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**DUALITIES OF GENDER: THE CASE OF WOMEN'S SELF-HELP COURSES IN  
RIGA**  
MASTER'S THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyses the case of courses in Riga that teach women how to be more feminine and live according to pre-established femininity principles in order to improve their lives and relationships, with the aim of deepening the anthropological knowledge about how gender is constructed and experienced. The research explains how, in these courses, gender is naturalized and grounded in dualities; explores what characteristics are attributed to masculinity and femininity; and investigates why women consider it important to learn about and live according to femininity principles. The research concludes that these courses are a consolidation of the post-socialist, postfeminist and neoliberal contexts, and they call for women to change and develop themselves to be more content as well as perpetuate extensive, continuous emotional work and responsibility as expected from women.

**KEYWORDS:** *Gender, women, self-help, femininity, postfeminism*

## ANOTĀCIJA

Šajā maģistra darbā tiek analizēts kursu gadījums Rīgā, kas māca sievietēm, kā kļūt sievišķīgākām un dzīvot saskaņā ar noteiktiem sievišķības principiem, lai uzlabotu savu dzīvi un attiecības, ar mērķi padziļināt antropoloģisko izpratni par to, kā dzimte tiek konstruēta un izdzīvota. Šis pētījums skaidro, kā šajosursos dzimte tiek dabiskota un balstīta dualitātēs, kādas īpašības tiek piedēvētas vīrišķībai un sievišķībai, un kāpēc sievietes uzskata par svarīgu mācīties par sievišķību un dzīvot saskaņā ar sievišķības principiem. Pētījumā tiek secināts, ka šie kursi ir balstīti postsociālisma, postfeminisma un neoliberalisma kontekstos, un tie aicina sievietes mainīt un attīstīt sevi, lai būtu apmierinātākas ar dzīvi un attiecībām, kā arī iedzīvina to, ka no sievietes tiek sagaidīts ilgstošs, nepārtraukts emocionālais darbs un atbildība.

**ATSLĒGAS VĀRDI:** *Dzimte, sievietes, pašpalīdzība, sievišķība, postfeminisms*

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender identities, performances, and expectations shape people's world-views and lived experiences on a daily basis. In social sciences, gender studies have for long been a widespread field of inquiry for scholars interested in power relations (see, for example, Bourdieu 2001 [1998]; Connell 1987; Mac an Ghail and Haywood 2007), nature vs nurture debate (see, for example, Colebrook 2004), and the social construction of lived realities (see, for example, Connell 2000; Kimmel 2008). However, the basis of gender as a concept, as well as its implications, have somewhat deservedly sparked heated political discussions not only internationally but also in Latvia (see, for example, Delfi 2017, Satori 2016, Rotberga 2015), because people's ideas about women and men unearth very basic conceptual understandings of how the world around us is categorized and aligned. In this thesis, I will add to the growing anthropological material on gender and how it is conceptualized as a conspicuous aspect of human existence, deepening the anthropological body of knowledge about unique ways people interpret and experience gender as a part of their life-worlds.

The #MeToo era, while commencing in the USA (Fox and Diehm 2017), soon spread to initiate a discussion about gender and women's rights also in Latvia; more controversy and debate about gender in the Latvian political and public sphere has been sparked by the ongoing disagreements over the ratification of The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, *aka* the Istanbul convention (Semjonova 2019). In such politicized and controversial context, it might appear to a superficial observer that the scene is of a divide between the ones who are for and the ones who are against the abovementioned events, situating the actual realities and opinions of people in dichotomized categories that are mutually exclusive. However, simplified dichotomies are exactly what this thesis will criticize as counterproductive and unfit for understanding people's lived experiences. The main task of this thesis is to show how women in Riga conceptualize femininity and masculinity in relation to each other in order to deepen anthropological knowledge on gender as a part of how people's lived realities are constructed. Further in this introduction, I will present an overview of this research, discuss the multiple conceptual levels that this research will shed light on, outline the main research questions, as well as present the methods I use for gathering and interpreting ethnographic data.

In this thesis, I focus on classes and seminars in Riga intended for women that concern ideas about femininity and teach women how to be more feminine, and, through that, how to be happier in their lives and relationships. Such classes offer practical and spiritual knowledge about femininity and masculinity, as well as an opportunity to increase happiness, life-

satisfaction, well-being and encourage personality development. In order to explain and substantiate the choice of my research site as appropriate for the goal of this thesis, namely, the analysis of the ideas about gender as related to personality development and work-on-self, in the context of women in Riga, I will provide some analytical context of this research and its relevance in an anthropological research of gender.

First of all, there is a growing popularity of personality development practices and schools, frequently esoteric (as opposed to based on specific organized religious doctrine or institutionalized scientific data), based on spirituality, that focus on the idea of self-help and enhancement of one's personality in order to improve one's life and wellbeing. As my research suggests, gender is closely related to ideas about self-help and personality development, because wellbeing and improved personality traits are gender-related and gender-dependent, thus, understanding personality development illuminates the ideas about desired femininity and masculinity and vice versa. Also, I situate the women's courses in a larger context of contemporary postfeminism and neoliberalism, which help me understand the relation between gender and personality development.

Secondly, I argue that it is valuable to research women's self-help courses for an in-depth epistemology of gender because it adds to our understanding of heteronormativity. There are three main reasons why this thesis considers solely the heteronormative viewpoint – first, the scope of this thesis is too limited for considering all possible viewpoints of gender in relation to self-help, second, all of the research participants, as well as the content of the women's classes in question, poses heterosexuality as the default, without even voicing it, and thus the third reason – it is of utmost scholarly importance to problematize heteronormativity as such, since, as Van Hooff rightfully acknowledges, problematizing and researching the heteronormative viewpoint gives an opportunity to criticize heteronormativity as the 'blueprint' and an 'unquestioned paradigm' (2013, 21) in understandings of relationships between genders, thus expanding the anthropological knowledge of how gender is understood and experienced in different contexts.

The third valuable and illuminating aspect of this research is that of the naturalization of the socially constructed category of gender. In this thesis, I rely greatly on Bourdieu's monumental analysis of the social construction of gender and how these arbitrary constructs and divisions come to place heteronormativity and power relations at the heart of people's lived experience of gender (2001 [1998]). This thesis serves as a useful tool for analysing how gender is constructed through interpreting biology and nature, and how dichotomic differences between femininity and masculinity prevail as a part of people's understandings about gender as well as the broader order of the world.

Lastly, with this research, I add to the body of anthropological literature that approaches gender as relational and practice-related, since in this research masculinity and femininity are constructed in relation to each other. In this I follow Connell, who calls for ‘a form of social theory that gives some grip on the interweaving of personal life and social structure without collapsing towards voluntarism and pluralism on one side, or categoricalism and biological determinism on the other’ (1987, 61), showing the various ways femininity and masculinity can be experienced. As mentioned previously, this research avoids analysis through dichotomization, while it celebrates the diversity of human life and lived experiences. In this thesis, I show how ideas about gender and femininity in relation to practice and personality development can illuminate one particular way of how gender is experienced, understood and practiced, providing a significant contribution to an anthropological understanding of how people conceptualize their own as well as other people’s gender.

For this study, I have defined and established three main research questions, which also mark the three major directions the study employs. First, I discuss the ways femininity and masculinity are described and constructed in the courses in question as well as the opinions of the women who attend them, posing a research question – what are men and women supposedly like, and what this can tell us about how masculinity and femininity are constructed? Second, I analyse the epistemology of the abovementioned gender constructs and characteristics as argued by the research participants, asking – why are men and women the way they are? Third, I am studying the ways femininity and masculinity is related to the idea of personality development and work-on-self, attempting to explain why knowledge about gender relations and features is relevant to a ‘happy life’, why there are such courses, and why some women are eager to attend them, asking – why does it matter to know about what women and men are like? By finding answers to these questions, I achieve the goal of this research – explaining the ways gender is understood and conceptualized in the unique field of femininity courses in Riga, and so enriching the anthropological understanding of gender.

In order to answer the research questions I have posed, I employ two qualitative methods of gathering data, namely, in-depth interviews and participation as well as participant observation in the women’s self-help courses. Further in this paper, I substantiate and justify the choice of methodology, as well as explain the limitations of this research. After, I reflect on the ethical aspects of conducting this research, the question of representation, as well as consider my position as a researcher, anthropologist, and a woman, and how this position might affect the study. Then, I move on to provide a brief insight into the theoretical framework that I am using for interpreting data – I start by defining and explaining the terms that I am using in this research and continue with an overview of what other scholars and theoreticians have

concluded about how gender is perceived, explained, and related to self-help and personality development in the context of postfeminism and neoliberalism. Moving on to the main section of this paper, I provide an analysis of the data that relates to the research questions that I have posed and finally draw conclusions about how gender is conceptualized and understood in the context of women's self-help courses in Riga.

## **1. METHODOLOGY**

In this section, I discuss the methods I am using in this study and argue why these methods are appropriate for and effective in aiding me to answer the three research questions that I have posed in this paper, namely, how femininity and masculinity is understood by the research participants, what are the supposed reasons for the way women and men are, and why it is of importance for an individual's happiness and well-being to know what women and men are like and why. In this methodology section, I reflect upon how much data I have gathered and my own position as a researcher in the field, as well as discuss the limitations of this research. I conclude this section with a discussion of the ethical considerations for this research.

In this study, I employ two qualitative methods. I argue that qualitative methods, according to the anthropological tradition, are effective and insightful in a study like this one for the following reason – the research goal could not be achieved with a broad and representative sample (that would require a quantitative approach), because the goal is not vast generalizability, but an in-depth insight into a unique way of experiencing gender, and particular notions about masculinity and femininity, that cannot serve as a model for understanding everyone's experience of gender, but instead serves as an insight into the multiple and diverse ways of experiencing gender. Furthermore, I use two different, however related, sources of data – first, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and second, participant observation in the women's self-help courses. I employ both of these methods parallelly because the fieldwork complements my ability to conduct insightful interviews, and vice versa. The diversity of data 'makes it possible to capture different aspects of the research issue' (Flick 2004, 180), for example, what information about gender the courses provide, how this information is interpreted and understood by the women that participate, and what are the things that motivate women to participate and learn about femininity and masculinity.

### **1.1. Interviews**

One of the qualitative research methods used in this study is interviewing. In this research, my goal is to speak of gender in the terms and categories of the people I am studying, instead of recreating my own categorization and presuppositions, and to learn more about the field with each interview, instead of confirming or denying my own assumptions or hypothesis. Thus, while staying open for new terms, issues and concepts, and also ensuring that the data can be analysable as a whole and common conclusions can be drawn, I conducted semi-structured interviews. According to Bernard, semi-structured interviews are useful for providing 'reliable,

comparable qualitative data' (2011, 158) and at the same time leaves room in the interview 'to follow new leads' (ibid.).

For finding and selecting research participants, I used the snowball method. The target group of the participants in the research had the following requirement – that they have, in the last two years, attended at least one course, seminar or lecture about the topic of femininity, namely, a public event which educates women about how to be more feminine, what men and women are like, and how femininity is related to general happiness. All of the interviews were recorded with spoken permission from the research participants.

I conducted six interviews (see Table No. 1.1.) with women from different age groups. At the time of the interview, five out of six of the women had one or more children, and four out of six of the women were in a long-term relationship with a man. All of the interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed in relation to the research questions. All of the interviews, as well as the fieldwork, were conducted in Latvian, and all the translations from Latvian to English are mine.

*Table No. 1.1.*

**List of interviewees**

NAME	AGE GROUP	LENGTH OF INTERVIEW
Antra	Mid-twenties	1 hr 23 min
Gita	Mid-thirties	40 min
Ramona	Late thirties	1 hr 54 min
Nora	Mid-thirties	1 hr 30 min
Ināra	Early forties	1 hr 43 min
Laima	Early forties	1 hr 16 min

**1.2. Participant observation**

As the second source of data for this research, I conducted fieldwork, consisting of participant observation and fieldnotes. Participant observation has traditionally been the cornerstone of the anthropological method, and I strongly argue that this study has gained immensely in value and depth because I have myself participated in multiple women's self-help lectures and seminars that are the very focus of my research. During the fieldwork, I have written extensive notes on what is said and done, as well as continued my notes also after the course is over in order to preserve as much as possible of what is going on in the field. By

gaining data from participating in these courses, I can not only understand the data from the interviews better but also situate and contextualize the data conceptually in order to have a deeper analytical perspective on the data.

I began searching for the field site online, researching organizations that provide courses for women about femininity, as well as lecturers that speak publicly about the topics of femininity and masculinity. Due to the scope of this research and the lack of funding, I am only attending one-time events, instead of long-term courses. The preconditions for the courses that I have set in order to acknowledge the limits for this research is that they have to regard the following issues – what it means to be feminine or masculine, how femininity is related to happiness, and why women and men are the way they are. I have decided that I will not be including courses that are based on any organised religions (as Hinduism or Christianity, for instance) because such courses would reflect the particular religion’s take on gender, which is not the focus of my research.

I have participated in three separate events (see Table No. 1.2.). All of these events took place in Riga, were conducted in Latvian and were open to the public. The participation was for a fee ranging from 20 to 30 euros, that I procured from my personal funds. The organizers and lecturers were informed in advance via email of the fact that I attend with the purpose of research.

*Table No. 1.2.*

**List of events attended**

NAME OF EVENT	LENGTH	ORGANIZER	LECTURER
Liberation ritual from previous men and connections (Atbrīvošanās rituāls no iepriekšējiem vīriešiem un sakariem)	2 hrs	Dzīves Mākslas Akadēmija	Mūza Anna
A woman and femininity (Sieviete un sievišķība)	2 hrs 30 min	Pavasara studija	Inese Prisjolkova
What do men want? (Ko grib vīrieši?)	2 hrs	Dzīves Mākslas Akadēmija	Dimantra Antra

The first event I participated in was a lecture and a ritual that concerned the differences between men and women in relationships and on a spiritual level, and the purpose of it was to find closure and end connections and relationships with men from the past that were destructive to a women's well-being, happiness, and energy. The second event that I participated in was a lecture about what it means to be a woman, what women and men are like and why, and why some women are unhappy in their lives and relationships (namely, not acting according to the principles of femininity). The third event was a lecture about what men are like and what women are supposed to be like, what kind of women men like, and how to be more feminine in order to establish a lasting, happy relationship with a man and be happier in general. All of these topics provided me with rich ethnographic data that, when combined and compared with data gathered through interviews, opened possibilities for a deep, valuable, insightful anthropological analysis of how gender is understood, conceptualized and experienced by the women who participate in these events.

### **1.3. Research limitations**

There are two limitations of this research that I feel the need to reflect upon. First, because I am unable to gather data in Russian and had no funds for a translator, I am only considering women's self-help courses in Latvian, and all of my research participants speak Latvian as their first language. This might restrict my access to data, because, according to statistics from 2018, only about a half of the inhabitants of Riga are Latvian-speaking, and more than a third of inhabitants are Russian-speaking (Centrālais Statistikas Birojs 2018), which means that concentrating only on the courses in Latvian might not provide me with the full scope of the field of women's self-help courses in Riga.

The second, and, arguably, most important limitation to this study is the fact that I am only interviewing women and only attending courses intended for women, and this excludes the experiences of men when it comes to gender-related self-help courses. While interviews with men about gender, as well as participation in courses intended for men that talk about what women and men are like, would be extremely useful and appreciated in this study, there is another reason for why I have not included these sources of data apart from the limited scope of this research – I have not been able to find any courses that would be the equivalent of women's self-help courses, but intended for men. The requirements for courses that need to be met in order to be considered as fitting to this research are the following – the courses have to be public, and they have to regard masculinity and femininity in terms of explaining what men and women are supposedly like, and how masculinity and femininity is related to general

happiness, and success in long-term relationships. There are courses for men as fathers<sup>1</sup>, there are self-help groups for men<sup>2</sup>, which, however, are neither lectures nor seminars that explain the way women and men are and why, and there are events for men that do explain these questions, but are based on a specific religious dogma<sup>3</sup> and so stand outside of the boundaries of this research, since I am not studying any specific religious tradition's view on gender relations. For these reasons, I have not been able to provide the context from the perspective of men. However, the very lack of such courses is an interesting observation in itself, thus I will be taking that into account in my analysis.

#### **1.4. Ethical considerations**

In this section, first I demonstrate the strategies I have employed to ensure that this research is ethically conscious and that the participants of this research not only stay anonymous, but also are treated ethically, and the data gained is not misused. In the second part of this section, I consider my position as a researcher, and how my role as a researcher relates to the acquisition of data as well as its analysis. I complete this section with some concluding remarks concerning the representation of research participants and their experiences.

According to the established anthropological practice (American Anthropological Association 2012; American Anthropological Association 2009), I am taking all the necessary measures to ensure the anonymity of the people that I interview for this research, namely, I have changed all the names of interviewees, and I am only indicating the age group, not the exact age, as well as avoiding using personal details in quotes and analysis to make sure the identity cannot be deduced from context. In accordance with the third principle of professional responsibility established by the AAA (American Anthropological Association) (ibid.), all the interviewees have been informed about the purpose of this research and how the data is used and have orally consented to participate. As the fifth principle of professional responsibility suggests (ibid.), upon completion of the study, all the parties involved receive a copy of this thesis. All of the interview transcripts and other data are protected by a password known only to me, as suggested by the sixth principle of professional responsibility (ibid.). All of the interviewees agreed to participate in this research without a reward (monetary or other),

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the project “Tēvu līdzdalības veicināšana” (Promotion of father's participation) by Centrs Dardedze.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the project “Telpa vīriem” (Space for Men) by Riga Men's group.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the Vedic website Veda on relationships, family and gender roles.

however, frequently I paid for the coffee if the interview took place in a café out of general politeness. All of the participants are over 18 years of age.

Regarding the educational women's self-help events that I have attended, I have not anonymised either the lecturers nor the institutions organizing them since these events are open to the public. All of the organizers received written (via email) information before my participation in the event about my purpose as an anthropologist studying gender and were informed that I use the data for research, and gave a written (via email) consensus to my participation and observation of the event.

Nonetheless, ethics in anthropological research extend much further than just informed consent and anonymization. Anthropology and its qualitative approach are inherently subjective, and the researcher's subjectivity cannot be avoided – it can only be acknowledged. So, I deem it indispensable to reflect on my own position as a researcher and a woman, and how this position affects my research. First, I reflect on my place in the field, namely, my role in the women's self-help lectures that I have attended. As the anthropological method anticipates, I not only observed what the lecturer and the audience were doing but also participated in the events myself. Okely argues that 'ultimately, knowledge can be acquired through the total experience, not primarily through the role of a detached questioner' or observer (2013 [2012], 80). Thus, for example, in the ritual for liberation from previous partners, I also spiritually said farewell to the men that I have had a relationship with; after the lecturer mentioned that following such rituals these men from the past frequently reach out to the women who have spiritually parted from them, 'because they feel that they cannot feed off of your feminine energy anymore', I too expected a call or a message. Through actively participating in such ideas and practices, I could experience a little part of what the women that participate in this study might experience, which serves for an invaluable source of ethnographic data, no matter how subjective.

On the whole, my own gender has, I believe, opened the doors to this field of research for me greatly. I could speculate that the women I talk to feel more comfortable discussing their feelings and experiences with me instead of a man, and also when I participate in events, my co-attendees do not feel threatened by my presence mostly because of my gender performance. I do believe that my age also comes into play since my youth also puts me in a specific position towards women that are older or of higher status than me, and somewhat neutralizes that inequality between the researcher and the research participant. I encourage and happily accept the lesser power position while communicating because my purpose is to make the participants of this research feel comfortable and accepted sharing their ideas and experiences.

And this brings me to the last, but certainly not the least aspect of ethics in anthropology, namely, the question of representation. As argued before in the introduction, questions of gender and what women and men are like can be a source of political debate and division. I do acknowledge that many of the ideas expressed in the women's self-help courses as well as in the interviews do not correspond to my personal beliefs about gender. However, in this research, my chief priority is to maintain a highly professional anthropological approach. My goal is to situate the data in anthropological theory and at the same time give credit to the research participants by conceptualizing their practice as a strategy for making sense of the world around them and improving the wellbeing of themselves and others around them; in other words, my goal is to represent the people I study fairly and respectfully.

## **2. THEORETICAL APPROACH**

In this chapter, I establish the main theoretical concepts and approaches that I am employing in this thesis. By drawing on other scholars who have contributed to an anthropological understanding of gender as an important part of people's lived experiences, I show how I interpret the case of women's self-help courses. I situate the data in four conceptual levels of analysis. First, I show my and other author's stances on why it is important and insightful to problematize the analytical construct of heteronormativity in anthropological research. Then, I continue by defining gender in the context of this thesis as a subject of research, taking into account the dualisms on gender that constitute the heteronormativity framework. Further, I situate this particular case of women's courses in Riga as a composition of post-socialist, postfeminist and neoliberal contexts, that adds a new, specific input to these discourses. This theoretical discussion provides the basis and backbone of the data analysis that follows in the next chapters and assists me in giving answers to the research questions I established above.

### **2.1. Heteronormativity**

In this research, I draw parallels between the case considered here and Bourdieu's claim that heterosexuality is 'socially constructed and socially constituted as the universal standard of any "normal" sexual practice' (2001 [1998], 84), and this research attempts to shed light onto how this construction takes place. I reflect on the presupposition that is common nowadays not only in public debate but also in scholarly circles, that gender is something that mostly relates to the relationship between two opposite entities – men and women; according to Ingraham, 'the presence of this assumption [...] suggests that gender's purpose is primarily to organize relations between males and females – the process necessary for institutionalizing heterosexuality' (2006, 310). For me, gender is instead about multiple femininities and masculinities, and not based on juxtapositions.

I find it crucial to reflect on the fact that, as the data analysis of the following chapters shows, this case is a telling example of how heteronormativity is institutionalized, legitimized and perpetuated. In anthropological research the utmost importance is given not only to what is said, but also to what is kept silent, and since the participants of this research take their and other's heterosexuality for granted by not even mentioning it, and acknowledging neither a different way of living nor a gender identity that is not grounded in the opposition and heterosexual relation between men and women, thus establishing heterosexuality as the norm,

it shows that heteronormativity as the inferred way of organizing gender does not require additional legitimization. As Ingraham continues – ‘by treating heterosexuality as normative (heteronormative) or taken for granted, we participate in establishing heterosexuality – not sexual orientation or sexual behaviour, but the way it is organized, secured, and ritualized – as the standard for legitimate and prescriptive socio-sexual behaviour, as though it were fixed in time and space and universally occurring’ (2006, 311).

This research studies the case of women’s courses that assume heterosexuality as a given and thus ends up studying only heterosexual individuals that are or have been in heterosexual relationships, and this shows that the practices in question in this research are based on a heteronormative worldview. I agree with Van Hooff when she calls for a need to acknowledge and problematize heterosexual relationships. She makes a convincing case of why it is necessary to study heterosexual relationships in order to avoid treating it ‘as an unquestioned paradigm, resulting in heteronormativity’ (2013, 21). Through analysing the dualities and juxtapositions that masculinity and femininity are constructed upon, this research follows Van Hooff’s argument and provides an insight into how gender is conceptualized from the heteronormative viewpoint. Further, I move on to explaining what I mean when I speak of gender and argue why the dualities that gender, in the heteronormative framework, are often based on are anthropologically illuminating.

## **2.2. Gender**

The main concept I employ in this research is the concept of gender. Because it can be a contentious term, since there are many ways it is used nowadays not only in scholarly circles but also in public debates and the media, I provide a working definition of this term by borrowing Miller’s idea that ‘in its simplest form “gender” refers to what it is to be “masculine” or “feminine” at any given time in particular social and cultural context’ (2011, 34), namely, in this research, I am exploring what it means to be feminine (and masculine) in the context of women’s courses in Riga. As I already mentioned, gender is a widely discussed term, mostly because it is sometimes understood as being directly related to and dependant on the term ‘sex,’ describing the biological attributes and differences that are supposedly given and somewhat unchangeable, and, as Harrison puts it, it is often argued that gender ‘in some sense elaborates on, or builds on, sex’ (2006, 37). However, this relation between gender and sex has been widely criticised in anthropological circles, because ‘the apparent solidity and reality of sex is strongly associated with the idea that it is bodies (“sex”) that have substance, whereas minds and relationships (“gender”) do not’ (ibid). Ultimately, the distinction between sex as biological and

gender as social only obscures and perpetuates the dichotomized manner of categorization that ought to be unravelled and explained by social science, instead of being taken for granted (see Butler 1990, 1993).

In this research, I avoid unnecessary dichotomizing, thus I am not using the term gender as an opposite for or in relation to the term sex. Since femininity is always situated in relation to masculinity in the courses that I study, I draw on Connell's insightful work on the 'relational account of gender', which allows me to understand 'the different dimensions or structures of gender, the relation between bodies and society, and the patterning or configuration of gender' (2000, 23-24). By approaching gender from a relational perspective, I can use this concept to explain how 'social practice is organized' (Connell 2000, 24), respectively, the various structures that enable and perpetuate practices as the women's courses in question. Because gender is relational and grounded in practice, it provides space for change in what it means to be a woman or a man in a particular context, and in this research I am showing just one of the many ways femininity and masculinity is understood and practiced; as Connell argues, 'multiple femininities and masculinities are [...] a central fact about gender and the way its structures are lived' (1987, 64). This particular kind of masculinity and femininity that I am researching in the context of women's courses illuminates the multiplicity and diversity of gender constructs since many contexts (as I argue later, in this case, it is post-socialism, postfeminism, and neoliberalism) influence how gender is conceptualized and understood.

### **2.3. Gender dualities**

Now that I have established that in the context of this research I understand gender as relational, practice-based, and embedded in social structures, it is possible for me to draw attention to the arbitrariness of the dualities that gender is commonly grounded on and interpret them anthropologically, instead of taking such dualities for granted and perpetuating the heteronormative worldview. In the next chapters, where I provide the data analysis and discussion, I show the way thinking in dualities is employed by the research participants and attempt to outline where these dualities derive from in order to make sense of gender in this particular research context, but now I briefly explain why I have decided to focus on dualities in the first place, and why I find them insightful for a deeper understanding of how gender is experienced in the context of women's courses. Colebrook, for example, argues that we think about gender in dualities because such a categorization is a part of a larger cosmology of difference, where we explain and understand the world around us – 'gender is, therefore, one of the most common figures for thinking the basic differences or difference from which all life

emerges' (2004, 1). Analysing how gender is based on dualities and differences, and which dualities and differences are granted legitimacy, contributes to an anthropological understanding of how gender is conceptualized. As Yanagisako and Collier rightfully put it, 'instead of taking the difference between [the categories of male and female] for granted, we need to ask how particular societies define difference' (2008, 284). By analysing how people think about gender and what are the dualities and dichotomies they deem important, I am able to understand how difference is constructed, which differences are the ones that matter in people's lived experiences of gender, how these differences are socially interpreted and what are the relations between them, and thus, what this can tell us about what it means to be feminine (and masculine) in the particular sociocultural context at hand. The study of the gender dualities that are proposed by the participants of this research opens possibilities for an expanded anthropological understanding of how gender is experienced, practiced, and understood in the particular context of femininity courses in Riga.

Now that I have established what I understand by gender and how the concept of dualities is employed in this research, I outline the larger framework of this analysis, looking at the socioeconomic context of the case in question and how the ongoing anthropological discussion on postfeminism and neoliberalism is relevant in order to explain and understand the case of women's self-help courses in Riga.

#### **2.4. Postfeminism and post-socialism**

In Riga, as I show in the following chapters, the Soviet legacy has a strong impact on how gender is understood nowadays in the case in question. However, post-socialism in this particular case is not the only framework that shapes people's ideas about masculinity and femininity; I also argue that postfeminism as well as the neoliberal discourse has a substantial impact on people's practices and lived experiences. Gill suggests that 'like neoliberalism, it seems to me that postfeminism has tightened its hold in contemporary culture and has made itself virtually hegemonic' (2017, 609). I maintain that the women's self-help courses are a part of a larger postfeminism context, thus I must explain what I mean by postfeminism because this term has many, sometimes even contradictory, meanings and varied uses. In this research, by postfeminism I mean a 'historically specific discursive formation' (Butler 2013, 45), and, after Gill and Scharff, a sort of a '*backlash against feminism*' (2013 [2011], 3; emphasis in original), however, keeping in mind that it is at the same time an '*entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas*' (2013 [2011], 4; emphasis in original). Gill, when speaking about contemporary Western, English-speaking communities, defines the following aspects as the main

characteristics of postfeminism as a discursive context – ‘the notion of femininity as a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference’ (2017, 615-616). As the data shows and I discuss in the following chapters, parallels can be drawn between a combination of these postfeminist ideas and the post-social context of the women’s courses in question.

However, there is another aspect of the postfeminist context of the practices I study in this thesis that, I believe, requires elaboration and attention. As an anthropologist, I ought not to overlook the importance of class in the practices I study. Scholars of postfeminism claim that class plays a great part in postfeminist practices, Jolles even suggests that ‘postfeminism is a formation of class as much as gender’ (2012, 45). As all of the participants of this research are of a certain class, and the femininity courses in question are also intended for women from a certain economic and social standing as they require considerable funds and a great deal of free time, I agree with Jolles that ‘to postfeminism’s combination of individualism and rejection of feminism, we may add an assumption of a particular socioeconomic class location, whereby middle-class privilege serves as the necessary ground for post-feminist subjectivity’ (2012, 44).

## **2.5. Neoliberalism**

While ‘neoliberalism’ began as a purely economic term, many contemporary scholars have rightfully argued that the neoliberal order has a strong social effect, and can be seen as a form of governmentality that affects the individual lives across many spheres and ‘requires individuals to be increasingly self-reliant and self-governing’ (Butler 2013, 40). However, neoliberalism in social sciences has become a term that is used so widely and variably that, one might argue, it has lost its ability to shed light on phenomena, and instead blurs and obscures practices and constructs. As Gill and Scharff justly put it, ‘one of the criticisms levelled at neoliberalism is that it has become a “catch-all” term incapable of explaining or illuminating anything’ (2013 [2011], 6). However, in this research, I still argue that understanding the practices that I am researching in the neoliberal framework gives me the opportunity to put this praxis in a larger social context, instead of interpreting it as an isolated phenomenon. By conceptualizing neoliberalism as a discourse that implies the increasing importance of ‘personal responsibility and individual choice’ (Butler 2013, 41), I am able to situate and explain the ethnographic data. Furthermore, in this research, I follow Gill and Scharff’s lead and attempt to explain neoliberalism in relation to postfeminism. They argue that neoliberalism is closely

connected to postfeminism since both stress individuality, choice, self-reinventing and self-regulating (2013 [2011], 7).

Now that I have established my theoretical perspective and the context in which I situate the data in, I continue to the next chapters, where I provide a theoretically-informed analysis of the ethnographic data, in order to find answers to the research questions I have set out to discuss and contribute to a deeper anthropological knowledge of how gender is experienced, understood and practiced.

### **3. MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN WOMEN'S SELF-HELP COURSES**

In the following chapters, I discuss the ethnographic data and situate it in a larger theoretical context. I start by discussing the first research question, namely, how gender is constructed in the women's self-help courses and what, according to the research participants, men and women are supposedly like, and how this helps to understand and problematize the construction of the heteronormative worldview. In the next chapter, I show the epistemology of these suppositions and examine the research participant's ideas about why gender is constructed in this way, in other words, why women and men are the way they are. In the following chapter, I discuss the reasons why women find it important to learn about femininity and masculinity, and why it matters to know what men and women are supposedly like. I finalize this thesis with some general conclusions about the case of women's self-help courses, how gender is experienced by the research participants, and how the data can be explained by the postfeminism and the neoliberalism context.

#### **3.1. The dualities of masculinity and femininity**

My data confirms the dual construction of masculinity and femininity. In this section, I show what dualities are stressed by the research participants, and which differences are emphasized in the social construction of gender. According to Bourdieu, gender dualities are strongly based in people's worldviews, 'deeply rooted in things (structures) and bodies' (2001 [1998], 103), and this is why uncovering and understanding these dualities is vital in order to understand how gender is experienced and lived. The data repeatedly shows that men and women differ in their opinions and world-views. For example, Gita claims the following:

It has to be taken into account that men and women are different in their thinking, it's two different worlds.

In the data from participant observation in the lecture 'A woman and femininity' it is emphasized that women are what men are not and vice versa, which is an example of the essentialism that takes place in constructing gender in these courses, essentialism being 'the term which is used to describe and explain inequalities between men and women as naturally occurring, "essential" differences' (Miller 2011, 36). Moreover, the data from the participant observation and interviews corresponds to Gill's claim that masculinity and femininity are viewed not only as mutually exclusive but also as mutually complementary, as opposites that

make a whole (2009, 364). I will continue by providing some examples of such mutually exclusive dualities. Through this, I show that it is the *differences* between masculine and feminine behaviour that define what masculinity and femininity are supposed to be. In other words, masculine and feminine traits and ways of conduct are defined not by what they are on their own, but always in relation to what they are not – the feminine is the non-masculine and vice versa.

### **3.1.1. Physical vs material realm**

According to the interview data, men and women occupy separate realms. While men are more connected to the physical, material world, women are more incarnated in the energetic, spiritual, non-material realm. The data shows that the research participants acknowledge two separate energetical levels that are completely different – men have a rougher energy, and women have a gentle, delicate energy.

Women and men are very different, mostly in that men are more powerful in physical actions, the physical realm and matter [matērija in Latvian], he can create shape, whereas a woman is more able in the energetic, invisible part of the matter. It's not even about mystical things, it's not about the mystical, it's just that women are better in the energetic sense. [...] So a man is stronger in the physical sense, and a woman in the energetic sense, you know, to make the homey feeling, to create atmosphere, anything, make kids, projects, fantasies, ideas. That's the biggest difference. (Ramona)

Since the masculine and feminine adhere to separate realms, on another level of categorization, masculinity and femininity also have different traits and characteristics that are dichotomized as two opposite parts of a whole. Further, I show which pairs of characteristics are first, seen by the research participants as dichotomous, and second, is affiliated with masculinity and femininity.

### **3.1.2. Emotionality vs rationality**

One of the most common dichotomies that the data proposes is between emotionality and rationality, and several scholars have discussed the prevalence of such dualism. Women are supposedly predisposed 'to emotional, caring "expressive" behaviours and men to "rational", emotionally detached actions' (Miller 2011, 36). Turner also stresses the commonality of the dualism between the emotionality of women as opposed to the rationality of men (1996 [1984],

126). The data relates to this directly, because, as the data shows, multiple times in all three of the lectures that I attended as part of my fieldwork the lecturers stressed the idea that women have more emotions, and men do not feel emotions in the way or to the extent women do, for example, men do not feel what the woman wants or feels, so he has to be told these things out loud. The interview data supports the notion of women as more emotional than men. Ramona, for example, claims:

A man is more rational, more pragmatic, and a woman is more emotional. Women can be emotional. Maybe a woman that is a leader of a company is forced to be more rational, but I think that at home she would still have more emotion than a man.

In one of the interviews, the dichotomy between women as more emotional, and men as less emotional was seen as influenced by the social circumstances; nonetheless, that still meant that is the way things ought to be. Ināra argues:

It is not conventional [for a man to be emotional]. For a man it is conventional, well, I don't know if it is like that, but I guess it should be that way, that they don't talk about emotions. Talking about emotions is a women's thing.

However, the data shows that it is also stressed in the courses that there is a certain way women are allowed to show their negative emotions – women's anger has to be palatable (Gill 2017), different from how a man would express anger, more gentle and even playful. Ramona adds:

She can be angry, she can have different emotions, but the inner state is that she does it beautifully. Yes, there is anger, but in a feminine manner, not masculine.

Thus, while a woman is supposed to have and display emotions more, there is also a difference between masculine and feminine manners of feeling and displaying emotions, and again, this difference is what matters and defines the appropriate behaviour, always in relation to what it is should not be. (See more about women's acceptable display of emotions in Chapter 5).

### **3.1.3. Directness vs indecision**

Directness in speech is another attribute that is stressed as an important difference between men and women. While men speak their minds directly, feminine women ought to say what they mean in a roundabout, indirect manner. Ramona states:

You shouldn't speak in direct commands. That is masculine. You should speak indirectly, give a choice. The manner is completely different.

The data also shows a duality between how men and women make decisions – while men are guided by the result and make decisions easily, women are not motivated by the goal and ought not to make decisions nor have a clear view of what they want.

It is hard to describe, because describing is masculine, you know, to say precisely what the goals are and what you will get. The masculine asks – where is the result. But the feminine just wants to flow.  
(Ramona)

### **3.1.4. Competition vs solidarity**

The duality of competitiveness and solidarity is another important example of how gender is seen as based on dualities. Multiple theoretical sources argue that seeing masculinity as based on competition and fighting, and femininity as the lack of competitiveness, is a common way of constructing gender based on essential dualities. Hearn, for example, argues that this idea about the masculine body as based on, among other aspects, 'competition for food or sexual partners [...] is persistent in everyday, professional, media and academic discourses' (2012, 308). Bourdieu stresses the construct that being a man is closely related to 'the capacity to fight and to exercise violence' (2001 [1998], 51). These ideas correspond to the data of this study – in the lecture 'A woman and femininity' the women were told that a man has to fight to become and be a man, and Laima argues:

A man provokes [a fight] all the time because he needs competition. I used to respond to such provocations, because I am also able, and I'll prove to you that I am. But a woman doesn't really have to do that. That is not her energy. Not that – that's it, I will just not do it [compete] anymore, but I just noticed that I don't want to anymore.

Women, on the other hand, must not compete and instead collaborate, and have womanly solidarity amongst themselves.

It's that thing about girlfriends, the network, women are not competitors, but we are partners in cooperation, a whole, we are a team. Sharing lipsticks, loaning your clothes... like, oh, that looks so

good on you, take it. Not – no, I will not give my clothes because I know that they look better on you than on me. (Ināra)

It is also important that masculinity is established with other men that are involved in the competition and fighting. As Laima suggests:

Men need those free moments, and women shouldn't be angry at them that they need that hockey or football and to be in the men's environment, because there he feels that testosterone, that fighting. There he can affirm his fight and feel for the game. Because men fight amongst themselves all the time unconsciously. As the saying goes – they measure wieners.

Bourdieu suggests, that this is because 'manliness must be validated by other men, in its reality as actual or potential violence, and certified by recognition of membership of the group of 'real men'' (2001 [1998], 52). These quotes also draw the attention to another aspect of appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours – when talking about masculine behaviours, there are symbols of sports used (hockey, football) to speak about masculine things, that imply games and competition. Even the repetition of the idea of fighting, I argue, serves as a symbol of masculine behaviour, because it implies competition and some level of violence. On the other hand, as symbols of feminine behaviours in the quotes are looks and beauty-related items like clothing and makeup, thus serving as another marker for what feminine and masculine behaviours are like.

### **3.1.5. Care vs control**

The last important duality that is emphasized by the research participants as a very important difference between men and women is the dichotomy between feminine care and masculine control. Bourdieu in his analysis of masculine domination in the Kabyle society argues that it is common that women are assigned 'the virtues of submission, gentleness, docility, devotion and self-denial' (2001 [1998], 57), and I argue that certain parallels can be drawn with the cultural context I am researching here, because, as the data shows, it is assumed feminine by the women I interviewed to care for others. Control and leadership, on the other hand, is regarded as masculine.

A man and a woman's main essence, mission, is, well, it's about how a man relaxes and how a woman relaxes. For a man to relax means to work, command, compete, manage, and for him actually

any work is real leisure, but for a woman it's caring, providing, that is her relaxation and her main mission. (Gita)

Now that I have discussed the main dualities that the research participants have emphasized as the differences that characterize what men and women are like, I move on to explain some other characteristics that man and women adhere to.

### **3.2. The dos and don'ts of masculinity and femininity**

In this section, I show what the data suggests as the supposed behaviours and traits for women and men, in order to deepen the understanding of how masculinity and femininity are constructed.

#### **3.2.1. Women and looks**

When it comes to what women ought to look like to be feminine, there are several contradictions. While almost all of the women I interviewed explicitly voiced that femininity is not about how you look, the topic of outer appearances kept creeping into the conversation. Even in the ideas that I discussed in chapter 3.1.4. about competition and solidarity, clothes and makeup served as a symbol of feminine behaviour. There was also a discrepancy between the data from the interviews and the data from the participant observation. In the data from the fieldnotes, it was stressed that a woman must take care of her looks, it is not acceptable to 'wear tracksuit pants around the house' (from the lecture 'A woman and femininity'). It was also encouraged for women to wear dresses and make-up in the lecture 'What do men want?', because, according to the data, men like all the things that are completely different from the masculine, namely, since they do not wear dresses and make-up themselves, they like and expect it from the woman.

Skirt and dresses, actually, was an item that was talked about in all the interviews and lectures, and I argue that for the people I researched it served as a symbol for looking feminine. As the data from the participant observation suggests, it was encouraged to wear a skirt instead of trousers and jeans, because these items of clothing supposedly repress a woman's hormone system, and also disrupts the flow of feminine energy from the Earth towards her family. In the interviews, some women did mention that they acknowledge the importance of wearing a skirt:

They say it's better not to wear pants. It is not like they insist, but I actually specifically asked, and the answer was that women get the energy from the first chakra, which is well, like, you know, between the legs, and if you are wearing pants, than everyone can see you and take that energy and you don't have anything left for your own people and family. That's why you need a skirt because a woman takes energy from the Earth, and the longer the skirt, the more energy is concentrated there and stays there. (Gita)

However, in all of the interviews women emphasized that it is not the looks that make a woman feminine:

Very often women have this stereotype, these labels in their heads, [...], now I'm going to wear a skirt and smile and it'll be all good. That is a very narrow way to look at it [femininity]. (Nora)

Thus, I conclude that while women say that make-up and clothes are not imperative and central to femininity, they still think about their looks as connected to their feeling of being a woman:

Well, of course, having my hair done, red lips, a dress, all of that gives a bit of that femininity for a moment. (Gita)

Yes, I find it interesting how after the courses, you know, the difference that can be seen in some women, like, maybe she finally put some skirt on, or started to wear heels or to speak more gently and nicely. (Antra).

One aspect of what it means to be feminine that the women I interviewed did agree upon, and it also was prevalent in the data from the participant observation, was the feminine bodily movements and postures. Again, feminine movements are the ones that are not masculine (and vice versa). As suggested by the data from the lecture 'What do men want?', women are advised that men are attracted to micromovements, swaying, especially of the buttocks, because 'a mobile buttocks means that it is animate, it is alive, it can bear children'. Women in the interviews also stressed the importance of swaying hips for femininity along with other movements, attitude, and gait.

I don't know, it is a combination, it is about the attitude, self-confidence, and definitely, you have to show the movements. (Ināra)

To draw on to Bourdieu, the emphasis on movement and gait, as well as the stress on the dichotomy between a man's and a women's looks can be explained by the idea that 'the

antagonistic principles of male and female identity are thus laid down in the form of permanent stances, gaits and postures which are the realization, or rather, the naturalization of an ethic' of being feminine as opposed to masculine (2001 [1998], 27). This emphasis on feminine looks and movements brings me to my next point, where I explore what, according to the data, a masculine man ought not to be.

### 3.2.2. How *not* to be a man

According to the data, the feminine and masculine manners of walking, moving and speaking are juxtaposed. I have discussed the appropriate ways of being feminine in the previous section, and here I find it crucial to reflect on the fact that in five out of the six interviews I conducted, women expressed disapproval for when a man walks, speaks or moves in a feminine manner. The actions appropriate for women are discouraged in men.

I have one acquaintance, like, he's all good, but, if a man has those feminine ways of acting, it is like fags [pediņi in Latvian] or whatever we call them, and like this, swaying, you know what I'm talking about. For a woman it is ok, it is feminine, such movements. (Ināra)

It is also discouraged for men to be concerned with their looks, in opposition to how it is encouraged in women to care about their looks.

I think that it is masculine when men do masculine jobs, like come from the forest and smell like the forest, well, I don't care how good they look. [...] And my friend has this friend, who goes to the gym, and puts pictures of his muscles on the internet, and when he gets on the scales and there is one little gram too much – what a tragedy, he is even more emotional than she is, it is so Barbie-like [cacīgi in Latvian], and he has those feminine movements sometimes, and talks in such a cute way, like, it's ok, but it's just weird somehow. (Antra)

Excessive emotionality is also discouraged for men since it is appropriate for women, and, again, masculinity is what femininity is not and vice versa. As Bourdieu puts it, 'manliness, it can be seen, is an eminently *relational* notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of *fear* of the female, firstly in oneself' (2011 [1998], 53; emphasis in original). So now that I have concluded what a man ought not to be like, I am moving on to what a masculine man is supposed to be like according to the data.

### **3.2.3. How to be a man**

In this section, I will summarize what were the characteristics that the participants of this research connected to masculinity, and thus illuminate what traits the constructs of masculinity are based upon in relation to femininity. I divide these characteristics into three main groups. I argue that the characteristics that are attributed to men as opposed to women show how the asymmetry of power is established because the appropriate behaviours for men are those of domination and power, which leaves the feminine traits and behaviours the position of subordination.

#### **3.2.3.1. Responsibility**

The data from five out of six interviews suggests that one of the most important masculine traits is the ability to bear responsibility. A man has to make decisions, be responsible for those decisions, and also bear responsibility for the family and the woman through protection and support. The data shows the importance for women of being able to count on the man and feeling safe.

So he has to be your support, that shoulder, that person that you can really rely on in hard moments. And you know that he will not leave you, exactly in those hard moments, that's that feeling of responsibility, of masculine responsibility. (Laima)

A woman definitely needs a man so that she can, well, [...], even though a woman is the one that can help the husband and support him and take care of him, he is that strong shoulder, that strong base. I am just talking from my own experience. I want to feel safe. A relationship and family can be happy when I feel safe. When that is my core, with whom I feel in harmony, that is why I think that woman needs a man so that she could feel that strong back. (Gita)

#### **3.2.3.2. Strength**

Strength, not only metaphorically, but also physically, is another very important trait for being masculine, and this data is a great example of how men are supposed to take the position of power as opposed to women.

He has to be strong, physically strong and also emotionally strong so that he could deal with me, pick me up, carry me on his arms. (Ināra)

I don't know why it feels like the big muscles are masculine. Maybe because then he can grasp the woman fully. So that there is safety, physically. I like to be held like that, too, so that you can physically feel that shoulder, and that is also emotionally, but also physically. And some sort of aggression, too – no one will fight of course, and most likely no one will attack the woman, but if someone would, it is nice, that if it is necessary he will protect you. Well, thank you, thank you. That is the masculinity the man wants to give, the way he sees it. It matters to him, and the woman has to say thank you, for being able to count on you, I feel safer, I can call you any time, that feeling... (Antra)

### **3.2.3.3. Dominance**

Along with being responsible, supportive and strong, masculinity also implies being dominant in the couple. Laima tells:

He really has to be like that alpha male, for you he has to be the main one. [...] I even like it when the man is a little bit brutal, harsh, direct, I like that actually, when it will be necessary he will put me and everyone else in their place, sometimes he even does it quite harshly, but afterwards I understand why and I sort of like it. That's it, no more discussion, it is the way he said. Because he has this confidence, I feel that confidence, I believe that he knows, where to go, he knows the path that we will take, that reliance in me has grown immensely. While I used to fight with him, now I follow him. He is like the leader. [...] The power has to be left for the man. He has to feel like the king. You will never be the queen if your man is not the king.

The idea that the leadership position in a relationship is reserved solely for the man is also voiced by the lecturers in the women's courses. So how do I explain the feeling women have that it is appropriate and even encouraged for them to be dominated? For this, I once again rely on Bourdieu's insightful work. He claims masculine domination takes place as a form of symbolic violence, and the subjugated are socialized to think in the categories that are constructed from the dominant perspective, which fosters the continuation and normalization of these categories (2011 [1998], 35). Thus, the women give preference to men that are dominant, in control, powerful, strong and as Bourdieu accurately puts it, 'because differential socialization disposes men to love the games of power and women to love the men who play them, masculine charisma is partly the charm of power, the seduction that the possession of power exerts, as such, on bodies whose drives and desires are themselves politically socialized' (2011 [1998], 79).

Now that I have reflected on the different dualities the women of this research employ to explain and understand gender, as well as discussed the encouraged and discouraged conduct for men and women, I continue with showing what is, according to these courses in question, an appropriate relationship between a man and a woman in a family, namely, what are the expected contributions to the relationship from both men and women. This helps me understand what it means to be feminine and masculine, and how these concepts are interrelated and negotiated in people's everyday lives.

### **3.3. Contribution to the relationship**

In this section, first I discuss what is expected from a man in a relationship, and after I explain what is the contribution a woman makes to a relationship. After, I move on to the issue of parenting for two reasons, first, because this is an important topic for the participants of this research, since almost all of them have children and for them the relationship between a man and a woman is inseparable from child-rearing, and second, because this provides me as a researcher with some illuminating information about what it means to be a woman and a man in the context of a relationship and family. While keeping in mind the already discussed ideas about care and control in the family, in this section I am explaining what exactly is implied by women as caretakers and men as the ones in the dominant position in the relationship.

#### **3.3.1. Man's contribution**

As the data suggests, the one main contribution that is expected from a man in a relationship is of monetary value.

The man has come to Earth to increase material prosperity. He gets it from above, from the space, all this knowledge on how to increase material prosperity. (Ināra)

The man is supposed to take financial responsibility for the woman and the family, and this corresponds to what Chambers claims to be a common idea in western societies, where 'the concepts of the 'male breadwinner' or father as 'family provider' have been linked with familial legitimacy' (2012, 64; see also Miller 2011, 15). It is considered masculine to be the provider and have an income. Some women in the interviews actually use the term 'care' in relation to the man in the family as well – for example, the man has to take care of the financial matters. This suggests that there are different levels of 'care' in the categorization of masculinity and

femininity, where masculine care is seen as inherently different from feminine care. The man is expected to be successful at work in order to provide income, as Ramona says:

The man works hard [moči in Latvian], he has crazy rhythm and long hours.

This is what Hearn calls ‘the proletarianization of male bodies’ (2012, 311), namely, that masculinity implies and demands hard work.

### **3.3.2. Woman’s contribution**

So if the masculine contribution to the relationship is material, then, according to the dualistic thinking about gender discussed above, the feminine contribution is energetic, invisible, spiritual. As the data from the participant observation in the course ‘A woman and femininity’ informs, a man survives off a woman’s energy, and a woman survives off a man’s money. While it is of utmost importance for a man to work and earn, it is not expected from a woman to work and earn money. The woman either supports and helps with the man’s career (from the data about the lecture ‘A woman and femininity’), or works a part-time, hobby-like job so that it would not occupy too much of the woman’s time and energy that should be spent on more important matters. Ramona explains:

I don’t want to work full time, because I understand how valuable my energy is, especially talking about my man and my family. No one can ever pay me enough to make up for it, it’s not that I can’t work, I can, I can make good money, but then I can’t be with the kids, and in the evening I still have to cook dinner and clean the house, it is important for me that the house is clean.

Nonetheless, as I already established in the theory chapter, economic welfare is an aspect that I as a researcher cannot overlook in relation to the ideas about masculinity and femininity in this context. Data from two of the six interviews shows economic welfare as an important factor in relation to the contribution that is to be made by the woman in a relationship.

It is not that I wouldn’t want to sit at home like that, it would be great, but in reality, it is not like that. You can’t do it like that. Honestly, I sometimes have the feeling that these courses are for the wives of rich husbands who have nothing better to do, so they come in their free time and entertain themselves by doing this stuff. Because that idea what a woman has to do, what her role is, nowadays in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at least when it comes to my family, I do not see how it could work. Because they [in the courses] postulate it very much that a woman should not work. A woman has to be home, a

woman has to be so occupied with herself, and with the husband, to be able to act appropriately, and you just have to be home. And that you support your man with your energy and then he's going to be the big money maker. (Gita)

Nevertheless, while women understand that it is possible and sometimes necessary to be employed and have an income of their own, this still reflects the idea that Chambers describes as 'women's employment as a sideline to husband's wages' (2012, 31). Thus, I conclude that while class undoubtedly influences woman's contribution in terms of material provision, in the data I have gathered through interviews and participants observation men are nonetheless considered to be the main breadwinners. However, this does not mean that women are not expected to contribute to the relationship; there are two main contributions, first, housework, and second, emotional labour. Regarding housework, there is little explicit data that women have to cook and clean because mostly it is implied automatically, regarded as self-evident and taken for granted. (Ramona, however, does voice this by claiming that the woman's task is to '*clean, feed and take care of*' the family and the household.) In regards to the second main contribution - as I mentioned above, it is the woman's energy that is the contribution to the men and the whole family.

When I am at home, waiting for my husband in a clean house with dinner, I am happy, that is great. I have the energy to manage all of it. (Ramona)

So the man gives the material, takes care of and spoils the woman, and she gives the energy, the lovingness, the gentleness, the femininity to him. (Ināra)

Many scholars talk about the importance of woman's emotional labour in a relationship (see, for example, Chambers 2012; Gatrell 2004; Gill 2009), and I will expand on this topic as well as the other responsibilities a woman has in a relationship in chapter 6.

### **3.3.3. Parenting**

The last aspect of this section that I discuss is parenting and the appropriate roles of a father and a mother, according to the data that I have gathered. Because parenting, as argued above, is inseparable from the research participant's daily lives and their understandings of what it means to be feminine and masculine, I believe that understanding how parenting roles are constructed is crucial for understanding how gender itself is experienced. While I give a more thorough analysis of women's responsibilities in a relationship in chapter 6, here I show an insight into what how parenting roles are conceptualized, namely, that they are based on the

same dualities and to borrow Miller's phrase, 'essentialist assumptions' (2011, 13) that I have already discussed above.

There is a general consensus in the data that the children are the woman's responsibility, and that is connected to the larger framework of how masculinity and femininity are experienced.

It's actually the motherly instinct. It is very feminine because men don't have such an instinct. And how a man treats the child, and you have to accept and understand that, his attitude will be different. It will be important for him to provide materially so that the child has everything, but there will not be that emotional investment from the man's side. And that is that difference between the masculine and the feminine. (Gita).

Well, when the children are older, starting from like 4 years of age, then the father comes in. I think that until 3 years of age the man can take no part in the upbringing whatsoever. Ok, maybe not the whole upbringing, of course, he is alongside, right there, the child sees him, but the child sees him through the prism that he feels him, feels that he [the father] takes care of the mother actually. And the mother takes care of the child. Because the contact till 3 years of age is with the mother, and for the child, the mother is the closest. And then when he can start running, play football or learn to ride a bike, the father might do that. Teach him to ride a bike, entertainment, that is the father's task. But the feeding and caretaking I think is the woman's task. (Laima)

This shows that women are the ones responsible for the routine caretaking, while the father can choose to take part in more non-routine aspects of child-rearing (Gatrell 2004, 64). Nonetheless, according to the data, there are dangers in disrupting this system of parenting roles. The reason for this is that by making the man participate in routine caretaking, he becomes less masculine:

You are taking the man into the wrong energy. [...] I think that it is the feminine energy that you put onto him with such feminine tasks. If you do that, the testosterone in him decreases, and that is the hormone that really produces this fighting, this ability, this mindfulness, this willingness, and he becomes gentle. With kids, you become gentle whether you want it or not. And he starts producing this feminine energy by changing diapers and feeding the bottle and not only that, going to playgrounds and so on. So taking care, feeding and all that, I think that that is a woman's task. (Laima)

The consequence of this is that the man becomes unable to be masculine and to earn money for the family. Miller provides this explanation for the supposed dangers of men taking care of children – 'other ways of being – for example, involvement in unpaid nurturing and childcare – could be perceived, or experienced, as threatening to, or weakening, a sense of self-identity

that is contingent on and understood within a framework of hierarchies of masculinities where paid work is often a central, and highly valued, feature and emotional work is absent' (2011, 42). Thus, I can conclude that the distinction between father's and mother's appropriate manners of conduct are deeply embedded in larger structures of gender dualities and power relations between masculinities and femininities.

Nonetheless, there is another important issue raised by the research participants that relates to not only parenting roles but also the appropriate gender expressions. While in the previous paragraph I reflected on what are the appropriate tasks for each parent and why, now I will point out why, according to the data, it is important to have both of the parents present, and why this presence has to be based on contrasts. The data shows that the existence of clear gender dualities in the family is crucial for the development of 'healthy' gender identity and expression for the children.

If I had a daughter, I would like that she has a father that is with her and lets her feel like a little princess, because that is very important for the fostering of femininity. Already in the childhood, it promotes the relationship between a man and a woman, that is very important for a woman so that the father pampers and spoils, and then she will have the feeling inside that she can be pampered and spoiled. But if you have not had that feeling, then you have to fight for it yourself, to learn it and not forget it. When a father goes out in the society with the little daughter, in a pretty little dress, that is very important, to be able to have that femininity. And not only that you are loved, but exactly this relationship with the masculine, and that you deserve it. It is hard to get from the mother. It is important exactly because of the contrast. (Antra)

Laima goes even further and explains the problems that arise when gender identity is not clearly established in childhood:

I think that it is not necessary to have everyone for a long time without finding their identity, and then he [the child] himself will decide what he is. [...] We often even bring healthy kids to that state that he starts searching for himself [and his gender identity], especially if the little boy has grown up only with the mother, the father has not taken part, and then the godmothers and mother's sisters and grandmothers and all, and maybe he really wanted to get out and become a man, but he has not had the choice to identify himself, because there was no grandfather, nobody. And he struggles. And this is where the root is, where the weak men originate because the environment matters a lot, where we are.

This means that being exposed to the appropriate femininity, masculinity and the relationship between the two ensures that these appropriate behaviours and traits can be perpetuated and continued in the children's lives and experiences. Moreover, this shows that women (consciously or maybe unconsciously) do see a correlation between one's gender performance and social conditions. And now that I have explained what masculinity and femininity are like and on what assumptions it is grounded, this brings me to the next section of the data analysis chapter where I explore what the women's opinions are about the origins of the dualities of femininity and masculinity.

## 4. THE BASIS OF FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY

In this chapter, I am discussing the ideas about where the abovementioned dualities and traits derive from, according to the data. In the previous chapter, I concluded with the claim that some of the women that I interviewed, when asked indirectly and talking about some other aspect, did see a correlation between one's gender experience and the social conditions as upbringing. However, when talking directly about why it is that men and women are the way they are, upbringing was not mentioned at all. I suggest that this is so because, as I am going to show in this chapter, the relationship between men and women, as experienced by the research participants, to them seems so ordinary, normal, and fixed, that they see the reasons for this order and normality as fixed and unchangeable as well. Besides, in four of the interviews the research participant started their answer about what makes men and women the way they are with a 'not sure' or 'I don't know', for example:

Well, I don't know why we are so different. (Gita)

I don't know, why. It should be that way I guess. (Ināra)

Only after a continued conversation and indirect questions answers were given. To understand why this happens, I draw parallels with Bourdieu's concept of *doxa*, namely, the set order of the world, with its relations of power and subjugation, that perpetuates itself seemingly easily, even inconspicuously, and makes any conditions of existence appear 'acceptable and even natural' (2001 [1995], 1). Thus, to the women in question, the gender relations that they perceive and live in accordance with seem so normal and common, that they are imposed 'as neutral and [have] no need to spell [themselves] out in discourses aimed at legitimating [these relations]' (Bourdieu 2001 [1998], 9). Thus, because the ideas about what men and women are like are so normative, they do not require legitimization and even vocalization. Nonetheless, now I am going to describe the three main sources of origin that the research participants did vocalize when explaining why masculinity and femininity are as described previously.

### 4.1. History and culture

Drawing from the data, I contend that history and culture are important factors that make women and men the way they are. These factors are overlapping, since they draw their legitimacy from the same idea of timelessness and established order with no alternative. The

order of and hierarchy among masculinity and femininity draws its legitimacy from memory of history, a feeling that this is how it is because it has always been that way.

It's from ancient times, history, a long time ago, that a woman sat at home. [...] The knowledge [about how things should be] is centuries old, nothing has changed. (Ināra)

I think that the lecturers [in the courses], they get that information by going back to the basics, the primordial [pirmatnējais in Latvian], the history, because only through history we can understand today. (Laima)

In the cave and stone ages, why they divided it [labour] that way, because the man was physically stronger, and the woman wasn't strong enough for that mammoth, that's why they divided the labour, and the woman needed the strongest man so that she could be safe, physically. (Ramona)

All in all, I conclude that the data suggesting that masculinity and femininity nowadays are the same as they supposedly were a long time ago, adds to the discourse of normality and normativity, because the gender organization seemingly has no beginning and thus no alternative.

Another source of information about masculinity and femininity that the women mention is culture; however, the participants do not speak of culture as nurture or social conditioning. For them, culture is another aspect of history – timeless beliefs that are normative since there is no alternative. There are two sides to the culture factor. First, interviewees acknowledge that in the women's courses in question a lot of knowledge and information comes from historical 'other cultures', for example, ideas about energies and chakras. These ideas are not necessarily appropriate to the local context, and some women acknowledge the foreignness of these ideas, whereas for others the longevity and historicity of these foreign ideas serve as a justification for legitimacy.

The man gets the knowledge and the woman has the energy, and together they collaborate, yin and yang, this is where it all is, all of the East, that's it. (Ināra)

The knowledge is taken from some other cultures, from some other understandings, their life, and daily routines. From other beliefs, I think. (Antra)

A lot of the thoughts and ideas are something Vedic. [...] what they teach is more like the Oriental culture, it is a completely different mentality, the way they live and their ideas about life and beliefs, which, well, for Europe and Latvia, they probably aren't really connected. (Gita)

The second aspect of culture in relation to masculinity and femininity that the interviewees talk about is the local, Latvian culture and life-knowledge (dzīvesziņa in Latvian).

Some women claim that the information about what men and women are like is also to be found in ancient Latvian knowledge and culture, especially in the folksongs (Dainas).

Well for me it is a very important topic, all that deeply Latvian stuff, I like to find examples in all that's Latvian, how our ancestors knew it, in the Latvian life-knowledge [dzīvesziņa in Latvian].  
(Nora)

It is all the ancient teachings, also in our Latvian folksongs everything is said, I hadn't even looked at the folksongs like that before. (Ināra)

I can draw the following conclusions from this data. First, when women acknowledge that the way masculinity and femininity are constructed originates from foreign beliefs, there are two ways they deal with this – either it becomes a reason to doubt the legitimacy of the courses, but not the gender hierarchy, or it helps to legitimize the ideas about masculinity and femininity because of the timelessness and historicity of the beliefs. Second, Latvian national and ethnic beliefs as the foundation of gender organization serves as a convincing means of legitimization. Thus, ideas about what men and women are like are deeply embedded in not only notions of gender and dichotomies, but also local and foreign beliefs, ethnic and national affiliation and membership, and a general sense of 'Latvianness'. All in all, women differentiate between history and culture, while they use the same symbols to legitimize these discourses – notions of centuries-old knowledge and ancestry.

## **4.2. Nature**

Still, the most attention and legitimacy is granted to the idea that it is nature that establishes the previously described manner of conduct appropriate for women and men. It is argued that masculinity and femininity are based on dualisms because men and women are naturally different, even dichotomous. In the data from the event 'What do men want?', for example, it is claimed that the male and female genitals are proof that men and women are direct opposites that are complementary to each other – 'It is the nature that is different, because men have it outwards, and women have the same, but inwards'. As Gill suggests, such a rationale is common in postfeminist practices – 'a reassertion of natural sexual difference grounded in heteronormative ideas about gender complementarity' characterizes the postfeminist context (2009, 346). In the remainder of this chapter, I show what the participants of this research understand by nature, how they explain the natural difference on different

levels, and how they connect difference in bodies to difference in behaviours, thus recreating the heteronormative worldview.

#### 4.2.1. Hormones

One aspect of biology that is mentioned frequently in both the data from the interviews and participant observation, is the notion that hormones establish differences between masculinity and femininity, testosterone being the only hormone that is named and emphasized.

It's because of the hormones. (Antra)

It's the man's world, working, and career and all. It's that testosterone that changes, it is the man's way. [...] Because when we are born we can see if it is a girl or a boy, the hormonal structure is already there, we know the scientific base, that they are different. (Laima)

It's the hormones. Because we really are different. We are born different, we are made different, and to deny that, I think, is quite foolish. (Nora)

There are two aspects to this that I find crucial to comment on. First, as existing literature shows, talking about testosterone as solely the man's hormone that makes a man masculine is common in many discourses, not only in the public debate and popular culture but also in politics and academia. As Hearn puts it, 'testosterone is often represented as *the male* (androgen) hormone. However, while it is produced mainly in the male testes, it is also produced in the adrenal cortex and ovaries in females, and is responsible for differentiation of male and female primary sex characteristics, and sexed stature and musculature' (2012, 308; emphasis in original). Thus, while testosterone is produced in both male and female bodies, considering it as a sort of a symbol of masculinity is a common means of emphasizing the difference between men and women.

The second aspect of the hormone discourse is as follows – as the quotes above show, because hormones are something that people connect to scientific research and knowledge, therefore, they are seen as a legitimate reason for the construction of difference between men and women; they are seen as 'immutable 'facts of nature' with which each society must somehow come to terms' (Scheffler 2004, 294). Thus, naturalization of difference gains its strength from socially constructed knowledge about what nature is and how it works. However, the difference in hormones is not the only aspect of natural difference emphasized in the interviews – it is also the concept of bodily difference.

#### **4.2.2. The body**

The difference in bodies is conceptualized on two levels – first, on the genetical level, and second, on the level of reproductive abilities. In two of the interviews, women stress the importance of genetics and cells in the creation of masculinity and femininity:

Well, the chromosomes for us differ in the amount a bit, you know. (Gita)

Maybe it will sound too harsh, but I think, that if there are problems with gender identity, it is because there has been some genetical breakdown, because something in the hormonal sphere has not happened in balance, or sufficiently, and then someone is born that has trouble identifying himself. (Laima)

Regarding the reproductive abilities, it is considered of utmost importance that women can bear children and men cannot. This serves as a very important difference between men and women, and also as a symbol of the fixedness and unchangeability of masculinity and femininity. The concept that ‘the biologically given difference in the roles of men and women in sexual reproduction lies at the core of the cultural organization of gender’ is common not only in scholarly circles but also in public debate (Yanagisako and Collier 2004, 290); however, as the data shows, it is only one of the aspects that, in this particular case, constitutes and influences the gender organization. The interview data highlights the woman’s ability to give birth:

Nature determines it, it is from nature because the man cannot give birth. (Ināra)

A man, well, he cannot be a woman, because he cannot give birth. (Ramona)

Nature has given this to us, it is about how we are born, nature tells us, it is given from nature, nature has given me the ability to create children. (Laima)

Even though it appears that ‘the reproductive dichotomy is assumed to be the absolute basis of gender and sexuality in everyday life’ (Connell 1987, 66), as the previous chapter shows, it is not only the act of giving birth that makes a woman feminine (and vice versa) – it is also a complicated, elaborate set of acceptable practices and traits that need to be constantly developed and practiced, and are always considered in relation to the opposite (femininity means avoiding being masculine and vice versa), that constitutes femininity and masculinity.

#### **4.2.3. Naturalized gendered behaviour**

Therefore, the dichotomized differences in hormonal systems, genetics, and reproductive functions in the context of women's self-help courses in Riga serves as the main symbol for categorising masculinity and femininity as based on dualities. In the data from the lecture 'A woman and femininity', it is suggested that the prototypes of masculinity, femininity and the relationship between the two are visible in the process of fertilization – the spermatozoa move towards the goal and compete, so that is what masculinity essentially is, and femininity, accordingly, is like being the static ovum. Moreover, the women I interviewed actually use the term 'natural' to describe behaviours that are, indeed, social:

For a man it's hard to learn [about masculinity], it is not his natural way of thinking. (Nora)

But it is not really a law [to clean, feed and take care of the family]. It is natural. The fact that I love and respect my man, that is natural. The fact that I talk to him in a gentle, pleasant voice, that is natural. When I start to scream, when I am tired, I don't like myself anymore. That is not the natural way. (Ramona)

Such discourse about what the natural behaviour is helps to legitimize the social constructs of masculinity and femininity; it is a part of a process that, as Bourdieu puts it, transforms 'history into nature, [...] cultural arbitrariness into the *natural*' (2001 [1998], 2; emphasis in original). Bourdieu continues to describe this process of naturalization of social constructs, and explains that it is 'the biological appearances and the very real effects that have been produced in bodies and minds by a long collective labour of socialization of the biological and the biologicalization of the social', and the combination of these processes is at the basis of why such a naturalization of the 'arbitrary division' between masculinity and femininity takes place (2001 [1998], 3). Nevertheless, Kimmel offers these two points for explaining why natural differences have such legitimating power when it comes to gender – 'first, biological explanations have the ring of "true" science to them: because their theories are based on "objective scientific facts" [...]. Second, biological explanations *seem* to accord with our own observations: women and men seem so different to us most of the time' (2008 [2000], 19; emphasis in original). While I believe that parallels can be drawn between Kimmel's idea and this particular sociocultural context, I suggest that there are additional means of legitimization at work when it comes to women's courses. In the courses, supposedly scientific terms are used (for example, energy, biology, hormones), but they are given the strength of meaning-saturated symbols. When, in the courses, the lecturers speak about hormones and biology, as well as energy (for example, in the ritual Liberation ritual from previous men and connections, the ideas of masculine and feminine energies and exchange between them were explained as related to

the law of conservation of energy), the scientific concepts inhibit an altered, changed, esoteric meaning, that draws legitimacy not only from its supposed relation to science, but also from its relation to the spiritual and esoteric background.

To summarize, I have discussed the three aspects of what dictates masculinity and femininity according to the research participants. I have explored the way ideas about history and culture are conceptualized in relation to the gender organization, as well as described how the idea of nature is employed and constructed as a means of legitimization. In conclusion, the women that I am researching in this thesis believe that gender is fixed, because it is based on timeless, permanent, unchangeable foundations – history and cultural beliefs that have no alternative, and biology that has no room for variation.

## **5. THE RELEVANCE OF UNDERSTANDING FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY**

In this chapter, I seek answers to the third research question that I set out to investigate and discuss the importance of knowing what men and women are like, why, according to the data, women's self-help courses are necessary, and what are the impacts of leading a life according to gender-related principles and behaviour. First, I explain why there is a demand for femininity courses for women, and why women feel like the supposedly appropriate gender organization has been disrupted and thus, learning about femininity (and masculinity) is necessary. I further discuss the notion of women not being feminine enough, and how this illuminates the paradox that prevails throughout this analysis that femininity is, at the same time, supposedly natural and fixed, and something that must be developed and learnt. Further, I discuss the importance of self-help and personality development in relation to gender. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of what the data shows as the positive consequences of living according to femininity standards and principles for the women involved.

### **5.1. Disruption in the gender organization**

As described in the previous chapters, the data suggests that women in this research hold the view that there are certain characteristics and appropriate behaviours that adhere to men and women which are fixed and are ordained by history and nature. However, they express the sentiment that while sometime in history people lived according to these prescriptions of masculinity and femininity, recently there has been a sort of a disruption in the system that has created a subversion of these principles, and women's courses as the ones in question in this thesis, as well as a general practice of personality development in relation to gender practices, is necessary in order to go back to the appropriate, desirable gender organization. This disruption, the data suggests, is the reason women feel unsatisfied with themselves and their relationships, and thus search for ways to be more content and happy, as well as make sense of the world around them. The reason for this disruption is, according to the data, the notions about masculinity and femininity promoted by the Soviet regime. In the following paragraphs, I outline how the post-socialist framework is important for understanding the data regarding how gender is experienced and conceptualized.

It's the Soviet legacy. And that is something our generation has to get rid of, because a woman doesn't have to be able to do everything, and a woman doesn't have to do everything. (Gita)

I think for us as a nation there is some history dragging along. I feel that I have those ideas. It's this heaviness, it's this post-soviet thing. (Antra)

Thus, I can observe that there are two ways history is understood – there is the valid, trustworthy kind of history, which is ancient and centuries old, and there is the more recent, Soviet history, which includes the untrustworthy, wrong assumptions about masculinity and femininity. Also, the fact that historical and social circumstances can affect and change what is, as was discussed before, supposedly fixed and pre-ordained by nature, proves that the very essence of the dualities that femininity and masculinity are based upon is socially constructed in this particular sociocultural context.

Another source of supposedly inappropriate gender practices that go against the naturally-set principles and traits of femininity and masculinity is, according to the data, one's family and childhood experience.

A lot of it depends on childhood, the patterns in the family and so on. (Nora)

I am talking about the tendency that is also in my lineage [dzimta in Latvian], both of my grandmothers are always nagging the grandfathers, in their own way, always – what are you doing, always pestering, always babbling [bubina in Latvian], nagging [piļi in Latvian], scolding [zāgē in Latvian] about something. [...] I got an inner revelation, that for a very long time around me and also in my family a lot of women don't respect the masculine power. (Ramona)

In my lineage it is always the women who make the rules, they control everything, they understand they need to work hard to get somewhere. (Antra).

Women acknowledge the importance of family in the development of appropriate femininity and masculinity, and consider it one of the reasons to be more feminine:

I also wanted to go to the courses so I would be a better example for my children, so my attitude would be the best possible. They also talk about it in the courses – what do we all remember from childhood? Mother was always concerned and distressed, she always had to think about everything and she didn't have time to smile, and what I am trying to do in my daily life, in my communication with children, is to be more gentle and loving. (Gita)

Nonetheless, there is a discrepancy between how parenting and family life is viewed in relation to gender-appropriate behaviour, that I already outlined previously – women acknowledge the importance of nurture in the development of masculinity and femininity, but not when they are directly asked to explain the roots of masculine and feminine practices. The importance of

childhood and nurture, again, shows the multiple levels in which women categorize what femininity and masculinity are like, and illustrates the connection, not juxtaposition, between what is naturally fixed and socially cultivated.

Whereas the Soviet regime is seen as the beginning of the wrong ideas about gender, ‘nowadays’ is a continuation of inaccurate understandings of what masculinity and femininity are supposed to be. Women claim that there is a ‘loss of value’ in today’s world; value, that existed in history, was lost along the way and must be brought back to life.

Nowadays, you know, who needs a man anymore, a woman can do everything by herself, if you look in the history, in the Russian Empire times family was a value, but then came communism, and now everything is so blurred, everyone can do anything, and then it seems – where are we, because the values are disappearing. Value of the family per se. But fashion has a tendency to repeat itself, and now it is coming back slowly, we are going back to those values, of the family, of the person, and now we have enough time to think about it, and learn, and go [to the courses] and pay attention.  
(Ramona)

The feeling of a loss of value as well as nostalgia for bygone times is not only a discourse shared by four out of six participants of this research but is also very common in the public debate, media and politics in Latvia as well as other sociocultural contexts. Chambers explains this prevalence by arguing that ‘*family values discourse*’, as ‘a framework of ideas based on moral anxieties about the fear of collapse of familial principles and ideals’, is ‘produced by a cluster of prominent public voices including politicians, religious leaders and the media’ (2012, 174; emphasis in original). I would also add that it corresponds to a larger, prevalent discourse about the disintegration of known, clear, fixed categories of thought and perception. As Gill and Scharff claim, the nostalgia for a bygone time when men were men and women were women, and everyone was satisfied that way, is common in the postfeminist context (2013 [2011], 3).

Another factor that is prevalent in the context of postfeminism is the feeling that feminism has failed, or at least reached a crisis (Jolles 2012, 44). While what people understand by the multifaceted and somewhat perplexing concept of feminism undoubtedly differs among cultural and socioeconomic contexts, a certain degree of dissatisfaction with feminism is articulated also in this research. From the data, I conclude that for the women in this research feminism is a symbol for equalization between men and women, and women having to be strong, independent from the man and acting in a masculine, not feminine way.

I would say that it is the post-Soviet consequences, but possibly at the same time, it’s the dead end of these very passionate feminist ideas. [...] The dead end is comprehensive because they want to

make us equal, the same, they say that sex [dzimums in Latvian] is something so tiny in the context or personality, that it doesn't need to be taken into account. I used to think that way, I had all of this fifty-fifty thing and my attitude was very aggressive and feministic in general. I can do anything, I am so strong and all. And I have really seen for myself that it doesn't work. And if you'd hear my ideas, my conviction, my viewpoint, my attitude towards a man for example... no way will I let someone pay for me, or let me go in front through a door, I was very aggressively feministic. [...] But I'm telling you, you come through your own experiences, through your own dead ends, and understand that it just doesn't work. [...] Because a woman has been built around the uterus. And yes, of course, we can be all feministic and – oh, no, and be angry again, but if you go deeper, it says so much, and it works. (Nora)

You have to raise your kids that way, so that the strong men and the, you could say, weak women develop, because nowadays the women start to dominate, and they become so strong, and it doesn't work. (Laima)

In this call for bringing back the family values and appropriate gender behaviour, historical discourse comes in to play again, and the concept of war prevails as a symbol for the disruption in masculinity and femininity. Women speak about the war in most of the interviews and in the courses as the exception to the rules about gender organization.

In the wartime, women had to take over men's functions, because a lot of men died. [...] When there is war, when you have to save yourself, it doesn't matter whether you are a man or a woman, no one cares. But in the courses, you understand that darlings, maybe you already know that, but the war is over, it is a different time now. (Ramona)

We are able to do anything, women are actually all-powerful, if there is a war I know my potential, I know, how much I can do. But that is in the times of a crisis. We don't have to live in crisis mode all the time. (Laima)

With all this rushing and haste it has all gone wrong, in the way that women make the wrong choices. When there was the war, when there were only women and children left, then they do everything, they are able to do anything, amazons, because there is no choice, but hey, let's change back, that's it, there is war no more, we are not at war, we live in harmony now. And maybe that's why there are such courses, and all the ideas come back because a lot of women understand – that's it, that's enough. (Ināra)

This data again illuminates the same paradox in gender organization – while women claim that masculinity is fixed and ordained by nature, the concept of war provides a symbol of the possibility of change in what is appropriate and possible for women and men and thus reveals that there is room for variation in masculinity and femininity.

All in all, I can conclude that there are multiple levels of categorization that women employ to create an understanding of the disruption in the system of gender-appropriate relations and behaviours. They differentiate between acceptable disruptions – crisis and war – and unacceptable disruptions – the Soviet regime, feminism, and an ongoing loss of value. They also differentiate between the acceptable history and parenting, meaning, the one that validates their views about masculinity and femininity, and the unacceptable history and family patterns, namely, the ones that go against their established beliefs about gender. In the next paragraphs, I elaborate on what the negative consequences are of not living according to the established gender principles – more precisely, what were the sentiments and motivations that lead the women in this research to take up women’s self-help courses.

## **5.2. Women’s self-help courses as the backlash to the current women’s position**

According to the data, when asked about what motivated these women to take part in the women’s courses and live according to the principles of femininity, all of them expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in their personal lives and relationships. In the following paragraphs, I am analysing how these feelings of dissatisfaction can be interpreted in the post-socialist and postfeminist context of Riga.

A lot of women feel the way I did. Like, society would call me very successful, I am, well, they would call me this iron woman, someone who take matters into her own hands, does everything herself in life, has achieved a lot. For society’s standards I am very successful, if I want to, I go on holidays somewhere warm or to ski or what not, I have two three cars and an apartment, and a country home, and I have all this stuff, and maybe somewhere along the way I had a kid as well, so by society I would be considered a very successful person. (Nora)

I understood that something’s not right. I am unhappy. I can do anything, I do so much, everything seems good, but I am unhappy. I have the career, I have it all, I am in control, but I am unhappy. In my relationship and with myself as well. (Laima)

I think the courses are for women that have lost themselves a bit, in the daily routine and in the family. When they just go to work and back and then they understand they have no energy, no joy anymore. (Antra)

I argue that the dissatisfaction that motivates women to learn about and implement in their lives the appropriate feminine behaviour stems from two major factors – the post-socialist context and the postfeminism context, that both interplay and create the demand for women’s self-help courses in Riga. To explore the post-socialist influence on women’s lives, I draw parallels with

Leinarte's (2010) insightful analysis of the life stories of Lithuanian women that have lived during the Soviet regime. Leinarte provides an illuminating study of what it meant to be a woman in the Baltics in the Soviet era, which would correspond to what the mothers of or, to an extent, the women I research themselves have experienced and continue to experience to this day.

While before the Soviet regime women were mostly housewives and there was strong patriarchy in most families, the Soviet government 'disseminated the image of worker-mother-wife' through propaganda and policy (Leinarte 2010, 21), popularizing the notion that the woman is supposed to be a productive worker. Working for a wage was declared not only an integral part of Soviet daily life and something inevitable in order to have money, but also 'a major aspect of women's self-expression' (ibid., 33). However, the praxis of women as workers did not exempt them from being the main caretakers of the household, children, and, to an extent, the husband (ibid., 37). Even more, while 'women bore the "double burden" of paid work and household chores' they did not expect the men to help (ibid., 38), and this order was promoted by the Soviet public media as well. 'Soviet journalists believed that only those women who were capable of organising housework without men's help deserved attention and respect. The Soviet press called these women "dignified"' (ibid.). Moreover, in an economy of ongoing shortages and financial instability, the women were, in many cases, responsible for all the planning and decision-making in the family, but at the same time they were also responsible for keeping the appearance that the man is the 'head of the family' (ibid., 39). All of this, I argue, resulted in the sentiments women describe in this research – the memories of their mothers as always overworked and juggling too many responsibilities, and the feeling of unhappiness with being in control of everything and attempting to have a career as well as the household and family responsibilities.

Nonetheless, I strongly believe that the post-Soviet legacy is not the only one that contributes to the sentiments that emerge in the data. I suggest that the previously described backlash against feminism and an increasing women's presence in the workforce is another factor that strengthens women's disappointment in what society expects of them. It is argued that one of the factors adding to the popularity of postfeminist attitudes is the idea that feminism spawned 'an entire generation of miserable, burned-out, confused women' (Butler 2013, 42), a notion that, as the data shows, the women I am studying here might agree to. Even more, Jolles argues that postfeminism 'posits a feminine subject who enjoys expanded social, political, and economic opportunities thanks to an earlier feminism, but who, at the same time, scorns the constraints feminism is thought to impose on her current lifestyle' (2012, 44), namely, the

women in this research disdain the expectation to be not only in charge of the household and children, but also have a successful career.

However, the data not only suggests an emotional dissatisfaction; there are also certain health risks produced by something that, one might argue, also is a consequence of earlier feminism – the popularity of hormonal contraception. In two of the six interviews I conducted, women explained the possible consequences of continuous use of hormonal contraception – infertility, premature climaxes, extrusion of the uterus and other reproduction-related issues. They explain that hormonal contraception suppresses and damages femininity, thus contraceptive pills and IUD's must be avoided. Additionally to the health issues, hormonal contraception also causes women to become angrier and act in a more masculine, competitive manner.

And the consequences, when a woman ignores her femininity and her cycle, which is actually her whole world, then the consequences are that she has very high achievements in science and in business, but she cannot establish a good relationship. A lasting and beautiful relationship. And the other thing they sacrifice is their health. And mostly the health that is related to sex, related to the cycle and periods [...] And these are the repercussions that we as a society have to pay a high price for, the stakes are high. Infertility. Very common. Unfortunately. (Nora)

Women so often don't take care of themselves down there. They use all these medicines that suppress their femininity, just to offer the man safe sex without pregnancy, just for that. But what they do to their fallopian tubes, all that stuff that goes on inside, in the lap [klēpis in Latvian], the changes we make with that, just to ensure free, pleasant sex for the man, it just means we don't love ourselves, we don't love ourselves down there. [...] And in the courses they also said, that actually if you know your body and how your cycle works, we can actually regulate everything easily from nature, we don't have to do anything artificially and damage ourselves, because we don't make anything better with that, [...] because it's 3-4 days a month that you can get pregnant in, so to wreck yourself, I don't know, maybe there are other ways to protect yourself. And not yourself, but the couple. Because it is a co-responsibility. (Laima)

To understand this data, I adopt Bourdieu's suggestion that the disavowal of contraception is another means of establishing and perpetuating the heteronormative order – 'the dominant model of family structure and [...] legitimate sexuality – heterosexual and oriented towards reproduction' (2001 [1998], 89). Nonetheless, as the data shows, orientation towards reproduction is not always the reason women refuse hormonal contraception, because research participants explain that pregnancy is only possible in very few, set days of the month. I argue that it is more the discourse of hormonal contraception as unnecessary and harmful for

the woman's body. However, whilst I acknowledge that the legitimization of heteronormativity is one factor that influences people's views on contraception, I argue that in this particular case there is another paradox at hand, which is very characteristic of the postfeminism context in which I am interpreting the data in this research. As discussed previously, postfeminist practices combine notions from feminism and anti-feminism (Gill and Scharff 2013 [2011], 4). In this case, on the one hand, women express the idea that a woman's fertility is an issue of society, not an individual choice, which, I argue, is a very anti-feminist opinion. On the other hand, women talk about the fact that using hormonal contraceptives for the sake of the man's pleasure is a transgression and stress the importance of shared responsibility in the couple for family planning issues, which, I argue, is a sensibility derived from earlier feminist ideas. This paradox illuminates the ambiguity of what the research participants consider to be appropriate behaviour for women, and provides insight into the specific postfeminist context of the women's courses in question.

Another aspect I find crucial is to reflect on how femininity is seen as embodied by these women. Not only is it supposedly based in their bodies and reproductive abilities, it is also lived through and constructed within the body through discourses as the quotes above – that femininity is embodied, and the unhappiness that might derive from not being too masculine (thus not feminine enough) is also perceived through the discourse of the body. Another example of the embodiment discourse comes from the data from the lecture 'A woman and femininity', where it was explained that women feed men through three channels – food, intercourse, and praise. This example also shows that the relationship between masculinity and femininity is constructed on the bodily axis.

### **5.3. The relationship factor**

Now that I have considered what problems women identify with the gender organization nowadays, and why they find it important personally to learn about femininity and masculinity and live according to the femininity principles taught in the women's courses, I must examine another important aspect for the women in question for choosing to learn about how to be more feminine – the relationships with their partners. While general dissatisfaction with the life course and health risks are important reasons for women to seek ways to improve themselves through becoming more feminine, failing relationships are another factor that all the women mentioned in the interviews. The data suggests that relationships are an important part of a woman's life.

For a woman in any way relationships are important, and possibly more important than for a man.  
(Nora)

The quotes provided in the previous paragraphs also show what Bourdieu calls ‘the true nature of the structural relations of sexual domination’ (2001 [1998], 107), namely, the notion that women have to pay for success in their careers by giving up lasting, happy personal relationships. Nonetheless, when women are in relationships that are not harmonious, women acknowledge that the reason for this is that the man is not masculine enough; however, a man loses his masculinity as a consequence of the woman not being feminine enough, so the responsibility ultimately lies with the woman. According to the data from the lecture ‘A woman and femininity’, the participants are told that a man and a woman in a relationship are like the connected vessels – the more masculine (thus – less feminine) the woman is, the more the man is like a rag [lupata in Latvian], thus – non-masculine. Women in the interviews stress that a man should not be controlled by the woman, even when he, for example, stays out with friends all night. Instead, the woman has to let the man feel free and then allow him to control her.

When a woman controls the man, it’s always nagging and babbling, where are you, what are you doing, but they don’t like it, it is like distrust. He doesn’t like that feeling, to be constrained, to have his energy repressed. [...] And then the crisis in the family comes, there are more divorces, there is research about this, because when a woman becomes more independent when the kids are in the kindergarten, then she starts to grow her muscles, and she starts a career. [...] And then, very often, the divorce comes. [...] Or it’s the other way – you just sacrifice all of yourself. But you need to be a little bit inaccessible, and a lot of us have this sin, when we get married, then we are always reachable, we sacrifice ourselves. And if you do that, you become uninteresting, boring. (Laima)

A woman shouldn’t do everything. We are actually the ones that spoil the men with all this – we can do everything ourselves. Because we don’t have to. And if the man sees that we can do everything, why should he try anymore? (Gita)

It is important to not only feed the man with energy but also create needs, tell him what you want. Because otherwise you’re just running for him, and you become stressed and overworked, and the man degrades because he’s so overfed with energy. And then a man who is faithful starts to drink or degrade in some other way, and then very often dies sooner than the woman, it’s quite sad but it’s a fact. Or if a man... well, it’s not even about faithfulness, if he is normal, if he wants to live, he will just look for a woman elsewhere. [...] So a woman needs to know how to give energy and also create needs, and inspire the man for success. (Ramona)

This data shows that it is the woman's responsibility to maintain the relationship and ensure its success; any of the man's shortcomings, including adultery, is a consequence of the woman's inappropriate behaviour. I will return to the issue of responsibility in the conclusions chapter.

Not only do women acknowledge their responsibility in the relationship, but they also acknowledge that it is up to them and them only to improve their lives, as well as the lives of their partners.

Well, you're not going to change others, so you have to change yourself. That's why I started to look for such courses. And the man is always just fine, he would never do such things. It's like they said [in the courses] – when it comes to a divorce, the man will never make that decision, he will drag it [the marriage] till the end. Maybe he'll get a lover or something if he doesn't get what he expects from the relationship with the wife he will find a lover. But he will not divorce, because he's comfortable anyway. Though sometimes I don't like it, I wonder, why is it always the woman that has to change. A man never has to change anything, it's always the woman who has to learn how to treat him better. He just lives, I guess he is happy the way everything is. (Gita)

Since I've been going to the courses, he pays more attention to me, but that is because I have become more feminine, more gentle, that's why he has started to take care of me better, like in the beginning [of the relationship]. (Laima)

The men don't go to such courses. They don't think they need to change anything. (Antra)

It appears that the women accept the fact that they are the ones who have to change their behaviour because that is just how men are – according to Gill, there is no space for blaming the men, because 'it is simply a matter of "the way men are" and a naturalization of ideas of essential sexual difference' (2009, 356), corresponding to other notions about the essential and fixed nature of masculinity and femininity discussed in the previous chapters.

#### **5.4. Masculinity as a consequence of femininity**

As I deduce from the data and show in the following paragraphs, the responsibility of maintaining a relationship is dependent on the woman, and also the man's masculinity (which is necessary for a successful relationship) also depends on how the woman treats him, thus masculinity is seen as the consequence of the woman's feminine behaviour. The data from the women's courses provides a recipe for how to treat the man correctly so that he would be successful and masculine. To interpret this, I borrow Gill's pertinent term 'man-ology', which she characterizes thus – 'first, the emphasis [...] upon studying and learning [...], and second, [...] the preeminent focus upon educating women to understand men, to learn to please them, to

take responsibility for the emotional management of relationships with them' (2009, 354). Women in this research do describe the necessity to learn and develop their ability to communicate with men in a way that is inspiring, supportive, acceptive, encouraging, instead of resentful, negative, critical. The notion of the woman as the inspiring muse emerges in both the data from the courses and the interviews. The emphasis, interestingly, is on the man's feelings – whether he feels appreciated, endorsed, flattered – instead of the woman's sentiments, since it is assumed that the woman gains her happiness through, and only through, the man's happiness and, subsequently, the happy relationship between the two.

The main tool in the woman's arsenal for keeping a man happy and thus encouraging his success in his main task – provision (see chapter 3.3.1.) – is communication. Women are taught to speak in a gentle, positive, pleasant voice, without nagging, negativity, accusations.

You have to make the man feel like, like he has all the knowledge. You have to put the crown on his head, tell him he's the best, and that he is your king. (Ināra)

You have to speak nicely, say everything through compliments, you are so strong, you are so smart. Don't say what you want in direct orders, you have to say it in a roundabout way, in a positive way, don't offend him. (Ramona)

The main thing in the relationship is that there is harmony and that everyone is healthy. How to get the harmony? Well, stop nagging [zāgēt in Latvian] the man [laughs]. (Gita)

All of this shows the emphasis on women's emotional labour in a relationship, an issue that I expand on in the conclusions of the thesis. However, now I discuss the self-help aspect of the courses and man-ology, explain how women interpret their task to change themselves in order to ensure their and their family's wellbeing, and how this can be situated in the postfeminism and neoliberalism context.

## **5.5. Femininity and self-help**

Since women express dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs when it comes to gender organization, as well as recognize that it is their responsibility to improve their lives and their relationships, they materialize and embrace the neoliberal consciousness of having to improve, discipline, and work on oneself. According to the data, women, however, see a direct connection between personality development and their gender performance, arguing that in order to feel better and be happier in life, it is particularly their femininity that has to be developed. According to the data from the lecture 'A woman and femininity', women are told

that life choices, no matter how big or small, have to be made according to the appropriate gendered behaviour, in order to feel better.

You can't separate it – femininity and just being a better person. [...] You cannot take the personality development outside of the context of one's sex. It won't end well. It matters to know your sex because you are in it, it is a massive part of identity. (Nora)

In the interview data, women stress the connection between their identity and their gender as conclusive. This, I argue, is another example of the combined postfeminist and neoliberal sensibility. Since feminism, supposedly, has achieved (or at least advanced) equality between genders, people often feel like gender is not a valid aspect to base their identity on (Jolles 2012, 56). Furthermore, in combination with the neoliberal context in which 'secure and stable self-identity no longer derives automatically from one's position in the social structure' (Gill and Scharff 2013 [2011], 8), the neoliberal postfeminist answer to these processes is that 'we are seeing attempts to ground identity in the body, as individuals are left alone to establish and maintain values with which to live and make sense of their daily lives' (ibid.). This corresponds to the previously discussed notions that femininity and masculinity are based on the body, biological essentialism, and is ordained by nature. Thus, I can conclude that the emphasis in femininity as the essence of these women's identities and appropriate behaviours is based on the postfeminist and neoliberal sensibility, because they categorize their femininity, as I discussed in chapter 4.2., as derived from and based on their bodies, hormones, biology, and their reproductive abilities.

However, the very idea that femininity is something that can be developed, learnt, is somewhat paradoxical when one takes into account that it is, supposedly, fixed and pre-ordained by nature. Nonetheless, the women in question do describe their femininity as a trait that can be and, indeed, must be improved and worked on.

I understood that something is not right, something is not working, so I decided – that's it, I have to develop my femininity. (Ramona)

I can draw parallels with Gill's work on women's magazines, where she claims that 'femininity [is] always portrayed as contingent – requiring constant anxious attention, work and vigilance' (2009, 365). Nonetheless, women in the interviews explain this paradox so – because the society nowadays, as a combination of the Soviet legacy and the feminist mindset, expect women to be masculine, namely, strong, controlling, and making wages, and all of the education since early

childhood favours masculine traits over feminine ones, it is actually that instead of learning to be more feminine, the task in the courses is to un-learn being too masculine. This again shows how masculinity and femininity are constructed as opposites; as Bourdieu puts it, ‘to be feminine means essentially to avoid all the properties and practices that can function as signs of manliness’ (2001 [1998], 99) in a particular socioeconomic and historical context.

Nevertheless, the data from interviews shows that women base their understanding of improving their lives through being more feminine (and less masculine) in the neoliberal framework, which requires changing oneself for the better – transformation, discipline, management and regulation of one’s self, including one’s attitudes, habits, and behaviour.

I understood that I have to change my attitude because I was unsatisfied with my life and my partner. It’s what I need, but it’s not easy, to change my habits to be more feminine, because I used to have a commanding position at work, I like all the masculine stuff, so I really have to break myself to go to that feminine stuff. (Gita)

Pretty much I go to the courses to change my habits and to do things with a different attitude. But I would say that you need to go there for yourself, if you want to change yourself, not for the sake of the man. (Ramona)

This data illuminates another paradox. While, as described previously, women learn a lot in the courses about how to treat men, there is also the conviction that you need to change for your own sake. I agree with Gill, when she claims that such combination of antifeminist practices (learning how to please the man) and feminist ideas (improving yourself for your own sake), ‘together with the focus on pleasing oneself’ through the process, delineates practices as the women’s courses in question ‘as distinctly postfeminist’ (2009, 359).

In addition, courses as the ones studied in this thesis emphasize the need to ‘[transform] the *self*, [not by] acting or performing, but, more profoundly, [...] remodelling one’s very sense of self’ (Gill 2009, 357; emphasis in original). Moreover, the case of these women’s self-help courses show that postfeminism is not only an answer to feminism but also is created in the particular context of neoliberalism, since it is ‘women who are called on to self-manage, self-discipline. To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen’ (Gill and Scharff 2013 [2011], 7), and this continuous work on self is a requirement for success in private life and relationships (Jolles 2012). (As I mentioned previously in the methodology chapter – there is a shortage of courses for men in Riga that teach them how to be happier in their lives and relationships through developing their masculinity, while the supply for women is considerable).

Another aspect of self-work that the data from the participant observation and the interviews suggest is the idea of self-confidence. A part of the appropriate, feminine behaviour and attitude is the confidence one has about her body and her personality.

You have to start with yourself, you have to start loving yourself. You have to work on yourself, your education, your development. And, of course, the body, to feel better. That's when the change happens. And you need to find that confidence in yourself. (Ināra)

The emphasis on self-confidence, especially for women, is another specifically postfeminist attitude. This can be interpreted as an attempt to move the responsibility for women's unfavourable situation from the pervasive inequality and structural relations of domination, to a woman's own personal traits and choices – 'female self-confidence increasingly takes centre stage in diagnoses of the persistence of inequality', and women are encouraged to accept that 'they are being held back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalized sexism but by their own lack of confidence – a lack that is presented as being entirely an individual and personal matter, unconnected to structural inequalities and cultural forces. The solution, thus, becomes to work on the self, rather than change the world' (Gill 2017, 618). I can conclude that the neoliberal emphasis on changing oneself in order to improve one's life, in the context of gender organization, is a tool of perpetuation and normalization of the heteronormative worldview and the ongoing structural inequalities between men and women.

## **5.6. Other's opinion as the reference point for women**

The last topic in this chapter that I discuss in relation to self-development and self-management is the notion that it is other people's opinions that often serves as the reference point and evaluation for the woman's success in changing and improving herself.

People come to me now and say – wow, you are so feminine... and my friends are surprised that, like, how did you manage it after so many years of being married that he [the husband] looks at you like that, even carries your bag. [...] Because we cannot forget about taking care of ourselves, outside and inside so that you are attractive to him, interesting for him. You have to be interesting to have a conversation with, otherwise, he will lose interest in you. And you have to think, how to be, so to say, diverse and interesting, so that he would desire you again and again. [...] In the end, the main task for a woman is that other people feel pleasant in her company. (Laima)

This data corresponds to Bourdieu's claim that a woman in the context of power relations among genders is 'a being-perceived' (2001 [1998], 68) that 'exist[s] first through and for the gaze of others' (ibid., 66). He goes a step further and argues that 'what is called "femininity" is often nothing other than a form of indulgence towards real or supposed male expectations, particularly as regards the aggrandizement of the ego' (ibid.). I strongly believe that the notion that a woman has to work on herself to become more pleasant for others, especially their partners, does indicate that the relations of subordination between men and women are deeply embedded in practices as the women's courses in question.

As I discussed in the first chapter, women are supposed to be more emotional than men. However, as I argued, there is also an established manner of showing a woman's emotions, especially the negative ones, that have to be 'palatable' (Gill 2017, 619) to others, which, again, proves that other people's reactions are the reference point for woman's behaviour. While emotionality is, as described, the appropriate, feminine characteristic for women, there is a paradox when it comes to negative emotions, which, as the data suggests, in turn, have to be either repressed or made likeable to others, because a woman must at all times remain gentle, pleasant, amiable. Gill suggests that this is a characterising feature of the postfeminist culture, which 'calls forth a subject incited to work on her character and psychic dispositions, [and attempts] to shape what and how women are enabled to *feel* and how their emotional states should be presented' (2017, 618; emphasis in original). I propose that the data of this research shows an overlap of Bourdieu's abovementioned idea that femininity is linked to the man's expectations (2001 [1998], 66) and Gill's approach, which is that in the postfeminist context, where women (as in this case) stress that it is their own choice to live according to the postulates of femininity and self-development, 'it is as if [...] men's desires have been internalized and must now be understood as authentically women's own' (2009, 363), meaning, in the courses in question, women are taught to want to be the way the men supposedly want them to be.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, I present a few conclusions that I have drawn from the data that I analysed previously, and thus show the main contributions from this thesis to a deeper anthropological understanding of how gender is conceptualized and understood in the particular context of women's self-help courses in Riga. I discuss the subjects of individual choice, emotional labour, and responsibility as the closing contribution of this thesis.

### 6.1. Femininity as choice

In this thesis, I have shown multiple examples of how women think and act in the categories that are constructed from the dominant, masculine point of view, and thus perpetuate the systematic, institutionalized inequality. However, I feel it is indispensable to consider a different point of view, and instead of contributing to the (somewhat counterproductive) discourse of women as the oblivious victims of masculine dominance, I wish to show that, as several scholars argue, it can be a woman's choice to 're-embrace traditional femininity' (Gill 2009, 363; see also McRobbie 2004); it can be a matter of a woman's agency to strive towards stability, clarity, tradition (Mahmood 2001, 212). Genz, for example, shows that postfeminist practices (as the women's courses in question) cannot be simplified and reduced to 'a ruse of patriarchy to spread *false consciousness* among women' (2006, 336; emphasis in original); instead postfeminism 'distances itself from the idea of an enlightened feminist elite that strives to illuminate the obfuscated and silent majority of women' (ibid., 344). All in all, I conclude that when it comes to practices like the women's self-help courses in Riga, whilst I cannot overlook the substantial influence of institutionalized relations of domination between men and women, I must give the women in question credit and freedom to exercise their agency, instead of adopting a patriarchal stance and condemning their behaviour.

### 6.2. Emotional labour

The second conclusion that I make about the practice described in this thesis is the ongoing importance of emotional work in relationships, which is, in this case, done by and expected from exclusively women. Emotional labour, as defined by Morgan, 'involves a multiplicity of skills designed to control or to handle the emotions of others, to smooth tensions and strains between family members as well as providing a refuge from or a counterbalance to the tensions of the public sphere' (1996, 105). The encouraged monopoly of women ensuring

the positive emotional states in the family and thus family coherence (Chambers 2012, 58), doing emotional labour in the family – as the research participants described it, creating an atmosphere, inspiring others, giving energy – , as well as being responsible for managing the emotions of the partner (Gill 2009, 354) is, I argue, the most important takeaway from the women’s courses that I have examined. Women are taught to remove themselves from paid work into somewhat unrecognized emotional labour. And this brings me to the third conclusion that I have drawn, namely, the emphasis on women’s responsibility.

### **6.3. Responsibility**

When it comes to the question of responsibility, women regard it as a masculine trait, thus, unfit for a woman. It must be the man that makes decisions and takes responsibility for them. In the courses, it is also promoted that a woman should decrease her responsibility, let go of control, for example, of the finances and other aspects suitable for men. While decreasing a woman’s responsibility and thus not only having more leisure time, but also higher life-satisfaction, is one of the main reasons why women choose to live according to the principles of femininity, I can conclude that there is still a substantial, unequal burden of responsibility on the woman’s shoulders in a relationship. While a woman, supposedly, does not need to be responsible for the financial matters in the family, it is still her responsibility whether the man is inspired enough and successful at work. While the man has to be the leader and control the relationship and the woman, it is still the woman’s responsibility to make him masculine enough to be so, with her actions. The emotional labour and management in the household is solely the woman’s responsibility, and all the failures of the partner and the relationship are translated as the failures of the woman. For example, if the man chooses to not be monogamous, (as well as, as the data from the lecture ‘What do men want?’ suggests, if the man has an alcohol problem) it is a consequence of the women’s insufficient femininity. Even more, child-rearing and housework are also women’s responsibility, and it is not appropriate for the man to take part in these activities.

All of these paradoxes indicate towards the main conclusion – that while the women’s courses are supposed to change the idea that a woman has to do everything and take responsibility for everything, they actually perpetuate this occurrence. The difference, though, is in the discourse of self-help and personality development, and also in the idea that the responsibility has to be accomplished through complicated, roundabout emotional labour, instead of direct, outspoken leadership. Also, the discourse of encouragement for a woman to work on oneself, embrace her femininity and improve her life and relationship through

femininity, implies 'empowerment and choice', but, at the same time, the stringent rules of how to live according to the femininity principles, as well as the emphasis on thorough emotional responsibility for maintaining a happy relationship an life, induces women to live up to even more rigid and harsh expectations of being perfect (Gill 2017, 609; see also McRobbie 2015).

All in all, this thesis has provided an illuminating insight on how gender is constructed and experienced, adding to the anthropological knowledge about how femininity and masculinity can be conceptualized and performed. I have discussed gender in the context of neoliberalism and postfeminism, situating it in a larger academic inquiry into how social constructs are naturalized and power relations perpetuated and legitimized. Through this research, I have illuminated and problematized the heteronormative worldview, and shown how gender is experienced relationally – femininity does not exist without the reference to masculinity, and vice versa. The case of women's self-help courses in Riga has proven to be an exceedingly enlightening example of how people understand gender and employ concepts of masculinity and femininity to make sense of their life-worlds.

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