Housing, Lone Parenthood and Gender:
A Qualitative Approach in Southern Europe[1]

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Abstract

One of the most significant changes affecting family structures in Europe over the last few decades is the remarkable increase in the number of lone parent families as a result of the dissolution of relationships. Housing is one of the primary needs that arises. Attitudes for coping with the situation are varied and are determined by a number of factors - legal/legislative framework, finances and employment, psycho-social factors - which all affect men and women differently in terms of housing. The main goal of this research is to address, from the gender perspective, the constraints, needs and preferences expressed by men and women who become lone parents as a result of separation. We have adopted a qualitative method based on discussion groups including a sample of divorced or separated men and women living as lone parents in Southern Europe.

Key words: Lone parenthood, divorce, separation, housing, gender.

Introduction

One of the most significant changes we have seen in family structures throughout Europe over the last few decades is the substantial increase in the number of lone parent families. Along with the hegemonic role of nuclear families, there is increasing diversification in alternative forms of living together which have become especially relevant in recent years, even though they existed in the past.

In Spain, studies on lone parenthood took off after the democratic transition in 1975 which introduced greater flexibility to a whole host of legal hurdles; psychosocial censure also became less harsh and both were needed to launch public debate on these issues. Until that time, a number of cultural and religious factors sustained the traditional family and ideological model, a model so powerful that Spain ranked among the European countries with the lowest rates of lone parenthood as a result of marital dissolution or separation of couples. The number of single parents has grown spectacularly over these last few years, essentially due to changes in the culture of marriage and divorce which have led to the liberation– both social and in the workplace - of Spanish women (Yodanis, 2005)

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The first Divorce Law came into force in Spain in 1981, but it was not until 1996 that official statistics became available on marriage break-ups, thanks to an agreement between the National Statistics Institute (INE) and the Spanish General Council for the Judiciary. In 2005, the Divorce Act was revised with the intention of ensuring a simpler and more expedient law. Amongst other issues, the situation of joint custody of children was introduced even though even in 2008, according to INE statistics, custody of the children was awarded to mothers in 86% of cases, to the father in only 4%, while shared custody was granted in 9.7%; in the remainder, 0,3%, custody was granted to other parties (i.e. family relatives, institutions).

Table 1: Divorces per 1000 persons in several European countries

GEO/TIME	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Spain	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.7		2.8	
Italy	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.8		0.8	0.9
Greece	0.9	0.7	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.2	
Portugal	1.4	1.5	1.7	1.9	1.8	2.7	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.4	
France	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.9	1.9	1.9	2.1	2.2	2.5	2.2		
U.K.	2.8	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.8	2.6		2.4	
Ireland	0.0	0.4	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8		0.8	
Belgium	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.8	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.9	2.8	2.8	2.8
Netherlands	2.2	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.1	1.9	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.0	2.0
Germany	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.3
Austria	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.6	2.4	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.5	2.5	
Switzerland	2.4	2.5	2.9	1.5	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.9	2.8	2.6	2.6
Czech Rep.	3.2	3.1	2.3	2.9	3.1	3.1	3.8	3.2	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.0
Hungary	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5
Romania	1.6	1.8	1.6	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.6	1.5	1.5	1.7	1.7
Poland	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.5	1.8	1.9	1.7	1.7
Lithuania	3.2	3.3	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.1
Estonia	3.8	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.2	3.0	2.9	3.1	3.0	2.8	2.8	2.6
Denmark	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.9	2.9	2.8	2.6	2.6	2.7
Finland	2.6	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.5
Sweden	2.4	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.3	2.3
Norway	2.3	2.1	2.0	2.2	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.1

Fuente: Eurostat.

As can be seen in Table 1, divorces per 1,000 inhabitants have grown faster in Spain than elsewhere in both the Mediterranean and Europe over the past few years, with a three-fold rise in divorce rates between 1997 and 2007. According to INE, in absolute terms, the number of divorces also tripled from 36,072 in 1998 to 110,036 in 2008, while there has been a six-fold increase if we take the 17,879 divorces registered in 1982 as the baseline. Elsewhere in Europe, divorce statistics have remained fairly stable over the same period. In ten years, instead of showing similar rates to other countries in SW Europe, Spain now resembles countries in the NE of Europe and currently ranks as one of the European countries with the highest divorce rates.

In the following Table drawn up with Eurostat data, we can see that Spain has the lowest percentage of single-parent households vs. the total number of households with dependent children in Europe with only 3% compared with 22% in Sweden and 17% in the United Kingdom. Also, if we consider the distribution of the different kinds of households for the 15-member state Europe of 2001, using the Eurostat

classifications, Spain, together with Italy, shows the lowest rate of single-parent families in the European Union, with just under 1% of all households, compared with 7% in Sweden and 5% in the United Kingdom.

Table 2: Lone parent households in European Union, 2001

GEO / TYPES	% of all households with dependent children	% of all households	Total number in 000s
Spain	3	1	182
Italy	4	1	311
Greece	4	2	62
Portugal	4	2	65
Luxembourg	5	1	2
Denmark	6	2	43
Ireland	7	3	43
Germany	8	2	766
Austria	8	3	91
France	9	3	845
Belgium	9	3	136
Finland	9	2	59
Netherlands	11	3	202
U.K.	17	5	1229
Sweden	22	7	303
E.U.15	9	3	4338

Fuente: Eurostat. European Community Household Panel

There are signs now, however, that the number of single-parent families is growing significantly in Spain. Amongst other data, between 1997 and 2001, overall in the European Union, the number of people in situations other than lone-parenthood in the preceding year remained stable at around 15%, while in Spain this figure almost tripled from 10% to 29% in the same period. Along similar lines, according to INE data, the number of single-parent households increased more than any other kind of household between 1999 and 2001, with almost 48%.

As a result, since 2008, the members of officially recognised single-parent families now benefit from a series of state, regional and local aids and allowances, such as: reduced public transport fares or aid for private vehicle purchase; reduced fees at publicly-run schools and in services such as school lunches, transport and crèche; advantages when requesting educational grants as well as places or enrolment at educational centres; discount entrance fees for publicly-funded museums; equal tax relief as for families with 3 or more children; in some regions, single-parent families also enjoy certain advantages in accessing public funding for the purchase of the family home and preferential access to subsidized housing. On the local scale, some town councils also provide educational, training, psychological and social assistance and support to help these families cope with the added difficulties of single parenthood.

As pointed out by Bradbury & Norris (2005, p. 425) "*...apart from birth and death, marital separation is the family structure change that has the most dramatic impact on the lives of family members...*". So housing is one of the primary needs of all lone

parent families as a consequence of marital dissolution Switching to lone parenthood alters family structures and hence the type of home required may also change (Feijten & Mulder, 2005). Likewise, separation and divorce necessarily mean that parents will no longer share their common home, and at least one of the spouses will need to find new accommodation. Change of residence is not applicable exclusively to the progenitor leaving the family home; it is an option that the custodial parent who stays might also have to consider.

There are a variety of coping strategies and attitudes which are determined by the legal/legislative framework, financial and work-related issues and psychosocial factors, all of which affect men and women differently in terms of housing. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to address, from the gender perspective, the constraints, needs and preferences in relation to housing, as expressed by men and women who have become lone parents as a result of marital dissolution.

There are a number of arguments underpinning this study. Firstly, little research has been conducted on the specific problem of housing for lone parents and certainly not from the qualitative approach, despite the increase in the number of single parent households over the last few years. Likewise, the issue of housing is currently central to family and social policy in many European countries, Spain among them. There has been a great deal of criticism regarding the fact that the nuclear patriarchal family is the model on which housing policy has been based, and there are calls for greater attention to be paid to other housing needs which are evolving and on the rise (Watson, 1986).

Secondly, the importance of the social, economic and legal factors that go hand in hand with lone parenthood has led research to be conducted to date from a macro-social perspective. However, a multidisciplinary approach is essential in order to embrace other "micro" arguments which take into account the psychosocial scenarios of lone parenthood, as well as the subjective perceptions of all those involved in relation to housing (Coolen & Hoekstra, 2001).

Thirdly, very few studies have been conducted explicitly taking into account the gender issue. If we bear in mind that "the lenses of gender" fundamentally shape our culture and that individuals have clearly defined theories about the sexes and these theories, or schemas, directly influence behaviour and thinking, (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), it is reasonable to hypothesise that gender might influence housing preferences, needs and circumstances (Devlin, 1994; Jabareen, 2005). Likewise, there is a growing area of housing studies which conceptualises the housing system as part of an interlocking network of markets and institutions able to mediate (accentuate or attenuate) social inequalities that are organised around some notion of class and/or gender (Munro & Smith, 1989; Watson, 1986; Watt, 2005).

From our point of view, this research may meet the demands recently put forward in "Housing Studies" by Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen (2008, p. 521) calling for further international studies on the facts and emotions stemming from problems relating to housing and divorce, but from a cultural, social, legal, economic, work-related, psychological and Mediterranean gender perspective that is different to the Scandinavian context addressed in their research.

One theoretical study that consistently relates lone parenthood, housing and gender by Ihinger-Tallman (1995) reviewed a large number of research papers on lone parent families, and established a comprehensive and interactive relationship between macro (institutional) and micro (interpersonal and individual) variables. Several social institutions are identified as having a direct impact upon the housing situation of single parents: the legal system (custody arrangements, child support awards/payments, visitation privileges, etc.), economic and employment institutions (income, dependence, standard of living, job market characteristics, availability of child care, mortgage practices, etc.), and the political institutions (in the form of government decisions and social policy). At the micro level, identifying and committing with the role of parents, support networks and the gender-based psychosocial beliefs learned by individuals during socialisation are proposed as the main modulators of the interaction between lone parenthood, housing and gender. Our research identifies some of the institutional (macro) and psychosocial (micro) factors proposed by Ihinger-Tallman, describing how they impact differently on single parents – men and women – in relation to housing problems.

Lone parenthood and gender

The rather simplistic term 'single parent family' conceals a complex and diverse panorama of family strategies that probably have fewer points in common than those they share. It is difficult to refer to single parent families as a unique type in view of the broad range of circumstances that gives rise to them, the different life experiences of their members, the diverse social situations that they face on a daily basis and how their members interpret the facts (Chambaz, 2001).

Heterogeneity is, therefore, an essential feature. Common traits are the presence of a single parent and one or more dependent children sharing the same home. Of the variety of causes and life events that lead individuals to establish a single parent family at some point in their lives, this research will focus on marital dissolution or break-up of the couple (separation and divorce) as this is the most frequent and relevant cause in western countries.

Most of the characterisations regarding lone parenthood have a great deal to do with gender. One of the first features to be stressed is the widespread absence of fathers from the family unit. Lone parenthood is predominantly feminine; in fact, some authors prefer to use the term lone motherhood to refer to this phenomenon (Bianchi, 1995; Chambaz, 2001).

Another of the features defining this type of family is that they have fewer children than conventional families, and there is a positive correlation between the number of children and rate of paid work among women (Bianchi, Subaiya & Kahn, 1999). In general, employment rates in this population sub-group are fairly high. However, bearing in mind other parental characteristics – such as race, age or social class – the financial/employment status of single parent families, especially those of mothers, is worse than that of average conventional families (Skaburkis, 1997).

Education/training is an essential component in the process whereby lone mothers and fathers reorganise their lives; it improves their opportunities for employment and their access to resources while facilitating social relations beyond the family unit (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). The level of education and training among women tends to be slightly inferior to that of males, and this has implications in terms of career development and psychosocial integration, as mentioned above (Chambaz, 2001).

Distribution by ages also differs according to gender. Female heads of single parent households are younger than their male counterparts, thus increasing probabilities that lone parenthood will interrupt work-related training, hindering future job promotion **(**Bianchi, 1995).

In addition to these macro factors - demographics, financial and employment status - we also have to consider the psychological and social contexts which structure the lives of men and women very differently in our society. Female, or matrifocal, lone parent families overall, display singularities that make them substantially different to lone fatherhood, namely discriminatory expectations in terms of lone motherhood versus lone fatherhood; sexist attitudes regarding single-parent mothers' sex life/relationships versus that of lone fathers; gender-based inequalities in sharing out of responsibilities to tackle the issues that arise as a result of lone parenthood, and a long list of asymmetries that determine, from the gender perspective, very different lifestyles between the sexes (Silva, 1996).

In this regard, given that male and female social roles are different, psychosocial rules and expectations also differ between single-parent mothers and fathers and, consequently, also the type of child–mother/father relationships that are established (Ihinger-Tallman, 1995; Silva, 1996). Some studies (Stewart, 2003) highlight that activities involving children and non-custodial parents (generally men) are typically recreational, focussing on leisure, whereas the more serious, formal and routine activities fall under the responsibility of the custodial parent (frequently women).

At any event, the fact that two-parent families are the vast majority, along with the general belief that couples provide the ideal setting for cohabitation and father/motherhood explain to a large extent that lone parenthood is seen as a transition phase as opposed to more stable straightforward or reconstituted two-parent households. Hence until very recently, to a large extent single parenthood was subject to negative moral criticism and there were clear differences in social treatment of lone parenthood depending on the underlying causes. So widows, for instance, have traditionally enjoyed respect, social protection and a certain degree of prestige, whereas divorced women or single mothers have frequently been rejected and marginalised. As described by Walters & Abshiere (1995, p. 163):
> *"…considering the social problems associated with single parent families, they are often thought to represent some form of social pathology"*

Lone parenthood and housing

The home – i.e. the physical space shared by the members of a family unit – is the place where daily activities and interpersonal relations unfold. The emotional

connotations of these activities give rise to the concept of "home", and the home is identified with the family (Despre´s, 1991).

The concept of *place-identity* (Proshansky, Fabian y Kaminoff, 1983) arises along these lines too, and is considered to be part of personal identity made up of a series of cognitions linked to places or sites where the individual lives out his/her daily life and that enable him/her to forge emotional links with, or a sense of belonging to these areas. This provides a feeling of stability and security that turns these physical locations into a psychosocial area, and thus "the house" becomes "the home". From this standpoint, the individual is not generally aware of this kind of attachment unless he/she feels his/her identify is threatened, as occurs during separation or divorce. Such links are also at least as important as those forged with different social groups with whom the individual interacts. Besides individual identity, research has also been conducted on how physical-spatial environments, i.e. the home, influence an individual's social identity in terms of socio-economic status symbols, elements of cultural expression and indicators of family status (Sadalla, Vershure and Burroughs, 1987; Stokols, 1990; Wilson and Mackenzie, 2000).

The Life Stages Model (Clark & Onaka, 1983) is one of the classic approaches to the relation between family and housing. It suggests that an individual's housing needs, preferences and determinants change as our life-cycles unfold so that during expansion stages – leaving home, long-term relationships, children – there is a greater need for space and rooms, whereas during periods of recession (marital dissolution, children leaving home, retirement etc. – these demands decrease. Consequently, Winstanley, Thorns & Perkins (2002, p. 823) believe that the environmental, social and personal histories implicated in housing decisions and experience of home cannot be separated from the context of marriage and divorce. As pointed out by Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen (2008, p.519), separating is not only about being separated from a former partner, it is about a total change in everyday life and identity, and the housing situation plays an important role in all this.

So looking for a new home – for at least one of the spouses – is one of the first issues to deal with after separation. Sometimes both members of the former couple seek a new home for a variety of reasons, i.e. the marital home may not adapt to the new family situation; both partners wish to leave the marital home; one or both are moving out of town; or the partners have to adapt to a drop in income after the break-up (Dieleman & Schouw, 1989).

Post-divorce residential mobility essentially depends on two factors. Firstly, age - greater mobility at younger ages - and secondly, the presence and number of offspring – the higher the number of children, the fewer the chances of residential mobility (Long, 1992). In social systems like the western world where economic rationale is the driving force, consideration must also be given to economic factors as they have a major impact on any decision regarding housing (Winstanley et. al., 2002).

Although changes in residence have usually been viewed from the standpoint of the myriad of losses and difficulties faced by the actors as they tackle new lifestyles and social systems, the experience does not exclusively entail a global process marked by

losses. For some single-parent fathers/mothers, moving also brings positive aspects and gains in terms of their expectations for a new life. In fact, Anthony (1997) highlighted the positive and negative effect of housing on stress generated during the various stages of the break-up.

However, single parent families are certainly at a disadvantage compared to two-parent families in terms of economic status and housing conditions. Fewer single parents own a home and when they do, the value of their property is significantly lower than that of two-parent families (Anthony, Weidemann & Chin, 1990). Besides, the economic burden of housing is higher for single parents than for two-parent families (Bianchi, 1995) and they set strict economic limits and have a difficult time finding places to live within their budget (Chasteen, 1994). Likewise, the size of homes occupied by single parent families is smaller – both in terms of rooms per occupant and in total space – and they tend to be located in poorly located areas that are not as well serviced (Skarbuskis, 1997).

The negative consequences of separation on housing can be severe, not only in the immediate future, but also for a long time afterwards (Dieleman & Schouw, 1989). Even conventional wisdom suggests that many people whose marriage has failed continue to stay with their spouse because they cannot afford alternative housing (Skaburskis, 1997).

In short, housing is a central component of lone parents' lives, and for most households the maintenance of housing status and security is a key priority (Forrest & Kennett, 1996). This is because home ownership is not purely an exercise in accumulating capital. People's housing decisions also depend on the consumer value of the property, on cultural understandings about the perceived appropriateness and desirability of home ownership, as well as on powerful emotional attachments to "home" (Dowling, 1998). For many single parent families, housing is, therefore, an especially important factor which also leads to vulnerability; a number of gender differences can be found which we intend to highlight in this paper.

Methodology

To attain our goal we adopted a qualitative method because we believe that it is ~~better~~ well suited to capture the sheer complexity, dynamics and subjectivity inherent to lone parenthood, housing and gender. As pointed out by Wallace (2008, p. 268) or Winstanley et al. (2002, p. 817), statistical studies on housing-related behaviour invariably simplify the complexity of the topic as a result of the method adopted. This occasionally leads to analyses that leave out of the equation certain psychosocial and subjective issues that are essential if we are to grasp an overall understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, from the gender perspective, these topics are better studied using qualitative methods the emotions and culture inherent to gender issues (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).

For these reasons, we staged a number of peer group discussions with single-parent mothers and fathers, after divorce or separation, who were all living, at least temporarily, with their socio-economically dependent children in southeast Spain, more precisely in the provinces of Granada and Cordoba in Andalusia. By using this qualitative research technique, we are able to gain a comprehensive ~~perspective~~ understanding of the phenomenon given that both personal views on the role of housing and the relevant social construct are reflected while those issues requiring social integration to materialise are also recorded. Information has been gathered in a very open manner, without a great deal of supervision. The starting point was a script containing questions related to the topics of interest to our research, namely influence of children on housing needs among single parents; legal and economic constraints that impact the housing status of single parents; social, cultural and psychosocial aspects which, depending on gender, affect lone parenthood and housing; different gender-based preferences in terms of the structural and functional features of single parent homes; identity and housing in lone parent families.

The balanced combination of the three methodological criteria defined by qualitative research determined the number and the profile of participating subjects as well as the data collection process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Firstly, we sought typological or psychosocial-structural representations instead of numerical statistical representation, in order to capture the heterogeneity in social and demographic data, variability in discourse and diversity of profiles or patterns of the target social group. Secondly, the saturation or redundancy criterion told us when to stop either looking for further peer discussion groups, or when to draw the data gathering sessions to a close. Thirdly, the accessibility or availability criterion also provided possibilities to access a larger or smaller number of individuals, to tailor the make-up of the discussion groups and, in some cases, even the duration of sessions.

So we conducted 5 discussion groups (2 with males, 2 with females, and another with both) with 27 lone parents (14 lone fathers, 13 lone mothers) as a result of marital or union dissolution. Participants were aged 23 to 64 yrs, with an average of 45 years of age and 1.29 children. Mean duration of sessions was 82 minutes and ranged between 60 and 120 minutes. All the information compiled was recorded with the prior consent and permission of participants. Field work was conducted from late 2005 to mid-2006.

To access the subjects in our sample, we enlisted the collaboration of associations of divorcees, non governmental organisations and institutions working with lone parent families. They provided some of the premises for staging the discussion groups and also served as intermediaries to make contact with our subjects.

With the information gathered we analysed the statements – understood as the spontaneous, oral expression of the subjects' thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Our analysis did not focus on linguistic aspects such as syntax, style of discourse and/or rhetorical resources but rather on the semantic content of the discourses. More precisely, our goal was to identify and interpret – from the gender perspective – the oral expressions of single parent families in relation to constraints, needs and preferences regarding housing.

As to the specific procedure followed for this analysis, each category was implicitly and clearly defined in the theoretical approach for our research. They were also included *a priori* in the script used for data collection (Chasteen, 1994; Christie, 2000; Dowling, 1998). So, using verbatim transcripts of the statements, we sorted and coded participants' narrations according to the topics addressed (children and housing, economy and housing, home ownership, personal identity and housing, structural and functional features of housing). We then categorised these thematic units based on the specific objectives of our research (constraints, needs and preferences as regards housing) and later related and structured those categories on the basis of participant gender with the aim of configuring the various discourses underpinning all this information. Lastly, the results were presented by prioritising the most outstanding topics emerging in the discourses. Some paragraphs or verbatim excerpts of the material were also added in to illustrate and, to some extent, justify our interpretations and ultimate conclusions.

In order to guarantee the rigour, credibility, transferability, consistency and neutrality of both our analysis and conclusions, we adopted a number of control measures, i.e. four members of the research group coded, categorised and interpreted the results independently; they then discussed jointly to agree on the selection criteria and any decision adopted. Some of the preliminary results were reviewed and discussed with interviewees. Our conclusions were compared with those drawn in other studies addressing similar phenomena. Finally, each stage of the research has been described and justified as clearly and in as much detail as possible.

Lone parenthood, housing and gender

Children and the family home

Children are the backbone of the entire discourse referring to lone parenthood and housing. They determine the restraints, preferences and needs of the home required by their parents and they exert an influence on most of the decisions taken.

> *"...our housing problems arise essentially as a result of the kids and their needs ..." (male)*

> *"...at the end of the day, its all about the children and their wellbeing ..." (female)*

However, there are gender-based differences in the way children influence these issues. In the case of fathers, housing is essential in ensuring father-child relations for two important reasons. Firstly, the new home expresses the mood and personal situation of the father and, to a certain extent, the status of the father-child relation. Secondly, a father's home is constantly being compared to the home of his ex-partner or with the former family home, so fathers try to ensure that their home is as pleasant as those other homes, for all that this symbolises.

> *"...you've got to have a home so that your children are OK and feel good. Otherwise your relationship with the kids will suffer and kids gradually get tired. They'll say "I don't want to go with Daddy because I don't want to live in a dump!..." (male)*

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The binomial housing-children appears again and again in the discourse of males as if somehow one thing (housing) led to another (children). In addition, this association seems to be overestimated because, sometimes, it is through this and not through affection that fathers try to ensure the trust and love of their children.

> *"...the issue of housing implies that your child has to adapt to a new environment,..., its Daddy's house and you want it to be your children's home,...,I've cried because my daughter didn't want to come and stay with me despite the fact that my home was new and fully equipped ..." (male)*

As Lacroix (2006) also pointed out - albeit in a different geographical and cultural context from Spain - despite legal formalities, men and women take equal responsibility for children in the case of shared custody. For instance, some fathers essentially focus on meeting their children's material or physical welfare requirements, whereas many mothers are constantly preoccupied for their children's emotional and mental development, as well as their daily needs. In some respect, this difference in attitude between lone Spanish men and women is consistent with the classic, international gender-based dichotomies between instrumentality and expressivity or between breadwinning and nurturance (Porter, 2001).

On the other hand, legal child custody decisions are determinant when it comes to assigning the family home. To safeguard children's domestic stability, the custodial parent stays in the family home. In Spain, for traditional and cultural reasons, there is a significant gender-based asymmetry in this matter. A large part of society – not only the legal system – believe that children should stay with their mothers in the event of separation and, consequently, most mutual consent separations entail custody for women, so they retain the right to remain in the marital home. Meanwhile, men have to cope with the great anguish of finding a suitable home to enable them to improve shared custody expectations or the visitation rights established by the courts.

> *"...many of us are tied to our children not only because we love them unconditionally but also because we don't want to be homeless, and on the streets overnight ..." (female)*

> *"...try to stay at home; if you leave home you'll lose the kids! Because this is one of the criteria in jurisprudence – I'm not saying it's a requirement in legislation but in customs, and the way courts interpret the law ..." (male)*

This situation is familiar to women and criticised by men because they feel there is a feminist bias which establishes gender-based asymmetries in terms of the requirements to be met by men and women to attain the same goal. Some men perceive that they are expected to meet more requirements than women – who are assumed to meet them simply on account of their gender.

> *"...psychosocial experts highly value the fact that a father has a home, a steady job, that he is an emotionally stable individual, does not get drunk, does not smoke pot, does not see prostitutes, does not switch partner every week etc. If a man meets a huge list of requirements then he gets visiting rights, rights for over-night stays, rights of some sort...always fewer rights than mothers get. But women don't get asked anything at all: whether they drink or not, smoke or not – cigarettes or anything else for that matter – if they have fixed paid work or whether they work from time to time, or if they've never had a job because they weren't interested... She's the mother, and mothers are sacred in Spain ..." (male)*

This type of gender discrimination is a problem arising more in the legal framework than in law itself and is not only found in the Mediterranean context. Although laws have become more gender neutral, the legal framework in which laws are applied is not (Walters & Abshire, 1995). According to Lacroix (2006, p. 185) men's lack of involvement in childcare and/or their ability to exercise their "parental responsibility" stem from the unequal distribution of rights inherent in the regime of custody and access, and the connotations and practical dynamics of winning and losing in the legal settlement of their affairs.

Another important role of housing, albeit indirectly, is related with the so-called parental alienation syndrome (Baker, 2006). Since one of the spouses remains in the family home (generally the former wife) it may seem – and in fact some men in our study believe this is so – that children are persuaded by their mothers to believe that the father left home and the family, which leads to a poor image that contributes to children rejecting their fathers and becoming distanced.

> "...because men are thrown out, it looks like they've abandoned the home... that we've left of our own accord ..." (male)

> "...also, with time, it's possible that children are brainwashed into thinking that Dad is a philanderer, that he left home, abandoned the child...a certain antagonism has been instilled (in children) against their ..." (male)

Economic and work-related constraints on housing

Together with the issue of children, finances are the other great issue in the whole problem of housing for single parent families. They invariably have to cope with this problem even though faced with pressing cash problems which are difficult to overcome.

> "... always thinking about the kids and your finances..." (female)

Financial hardship among this group makes the purchase of a house unfeasible, in many cases. As mentioned above, men are generally forced to leave the former marital home, so in addition to the costs incurred in divorce and child support (and sometimes alimony for their former spouses) they also have to add the costs of finding a new home.

> "... financially, it's impossible to buy another home, unless you have two jobs. But if you have two jobs you'll never get shared custody because you don't have the time to spend with your daughter..." (male)

These male comments from the participants in our research contradict the assumption mentioned by Kalmijnl (2005, p. 348) in a study conducted in the Netherlands that for men, consequences of divorce are most often believed to be personal or psychosocial, given that after divorce, also men experience one stop in their careers, an increased chance of becoming downwardly mobile, increased chance of becoming unemployed, and an increased chance of becoming disabled. Likewise, for some time now it has become apparent in other countries that "postdivorce parenting is an important source of resocialization for men in areas of work orientation and personal relationships and as the primacy of work and occupational roles in the lives of the fathers is challenged by the contractual obligations of parenting"(Rosenthall & Keshet, 1978).

As to women, child-care responsibilities – which they take on because they are generally custodial parents – generate significant problems and work-related limitations with the resulting drop in income and repercussions in terms of housing.

> *"...my main problem was working hours and school hours. Whenever I had to go to work, I couldn't drop my son off at school; I couldn't pick him up either or my daughter because she started earlier, and finished late. Sometimes, if I made enough money, I'd pay this lady to pick them up at home and take them to school, but otherwise, my son has had to grow up into a young man since he was six and had a key to come and go to school ..." (female)*

Despite the above, employment rates among single mothers are higher than among married women with children. Sometimes however, paid work is not the result of a deliberate choice, but rather stems from the need to raise financial resources. This need forces women to enter the labour market under precarious conditions, to accept working inside and outside the home as a result of the scarcity of specific services that favour juggling family and work. Most importantly in our view, women are forced to assume a gender role for which some have not been socialised (Enders & Radcliff, 1996).

> *"...I was used to my husband putting the bread on the table because he didn't want me to go out to work and suddenly ..., I had to go out and find a job ... to face the world of paid work, at my age, with no experience or training ..." (female)..."*
> *"...we are more prepared to cope with the inside (family life) than the outside..., for me, it was an uphill struggle to go out to work, but I did it because I recently separated ..." (female)*

Quoting Walters & Abshire (1995, p. 182):

> *"...the vast majority of single parents are women. Their lives are shaped by myths and stereotypes that even they often do not recognize-they hold many of the stereotypes themselves. They are poor, often educationally unprepared to work for an adequate wage, and believe that they should be at home to care for their children. Decisions are made about their lives by people who feel that they should be good mothers and stay home with their children while, at the same time, believing that they should be hard workers and support themselves..."*

As occurred in certain Anglosaxon countries a few decades ago (Crow & Hardey, 1991), currently in southern Europe the paucity of public subsidies for this group, and the difficulties they face in obtaining mortgages, further hinder their access to the real estate market. As a result, many men – as habitual non-custodial parents – find great difficulty in obtaining state aid because, legally, they already own a property – i.e. the home currently occupied by their former spouse and children …

> *"...we recently applied for government aid to purchase a house and we've been told we don't have any rights because we already own a home, even though we can't use it as a result of a court ruling..." (male)*

…, whereas in the case of women, along the same lines as stated by Robinson (2002) for the US context, the arguments raised most commonly are that they lack a guarantor to apply for a mortgage, that their work conditions are precarious, and they only have one pay check rather than two as in two-parent families.

> *"...the problem with housing is a financial one. The bank puts up the money. So you go to them and say "well no, I'm separated" and manager and staff change their tune..., I can feel my hairs stand on end ..." (female)*

Another complaint affecting single-parent fathers especially has to do with the fact that many continue to take care of mortgage payments related to purchase of the marital home. They are not eligible to benefit from the tax relief established by the Spanish state for amortizations of mortgage payments to purchase a first home, since from the moment the marriage was dissolved, the marital home is no longer a first home (or habitual place of residence) for one of the members of the former couple (generally the man).

"...these situations are aberrant… You're paying for the house for others to live there, sometimes your ex-wife's new boyfriend or partner, and that's downright insulting, right? But on top of that, the tax authorities say: No, this is not your first home and therefore you are not entitled to tax relief, and yes, don't forget to pay the mortgage because it's your responsibility!..." (male)

As seen in other North American and European studies in socio-cultural and geographical contexts that differ from those of the participants in our study, people who find themselves suffering a severe decline in financial status face a whole range of implications (Amato, 2000; Feijten & Mulder 2005) and there is also a gender bias (Bondi, 1999; Watt, 2005), i.e. shift in status as a result of having to move to poorer boroughs with reduced quality of life and worse urban and social amenities; possible isolation and breakdown of links with friends and relatives given greater distances and/or difficult access and communication; in relation to children, a new school and the need to embark on a fresh start at school and socially too.

"...we went to live in a very small apartment that my parents bought me when I was a student. Of course, my children lived in a villa, with swimming pool and garden… the quality of life you cannot get in a 70 sq. m. flat. So the kids were, well… we had separated, they didn't see their Dad and what with the change and all… it was awful…" (female)

In addition, as custodial parents, women usually remain in the marital home. This, along with their precarious financial situation, limits their chances of moving on to a new residence and this may imply serious problems, as highlighted by Chasteen in the United States (1994) or Uunk (2004) in the European Union.

"… when I separated he let me stay in the house, but he also left me with the problems inherent to the house – drugs, burglaries, everything… I wanted to get my kids out of there…" (women)

As pointed out by Walters & Abshire (1995, p. 163) explanations given to account for the housing problems experienced by women, precisely because they are female, often assign such problems to their own personal responsibility:

"...if families headed by women live in substandard housing,…, it is because it is their choice…"

As to men, the scarcity of financial resources forces many to rent or move in with their parents or relatives, with all the problems that this entails, as we shall discuss later.

"...when my wife threw me out of the house, I had to move in with my parents. I didn't have enough money to rent so my parents took me in …" (male)

Home ownership regime

Ownership of single parent homes points to interesting gender differences as shown in studies conducted elsewhere in Europe (Feijten, 2005; Yeates, 1999). In this

research given that most women remain in the marital home they are naturally the owners of the property (co-owners with their former partner). However, there is greater variability among men in this respect. The proportions of fathers who own their home, rent, or live with other relatives – generally parents or siblings – is very similar.

If we overlook this Spanish case law-induced gender bias, our results are consistent with those seen in other international studies (Skaburskis, 1997) in the sense that single-parent mothers have on average a lesser chance of being home-owners than single-parent fathers, but most of the difference is accounted for by differences in income. Besides, single-parent women renters have the most affordability problems.

In addition, men's statements point to a clear desire for home ownership. This aspiration is associated with a Western culture that links property ownership to stability, security and permanence as defining elements of family life (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Renting, however, is socially linked to an unstable, insecure or – at best – a temporary situation, which not only runs counter to male expectations in terms of normal family life but also hinders their chances of obtaining child custody or better visiting rights.

> *"...insecurity is always a dangerous criterion. It implies risks for the child,... One assumes that psychosocial services and family courts value security, that the child should not be exposed to constant changes of residence, or educational rules. And this applies to housing, what's called domestic stability..." (male)*

Despite this, the fact is that a large part of lone fathers meet their housing needs by renting. Among other reasons, renting allows them to better adjust their accommodation requirements to other issues – work, personal relationships, etc. Renting also allows greater mobility and choice of place of residence which enables working parents to count on grandparents' help for child-care, to stay close to where their children live, also enabling the family unit to relate to extended family members. These are all vitally important issues in the case of single-parent fathers. Likewise, renting is the quickest solution to meet housing needs when they arise unexpectedly as in most cases.

> *"...I left a nice home to rent a flat that was not too bad, but it needed renovating, the furniture was OK for students, the walls hadn't seen a lick of paint in years... but I had to get sorted over night... with time, a year later, I bought my own flat ..." (male)*

As pointed out by Feijten & Mulder (2005, p. 575) in the Netherlands , people who have experienced separation may be more sensitive with respect to the fragility of a partnership, and may not repeat the risk of having to move out of an owner-occupied home should union dissolution recur.

In short, in agreement with other international studies, women and men often devise different - and very distinct - strategies for managing household finances, as well as holding different attitudes towards both debt and home ownership (Christie 2000, p. 878). Along these lines, Smith (1990, p. 85) stated that as renters, men seem more successful than women in minimising the proportion of income spent on housing, while as home buyers they are more able to allot relatively higher proportions of their income to a potentially lucrative housing investment. Similarly, Yeates (1999, p. 608) argues that housing provides an illustration of how access to and control over a particular type of resource – property - is gendered and demonstrates the consequences of this for men and women's autonomy or dependency. Finally, Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen

(2008, p.520) conclude that men are the extreme gender, with well-off men as the winners, and socially marginalised men as the losers with regard to the question of who stays in the matrimonial home.

Living with parents

In Southern European countries, the welfare state is under-developed and the family, as the cornerstone of society, carries the burden of unprotected risks (Castles and Ferrera, 1996). In this sense, in a transnational study conducted in 12 EU member states, Dewilde (2008, p. 817) shows that in Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal, the extended family tends to provide assistance in meeting housing needs after divorce given both the precarity of institutional aid that provides back-up under these circumstances and the scant development of publicly subsidized housing in these countries of Southern Europe.

As discussed above, a significant percentage of lone parents resort to their own parents' assistance to resolve their housing needs. There are substantial gender differences in this pattern of behaviour. Most single-parent fathers returning to their parents' home do so as a result of marital dissolution, whereas a large part of single-parent women living with their parents are single mothers (Baum, 2003; Burton, Dilworth-Anderson & Merriwether-de Vries, 1995). Bearing in mind Spanish gender culture, there are various interpretations to explain this trend. One is that males who have interiorised the traditional male role (oriented towards work and the public side of family life) and are incapable of meeting the needs that arise (domestic as well as child care and education) as a result of marital dissolution resort to their parents for help, especially their mothers, to meet those needs. And some women return to their parents' home seeking to meet needs typical of the classical stereotype male role, such as financial support and accommodation.

> *"...I moved in with my parents because they are the first people you turn to, ..., the only alternative, ..., it's the quickest solution, ..., it's been really tough, because we are not ready to deal with education (of the children), meals, laundry, and all that. Men have always been better at the outside world than at domestic issues ..." (male)*

There is a correlation between the age of lone parents and a return to their parents' home. For instance, lower ages are linked to a higher probability of moving back. However, this is not a feasible solution in all cases. In addition, important issues arise for men in terms of their aspirations to gain child custody rights, and returning to their parents' home becomes a determining factor in the relation they establish with their offspring.

> *"...I'll never get custody of my daughter while I live with my parents..." (male)*
> *"...in my current situation I can't have my daughter because I wouldn't be able to give her a good life. It's really chaotic there (referring to his parents' house where he lives). My 19 year old sister comes home in the early hours; my other sister, more of the same, and that's no life for a child..." (male)*

Moreover, returning to the family home also implies losing independence and privacy. This triggers self-esteem problems and personal dignity issues as well as

disturbing feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and the unsettling notion that everything is provisional.

> *"...you lose the privacy and freedom that you had before, ..., you need the self-autonomy you once had ..." (male)*
> *"...it's a provisional home (referring to that of his parents)..." (male)*

This is an unpleasant blow to the stereotypical male ego, since men are incapable of achieving something that is inherent to their Mediterranean gender role, namely home ownership and independence.

> *"...a man who cannot afford a house, isn't a man or anything ..." (male)*

Structural and functional housing preferences

Houses express culture and echoing Devlin (1994, p. 225), as gender is one of the fundamental categorizations in our culture, one might wonder about its influence on housing preference. Gender, structural and spatial requirements are ideologically interlinked.

In this research, we have found no fundamental differences in terms of the structural characteristics and furnishing/fittings of the homes required by men and women. However, there are certain gender issues that are important to note. We must again refer to men's need to adjust their residential space and distribution to certain criteria, seen from the legal and psychosocial standpoint, and requirements to secure custody of their children. This will enable them to obtain the stamp of approval from home inspectors – agents from the judicial system who are responsible for ascertaining home standards.

> *"...the psychosocial team demanded that I have a home with at least two bedrooms, so that my daughter could have her own room ..." (male)*

> *"...they value highly two fundamental issues for Spanish family courts: health and education, ..., they will give extra points if the school is close by, or the nursery if the kids are small, and that health services are accessible, close to home, so that the father can easily take care of the child's health ..."(male)*

On the other hand, men focus on housing as a physical structure used in an instrumentalist way and women's notion of housing is related to creating home and in a more expressive sense. So men tend to require spaces that adapt to their new status; they stress the importance of functionality in home design, proximity to basic and/or daily services (schools, shopping malls, health centres, etc), and that the home be equipped with all the technological resources that may ease the tasks that are alien to their traditional male role which they have to cope with following break-up – housework and child care.

> *"...easy to clean, communication systems are fundamental – phones, intercoms, entry phones - ..., so that my son can go out to the playground, ..., modern gadgets are really very helpful..." (male)*
> *"...we need practical homes, in line with our children, the time available and our work ..." (male)*

As to women, the sense of maternal and domestic responsibility that is so embedded in the traditional female role leads many lone mothers to structure and organise their lives – including housing – on the basis of these dimensions contrarily to the approach taken by many lone fathers. In this research, we pinpoint the influence of classical

female stereotypes on the comments made by some lone mothers regarding the desirable structural characteristics and furnishing/equipment of a home. Their statements frequently refer to daily organisation of the home and their children's activities....

> *"...you need some sort of storage room, of course, because everyone needs to store stuff. And when you're in a small flat and you think, eh I've got to store all the summer clothes and bring out winter garments, or you have something you no longer use and need to keep it somewhere in case it might come in handy in the future. Things like storage space are very useful when you have them ..." (female)*
>
> *"...when I was thinking about moving out, I really wanted a place which, to some extent, would guarantee my child's development and wellbeing. I went to live in a residential area, where there were other kids, because that was important to me, and what really made me decide to move there..." (female)*

…, to home aesthetics and decoration,…

> *"...I'd always dreamed about those lovely villas with a garden, swimming pool and beautiful surroundings ..." (female)*

…, or to homes that are traditionally associated to women.

> *"...it's essential to have a large kitchen; a home must have a good kitchen ..." (female)*

Safety was a frequently recurring topic in our discussion groups with the female single-parents studied in this research.

> *"...you need a place where children can play, where they can come and go safely, so that you can be sure they're all right. Where there are children, security is essential ..." (female)*

And the fact is, as pointed out by Chasteen (1994, p. 312, 319, 323) that

> *"...Women are socialized to have a diffuse fear, connected to potential attacks by unknown men,..., women see the world around them through the lens of socialised fear,..., in housing, safety considerations were the most salient determining factor influencing the single women interviewed. Women will pay more, drive further, work longer hours, and sacrifice their aesthetic preferences to be able to live in a place they consider safe,..., the women who were recently divorced were the most fearful..."*

Although there are other international studies that also find gender differences on housing preferences (Nasar, 1989), it must be borne in mind that changing gender roles are affecting traditional assumptions about the spaces where men and women interact. As women raise their public profile, they will seek more open home spaces that allow for simultaneous multiple uses and, vice versa, i.e. men's increasing role in the private family sphere is also being reflected in the structural and functional design of homes. In fact, the findings of the research conducted in North America by Dellpeatross and Hasell (1992) suggest a correspondence between changes in gender beliefs and behaviours and spatial preferences. House form and gender issues will become increasingly linked in the years ahead.

Personal identity and housing

Winstanley et al. (2002, p. 822) describe how, when moving to another home, some people bring their past with them, whereas others seek to turn over a new leaf and renew their identity through the new home. This behaviour is common to men and women, but our research indicates that there are certain gender nuances which we believe are interesting to underline.

For many lone fathers, housing is the symbol of personal and family normalisation, and a means to consolidate father-child relations. To resolve the issue of housing after the break-up marks an important milestone that provides continuity in their lives, as well as greater confidence, dignity, independence, privacy and personal identity.

> *"...if you don't have a place to live, how can you have a family? ..." (male)*

Housing is one of the most crucial aspects in the life of any individual, for a variety of reasons – family, personal, economic, social, cultural etc (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2004) – but in the case of single-parent fathers, having a place to live takes on additional relevance. This stems not only from how lone fathers value a home as a place to spend time with their children, but also has to do with their idyllic notion of the family – that failed and broke up. Hence the home becomes the physical representation of the idyllic home that lingers in our imagination. A home therefore is an essential component in the stereotyped image of the family and an individual's own identity.

Contrarily, for many women, housing becomes a cathartic element through which to express a break away from a past relationship and a woman's current reality. This is apparent in women's search for a new home, or in plans to redecorate and renovate the old one, in the quest to renew their identity based on the more or less conscious belief "new home, new life".

> *"...restructure my home and reorganise my life…"(female)*
> *"...the first thing I did was throw out our double bed…" (female)*
> *"...I stayed in the house, it was mine, my parents gave it to me as a gift so obviously I stayed, ..., but I changed everything, re-painted and decorated ..." (female)*
> *"...yes, yes, yes, I hate that sofa, upholstered or out of my sight, I don't know, change everything, re-paint, ..., a whole year changing things ..." (female)*

These nuances in discourse could be influenced by the fact that, according to court-based case law in Spain, single-parent fathers are usually the ones who have to leave the marital home, whereas women stay. These statements could also be interpreted on the basis of certain gender-based hypotheses that consider women gain quality of life after divorce, whereas the quality of life for many men as lone fathers declines severely and hence they yearn for the family and domestic wellbeing that marital union once provided (Rice, 1994).

Conclusions

On the basis of the above analysis we believe that children, judicial/legal and financial issues are three crucial elements that impact lone parenthood and housing. After the break-up, the home takes a leading and distinctive role in peoples' lives since

it has such an impact on issues stemming from being single-parent progenitors following separation, such as the relationship forged with the children, the course and outcome of legal proceedings to dissolve the marriage, the economic and financial situation they face and the psychological identity and future expectations of the individual. However, we understand that the main contribution made by this paper to the understanding of the topic is that we have revealed the differential effect these issues have on men and women and the nuances introduced by the Mediterranean culture present in southern Europe.

So in the case of men, housing is linked to a better or worse situation to confront the legal dispute over child custody and visiting rights. It is most importantly a vehicle to maintain father-child links, invariably in competition with the female parent who stayed in the family home. In the case of women, offspring are amongst other things a means to remain in the marital home by capitalising on children's domestic stability and the traditional cultural understanding of Mediterranean gender whereby mothers are best suited to child care and education.

The financial weakness that most lone parents suffer is another determining factor for housing and tends to be associated to lower quality accommodation in terms of space, location, furnishing/fittings, etc. From the male perspective, this forces men to move in with their parents or close relatives, with the significant problems this entails – lack of independence and privacy, low self-esteem. Renting a property is a fairly common option that is particularly appropriate as these situations normally arise without warning. Renting allows individuals to choose their home depending on their interests and needs. However, it is also perceived as a provisional solution, given that Mediterranean culture attaches greater value to home ownership than to renting. In the prevailing stereotyped family image, home ownership is tantamount to stability and the creation of 'home'.

Lone parents also have great difficulty in accessing the subsidised housing market; as well as a clear lack of support from all levels of public administration, given that there are no specific aid programmes and discrimination in terms of tax relief. For women, the financial problems associated to lone parenthood mean that they are forced to stay in the marital home, they lack financial credibility and/or they need to access paid work for which the most traditional female sectors have not been socialised, amongst others.

In terms of the structural characteristics and furnishing/fittings of housing, men value the requirements set by judges and psychosocial evaluation teams to decide on child custody following marital dissolution. In addition, men also value highly a functional home, equipped with technological gadgets to make life easier. Likewise, for men the material wellbeing of their children is vital when considering the characteristics of the new home, whereas many women tend to broach this subject from the point of view of the child's emotional wellbeing. Another significant difference between men and women is that women place greater emphasis on issues regarding domestic management and children, as well as home decoration and aesthetic values.

From the psychological and emotional (relationships) point of view, for a man a home epitomises the notion of the ideal family that will allow him to resume a normal life. In the case of women, the home is related to their quest for a new identity and to breaking away from the past through change, redecorating and reorganising the home.

In general terms, we can say that for men lone parenthood highlights the role of caregivers and providing emotional support (nurturance). For women, however, greater importance is given to the role of providing financially (breadwinners) and the model of authority and security. As a result, all housing decisions are conditioned to a greater or lesser extent by the demands posed by the new challenges now faced by women on their own.

As we have shown, Spanish judges' decisions on child custody and the use of the family home have a huge differential influence, in terms of gender, on many aspects in the lives of lone parents, i.e. quantity and quality of parental relations with their offspring, economic and financial situation, employment conditions, family and social relations, psychological wellbeing and emotional stability. Consequently, the constraints, needs and preferences expressed by participants in this study with regard to housing also interact with these factors giving rise to a continuous process that permanently feeds back into the process.

On the basis of these conclusions one may infer, at least in the socio-cultural context considered in this study, that case law needs to be modernised so that current gender relations are considered on a more even standing. Also evident is the importance of promoting housing policies that favour gender equality, meeting the demands expressed by lone parents. Also, instruments to provide economic, financial and social support should be devised bearing in mind the singularities of lone parenthood. We also suggest rolling out new housing designs that are more suited to lone parents' needs. And in general terms, there should be greater tolerance and social acceptance of the vast range of identities and cultures that are implicit to a social group like the group of lone parents studied here.

From the analysis conducted in this study, we may conclude that the influence of both Mediterranean culture and the Spanish social context on the phenomenon of lone parenthood, housing and gender is conditioned by the fact that marriage and partnership break-ups are relatively recent in Spain, i.e. it is not a firmly rooted in traditional Spanish Catholic culture. Quite the opposite, in fact this is a new phenomenon that emerged with the advent of modernisation and when Spain opened up politically, economically and socially to international contexts during the 1980s and 90s. This coincided with the phenomenon of economic and political globalisation on a worldwide scale that has played a major role in social and cultural homogenisation. As a result, the evolution of such topics in Spain, *grosso modo*, continues to follow the features, patterns and manifestations similar to other European and North American countries with greater experience in these fields. This would account for the similarities seen between some of the results in our study and others conducted on an international scale. In spite of this, however, certain aspects were mentioned during the study that reveal a clear influence of Spanish Mediterranean culture on lone parenthood, housing and gender, for instance, the issue of case law, or traditional gender attitudes expressed by

certain men and women in our study, as well as a particular view of housing and ownership culture that is characteristic of the Mediterranean geographical context.

Finally, we believe that housing is a pivotal element in the process of lone parenthood, not only on practical grounds – where to live – but also as a symbol of the new family situation that provides the individual with psychological and emotional stability. Both men and women perceive housing as a primary need. Homes must meet a series of specific characteristics which are essentially determined by children's needs, legal/judicial requirements and the precarious economic and financial situation of the actors; all these factors have considerable gender- and culture-based nuances. In short, lone parents' homes and new spaces are re-defined on the basis of the changes that have occurred in the family biography and on the new positions and roles that each lone parent adopts after union dissolution. It is not only a question of making a new space more functional, but rather of providing the new spatial geometry with a fresh family identity in line with the gender-related issues affecting each individual.

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