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The triple bind and beyond: the case of Lithuanian single mothers who migrate

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ABSTRACT

Using Lithuania as a case study, this research examines how migration intensifies the challenges faced by single mothers, expanding the triple-bind theory to address intersecting resource, employment, and policy gaps in the migration context. It draws on qualitative data from 30 semi-structured interviews with Lithuanian single mothers who migrated to Germany, Norway, and the UK, alongside a comparative review of welfare policies in these countries. The interviews illuminate migrant single mothers' lived experiences, while the policy review highlights the strenghts and gaps in support systems.

Findings show that challenges compound over time, with the initial stage of migration being the most difficult. Mothers confront language barriers, limited social networks, and unfamiliarity with local systems, alongside precarious employment and housing, with little to no policy support. Being apart from children is emotionally difficult, and once reunification occurs, mothers face new practical challenges. Over time, difficulties shift and ease as mother adapt and gain access to support within host countries.

These insights underscore the need for tailored support to buffer the vulnerabilities, particularly during the early stages of migration when resources and information are scarce, pointing to how migration reshapes the triple bind of single motherhood.

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Introduction

Single-parent families, especially those headed by women, constitute a significant portion of households across Europe and beyond and face a higher risk of poverty than other family types (Eurostat, 2024; Nieuwenhuis, 2022; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). This 'feminisation of poverty' is recognised as a 'new social risk' (Bonoli, 2005; Gornick & Boeri, 2017), linked to numerous challenges that single-mother families face, such as economic hardship (Bernardi et al., 2018; Hübgen, 2020; Maslauskaitė, 2014; Stankūnienė et al., 2016), societal stigma and discrimination (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Jørgensen,

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2018; Kanopienė, 2015), difficulties balancing work and family life (Albelda, 2011; Kuconytė-Būdelienė, 2017; Millar & Ridge, 2013; Skinner & Hakovirta, 2020), health strains on mothers and children (Fritzell & Gähler, 2017; Lipman et al., 2002; Manning & Lamb, 2003), and lower educational outcomes among children (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009; Blum et al., 2000).

Despite these realities, policies often fail to adequately address their needs (Nieuwenhuis, 2020; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). Weak policy support – marked by limited defamilisation (such as restricted access to early childhood education and care) and low decommodification (insufficient income transfers) – adds to the poverty risk faced by single mothers (Brady et al., 2017; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Misra et al., 2012; Nieuwenhuis, 2022; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018; Zagel et al., 2022; Zagel & Van Lancker, 2022). Lack of adequate policy combined with resource shortages and employment difficulties (the three pillars of the triple bind they face), can even push mothers to emigrate (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018; Skubiejūtė, 2021).

Migration, on the other hand, introduces its own set of challenges for single mothers and their children. Emigration disrupts family dynamics, often causing separation between mothers and children, which can strain their relationship (Constable, 2018; Kazlauskaitė et al., 2008; Styraitė, 2011). Additionally, migration requires mothers and children to adapt to new languages, cultures and systems (Bryceson, 2019; Styraitė, 2011). Children who move to a new country often face considerable emotional difficulties, including feelings of anxiety and loneliness (Kazlauskaitė et al., 2008; Leliūgienė et al., 2005). They also frequently experience stigma and have lower educational outcomes (Dronkers & Kalmijn, 2013; Kazlauskaitė et al., 2008; Motienė et al., 2014; Styraitė, 2011). At the same time, migrant mothers (and migrant parents in general) often face migration-related stress due to economic challenges, unstable employment, and social isolation, which can negatively impact their parenting and emotional support for their children (Kačkutė & Heffernan, 2024; Loukas et al., 2008; Muzzio et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Employment opportunities are overall lower for immigrants than non-immigrants (Milewski et al., 2018; Shutes, 2022). Furthermore, both single mothers and migrants often face stigmatisation, with labels such as 'scroungers' or 'welfare tourists', while mothers who migrate and leave their children behind are subjected to harsh judgements due to the societal gender norms and expectations placed on mothers (Ehata & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2017; Gibson et al., 2018; Herbst-Debby, 2022).

While substantial research exists on single mothers and migrant mothers separately, the intersection of these identities remains underexplored, resulting in a significant knowledge gap. Single mothers is a group often overlooked in migration research focused on 'complete' nuclear families (Moskal & Tyrrell, 2015). The growing feminisation of migration with increasing numbers of women migrating for family-related reasons such as financial constraints in caring for children or elderly relatives, or escaping abuse, underscores the urgency of understanding their specific motivations and challenges (Bernardi et al., 2018; Herbst-Debby, 2022; Millman, 2013). This shift demands a broader analytical framework that addresses the intersection of migration and single motherhood.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines migrant single mothers through the triple-bind theory (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018), using Lithuanian migrants as a case study. I expand this framework, which analyses hardships related to resources, employment, and policies, arguing it overlooks the specific challenges faced by migrant single mothers.

Applying a life-course perspective, the research explores how interactions with welfare systems, resources, and employment evolve through migration stages. Like single-parent families navigating life phases (Zagel & Hübgen, 2018), migrant single mothers experience a shifting triple bind throughout their migration journey.

Lithuania serves as a fitting case given its high poverty rates among single-mother families and limited policy support, factors that often push mothers to seek better opportunities abroad (Skubiejūtė, 2021). Migration from Lithuania mainly targets Germany, Norway, and the UK – countries with stronger welfare systems, higher wages, and established Lithuanian migrant networks. In 2017, 21,577 Lithuanians migrated to the UK, 5,031 to Norway and 4,136 to Germany (EMN, 2024). Although migration flows have declined since then, these three countries remain the top destinations, with 6,065, 2,554 and 2,345 migrants respectively recorded in 2021 (ibid.). Due to the lack of precise data on single mothers among these migrants, the choice of these countries instead relies on broader Lithuanian migration trends. These countries also exemplify distinct welfare regimes – Germany's conservative, Norway's social-democratic, and the UK's liberal – offering a comparative framework to understand how policy contexts shape migrant single mothers' experiences. Additionally, the European context presents a unique perspective that is often overlooked in migration studies, as EU nationals are generally perceived to be relatively privileged due to their freedom of movement and equal access to rights as workers or job seekers in all EU member states (Council Directive 2004/38/EC).

Triple-bind theory and migrant single-mother families

Triple-bind theory, proposed by Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado (2018), is widely used to analyse the challenges faced by single-parent families. It offers a comprehensive framework to understand the unique vulnerabilities of these families, particularly those headed by single mothers, who face intertwined inadequacies in resources, employment and policies. The theory argues that failure to address these gaps contributes significantly to the disproportionate poverty and economic hardship experienced by single-parent households.

The first core component highlights the lack of adequate resources. Unlike two-parent families, single-parent households lack the financial and caregiving support a second adult provides. This absence of a second income or 'tag-team' parenting intensifies financial instability, time poverty, and work – family conflict (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

The second component focuses on employment challenges. Although employment can improve well-being through income and social networks, jobs typically held by single mothers tend to be low-wage, unstable and offer few advancement opportunities (Biegert et al., 2022; Misra et al., 2012; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). Precarious work conditions, including part-time and night shifts, are common (Bardasi & Gornick, 2008; Dunifon et al., 2013). Consequently, employment alone often fails to lift single-mother families out of poverty despite relatively high employment rates (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

The third dimension addresses policy inadequacies. Many welfare states offer financial transfers like child benefits or housing allowances, but these often overlook the needs of

single parents. Policies designed primarily for two-parent families or focusing solely on income redistribution fail to tackle the structural labour market and caregiving challenges single parents face, resulting in insufficient support (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018; Van Lancker et al., 2015). Social investment and activation policies that ignore these unique barriers further limit effectiveness (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

While the triple-bind theory effectively addresses the interplay of inadequate resources, policy gaps, and employment challenges faced by single-parent families, it does not fully capture the additional complexities experienced by migrant single mothers. Migrant single mothers face a double disadvantage, as both single-parent and migrant families in high-income countries are at greater risk of poverty than two-parent or native-born families (Shutes, 2022).

Context of Lithuania and destination countries

Lithuania presents a particularly challenging environment for single-mother families due to extremely limited policy support, minimal paternal involvement (both in terms of sharing caregiving responsibilities and providing financial support), restricted access to stable employment and a severe shortage of early childhood care institutions, particularly for children under the age of three years (Bučaitė-Vilkė, 2020). With the highest proportion of single-parent households in the European Union (EU), where 31.4% of children live in single-parent families – predominantly headed by single mothers – the state has not provided adequate resources to support these families (European Union, 2004 September 23). As a result, single mothers face considerable socioeconomic hardship, with 32.4% of them at risk of poverty, compared with 15.7% among two-parent households (OSP, 2022). The emigration of Lithuanians is also regarded as a major demographic challenge, with 679,000 people leaving the country between 1990 and 2021 (Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020). Germany, Norway and the United Kingdom (UK) have always been the primary destination countries (ibid.).

Lithuanian policy (in common with policies of other post-Soviet countries) often categorises single-mother families, along with those with a history of migration, as 'families in crisis' or 'troubled families' rather than as idealised 'harmonious' family units (Juozeliūnienė & Bielevičiūtė, 2020; Leinartė, 2021). Single-mother households are labelled as morally and socially problematic; they are framed as requiring 'rebuilding' instead of support (Leinartė, 2021; Skubiejūtė, 2021). Consequently, family policies in Lithuania largely overlook the needs of single mothers, forcing them to depend on alimony from fathers or on limited, hard-to-access means-tested support intended for low-income families (Maslauskaitė, 2023). This is indicative of a highly familialistic policy environment that exacerbates gender inequalities (Natalier et al., 2018; Orloff, 1993).

In contrast, Germany, Norway, and the UK provide more comprehensive welfare systems for single-mother families. Germany, a conservative welfare state, has traditionally prioritised nuclear families, leaving single mothers reliant on policies such as spousal support after divorce (Worms, 2023). However, there is now a shift towards greater attention to childcare access and improving employment opportunities for single mothers, with measures such as tax relief and generous means-tested support being offered (Scholz et al., 2019).

Norway, a social-democratic welfare state, uniquely emphasises state responsibility for childcare to enable women's workforce participation, while also recognising care work's

value (Bungum & Kvande, 2013). As a result, it provides extensive support, including universal child benefits, subsidised childcare, supplemental single-parent benefits, and targeted income support for work and education (Bungum & Kvande, 2013; Kjeldstad & Rønsen, 2008).

The UK, a liberal welfare state, relies on means-tested support through Universal Credit, which combines such benefits as housing support, tax credits and reimbursement for childcare services (Stack & Meredith, 2017). The main challenges are limited access to free childcare and high childcare costs (ibid.).

Overall, although these three countries have different approaches, they offer more robust support for single mothers compared to Lithuania, combining policies that reduce financial dependency and improve access to work.

Methods

The methods used in this research comprised two components: (1) an analysis of semi-structured interviews with Lithuanian single mothers who migrated to Germany, Norway or the UK, and (2) a review of relevant policy documents and support measures from these countries. To maintain consistency in migration laws across the study, the focus was placed on the pre-Brexit period for the UK, given that post-Brexit regulations differ from those within the EU.

Between February and March 2024, 30 interviews (10 per country) were conducted via online platforms like Teams, Messenger, and WhatsApp. Participants volunteered without compensation, with interviews held in Lithuanian. Topics included demographics, single motherhood in Lithuania versus host countries, migration decisions, and related experiences. Interviews lasted 27 minutes to 2 hours, averaging 1 hour 15 minutes, and were audio recorded and transcribed.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and Facebook groups within Lithuanian migrant communities to ensure diversity in education, age, migration duration, and family size. Eligibility requires prior single parenthood in Lithuania and at least two years of migration experience. Each participant was anonymised with country-specific codes (e.g. DE1, NO2, UK3).

The interviewees were predominantly in their 30s and 40s, with ages ranging from 28 to 56. Regarding education, 15 of the interviewees had higher education, 8 had further education, and another 7 had a secondary education degree.

Their employment statuses varied widely, with all three countries showing a mix of roles. Six were students at university (4 in Norway and 2 in Germany) and not working at the time of the interview. A total of 15 interviewees held roles that generally require professional qualifications or specialised training, including 5 in managerial positions, 3 teachers, a laboratory worker, a nurse, an accountant, an administrator, and a small business owner. In contrast, 8 interviewees were in roles typically considered less specialised or entry-level, such as 3 cleaners/housekeepers, 2 sales assistants, 2 factory workers, and a casino worker. A unique case was one interviewee who combined a forklift driver role with being a PhD student. Additionally, 3 individuals were not working due to caring for a child with disability.

In terms of family, the majority of interviewees had one or two children, though several had three or four children, with ages ranging from one year old to adult at the time of the

interview. The time they had spent in migration ranged considerably, from as little as 2 years to as many as 24 years. On average, interviewees had spent approximately 10 years in migration.

Interviews were analysed using an inductive coding approach facilitated by MaxQDA software. The study was approved by the Research Council of Lithuania.

In parallel, a comparative policy review was conducted on support measures available to single mothers in all four countries. The selection criteria focused on policies and programmes currently in force that directly affect single mothers, particularly regarding access to childcare, employment support and redistributive benefits (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). The author's fluency in Lithuanian and English, alongside good German skills, ensured accurate interpretation of source documents. Policy documents were sourced from the UK government's official website in English and from Lithuania's Ministry of Social Security and Labour in Lithuanian. Relevant Norwegian information from NAV and most German materials from Familienportal were available in English. The main policy tools identified are summarised in the table below (Table 1).

Each policy tool was thematically coded to assess its objectives, eligibility requirements, financial support levels and conditions. This analysis provided a structured overview of how the different countries' social protection frameworks address the needs of single-parent families, complementing the qualitative interview data.

Results

The push to migrate: life in Lithuania and the decision to leave

In the Lithuanian context, single-mother families face a combination of economic hardship, inadequate policy support and the need to rely on family and social resources. These factors lead many single mothers to consider migrating to countries with stronger economies and higher wages. This decision, although deeply personal and challenging, is driven by a desire for independence and a better life for their children.

For all of the interviewed mothers, the primary factor pushing them to migrate was economic instability caused by low wages, inflexible work conditions and high living costs in Lithuania. Many single mothers found themselves in low-paying jobs with demanding hours, often including night shifts, and with almost no flexibility. However, even with their extensive work hours, they struggled to make ends meet, and this

Table 1. Key policy tools identified in each country.

Country	Key policy tools
Lithuania	Advance on maintenance payments, child benefits, child sickness benefit, parental leave days, Labour Code work scheduling priorities
Germany	Advance maintenance payments, child sickness benefit, child benefits, tax relief, child tax allowances, means-tested supplementary supports
Norway	Transitional benefit, education support, supplemental benefit, advance maintenance payments, carer's allowance, cash-for-care, child benefits, childcare support, means-tested support
UK	Child benefit, Universal Credit (a consolidated monthly payment for low-income or unemployed individuals combining Housing Benefit, Tax Credits, Childcare Cost Reimbursements, and other).

Source: compilation from The Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend. (2024) Families and children; NAV. (2024). Er helt eller delvis alene med barn; gov.uk. (2024). Benefits and financial support for families.

persistent financial instability left them feeling hopeless and burned out. The need for money often forced many to borrow from relatives and friends, further compounding their stress and financial strain.

> I worked as hard as I could, even night shifts, but it was never enough to afford rent or keep up with living costs. I could not give my daughters what I wanted, and every day was just survival. Ultimately, I started borrowing money from friends and family, which was even more stressful[1] (NO3).

Lithuania's lack of robust welfare support and accessible childcare intensified the strain on single mothers, increasing their reliance on informal social networks and creating a loss of autonomy. Many mothers had to depend on relatives, often their own parents, for childcare and, in many cases, housing. Living with their parents allowed them to save on housing costs and continue working, with grandparents taking on childcare responsibilities. However, this arrangement often left mothers feeling as though they were unable to live their lives to their full potential. They had to adhere to their parents' household rules, which limited their ability to establish their own routines and boundaries with their children. This dependence often led to feelings of indebtedness, with mothers striving to minimise their burden on relatives. As one mother recalled, she avoided taking any personal time to lessen the sense of being a burden to her parents, with whom she lived.

> It was nice that my parents helped, but it also made me feel very bad about myself. We had to follow their rules, and they'd often comment on how I was raising my children. I felt like I didn't have my own life / … / To be less of a burden, I avoided taking any time for myself, such as going to a hairdresser or meeting friends (UK7).

This pattern aligns with findings from studies of migrant single mothers in other contexts, such as immigrants to Canada from Israel, Syria, Venezuela, Pakistan, India, and Malaysia, as well as Filipinas migrating to Japan (Celero, 2021; Lam et al., 2022). Like Lithuanian mothers, these women often rely heavily on family financial and care support before migrating and view migration as an opportunity to improve their lives and gain independence.

However, for those without family support, the burden is even greater, as they navigate work and family responsibilities alone, often at great emotional cost. One mother described the guilt of leaving her young child alone at night due to her night-shift work and inability to afford childcare.

> It was terrible. My eight-year-old would keep all the lights on at home, and I'd call her every half-hour until she fell asleep. The fear and guilt I felt … it was unbearable (NO1).

The stigma surrounding single motherhood in Lithuania worsened the situation, as mothers frequently faced judgment, both socially and institutionally. Encounters with social services staff were particularly disheartening, leaving mothers feeling dismissed and undeserving of assistance.

> I felt like complete trash and the worst mother in the world. The social services lady looked down on me, as if I was completely delusional. She asked me what support I was expecting if I'm not disabled or homeless, and said that instead of wasting time looking for support, I should look for a job (NO4).

In Lithuania, a long history of familialistic policies and framing single mothers as 'deviants' has embedded a societal view that single mothers are to blame for their circumstances

and are solely responsible for their situation (Leinartė, 2021; Skubiejūtė, 2021). This view is reflected in various policies, such as the *Family Strengthening Law* (Seimas of Lithuania, 2017), which focuses on strengthening nuclear families, increasing numbers of large families (with 3 and more children) and 'rebuilding' single-parent families, encouraging them to take full responsibility for their lives, as if they had failed to do so. Due to such laws, public funding largely supports initiatives and policy tools that promote traditional family values, including awareness-raising events and free counselling for married couples (The Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022). In addition, large families receive priority for childcare, larger child benefits, and more paid mothers' and fathers' days (usually one day off every three months to care for children) (ibid.). Means-tested support is also difficult for single mothers to access, as they are required to first seek alimony from the father, which many choose to avoid. Only the Labour Code acknowledges single mothers and allows priority in choosing holidays and work schedules.

Ultimately, the confluence of financial struggles and inadequate policy left these mothers feeling as though migration was their only viable choice.

> I decided to leave because I knew things couldn't get any worse, but there was at least some hope in this decision, for both my future and my children's (NO5).

Transition into migration

Lithuanian single mothers reported that their transition to becoming migrants was a profoundly challenging period. Despite their hopes for a better future, they felt torn between leaving behind family, friends and their homeland and the necessity of moving abroad for financial stability, the opportunity to escape harsh judgment, and the *possibility of becoming a dignified woman again* (UK7).

Once committed to emigration, mothers faced further obstacles, including choosing a destination, securing start-up funds and making arrangements for their children. For most, the decision was made even more difficult because they had to leave their children behind in Lithuania, often with grandparents or other family members. Only a few (6 out of 30) interviewed mothers were able to bring their children with them immediately. This was not related to the country of destination but depended largely on the availability of family and friends' support abroad and the mothers' financial situation at the time. The mothers who had to leave their children behind described this time as the darkest period of their lives, and many refused or avoided talking about this during the interviews. Extensive research shows family separation causes deep grief and strains parent–child bonds, with children often experiencing ambivalent feelings after reunification, requiring rebuilding trust and sense of family (Cardoso et al., 2021; Kazlauskaitė et al., 2008; Shapiro et al., 2013; Shaw, 2022; Styraitė, 2011).

Mothers chose Germany, Norway or the UK as countries of destination due to their stronger economies, higher wages and large Lithuanian communities. Previous research shows that migrant networks play a major role in facilitating migration decisions (Bučaitė-Vilkė & Rosinaitė, 2011; Giulietti et al., 2013; Granovetter, 1973; White & Ryan, 2008). The language barrier and lack of local knowledge meant they often relied on other Lithuanians for work and accommodation. Through Lithuanian communities, some mothers

managed to secure jobs before they even left Lithuania, typically in remote areas in factories or on farms, taking on physically demanding and often unprotected work. In many cases, these jobs were unofficial, meaning mothers worked without social security or legal protections, allowing them to save more quickly but leaving them vulnerable. They lived in shared, overcrowded housing with other workers from Eastern Europe, facing precarious living conditions and little recourse to improve their situation.

> I lived practically in the middle of nowhere in the UK, where I worked in the fields. Every day, I had to wake up extremely early to pick strawberries, and then I'd take a second shift in the afternoon to save money faster. My back was killing me, and my hands were swollen. I was so exhausted, but I couldn't get proper rest since I shared a room with other women (UK4).

Meanwhile, for those who arrived without employment, the initial period was marked by high levels of anxiety. Navigating unfamiliar cities without language skills, they often took the first low-paid job and shared housing they could find.

> My head was spinning. I didn't know how to get around a big city like Hamburg or use public transport. I didn't speak German and had only a few hundred euros. I knew that if I failed, I'd have to return to Lithuania in even more debt. So, I went to the first cleaning agency with my broken English, found a cleaning job, and rented a room in a shared house with other Russian-speaking immigrants[2] (DE2).

Without connections or local knowledge, many mothers ended up in poorly paid jobs, often arranged through fellow Lithuanians, particularly in Norway and the UK. In some cases, employers exploited these mothers by paying them less than other workers or requiring them to work extra hours. The most common jobs included cleaning, construction work and factory jobs.

The transition was easier for mothers with resources in the host country, such as family, friends, or knowledge of the system and language. These advantages helped them find stable, legal jobs and better housing faster, allowing earlier reunification with their children. Since EU immigrants are viewed as equal to locals, there is no targeted integration support. Without policy or accessible immigrant-tailored information, social connections are vital for securing jobs and housing. Interviewees reported that finding accommodation as new immigrants with limited work history and plans to reunite with children was especially difficult, exposing discrimination and gaps in policy support.

> Finding housing was probably the most challenging part. No one wants to take on a newly arrived immigrant with no knowledge of the language, working as a cleaner, and about to bring over two small children. In Germany, there are long waiting lists for housing, and there is no shortage of tenants, so why would someone choose to rent to an immigrant when they can select a more reliable tenant? I was lucky because one man genuinely empathised with my situation and took the risk of renting the apartment to me (DE2).

Mothers without social support and sufficient knowledge often took significantly longer, sometimes years, to establish the stability needed to bring their children over to join them. This was particularly the case for those initially working in remote, shared accommodation in poorly paid jobs.

This highlights that, during the initial stages of migration, knowledge and social networks are crucial for establishing stability and a decent living standard, and this finding aligns with broader research highlighting the importance of social and informational

support in overcoming initial settlement challenges (Bučaitė-Vilkė & Rosinaitė, 2011; Gečienė, 2009; Giulietti & Wahba, 2012; Giulietti et al., 2013).

A further issue at this stage of migration is that mothers do not seek support that is tailored for single-parent families. One reason is that many have not yet secured legal employment or are not registered as job seekers, which is a prerequisite for accessing such assistance (Council Directive 2004/38/EC). Many mothers are not even aware of the support available, and even when they are, it is often not their primary focus, as they are not used to receiving support.

The arrival of children and the beginning of integration in host countries

Only after securing stable employment and housing through their own efforts were Lithuanian single mothers finally able to reunite with their children, a moment of immense relief that also brought new layers of responsibility and challenges. This reunion offered an opportunity to rebuild family life and enhance their children's well-being; however, it also brought logistical and emotional challenges as they sought to integrate their children into a new society and reestablish their family bonds – a complex task of reunification (Shapiro et al., 2013; Cardoso et al., 2021; Shaw, 2022).

The first and most urgent task upon their children's arrival was securing childcare and school placements, a challenging, often lengthy process. Public access to childcare varied considerably across the countries. Norway provided the most support, offering single mothers priority for childcare placements and financial assistance for nanny services. In the UK, however, mothers faced numerous challenges as they had to apply for Universal Credit, a requirement for childcare support, which could take several months to process. Even with approval, many struggled to afford childcare. In Germany, limited childcare availability and a lack of prioritisation for single mothers made access difficult, with conditions varying by region (Scholz et al., 2019). Yet many mothers, especially in the UK and Germany, still waited months before their children could attend local childcare or school. During this wait, options were limited; some left children alone while working, others relied on visiting relatives or friends from Lithuania, increasing stress and financial strain.

> I brought my sister from Lithuania to help me with my children. With five children of various ages and UK law prohibiting leaving children under 12 unsupervised, I had no other option. While having my sister here was comforting, it also meant I had to support her financially, and the living situation became quite chaotic with so many people under one roof (UK2).

For many migrant single mothers, childcare is crucial because employment is survival, and they often have to depend on informal networks as struggles to access childcare are common (Celero, 2021; Lam et al., 2022).

Only when their children arrived, bringing new financial and care responsibilities, did some mothers actively seek benefits to improve their living conditions. Since EU law grants Lithuanian single mothers the same rights as nationals, the emphasis here is on general family policies supporting single mothers rather than migrant-specific provisions.

However, not all mothers were able to access support. The main barriers to seeking support remained a lack of knowledge and fear of making mistakes when navigating complex bureaucratic processes, particularly in Germany. Moreover, some mothers refrained from seeking support due to a fear of being perceived as 'benefit scroungers'

(Gibson et al., 2018). This fear was especially pronounced among mothers in Germany, where they observed a clear distinction made by locals between 'good' and 'bad' immigrants. Good immigrants were viewed as those who supported themselves and contributed to society by paying taxes, while bad ones were perceived as those relying on the welfare system.

> I feel very good; my German neighbours and colleagues are always pleased because I am not the kind of immigrant who takes from them. I work, and I work well … I understand this stance – why would I come and kind of 'steal' from them? (DE5).

Previous research indicates that such distinctions are also made in the UK and reflect a broader trend in how immigrants are often judged (Ehata & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2017; Gibson et al., 2018; Herbst-Debby, 2022). Studies on migrant single mothers also highlight limited knowledge and stigma as significant obstacles to accessing welfare support (Celero, 2021; Lam et al., 2022).

Accessing support – a transformative experience

For those who did access policy support, the impact was transformative. It significantly reduced their financial burden and allowed them to provide greater stability for their children. Key resources that helped these mothers understand their entitlements, apply for support and navigate complex bureaucratic systems included social networks and NGO support, particularly in Germany. In the UK and Norway, other immigrants, children's teachers in schools and employers were the main sources of information and guidance for these mothers.

The policy measures analyses showed that support systems in the UK, Norway and Germany are largely tied to employment. In the UK, mothers must work at least 18 hours per week to qualify for Universal Credit (GOV.UK, 2024). In Norway, most benefits require labour market participation or study programmes aligned with job market demand (NAV, 2024). In Germany, employment incentives include substantial tax relief for working single parents and access to income support and housing benefits through Citizen's Benefit, available only to those working part-time, in 'mini-jobs' (8 hours a week) or actively seeking employment (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2024). However, the interviewed mothers did not view these employment-based conditions as a drawback; rather, they expressed deep appreciation for the support available, as they had experienced a complete lack of assistance in Lithuania.

Among the various forms of support, child benefits were found particularly valuable and are available in all countries, though Germany offers a supplementary allowance for single parents and Norway provides double child benefits for them (2024; NAV, 2024 & Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2023). However, housing support was considered the most important, with all countries offering rent subsidies, mortgage help and access to quality social housing. Previous research has shown that housing benefits for single mothers are key in reducing their level of housing deprivation as well as overcrowding (Nieuwenhuis & Zagel, 2022), and studies of migrant single mothers highlight that stable housing provides a sense of 'middle-classness' and security (Celero, 2021).

Additionally, financial assistance for those on low incomes (a common situation among Lithuanian immigrant single mothers) and the transfer of maintenance payments proved

highly beneficial. Many single mothers transferred their advanced maintenance payments from Lithuania to their new country of residence, as permitted under EU law (Council Directive 2004/38/EC). These payments were significantly higher in the host country than in Lithuania. Mothers also greatly appreciated the tax relief they were eligible for on the salary they received from working, noting that the reduced taxes motivated them to work more. Unlike in Lithuania, they felt they could keep a larger proportion of their earnings instead of seeing a considerable share go to the state. Mothers with younger children in the host countries were highly pleased with the opportunity to work part-time while receiving welfare support to supplement their income (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2024; GOV.UK, 2024; NAV, 2024).

While in Lithuania single mothers had to rely on support from their extended family, a resource often no longer available once they had emigrated, policy measures in their host countries assisted them in independently managing their child-rearing. This enabled them to feel less dependent on others and more empowered to live their lives as they chose.

Additionally, once mothers found work not through Lithuanian networks but directly with local employers and more diverse colleagues, they greatly appreciated the work culture, which felt vastly different from Lithuania. They shared that, unlike in Lithuania, where single mothers are often viewed as a burden to society (Leinartė, 2021), abroad – especially in Norway and the UK – people see single mothers as *heroes* (UK4) who manage to raise children on their own, often working twice as hard and sacrificing personal needs to ensure their children's well-being. Employers in these countries generally demonstrated greater understanding and prioritised family needs over work demands. This flexibility came without the need to plead, as mothers often had to in Lithuania.

> I just tell my employer that I need to go because the school called to say my son is sick. I simply leave, pick him up, and then come back to work. This is totally normal – I don't have to lower myself or beg for it; it's just a matter of informing my employer rather than asking. Of course, if I were to misuse this, it might be a problem, but I'm so grateful for the respect and understanding I receive that it actually motivates me to work even harder (NO6).

While previous research has indicated that migrants often face discrimination in the job market and are more likely to work in precarious conditions (Shutes, 2022), the experiences of Lithuanian migrant single mothers show that this is more prevalent in the initial stages of migration. Once these mothers secure legal-worker status, they gain equal rights under EU policy. Combined with a generally supportive work culture, this significantly improves their employment experience and prospects, offering access to skill development and local language courses. Such an environment made mothers feel hopeful, valued and *normal* (UK9).

Built lives abroad and future plans

The newfound stability, particularly when receiving social assistance, offered a stark contrast to single mothers' experiences in Lithuania, where support had been minimal or entirely absent. For the first time, they felt recognised and valued in their host countries, a transformation that profoundly impacted their mental and emotional health. Better working conditions and the ability to work fewer hours while receiving adequate salaries and even financial support led to a notable reduction in burnout and stress, allowing

these mothers to devote more time and energy to their children's emotional and developmental needs.

Financial stability also unlocked opportunities that had previously been out of reach to these mothers in Lithuania. Higher-paying jobs and stable housing contributed to a sense of security and normalcy. This allowed mothers to engage in enriching experiences with their children, such as attending cultural events and travelling abroad – activities that once seemed unattainable.

Taken together, these improvements led mothers to develop a strong sense of belonging in their host countries. No longer dependent on their extended family or their children's fathers for financial help, many mothers felt liberated and empowered. Although some missed their relatives in Lithuania, they noticed that their ties, and those of their children, gradually weakened over time. Younger children, in particular, began to identify more with their host country, leading to language and cultural gaps that some mothers found challenging. Nevertheless, they preferred this to the hardships they had faced back home. Similar patterns emerge in other research on migrant single mothers, where economic independence and better opportunities abroad outweigh the desire to return home (Celero, 2021; Lam et al., 2022).

Access to comprehensive support systems fostered deep gratitude for their host countries. Many mothers expressed a sense of relief and appreciation for the assistance they received.

> I could not believe that they would give me things just because I had children! I was so thankful. Just a few months after my children came, I received so much support – we got a house, I could work part-time, and I received decent financial support. It was such a relief to finally get help, and at the same time, I wanted to give back as much as I could to this country (UK3).

Receiving recognition also encouraged them to engage more deeply with their communities – participating in NGOs, donating to charities and willingly paying their taxes – actions they felt more inclined to undertake. The desire to give back was a testament to their gratitude and determination to become active, contributing members of their host societies.

Far from permanently relying on social support, many mothers aspired to build independent lives. With the opportunities provided in their host countries, they enrolled in language courses, pursued further education and sought career advancements. Even in entry-level roles, such as factory work, opportunities for growth instilled hope and a sense of opportunity. Those mothers who were still not receiving any support in their host countries still appreciated receiving fair wages despite long working hours and challenges. They valued better treatment and the greater career prospects available to them, along with significantly improved opportunities for their children.

While some mothers considered returning to Lithuania once their children had grown up or after saving enough for a pension, such opinions were rare. Reintegrating into a socioeconomic and political environment they had previously left behind is daunting. For mothers, returning to their home country after years of living abroad seems equally, if not more, stressful than their initial migration journey. Over time, many have lost their connections in Lithuania and are no longer familiar with how systems and services operate there. They feel uncertain about employment prospects and career opportunities, making re-emigration feel like starting over. Moreover, some mothers expressed anger towards Lithuania and unwillingness to pay any further taxes there, feeling they

were abandoned and without support during times of crisis. They stated that they would rather contribute to the country where they received assistance. Meanwhile, for their children, who have adapted to their host country's language, culture and opportunities, returning to Lithuania would be even more stressful and foreign.

Conclusion

Migrant single mothers share many challenges with non-migrant single mothers, such as low-wage jobs, limited childcare access, and financial strain. However, migrants face additional barriers, including the difficult decision to leave their home countries, separation from their children, and complex integration challenges in host societies, such as language difficulties, limited access to formal employment, lack of policy knowledge, housing struggles, and absence of local support networks.

As illustrated by the stories of Lithuanian migrant single mothers, the experiences of migrant single mothers evolve through each stage of migration, with challenges increasing or decreasing over time. Applying the triple-bind theory (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018) to migrant single mothers highlights their unique vulnerabilities due to resource limitations, employment barriers and policy inadequacies that exacerbate the challenges faced by this group.

Social connections – a key resource for single mothers establishing themselves in host countries

The first component of the triple-bind theory highlights the lack of adequate resources for single-parent households (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). For migrant single mothers, this inadequacy is exacerbated by their status as newcomers in a foreign country, often without access to family support, language proficiency or local knowledge. Before migrating, many of these mothers relied heavily on informal networks or extended family support in Lithuania due to the country's familialistic policies and lack of formal childcare services. However, moving abroad severed these connections, leaving many mothers to navigate their path entirely on their own.

During the early stages of migration, single mothers struggle to access adequate employment, housing and, upon their children's arrival, childcare. They often face discrimination and housing instability, as landlords are hesitant to rent to newly arrived immigrants with a limited employment history and plans to bring their children to join them. Social networks, if present, become a critical resource, providing informal assistance with housing, childcare arrangements and navigating bureaucratic processes. The importance of these networks is evident, as mothers with established connections in their host country often fare better than those without. Without such resources, even after many years of living in their host country, some mothers remain unaware of available welfare support opportunities, highlighting major gaps in European migrant integration efforts.

Employment challenges across the stages of migration

The second component of the triple-bind theory involves employment challenges (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018), which are particularly pronounced for migrant single

mothers. During the initial stages of migration, access to formal employment is limited by language barriers and a lack of local work experience and knowledge of how to navigate the labour market. Many migrant single mothers start in low-wage, unofficial jobs with little security, such as cleaning or factory work, where they are often vulnerable to exploitation. These jobs exacerbate the demands on their time and their stress, making it difficult for them to look for better employment opportunities. Without stable employment, mothers hesitate to bring their children to the host country, further intensifying their emotional stress.

As they find stable employment and gain legal-worker status, the nature of employment shifts, and their quality of life improves. EU policy (Council Directive 2004/38/EC), which ensures equal rights for legal workers, begins to play a critical role in improving their prospects. Access to flexible working arrangements, such as part-time roles or family-friendly shifts, becomes increasingly important. Even mothers who do not use any flexible working arrangements benefit from work cultures in their host countries that are more supportive of family responsibilities. However, mothers who do not receive any support from policies such as this continue to face the challenge of long working hours, similar to their experiences in Lithuania, as they strive to independently support their children.

Opportunities for career advancement and skill development through local language and training courses further enhance migrant single mothers' ability to support themselves and their children. Employment opportunities become a stabilising force, providing not only financial security but also a sense of inclusion and respect. This shows the importance of an employment policy that provides opportunities for learning and career growth.

Policy barriers and evolving access

The third dimension of the triple-bind theory highlights the inadequacies of social policies in supporting single-parent families (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). Migrant single mothers often face major barriers to accessing social support in their host countries (Shutes, 2022), particularly during the initial phase of migration. However, during this stage, support such as secure housing and access to childcare is especially critical, as stable housing is often a key condition for reuniting with their children, while childcare enables mothers to effectively balance work and family responsibilities.

Many migrant single mothers are either unaware of the benefits available to them or are ineligible due to their employment status or lack of legal documentation. Policies tied to employment remain inaccessible for those working unofficially, further compounding their challenges.

As migrant single mothers gain stable employment and integrate into the local workforce, their access to policy support improves. Countries with strong welfare systems, such as Norway, the UK and Germany, provide valuable benefits, including childcare subsidies, housing assistance and financial support for low-income families. Although these countries differ in the support they offer single mothers – Germany provides child benefits and tax relief but faces challenges in childcare access and bureaucratic hurdles; the UK offers Universal Credit, yet high childcare costs and income-based eligibility limit its effectiveness; and Norway, despite offering the most targeted support,

ties most benefits to employment – all significantly reduce mothers' burdens and improve the quality of life for these families.

However, navigating these systems often requires a huge amount of effort, including overcoming language barriers and complex bureaucratic processes. Social networks, NGOs and local community organisations play the key role in helping mothers access their entitlements, again highlighting the importance of social resources, especially when clear policy information is lacking.

In conclusion, this research expands on the triple-bind theory by demonstrating how migration adds a new layer of complexity to the challenges faced by single mothers. While the original framework highlights the intersecting inadequacies in resources, employment and policies, the experiences of migrant single mothers show how these binds are amplified and transformed by migration dynamics. Resource limitations (and importance) become even more pronounced as these mothers navigate unfamiliar systems, while employment challenges are intensified by language barriers and reliance on often unofficial, low-wage, precarious work, especially in the early stages of migration. Policy barriers, already restrictive for single parents, are further complicated by a lack of accessible information, bureaucratic hurdles in host countries and social stigma surrounding welfare use by immigrants. However, accessing support, along with securing legal work and more favourable family – work arrangements, can be key to improving the lives of migrant single mothers and their children.

By shedding light on these unique experiences, this research underscores the need for effective support systems that address not only the standard triple-bind but also the additional complexities introduced by migration. Tailored support is essential to promote integration, stability and empowerment for this particularly vulnerable group.

Finally, it is important to note that the experiences of Lithuanian single mothers are not unique and align with those of other migrant single mothers. Studies of single mothers who migrated to countries such as Canada (from Israel, Syria, Venezuela, Pakistan, India, and Malaysia) and Filipinas migrating to Japan show similar patterns (Celero, 2021; Lam et al., 2022). This shows that the application of triple-bind theory to migration is not unique to Lithuanian single mothers but is also relevant for understanding the experiences of other migrant single mother populations.

Notes

1. Author's note: The interviews were originally conducted in Lithuanian; all quotations have been translated by the author to maintain accuracy and fidelity with the original statements.
2. Author's note: Most Lithuanians, especially those born before 1991 (the year of Lithuania's independence from the Soviet Union), speak Russian fluently, which enables them to easily integrate into Russian-speaking communities abroad, primarily with people from other former Soviet-bloc countries.

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