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**WHAT MAKES A WOMAN A WOMAN? EXPLORING THE GENDER  
IDENTITIES OF YOUNG FEMALE ESTONIANS WITH HIGHER  
EDUCATION**

MA thesis

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This thesis conforms to the requirements for a Master's thesis

..... (signature of the supervisor and date)

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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## **Abstract**

To gain a better understanding of how women conceptualize gender and situate themselves in a changing society, the research conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with highly educated young Estonian women aged between 24-35. The interviews were conducted from February to March 2018 in Tartu, Estonia. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling on an entirely voluntary basis. The research inquires into the ways the informants define themselves in terms of gender and the social significance of the elements utilized to construct their gender identities. The results were categorized thematically and analyzed with Discourse Analysis (DA).

The study finds that femininity at the individual level is conceptualized, experienced and related to one's social life very differently. First of all, how "woman" is defined and how one understands the relationship between biological sex, gender and gender identity are already sites of struggle. Secondly, the boundary between women's essential nature and socially constructed femininities is fuzzy. It is very difficult to claim anything other than female physiology essentially feminine since what makes a woman a woman differs from person to person. Lastly, the perceived importance of each elements of femininity to the participants' overall self-identifications and their social life varies, which is highly contingent on the socialization processes that the informants have undergone.

The empirical research illustrates the diverse conceptualizations of femininity and individual struggles to get rid of traditional gender roles while preserving a sense of

belonging to her assigned gender group or her sex category, contributing to existing literature with an in-depth understanding of how gender as a social identity is negotiated at the individual level when different strands of thoughts coexist in society. Yet the research only focuses on highly educated young females perspectives. How other groups of women conceptualize and practice femininity may be interests to future research.

Key words: woman, female, femininity, gender, identity

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender is ubiquitous in almost every aspect of life. At the societal level, gender regulates the way in which individuals participate in political, economic, and social activities in the public sphere. In the private sphere, family life in particular, gender defines the meaning of family, responsibilities of and desirable relations between each member. At the individual level, gender is a crucial lens through which individuals understand themselves in relation to the external world. By internalizing culturally specific definitions of masculinity and femininity, individuals define themselves in a gendered way, and may think and behave according to prescribed rules for males and females in a given social context. (Wood and Eagly, 2010, 2012, 2015). To gain a better understanding of how gender identity and social behavior are connected to each other, the research analyzes interview data collected from 12 volunteer participants, exploring how individuals construct their gender identities and relate these identities to their everyday lives from highly educated young female Estonians' perspectives. By investigating how different notions of femininity are perceived, accepted, negotiated, or rejected by individuals, the research provides a more sophisticated understanding of how gender equality or inequality is maintained and reproduced at the individual level.

The dissertation is structured into nine sections following introduction. Chapter one offers an overview of the historical background and previous gender studies in

Estonia to familiarize readers with the social context within which gender is understood. Chapter two outlines the fundamentals of Berger and Luckmann's Social Constructionism, providing the theoretical framework under which gender and gender identity are conceptualized. Chapter three discusses the practicalities of the research, provides brief background information about the participants and introduces Discourse Analysis (DA), the methodology utilized to analyze data. Chapter four examines the interrelatedness between the informants' understandings of sex, gender and gender identity. Chapter five thematically presents analysis of the major resources utilized to construct gender identity and how these conceptualizations of femininity contribute internally to the participants' sense of belonging to one gender category and externally to their perceptions of common gendered practices. Chapter six shows the varying degree to which gender identity is considered important to the informants' overall self-identifications. Chapter seven discusses unexpected results yielded from the research. Chapter eight outlines the limitations of this research. Finally, conclusion summarizes the main findings of this research and provides suggestions for future research.

## 1. UNDERSTANDING GENDER IN THE ESTONIAN CONTEXT

### 1.1. The false emancipation and women's double burden during the Soviet era

Despite official discourses to “emancipate” women from the private sphere, as numerous studies have shown, Soviet policies were actually highly gendered, which reinforced rather than eliminating traditional gender roles and perpetuated the patriarchal order inside and outside home (Saxonberg and Szelewa, 2007). The most pronounced example is the “double burden” imposed on women that on the one hand, expected women's participation in labor market while on the other hand, left household duties mostly to women (Haavio-Mannila and Kauppinen, 1994; Saxonberg and Sirovátka, 2006). Although communal services were provided as a solution to fulfill the needs of household services, the qualities of these services were dubious (Oprica, 2008). Childcare and household chores remained predominantly performed by women (Klots, 2018).

With regard to participation in production, the ratio of female labor force was higher than that in contemporary Western societies. Nevertheless, the average pay that women received was lower than that of men, and they were mostly engaged in low skilled jobs (LaFont, 2001; Penn and Massino, 2009). Rather than enjoying an advantageous position, women were “in fact more at the mercy of state policies than men were” (Gal and Kligman, 2000: 8).

## 1.2. Estonia after 1991: Gender in Estonia in the past 28 years

The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not bring a true emancipation to women, either. Women bore asymmetrically heavy burdens especially during the 1990s following the collapse of the USSR (Hallas, 1994). Gender stereotypes remained deep-rooted in people's minds (Kolga, 2000). And despite their eagerness to “return to Europe”, Estonians were skeptical about gender equality (Kaskla, 2003; Põldsaar, 2006), which was deemed identical to the ideology imposed by the former regime related to memories of oppression that most Estonians have been anxious to get rid of (Hallas, 1994). Moreover, gender equality was seen as one of the potential challenges EU poses to Estonian selfhood (Põldsaar, 2006), which fits into the broader picture of its continuous struggle of national identity (Feldman, 2001; Berg, 2002).

In the past decade, Estonia's acceptance of gender equality has gradually increased though in practice gender inequalities remain prevalent. The most pronounced gender inequality is the disparity of men and women's average wage—Estonia has the largest gender pay gap advantageous to male employees among all European Union countries while at the same time has the biggest education gap in favor of women and girls (Roosmaa and Aavik, 2016). Politically, the socioeconomic situation and institutional barriers prevent women's political participation notwithstanding the fact that they are not particularly biased against by the constituency (Allik, 2015; European Commission, 2015a). In addition to the uneven distribution of financial resources and entry barriers into the political field, traditional stereotypes remain strong though gender equality has

gradually become a widely accepted concept by the Estonia public. Despite the fact that over 80 percent of people agrees that “gender equality (equal rights and treatment for men and women) improves the way societies function” (European Commission, 2013), Estonia is the 10<sup>th</sup> country most likely to hold stereotypical attitude towards gender among the 28 EU member states (European commission, 2017). And interestingly, there is an inclination to stereotype females more rigidly than males. While 78% of respondents believe that “women are more likely than men to make decisions based on their emotions”, merely 13% of them considers it unacceptable for men to cry (European Commission, 2017). With regard to their roles in household, although 69% of interviewees disagrees the statement that “women are less willing than men to make a career for themselves, 59% of respondents believes that “all in all family life suffers when the mother has a full time job” (European Commission, 2015b). In a later report, 7 out of 10 respondents are convinced that “the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family” (European Commission, 2017). On the other hand, only 53% of respondents believe that “the most important role of a man is to earn money” in the same report. In an earlier survey in 2015, 73% of informants respond negatively to the statement that “a father must put his career ahead of looking after his young child” (European Commission, 2015). In other words, although men’s roles in Estonian society has become more diverse, women’s “mission in life” remains relatively unitary—a care-giver of her family.

These surveys illustrate the bigger picture of gender relations in contemporary

Estonia where two parallels of ideas exist simultaneously. On the one hand, the concept of gender equality is widely acknowledged and accepted; on the other hand, stereotypical views of gender, especially towards females, remain prevalent. Hence, female Estonians are often the less advantageous ones in relation to their male counterparts.

## 2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER AND GENDER IDENTITY

### 2.1. Berger and Luckmann's Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a theory in the discipline of sociology that discusses how people gain knowledge from the world. In *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966), Berger and Luckmann laid the theoretical foundation of social constructionism. The central argument of social constructionism is that human reality is socially constructed. Berger and Luckmann (1967: 17) define reality as “a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition”. The taken-for-granted reality of everyday life originates in and is maintained by thoughts and actions of ordinary members of society. It appears as an already objectified and ordered reality, which constitutes one's natural attitude and further presents itself as an intersubjective world that one shares with others. That is, members of the society share a common sense about the reality. This is achieved and sustained through language. It is language that makes thoughts and concepts as well as objectifying experiences possible.

The society exists both as objective and subjective reality. Andrews (2012: 40-41) summarizes Berger and Luckmann's argument about society as objective reality. The objective reality:

...is brought about through the interaction of people with the social world, with

this social world in turn influencing people resulting in routinisation and habitualization. That is, any frequently repeated action becomes cast into a pattern, which can be reproduced without much effort. This frees people to engage in innovation rather than starting everything anew. In time, the meaning of the habitualization becomes embedded as routines, forming a general store of knowledge. This is institutionalised by society to the extent that future generations experience this type of knowledge as objective. Additionally this objectivity is continuously reaffirmed in the individual's interaction with others.

One experiences the society as a subjectively meaningful reality through primary and secondary socialization. In the process of the former one internalizes the roles and attitudes of his/her significant others and acquires a coherent identity. In secondary socialization, one is given a more institutionalized and role-specific stock of knowledge.

Social constructionism emphasizes the reflexive and dialectical relationship between human beings and the social world. Through externalizing their behavior, human beings form the society. After being objectivated the society becomes the objective reality experienced and internalized by individuals. Individuals then again, externalize their behavior, which sustains or poses a challenge to the society. The society is therefore "part of a human world, made by men, inhabited by men, and, in turn, making men, in an ongoing historical process" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:136).

Take identity as an example. Berger and Luckmann (1967) see identity is a crucial

component of subjective reality formed by social processes. Identity represents a designated social location in a certain world, which “can be subjectively appropriated only *along with* that world” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 274; original italics). In other words, an identity arises within a specific social context that denotes a particular understanding of the social world. When one internalizes others’ roles and attitudes and forms an identity of his/her own, he/she also embraces their understandings of the world:

In any case, in the complex form of internalization, I not only “understand” the other’s momentary subjective processes, I “understand” the world in which he lives, and that world becomes my own (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 270).

And just as other aspects of reality, once an identity is crystalized, it is “maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 354). Berger and Luckmann (1967) maintain that the mechanism is double-sided since identities originate from the dialectic between individual and society. To be more specifically, identities are products of the interplay between social structure, organism, and individual consciousness, which in turn “react upon the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or even reshaping it” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 354). Identity, therefore, can be understood as a reflection of a particular worldview that is made possible by and remains reflexive to the given social structure.

Importantly, social constructionism is an epistemological perspective in the sense that it does not question the ontological existence of an objective reality. It only maintains that the meaning of reality is socially constructed (Andre, 2000; Andrews, 2012; Guzzini, 2013; Walker, 2015). Having a social character does not imply that the reality is not true; instead, its implication is that the reality we perceive as natural is constructed by human beings.

## 2.2. Theorizing gender and gender identity

### *Gender*

Instead of being seen as fixed and unchangeable which determines people's social location and behavior, gender is distinguished from sex and is understood in a more complex, fluid, and relational sense. While sex is defined rather unequivocally in biological terms as "a biological category where individuals are sorted into males and females on the basis of relatively straightforward anatomical features and underlying chromosomal arrangements" (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2010: 74), gender, on the other hand, is "the social meaning of sex" that concerns "the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females" (Giddens, 1989: 158 in Wodak, 1997: 3). According to their anatomical features individuals are classified into two groups: men and women.

There are many ways to theorize gender more concretely because gender can refer to various things. Humm (1989: 84) sees gender as "the culturally-shaped group of

attributes given to the female or to the male” that defines the way in which individuals of different sexes are expected to behave. That is, gender defines what it means to be a “man” or a “woman”; what is “masculinity” and “femininity” in a culture. Haslanger (2000: 37) views gender as a social class and endeavors to address “the pattern of social relations that constitute the social classes of men as dominant and women as subordinate”. A more inclusive definition is provided by Bradley (1996: 205) who sees gender as “the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labor and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity”.

From a social constructionist point of view, the research understands gender as a reflexive social institution, and adopts Gal and Kligman (2000)’s definition of gender, which defines gender as “the socially and culturally produced ideas about male-female difference, power, and inequality that structure the reproduction of these differences in the institutionalized practices of society”. Similar to West and Zimmerman (1987)’s notion of “doing gender”, these ideas are embedded in major social institutions that constitutes the gendered social order and is produced and reproduced through everyday interactions framed within the larger social context (Gal and Kligman, 2000; Judith, 2005).

## *Gender Identity*

In psychology, gender identity is an individual's "broad psychological orientation to the world" (Haslanger, 2000) in terms of gender. It is "the sameness, unity, and persistence of one's individuality as male, female, or ambivalent" (Money and Ehrhardt, 1972: 4). Nagoshi and Nagoshi (2014: 4) summarize Wilchins' (2002) argument and similarly define gender identity as "an individual's internal sense of self as being male, female, or an identity between or outside these two categories". Gender identity is determined by multiple factors and "no single factor alone can be considered causal, even though it may represent a durable pattern" (Shainess, 1969:77). As Lewontin (1982: 142) argued, "biological differences became a signal for, rather than a cause of, differentiation in social roles". Therefore, despite the fact that gender identity is generally presumed to be in line with an individual's biological sex (Nagoshi and Nagoshi, 2014), the self-conception of being male, female or others does not necessarily have to be consistent with one's biological sex. For instance, the biological sex and gender identity of a transsexual individual are different.

Although Berger and Luckmann (1967) as well as West and Zimmerman (1987) offer a sociological understanding of identity and of gender separately in their work without defining what gender identity is, it could be inferred that from social constructionist perspective, gender identity not only concerns an individual's inner feeling about himself or herself as a gendered human being, but also about one's perception of her social location which is made available only within a specific social

context. Gender identity is thus also a social construct in the sense that it is contingent on the socialization process one experiences, which remains reflexive to the society. To be clear, how an individual's gender identity develops may largely depend on the label "attached to him or her as a child" (Lewontin, 1982: 142). Yet as what Simone de Beauvoir (2009: 267) said, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".

Since all informants are ciswomen and the primary interest of this research is the social significance of gender identity to individuals, the research will only briefly discuss the participants' gender identities as a mental state while explore more in detail how gender identity as a social identity is constructed and reflects their understandings of gender relations in a broader sense.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Data and practicalities of the research

The research investigates the way young Estonian women with higher education construct their gender identities. To understand what elements are considered central to one's gender identity, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with participants recruited through snowball sampling. Interview is chosen as the way to gather data for two reasons. Firstly, compared to survey, interview encourages interviewees to make longer and more complete utterances, thus allowing the interviewer to observe and record the entire process of the construction of language as well as the context. Secondly, interview offers a chance for the interviewer to speak and interact with interviewees, which minimizes misunderstandings or misinterpretations. The interview questions were designed in an open-ended manner, which can be found in Appendix 1. The interviews were carried out in Tartu where the first-ranking higher education institution in Estonia—University of Tartu—is located. The city provides abundant opportunities to meet qualified potential participants from diverse academic backgrounds.

The research has obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of University of Glasgow. Participation is entirely voluntary. All interviews were conducted individually in English and audio-recorded by the recording device provided by the researcher. All texts were transcribed by the researcher and were kept confidential during the entire research process. All information that makes participants

identifiable is wiped out and interviewees are identified by pseudonyms in this dissertation.

### 3.2. Background information of the participants

There are 12 participants in total involved in this research. Birgit (34), Jaana (35), Laura (30) and Moonika (25) are reached through Feministeerium and other participants are accessed through snowball sampling. The chart below summarizes the age, educational level and subjects, occupation as well as partnership status of the participants, which can also be found in Appendix 2.

Pseudonym	Age	Educational level and subjects	Occupation	Partnership status
Anna	32	Master in Social sciences	Master's student in Formal sciences; Part-time employee in government sector	Cohabitation

Birgit	34	Master in Social sciences	Part-time Ph.D. student in Social sciences; Full-time employee in military sector	Married
Elena	29	Master in Humanities	Stay-at-home mom; Part-time teacher	Married; has one child (1-year-old)
Eva	30	Master in Humanities	Stay-at-home mom	Married; has 2 children (4- and 1-year-old)
Ines	32	Master in Social sciences	Ph.D. student in Social sciences	Married; has 2 children (8- and 10-year old)
Helena	24	Bachelor in Natural	Master's student in	Cohabitation

		sciences	Natural sciences	
Jaana	35	Master in Natural sciences	IT specialist	Married; has one child (4-year-old)
Katrin	27	Bachelor in Humanities	Master's student in Humanities; Teacher	Cohabitation
Laura	30	Ph.D. in Natural sciences	Researcher in Natural sciences	Single
Mia	24	Bachelor in Social sciences	Master's student in Social sciences	Single
Moonika	25	Bachelor in Humanities	Master's student in Humanities	Single
Tiina	27	Master in Social	Employee in educational	Cohabitation; has one child

		sciences	institution	(2-year-old)
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Anna is a 32-year-old student studying Formal Sciences at Master’s level and a part-time coordinator in a governmental administrated institution. She has a master’s degree in Humanities and is currently living with her partner. Birgit is a part-time Ph.D. student in Social Sciences and a full-time employee in the military sector. She is 34 years old and has been married for three years. Elena is a 29-year-old stay-at-home-mom as well as a part-time teacher at this moment. She completed her master’s degree in Humanities. She is married and has a one-year-old son. Eva has been a full-time stay-at-home-mom since graduating from her master’s studies in Humanities five years ago. She is 30 years old, married, and has two children. Both Elena (29) and Eva (30) are Christians. Ines has a master’s degree in Social Sciences and is studying the same subject at Ph.D. level. She is a 32-year-old married woman with two children at the age of 8 and 10. Helena is a 24-year-old master’s student in Natural Sciences. She has been cohabitating with her partner for three years. Jaana has an education background in Natural Sciences and is working as an IT specialist. She is 35 years old, married and has one 4-year-old daughter. Jaana is the only participant whose biological gender and her social gender identities are incongruent. Biologically she identifies herself as a female and is satisfied with her body, while identifies herself as a gender nonconforming person in the social sphere. She is also the only participant who is the main provider in her family. Katrin is a master’s student in Humanities and is working

at two educational institutions. She is 27 years old and just started cohabitating with her partner. Laura has a Ph.D. degree in Natural Sciences and is a research fellow in the same field. She is 30 years old and has been single for five years. Both Mia and Moonika are master's students and are single at this moment. Mia is 24 years old and studies Social Sciences. She also works part-time in private sector. Moonika is a 25-year-old student majoring in Humanities. Lastly, Tiina has a master's degree in Social Sciences and works in an educational institution. She is 27 years old, lives with her partner and has one 2-year-old child.

### 3.3. Social Constructionism and Discourse Analysis (DA)

From social constructionist point of view, language is of paramount significance since it is the most important content and instrument of socialization through which realities are constructed and maintained. As contended by Berger and Luckmann (1967), the crystallization of identity and the internalization of language take place at the same time:

Society, identity *and* reality are subjectively crystallized in the same process of internalization. The crystallization is concurrent with the internalization of language. Indeed, for reasons evident from the foregoing observations on language, language constitutes both the most important content and the most important

instrument of socialization (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 276-277; original italics).

By defining meanings of abstract concepts and experiences, language makes the intersubjective world possible. Put differently, it would be impossible to create a world with shared understandings without language.

Since identity is regarded as a crucial component of subjective reality that one experiences and is maintained by language, Discourse Analysis (DA) is chosen as the analytical tool to analyze data obtained. “Discourse is an umbrella term for either spoken or written communication beyond the sentence” (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos, 2004: 4) which in social sciences, includes “all the non-verbal as well as the verbal construction of meanings occurring in the wider sphere of “ideological” practices” (Macdonnel, 1986: 4). Discourse analysis is therefore a methodology analyzing “the ways in which socio-cultural and ideological practices take effect in language” (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos, 2004: 5).

#### 4. THE INTERRELATENESS BETWEEN SEX, GENDER AND GENDER IDENTITY

This chapter presents the informants' conceptualizations of the relationships between sex, gender and gender identity. Though the three terms are commonly used and rarely distinguished in daily life, not every participant understands them in the same way. To avoid confusion and to facilitate a more in-depth discussion, this chapter firstly deals with the direct question about sex and gender identity, and secondly, outlines two major ways in conceptualizing gender.

##### 4.1. The direct question about sex and gender identity

In this research, all participants are biological females, and identify themselves as females. From their perspectives, biological sex is the most crucial and fundamental signal based upon which one acquires a sense of self as being female. In general, there are two though somewhat similar perspectives with regard to the relationship between sex and gender identity. Most participants subscribe to the first perspective where gender identity is conceptualized as an essentialist identity presumed to be in line with one's biological sex. Since one's chromosomal arrangements are predetermined and cannot be changed without deliberate and considerable efforts after birth (e.g., sex reassignment surgery), they do not question the label attached to them at birth. Instead, these informants accept the fact that they were born with female genitals and take their female gender identities for granted. Gender identity in this sense, is better understood

as the participants' recognition of their anatomical features. Eva (30) for example, identifies herself as a woman because she was born one:

I like being a woman, but I guess I would similarly enjoy being a man if I was a man, but I am who I am. I was born as a woman, and I am. It's just the way it is.

(Eva, 30)

There are also few participants who see gender identity less as an essentialist identity even if their sex and gender identities are aligned. Still, individuals cannot choose which body to be born into. Yet rather than passively accepting what was assigned at birth, these participants believe that gender identity concerns how comfortable one feels with his/her body, which does not come automatically to individuals. Identifying oneself as a female, therefore, is not only one's recognition of, but also her satisfaction with her female body, and vice versa for other gender identities. This perspective acknowledges the possibility that an individual's gender identity may not be in line with his/her biological sex. Birgit (34), for example, perfectly illustrates this point:

Biologically I got the lottery check. I feel myself good in my body. I identify myself as a woman. (Birgit, 34)

For Birgit (34), biological sex is crucial in how she identifies herself in terms of gender. Yet rather than ascribing her gender identity to the fact that she was born a female, she relates her sense of self as being female to her satisfaction with her body, which is rather a coincidence than a destined result.

#### 4.2. Defining woman: Gender and femininity

In general, gender is understood in a dualist sense where individuals are categorized either as a man or a woman. However, unlike biological sex, what gender means vary from person to person. For some participants, gender is equivalent to biological features, unrelated to how feminine or masculine one sees herself at the social level. For example, Tiina (27) is aware of her gender when going to gynecologists:

Maybe with gynecologists...like women stuff...like, my biological features is gender for me. I've never felt that my gender sets me a limit for something. This is never for me. (Tiina, 27)

Women, in this sense, are no more than biological female human beings. If a person is biological female, she is a woman, and the same works for men. Apart from their anatomical structures, there are no deterministic differences between any two women. And as generic as the word "female" is, members in this gender group are as

heterogeneous as in the group of men. Hence, despite the fact that many participants do not consider themselves feminine, the lack of womanliness barely diminishes their self-identifications as woman.

Yet for others, gender also denotes particular style of dress, social behavior and social roles expected from individuals according to their biological sex. Gender identity, therefore, not only implies one's biological sex, but also the extent to which an individual conforms to or identifies with existing gender norms and gender ideals. A woman is not only a biological female human being, but also a person who possesses certain attributes, behaves and interacts with others in a "womanly" or "feminine" manner distinguished from that of men. Since conceptualizations of femininity ranges from an individual's appearance, personality, interests to the roles she plays and the way she interacts with people, femininity marks the site of struggle of what it means to be a woman and whether one qualifies as a woman.

The reconceptualization of gender illustrates the informants' resistance to gender stereotypes. By reducing gender to biological sex, the boundary between biological sex and gender is blurred. Although both terms are preserved, societal expectations attached to one's biological sex are largely removed from what the word "gender" may have originally suggested. Similarly, by extending the meaning of gender to incorporate all traditional stereotypes, the informants delineate an unambiguous boundary that allows for possibilities to separate the biological and social realms of gender. Through whichever manner, the meaning of gender is negotiated, and stereotypes are rejected.

## 5. CONSTRUCTING THE SELF AS A FEMALE/WOMAN: COMPONENTS OF FEMALE GENDER IDENTITY

### 5.1. Physical strength and frailty

It is agreed that females on average, are smaller in skeletal size and weaker in strength compared to males, which sets the limits of what a female might be physically capable of. Though the difference is not absolute, identifying oneself as a female often comes with the acknowledgement of the physical restraint placed on her body:

Average women have smaller bodies than average men...And of course, female sexual organs are much more sensitive and we need to consider that when we do certain physical activities. We can't also train as much as men can because it affects our eggs that are inside us from the birth to the death. For men, the sperm renews very often, so they can damage their body more. So biologically we have to more careful, yes. (Birgit, 34)

In everyday life, gender difference in physical strength gives grounds for gendered division of household duties. Men are expected to handle physically demanding tasks such as moving heavy objects, home building and renovation. "Women's work", on the other hand, usually entails chores requiring less physical strength such as cooking, cleaning, laundry as well as other housekeeping chores. The division is rarely questioned because males are believed to be inherently stronger while women weaker.

Informants with petite body figure, in particular, are more aware of their physical frailty and have a preference to avoid dealing with “men’s work”. For example, Tiina (27) prefers to let her partner carry out tasks involving much physical strength:

Of course he does [the heavy work in household]. He brings all the wood inside, and I put it on fire. I don’t want to carry it because...I can carry 4 or 5 logs, and he can carry 11 logs. I would have to go 3 times outside and inside and put them on the floor, and he can [does it] with one going. So it makes sense to me that he does it although he does not like it all the time. (Tiina, 27)

Similarly, Mia (24)’s father and her two male colleagues helped her with heavy objects and housing-related tasks when she was moving. From her point of view, in addition to strength, men also seem to have more knowledge and experience in home maintenance:

...like, building, housing works, this is also always for my dad...this is kind of things that are for men...I’m not good at making these men things in our, in my home. So they are helping me with...heavy things and also like some things that I am not, I don’t know how to do them in housing, yeah, so they have helped me. (Mia, 24)

Nevertheless, the participants do not insist on a strict gender division of housework. Availability plays a more important role than preference. Tiina (27) will carry the logs on her own if her partner is not present. In Anna (32)'s opinion, although tasks such as roof repair are usually tackled by a male, she is willing to help. And if she lives alone, she will handle it herself:

But I can help if they need to. I can help like give a hammer or hold something or...  
I am not opposed to it like, "Humph! I'm not dealing with that". If I would be living alone then I probably will figure it out. (Anna, 32)

More importantly, gender difference in physical strength is not universal. For informants who are as capable as average males in undertaking physically demanding tasks, physical frailty is not part of their female gender identities, which however, is in conflict with perceived societal expectations of female fragility. At the individual level, the conflict affects how a female socially defines herself. Helena (24) for example, sees herself more masculine than feminine because she does the work that are generally considered men's responsibilities:

I figured it out because my parents divorced when I was very little, and maybe...we grew up in the countryside, so in our family there is nothing like, this, women and men work. Women do everything like fixing the roof and breaking the

wood for the winter, so that's why I kind of feel maybe the society has made me feel this way because it's like, not feminine to do these things and that's why I feel I am more masculine. (Helena, 24)

In daily life, the social conflict can result in discords in interpersonal interactions since frailty as a feminine trait is defined as opposite to strength of masculine attribute. Failing to enact according to traditional gender roles also prevents a male from performing masculinity. An encounter Jaana (35) for instance, illustrates how not conforming to the traditional gender roles can cause tension between two individuals of different sexes during interactions:

I have no problem lifting the five gallon water pipe. I can do it myself. Why would I ask somebody else to do it for me? No need. I can do it myself. I've actually seen a guy get offended because I didn't ask him and lifted the bottle myself. (Jaana, 35)

Gendered expectations of an individual's physical strength or frailty originate from differences in human physiology, but extend beyond the physical aspect. These expectations are also reflected on the different traditional gender roles set for males and females. The former are encouraged to be strong, competent and tough while the latter to be dependent, helpless, and delicate in personality. However, unlike physical frailty, frailty as a personality trait is not considered intrinsic to females. Rather, it is conceived

of as a social construction tenable within a particular cultural context, which may not be aligned with a female's life experience or her inner sense of herself. Moonika (25) for example, finds frailty exotic to her perception of female nature:

It's interesting that I've been told that I'm more masculine compared to other women. These people who said that to me are straight men. But then again, I feel myself very feminine. I feel that the femininity the Western culture has imported was very unfeminine to me. Like this frail and fickle. But I feel myself very feminine though. I feel that that does not align with the cultural norm. But I have this sort of inner feeling. (Moonika, 25)

From a cultural perspective, Moonika (25) denies frailty as part of essential femininity by contending that it is a concept imported from the Western world, which is consistent with her central argument that essentialist notions of gender are problematic because the standards of masculinity and femininity vary according to different social contexts and historical contingencies. In addition to culture, the rejection of frailty or helplessness as an inherent female quality is in line with neoliberalist emphasis on personal responsibility. The capability to take responsibility independently, rather than dependency, is valued and aspired. Moreover, apart from physical strength, the informants do not see observable gender differences in other skills or capabilities, rendering the notion of female frailty unjustifiable. Even though a female happens to be

the one in need of a male's help, the relationship between the helper and the helped is reinterpreted. Males do not bear the obligation to help a female. Neither should females be presumed to be the less advantageous party or the less capable ones:

My father came to help me not because he's a man and he's obliged to help me out because he's stronger, but because he's a decent human being and he sees me lifting things that are heavy for me. (Birgit, 34)

I needed to learn how to use the plant system, and I said that I probably make some cake or something for the guy who would like to teach me. The guy with who I was talking about it said that, "Oh no, that's okay. It's normal for men to help women. You don't have to do anything." I was like, "Are you kidding me right now? Are you fucking kidding me?" And he said, "No, no, no, no, no." He just ran away. I was like, "Don't flip out on me!" (Helena, 24)

## 5.2. Female reproductive potential and women's roles in the domestic sphere

Women's primary role has long been associated with reproduction. It is thus not surprising that another physiological specificity of a female human being utilized by most participants to construct their gender identities is their reproductive potential in giving birth to the next generation. In the current state of technological development, reproductive function remains one of the major differences between males and females

since female's reproductive capability cannot be substituted yet. Women are still the ones who undergo pregnancy and labor. Identifying oneself as a female, therefore, includes identity as a potential mother.

However, there are notable differences regarding the centrality of maternity to individuals' self-identifications and their daily lives. Firstly, for some participants, especially participants who are already mothers, maternity is an essential part of their gender identities and governs a huge part of their everyday life. While for others, motherhood does not necessarily have to be part of their life course. Secondly, what motherhood entails varies from person to person, revealing the informants' different understandings of women's childrearing, homemaking and breadwinning roles. To further explore the importance and influence the potential mother identity has on individuals, this section is divided into four subsections. The first subsection presents the informants' opinions on the necessity of maternity. The second and third subsections explore how women's roles in childrearing and homemaking are contemplated and intertwined with motherhood. The last subsection discusses the importance of the mother identity to individuals' overall identities.

#### 5.2.1. The necessity of motherhood and vision of family life

Forming a family is considered a normative desire that people have regardless of their gender. Together with job, friends, and hobbies, family is viewed as an essential part of a normal life course. The participants of this research are no exclusions. They

can easily envision themselves forming a family with their loved ones. Yet how family is defined and pictured differ, which is reflected on the diverse perceptions of the necessity of motherhood to a female's gender identity, her identity as a whole and her life course. For some participants, family is conceived of as a social unit composed of a couple and their (biological) children. Eva (30) is one informant who shares this opinion:

I have two sisters. I have seen families with lots of children. So it's like, natural thing. It's...always feel natural that family should have children. (Eva, 30)

As Eva (30)'s statement indicates, this conceptualization of family is heavily influenced by one's perceptions of objective realities, including social norms and the environment in which one grew up. For Eva (30), both realities are important. While for Tiina (27) and Jaana (35), the structure of their original family is particularly influential. Both informants grew up in a big family and express a strong desire to create one of their own:

I have always known that one day I will have children. And as I have so many brothers and sisters, it's a very natural environment for me to be in with children. (Tiina, 27)

...I don't know, it's probably because I grew up in a large family, and the expectation is that you have a large family as a supposed structure. I haven't thought about this. But this is like, it's a bit lonely otherwise. So you grow out to be a family at one point. Two people feels a bit less than it could be. This one is not the same as what you have with your blood-relatives, so the only way to have a large family as the one you grow up is to have one of your own. (Jaana, 35)

On account of the fact that family is considered an essential part of life, that children are essential to a family, and that only females can give birth to babies, motherhood is an integral part of these participants' gender identities.

In addition to whether a woman should have children, social norms also shape the participants' perceptions of the "best time" of childbearing, which is already incorporated into the latter's conceptualization of a normal life course. A similarity between Eva (30), Elena (29), Ines (32) and Tiina (27) is that they all gave birth to their children in their 20s. Eva (30) gave birth to her first kid at 26, Elena (29) at 28, Ines (32) at 22, and Tiina (27) at 24. Ines (32) had her first child born at the age of 22, relatively early compared to the mean age of women at first birth in Estonia, which was 25.7 ten years ago (Eurostat). While in her opinion, it was a normal step in that phase of life:

It seems to be the next step in life to start a family because for me, family is a couple with children. We were just in that phase. I wouldn't say it was my personal

goal to become a mother. It was just normal next step. It was more biological in a way because I've never been a person who has a big dream to become a mother. I would dream of finding an interesting job or things like that more. (Ines, 32)

Similarly, Eva (30) gave birth to her first child when she was 26 and considers it normal since her friends started a family at approximately the same age:

I actually have many friends who have families, friends of my own age. Actually most of my friends have families. I think it's kind of church thing: to have families at that age. (Eva, 30)

Nevertheless, not all participants share the same vision of family life and consider maternity indispensable. First of all, Mia (24) and Helena (24) are still uncertain about maternity. Mia (24) is not in a relationship and considers motherhood too remote for her. Helena (24) is in a stable relationship but does not see maternity as a current concern. Secondly, the definition of family has been expanded. The term is conceptualized in a broader sense in which alternative compositions of family other than nuclear family are included, fundamentally challenging the normalcy status of nuclear family and making it possible to separate motherhood and womanhood. Anna (32) for example, refers to her current family consisting of she and her boyfriend as "now family" although she does not have offspring at the moment. Similarly, Laura (30) has a clear preference to

remain childfree and envisions her future family to be a DINK family. In both cases, a “family” is not composed of two parents and their offspring.

In addition to how the term “family” is defined, the lack of “maternal instinct” Birgit (34) and Laura (30) have experienced also renders maternity less an essential part of femininity. Birgit (34) is still hesitant about whether to have kids because biologically she does not feel the nurturing desire to have a child of her own, and socially motherhood need not be a necessary part of life since, from her perspective, there are already many challenges as well as opportunities in life and she is satisfied with the status quo. At the same time, she understands the benefits of having children:

I’ve never felt a biological clock ticking and I don’t feel like “Oh! Little kids! I need to hold them.”...At the moment I don’t want to have kids. There are many reasons why I don’t want to have them... We have so many opportunities. We have so many other challenges in life than being a perfect mother or father. So being a parent doesn’t necessarily have to be part of your life journey. The second reason is that I feel that I am young, energetic and I like my life the way it is... I know why it would be good to have kids... why is it an investment to have someone who is obliged to take care of you if you are nice enough to them in their youth. But at the same time, in the history we’ve never been so free and why not using this chance. (Birgit, 34)

Similar to Birgit (34), Laura (30) relates her lack of interest in having children to the absence of maternal instinct. In her opinion, most people have emotional reasons such as a yearning for nurturing their descendants when considering whether to have offspring. Laura (30) herself, however, has not experienced such craving for kids or envisioned herself as a caregiver since childhood. She recounts that when playing with her sister, she chose a role (grandma) consistent with her gender (female), but did not see herself in taking care of the minor:

I never really have some kind of...I don't know, some people say that they have, like, maternal instinct that they really, really want children and if I look back, I've never really...you know, if we played family with my sister, I always want to be grandma because then you didn't have to do much and nobody wants to be dad. So, I don't know. I would like to be the grandma in the sense that I would spoil them and they would go back to their parents and it wouldn't be my problem. (Laura, 30)

Birgit (34) and Laura (30)'s opinions suggest an alternative vision of family life where children and motherhood are optional, questioning the ostensible indispensability of maternity to a female's life and her gender identity. Though both participants are biologically capable of having children, not having the nurturing desire does not weaken their identities as women.

Interestingly, Eva (30), Tiina (27) and Jaana (35) ascribe their desire for children to their perceptions of the objective world, highlighting the influence the society has on individuals. Birgit (34) and Laura (30) point to a lack of biological urge when explaining their dissociating motherhood from their being as females. From both perspectives, the taken-for-granted bond between motherhood and womanhood is not justified by female's physiological reproductive capability. Their decisions to be or not to be a mother are more affected by social norms and emotional needs.

It should be noted that, at the social level, maternity is not a free choice despite the absence of institutional punishments for childless women. Identity as a woman not only includes identity as a potential mother, but is also accompanied with the social pressure of becoming a mother. Birgit (34) and Laura (30) have perceived the pressure from their families due to the single vision of ideal family life. As a married but childfree woman, Birgit (34) finds the constant pressure of becoming a mother the most frustrating part of being a woman:

The constant pressure of becoming a mother like you shouldn't have any other dreams or aims in life than becoming a mother, and that comes from all the levels. It comes from my family, when my grandmother, she doesn't do it anymore, but my father and mother still ask, "so when will you get pregnant? We want to hear the baby steps in our rooms!"... I think this is the most frustrating part of being a woman. If it happens twice a year, I think it's already too often. I've heard the

story for the last 15 years in my life. Every year, every month, someone thinks they have the right to ask about my body. Ever since I turned 20, people have been poking me with this question. Even if it's asked in a joking way, it is still intrusive and impolite. (Birgit, 34)

The pressure becomes more general and acute when childbearing is intertwined with national demographic crisis. During a time when the population size of Estonia can hardly be sustained without immigration (Estonian Human Development Report, 2017), women's roles as mothers are re-emphasized. The appreciation of maternity, nonetheless, also fosters objectifications of women and simplifications of the population problem. Young females, married and unmarried alike are made the scapegoat for stagnant population growth, and their social roles are reduced to mothers. For example, one word used to refer to women is "birth machine", which Mia (24) finds insulting:

The population is decreasing...And this is one problem that's also in media: they say that women have to get babies. And they say...one word which is a bit insulting is like... women are birth machines, that we need to give birth. And there have been some stupid people in some parties who say that if a woman don't get baby, then she, she's...like harmful for the society or something like that. And yeah, this is really insulting because they say that women just need to give birth even though you don't have family. How come that you give birth to somebody?

So this is also one difference in men and women, I think. (Mia, 24)

Mia (24) herself has complex feelings of maternity. On the one hand, she understands that population decline is a problem, which makes women's roles as mothers particularly socially important. On the one hand, although she can envision herself becoming a mother, she disagrees with the disproportionate reproductive responsibility imposed on women.

In short, opinions on maternity as a form of femininity vary. It is a crucial part of many participants' gender identities, which is inextricably related to the informants' vision of family life and normal life course. There are also participants who do not consider motherhood essential femininity due to uncertainty, alternative conceptualization of family life and lack of biological urge. However, at the social level, identifying oneself as a female also comes with the pressure of becoming a mother, which is perceived to be gender-specific and more obviously felt by childless informants.

#### 5.2.2. Women's childrearing role: Motherhood vs. parenthood

In addition to fundamental differences in perceiving the necessity of motherhood to a female, how women's childrearing role is conceptualized varies. It is agreed that both parents ought to be involved in childrearing, yet there are differences in how the participants contemplate each parent's capability and responsibility. Elena (29), who

has been the main caregiver of her son for one year after the latter was born, holds that a female's reproductive capability and her ability to feed her offspring out of nothing make a female different from a male:

I think it's a big miracle to give birth. It's a wonderful thing. One thing I remember is my husband's grandmother. She is 96 years old already. She says that a really special thing of being a woman is giving your child food. Breast-feeding for her is a really precious thing. It's something magical. It is, it's a beautiful thing that you can give your child food from nothing. I agree with her. (Elena, 29)

From this point of view, the female parent's role in childcare is irreplaceable especially at the very early stage of a child's growth since she can breastfeed while the male parent cannot. At the same time, there is no obvious difference regarding which parent performs the caregiving role after the child no longer needs to be frequently fed, which opens up the possibility to more evenly divide the childrearing responsibility and parental leave between both parents:

We can get salary for a year and a half. Now probably it's about time that we change. My son is still breastfed, but he won't need me so much. He can get without me for a few hours, so we can change that. (Elena, 29)

While from Tiina (27), Jaana (35) and Ines (32)'s perspectives, females' capabilities in caregiving are not as unique as mainstream discourses on motherhood suggest. Jaana (35) is particularly dubious about the notion of the "nurturing instinct"—the natural drive to care for one's offspring— usually assumed to be intrinsic to a female. This presumption is at best partly true. Jaana (35) felt the hormone compulsion and started to adopt feminine nurturing behavior after giving birth to her daughter despite the fact that she does not see herself as a feminine person and claims to have no nurturing instinct at all. Yet instead of attributing her care for her daughter entirely to her being as a female, Jaana (35) contends that nurturing is also an acquired skill:

I don't have this nurturing instinct at all. Like, I don't relate to dolls. I have never related to dolls in any way. But something does get triggered biologically when you have a child. So the hormonal balances and the hormonal stabilization are there, and they work...since I had a kid, I really wake up whenever she makes any sound at all even in the other room across the whole house. It's very much automatic. A lot of it comes with the biology, but not all of it. (Jaana, 35)

In Jaana (35)'s opinion, although females are biologically affected by childbirth and demonstrate nurturing behavior as a consequence, the "nurturing instinct" considered inherent to females hardly justifies the childcare responsibilities foisted on women. Indeed, only biological females can breastfeed, but breastfeeding does not

make women's role irreplaceable. Jaana (35) herself did not have much milk. Moreover, in her own experience, the challenge of rearing a child does not begin until the latter has the capability to move around when it is not as dependent on the mother for breast milk as it was just born. It seems particularly odd to her that the childrearing burden is placed merely on women:

It's sort of really weird around here how all this debate about sharing like, the childbearing load is put on the mother as if it is some sort of magic that it belongs there. I can see that biology in many cases forces people to take it. I mean, my waking up at night...But there are so much that doesn't depend on having that instinct. There's a whole 16 hours of wake time that I need to manage somehow.  
(Jaana, 35)

Similar to Jaana (35), Tiina (27) and Ines (32) do not believe in women's special capability or interest in childrearing, not to mention the responsibilities expected to be undertaken by women. Both participants understand motherhood more as parenthood than as female's special role in childrearing, and see no gendered differences in what a parent can do. In Ines (32)'s opinion, the "parents" of a child do not even have to be a heterosexual couple. Homosexual family can also provide the same support for the child:

I also believe that for a child, it's not important whether he's with mother or father. It's important that the child has parents who take care of them and who they can rely. There can also be two mothers or two fathers, whatever. I don't believe that one can't make up the other's job or something like that. It can be divided in a way that's suitable for the family. (Ines, 32)

Echoing Ines (32)'s opinion, from Tiina (27)'s standpoint, men are not less suitable for being a caregiver, and they may actually enjoy performing the role. It is the feminization of childcare that prevents men from considering staying at home with the child an option and makes it practically more difficult for them to do so due of lack of assistance. Tiina (27) recalls that when she was on parental leave, there was a support group on social media where she could share her feelings and remained socially active. But it was much harder for her partner when he was at home because he had no such support group and felt more socially excluded:

When I was at home, I joined the Facebook baby group where all the babies were born in November, 2015. There are mothers in this group and we could talk everyday. But when he stayed at home, he didn't have it. There were no fathers there... So my partner was just home with our baby, and didn't have a place like this where he could share his things. (Tiina, 27)

In spite of the slightly different understandings the informants have regarding women's childrearing capability, they all disagree with traditional gender roles which presuppose women's inherent "nurturing instinct" and assume childcare to be primarily women's task. The other partner's participation in childrearing is equally important though men's actual involvement is highly contingent on their jobs.

### 5.2.3. Maternity and women's homemaking responsibility

There are some things you can't do as a man, so there are additional options but also a bit more work at home, maybe. (Elena, 29)

Entwined with women's childrearing role is their homemaking role. In most cases, motherhood not only entails childcare, but also more housekeeping responsibilities. Especially in households with newborns, it is not uncommon that women are simultaneously the main caregivers of youngsters and homemakers. For some participants, the combination of childrearing and homemaking responsibilities is natural since it is easier to satisfy the needs of the infant at home. Compared to the other parent who is very likely working outside home, the caregiver who stays at home can more efficiently carry out indoor household duties. Therefore, it makes sense to these informants that house chores are divided in a manner that happens to be consistent with traditional gender roles: the mother stays at home for the convenience of childcare and

performs most homemaking tasks while her partner tackles chores involving mobility.

Elena (29), for instance, divides housework with her husband in this manner:

It's easier for him to move around outside because I have to be near my son when he wants to eat. That's why some of the jobs were divided in this manner. So he can take the garbage out, and I don't have to leave the house. I can look after our son because he likes to wake up a lot during sleeps, so somebody always has to be near him. (Elena, 29)

This division, however, is more often conceived of as a decision made based on practical concerns than an agreement with gender stereotypes. First of all, it is justified by the criterion commonly used to divide household duties—availability. Availability is determined by one's employment status and the nature of his or her job. The one who stays at home or has more flexible work arrangements usually carries out more house chores. The division of housekeeping responsibilities changes as one's availability changes, which may take place not only after a woman gives birth, but also when one's employment status or job changes. For example, in Helena (24)'s opinion, a mother's undertaking more housework is more associated with her availability than with gender. By the same token, a man is expected to handle more chores if he is more available than his partner. In Helena (24)'s own experience, her boyfriend did more cleaning because he spent more time at home than she did:

I think once women have children, they are home with children then, yes, they will do the cleaning and cooking. I have a few friends who already have children or pregnant. But it kind of seems natural that the one who is at home does the things. Like when my boyfriend was working at home, he did the cleaning. It's associated with that, I think. (Helena, 24)

Eva (30), Jaana (35) and Ines (32) also subscribe to this view. As a stay-at-home mom, Eva (30) does more housework than her husband and considers it natural since she has more time. And in Jaana (35) and Ines (32)'s families, their husbands fulfill more household duties on account of the fact that they are more available than their wives:

Of course I do more because I have more time for it. (Eva, 30)

Actually as I am quite busy, we have a housekeeper who does the cleaning. But we divide other things based on who has more time, and usually my husband has more time for that. (Ines, 32)

In addition to availability, the gendered division of housework is considered only temporary. In the normal life course conceptualized by most informants, a mother may

bear a heavier homemaking burden than her partner at the early stage of motherhood, but she will eventually start her career or return to work, which changes her availability again. Household duties will by that time, be re-divided. This line of thinking has two important implications: firstly, homemaking is not solely women's responsibility, and secondly, career is as essential as family to women just as it is to men, none of which conforms to what traditional gender roles suggest.

To begin with, unlike childcare, household maintenance is not closely tied to female physiology and considered inherently feminine. Rather, it is viewed as a responsibility of all members living in the household and thus ought to be shared if a person is not living alone. The idea of sharing household duties is so ingrained that a strict division of responsibilities is unwanted or deemed unnecessary:

...it's so natural because if you live in the same place then you shouldn't like...I don't know...expect other people to clean up after you or if you are just cooking for...if other person is cooking then it would be weird to just like, sit and like watch. [You] should help so it will go much smoother. So it's natural thing. It doesn't [need] agreement. Just the way it is. (Anna, 32)

Even in households with newborns or young children where flexibility is much more restricted, fathers are not entirely exempt from indoor housekeeping. Despite being the breadwinner of the family, Eva (30)'s husband helps with cleaning and other

chores. And when Tiina (27) was on parental leave, her partner not only dealt with grocery shopping, but also did the cooking from time to time:

So usually my partner went to stores. I cooked the meals sometimes. Sometimes he did it. We didn't like, sit down and talk and divide like, "this is mine. This is yours". But if one of us could do something, we could do. But at the beginning when he stayed at home, I prepared all the food for the child just in case. (Tiina, 27)

Related to the participants' understandings of a more equal and flexible housework arrangement is their recognition of the importance of career, which is reflected on the general rejection of being a housewife. Certainly, an individual can choose to become a housewife or househusband and take full responsibility of homemaking if it is financially viable, yet the participants in this research are unwilling to become one. Compared to being a housewife, pursuing a career outside the domestic sphere is considered a more desirable option since the former is not only associated with old-time stereotypes and negative connotations such as confining to the household, but also deemed an occupation with low dignity. Helena (24) says that even if she would like to be a housewife, her ego does not "allow" her to. For participants who have not had children, their yearnings for realizing professional ambitions are noticeably stronger. Mia (24), for example, expresses a clear preference for building a career over being a

full-time mother and homemaker. From her point of view, mother can be part of her identity, but not the only identity she has, especially when mother and homemaker are merged into one identity:

I am not sure if I'm gonna get married, but I think I would be the one who wants to make good job, or make career, more than, like, have six kids and stay at home with them. So probably...but it will be lovely to have a couple of kids, but I also want to still go to work and, do my career. Not just stay at home and be only the mom who takes care of the children and household. (Mia, 24)

Similarly, emphasis on the importance of employment is also present in Anna (32)'s statement:

No. I will not be a housewife. I have to work. Yeah. Yeah. It's ludicrous for me to be a housewife. Why should I be a housewife? We don't live in the 50s. (Anna, 32)

In sum, although motherhood usually entails more responsibilities in homemaking, identity as a mother or a potential mother does not include identity as a homemaker since housekeeping is not considered intrinsically feminine. In the broader context, the exclusion of homemaking from womanhood illustrates the informants' resistance to traditional gender roles that limit women's field of activity to the domestic sphere.

#### 5.2.4. The importance of mother identity and visions of work-life balance

Just as the diverse understandings of responsibilities that come with maternity, the importance of mother identity varies from person to person. From Laura (30)'s standpoint, maternity is not crucial at all since it is not included in how she plans her life. For informants who see themselves as potential mothers (e.g., Anna, Mia, Helena, Katrin), although identity as a potential mother shapes how they envision and plan their lives, or at least is not ruled out from their lives, it is not a salient part of their gender identities, which may be ascribed to the fact that maternity hardly interferes with their current lives. For participants with young children (e.g., Eva, Elena, Tiina), mother identity is not only an essential part of femininity, but also central to how they see themselves as a whole. In Elena (29), Eva (30) and Tiina (27)'s opinions, mother is the most crucial identity they have. Their offspring regulates their daily life and is prioritized over all other things. And there are also informants for whom mother is a predominant but not the single most important component of their overall self-identifications. For example, maternity is essential to both Ines (32) and Jaana (35), yet their identities as a good employee are not less vital.

In addition to the extent to which maternity dominates one's everyday life, the different perceptions of the significance of motherhood are closely related to the value one holds, which is particularly pivotal when one has to choose between two or several competing goals. For example, pursuing achievements in professional fields and being a good mother are often conceived of as two conflicting goals because of the limited time

and energy one has. Which goal is prioritized is therefore contingent on what one considers more important. For Elena (29), Eva (30) and Tiina (27), family in general is of greater significance compared to their personal achievements in professional fields. They obtain a sense of accomplishment mainly from how well they perform their roles as a mother and wife. As Tiina (27) explains, her values determine what she considers success:

My values are like this: family is important to me. Being home with my family is important to me. Career wise I don't have high expectations. I'm not like "I have to pursue this career or have to pursue this paycheck or something." I think that I have my whole life when I can work. And this is something that most of the people in my generation doesn't think. They think that they have all the time in the world to have children, but now it's the best time for them to have career. This is our difference. They think of the career. They kind of feel like it is something they have to do to be successful, but I think that having children is something that I have to do to be successful although it has very bad influence on my career. So they have some point, but I also don't regret it. I think that I can just do it later on.

(Tiina, 27)

Importantly, although Elena (29), Eva (30) and Tiina (27) value family more than pursuing a career, as mentioned in previous section, an aspiration for returning "to their

purely womanly mission” (Gorbachev, 1987: 116-118) that many women in post-socialist countries have (Lobodzinska, 1996; Tiggemann and Rützel, 2004; Voormann, 2005) is not present in their utterances. Tiina (27) in fact, expresses a wish to bring in more income so as to avoid negotiating her expenses with her partner though she spends more on household necessities than on herself. Elena (29) and Eva (30) are similar to Tiina (27) in the sense that both informants consider themselves not ambitious in terms of building a career, but neither of them wishes to restore women’s traditional roles as both caregivers and homemakers. However, paradoxically as it may seem, Elena (29) and Eva (30) do not oppose the male breadwinner model in practice. In addition to the fact that both informants have been the main caregivers and homemakers in their households since their children were born, they conceive of job more as personal self-realization than as their responsibilities to financially contribute to the family. Eva (30) in particular, has ambiguous feelings about finding a job:

I do want to have a job. Still, I want to have a job, but maybe not like very...I don’t want to have a very stressful job because I feel that life is already stressful, so I would be happy to do my own things, things that I know well and get some decent salaries. It doesn’t have to be an amazing salary, but that would allow me to travel and to be more comfortable (Eva, 30).

On the one hand, Eva (30) stresses her yearning for a job and a better quality of life.

On the other hand, her interests are more important than the financial rewards of the job, which presumes her husband's primary role in breadwinning. In another part of the interview, she admits that although it is "crazy" that she has been home for more than five years, she does not desperately need a job because her husband earns a good salary, which is enough to support their family already. The ambiguity demonstrates Eva (30)'s struggle to locate herself in a society where competing strands of thoughts coexist. On the one hand, she rejects traditional gender roles. In spite of the fact that she considers family more worthy of her energy, she does not think that she will permanently be a full-time stay-at-home mom responsible for childcare and housekeeping. On the other hand, her understanding of her role in breadwinning is closer to the dual-earner family structure where the female partner's occupational involvement is considered secondary to husband's career (Gilbert and Rachlin, 1987: 9).

While from Mia (24), Helena (24), Katrin (27), and Jaana (35)'s perspectives, career is as vital as family. Mia (24)'s strong rejection of becoming a full-time stay-at-home mom demonstrates how much she values employment. In Helena (24)'s opinion, it is normal that both partners bring in incomes and maintain the household together. For Katrin (27), an ideal that she would like to achieve is to be a powerful and independent woman who builds a career and at the same time, takes good care of her family with her partner. Mia (24), Helena (24), and Katrin (27)'s views illustrate an alternative vision of ideal family type, which is similar to the dual-career family structure where both partners are committed to establishing their own careers and share

the childcare and homemaking burden (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1971; Gilbert and Rachlin, 1987). And from Jaana (35)'s perspective, job is not only a way to fulfill her ambition, but also an indispensable part of herself. She returned to work after being on parental leave for nine months, which she describes as the only way for her to "function properly":

Mothers' going back to work at nine months is really unusual. It was really surprising for many but I did that. But I really didn't see any other way for myself to function properly at that point especially since I'm economically useful for the family. (Jaana, 35)

It is noteworthy that no matter a participant values family more or considers career as essential as family, the informants are reluctant to make generalizations of their opinions. Tiina (27) recognizes the different values that other women may hold. Mia (24) likewise, emphasizes that pursuing a successful career may be her personal longing rather than a universal wish of other people. Eva (30) contends that her lack of interest in "competing and competing for a career" is purely her choice. These opinions reflect the informants' understanding of woman as a highly heterogeneous collective as well as their resistance to a single gender ideal. While defending their own values, they are skeptical of a universal gender-specific desire that all women have, not to mention a "mission in life" that every female should achieve. In this sense, the participants negate

a unitary idealized form of womanhood, be it a traditional or an unconventional one.

There is also a more dynamic view of mother identity. For Ines (32), the centrality of mother identity changed as her children became more independent. Her children used to be the center of her life, regulating when she “go to the toilet, or eat, or drink, or whatever.” Yet as they became more capable of managing their daily lives, Ines (32) regained her original identity and became more like her again:

He came first all the time. But as they became more independent, you get time for yourself back. You can be more *YOU* again, not only the *MOTHER* because the identity of me when they were little was “I was the mother”. Now I can be more like *ME* again. (Ines, 32; italics added by author)

The opinions demonstrate distinct conceptualizations of the centrality of maternity and visions of work-life balance. Although motherhood is commonly aspired and considered crucial, its importance is contemplated very differently, especially in relation to career. For some informants, mother is their primary identity. While for others, mother is not or not yet the biggest part of who they are. Still for others, mother is an essential part of the core Self, but not the sole component of it. Of course, the importance of maternity to one’s overall identity and her life may change over time, but a long-term follow-up is beyond the scope of this research.

### 5.3. Appearance and the performativity of gender

Appearance is a crucial factor when making judgments of an individual's gender since males and females have different physical attributes and usually, they conform to different dress codes in a culture. For example, females on average are shorter in height and lighter in weight than males. In terms of dress codes, in many parts of the world today including Estonia, skirts, dresses and makeup are only considered appropriate when being worn by females. By putting on outfits that are socially acceptable for one's gender, individuals convey their gender identities to the external world. And in turn, appearance serves as a resource for acquiring, strengthening or weakening one's sense of belonging to a gender category, which is the case of Mia (24) and Jaana (35). Although they emphasized different aspects of appearance and reached different conclusions, both participants used appearance as an important element in constructing their gender identities. From Jaana (35)'s point of view, appearance is one of the many criteria based upon which an individual is included or excluded from one gender group. To be more specifically, the word "woman" already incorporates societal expectations of female body figure. She does not consider herself a woman and has not been bothered with living up to the female ideal of beauty because she is not even qualified as a "woman" in terms of body shape:

As I was growing up, I was really fat. And fat women are not really considered women anyway. They are like, ugly. So you get a bit different treatment from that

already in the sense that nobody expects you to be beautiful in the first place.

(Jaana, 35)

Appearance on the other hand, consolidates Mia (24)'s identity as a woman. In addition to her physical attributes and sexual orientation, Mia (24) refers to her dressing behavior when explaining why she thinks she is a woman:

I would say that I look like woman. I wear makeup sometimes. I buy woman cloth.

I like men. Yeah, maybe that's why I think I am a woman. (Mia, 24)

Mia (24)'s understanding of womanhood largely rests upon her appearance. Indeed, womanhood displayed through one's appearance is the most visible form of femininity, and therefore can be concretely conceptualized as well as stereotyped. For instance, physical attributes that are typical for females are the first things coming to Helena (24) and Tiina (27)'s minds when being asked how would they picture a feminine person:

Slender maybe. A slender body. Fit. Maybe like beautiful. Maybe a bit calmer, calmer than masculinity. Maybe smaller ego. (Helena, 24)

...something like big hips, loud laughing and really voluminous hair. I think they are all the things that I don't have. I have small hips, quiet voice and really straight

hair. (Tiina, 27)

On the other hand, for Eva (30), femininity is about wearing makeup, jewelry and nice dresses. And from Katrin (27)'s point of view, although she defines femininity mainly as the lady-like behavior, she acknowledges that sometimes femininity is associated with the "female outfit" such as dresses rather than with sweatshirts, sweatpants or trainers.

Whether femininity is defined as certain bodily attributes or the ways a female dresses herself, this form of femininity can be easily enacted and practiced by individuals due to its superficiality, which however, also makes it easy to be reduced to a purposeful performance of gender or even to be entirely detached from one's gender identity. Tiina (27) for example, is one of the many participants who do not relate their appearance to gender identities at all. She is not feminine since she does not have big hips, loud laughing and voluminous hair, yet she is still a female. Just as what West and Zimmerman (1987: 134) contend, "Women can be seen as unfeminine, but that does not make them "unfemale".

By the same token, wearing skirts, dresses or makeup do not make these participants aware of their gender, nor make them feel themselves especially feminine or masculine. How one dresses her up instead, is viewed as a performance expressing or aiming to express particular emotions, messages, or attitudes of the participant at a specific moment. To be more specifically, though dressing options available to

individuals are gendered and are endowed with culturally specific meanings, the participants' decisions of what to put on depend more on their mood or their intentions, which neither reinforces nor challenges their existence as females. For instance, in Birgit (34)'s opinion, what she puts on her face and body is an expression of her feeling of the day, which may appear feminine or masculine to others. While she is just being herself:

I can be ultra feminine, wearing lipstick and high heels, which I am kind of doing at the moment. The next day I am in my military uniform and carry 20-kilo bags on my back and I don't wear the lipstick. I don't use the hairdryer. I'm just like, conducting my duties. So in my free time, I can be whatever I want. It depends on my mood. It's kind of like a mask or costume that I decide to put on because I feel like that at the moment. It's a performance. I am performing it. (Birgit, 34)

In addition to reflecting one's state of mind, what an individual wears also satisfies various functional purposes. For Tiina (27), wearing colorful clothes is a way to get out of bad mood:

I never think that if I wear a skirt, I am more feminine. Or if I wear pants, I am more masculine. Or pad shoulders, I don't feel more masculine. Just like, I could do both...[it's a matter of] how I feel and I don't connect this to my gender...If I

am feeling down then I just have to have something really stupid. Like I have this really big flower trousers, like all my legs are just flowers. And I just put them on and I think, “Oh yeah!” Then I am awesome. But I don’t think they are more feminine because they have flowers on them. (Tiina, 27)

From Helena (24)’s point of view, dressing in a typically feminine manner may be advantageous to her promotion in workplace. Though personally she does not connect the clothes she wears to her gender identity, she is aware of the cultural meaning embedded in women dresses and the benefits she might garner from putting them on:

Most of the seniors are guys. If I wear dresses, maybe I get advanced quicker. If I knew it, it’s my conscious decision to decide what kind of cloth to put on, and makeup and stuff like that. Yeah, I definitely think it affects. (Helena, 24)

Similarly, Jaana (35) and Moonika (25) emphasize the functional rather than the symbolic aspect of how they dress up and testify the irrelevance of their clothing to their gender identities. In the case of Jaana, although she does not even consider herself a woman, she can dresses up “like a female” and put on womanly clothes in special occasions such as parties. Yet for her, her feminine dressing up is no more than an act with purpose:

I could put on a princess dress and dress up like a female for parties. But I think, maybe the trans people who are like drag queens and dress up for occasions, they feel that way. I could put on the clothes. I can act, but it's an act. It's a show for purpose. (Jaana, 35)

With regard to the participants' separation of gender expressions on clothing from their gender identities, Moonika (25)'s story is probably the most illustrative:

...when I was 12, I liked to wear baggy pants and sweatshirts, and I had short hair. I didn't think of it as a gender identity expression. I just thought that it was cool. I remember there was a really small boy at school who asked if I was a girl or a boy. I remember saying to him that "what do you think?" He was really confused. The point is, at that moment, I was like "Hum, well, I am a girl". And there is no question about that. I just had short hair and baggy pants but I am a girl. So I think my sexuality has been much more fluid, but my gender identity has been quite static at one place. (Moonika, 25)

Likewise, though makeup is considered appropriate only when being put on women's face in Estonian society, it is deemed as an intentional performance unrelated to one's identification of her gender. More often, makeup is regarded as a way to enhance one's self esteem. For example, Anna (32) and Helena (24) both feel more

confident after putting on makeup. And for the latter, makeup is also a means to seek attention from others:

I do wear makeup, but I basically do it like, for myself. So I could feel like, feel myself better. (Anna, 32)

I don't really think that "Now I'm a woman" when I do makeup, but I do feel that I am pretty and I want people to pay attention to it. (Helena, 24)

Interestingly, both Anna (32) and Helena (24) mentioned a shift in their attitudes towards wearing makeup, reflecting their resistance to the feminine beauty ideal, which Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003: 711) define as "the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of the women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain." Anna (32) recounts that she tried to be more feminine through making herself look beautiful but somehow lost her motivation in recent years. And Helena (24) only puts on makeup now when going out for parties. She ascribes her shift in attitude to a change in values:

I think partly it's related to the rebellion against that "you are pretty when you have makeup". I also think I am pretty without makeup. When I was teenager, I thought yes, those women are very beautiful who like to wear makeup. But now I think it's

much more important that you don't have to wear makeup, and still look beautiful and take care of your skin. (Helena, 24)

#### 5.4. Female characteristics and social behavior

Physiological differences are not the sole criteria based upon which an individual identifies himself/herself as a male, female or an identity outside the two categories. Characteristics and behavior observed to be exclusive to members of a gender group are also resources that maintain and reinforce one's sense of belonging to that group.

##### 5.4.1. Non-aggressiveness

Non-aggressiveness as part of femininity is constructed in comparison with male aggressiveness. Consistent with traditional stereotype that believes females to be less aggressive than males or nonaggressive at all, some participants have observed that men are behaviorally more aggressive than their female counterparts particularly in fighting for social status. In urban area, a common form of such fight is competition for positions in workplaces. As Elena (29) observes, men are more likely to be concerned with their social ranking and professional achievements. Women, on the other hand, are inclined to be more contented with relations:

I have noticed comparing issues. I think men have more with the work they do or with each other like "how good I am, how high I'm in my ranking". I think they

have a little bit more pressure in “to become something”. I think women have less of that. And they are more satisfied maybe with their home, with their hobbies, or with their relations, maybe. (Elena, 29)

In everyday interactions, humor is another form of fight through which men gain social power. From Moonika (25)’s perspective, men take jokes and make jokes back at other people to show their strength, which is nonexistent in women’s interactions:

Humor is very masculine...In our culture we are taking a joke about yourself to show strength... Here if you can’t take a joke, then you are weak and you are lame. You have to take jokes, and you have to know how to make jokes back at other people and it takes a lot of social nerve and skill...Girls don’t do that at all. Like, AT ALL. This sort of fighting for your social status with humor is a very masculine case. This is how men interact with each other. (Moonika, 25; capitals added by author)

Being considered more a masculine than a feminine trait, aggressiveness is virtually absent in most participants’ constructions of their feminine gender identities. In fact, many informants view their gender group more positively than the other because aggressiveness is not deemed a desirable trait to possess. For instance, Helena (24) prefers to be a woman when being asked if she were given the chance to choose her

gender:

It will be interesting to be a man, but men seem more aggressive by nature because men need to compete more to keep their DNA and so on. So I would choose woman. I would like to be a man just for one day just to see maybe I want it. But this is a very biased decision because I don't know [what it is like to be a man].

(Helena, 24)

While from Moonika (25) and Jaana (35)'s point of view, aggressiveness is not a gender-specific characteristic. Everyone aspires higher social status, and can be aggressive regardless of their gender. The difference lies in the ways of expression. Males express their aggressiveness in a rather explicit manner. They compete through work or language behavior as mentioned above, or more often, through violence. Female aggressiveness, on the other hand, is more indirect, implicit and non-confrontational. In Moonika (25)'s words, it is "more contained, silent with like, very small social cues," which interestingly, both Moonika (25) and Jaana (35) do not excel at dealing with:

You can see that basically men and women are all people, and in women when you don't have power, you use more like, underhand tactics. In men it comes out explicitly. And there is like this, facing one's strength. In another it's just like this,

I don't know, quite often it seems like, the soft power is preferred... And this not direct thing is something I don't know how to do. I don't understand. I have to often think why people do that because when it comes to sort of like, getting things done, I really like, can only go straight. (Jaana, 35)

Moonika (25), too, prefers explicit confrontational manners. Humor is an example. She understands how it works and feels more comfortable when fighting for her social status with humor than with indirect language devices typically used by women.

A minute difference between Jaana (35) and Moonika (25) is their interpretations of their preferences for direct confrontations. In Jaana (35)'s opinion, it is somewhat predestined in the sense that she grew up with her sister, who is "definitely a lady", and neither of them changed each other. Yet for Moonika (25), the reason why she feels better equipped to cope with aggressiveness expressed in masculine ways is her experience of socialization as a child:

This is something that definitely has been shaped by the fact that I hung up with more boys in my childhood than girls. (Moonika, 25)

#### 5.4.2. The incompatibility of authority and femininity?

Similar to aggressiveness, authority is more thought of as a masculine quality than a feminine feature. Yet instead of being seen as inherently masculine, authority as a

form of masculinity is rather elusive and unconscious, making it difficult for the informants to substantiate their feelings. For instance, Katrin (27) observes that one of her male colleagues had more authority among students compared to female teachers. Personally, she feels that she has to work more to get to the same level of authority that the male colleague had achieved because of her gender. However, she is uncertain whether it is gender or the personality trait of the colleague that gives him the authority:

We sensed that they (students) were listening to him. He has like, authority straightway because he is a man. This makes me to think, “oh yes, maybe this way, kind of like, but it’s unconscious, and it actually depends as well on the person because I think when the students sense the fear, so it doesn’t really matter. But somehow it feels that... when we also think about the principal, when he is like, a male person, it seems to be more fear in that way. (Katrin, 27)

Helena (24) also has ambiguous feelings about authority. On the one hand, she disagrees with the notion that authority makes a woman less feminine. In her opinion, it is the society that pushes people to see authority as unfeminine. On the other hand, she finds it difficult to break her own thinking path even though she knows that the masculinization of authority is a social construction. This ambiguity is reflected on her perception of the biggest challenge that she has encountered as a woman. As a woman, she feels that it is challenging to get people’s attention although paradoxically as it may

seem, she is diffident about expressing her opinions:

I feel it's challenging to make other people listen to you. And it's also connected to how I feel because I also feel that I am not smart enough to say something out loud. Or if a superior guy says something, I would rather agree with him than going into discussion, saying, "it's not like that". Authority, I think. It has something to do with authority. But it might be [because of the fact that] I am a woman, too. I don't know. I haven't really spoken that much with women who are more authoritative.

(Helena, 24)

In the excerpt, Helena (24) is perplexed and has difficulty figuring out whether her unassertiveness in front of male superiors is fear of authority or a form of femininity. In whichever case, she is the one who has less authority compared to her male superiors due to the overlap of gender and institutional hierarchy.

Moonika (25) does not consider authority an essential masculinity, either. Her authority in her subculture community is the best example that disproves the essentialist understanding of authority. But she does notice men's particular obsession with authority that is absent in women. For instance, many of her male acquaintances have what she called "father-figure problem":

Lots of men have told me that they have this father-figure problem and they need

this. I'm like, "Why? Why do you need an authoritative figure in your life?" ... Maybe it's the way they've been brought up. I don't know what's there. But there's definitely something that they need these father figures, these role models. And they kind of imitate them and they find themselves through that. (Moonika, 25)

Women, however, do not have this indefinable longing for authoritative role models and construct their identities with authority. From Moonika (25)'s standpoint, the gender difference may result from the different role models men and women have. She continues:

We don't have role models so much. What do mothers do? They take care of you. But male role models are great men who have done great things or changed the course of history. (Moonika, 25)

In this sense, the masculinization of authority may be a result of both nature and nurture. Men might have an unconscious yearning for authority, and have more role models as such to imitate. While authority is not present in the role models women have, and personally, at least in the case of Moonika (25), an innate aspiration for authority is nonexistent.

Interestingly, even though Elena (29)'s mother was a businesswoman who had her own company, Elena (29) does not see herself in the same role. In the first three sentences of the excerpt below, she especially emphasizes the difference between she and her mother. From her perspective, authority entails strained relationships with others, which she is not interested in and feels comfortable with:

I don't think I have this kind of leadership in my life. I probably won't own a business. I think I'm not like a businesswoman. I think I'm better with other people or in a group, so I don't think I will be a leader in that sense. I could be a teacher, but I don't like to tell people what they have to do. It sounds serious to me and I don't want to be a bad person. I can see that sometimes it won't be issues, but I can't see myself in these things. I can see my mother, for instance. (Elena, 29)

The implication of Elena (29)'s utterance is two-fold. On the one hand, authority, or leadership in Elena (29)'s words, is not essentially masculine since she can see it in her mother. On the other hand, her lack of interest in pursuing authority seems to echo Moonika (25)'s opinion.

#### 5.4.3. Emotional expressivity

A prominent gender difference in the context of Estonia concerns an individual's capability of expressing his or her emotions. Women are perceived to be emotionally

more expressive than men, which is closely associated with the notion of “Estonian men”. A typical Estonian man is conceived of as a male who is rather quiet and reserved about his emotions. Eva (30) shares a joke about Estonian men:

There are jokes about Estonian men who just say, “I love you” when they get married and after that they say that “if something changes, then I tell you”. (Eva, 30)

Women, by contrast, are more demonstrative of their feelings. For example, Mia (24) observes that although women may be shy, they are not as introvert as men. Nevertheless, Estonian men’s being emotionally reserved or Estonian women’s relative emotional expressivity is deemed an outcome of gendered socialization rather than an immanent gender difference. From Katrin (27) and Birgit (34)’s perspectives, the difference stems from the distinct ways boys and girls are raised and educated by their family, teachers and the society as a whole. Men are expected to be strong, while women to be weak. If one shows emotions, he or she is weak. Since femininity exhibited through a male body is disparaged, men restrict themselves from expressing their emotions to avoid being marginalized in the social hierarchy. Therefore, Estonian men are emotionally reserved, or even, in Birgit (34)’s words, capsulated:

I think the society has unconsciously raised children in the way that girls are

sensitive and weak and boys are strong. They can't be weak. They can't show emotions. (Katrin, 27)

I see a lot of men who think that being emotional is feminine and thus very bad, so they are very closed, or I would say even encapsulated because they are brought up with this knowledge. Their fathers were the same. Their grandfathers are the same. And of course as a child, if you don't learn certain things, then as a grown-up you don't pick them up easily anymore. (Birgit, 34)

Although this form of masculinity is prevalently internalized and practiced by Estonian men, femininity defined as opposed to it is not deemed crucial to one's sense of belonging to the gender group for obvious reasons. Firstly of all, the ideology behind is rejected. For example, Birgit (34) refuses to label her husband who keeps his emotions reserved masculine because she is unwilling to recreate the dichotomy that admires masculinity while devalues femininity. Neither does she see herself the weaker one compared to her husband. Secondly, the definition of femininity is too superficial and blurry. Despite the fact that people obtain a sense of themselves through comparing with others, the boundary between masculinity and femininity are blurred, and transgressions are easy to make. As a consequence, even though behaviorally there is a gender difference, it is not an important resource for identity construction.

#### 5.4.4. Prosocial interest and field of interest

Though she is hesitant to make essentialist statements, from Moonika (25)'s point of view, one thing that makes her feel connected to other females is her prosocial disposition. Prosocial behavior, in Eagly (2009:644)'s words, "consists of behaviors regarded as beneficial to others, including helping, sharing, comforting, guiding, rescuing, and defending others". It seems to Moonika (25) that it is easier for women to understand the needs of the external world:

This is a bit essentialist that I've always seen women having this natural...it comes more easily, usually for them to understand the needs of the community, the needs of people...there is this sort of outwardness, like outward-oriented perceiving that you understand there's a community of people and they have needs and these needs should be met. This is something that I feel that if a woman is able to express herself, then this sort of understanding comes to her more easily. (Moonika, 25)

This outward-oriented perceiving capability is reflected on the gendered differences in fields of interests. In her observation, women are more interested in people and in relations between objects, while men are more interested in lifeless matter. She contends that apart from those women in developing countries where engineering is the only ticket out of poverty, there are definitely more women interested in life

sciences such as biology and biochemistry:

There is something there that you feel more drawn to this. I've always felt more drawn to microbiology, to these ideas that manipulate with living matter. It's engineering, it's bio-engineering. It's the same, but the material is different. Manipulating lifeless material has been [contempt]. That doesn't interest me at all.

(Moonika, 25)

## 6. WOMANHOOD AND PERSONHOOD: COMMON GROUNDS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

In addition to the differences in conceptualizing femininity, the perceived significance of gender identity to one's overall self-identifications varies, which is intimately connected to the extent to which one considers her experience and identity related to her biological sex or socially defined notions of gender. For some participants, gender has limited influence on how they identify themselves as a whole. These participants contend that their identities as a human being are much more important than their gender identities. Emphasizing human commonalities, they question whether life is experienced differently by men and by women aside from physiological workings of body. For example, gender is not a label that Anna (32) strongly identifies with because in her opinion, gender is not a convincing criterion to distinguish people. There are not significant intrinsic differences between men and women. She is confused whether gender makes a difference in her own life experiences. Moreover, she disagrees with gender ideals. From her point of view, everyone should strive to be a decent person regardless of his or her gender:

I don't know. Is it so different from being a man? I am not sure. Being a woman is, yeah, I don't know. I think it's more important to be a decent human being than to be some great women or great men. I don't know those things. I consider myself regular human being, nothing special about me. (Anna, 32)

Ines (32), Laura (30) and Eva (30) also identify themselves more as ordinary human beings than as women. For Ines (32), her private and public experiences of gender are trivial. Personally, although she looks up to people who are good in their fields, she does not have an ideal figure that she would like to become in mind. Similar to Anna (32), she considers it more important to be respectful to others and do something meaningful in life, which from her point of view, is unrelated to her gender. When interacting with other people, she does not think of gender because she never feels being treated differently due to the fact that she is a woman. In her experience, her male colleagues and her partner have treated her as equal, which is a norm in her life. By the same token, gender is not the first thing that Laura (30) identifies with since she does not see notable gender differences:

I'm more like, "Yeah, I'm a human being"... I mean...it's not like my gender would be the first thing I identify with... I mean, I don't think there's differences between genders in these things, so why would you need to know my gender if you ask about my, I don't know, radio listening habits or whatever the test is about...if I would be like, in a relationship or something like this, I would probably have like, totally different stories to tell right now. But I don't know. (Laura, 30)

From Eva (30)'s standpoint, in addition to the similarities between men and

women, she is convinced of her freedom to choose as an independent individual, which is in line with neoliberalist discourses on personal choice. In her opinion, gender is not important since she makes her choices mainly as a human, not as a woman:

First and foremost, I am a human, not a woman. I think I need to make my choices as a human, not so much as a woman. I think I believe in choices. It's good that I have freedom to choose what I want. (Eva, 30)

There are also informants for whom gender is not a negligible factor that influences their everyday life, yet it is not decisive to how these participants understand themselves. For instance, in Tiina (27)'s opinion, she could accumulate more work experiences if she were a man because her career would not be interrupted by childbirths and childcare. However, apart from work, she does not think that her life would be significantly different. Although she is unsure whether it would be appropriate for her to behave like men under certain circumstances, she attributes her confusion to the restrictions in her head instead of to social pressure. With regard to her self-identification, although she believes that men and women are different, she does not consider gender pivotal to how she defines herself since woman is a large category for her, which echoes her previous statement on the heterogeneity of women. While she values family more than career, she is acutely aware of the different choices of value that other women in her generation may have:

It's a large category for me. Of course [women are] different from men. I think as a woman, I don't know, maybe I am not allowed to behave goofily or make some kind of jokes that would be appropriate for men. But I also think that maybe this is more in my head than in society... Another thing I think about being a woman is easy... It's easy to be a woman, I think. I don't think that there are a lot of restrictions in this category. (Tiina, 27)

Elena (29) shares a similar opinion though her feelings are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, she contends that “experience everything doesn't depend on your gender. Just to live life”, denying the importance of gender. On the other hand, she likes “how women think” and recognizes the influences of biological sex on her daily life. For example, she agrees that because of her biological structures, she is the one who has been home mostly with her child, not her husband. And her staying home also makes herself more available and thus more responsible for homemaking. Insisting that biological sex plays a role in her everyday life “in a really practical way” and it is a “really, really biological thing”, she denies the social significance of her identity as a woman.

For Moonika (25) and Jaana (35), gender is important to how they define themselves and their perceptions of the external world. For Moonika (25), gender is a

huge part of who she is. Through comparing herself with her male acquaintances and to females in or outside her cultural setting, she gains an understanding of who she is and who she is not as well as a sense of belonging to her gender category. She identifies herself as a female human being because she is non-confrontational, tender, and sensitive. And her gender identity shapes how she perceives and deals with the problems that she has encountered, which can be distinguished from a male's perspective:

I have the sense of self that I am a woman living in Estonia in 2018. I put myself in this background very easily. It's a very big part of who I am. I've always been very certain that gender shapes a lot in terms of how we perceive the world. And when I compare the way my male friends think about social issues or their own issues, I feel that they don't perceive themselves tender. They are humans. But I perceive myself female, a human, and my problems and the way I address these problems are a bit different. I definitely feel that I am not a genderless human. (Moonika, 25)

From Jaana (35)'s point of view, gender is a crucial perspective through which she gets more understanding about who she is, what she wants, and why it is so difficult for her to reconcile with other people. Identifying herself as a gender nonconforming person is not only her disagreement with dualistic ideas of gender, but also a crystallization of her continuous struggles to situate herself socially. On the one hand,

she does not consider herself a woman because she is not fragile and beautiful, and does not expect to be treated or referred to as such. When a task involves heavy lifting, she tries to deal with it on her own first instead of asking for help from a male. On the other hand, she also refuses to be categorized as a man since she is satisfied with her body and does not identify with many forms of masculinity. Through constantly defining and redefining herself in gender terms, she obtains more understandings of her core Self and her relations with other people:

I think this is part of the reason why I have some acquaintance people who are like, hardline conservatives and doubt my existence as such outside the boxes thing because you need somebody to reflect on what you are and how you define yourself. And having those arguments in a sense sort of helps understand yourself better, why you think these things...I think there's a lot to go and a lot to discover yet. But I don't think I would ever fit into one of the two boxes even if I wanted to.

(Jaana, 35)

## 7. DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Previous sections have analyzed how the participants construct their gender identities and rationalize the organization of their everyday life through accepting, negotiating or rejecting various notions of femininity, demonstrating significant differences in how they define themselves socially in gender terms. Consistent with social constructionist understanding of the way people obtain knowledge of the world, the different experiences and conceptualizations of gender are closely related to the different socialization processes the informants have undergone. Social norms, in particular, are powerful in shaping the informants' perceptions of the objective realities and their interests. For instance, it is taken-for-granted to many participants that family is composed of a couple and their children. Nevertheless, social norms are not always deemed unchallengeable truth. For informants who envision family life differently, social norms are mere social pressures that perpetuate stereotypes. Similarly, dividing household duties in a gendered manner when heavy lifting is involved is normal to some participants, while it is considered unnecessary by those who are capable of tackling such tasks independently. Gender identity, therefore, not only concerns an individual's satisfaction with her body, but also an individual's understanding of the boundary between essential femininities and socially constructed femininities. Importantly, the boundary is susceptible to changes since socialization is an ongoing process, which can also be seen from some informants' changed attitudes to maintaining a feminine appearance.

In the broader context, the diverse conceptualizations of femininity reflect distinct understandings of gender equality. From some participants' standpoint, gender equality is achieved if individuals are not discriminated institutionally and their freedom to choose is protected. While in other informants' opinions, a true equality takes place if people are not encouraged or discouraged to make certain choices because of their genders and if they are freed from the pressure of conforming to gender norms. Despite the differences, there are conspicuous similarities between the informants' opinions as well. For example, one common thread that weaves through almost all discussions is the participants' resistance to traditional gender roles. By negotiating the meaning of gender, re-conceptualizing women's childbearing, childrearing, and homemaking roles, and questioning notions of femininity as well as existing social norms, traditional understandings of women's innate nature and their social responsibilities are repudiated, or at least, re-interpreted. Another similarity is the universal rejection of a single gender ideal, be it a traditional or an unconventional one. The informants are not convinced of a standard "ideal woman". Instead, they are aware that woman is a highly heterogeneous collective whose members hold different values.

There are two unexpected findings of the research. Firstly, according to the surveys conducted by European Union, in Estonia, societal expectations of women's social roles and responsibilities are more rigid and conservative than those of men. Yet in this research, some informants have opposite perceptions. From Elena (29) and Anna (32)'s perspectives, men are under more social pressure in achieving higher social status and

becoming financially successful than women. In Jaana (35)'s observation, males are punished more for not living up to their gender ideal than females who fail to enact traditional femininities. Her husband is an example who, from her point of view, would have been a lot more feminine if he had not been raised to be a "man". While Jaana (35) herself did not feel the same extent of suppression that her husband has undergone. The notion of "Estonian men" is another prevalent gender stereotype of men, which regulates men's behavior but not women's. These perceptions may be ascribed to the resilience of a relatively unitary idealized form of manhood that the participants have perceived. Compared to men whose success is mainly defined by their professional achievements, the definitions of a woman's success are more varied. In many informants' own experiences, there is not a universal feminine gender ideal that they feel obliged to pursue. Thus, although both men and women are victims of gender stereotypes, from some informants' perspectives, men are under more societal pressure than their female counterparts.

Another unexpected finding is the downplayed importance of gender, which is particularly surprising considering the centrality of motherhood to many informants' self-identifications. Since in most cases maternity is conceptualized differently from paternity, the research expected the perceived importance of gender and motherhood to be positively correlated. However, as previous sections have shown, although motherhood is a crucial component of femininity and has significant influence on how one envisions, plans, and organizes her life, gender is deemed of little importance. The

inconsistency may be attributed to four possible reasons. Firstly, the informants' visions of life already incorporate a female's perspective, which many of them are unaware of. Therefore, in spite of the fact that many can foresee or accept interruptions of one's career due to childbirths and childcare, few relate it to gender and think that they would experience life differently if they were born male. Secondly, consistent with finding in previous studies (Jacques and Radtke, 2012; Mohanty, 2013; Marling and Koobak, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018), there is a common belief in neoliberalist values, which reduces structural issues to individual matters. The participants are convinced of their freedom to choose, and are aware that they are held entirely accountable for their decisions. Rather than contextualizing their choices in the cultural setting and contemplating issues from a structural perspective, the informants ascribe their decisions to personal values or personality characteristics. The significance of gender, as a consequence, diminishes. Thirdly, related to beliefs in individual choice and responsibility, the informants resist acknowledging social influences on their decisions to become a mother. By claiming the influences of maternity on daily life biological and thus inevitable, the participants preserve their autonomy as independent agents though paradoxically, the argument that motherhood is a choice is made repeatedly. Lastly, with a well-planned parental leave scheme, the work-life conflict that females commonly perceive lessens, which diminishes the differences between men and women, making gender less important.

There are two limitations of the research. The first limitation of the research

concerns the materials for analysis—discourses gathered from interviews. Discourses are always contested because there are various ways of interpreting the same sentence or even the same word (Gee, 2014: 19-20). It is neither practical nor possible to make an exhaustive investigation into all potential interpretations. The possibility to be falsified in the future is an inevitable limitation to all interpretivist research.

Secondly, the research only focuses on highly educated young females' perspectives, which should be born in mind at all times. A nationwide survey is neither within the scope of the research nor does it fit the purpose of the study whose primary aim is to explore how individuals navigate between different notions of femininity. In addition, despite the fact that the informants' opinions are very diverse, they do not represent the voices of all other Estonian women since woman is a heterogeneous collective as the research has shown. And although these opinions are similar in negating traditional gender roles, the problem of selection bias should not be ignored. For example, individuals willing to take part in interviews may share something in common that individuals unwilling to get involved in face-to-face meetings do not possess. As a consequence, the informants' opinions should be regarded as personal views rather than universal beliefs held by all highly educated young Estonian women. In short, this research should be seen as an endeavor to shed additional light on Estonian women's conceptualizations of femininity instead of an exhaustive research that includes all opinions or an effort to generalize women's experiences.

## CONCLUSION

To gain a better understanding of how women conceptualize gender and situate themselves in a changing society, the research conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with highly educated young Estonian females aged between 24-35. The research inquires into the ways the informants define themselves in terms of gender and the social significance of the elements utilized to construct their gender identities. The results were analyzed with Discourse Analysis and were coded and presented thematically.

The study finds that femininity at the individual level is conceptualized, experienced and related to one's social life very differently. First of all, how "woman" is defined and how one understands the relationship between biological sex, gender and gender identity are already sites of struggle. Secondly, the boundary between women's essential nature and socially constructed femininities is fuzzy. Apart from female physiology, nothing is universally considered essentially feminine. In terms of physical strength, there are participants who consider physical frailty part of femininity, and agree with arrangements of household duties made based on the presumption. Yet there are also informants who disagree with the assumption of female helplessness and the norms that perpetuate it. With respect to maternity, neither is there a consensus regarding the necessity of motherhood, nor do the informants understand women's roles as mothers and their childcare responsibilities unanimously. While no matter one understands motherhood more as parenthood or women's special role in childrearing,

homemaking is considered a responsibility of both partners. With regard to appearance, although for few participants their physical attributes are crucial to their gender identities, maintaining a feminine appearance in general is of little importance to how most informants define themselves. Opinions on feminine characteristics and social behavior are even more divergent. From some participants' point of view, women are less aggressive or nonaggressive compared to men. While from others' perspectives, both men and women can be aggressive. The difference lies in the ways of expression. Behaviorally, women are observed to be more expressive of their emotions than men. Yet since the behavioral difference is more pronounced in and commonly practiced by males, it is more viewed as a legacy of traditional gender stereotypes than a fundamental gender difference. The participants' feelings of authority are perhaps the most complicated. Although authority is not believed to be essentially masculine, the participants share an elusive feeling that they are the ones who have less authority or have less desire for authority compared to their male counterparts. In short, what personality trait or social behavior is exclusive and inherent to females is an everlasting question that can hardly be answered. As a consequence, it is very difficult to claim anything other than female anatomical features essentially feminine since what makes a woman a woman differs from person to person. Lastly, the perceived importance of each elements of femininity to the participants' overall self-identifications and their social life varies, which is highly contingent on the socialization processes that the informants have undergone. For some participants, gender is not central to how they

define themselves as an independent individual and as a member of the society because they do not consider themselves affected by their gender. While for others, gender is pivotal to their perceptions of the world and the way they locate themselves in relation to other individuals in the social realm. Still for others, gender is not unimportant to their everyday life at all, but nor is it decisive to how the informants see themselves.

The empirical research illustrates the diverse conceptualizations of femininity and individual struggles to get rid of traditional gender roles while preserving a sense of belonging to her assigned gender group or her sex category, contributing to gender studies in Estonia that primarily focus on macro level gender issues such as parental leave and gender pay gap (e.g., Pajumets, 2010; Karu, 2012; Anspal, 2011; Vassil, Eamets and Mõtsmees, 2014) with an in-depth understanding of how gender as a social identity is negotiated at the individual level when different strands of thoughts coexist in society. Yet since the scope of the research is limited, many areas are left unexplored. For instance, the elements that non-heterosexual women or sexual minorities use to construct their gender identities may be significantly different from those of the informants involved in this research. Likewise, women living in rural areas, coming from other ethnic backgrounds or with lower educational attainment may enact femininities in alternative ways. How these groups of women conceptualize and practice femininity may be interests to future research.

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## APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What do you identify with in terms of gender?

When are you aware of your gender?

How would you define femininity and masculinity?

Do you think you are more feminine or more masculine?

Can you envision yourself as a mother?

Why would/wouldn't you like to have children?

What do you think is the best thing about being a female/woman?

What frustrates you the most as a woman/female?

Is there an ideal figure that you would like to become?

What do you think are the most important roles or missions in life for men and for women?

Would you like to be a housewife?

How do you share or divide house chores in your family? How the state of division was achieved?

Do you think men and women have the same opportunities and access to social resources such as education, social welfare, business, and politics in Estonia?

Do you think there are gender inequalities in Estonia? What do you think are the reasons for such inequalities?

If you are given the chance to choose your sex/gender, what will you choose?

Can you sum up your experience as a woman/female?

APPENDIX 2: BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Age	Educational level and subjects	Occupation	Partnership status
Anna	32	Master in Social sciences	Master's student in Formal sciences; Part-time employee in government sector	Cohabitation
Birgit	34	Master in Social sciences	Part-time Ph.D. student in Social sciences; Full-time employee in military sector	Married
Elena	29	Master in	Stay-at-home	Married; has

		Humanities	mom; Part-time teacher	one child (1-year-old)
Eva	30	Master in Humanities	Stay-at-home mom	Married; has 2 children (4- and 1-year-old)
Ines	32	Master in Social sciences	Ph.D. student in Social sciences	Married; has 2 children (8- and 10-year old)
Helena	24	Bachelor in Natural sciences	Master's student in Natural sciences	Cohabitation
Jaana	35	Master in Natural sciences	IT specialist	Married; has one child (4-year-old)
Katrin	27	Bachelor in Humanities	Master's student in Humanities;	Cohabitation

			Teacher	
Laura	30	Ph.D. in Natural sciences	Researcher in Natural sciences	Single
Mia	24	Bachelor in Social sciences	Master's student in Social sciences	Single
Moonika	25	Bachelor in Humanities	Master's student in Humanities	Single
Tiina	27	Master in Social sciences	Employee in educational institution	Cohabitation; has one child (2-year-old)

I, Meng-Yu, Tsai

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