Historical Perspective on the Ideologies of Motherhood and its Impact on Social Work

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1 Introduction

Throughout history, many attempts have been made to construct femininity. Women were chained to their homes by various rituals, customs and traditions that acted as unwritten laws which must be complied with. The construction of femininity was the most intense in times of industrialisation when migration from the countryside to the city was at its height. Social relations became more complex, with private life in rural communities no longer being subject to an effective social control. The modernization and emergence of new roles and power centres during the late 19th century deprived women of even those rights that they had enjoyed until then. There were several ways in which they were restricted and their roles and social positions determined. The most important were those that were a result of discourses on femininity. In this article, we will concentrate on the ideologies of motherhood and their impact on early social services for women and single mothers. We will restrict ourselves to early 20th century Europe, when contemporary divisions into the east and west, the north and the south had not yet been in place. Although in many ways the constructions of reality have specific local features, feminist theory has shown that the ideologies of motherhood place women in similar positions in the most part of the world. This article will therefore adhere to the general overview that does not comprise specific dimensions of the construction of motherhood within different and specific cultural, social and political contexts.

Feminism also demonstrated that the ideologies of motherhood firmly tied women to their homes, restricted them to private life and influenced gendered division of labour. Women's mothering is central to the sexual division of labour, claims Chodorow "Women's maternal role has a profound effect on women's lives, on ideology about women, on reproduction of masculinity and sexual inequality, and on the reproduction of a particular form of labour power. Women find their primary social location within the sphere of social reproduction (1978: 11)."

The ideologies of motherhood experienced intense development at the time when social work was in its early phase, with the first schools for education in this area only beginning to emerge. At the same time, the women's movement was very vigorous and it importantly influenced the development of social services and the position of women for whom these services were intended. Most attention was accorded to single mothers with children, who were exposed to the moral judgments on the part of religious institutions and the moralizing majority because they challenged the ideals of a good mother and the family. In this article, we will be interested in the beliefs about motherhood and women's sexuality and in how these influenced the position of single mothers with children whose social status exacted a special protection. We will explore how the early social services responded to their needs and on what their response depended. We will seek to answer the question of whether early social work was connected with the ideas of women's movements on single mothers with children

and what was social work perspective on motherhood. In collecting data, we relied on the archive researches in Slovenia and on a broader literature review, which enabled us to make a comparative analysis.

In order to understand the attitude towards single mothers, it is necessary to understand the role of motherhood in the construction of femininity and women's sexuality. Both the first and the second wave of the women's movement was concerned with the deconstruction of motherhood and sexuality, since by tying women to the patriarchal heterosexual family these two ideologies importantly determined women's options of entering the public space. Single mothers tarnished the dominant image of motherhood and represented a threat to the established gender relations. One of their strong adversaries was the Catholic Church, the institution that was among the most active ones when it came to constructing motherhood and offering various institutional treatments. This was the kind of climate surrounding the beginnings of social work and the first secular organizations catering for women. Below we first look at motherhood and women's sexuality, and ideologies that pathologized and criminalized single mothers. We then proceed to explore the beginnings of organized assistance to women, part of which was social work.

2   Motherhood

Throughout history, motherhood was described as the woman's basic mission, profession, and an inseparable part of her nature. Women are supposedly drawn into motherhood by their inner instincts which at the same time guarantee their children's healthy growth and development. This natural ability makes the woman the best possible educator. Motherhood was equated with femininity. It was considered the most beautiful and the most natural profession for the woman, as were the relations within a heterosexual family which could not be avoided or concealed. Catholic marriage was one of the key reasons for the subordination of women. It rested on a strict dichotomy, whereby women were the heart and men were the mind (Mahnič, 1893: 317-321). Although only the union of the two could create the whole, a man was able to survive on his own, but a woman was not. She could only keep her decency in a marriage, where she was controlled and guided by her husband. Catholic marriage was constructed as the only refuge, a place where a woman was protected from the dangers that lurked outside of the home. But this protection came at a price: she had to obey her husband simply because she was the weaker half of the whole (de Beauvoir, 1988: 445-500).

In today's collective as well as professional memory the nature (which was a women's domain in contrast to culture that was ascribed to men) appears as a motherly instinct. Nancy Chodorow notes that parenting is biologically self-explanatory. "This assumption holds that what seems universal is instinctual, and what is instinctual, or has instinctual components, is inevitable and unchanging." (Chodorow, 1978: 13-30) Women's only reality is child bearing and feeding, they have no other reality. In another explanation of this kind, women are mothers because that is what they have been since time immemorial. It is a biological fact that cannot be changed, say the proponents of this explanation. Motherhood therefore appears as a natural fact that is uninteresting in itself and self-explanatory (*Ibid.*).

Such a patriarchal mental pattern debased the woman mentally and physically. Woman was seen as intellectually and emotionally inferior, physically weaker and therefore fully dependent. The only function that could endow her with a certain value was her reproductive ability which consequently became an object of patriarchal ownership. The ownership of the "womb" and the prohibition of sexual intercourse with other men made possible that identity of the child, who at the time of the transition to individual economy had already assumed the

role of a heir, was unequivocal. In this perspective, the woman is not essentially different from any other means of reproduction. Her womb is a "flower pot" (Rothman, 1989) into which a man plants his seed which then produces a child. According to the patriarchal mental pattern, children were the father's property because they came from his seed. Although the seed has no value on its own without a seed bed, woman is only a medium in this chain of events as the seed only passes through her body. The same pattern presupposes that individual characteristics are passed down from the father to the son. Accordingly, such a relationship was seen as the only one having a real value; it symbolized the continuation of the lineage and of the mankind as a whole. Rothman (*Ibid.*) noted that a similar alienation of the womb is taking place today with the help of modern medical technologies. Medicine has established a direct connection with the foetus; it has been observing and studying it, enabling or preventing its coming into being.

The idea about being able to access a child without mother's participation is crucial for the explanation of the longevity and obstinacy of the myth of motherhood (Oakley, 2000). Prohibition of abortion is one of the most effective means of controlling women's reproduction. What is behind it is a denial of the woman's right to be in charge of her own body. The child's advocate is no longer the mother but the moralizing public in whose definition a mother is just a medium who can pose a danger for a child as much as anyone else, although, once the child is born, it is no longer anyone's concern but mother's.

Similarly, women's natural abilities and capabilities are promptly dismissed as soon as a woman decides not to have a child or has a child out of wedlock. The motherly instinct, which should be universal, ceases to be something naturally given. Rather, it appears to be selectively distributed, representing the boundary between the normal and the pathological. It is definitely possessed by heterosexual married women, given that most motherhood ideologies address precisely this group, but it is apparently absent in single mothers, sexually active women and social mothers, or homosexual women. For example, stepmothers in large part of the world are thought to be cruel and hostile towards children (Salwen, 1990). The analysis of children's stories has shown that most stories portray stepmothers as evil. Having their own children does not change their attitude: they are loving towards their own children, but hostile towards their non-biological children (Dalton, 1993; Thiel, 2008). Since in this perspective the motherly instinct works only within heterosexual marriages, it follows that it is a partnership with a man that fills a woman with some supernatural force and gives her the ability to be a mother (Carabine, 2004). It is the man who enables the woman to fulfil her task in the proper manner and who warrants the proper development of a child. Accordingly, only children born in wedlock are desired, since the father is the key figure in their development. Without the father and his intervention in the development of the child's personality, the child is lost for society.

The traditional patriarchal marriage is based on the Catholic assumption that man and woman are two parts of a whole (Castelli, 2001). According to this conviction, women are more attached to religion and more connected with God. They are the most loyal guardians of religious ideas and life, and particularly so if they are mothers. "They are by nature weaker and feebler than men. Their intellectual and physical abilities are also weaker, and this is manifested as gullibility and intellectual inferiority. The man seeks and chooses intellectual and material goods, while the woman distributes those to others, which is proof of man's rationality and female emotionality. However, the woman is not only his substitute, 'a reservoir of his strength,' but she has her own autonomous task. The woman spontaneously feels that Christianity, with its principles of justice, love and freedom protects her rights

against men's self-will, so her mission is to disseminate religion, and she can fulfil it only as a mother. Only motherhood awakens in her the supernatural feelings of love and justice" (Slovenka, 1919: 123). However, not even religion could save women from inferiority, so in some countries, after the separation or divorce the child is given to the father because the mother supposedly cannot raise it on her own (West, 2007: 26).

3   Maternity, sexuality and single mothers

Sexuality can be equated with corporeality, which is also one of the basic characteristics of women. Pregnancy and motherhood are the obvious signs of sexuality which is a matter of passion and sexual desire. In the Catholic religion, the outward sign of the sexual desire and the corporeality of pregnancy formed the basis for women's devaluation. As Ute Ranke Heinemann says, the former was the national enemy number one and the latter was fully subordinated to the intellect and despised (Heinemann, 1992). Since the new age subject must control its instincts (Ule, 2000: 28), and since sexuality is a symbol of these, woman's pregnancy indicated her primitive nature. She is a garden governed by natural laws or instincts and cultivated by others, with this cultivation being mainly her husband's mission.

Such a situation was a consequence of the "struggle" of two instincts, that is, the motherly instinct and the sexual instinct. In this perspective, the level of humanity depends on which instinct comes out the winner of the struggle. Chodorow (1978: 13) says that even the early science took motherhood for a natural fact that did not need verification. The motherly instinct was believed to be stronger than the sexual ensuring the development of positive traits in a woman as soon as she had a child. Sexuality is therefore only a path leading to motherhood. Women whose sexual drive was as strong as their motherly instinct, or stronger than it, could not develop positive traits so they were lost for society. The situation with men was just the opposite. Their sexual drive is stronger than the fatherly instinct, or even, there is no such thing as a fatherly instinct. The duty of the woman was to tame man's sexual desire in addition to her own. Part of this belief is still present in the processing of rape cases. For a long time, there existed the myth that rape was not possible in fact and that women could prevent it because their task was to control the man's sexual desire (Brownmiller, 1987).

The status of single mothers during the early 20th century confirms the thesis of that time that motherly instinct develops only in a heterosexual marriage. The construction of single mother incorporated punishment for premarital sex according to which women's pregnancy was her responsibility and was a consequence of her sexual desire or at least inability to protect herself from the sexual desire of man which made her a bad mother that could not raise a child. Consequently her children could not be seen as moral and worthy members of society (Swain, Howe, 1995).

It is not possible to identify any good properties associated with unmarried mothers or their illegitimate children, that is to say, the properties usually ascribed to mothers whose children were born in wedlock. The emergence of unmarried mothers is connected with industrialization. Migration to cities seems to have been connected to the rise in illegitimacy rates in the nineteen century. "Children born to unmarried women traditionally comprised 2-5 percent of all births, at the end of the eighteen century, the rate increased to 15-20 percent" (Andreson, Zinsser, 1990: 243). In preindustrial Europe, pre-marital sex was part of the sexual behaviour of peasant and working class couples and they usually married when the bride was already pregnant. With the increase of the male mobility this traditional system broke down in rural areas resulting in the higher number of single parent families. Historically, the life of mothers with "illegitimate" children reflects social and cultural

position of women that was framed and bound by prevailing ideologies about the place of women in the society. Pregnancy and care for children were entirely women's responsibility, and this was also supported by the legislation. For example, under the Prussian Civil Code of 1854, the concept of natural fatherhood that was enshrined in the Civil Code of 1794 disappeared, and the conditions for alimony narrowed greatly. The Italian Civil Code of 1866 allowed for no paternity suits except in cases of rape or abduction. Italian women did not gain the right to sue for paternity until as late as 1975. The prevailing European attitude was stated by an Irish legislator in 1837: "Irish females should be (…) guardians of their own honour, and be responsible in their own person for all deviations from virtue." " (*Ibid*.: 243).

The situation in Slovenia was similar. Lenard (1922: 429) claims that there was no law obliging men to care for their illegitimate children. Of particular significance was the inability to inherit from the father. Children in particular had to bear the consequences, and they were often given most unusual names. The women's movement in Slovenia problematized the public status of unmarried mothers and their children as early as the 19th century, but became actively involved with this issue only during the first half of the 20th century. The feminist newspapers of the time covered the stories of persecuted and despised unmarried mothers and their children. One such story was that of a young woman who was "honest and religious" and loved her boyfriend. However, when the parish priest learnt that she was pregnant, he sent three men to the house where she served to chase the "harlot" away from the parish lest she would bring bad luck to the household. A woman pregnant with an illegitimate child, particularly a maid, was a blemish for the parish (Slovenka, 1901: 106). In another article on sexual education, it was explained why poor women were under constant pressure from rich young men. When socializing with women of their own standing, young men had to observe certain very restrictive rules. By contrast, when socializing with poor women no observation of these rules was required. Consequently, in most cases the victims of licentiousness were young working class women who fulfilled the passions of higher classes. In addition, men were not bound by any law to take care of their children, and proving paternity was also difficult (Slovenka, 1901: 38-41).

In struggling for the change in the status of single mothers and their children, the women's movement formulated three basic demands, two of which were voiced at the end of the nineteenth century and the third during the 1920s. These were civil marriage, divorce and abortion (Author, 2003, 2005). All three were defined as the basic rights for the liberation of women.

4   Early organizations for the protection of "fallen" women and mothers

Throughout history, services for unmarried mothers and their children developed within various ideological frames. The most active were various religious institutions whose point of departure was the belief that women were licentious by nature and lacked moral norms. The Irish director Peter Mullan drew attention to the situation within monasteries in his movie *The Magdalene Sisters*. The movie describes contemporary events in the Magdalene Sisters Asylum intended for "fallen" women. Young women who have found themselves alone during mainly undesired pregnancy are left to the mercy of their relatives who, in an attempt to conceal the shame they have brought upon them, send them to the Magdalene Sisters Asylum where real abuse begins. Rapes, beatings, intimidation and constant work, which provided the source of livelihood for the Magdalene sisters, characterized the lives of women within the asylum home; some among them spent entire lives there. Similar asylum homes were put up by the Catholic Church across Europe, Canada and the USA, and these endured

as long as the late 20th century (Smith, 2008). Asylums were closely connected with the adoption strategy of that time that flourished primarily on account of undesired pregnancies.

However, not all church establishments were equally abusive, although it should be noted that Christian churches held sway over the field of care for fallen women. After all, it was the Church that labelled and constructed them as such. Susan Mumm writes about Victorian penitentiaries managed by the Anglican nuns: "In Victorian Britain, a female penitentiary was not a penal institution for the punishment of crime, but a charitable enterprise entered voluntarily by members of an outcast group, popularly known as 'fallen women.' Many fallen women were prostitutes, but the category also encompassed groups other than sexual deviants: female thieves, tramps, alcoholics, and those who were described as feeble-minded were also considered fallen, and it was seen as appropriate to rehabilitate them alongside street-walkers. Penitentiaries were intended as transformative institutions, where female outcasts of many kinds could be changed into 'honest' women, a conversion which incorporated both a spiritual change from sinner to penitent, and an equally important social shift from dissolute and deviant female to respectable woman. The penitentiary, despite its penal overtones, was a therapeutic community which was not experienced as unbearably punitive. As well as reforming prostitutes, Anglican penitentiaries in Victorian Britain offered shelter to the survivors of incest and sexual violence, women fleeing abusive relationships, and female alcoholics." (Mumm, 1996: 527).

From the 19th century onwards, many non-Church organizations for single women (although under the patronage of various Churches) were founded. Among these were missions located at railway stations intended for young women who were moving to big cities, prostitutes who worked at railway stations and other women who needed shelter. A number of organizations catered for housemaids who lost their jobs or were pregnant as a result of rape or abuse within the households where they worked. One such example was the St. Nicholas Establishment in Trieste, Italy. It was both a refuge and an educational centre. Its manager, Marija Skrinjar, (an important figure within the women's movement), managed the place with a gentle hand although housewives expected strictness and ruthlessness. Skrinjar emphasized that such demands were put forward by those who never contributed anything to the Establishment. She noted down that "absolutism and terrorism were not befitting the new century!" She was convinced that more could be achieved with gentleness and softness than with ruthlessness and oppression. "For me, a young woman who enters our Establishment is like my child for whom I must care regardless of whether or not she deserves it. She came to the Establishment because she is in need of help and protection!" (Slovenka, 1900:90).

Her response to the accusations that she was an advocate of housemaids was equally adamant: "Of course I am, it's what this Establishment was intended for – because they cannot and are not allowed to defend themselves! I defend them against good-for-nothing men, against exploiters of their ignorance, against the destroyers of female modesty, and against their masters and the police, if necessary. I defend them wherever they suffer injustice. I also know their weaknesses and these give me pain – but the blame lies with those who turned her into what she is now. Those who prefer some emotionless machine over an emotional being! The housewife is obliged to take care of the spiritual and physical well-being of her housemaid!" (Slovenka, 1900:91) Skrinjar also acted as a mediator with the police and the court in conflicts between housewives and housemaids, consistently advocating for the latter. Many housemaids were pregnant or they came to her after an illegal abortion; the reason was frequently sexual abuse on the part of the master of the household for which they worked. In addition to legal help, advocacy and shelter, women in the Establishment were given an

opportunity to learn various skills like mathematics, accounting, orthography, household skills and so on.

The two examples above (the Magdalene Sisters Asylum and the St. Nicholas Establishment) show that there existed an essential difference between the approaches employed by church organizations and those employed by philanthropic ones, although both were Christian organizations. Thanks to its connection with the women's movement, St. Nicholas Establishment was a humane institution and an advocacy service based on the recognition of the importance of social justice.

The third, secular type of organization catering for women began to develop towards the end of the 19th century and it can be associated with the early beginnings of social work. The intention was not to re-socialize "fallen" women but to ensure that single mothers and their children had equal opportunities as other women of the time, particularly married women. The right to alimony, access to accommodation and education, assistance to children and the option of education and employment were the main demands. Among the more important was a settlement movement that was initiated by Jane Adams in 1889, which was known as the Hull House Settlement. This type of settlement also spread elsewhere across Europe during the first decades of the 20th century. For example, the Kozma Street settlement in Hungary was established in 1912. . It received state funding to operate a kindergarten, a legal aid and employment office, and to provide health care for mothers with small children (Szikra, Varsa, 2005).

5   The role of social work in the (de)construction of single mothers' image

The demand for the rights of women and the foundation of organizations for their protection could be described as the early stages of the welfare state development. According to Bock (1994: 403) since the late nineteenth century women's struggles for political and social rights, citizenship, and welfare had been closely linked, and the emphases was on working class women and their poverty. Many women fought not just for suffrage but also to shape social policies in favour of women. Women began to investigate poverty and found out that it was closely connected to maternity and to the status of single mothers. In Norway, Katti Anker Møller, a protagonist of women's "birth-strike" and an advocate of voluntary motherhood, claimed state assistance for unmarried mothers. She theorised that maternity should be recognised as work and be awarded a wage (*Ibid*.: 408). In the United States, the first mothers' pension law was enacted in Illinois in 1911, and by 1919 thirty-nine states provided some form of mother's aid. "It was granted on two conditions: economic need and the absence of husband's support, and thus was granted especially to widows, but in some states also to single, deserted or divorced women". (*Ibid*.: 416) In Norway, the Child Welfare Act of 1915 granted benefits, financed by taxes, to single mothers who were too poor to bring up their children on their own. But benefits were small and depended on moral supervision; "bad mothers" were excluded or had their children taken away from them. Bock concludes that although "such maternity policies were rooted in diverse and sometimes conflicting motives, they coincide to a large extent with the feminist demands for mothers' rights." (*Ibid*.: 420)

Different views can be found in the work of Nadine Lefaucher. She writes about the close connection between the growth in female employment and the expansion of the public and private life and the "labour-power reproduction sector" which is a synonym for social services. She claims that this connection led to women being "wedded to the welfare state" (Lefaucher 1994: 447). Economic dependence on the state can be the same burden as being dependent on husbands or fathers. For single mothers this means that only the forms of

control and dependence have changed; these have become more complex and less obvious. Although they are no longer called "fallen women" and are now recognized as mothers, the control over their motherhood has increased.

As Kunzel (1993) claims, social work in the times of its early professionalisation responded to the problem with believes about what women were and what their role in private and public sphere was. These contributed to the pathologisation of single mothers by labelling and categorising them and by attempting to change their deviant nature. This only reinforced their already unfavourable social position. Kunzel researched a network of maternity homes that were founded and run first by the evangelical women of the 19th century in the United States. In 1910 social work became an important new profession in those homes that were legitimizing rhetoric of science and language of casework in an attempt to advance their professional status. Creating new scripts to explain out-of-wedlock pregnancy, they characterized unmarried mothers first as "feebleminded" and later as "sex delinquents." (Garrison, 1995) Even today, everyday professional discourse divides mothers into good and bad ones; social parenthood is not valued the same as biological parenthood, and the conviction that single mothers' children are more delinquent and that they more easily take the "wrong course" is still in place. Single mothers face difficulties when they want to obtain equal status within motherhood ideologies, although we should not overlook the shifts in their and their children's legal status.

6 Conclusion

Motherhood had been historically equated with femininity. It had been considered the most beautiful and the most natural profession; something given by nature. Women's power was believed to lie in motherly love. Women who did not want to be mothers were considered inadequately physically developed; only motherhood could leave the right imprint on a woman. To reject motherhood was to be egotistic and selfish. The attitude to children was believed to come from the depths of woman's human existence and to determine the direction of her emotions and sacrifice; family life therefore placed her into natural relations that could not be rejected or concealed. Woman could represent her gender only as a mother. Without motherhood, she turned into something completely different.

The discussion on motherhood shows that to control female reproduction is to control women in general. Women's reproduction was the subject of control and regulation throughout history, and it is deeply rooted in women's collective memory. The ideology governing this area in the past had been carried forward to various sciences, especially medicine which has the power to intervene in the human body, and this proved disastrous for women in situations in which this intervention restricted their free will. In addition to greater awareness, these interventions produced two other results. The one, smaller in scope, is voluntary motherhood, and the other is manifested in the decisions taken by single women to simply not have a child, evade control in this way and maintain free will in decisions concerning themselves. Both are equally radical and reflect the wish for greater personal freedom in matters concerning one's own body. In environments characterized by powerful formal and informal control, these were the only possible decisions, since as intimate and personal choices they could not be affected by technology. Demands for public morality and social pressures were still present, but the emergence of the women's movement, and particularly its influence on the changes in mentalities gave the movement sufficient power to resist the social organization of motherhood.

In the course of history, social work responded to this problem in a variety of ways, depending on the context. The examples show that work practices in dealing with single mothers with children depended on the awareness about their social position and on the dominant perspective on motherhood and marriage.

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