and mentioned that I recognize and appraise all women who are raising their children alone. This introduction created not only a more equal base for our interview conversation but also created an image of me being related to my respondents in many different ways.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical codes have been followed at every stage of this study. In the construction of the Interview guide, implementation of the interviews, transcription of data, and analyses, the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles was considered (IFSW, 2018).

In the interviews, the women participants were given an overview of the interview instructions such as the possibility to withdraw whenever they feel the necessity to do so, not to answer the questions that they do not feel comfortable with, take a break, and ask for clarifications in case if

a question/ information is not clear. Additionally, permission to use the voice record was asked for. After close familiarization with the consent form and confidentiality terms, verbal consent about voluntary participation in the study and permission to use the information obtained from the interview to be used for research purposes were asked for. The names of the participants were substituted with pseudonyms and any possible private information that could have revealed the individual's self has been removed from the analysis.

5.7 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that need to be mentioned. First of all, although the title of the study was generalized to the whole country, only seven divorced mothers were interviewed in the capital of Baku. It should be acknowledged that the experiences of the women in the regions of the country may be different and this study does not claim to cover the perspectives of all women in the country. However, due to the gap in the research sphere in the country, there are no studies conducted in different regions and, unfortunately, it was not possible to compare the results of this thesis in order to get a more broad picture of the problem. Secondly, most of the participants of this study have been in official divorce with their ex-partners for an extensive period of time. It is believed that the interviews with the mothers recently separated from their ex-partners would also give a more recent picture of the welfare system in the country. However, due to the sensitivity of the topic, it was impossible to get permission from the women, who are still trying to adapt to their new family structures. Thirdly, the number of participants has to be kept to only seven due to time and resource limits and based on the scope of the required Master's thesis dissertation.

Chapter VI

Analysis and Discussion

In this chapter the analysis of the data, obtained from the interviews will be presented, drawing references to the studies, conducted in different contexts and the theoretical framework of the study will be presented. Firstly, the socio-demographic profile of the participants and more detailed information about them will be provided. Following, the sub-objectives of the study will be discussed, based on the themes, that appeared in the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The final analysis will be made, referring to the Theory of Resilience by Michael Ungar and The Theory of the Form of Capital by Pierre Bourdieu.

6.1 Socio-demographic Profile of the Participants

The number of participants, techniques that were applied to approach them, challenges and limitations, as well as more detailed information regarding the interviews, are described in the Methodology Chapter of this document. However, in this section, the socio-demographic profile of the mothers-participants will be presented.

There have in total been seven interviews conducted with the participants. Table 1 below describes the important characteristics of the participants, providing information about their age, educational backgrounds, workplaces, number and sexes of their children, whether they share an apartment with any of the family members or live alone, and the information about their marital statuses.

As seen in the table below, all of the mothers are in the age group from 24 to 54. However, considering the fact that the majority have been divorced for a long time period and the children are prevalent in their teenage years, the average age of participants is 41.

A strong emphasis was made to approach participants with diverse educational backgrounds to observe if there are any differences in perceptions and experiences with informal support. Considering the “culture of education” that is a legacy of the Soviet regime, the literacy rate in Azerbaijan is high. According to the data, provided by the World Bank, the literacy rate in the country reached almost a hundred percent in 2019 (World Bank, 2022). There is a tendency among the youth to attend at least the undergraduate level after high school. Consequently, in the

context of the country, the participants of this study have different educational levels, including one high-school graduate, graduates of vocational schools, and the ones who attended undergraduate and graduate levels of education. This diversity in education also affects their experience with informal support, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The workplaces and professions of the participants similarly show a variety. While some of the mothers have stable jobs and incomes, there are also the ones who had several different workplaces before and currently work in relatively low-income jobs.

A quite interesting observation is made regarding the discrepancy between the number of years that mothers have been separated and being officially divorced from their ex-husbands. Excluding the individual narratives and personal reasons of the participants, this phenomenon can partially be explained by the dominance of patriarchal ideology in the country. As Mahmudova narrates in her study, being an officially divorced woman can bring along societal pressure and stigma (2017). Simultaneously, as women have less power and are subordinate to men's positions, they are expected to tolerate family conflicts, to “keep the nest”. Returning to an extended family home is considered a shame for women (Mahmudova, 2017, p.39). Among the participants, the discourse of postponement of the official divorce from the side of women, with the expectations of possible improvement of the relationship between the partners, as well as the hesitation to return to their parent’s home were observed. In the interview, one of the mothers even expressed her attempts to hide her official divorce status from the environment in order to prevent further questioning and possible stigma from people. However, there also were some variations in the responses, depending on the educational level, that will be developed further in this chapter.

Lastly, the categorization of those living with their extended family members and the ones, who live alone with their child/children was made. Three of the mothers either rent or own an apartment and live with their child/children alone. The other three live at their parents’ home and share it with the rest of the extended family members and their child/children. One mother lives in her own apartment, however, shares it with her child and her mother. This factor will be influential in the determination of the informal support providers, the frequency of help, and the spatial location where the help is provided for the mothers.

Name	Age	Educational Level	Work activity	Number of years of being a lone parent	Number and sex of children	Age of children	Lives with or w/o extended family members
A1	25-54 (39)	Upper Secondary education+ short computer courses completion	Tutor in the private computer courses	10 yrs of separation, 2 yrs in official divorce	1, F	15	With maternal parents and a child
A2	25-54 (35)	Master's or equivalent level	Doctor-Pediatrician	Separation- since the birth of a child, 3 yrs in official divorce	1, F	7	With a maternal mother and a child
A3	25-54 (38)	Bachelor's or equivalent level	School teacher	Separation- since the birth of the child, 9 yrs in official divorce	1, F	12	With maternal parents and a child
A4	25-54 (51)	Short-cycle tertiary education	Nurse	3 yrs in official divorce	1, F	7	Alone with her child
A5	25-54 (40)	Short-cycle tertiary education	Nurse	5 yrs in official divorce	2, F, M	10-M, 14-F	Alone with her children
A6	25-54 (48)	Post-secondary non-tertiary education	Seller in a supermarket	In official divorce since the birth of the child	1, M	15	With maternal extended family (2 brothers, mother, father) and a child
A7	25-54 (38)	Bachelor's or equivalent level	Part-time manager in a communication company, Part-time a nail artist	5 yrs in official divorce	2, F, M	10-M, 12-F	Alone with children

Table 1. Socio-demographic Profile of the Participants

6.2 Challenges

One of the objectives of this study is to understand the challenges of divorced mothers with children of 5-15 y.o. experience with childcare and the forms of informal support they use to overcome these challenges. After implementing the thematic analysis of the data, obtained from

the interviews, it has been decided to break the first objective into two parts and discuss the challenges and the forms of informal support separately, as both cover a very broad set of information and subthemes. In the first part of this section, the theme of *Challenges in Childcare* and the subthemes that were detected based on the codes will be discussed. In this part of the section, the descriptive data will be presented, referring to some of the studies, introduced in the Literature Review Chapter. In the second part, the theme of *Types of Informal Support*, and the related subthemes will be analyzed, based on the Theoretical Framework of this study.

6.2.1 Safety

The narratives about safety concerns were detected in every interview with the mothers, implied in direct or indirect ways. The feelings of anxiety and stress are largely related to the lack of cooperation with the fathers of their children and their absence in daily life. In the studies, conducted with divorced mothers in different countries, it has been seen that good communication with an ex-partner is key to better development of the family in different aspects and has a positive influence on children in the aftermath of a divorce (Jahng&Song, 2017; Ferraro et al., 2016). However, in this study, five of the seven mothers mentioned a complete lack of cooperation, while the other two described the involvement of fathers in child-related concerns as being very limited and rare. One of the mothers described her thoughts in the following manner:

For a very long time, I used to take her to school myself. Then her teacher said that she can come herself, she has grown enough to do that. I took her advice and allowed my daughter to go alone. Although the school is nearby, psychologically I always have some anxiety because I am alone.- (A3)

Another mother, who has some sort of communication with her ex-husband, mentioned that she still has safety concerns and tries to control her children as much as she can:

He meets the children once in a while, in his house, but just to spend time together. He is not involved in problems and never gives us a sense of “I am always here!”, you know?... I’ve tried to provide them with all the necessary technological devices so that we communicate wherever they are, whatever they do. They do everything alone, I need to

monitor them all the time. I have also tried to find schools, tutors, and extracurricular activities very close to the location of our house. - (A7)

Another reason why the mothers feel unsafe being divorced lies in the patriarchal structure of society. In the conversations with the mothers, it became clear that the safety concerns they experience are largely related to the necessity as well as the expectations of society to have a male figure in the family, rather than the potential danger of the outside world. In the study of Kucur&Kelebek (2021), conducted in Turkey, geography, which has very similar to Azerbaijan societal norms, the authors reveal parallel safety issues that divorced mothers have due to the male domination in the country.

In her explanation of how the absence of her ex-husband affects her and her daughter, one of the mothers told the following:

There is a huge effect of my ex-husband's absence on my daughter. She is scared of everything when she goes outside. She knows that if you don't have a father in this society, you don't have anyone. She is not able to say "I will complain to my father!" in cases when she faces a problem.- (A2)

As is explained by the authors, who have a sub-theme in their study, titled "The hidden marital status" (Kucur&Kelebek, 2021, pp. 256-257), the mothers are concerned both, about their safety and the safety of their children, as well as the stigma that they can face from society. A similar pattern was detected in the interview with the divorced mothers in this study.

I cannot communicate or invite anyone into my house in case I have problems, especially someone of the opposite sex. Now that everyone knows I live alone with my daughter, firstly, I cannot trust strangers. Secondly, people are very open to questioning my morality. Even if it is a plumber that I take into my house, they will gossip.- (A4)

I haven't revealed to anyone that we are divorced. We used to live in the same neighborhood before as well. I am just saying that he is working in a far place, he doesn't visit us often. I don't want people to know that I live with my children alone for safety

reasons and don't want either my children or myself to face any stigmas from society as well.- (A7)

Kucur&Kelebek (2021, pp. 256-257) explain that one of the ways that divorced women protect themselves from possible societal pressure is to hide their marital status. It is possible to see the same solution in the case of Participant A7, however, this narration was not common.

6.2.2 Financial Shortage

Financial Shortage was mentioned by all mothers as one of the greatest challenges that they face in childcare. In fact, financial insufficiency was the first and foremost concern that the mothers spoke about the most. One of the main reasons, that the participants expressed, is the unregulated alimony system. As mothers described, the alimony that the ex-husbands are tied to pay, decided by the court, in most cases either is not paid, or paid in different amounts and time slots.

From the studies of Okanova (2016) and Churilova (2015), conducted in Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, it has been analyzed that the absence of a control system by the state, that would monitor the alimonies, leads to a significant financial burden for divorced mothers to raise their children. Similar to Kazakhstan and Russia, the mothers in Azerbaijan about the inadequacy of the alimony system and the financial hardships that it creates.

Financially it is very tough to be the only "breadwinner" in the family. Everything depends on me. I need to take care of every tiny detail, even a box of salt, and fill it once it's finished as soon as possible.- A7

I try to spend quality time with her. But activities like going to the cinema, cafes or shopping malls- that is very luxurious for us.- A2

I try to provide my daughter with everything. But with everything like the most basic-food, clothing, and most importantly, education. But she told me once that her friends go on holiday to other countries or travel within the country's borders with their families. I cannot organize those things for her. I don't have the financial capacity. I feel guilty of course, because our parents used to take us everywhere back then. - A3

Apart from the alimony system, some of the participants mentioned hardships in building a career and working full-time with children, which also affects their financial status. However, this concern is strongly correlated with raising their children alone and will be narrated further in the chapter.

6.2.3 Unawareness about possible formal support programs

This subtheme emerged as a result of an observation made in the interviews. Although the participants sounded very demanding regarding the control of the alimony system and aware of the gaps in the regulation of it, the question of whether they receive any formal, state support as divorced parents, was very surprising to them. Several participants asked me to repeat or explain broadly what I imply by “formal, state support”, the rest sounded very skeptical about the possibility of help from the state and the quality of that help if there is any. One of the women had the following reaction to my questions:

Help from the state? For what reason should a state help me?- A3

In the follow-up questions whether they have applied to any state assistance program, were aware of the existence of such, or if they know that they are supposed to get help as divorced parents, to raise their children, the women looked even more puzzled and confused. To all of these questions, the responses were negative and it felt that they are hearing about the existence and implementation of such a support system for the first time.

The unawareness and apathy about state support were also observed in the study of Okanova (2016) among the women in Kazakhstan, a country that was a part of the USSR, similar to Azerbaijan. However, in the studies of Kucur&Kelebek (2021) and Sancaklı (2014) in Turkey, divorced women seem to be more proactive, protective, and demanding in terms of their rights and most of them get legal help from the state. This comparison allows us to see the difference in perceptions about formal support and trust in the state, which largely depends on the historical socio-economic development of countries and current welfare regimes.

6.2.4 Work and parenting balance

Work and parenting balance are one of the main challenges that divorced mothers struggle with. The formal support in childcare, provided by the state appears as a vital mechanism to help mothers to access full-time job opportunities. Different authors mention the importance of welfare regimes in the determination of the career paths of women, who are the only caregivers in the family (Moilanen, 2016; Kröger, 2010; Christopher, 2001). However, in the interviews with the mothers of this study, the participants mentioned the lack of formal childcare provisions, which creates financial challenges for mothers due to the inability to work full-time. Those who work full-time face hardships in spending quality time with their children, being engaged in school activities, and raising their children the way they would like to.

The excerpts from the interviews below present the experiences of the mothers regarding work and parenting balance.

Oh, it is extremely hard! Especially because I live alone with my daughter, I need to take care of everything myself... I take her to school in the morning, then run to my workplace. After my work is over I try to be back home as soon as possible, clean around, and cook before picking up my daughter from school. I cannot be late, otherwise, she cries.- A4

The dialogue between the interviewer and one of the participants below shows the inability to spend quality time with a child while having a full-time job:

A2: I work full-time as a doctor. My profession is very tough both emotionally and time-wise. I put all of myself at work. When I am back in the evening, I am already tired.”

The interviewer: Do you spend time with your daughter when you are back from work?

A2: “I do. I ask her how her day was, her school, and help with homework.”

The interviewer: “Do you have any quality time activities with her when you are back from work?”

A2: “Only on weekends (breathing heavily). We read books and go for long walks in the park”

In the interview with one of the participants, a mother of two, who lives alone with her children and works two part-time jobs, she described her one day with the children. At some point, it became really hard to follow her. To keep her time management balanced and in accordance with her working hours, she explained how her children attend a lot of different extracurricular courses:

There have been times when we did homework after my working hours at night. Or if they are asleep already, I woke them up at 5 a.m. before school and we did the homework!- A7

Moreover, a mother who has a son with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), expressed her hardships of having a special child, being the only parent for him, and managing her work at the same time with child-related responsibilities:

My son has autism. His health condition changes several times during the day. Sometimes he has nosebleeds, he can faint in the middle of the road, or he can become aggressive and punch someone. It is getting really hard with school and I need to accompany him everywhere.-A6

6.2.4 Emotional Exhaustion

Regarding the question about the challenges, the second most mentioned response was “Moral difficulties”. While the word moral (“menevi”) in Azerbaijani can imply many different meanings, further in the explanations, the mothers described the emotional burden that they experience as divorced parents. Many studies, conducted with single mothers, frequently detect the over-exhaustion due to the double responsibilities that they have to fulfill, while carrying the roles of both parents simultaneously (Mandell, 1988, pp. 82-84; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). This pattern has been observed with the participants of this study as well:

I need emotional support so much! I am exhausted (crying). Imagine you have two full and heavy baskets in both hands. It is important to be able to leave one to somebody and

to breathe. Coping with financial problems is possible. But the emotional ones are not. I cannot share with my daughter these things because she is also a child.- A5

Moral means I am tired of this burden, I am losing all my strength. But I need to steadily stand on my feet to bring up my child!- A1

My friends tell me that I used to have light in my eyes and I don't look the same anymore. I don't have the same energy anymore. - A6

6.3 Types of Informal Support Provided to Divorced Mothers

Following the discussion of challenges that divorced mothers face in childcare, the questions of whether they receive any help from friend groups, extended family members, or social networks to overcome these challenges were asked. From the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts four subthemes appeared, that are *Material Support*, *Care and Parenting of child/children at any time of the day*, *Help with Education*, and *Emotional Support*.

6.3.1 Material Support

Material support is one of the most vital types of informal support that mothers receive. Material support is provided in a direct way, that is in the form of monetary contributions, and indirectly, including the provision of accommodation, clothing for children, monthly coverage of school/tutor expenses, gifts, monthly food, and bill payments, as well as help with the access to employment in some cases. The main providers mentioned by the participants are their parents, siblings, extended family members, neighbors, and friends.

Those mothers, who live with their parent/s, are supported with pensions that the elderly receive on a monthly basis. In some cases, parents provide for basic needs such as monthly food and household expenses, and mothers' monthly income is spent only on the child/children's concerns. One of the biggest contributions for these women is having an accommodation, a family house, that they do not have to pay for.

My parents provide for everything house-related. That helps me a lot, of course! The only financial concern that is left for me to cover is the expenses of my daughter. She has several tutors, who help her to prepare for the university entrance exams. I pay for them. I basically live for my daughter. I do nothing for myself. Have no financial capacity to do anything else for myself, honestly. Her prosperity is extremely important to me.- A1

They give me whatever I want. I ask for money from my brothers for a manicure, they even provide me with that. Of course, I cannot ask for a car, I know what their financial capacity is. But me and my son, we look nice, we eat well, that is important!-A6

The last excerpt is from the interview with the mother, who lives together with her single brothers, parents, and her son, who needs extra care. She is able to work only part-time as most of the time she is with her son. Her brothers play the role of breadwinners and provide for her and her son and cover all expenses.

Small help such as fixing something broken in the house, providing medicine when needed, or giving a ride by taxi, etc. is done for free by the community members and neighbors.

In some cases, women described their friends as the main mediators in access to their current jobs, helping with the applications, and referring to the recruiting agents, which is the biggest financial contribution for the mothers. It has been seen from the article of Ward & Turner (2007), that social networks may be important in increasing the career options of women.

Overall, as Skinner & Finch (2006, p.821) describe it, the informal material support provided by the extended family and social networks play a gluing role for divorced mothers, who do not receive any state subsidies to raise their children.

6.3.2 Care and Parenting of a Child/ Children

Care and Parenting of children emerge as another rather significant and uplifting for mothers support mechanism. Mainly, the providers are the parents of the mothers. However, several participants also mentioned their siblings and neighbors taking care of their children when needed.

My daughter calls my father “father-grandfather”.He is like a father to her.-A3

My son needs a father. But the father is absent. He is learning everything from my brothers. If he needs any “manly” things to be done, such as getting a haircut, learning to protect himself, or anything else, he does it with my brothers or my father.- A6

In the studies by Douglas & Ferguson (2003) and Brady (2016), the authors describe the characteristics of informal support being provided at any time during the day, as the main contribution to the lives and career paths of women. In this study as well, the participants mentioned the possibility of reaching out for help in childcare, especially from their parents, as the most appreciated feature of informal support. Also, the presence of grandparents in the house gives a sense of safety and increases the quality of leisure time for children.

My mother is always there for my daughter. She cooks for her, serves the food to her, takes her to school, communicates with teachers, and looks after her when I am at work. I cannot imagine how it would be without her!- A2

My parents usually are at home. It makes my life much easier. I do not have concerns about where to leave my daughter when I need to go somewhere.- A1

The mothers, who live alone with their children, mainly receive support in looking after their children from neutral people, such as neighbors, friends, and teachers.

When I stay late at work, I have a neighbor, she picks up my children if it is too late.- A5

There is a bride (the way relatively young women who joined a family by marriage are addressed in a community) living next door. Their yard is connected to my yard. When I urgently need to go somewhere, I ask her to look after my daughter.- A4

The teachers are very understanding. If I am late to pick up the kids, they stay longer accompanying them, and wait for me together. They are in constant communication with me about the needs of my children, they report about their progress and arrange meetings based on my free time. -A7

6.3.3 Help with Education

All of the mothers were deeply concerned about the education of their children. Although this subtheme could have been merged with the previous section of this chapter, all of the participants put a strong stress on the help with school concerns of their children. Overcoming a number of hardships in their lives, they seemed to be more aware of the importance of education and focused on providing the best academic opportunities to their children they can. In the case of the mothers living with their parents, who are educated, the help with school-oriented issues provided by grandparents was highly evaluated.

My mother is extremely concerned about my daughter's education. She supports her with everything related to school. They do the homework together, she meets her school teachers to learn about her performance in school. - A2

Our (her and her parents') primary concern is my daughter's education. When I am not available, my parents take her to school, meet her when she is back, and do the homework together. When my father is not at work, he meets the teachers to talk about her progress in school. -A3

The parents of both of the above-mentioned participants are university graduates and play an important role in the academic achievements of the children.

For women, living alone with their children, teachers are the main support agents. During the interview with A7, a tutor of her son called her and informed, her that she is available at the moment to have an extra class with him at her house. Following, A7 in a rush called her son and instructed him to get dressed immediately and head to the tutor's house. She told me later that teachers always try to arrange their time the way it is convenient with her working hours. Sending him to extra lessons is a good way to not leave him alone for a long time at home and get his schoolwork effectively done.

6.3.4 Emotional Support

A number of studies discuss the positive and extremely substantial influence of emotional support, provided by social networks to divorced women (Gladow&Ray, 1986; Taylor& Conger, 2017; Radey et al. 2022). However, the studies also show that, mainly, divorced women tend to share their feelings and emotions with neutral people, rather than extended family, for the former group will not be judgemental (Duffy et al., 1989; Gladow&Ray, 1986).

A similar pattern was observed among the participants of this study as well. While for the majority of concerns, the mothers tend to approach their extended family members, personal matters, and emotions are shared with friend groups and neighbors. The mothers expressed feeling relieved after talking to someone outside of their kin.

I had a very close neighbor. She also has one daughter. I used to talk to her a lot. She used to encourage me by saying “A1, you are strong, your daughter needs you, you have overcome so much, and you can do this too!” That meant a lot to me. But she has moved out of her apartment. But we keep calling each other. -A1

I have a friend group. We used to go to cafes, karaoke places. I used to have so much fun and it was a great emotional release for me. But now they are all married, so we do it less frequently. -A6

I do have friends. Although I don't have much time to spend with them, we do have some meetings sometimes. It feels really good to talk to someone.- A7

There is an old woman in the neighborhood. I go to her when I am overwhelmed. I cry, she patiently listens to me, and calms me down.- A4

6.4 Perceptions and Experiences of Divorced Mothers about Informal Support

In this part of the chapter, an analysis of informal support from the perspectives of the mothers will be presented. The following section will be focusing on the second sub-objective of the

study, that is *The differences and similarities (comparison) between perceptions and experiences of divorced women regarding informal support.*

First, the perceptions of the mothers about informal support as a coping mechanism will be discussed, referring to the Theory of Resilience by Michael Ungar, which will also allow us to see the impact of the ecologies on the emergence of Resilience. Further, their experiences will be elaborated on. In the thematic analysis of the experiences of the participants with informal support, two main subthemes appeared, which are *the uplifting effects of informal support and reciprocity.*

6.4.1 Informal Support as a Coping Mechanism

Michael Ungar, referring to early studies in the field of Psychology, defines Resilience as the capability to overcome risks and develop in times of adversity (2012, pp. 13-33). However, although Ungar stresses the importance of individual inner strength in the emergence of Resilience, he also brings to our attention the vital role of systems that an individual is interconnected with, in the development of Resilience, and increasing the accessibility to resources (Ungar, 2013).

This approach is particularly helpful to understand informal support as both- a mechanism, rationally chosen and adapted by the mothers, based on their inner strength, intelligence, and resistance, to raise their children, and a mechanism, that is offered and shaped by the environments and systems, that they are engaged with, to help in this process. Although, at first sight, the decisions taken by the mothers after a divorce, such as moving back to their parental home, sharing their apartments with extended family members, or asking for help from social networks may seem natural and spontaneous, in reality, behind every decision there are extensive calculations and conscious reasons. As one of the participants explained:

When I was moving back to my parent's house after the divorce, I knew that it was not going to be easy. I knew that it is not the type of family that I had always been dreaming of. However, no one forced me to do so and I could choose to live alone with my child. But I made the calculations of the pros and cons. I realized that my son needs to feel safe, to have that family environment that I alone cannot provide for him. I know that my

parents will help me a lot by being around all the time and my child will grow up in a better mental state in their company. - A6

As Ungar (2013) describes it, the expression of Resilience can show varieties, influenced by the sociocultural context and different other factors. For this very reason, the assessment of the level of Resilience cannot be evaluated based on a single model (Ungar, 2013). In this study as well, such factors as the availability of extended family sources and social networks, the financial stability and independence of the mothers, and the ideological stand of the participants significantly shape their perceptions about informal support and the way they cope with challenges. There was a great diversity in the responses about their views and experiences of informal support. While some mothers feel safer and more certain about the use of support in childcare from their networks, several others put efforts to raise their children extra-independent, regardless of their age, and manage everything on their own.

I am very grateful to my parents for their help to raise my daughter. I always ask for help from them if necessary. I trust them completely and I know that they want only the best for me and my daughter. Of course, my experiences with help in childcare have only been positive! -A3

They do everything in the house. They clean up after themselves, they put their books and notebooks and toys on shelves, they put the food in a microwave and eat when I am at work, and they look after each other from an early age. I barely ask for help with my children. They are capable of doing everything on their own. -A7

In the two excerpts from the interviews, we see the contrast between the perceptions and usages of informal support by the mothers. It is possible to see from this comparison how for some mothers Resilience appears in the form of support from their networks, while for others it is an individual empowerment and the independence of their children. The unexpected observation made in the interviews is the narrative of women being powerful and strong, that almost all participants used in the conversations.

Although the support providers, the types of help in childcare, and frequency change, all mothers one way or another perceive informal support as necessary in raising their children. In the interviews, every participant mentioned the vital role of social networks in their lives, as there is a shortage of childcare provision by the state.

I wish we had some places like the “prodlennkas” we used to have before, in the USSR. The kids used to stay there after school and teachers took care of them, did the school work together and then parents used to pick them up after their work, in the evening. Now, we have to involve several different people to pick the kids up from school, to do the homework and all of that, you know? -A4

However proud and hesitant to accept help from others I am, I also understand that without the help of people, it would be so much harder. My sister helped me to raise the kids, teachers helped me a lot, sometimes my colleagues or my patients. My neighborhood is like a small family kind of. -A5

Additionally, the strength and capability to overcome the hardships of being a divorced woman, and access to important sources such as jobs, good quality schools, leisure time activities for children, and other help that have been discussed in the previous section of this chapter, provided by the extended family members and social networks play a great role in the provision of a sense of family, safety, and comfort, as well as necessary coping strategies. Consequently, the certainty and support that the mothers and their children receive from their environment make them thrive, be more optimistic, and work towards their future. This is an example of what Ungar discusses as “Family Resilience”, which emerged in the process of interconnection between a family in a vulnerable situation and the ecologies (2008).

6.4.2 The Cultural Context and Uplifting Character of Informal Support

To the question of how would the mothers evaluate the influence of informal support in raising their children, received from the environment, all of the participants agreed on the positive effect of help from their social networks:

The importance of help for me? It is extremely important for me to raise my child, to give her proper education.- A1

Of course, only positive influence. It would be so hard to raise a child alone in Azerbaijan.- A2

The influence of the help is good, I could not do anything if not for their help. I have always been free to spend my salary the way I want, on my daughter's school expenses, her concerns, and medicine when she got sick. But we have never had any shortage of food, basic needs.-A3

Help is always good if you have it from reliable people. However, I would feel weak to ask random people. I know I am strong, my children are smart. If the help is a real help, I would be happy. I need emotional help, for example. I cannot say things to my daughter, she is still a child herself. -A5

Further in the conversations, the mothers specifically mentioned the importance of informal support to provide education to their children. As the education in schools in Azerbaijan is not universal and the quality of schools differs, separating schools into private and state, very careful control and help from the families of children is needed. The children of all mothers attend state schools and have additional tutor classes either to catch up with the school program in the case of younger children or prepare for the university entrance exams. For these reasons, the mothers highly appreciate the involvement of their social networks in the education of their children.

In the analysis of Resilience, Ungar discusses the importance of cultural context, which shapes the definition of Resilience, for what is considered Resilience in one society may not be perceived the same in another (Ungar, 2008; 2011; 2013; Ungar et al., 2013). In the case of divorced mothers in Azerbaijan, from the narrations of the participants of this study, the capability of bringing up a child and providing them with the best educational opportunities are the most valued by society as signs of Resilience. However, the attempts of women to focus on their personal lives, remarry or build romantic relationships are not perceived positively.

I like to look tidy and pretty. I have always been like that. Now when I wear make-up to take my children to school, people gaze strangely. It feels like if you are a divorced

woman you should sacrifice your life for your children. You cannot have your personal life. They keep saying that, your only achievement is the achievements of your children. You need to be concerned about their lives and education only. -A7

Although the issues of individual restrictions and stigma that divorced women face in the country is a topic of another, rather deep research study, in this section the main aim was to draw attention to the definition of Resilience in the sociocultural framework of Azerbaijan. Consequently, as the education of children is perceived as a primary concern, the help provided by social networks and extended family members to support mothers with school responsibilities is valued highly by the participants.

6.4.3 Reciprocity

Along with the uplifting effects, the help that the mothers receive has some setbacks. To the question of whether people, involved in the provision of informal support, expect something in return, those mothers, who mainly receive support from parents and extended family, immediately said “no”, and assured me that the help from the side of their family is gratuitous. However, further in the conversation, it became clear that taking care of old parents, visiting doctors, providing medical care, and domestic duties such as cooking, and cleaning, along with being a mother, are their primary responsibilities. However, the women perceive it as a duty.

The support of my parents is priceless. However, they are pretty old and sick. Sometimes I don't know whether to take care of my daughter, my parents, or myself. I don't know how my life has passed...- A1

My mother doesn't expect anything from me. She is not that type of mother. When I say doesn't expect anything I mean, I still take care of her, I satisfy all her needs. -A2

In the study of Radey et al. (2022), the authors describe additional obligations toward the extended family members that single parents get in return for the help, offered to them. According to several authors, in societies with high male domination, these obligations may take the form of strict surveillance by the family members and restrictions towards divorced women

(Kavas, S., & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Meler, 2015). In the interviews with the participants, the cases of control were mentioned by several of the women:

Another reason why I don't prefer to ask for help is because I don't want people to intervene in my personal life, or ask questions. I put borders between myself and them...My brother in the beginning was reacting to me being divorced. Then he stopped. I didn't allow it.- A7

My brothers told me "We will do everything for you but try to behave well, so that there is no gossiping around". We live in a small neighborhood, everyone knows everyone.- A6

Additionally, the mothers also mentioned some of their concerns regarding the way their parents intervene in the mother-children relations, dominating the parenting of their grandchildren. Due to the fact that mothers do not have enough for their children time with work and need help in taking care of them, the grandparents become primary caregivers and, consequently, decision-makers in child-oriented matters. In the study of Richardson et al. (1991) it is possible to see that help in parenting also creates challenges for mothers in building healthy relations with their children.

My mother is an old woman. She wants everything to be the way she thinks is good. She is dominant in the kitchen. She dresses my daughter as she wants, she usually dresses her very warm clothes, she thinks it is going to be cold all the time. I don't like her style. But it is what it is- A2

My parents love my daughter very much. I usually get teased when I do something wrong to her. They have brought her up very capricious. Sometimes I feel they are more her parents, than I am. -A3

Due to the abovementioned reasons, some of the mothers, the ones who live alone, and who can afford it, prefer to ask for help from neutral people, whom they can return in a monetary manner.

I ask no one when I need help. Only people whom I can pay back. Because I know that close people will expect something in return in the future. But I pay neutral people for some services, that is easier. -A5

6.5 The Role of Social Networks and Family of the Mothers in the Quality/Quantity of Informal Support

In this section, a more detailed analysis of who constitutes social networks of divorced mothers, how frequently informal help is received and what are the factors, influencing the quantity and quality of this support will be discussed. This section aims to elaborate on one of the sub-objectives of this study, that is *The role of the social network and family of divorced mothers in the quantity/quality of informal support they receive*. Mainly, the discussions will be made, based on the Theory of The Forms of Capital by Bourdieu (1986). In this part of the paper, the Social Capital, developed by Bourdieu will be the focus.

6.5.1 Living Alone with Children vs. Living with Extended Family

From the interviews, it became clear that the support network of mothers constitutes of members of their extended kin and neutral people, such as neighbors, friends, service providers, school teachers, colleagues, and community members. However, there is a great difference in the quantity, quality, and frequency of support provision. The main factor that shapes features of informal support is whether mothers live alone with their children, or share an apartment with their kin members.

Bourdieu defines Social Capital as a right to belong to a particular community, that in its turn, is not static and largely depends on reciprocity and mutuality, as well as the sense of unity (1986, pp. 51-52). Social networks and extended family constitutes the Social Capital of divorce mothers, which is extremely important to reach the necessary help and sources to raise their children. However, due to the reciprocal feature of these relations, only those mothers, that live with their family members receive high-quality, reliable, and systematic support in childcare. While, the materially-paid informal services provided by nannies, neighbors, and community

members are helpful, it is rather hard to control the quality and consistency of such services. However, due to the fact that help, provided by the kin members is based on the mutual sense of obligation and unity, that being a family conveys by its nature in the culture of Azerbaijan, the mothers have more trust in these relationships.

In the interview with one of the mothers, who works as a nurse, and lives alone with her daughter (7 years old), she told a very emotional story about the time, when she had to attend yearly training courses for nurses and used the services of neutral people to take care of her daughter. Below is an excerpt from the dialogue with the mother is presented:

A4: I remember when I was attending a training course for nurses, that we have to take every year for two weeks, I had to ask one nanny to pick my daughter up from school every day and bring to another neighbor's house. I paid some amount of money to the first for doing that, but with the second we were close. Once she called me and said that my daughter has a fever. I couldn't leave the course. When I came back, I saw she gave her very irrelevant medicine like some vitamins, etc. I was really annoyed also because I am a nurse, I know what she needs. But I didn't have any other options. Later, she also complained that my daughter always fought with her son and she, apparently, broke something in the house. I paid her too at the end for all inconveniences that she experienced having my daughter.

The interviewer: *That must be really tough! What about her food? Did she eat at your neighbor's house?*

A4: I used to put her food container and some fruits in her bag. But she doesn't eat when I am not around anyway.

The interviewer: *So she used to wait for you after school, that is a long time? (The school ends at 2 pm, while the mother used to return back home from the training course at around 6-7 pm.)*

A4: Yeah, she waited. I always made sure that she has a proper breakfast, but she never ate at the neighbor's house. But I did not have any other options. That was the only way to tolerate those two weeks.

As it is seen from this interview excerpt, although the services from third parties are paid by the mothers, the fact that they are not formal and monitored by the state, as well as not professionally qualified, make them less reliable and systematic. In contrast to these services, the availability of free and high-quality support at any time of the day by the family members of the mothers, who live with their kin, also helps them to work and improve their financial conditions.

Another benefit of living with an extended family, is the opportunity to receive the *symbolic power* that Bourdieu (1986, p.53) describes in his analysis, by belonging to a group of people. According to Bourdieu, by receiving membership in a group, that, in its turn, means gaining symbolic power, an individual also gets access to a number of sources (Bourdieu, 1986, p.53). This is the case for the mothers who live with their families. Due to the hierarchical structure of society, the elderly and men have more access to resources and public recognition. The father of a divorced woman, her brothers, and/or the mother are the primary figures to reach a more extensive network of people, consequently, more informal support providers.

My daughter once got a high fever at night. I did not know what to do. We called the doctor but it was taking too much time for the doctor to come. We had a doctor in the neighborhood. But it was so late. But my mother went to their house to ask her to come. They respect her very much. The doctor came and helped a lot. Since then we are very good friends with her. -A1

In cases of problems, my mother usually asks for help. She is old and people respect her. It is also more appropriate sometimes, you know, there can be cases when I don't have as much access being a young, single woman as she does as an elderly.- A2

While the *symbolic power* is guaranteed by the membership in a group, Bourdieu also discusses the convertibility of Social Capital into material benefits (1986, pp. 53-54). According to the Theory, although the importance of the forms of capital such as Social and Cultural should not be ignored, while thinking about economic gains, they have the potential to also produce financial benefits (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 53-54). In the section on the types of informal support, that women receive, we have seen the material benefits that their relationships mainly with their extended

family members, and sometimes third parties produce. The network and ties with people also mean access to job opportunities, gifts, monetary contributions, coverage of children's needs, and basic domestic necessities, which are financial gains that the Social Capital of women produces.

6.6 The Role of the Educational Background of the Mothers in the Quality/Quantity of Informal Support

In the final section of this Chapter, the last sub-objective of the study, that is *The role of educational background in the identification of social quality/ quantity of Informal Support* will be discussed. The discussion will be developed based on Bourdieu's Theory of the Forms of Capital, with a focus on Cultural Capital (1986).

6.6.1 Education and Professional Status as Determinators of the Quality of Informal Support

In the determination of the quality of informal support, another rather important factor emerged to be the educational background of the mothers. Mothers who received higher education, and have professional status have a wider network of people who can provide help with childcare. Especially, the professions such as doctor, teacher, and nurse are highly respected in the context of Azerbaijan. Additionally, they are more capable financially and psychologically to choose the social network and type of support.

Education holds great importance in the life of every woman. I am a supervisor now; I have my own group of employees. It makes me extremely happy to self-realize myself. I have gained connections through my work as well. I have found one job through another-

A7

Bourdieu defines Cultural Capital in three different forms, that are capital in the form of material cultural objects, passed from the family of an individual, such as pieces of art, books, musical instruments, etc., secondly, inherent features of an individual, such as taste in music, gestures, body language, etc., and, finally, capital in the form of academic achievements, certificates, and university diplomas, obtained from different institutions (1986).

In the case of the participants of this study, Cultural Capital in the form of academic achievements and the degrees obtained, is especially vital in shaping women's opportunities. The fact that academic degrees affect job opportunities and the professional status of the mothers, those who have better educational backgrounds, also have stable workplaces and monthly incomes.

Moreover, Cultural Capital in the form of education and professional status significantly affects the social network of women. Those participants, who work for an extensive time now and have regular salaries are more capable of choosing their network of informal support providers. The term “respect” was mentioned in the interviews frequently:

The fact that I am educated, and I am a doctor plays a huge role in gaining a status in society. They respect me as a doctor. They are ready to help with anything. I receive help instantly when I ask for it. No one has ever discriminated against my child in school because she has no father. Because they respect me.- A2

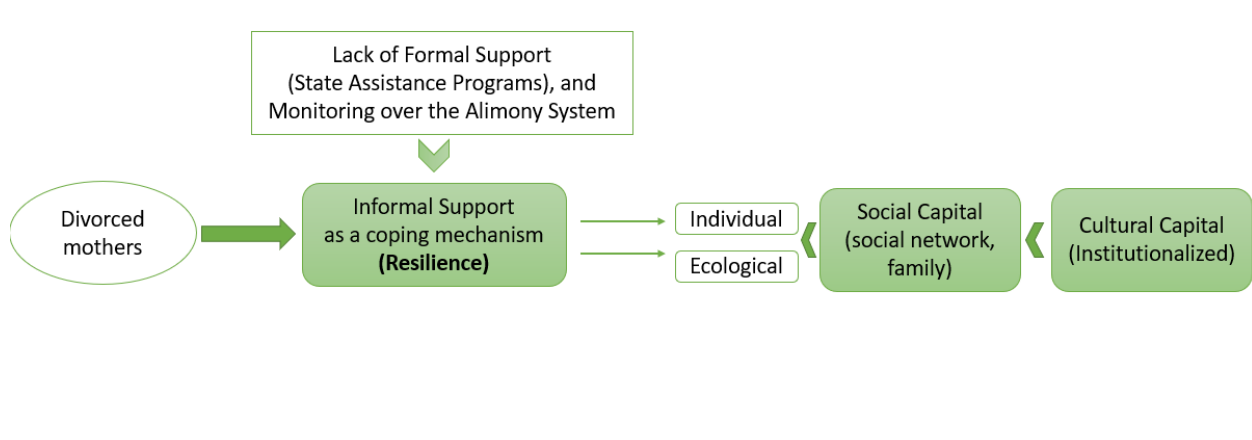
There is a great effect of my educational background. I am a nurse. It helps me to live. Everyone in the neighborhood prays for me, I help them to get well. They also help me with whatever needed. I am respected by everyone. -A5

Bourdieu in his discussion of the conversions of different forms of Capital into one another, stressed how the social networks a person is interconnected with, namely the Social Capital of an individual, is largely affected by the form of Cultural Capital (1986, p. 51). From the interviews with the participants, it became clear, that the educational background and professional status of mothers are extremely important in reaching necessary people and having a wider network of people, who would help mothers with childcare. Also, these qualities allow them to evaluate the help provided by other individuals and, in case it is not sufficient or of low quality, to seek other options. While for those, who have a lower educational background and financial income, it is impossible to look for options other than those that are available.

Chapter VII

Summary and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand how divorced mothers in Azerbaijan, that have children of the age group from five to fifteen years old, perceive the informal support in childcare, provided to them by social networks and extended family. The in-depth qualitative interviews, conducted with seven divorced mothers, were purposefully designed to analyze the experiences of the participants with informal help that they received or/and continue to receive from their networks and compare their insights regarding this topic. In order to provide a comprehensive summary of the study, the visual Graph 1 below is presented and discussed in the following paragraphs.



Graph 1

In the opening chapter, a significant gap in the welfare system of Azerbaijan and the absence of assistance programs, that would support divorced mothers in childcare, both in terms of financial subsidies and physical services, provided to take care of their children, have been discussed. Moreover, from the interviews with the mothers, it has been detected that they are not aware, and have never applied to the only state program, which is given to low-income families. The reasons behind the hesitancy regarding formal assistance, as it was described by the mothers, are a low sense of trust and expectations about state programs, as well as insufficient knowledge about the application processes. Currently, the only support that they receive is the alimonies, decided by a

court and provided by the fathers of their children. However, the absence of a system, that would monitor monthly payments of these alimonies, leads to unsystematic payments in different amounts and time periods.

In the interviews, the mothers described the main challenges that they experience to be safety concerns, financial hardships, emotional burn-outs, and difficulty of working full-time and being the primary caregiver to their children simultaneously.

Due to these factors, Resilience emerges in the form of informal support, provided by their social networks and extended families. Informal support appears as both, the individual coping mechanism, produced by mothers, and largely shaped by the ecologies, surrounding them as it is described from the Ecological Perspective of Resilience (Ungar, 2011, 2008, 2012, 2016; Ungar et al., 2013).

In the provision of informal support, the network of people, mothers are interconnected with, plays a vital role. The quality, frequency, spatial determination, and amount of informal support available in childcare are influenced by the agents, whom the mothers have access to. Consequently, the Social Capital of the participants, which Bourdieu (1986) describes as a network of people that an individual has relations with, based on his/her membership in a specific group or inherent quality such as kinship belonging, shapes informal support, that mothers receive. From the interviews, it has been observed, that living with extended family creates a larger network of reliable people, who can provide trustful and high-quality help for the mothers with childcare at any time of the day. In contrast, those mothers, who live alone with their children tend to use services of neutral individuals, based on the monetary exchange. However, in the case of the later group, the help received from third-parties may be of a low quality, unprofessional and unsystematic.

Lastly, the data obtained from the interviews showed that the social networks of the mothers, in its turn, is largely influenced by the educational background and work status of the participants. Those mothers, who have regular, stable income and higher educational background have higher access to good quality informal support in childcare. In cases, when they are not satisfied with the help provided, they have better financial capacity and social network to access other sources, including paid institutions, such as leisure clubs to send their children to, while they work

full-time. The work status and educational background, that explained in Bourdieu's *Forms of Capital* (1986) as an *institutionalized* Cultural Capital, allow mothers to evaluate the help, provided in childcare and choose the better options when necessary.

7.1 Recommendation for Policy and Practice

This study reveals several gaps in the Welfare System of Azerbaijan, as well as problems with the implementations of the current policies.

First of all, the shift of a common narrative of a family institution as an absolute, stable entity, constituting of a heterosexual couple and children should be questioned. While the traditional understanding of a family institution is prevalent, all other family structures that do not fit into the frame, including divorced parents and their children are discriminated against and marginalized, labeled as “incomplete” both by the state agencies and society. Consequently, the needs and demands of this group, who need additional help in raising their children, are not heard, and no formal assistance is provided, putting them in an extremely vulnerable position.

Secondly, a monitoring mechanism that will control the payment of the only formal source of help for divorced mothers, that is the alimony, should be developed. Due to insufficient control of the alimony system, the payments are not fulfilled regularly and in the amount that is decided by the court.

Thirdly, policies that would facilitate increase in numbers and working hours of free, universal care institutions such as after-school facilities for children, kindergartens should be introduced along with healthcare facilities that would provide psychological support to divorced parents in the process of divorce and in the aftermath period. The emotional overload of divorced mothers is extremely large and challenging to handle, when they also have many responsibilities of their children and extended family members. However, current psychological support, provided in the country, is expensive and hard to access.

Lastly and most importantly, the field of Social Work, that is very recent in the country, needs significant improvements. The introduction of programmes that would increase awareness about the role of social workers in society and possibilities to access them, when facing adversities,

should be implemented. While there are no assistance programs, targeting the divorced parents, the participants of this study are also unaware about the one existing program for low-income families. There is an urgent need for Social Workers to work more in the fields, on the grassroots level, to play the role of a bridge between the state and population as it is supposed to be.

7.2 Implications for Social Work, MFamily

This research study is an important step in the field of Social Work in Azerbaijan, as well as on the Global scale of Social Work practice. While the study is focused on a small group of divorced mothers particularly in the capital of Azerbaijan, the investigation of the hardships of lone mothers, which is an extremely under researched topic in every context, can be very influential in the global arena.

Moreover, although the challenges of divorced mothers were analyzed and described in a detailed manner in the study, the standpoint of this study is to stress the potential, strength and capabilities- the sense of resilience that individuals are able to produce in the times of adversity. This study is a clear example of the fact that as Social Workers, our main duty should be the acknowledgement of individual agencies and creation of space and effective dialogue in order to hear and understand the concerns of the populations that we work with.

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Appendix I

Interview Guide

- **Warming-up questions**

- How old are you?
- How many children do you have? What are their sexes?
- What are their ages?
- For how long have you been divorced officially? Separate unofficially?
- At what age did you have your first child?

- **Characterization of “Informal Support”**

- Do you live with your parents or alone? If not, is it your house/ rent?
- What challenges do you face in bringing up your child/children as a divorced mother?
- To what extent the father of your child/children is involved in child-care? (coparenting after the divorce)
- What kind of support do you need to receive to bring up your child/children?
- Do you receive any support from your extended family or social networks to take care of your child/children? If yes, what type of support do you receive?
- How frequently do you seek support?
- Who are the main support-givers in child-care for you?
- How much time do you spend with your child daily?

- **Comparison of the perceptions about Informal Support**

- What have been your experiences with the informal support so far?
- What do you generally think about the informal support that you receive to bring up your child/children?
- How/ from whom would you prefer to receive this support instead?

- **The impacts**

- How do you think this support affects your socio-economic conditions?
- What are the positive influences of this support in your life?
- What are the challenges of this support for you?
- How do you think you are expected to “return back” the help that you receive?

- **The role of Social and Cultural Capital**

- What is your educational background?
- What is your professional activity?

- How do you think your working environment affects your capability to seek help with child-care?

Appendix II

Thematic Analysis (Matrix Analysis)

Themes (based on objectives) and Subthemes (emerged from interviews):

1. Challenges in childcare : Safety, Financial Shortage, Emotional Exhaustion, Work and Parenting balance, unawareness about formal support
2. Types of Informal Support they receive: Material Support, Look for/parenting of child/children at any time of the day, Help with Education, Emotional Support.
3. Perceptions and Experiences of Informal Support: The importance of the level of dependency and financial stability, Women Empowerment, Child independence, Reciprocity
4. The role of social networks and family in the quality/quantity of support they receive: Living alone vs. living with extended family
5. The role of educational background in the quality/quantity of informal support they receive/received