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**Title:** *How much vulnerable am I?* Story of a gender-centered ethnography and its ‘maker’

This paper presents the path of a gender-centered ethnography, from the writing of the proposal up to the conduction of the fieldwork, and the position and relations of the researcher with the field of study/fieldwork and with the gatekeepers and the participants.

The research study took into consideration – Study on TRansition and Exclusion in Society of Single-Mums (STRESS-Mums) – is an Institutional Ethnography (IE) and has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no 843976. The study collects data in three EU countries (Belgium, Italy and Spain) and in the UK, with discursive interviews to lone mothers, professionals (judges, lawyers, other experts) and gender issues activists, participant observations, document analysis and photo-voice sessions with the mothers and the professionals.

Dorothy Smith first developed IE that is both a sociological theoretical approach and a social scientific procedure for investigating discourse as social relations. IE explores how institutional discourses frame the way in which individuals think and act within their everyday practices, according to ethnomethodological suggestions. IE has the ability to explicate tensions that are produced by the social organization of knowledge. This explication describes critically how and why experiences of tension are organized in an invisible manner by conceptual practices of power that regulate what

people know and do in everyday life. The aim is to generate knowledge about the invisible and taken-for-granted forms of governance that rule everyday life. The choice of IE resides also in its capacity to explore in terms of dominating relations what is conventionally understood in terms of micro-macro relationships and processes. IE arose within the feminist perspective (a combination of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and Marx's materialist method), but some recent reformulations extend the IE method beyond that perspective.

The focus of the research study concerns the lone mothers' everyday strategies and social practices to claim inclusion and to negotiate (or not negotiate) the dominant definition of family and parenthood proposed by institutions and professionals, and the less legitimated and multiple situated definitions of lone parents and their families. The study explores the lone mothers' manifest and hidden 'work' of legitimation and of possible de-legitimation by institutions, analyzing, in particular, the transition from double parenthood to lone motherhood, that is the period of judicial evaluation for child custody and judicial decisions for children/family allowances and divorce/separation. That transition was selected since, according to some authors, the law on children shared custody seems to conceal, in its reference to parents' equality, new forms of male dominance embodied in the cultural paradigms of Western societies, with long-term detrimental effects on children and mothers. In other words, a sort of naturalization of dominance relations may be not very visible and recognized in this law.

This paper analyses the standpoint of the ethnographer and the gendered practices that, before and during the fieldwork, affected the relationships between the ethnographer and the gatekeepers and participants.

This paper does not present an auto-ethnography, but it offers an analysis of the intricate and complex relations between the ethnographer's strengths and weaknesses and the gatekeepers/participants' characteristics. So that this paper constitutes in itself an IE on the process of doing research on gender issues like lone mothers' issues.

Since IE uses the concept of 'research problematic' as a conceptual research tool with the aim of identifying the social dynamics of a specific sector of the world of everyday experience, the

'problematic' envisaged by this paper highlights a 'disjuncture' between the experiences of the researcher and the ruling perspectives of the academic and judicial institutions. An example of this disjuncture concerns the construction of the notion of vulnerability.

The discussion highlights how gender interacts with dimensions of the ethnographer's social life and identity, her values and activism. Since, on the one hand, the ethnographer was facilitated by being a female and a (no longer young) woman, into that fieldwork, on the other hand, she dealt with visible and invisible obstacles to deconstruct and dismantle. In particular, this paper focuses on the issue of the *vulnerability* of the researcher and of the participants as defined and constructed in terms of a gendered category. That vulnerability implies dimensions of domination and fear, by both the researcher and the participants. One of the aims of this paper is to bring to light the naturalization of those dominance relations during fieldwork.

### **Keywords:**

Lone mothers, gender, power relations, Institutional Ethnography, intersectionality

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