

**“CAREER EXPLORATIONS?  
SOLE SUPPORT MOTHERS SPEAK”**

**BY**

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### **Abstract**

Sole support mothers have received considerable attention by the federal government over the past 20 years, as they have been perceived as a burden on the social welfare system. Employment-related support programs have been designed to help single mothers transition into the workplace in order to become economically self-reliant and less dependent on the state. This feminist qualitative research study explored the barriers single-parent mothers experienced and the strengths they possessed in their attempts at re-entering the workforce 4 months after graduating from a Career Explorations program. The findings revealed that sole support mothers encounter multiple barriers upon entering the job market including: difficulty with balancing family life responsibilities with obtaining an income, negative attitudes and stigma held by society and employers towards single mothers, lack of recognition of job skills, low wages and ethnic discrimination. A positive attitude, spiritual faith and the ability to perform one's job well were factors that contributed to the women's efforts and resiliency at securing work. Both study participants expressed their views regarding single mothers as being a "unique group of individuals" with "specialized needs." Recommendations for programs included the development of a "coffee house" designed specifically for single mothers where they can gain support and learn from the successes of other single mothers. The study concludes with a review of the implications for social work practice and possibilities for future research.

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Finally, I want to dedicate this thesis to my son, Bryant as he proved to be resilient and self-sufficient during the many months writing my thesis. A tall order for a young teenager. I would also like to thank my family, friends and a special thanks to Dr. Joey Edwardh for her undivided attention and encouragement during my pursuit of my journey.

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## **Chapter One**

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the last 20 years, Canadians have witnessed a major restructuring of the welfare system by the federal government (Breitkreuz, 2005). Accompanied with these changes has been the implementation of employment support and training programs designed to assist the unemployed (Breitkreuz, 2005), including single-parent mothers, in re-entering the labour market and lessening their dependency on the state (Christopher, 2004). Within the new welfare regime, participation in the workforce is strongly promoted and encouraged among job seekers including female lone parents (Dean, 2003). Underlying the welfare state ideology is the notion of “individualism” (Brodie, 1999, p. 44) and “accepting responsibility” (McDonald & Marston, 2005, p.375) for one’s situation. Through technologies within the “advanced liberal” state (McDonald & Marston, 2005, p.375) individual situations are standardized and routinized reducing one’s experiences and struggles (De Montigny, 2003) which has serious consequences for sole support mothers. As more single mothers enter into the paid work force, they are unmistakably “at a disadvantaged position in the labour market” (Evans, 2007, p.32) and are on an unequal playing field due to the number of barriers that they face (East, 1999). This market driven government approach blames women for their misfortune (Brodie, 1999) and leaves them struggling on their own to fight against structural conditions wherein they have little chance of succeeding.

As a social worker employed in the nonprofit sector in the field of employment and training services for over 12 years, I have witnessed how changes in welfare reform policies have gravely affected sole support mothers. Having worked with numerous

women in receipt of government assistance, I have observed the institutional barriers that they encounter in accessing employment/training services within the social service delivery system. Stricter controls and eligibility requirements in acquiring funding for training, pressures by case managers to find any type of job and a lack of understanding by funders as to the personal stressors women face in becoming economically independent create hardships that affect their ability to exit from the system.

Some of the barriers identified by sole support mothers in acquiring employment were inadequate childcare, limited skills and education, lack of transportation and abusive employers. I have counselled women who have suffered from depression and other mental health problems as a result of coping with the financial stress and responsibilities of being a sole support mother while at the same time trying to secure a job.

Based on my own experience, the primary focus of government is to help job seekers move off the system by finding the fastest route to employment, thus ensuring as little cost to the state as possible. Less energy is expended on developing services that acknowledge the multiple challenges that single mothers experience and how they potentially impact their decisions or ability to get or sustain a job. As a result, this creates a situation wherein single mothers find themselves relying on the state for longer periods of time, or leaving the system only to return to it rather than having access to services that ensure long-term sustainable employment. As a social worker who is a strong proponent of social justice, I have struggled with this business centred approach to employment services and questioned whose interests are being served? Who is benefiting? In managing government funded employment support programs, such as the Career



Explorations program at The Centre for Skills Development and Training, meeting employment quotas is a requirement of the service provider delivering the program. Graduates of the Career Explorations course are expected to be working four months after exiting the program. However, when doing a four month follow up review, I observed that many single mothers had not obtained work and continued to struggle in moving forward with their job goals. I was compelled to find out why they were having difficulty and what were the reasons that they perceived as preventing them from transitioning into the job market. Equally intriguing to me were those few single mothers who had successfully achieved economic self-sufficiency and thus questioned what were the factors that contributed to their success. As a sole support mother who is passionate about helping unemployed women, I felt strongly about the need to direct my thesis for the Masters of Social Work program towards exploring these concerns and provide women with an opportunity to tell their stories and speak about their experiences. Little attention has been paid by welfare researchers as to the factors impacting single-parent mothers (Danziger et al., 1999; Kalil et al., 1998) and their views (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003) in accessing employment upon leaving a job preparation/career planning program.

Subsequently, I chose the Career Explorations program at The Centre for Skills Development and Training in Mississauga as the site for this research project.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of single mothers <sup>1</sup> in determining the barriers they perceived as impacting their ability to access employment. It also proposed to explore the personal attributes or factors that contributed to their

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<sup>1</sup> Although, the women in the study are separated or divorced and much of the literature related to women and employment pertains to women who are separated or divorced, it is acknowledged that many women who were never in a relationship are also single mothers.

attempts at obtaining employment. In addition, the research study proposed to gain insight into whether the four month target was a realistic time frame for sole support mothers to successfully get a job. My hope was to gather data about women's impressions regarding the four month time frame. Specifically, for those who gained employment, what aspects helped them to meet the target and for those who were unemployed, what social supports did they require to help them in their efforts to get a job.

It was hoped that through the findings of this research study that knowledge would be provided to the social work community regarding the development of programs and services that best serve the needs of sole support mothers in order to improve and enhance their lives.

## Chapter Two

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### The Welfare State and Single-parent Mothers

Considerable attention has been paid to the number of single-parent mothers receiving assistance in the welfare system (Youngblut, Brady, Brooten & Thomas, 2000). Far more women with children are depending upon the government for financial support as a result of the changes to the welfare system in the past decade (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003). The Ontario Social Assistance Quarterly Statistical Report (2007) produced by the Ministry of Community and Social Services revealed that in 2006 single-parent mothers made up the majority of family benefits and general welfare caseloads for a total of 192,564. Although, this figure has fluctuated slightly, it has remained fairly consistent since 2001 with the number of single-parent mothers far exceeding the number of single persons (110,501) and couples (78,930) in receipt of benefits (Ontario Social Assistance Quarterly Statistical Report, 2007), thus making single-parent mothers the most vulnerable group at risk. Although records are not kept by the federal government as to specific population groups (like single-parent mothers) that are in receipt of Employment Insurance Benefits<sup>2</sup> at any given time of the year, statistics revealed that of the “660,000 unemployed individuals eligible for Employment Insurance benefits in 1998, two-thirds (66%) of adult men were potentially eligible, compared with only (53%) of women”

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<sup>2</sup> **Statistics Canada** does not provide a breakdown of specific populations groups receiving E.I benefits. Definitions are given for potentially eligible for E.I benefits, unemployed and reference week. **Potentially eligible for E.I benefits** is applied to anyone who does not have a job in the reference week or was receiving E.I benefits or was deemed able to receive benefits because of having been previously employed during a 12 month period and had not quit a job. **Unemployed** is defined as those individuals who were not working but were ready and able to work and could start work within 4 weeks. **Reference week** is an arbitrary week chosen every month for which work force activity and status is known. Taken from the **Report on the Main Results of the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, 1998**.

(Daily Statistics Canada, 1999, p.3). It would appear that little has changed since 1999 as statistics revealed that in 2007, “only one in three unemployed women collected employment insurance benefits” (Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action [FAFIA], 2007, March, p.4). This disparity between women and men is largely due to “an E.I system that is based on the standard male job of full-time, full year”(“Seeking Fairness,” 2007, p. 6). Thus, women find themselves discriminated against under the new rules for Employment Insurance which were introduced in the federal budget in 1997 as most women work part-time or in short term jobs therefore, making it unlikely for them to obtain employment insurance benefits (“Seeking Fairness,” 2007). Ultimately, they are left with having to rely on other sources of income including social assistance benefits in order to care for themselves and their children. According to Angleton (2005) the vast majority of lone mothers who are employed in part-time positions are also recipients of federal or provincial income assistance.

### **Neo-liberalism and the Welfare State**

The need to reshape and restructure welfare policies was initiated by the federal government in the United States in 1996 as a means to reduce caseload size and cut welfare costs (Christopher, 2004). As it appeared that more women were entering into the paid labour market, it was the government’s perception that recipients of government assistance (predominantly single mothers) should not be allowed to remain at home and care for their children but rather to find employment (Brock, Butler & Long, 1993). Social welfare policies endorsing workfare programs were developed over the years in order to move welfare recipients off of government assistance and into the labour market.

Although changes to the welfare system swept across the United States in the mid

1990's, Britain, Australia (McDonald & Marston, 2005) as well as Canada were equally affected (Breitkreuz, 2005). Over the past ten years, in an effort to decrease the federal deficit, curb spending and balance budgets, (Breitkreuz, 2005) the federal government in Canada has adopted a business management approach to welfare reform similar to other countries when dealing with the issue of unemployment. Since the early 1990's the government has restructured the welfare state and its policies altering how social programs are delivered and organized to Canadians under the "ideological umbrella of neo-liberalism" (Breitkreuz, 2005, p.148). With the restructuring has come a lessening of the federal government's involvement in social welfare policies and the downloading of responsibility onto the public and nonprofit sector (Brodie, 1999). With the shift in financial responsibility, there has been an increase in administrative and bureaucratic procedures placed on the social service sector (Eakin, 2007) coupled with an onerous demand for accountability, efficiency and effectiveness in program delivery. This "market oriented" (Breitkreuz, 2005, p.147) approach to welfare policies was endorsed by the government to manage the economic risks in society particularly the issue of unemployment while at the same time maintaining the social fabric or safety net of the social service delivery system (McDonald & Marston, 2005). This change in fiscal responsibility by the federal government led to a focus towards cutting back funds, implementing tighter controls on program dollars and placing greater onus on individuals to take ownership of their own well being (Weil & Karls, 1985; Brodie, 1999). At the root of this market driven ideology was "a tidal shift from communitarian and collective values towards notions of family and individual responsibility" (Brodie, 1999, p.43).

Neo-liberal ideologies have penetrated into the public sector resulting in a

movement away from the needs of the consumer to a “managerialism of service provision” (Payne, 2000). One of the by products of neo-liberalism has been the transfer from handling unemployment as a job creation project based on the belief that people are unemployed because there are insufficient jobs in a capitalist society to an emphasis being placed on the behaviour of the individual as the origin of her or his unemployment (McDonald & Marston, 2005). Thus, joblessness is delegated to the private realm and attention is directed away from examining the larger social and economic issues in society (Brodie, 1999).

This neo-liberalism ideology has penetrated downward into all levels of the political arena as witnessed with the election of the progressive conservative government in Ontario in the mid 1990’s and the introduction of the Harris workfare program, commonly known as Ontario Works. As a result of the cost cutting measures implemented by the federal government to reduce the deficit and curb spending, the transfer of monies to the provinces to administer social programs drastically changed. Breitkreuz (2005) explains that government funding that was dispersed to the provinces before 1996 under the Canadian Assistance Plan (CAP) was targeted to provide assistance to the poor and disadvantaged however, after 1996 with the change to “block-funding” (p.150) tighter controls and regulations were implemented in how money was to be administered. Eligibility requirements for employment insurance benefits became stricter as did the requirements for social assistance with greater emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility to the state (Breitkreuz, 2005).

This change in welfare reform had a great impact on sole support mothers (Breitkreuz, 2005). Prior to the new social welfare regime, single-parent mothers

were able to stay at home and care for their children (Christopher, 2004). Brodie (1999)

notes that:

“under the welfare state, single mothers were primarily seen as mothers who were unemployable, at least until their children entered school. They now have been recast as potential employees who need surveillance and discipline in order to make them take personal responsibility for their children”(p.45).

MacDonald and Marston (2005) purport that the notion of self-determination, individualization and self-motivation of the person are at the heart of the employment insurance system. Surveillance and monitoring of the unemployed (Brodie, 1999) are paramount under the new workfare model and noncompliance results in financial penalty or disciplinary action. Being seen as dependent on government assistance is perceived by society as a sign of inherent character defects (McDonald & Marston, 2005; Breitzkreuz, 2005). This is particularly trying for sole support mothers who find themselves on income benefits due to stressful family circumstances such as divorce or separation which further stigmatizes them placing them ultimately at fault and responsible for their own plight. Similarly, for women who were not in a relationship at the time of being a single mother, they also can experience distress due to negative societal attitudes projected towards them by being unattached.

### **Employment Programs and Single-parent Mothers**

Studies conducted on single-parent mothers and the welfare system have focused primarily on demographic factors (Kalil et al., 1998), attitudes regarding work, social assistance payments (Youngblut et al., 2000) reducing welfare costs (Bok, 2003) and how to get single-parent mothers “job ready” (McDonald & Marston, 2005, p. 377) and transition them into employment of whatever type leading to economic self-sufficiency (McDonald & Marston, 2005; Bok, 2003). Within the welfare system, there is an

underlying philosophy that adheres to the notion of “work first” (Dean, 2003, p.441) and finding the shortest route to employment and is based on streamlining, “individualism and economism”(Brodie, 1999, p.45).

To facilitate the movement of sole support mothers towards increased workforce participation and away from reliance on the state, numerous federal and provincially funded employment support and training programs have been developed across Canada in recent years. In Ontario, the Harris government’s welfare reform policies took the form of Ontario Works with the creation of employment support, job development, skills training and community work programs mandated for individuals on social assistance, including sole support mothers. The philosophy of Ontario Works as stated in a government publication entitled, “Broken Promises: Welfare Reform in Ontario” (1999) was simply “ to get people off assistance as quickly and as cheaply as possible, minimizing the public investment required to accomplish this, moving them toward the achievement and maintenance of employment”(p.8). Federally funded programs delivered by nonprofit organizations in Ontario followed suit. Employment and training services in Ontario provided four types of programs: career planning (career assessment workshops), skills enhancement services (upgrading, education, occupational skills training), job search assistance (job finding clubs, job placement, employer wage subsidy programs) and job retention assistance (job maintenance programs).

For example, in southern Ontario, programs are specifically designed for single-parent mothers to help them develop employability and job search skills. Various nonprofit organizations in Toronto such as Working Skills Centre and Times Change provide career planning workshops, upgrading, language instruction and skills training



programs to women in the community in order to help them with their career and educational needs while transitioning back into the labour market (Working Skills Centre, 2002; “Welcome to Times Change,” n. d.). Opportunity for Advancement, a nonprofit feminist organization offers women on social assistance, including single-parent mothers, a 6 week course covering career planning workshops, job search techniques like resume preparation and how to prepare for an interview, training/education information as well communication skills to help women become financially independent (“OFA Programs,” n. d.). Similarly, Ontario Works offers a host of programs including “On Track,” which is open to all social assistance recipients and is designed to assist individuals with assessing their aptitudes and career interests, acquiring high school credits as well as enhancing their job search skills so that they can access further training or employment opportunities (“Employment Programs and Services, Halton Region,” n. d.).

It is apparent that the current programs that exist in Ontario provide single mothers with a host of tools and resources to get them “job ready” so that they can re-enter the workforce, however, little is mentioned about their stressors in life or their ongoing struggles to successfully get employed. A few programs are available to sole support mothers that address the social stressors that they may encounter in their daily lives as well as how to cope with them in their exit from social assistance and transition to employment. Women under Stress, and Breaking the Cycle are two programs offered by Opportunity for Advancement that provide support and information to women who have experienced violence or abuse and teaches them techniques to manage stress, enhance their self-esteem, cope with health concerns as well as foster skills in how to find a job (“OFA Programs,” n. d.). There appears to be a scarcity of these types of programs

for women offered in other areas of the province. Based on my own experience, when referring sole support mothers to services within the community to assist them in dealing with emotional stressors in their lives, there are limited resources available to them other than personal counselling services or Women's Centres.

In essence, most of the current literature highlights employment support programs designed for single-parent mothers to move them rapidly into the workforce (Cancian & Meyer, 2000; McPhee & Bronstein, 2003) and thus, the Career Explorations program operated by The Centre for Skills Development and Training equally follows suit.

The Career Explorations program in Mississauga, the site for this research study, is a three-week career planning/job preparation course designed to assist unemployed individuals, including sole support mothers, to obtain a solid career direction, learn employability and job search skills as well as develop a return to work action plan that is targeted towards employment. This (Employment Ontario) government funded program requires individuals to have found a job, four months following completion of the program (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2007; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2006). As individuals are expected to be employed (Dean, 2003) and may experience difficulty in doing so, referral agents (case managers and agency workers) increase their monitoring of the unemployed (Moffatt, 1999; McDonald & Marston, 2005; Campbell & Gregor, 2002). This surveillance helps to ensure that contract obligations are met and program funding is renewed. Generally speaking, program statistics reveal that between 35 – 40% of graduates from Career Explorations obtain employment four months after leaving the program. No statistics are kept regarding sole support mothers. Given the low percentage of unemployed individuals

obtaining employment upon their graduation and given that single mothers face greater barriers to employment than do other marginalized groups, the question then arises as to whether the four month time frame for individuals to re-enter the workforce is reasonable. When asked, “Why four months?” the Senior Programs Manager of Career Services and Skilled Trades at The Centre for Skills Development and Training replied:

“When the Career Explorations proposal was initially written, the thinking was that two intervals of follow up, one and four months, would be a good span of time to be connecting with clients who had completed the program. Follow up at four months is to determine statistical progress that will demonstrate success to the funder. This ensures the continuation of the program. If the client needs more help, at this point they can be referred to another intervention. In reality, we know that six months is far more reasonable to get employed. The funder requires us to do it at four months“ (personal communication, April 21, 2008).

Most government funded work related programs have employment target outcomes specified at 3, 4 or 6 months post completion of an employment/training intervention (Buchanan & Klassen, 2005; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). A research study conducted by Ward and Riddle (2002) revealed that clients who were found to be “self-sufficient on all five employability dimensions (career decision-making, skills enhancement, job search, job maintenance and ongoing career management), in an “Employment Readiness Scale”(3) “were most likely to be employed within 12 weeks”(p.6). Although, it would appear that there is a likelihood of individuals achieving employment within 12 weeks should they have mastered the five employability areas, an individual’s success at getting a job seems to be based solely on her/his level of competency in career and job search skills rather than in how her/his barriers might affect her/his ability to get employed quickly. It is essential to factor into the equation the multiple barriers that single mothers experience in the job market such as racial and gender discrimination, and low wage earnings (McIntyre, Officer & Robinson, 2003)

created by unequal social and economic conditions, and how these elements can diminish the chances of single mothers becoming financially independent in 12 weeks. Further, although, additional interventions may be available to single mothers to help facilitate the potential for a quicker re-entry into the workforce, they are often short term or may not address their needs. The three and fourth month time frames for obtaining employment are particularly challenging for marginalized groups like single-parent mothers who already suffer from hardships and inequities in society. It is important for government funders to re-evaluate program employment targets that fit with the realities and life experiences of single mothers.

### **Barriers to Employment and Single-parent Mothers**

In a society where it is still assumed that women are in heterosexual unions, “lone mothers typically face greater barriers to employment than coupled mothers” (Angleton, 2005, p. 9). Some of these barriers include inadequate childcare, lack of family support, limited skills and education, and lack of transportation (Kalil et al., 1998; Angleton, 2005). Danziger et al. (1999) noted that the majority of welfare programs do not provide the necessary services to address these employment barriers despite studies (Kalil et al., 1998) that show the factors that hinder employment. There is a shortage of public funding for affordable daycare in Ontario and most of Canada with the exception of Quebec (Ontario Social Safety Network, 1996; Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2003).

Childcare continues to be a major obstacle for single-parent mothers in re-entering the workforce. Finding safe and adequate care for their children is of primary importance to sole support mothers from both a financial and emotional level (Youngblut et al., 2000). Securing affordable and dependable childcare, particularly finding a

responsible and trustworthy individual to look after their children, would facilitate a less stressful process for sole support mothers and provide the opportunity to job search or consider training options (Youngblut et al., 2000). Single-parent mothers who attempted to leave employment insurance or social assistance benefits and re-enter the labour force by quickening their job search, reported “having little time to find care, unable to visit potential sites because of a lack of transportation and received little assistance with the search” (DeBord, Fanning Cannu & Kerpelman, 2000, p.318).

Another barrier to employment for single women with children is the lack of financial and social support from family members and/or friends. Youngblut et al. (2000) cites that although, family and friends were available to provide childcare, they tended to be less supportive of work or school endeavours attempted by single mothers. In addition, the amount of involvement by the father in assisting with childcare and financial obligations either, positively impacted single mothers efforts to actively look for work or negatively deterred them due to a lack of resources, therefore, choosing to remain on benefits (Youngblut et al., 2000).

Among the many challenges that sole support mothers have to face, feelings of social isolation and being left out of the regular stream of society were also considered obstacles. McIntyre et al. (2003) explains that lone mothers “are isolated from the mainstream activities of society such as recreation, education and other social activities” (p.326) which can be largely attributed to their impoverished state and lack of social supports. McIntyre et al. (2003) explains that this “exclusion limits their opportunities to improve their circumstances”(p.326) and increase their potential to succeed.

Despite the overwhelming statistics and evidence that support the fact that

education and training are essential in improving the economic status and mobility of single-parent mothers (Bok, 2004), rigid government welfare policies and the philosophy of “finding the shortest route to the labour force,” increasingly create institutional barriers for sole support mothers in their potential to access work and obtain higher levels of income. Government regulations that restrict financial assistance to individuals on social assistance and employment insurance benefits to merely one year of upgrading and education (Zhan & Pandey, 2004) present hurdles to sole support mothers whose educational needs are much greater. Bok (2004) cited that “research has repeatedly shown that approximately 50% of welfare recipients have not graduated from high school”(p.46) and among social assistance recipients in Ontario, “35 % lone parents” (Ornstein, 1995, p.26) have not completed a high school diploma. The need for further education and training is paramount to sole support mothers in becoming financially self-sufficient and creating opportunities for job security (Bok, 2004).

In addition, single-parent mothers who had made the transition from income assistance to work and then were laid off and able to qualify for Employment Insurance Benefits reported that it was a tedious and lengthy process to apply for funding for training (Working Skills Centre, 2002). This mandate sends the message to poor women with children that engaging in further postsecondary education is not a good investment (Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

Another barrier for single-parent mothers that was supported by the literature is inadequate transportation. As nonprofit agencies provide employment programs and services to sole support mothers, transportation to these programs and to assist with finding employment is essential. The marginal level of income benefits provided to

support a single mother and her children in attempting to return to the workforce or seeking re-training does not adequately cover the transportation needs of women living in urban cities nor, foremost, rural areas. Danziger et al. (1999) cited that transportation was a significant factor among sole support mothers on financial assistance in their ability to access employment or retain a job, as many could not afford a car, maintain the cost of keeping one or had a driver's license. In addition, lack of bus routes or irregular hours and schedules presented as a barrier to finding suitable or accessible workplaces for sole support mothers to obtain employment.

In addition to this array of barriers, little mention has been given to single-parent mothers who suffer from depression, substance abuse, family difficulties and mental health problems as a result of coping with the responsibilities and consequences of being a sole support mother and which may impact their potential to secure employment (Kalil et al., 1998). Despite the government's investment in employment programs, job search services do not "systematically assess whether undiagnosed barriers to employment such as basic work skills and experience, inadequate knowledge of workplace norms, transportation problems, health and mental health issues, substance abuse and domestic violence limits recipients capacities to work regularly"(Danziger et al., 1999, p.2). These barriers and women's perception of them, have not been thoroughly explored in the literature.

### **Societal Attitudes and Dependency Discourse – Single-parent Mothers**

Among the many obstacles that single-parent mothers face, Youngblut et al. (2000) indicated that there is also a prevailing attitude and stereotypical view held in society about single mothers in their desire to gain employment. Single mothers may

have a strong desire to work but experience challenges and obstacles in doing so.

Youngblut et al. (2000) cited:

“media stereotyping has suggested that single mothers engage in behaviours to avoid employment; however, a recent study found that single mothers prefer to be employed but have difficulty doing so. Although, there have been qualitative studies of employment issues with married mothers with young children, similar studies of single mothers have not been reported. In addition, there are few quantitative studies on factors related to employment of single mothers” (p.126).

There is a common belief that sole support mothers are dependent and rely on the government to take care of them. This societal attitude is not only damaging to their self-image but further accentuates their economically deprived situations (Litcher & Jayakody, 2002). Christopher (2004) noted that there is a “dependency cycle or discourse” (p.160) that is prevalent in society about single mothers being lazy, idle and dependent on government assistance which needs to be dismantled. This perception is endorsed by social policies that promote reliance on a man as a solution to single mothers exiting the welfare system (Christopher, 2004). Although, there is the belief by society and welfare policies that single mother’s cohabitation or marriage to a man is likely to lead to improved economic status and greater independence, Christopher (2004) stated that “partners” incomes are generally not sufficient to keep lone mothers from needing social assistance” (p.144). Further, Christopher (2004) explains that there are many factors that need to be considered both economically, socially and culturally that work into the equation and that the “relationship between welfare policy and family formation is far from clear”(p.153).

Similarly, Pulkingham (1995) cites that federal and provincial legislation endorsing child support payments has been a strategy to help disadvantaged single mothers gain financial independence and reduce government costs. As many sole support



mothers need to depend on social assistance due to outstanding support payments owed, enforcement of child support payments are designed to reduce women's dependency on the state and promote the image of "the man as the breadwinner" and women's reliance on a man in order to be economically taken care of (Pulkingham, 1995). The dependency discourse reinforces the perception of lazy single mothers, reducing caseloads and perpetuating the belief in two-parent families to avoid reliance on the state.

Although, there is the perception that sole support mothers will achieve greater economic self-sufficiency and less dependency on the state by participating in employment support programs leading to employment, this notion by government policy-makers fails to address the realities of the job market faced by single mothers. Full-time employment often competes with the demands of parenting. Looking through a critical feminist lens, Breitkreuz (2005) analyzed government workfare policies under the guise of post liberalism in order to "deconstruct the concepts of gender equality, dependency and self-sufficiency as they are understood in current welfare-to-work initiatives"(p.148). Breitkreuz (2005) advocated that workfare programs need to acknowledge "the gendered nature of work, employment and poverty" (p.148). By government ignoring the challenges and hardships experienced by female sole support parents in the labour market such as precarious employment conditions "as well as the caring work that mothers do, they will be unresponsive to the realities of women's lives and therefore ineffective" (Breitkreuz, 2005, p.148) further perpetuating single mother's dependency on and off the social assistance system.

Coupled with the negative public attitudes and dependency discourse inherent in notions about single mothers, there is also a language discourse that is pervasive in

society to describe single mothers. Albelda, Himmelweit and Humphries (2004) noted a variety of terms used to describe sole support mothers including “lone mothers, single mothers, sole parents, female headed households” (p.1). Albelda et al. (2004) explained that “lone mothers are not alone”(p.1). They are parents who struggle to support their families while attempting to access the job market (Albelda et al., 2004). Lone mothers are frowned upon by society due to the singular nature of their lives in raising their children on their own, whereas widows are exempted from this stereotypical point of view (Albelda et al., 2004). In general, most women experience the gender inequalities that are prevalent in society regardless of whether they are single mothers or widows (Albelda et al., 2004). In addition, government policies also play a role in how lone mothers are perceived or treated in society. Himmelweit et al. (2004) noted that although “lone parent“ is a gender neutral policy discourse endorsed amongst many countries encompassing both “lone fathers and lone mothers”(p.238), it fails to “operate in a world of gender equality”(p.238). Uttley (2000) explained that as a result of the framing of policies towards a language discourse of “lone parent families,” lone mothers have been left out of having a voice in policymaking and “find themselves in a position of ‘other’ standing outside and to some degree in opposition to the emergent dominant discourses” (p.444).

The increase in the number of sole support mothers in society has prompted an awareness of the need to alter social policies and address how single mothers are spoken about. The present discourse language tends to stigmatize single mothers, hinders their self-image and deems them invisible. Uttley (2000) cited that welfare policies must not silence the opinions of “lone mothers,” under the umbrella of the traditional family unit

but reconstruct discourse language in a more positive light celebrating lone motherhood” (Uttley, 2000).

Christopher (2004) stated that it is important to challenge the system and view “lone parenthood as a choice rather than a social pathology”(p.161). This perception that single parenthood is a social ill, turns the focus away from seeking strategies to improve the inequities pervasive in the economic and social structures. This leads to a revolving door effect where single mothers cycle between government assistance and work, and “the packaging of work and welfare” (Christopher, 2004, p.155).

Stereotypical views and attitudes, childcare issues, transportation and a lack of family support are many of the factors that affect single-parent mothers in their opportunities to gain employment. However, little literature or research has been cited on the strengths, unique abilities and the resiliency that sole support mother’s possess (Cancian & Meyer, 2000) and its impact on their success in achieving employment and improving their lives.

### **Employment and Single-parent Mothers**

Census data compiled by Statistics Canada (2006) ”revealed that 1,132,290 million female lone parent families reside in Canada. FAFIA (2007) revealed that “ in 2004, 68% of female lone parents were employed”(p.1) and “far more women (27%) then men (11%) were employed in part-time jobs or temporary work in the workforce” (FAFIA, 2007, p.2). Female lone parents who had exited from social assistance and were tracked three months later, were less likely to be working full-time than single people on welfare in Ontario, yet more likely to have secured part-time employment (Workfare Watch, 1999). Although women, including single-parent mothers want full-time

work (Evans, 2007), part-time work appears to be far more pervasive among women in the labour force. Poor women are willing to seek opportunities to gain stable permanent work in order to support their children (Bok, 2004) however, increasingly, they resort to whatever jobs are available due to limited choices (Evans, 2007) that may or may not meet their needs. These part-time jobs usually do not have benefits such as pension plans, sick time, paid vacation, medical or dental insurance. They may consist of irregular and sporadic work hours (Christopher, 2004) which conflicts with their children's activities and needs. The dual dilemma of sole support mothers wanting to earn a living in order to support their children coupled with the need to be available for their children places considerable strain on these mothers as they are alone in dealing with their situation (Himmelweit et al., 2004; Albelda et al., 2004). Similarly, by providing a standard of living for their children, they run the risk of spending less quality time with their families, thus finding themselves caught in a dual bind balancing home and work life (Albelda et al., 2004). Although, single mothers tend to be employed, there is little evidence to suggest that the jobs that they obtain provide them with enough income to leave income assistance or rise above poverty levels (Evans, Eyre, Millar & Sarre, 2003). This places women, particularly sole support mothers at a disadvantage, as part-time employment yields low wages, lacks benefits and is precarious (Evans, 2007). Not only do sole support mothers find themselves employed in part-time, temporary or contract work, they are more often employed in low wage jobs such as in service sector positions (retail outlets, clerical and financial services, tourism industry) (Evans, 2007) or in helping professions (personal support workers or childcare providers) (Mosher, Evans & Little, 2004).

It is reported that women still earn less money than men performing the same functions in their jobs. Morissette and Picot (2005) noted that in “2000, almost one-quarter (23%) of Canadian lone mothers were low-wage earners, more than double the incidence for lone fathers (11%)(as cited in Evans, 2007, p.32). Alfred (2005) noted that for poor women of color, socioeconomic status and gender are not only important factors that hinder their prospects of earning a higher income but that “race is also a structural barrier that compounds their efforts” (p.366) towards achieving economic independence (Alfred, 2005). Alfred (2005) explains that employers “overwhelmingly cited racial discrimination as a barrier to Black women’s access and advancement in the workplace” (p.360) as well as their restriction to job opportunities within white workplace settings (Alfred, 2005). Similarly, the lack of “Canadian work experience and English language skills” (Working Skills Centre, 2002, p.6) are problems for foreign trained immigrant women who come to Canada hoping for economic prosperity and find themselves resorting to low paying dead end jobs in order to survive (Working Skills Centre, 2002).

In summary, women continue to make up a disproportionate amount of the low incomes in society and are the poorest group in Canada and more often, sole support parents (FAFIA, 2007). Amongst all single-parent families in Canada, 38% were reported as having “income that fell below the after-tax Low Income Cut offs, compared to just 13% of male lone parent families” (FAFIA, 2007, p.3). Women continue to experience higher levels of poverty than do men, wherein 2003 “the poverty rate was 48.9% for single-parent mothers compared to 20% for single parent fathers” (FAFIA, 2007, p.3). While government sponsored employment and training support programs are used as a

means to move sole support mothers into jobs, they are faced with labour market conditions that do not provide opportunities to sustaining employment (Evans, 2007).

Government policies need to reflect restructuring and reform of the labour market (Evans, 2007). Job creation policies that advocate permanent employment rather than precarious work (Bok, 2004; Evans, 2007), improved working conditions (Himmelweit et al., 2004), increased childcare subsidies (DeBord et al., 2000; Millar & Rowlingson, 2001) and higher wages is critical to reducing the hardships of women (Breitkreuz, 2005), particularly female lone parents in society. Greater education of employers and the government, and the acknowledgement of inequities within the broader social and economic context such as poor labour standard laws, inflexible employers (Himmelweit et al., 2004) and gender discrimination (Alfred, 2005) in the workplace need to be addressed and challenged.

### **Strengths Possessed and Single-parent Mothers**

Although more sole support mothers are participating in the workforce, the strengths, strategies and social supports that contribute to single mothers successfully obtaining employment and becoming financially independent have not been thoroughly researched (Cancian & Meyer, 2000). Similarly, considerable emphasis has been directed towards the problems and difficulties in single-parent families but little on their abilities or resiliency factors (Ford-Gilboe, 2000). According to Ford-Gilboe (2000), “existing studies have focused primarily on the risks or vulnerability of single-parent families, but research addressing the capabilities of these families is almost non-existent” (p.1). Research on single-parent mothers’ personal strengths and characteristics in securing work is limited, however, DeBord et al. (2000) noted that appropriate work skills and

experience, life management skills and social supports were seen as critical elements in single mother's success in obtaining and maintaining employment. Having the abilities and education to be able to effectively perform the tasks of a job as well as the job readiness skills to retain a particular type of occupation were deemed necessary to meet the challenges of paid employment (DeBord et al., 2000). Similarly, being able to successfully budget money while making the transition from benefits to employment was important. In addition, setting priorities, organizing their time and planning ahead were cited as skills necessary for successful entry into the workforce (DeBord et al., 2000). There appears to be no conclusive evidence or research to support whether personal characteristics and attitudes towards work are associated with sole support mothers success in re-entering the workforce. In DeBord et al. (2000) research study, sole support mothers "described positive mental attitudes, such as self-confidence, determination, self-motivation and self-esteem, as critical to both job success and an easier transition into work"(p.319). However, few studies have examined the aspects of personal strengths or characteristics and their association with female lone parents re-entry into employment or included these factors in analyzing employment success of single mothers on federal or provincial income benefits (Kalil, Schweingruber & Seefeldt, 2001).

This literature review has provided an overview of the research studies conducted on single mothers and the welfare state. The gaps in the literature and research highlight where further exploration is required not only with regard to the barriers that sole support mothers face but more importantly in relation to the personal characteristics and strengths they possess in transitioning to employment. The purpose of this qualitative study was to

learn more about sole support mothers' experiences in their attempts at employment and allow their perspectives and voice to be heard. In addition, it is important to heighten awareness of the ongoing demands and the struggles that single-parent mothers experience between earning a living and being the sole caregivers for their children. Feminists have had a long standing pre-occupation with women's unpaid work in caring for their children/elders, managing housework and the "unequal sexual division of labour" (Christopher, 2004, p.154). Consequently, undervalued and "unpaid domestic labour" (Luxton & Vosko, 1998) has hindered women from contributing to the marketplace, resulting in their position of subordination and subservience (Luxton & Vosko, 1998). Conversely, with the increased emphasis on single-parent mothers moving into the paid labour force and off government assistance, more investigation must be done to understand how single-parent mothers are to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities and conduct household chores while still being expected to maintain a job (Christopher, 2004). Government policymakers need to acknowledge and validate the role of parenting in society and develop strategies that make both work and caregiving appealing (Himmelweit et al., 2004).



## **Chapter Three**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the question, “What are the barriers experienced by single-parent mothers and the strengths they possess in attempting to gain employment four months following their graduation from a job/career preparation, Career Explorations program at The Centre for Skills Development and Training. This study contributed to understanding whether the federal government’s requirement of individuals being employed four months following completion of the program is a reasonable time frame for sole support mothers to re-enter the workforce. Secondly, it provided an insight into what social and community supports sole support mothers might need in order to succeed.

#### **Design**

A qualitative design approach was adopted for this research project. Upon close review of welfare reform research studies examining sole support mothers’ transition to employment, Christopher (2004) suggests that most studies have been largely quantitative in nature and statistically based rather than qualitative which emphasizes the daily experiences of sole support mothers. Finch (1991) explains, “qualitative methods for research seek to make visible the needs and experiences of women” (p.195). In addition, Luborsky & Rubinstein (1995) note that qualitative approaches, “permit us to explore diversities in cultural and personal beliefs, values, ideals and experiences” (p.90). I was interested in using a qualitative approach for my research so that I could capture the personal realities, perceptions and daily challenges faced by sole support mothers in their

attempts at accessing employment. Throughout my experience, the majority of government funded training and employment programs have focused primarily on gathering quantitative results based on numbers rather than examining the real life experiences of individuals in need.

I chose to use a critical/feminist research methodology as I embrace a feminist perspective and wanted to make single-parent mothers the centre of attention in the study.

Neuman (1997) explains that:

“Critical Social Science defines social science as a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves” (p.74).

Critical research ascribes to a realist perspective of society and acknowledges that it is “shaped by social, political and cultural structures” (Neuman, 1997, p.75) that evolve over time. It seeks to unravel the myths and distorted realities underlying the social structures by challenging and exposing them and recognizing how individuals are dominated and feel a sense of helplessness. A critical/feminist approach upholds the ideals of equality and dignity, and advocates for social change allowing disadvantaged individuals to feel empowered by participating in altering their social conditions by taking political and collective action to eradicate social injustice. This research study adopted a critical framework in order to allow for single-parent mothers to be actively involved, have a voice and feel empowered (Beresford & Evans, 1999).

The Critical Social Science methodology is located in feminism in that it alters sexist knowledge and opts to dismantle gender-based oppression. Neysmith (1995) indicates that feminist methodology does not silence the issue of gender or make it a variable, but rather “emphasizes the centrality of gender in the lives of women and as a

social construct”(p.110) and seeks to “respond to challenges about current understandings of gender arising from social divisions such as class, race, sexual orientation, ability and age”(p.101) that perpetuate inequalities and injustice. In feminist methodology, individual problems are taken out of the private realm and viewed within a larger social context in order to challenge the power relations and authority that permeate within social institutions. Utilizing feminist principles, I explored the current knowledge that prevailed around the barriers and challenges experienced by sole support mothers in gaining employment and examined the “effects of gender on women’s experiences” (Neysmith, 1995, p.59).

Further, it was important to hear the accounts of single mothers’ experiences and understand the factors that impact them in gaining or keeping employment in order to implement social policies that adequately reflect their needs. Finch (1995) emphasizes that whereas in mainstream research policies, women are merely added to the equation or included thereafter, it is essential for social policies to undergo a complete revamping with a new knowledge base that focuses attention on “ the interests of women”(p.199).

### **Ethical Implications**

#### **Role of the Researcher**

In conducting my research project, I reflected upon my role as the researcher as I recognized that I do have the power to shape and influence the course of my research and that I do bring knowledge and a way of understanding to the study. In the feminist/critical social science approach, Neysmith (1995) cites that “the researcher is seen as an active presence in the research process and the construction of findings” (p.56) and that one must be aware of one’s potential to influence the process as it is not always possible to be

totally objective and neutral. According to Neysmith (1995) the researcher within feminist methodology can make attempts to explain and talk about why she is doing the research, “the assumptions underlying it, who she, the researcher is, what experiences she has had and has not had in the area, to include informants in shaping the research design”(p.56). As a researcher, I felt that by telling the participants that I was a social worker in the field and that I had a personal interest in doing the research, it allowed me to remain empathetic and build a rapport with the participants.

I was very conscious of my social location as a white middle class female social work researcher holding a position where power is inherent and working with a disadvantaged group as sole support mothers, thus creating a power imbalance. Given my professional status, class, race and education, I was cognizant of the fact of being perceived as an ‘outsider’ (Lasala, 2003) in conducting the research. To overcome this challenge, I was open to varying points of views and values expressed by the women and encouraged their voices to be heard.

In contrast, I was also an “insider” (Lasala, 2003) thus, being a single mother having worked extensively with female single-parents in my role within employment support programs. Lasala (2003) cites that the benefit of being an insider is that it brings “special knowledge and understanding to the research which can facilitate data collection and analysis”(p.159). As an insider, one can access the population group to be interviewed easier and not generate hostility or suspicion as well as have the closeness of asking more in depth questions that an outsider cannot do as easily. Disclosing that I was a single mother during the interview process appeared to encourage the participants to share their views more openly and honestly which allowed for a richness in the data.

Lasala (2003) purports that participants may communicate sentiments knowing that they would have a voice in the research and understand that something important will be done with it, therefore seeing the benefit of being honest. The downside of being an insider is that one can assume knowledge that one does not have and take shared experiences for granted and fail to look deeper into issues (Lasala, 2003). Although, I am a single mother and can relate to the problems and the stressors pertinent to other single mothers, such as childcare or financial concerns, which could potentially bias my objectivity, I ensured that the experiences and the social location of the single mothers that I interviewed were foremost represented.

### **Sampling**

The research study consisted of a nonprobability sample type, specifically, “purposive sampling which is a practice where subjects are intentionally selected to represent some explicit predefined traits or conditions” (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995, p. 104). A purposive sample was used due to the very nature of the research, thus being qualitative. Luborsky and Rubinstein (1995) write that:

“probability sampling techniques cannot be used for qualitative research by definition because the members of the universe to be sampled are not known as priori, so it is not possible to draw elements for study in proportion of an as yet unknown distribution in the universe sampled” (p.104).

The purposive sample comprised of sole support mothers in receipt of employment insurance, social assistance benefits or child support payments who had completed the Career Explorations program at The Centre for Skills Development and Training Mississauga site location and were part of a four month follow up statistical review. The sample group was taken from those individuals who self-identified as being sole support mothers with children and were unemployed upon entering the Career

Explorations program. Graduates from the Career Explorations program were recruited from intake sessions that were completed from July 2007 to March 2008 which allowed for the four month time frame to elapse prior to potential participants being interviewed. Although viewed as acceptable to potentially recruit “12 to 26 people” (Luborsky and Rubinstein, 1995, p.104) to be interviewed for a study, Luborsky and Rubinstein, 1995; Patton, 1990) explain that with regard to an actual sample size, there is no specific formula or standard used as it can vary based on the number of individuals who wish to participate and the amount of finances and human manpower available for the research. As a result of the low response rate of potential participants for the study, pending time constraints and the exploratory nature of the research, a larger sample size was not feasible. However, the experiences shared by the participants interviewed were important as valuable insights were gained regarding single mothers in their attempts at achieving employment.

#### Research Participants

Two single mothers participated in the study. They were 47 and 55 years of age. One participant had children between the ages of 11 to 15 while the other single mother indicated that her children were beyond school age. Both women were Caucasian, although, one woman had immigrated from an English speaking country. Both single-parent mothers reported varying levels of education consisting of partial university to a college diploma. Reported sources of income included part-time work coupled with social assistance or child support payments. At the time of the interviews, both women were employed part-time and resided in Mississauga.

Given the cultural/ethnic diversity of the population group within the region of Mississauga, participants residing in this area were recruited for the research study. In adhering to a critical/feminist anti-oppressive framework, it was the hope of the researcher that single mothers of varying ethnic and racial backgrounds would come forward and volunteer to participate in the study, however, this did not occur. Nevid and Sta. Maria (1999) cite that resistance or refusal to participate in community research can be attributed to the fact that ethnic minority groups have historically been under-represented in research studies and there is a general feeling of “cultural mistrust” (p.311) among this group when engaging in community research. This mistrust has also been reinforced by the perception that researchers have “represented the interests of the dominant white culture rather than the interests of one’s own community”(Nevid and Sta. Maria, 1999, p.305) therefore, further marginalizing and oppressing persons of color.

### **Recruitment**

When preparing for the study, it was necessary to obtain approval by the Chief Administrative Officer at The Centre for Skills Development and Training to undertake the research project at their Mississauga site location. As a long standing employee with The Centre for Skills Development and Training coupled with my professional designation and strong adherence to social work values and the code of ethics, the management team were receptive to supporting my research. In addition, the government body responsible for monitoring and funding the Career Explorations program at The Centre’s Mississauga site office also gave its approval.

As a Project Coordinator and Social Worker with the Career Explorations program located at the Burlington office facilitating the functions of project management,

counselling and staff supervision and training, I was unable to ask the staff that I directly supervised to recruit participants for the research project as this could appear to be coercive. Therefore, the Career Explorations program located at the Mississauga office was the most appropriate choice to undertake my research study as I did not have any involvement in recruiting, supervising or firing staff at this location nor did I have contact with clients.

To ensure ethical standards and practices were upheld in obtaining participants for the study, recruitment occurred only at the Mississauga site location. Three methods of recruitment were used.

Method one consisted of the staff at the Mississauga office accessing the files of previous graduates from the Career Explorations program who met the sample criteria and were now at the four month statistical review. A mail out consisting of an Information Letter and Consent Form (see Appendix 1) to participate in the research study and a copy of the Interview Guide (see Appendix 3) were sent to participants who met the sample criteria. The Interview Guide was included to give potential participants an opportunity to review the research questions that would be asked. Two participants responded to the mail out and contacted the researcher by telephone to get involved in the project. I explained the purpose of the research as stated in the Information Letter (see Appendix 2) and emphasized that participation in the study was strictly voluntary and that one could choose to withdraw at anytime. The participants were informed that they would not be denied services within the agency should they accept, refuse or withdraw from participating. As the researcher, I did not have any previous knowledge of the individuals who chose to decline. An interview was arranged at a time and location that



was chosen by the participant. As the researcher, I obtained informed consent and a signature by the participant agreeing to the process (see Consent Form to Participate in Research - Appendix 1). The participants were advised that their names would not be identified in the study and all information disclosed remain confidential.

As a second method of recruitment, a poster was used to advertise the study and was displayed at the Mississauga office (see Appendix 4). The poster was made visible at the main entranceway into the office as well as within the training room where the program was held. The poster briefly described the scope of the project and noted the researcher's name as the person to contact should the clients have questions regarding the study or wanted to know more about participating. In this way the participants were able to volunteer for the project and not feel coerced. A final method of recruitment was attempted at the start of each new intake session for the Career Explorations program. The researcher made a brief 10 minute presentation to the students about the purpose of the research as stated in the Information Letter (Appendix 2) in an effort to generate interest. The students were told that the study was approved by The Centre for Skills Development and Training but conducted by McMaster University, Social Work department and if they were interested in participating that they could contact me. The participants were informed that they would not be denied services within the agency should they accept, refuse or withdraw from participating in the project. Using this method, I recruited two participants who expressed an interest in volunteering for the research and recorded their contact information. At the four month interval, the two participants were re-contacted by telephone to determine whether they were still interested in participating in the study or not. Both participants chose to decline from

volunteering for the study due to personal circumstances.

### **The Interviews**

The interview was guided by a series of open ended questions (see Appendix 3) in an attempt to ensure that the participants were actively engaged, “determining how the research should occur, how the information is used and how the analysis is to be conducted” (Rutman, Hubberstey, Barlow & Brown, 2005, p.157). The interview guide (see Appendix 3) questions were flexible and were used to encourage conversation (Rubin & Babbie, 1993). In keeping with a qualitative approach, the central research question was not meant to formulate a hypothesis but rather was broad in nature to allow the research to evolve. Topic areas covered the participant’s experiences of being employed, unemployed and temporarily employed, and included questions pertaining to the obstacles they faced as well as the strengths they possessed in gaining employment.

### **Data and Analysis**

Utilizing qualitative methods, the research project consisted of in depth semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length conducted at the participant’s home, a location chosen by the participant. Prior to the interview, the participants signed a Consent Form to Participate in the Research (see Appendix 1) and were informed that their identities would remain confidential and that their name or any identifying information would not be included in the transcripts or the study report. The interviews were audiotaped and field notes taken with permission from the participants. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. Member checks were offered to the two single mothers so that they had an opportunity to review their transcripts to ensure that their experiences were recorded accurately and validated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Only one

participant chose to validate her transcript and return it.

The transcripts were read in their entirety to determine key words or phrases that were then coded into categories/concepts for identification (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003). The findings identified categories with statements or quotes in the participant's words (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003). The conceptual categories were compared and developed into themes to be named, analyzed and "grouped by meaning" (Connelly, 2003, p.109). The audiotapes of the interviews and the transcripts were stored in a safe place to ensure confidentiality and all documents were destroyed upon completion of the research. Only the researcher had access to the data for the purpose of the study.

## **Chapter Four**

### **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

This chapter provides a discussion as well as an analysis of the findings derived from participant interviews conducted with two single-parent mothers. Given that only two participants came forward to be interviewed, for simplicity, fictitious names are used to protect the anonymity of the women when discussing the findings. Mary is Caucasian and a single mother with three children. At the time of the study she was employed part-time as a music teacher and was attempting to develop a home based business. Ann, was a newcomer to Canada and identified herself as a single mother, although her children were adults and not living with her. She was employed part-time as a Customer Service Representative.

At the start of each interview, the participants were asked the question, “Thinking about your attempts at getting back into the workplace since graduating from the Career Explorations program four months ago, can you speak about what your experiences have been?” Similarities in responses as well as distinct differences emerged between the women. While commonalities occurred in their responses regarding women’s challenges in balancing work and family obligations, the emotional stress of being a single mother, and societal attitudes held about single mothers, slightly different views were voiced pertaining to the labour market conditions that impacted the women’s lives and posed as obstacles in their ability to become economically self-sufficient. The participants’ comments regarding the types of community resources and supports to assist them in their attempts at gaining employment as well as the personal strengths and resources they possessed in their ability to acquire and sustain a job were explored. Interestingly, a

similar theme that emerged was that as single-parent mothers, they found themselves to be a unique group in society. Finally, this chapter concludes with common concerns emerging from the participants related to future programming required to help other sole support mothers to successfully achieve employment. They also offer possible ideas for structural and social change.

### **Family/Home Life Responsibilities**

According to the research cited in the literature review, sole support mothers struggle with conflicting demands of finding work or engaging in further education with balancing the challenges and responsibilities of family life (Youngblut et al., 2000). Both participants expressed similar views either in regard to themselves or in reference to other single mothers, about the importance of being available and caring for the needs of one's children while at the same time making efforts to find employment or enroll in training. Balancing the functions of home life such as laundry, cooking, taking children to appointments and being there for their children's activities were deemed as primary obligations that required a flexible work schedule while at the same time providing a source of income.

Mary said,

“The major income would come from (self-employment) and working at a part-time job. I mean its nice because I'm with my kids at night, that's when you teach (music)...cause you take them to activities you know, you have to make dinner and you have to squish everything in so you can only decide to do 2 or 3 (lessons) a night.”

Being available and accessible for her children was clearly seen as a priority for this single mother and having time to spend time with her children for extracurricular activities required having work hours that could accommodate her hectic life. Further,

family responsibilities weigh heavily on single mothers as they may not have anyone else to fall back on, nor can they rely on the children's father. The overwhelming sense of obligation and being alone in carrying out the daily responsibilities that accompany being a sole support mother was evident in this single-parent mothers situation. Youngblut et al. (2000) cites that the fathers' involvement with childcare responsibilities could help to minimize the deepening obligation that single mothers feel as well as their need to juggle paid employment, however, there are often circumstances that prevent the fathers from becoming actively engaged in the children's lives (location, conflict, other responsibilities, lack of interest).

Mary responded,

“Plus the fact that kids need you...Say, if I took off (from home) for \$10.00 an hour (job) all week. I'd be gone from 9 til 7. The kids need me, I mean the dad's not there. The kids need you there (home).”

As the literature indicated, women are more likely to find precarious work that lends itself to inflexible work schedules as well as long and unstable hours (Evans, 2007).

Many sole support mothers lack support from families and friends, financial resources (Alfred, 2005) or reliable daycare (DeBord et al., 2000) to accommodate these job demands. Further, should they engage in taking a job with low pay and long hours, they are not assured of obtaining an adequate income to support themselves (Guicciardi, Celasun & Stewart, 2004) nor are available to tend to their families needs which leads to emotional strain (DeBord et al., 2000).

For one of the participants, looking for work or considering additional training was also interrupted by the demands of family obligations. The participant noted that she had to stop her plans for furthering her education to enhance her credentials due to

challenges experienced with her children and trying to resolve issues at the local community school.

Mary stated,

“ I had to quit. They put me on the VPI list which is when you get funded to go to school full-time. And then there was big trouble here (at home), so I had to quit everything...Well, then my (daughter) was acting out... oh man, I was at the school every other day. They'd (school) call me. Come in for an appointment, we have to meet with you and your daughter. And it was like well, you can't say to the school well I can't make it.”

Coordinating and overseeing the general well being of their families has predominantly been the sole responsibility of women with single mothers bearing the brunt of the load on their own (“Mothers Still,” 2003). The school system assumes that the socially accepted role of parenting and handling the needs of children belongs to the mother and therefore, mothers are the point of contact more often than are fathers should their child be in crisis or experiencing a personal problem at school. According to David (1984), it is most often the “mother’s whereabouts, not the father’s that are first enquired about”(p.36) when issues arise for the child. The educational system takes for granted that working women or even stay-at-home mothers are available at any time throughout the day to meet the demands and rigid rules enforced around children’s school activities, cancellations and hours of regulation (David, 1984). As long as women are solely burdened with the responsibility in caring for their children and not their male counterparts, the state will continue to relinquish its moral and social obligation in the well being and preservation of families, placing the onus of responsibility back on the individual, specifically women (David, 1984).

A common theme expressed by the two participants interviewed was the emotional and mental stress that they perceived other single mothers experiencing in

having to juggle the demands of unpaid work (housework, childcare responsibilities) with the challenge of securing employment. According to Himmelweit et al. (2004), single-parent mothers who obtained paid employment reported that their everyday stressors were not alleviated as a result of gaining a job but rather were exacerbated further in their efforts to continue to manage their lives. Ann, made the observation that lone women with children are handling many jobs at the same time, not merely one job.

Ann stated,

“I will tell you why single mums want to commit suicide. This is one of the reasons. They come home. They are so sick of this job. They’re not sure if they’re going to have a job tomorrow. They have children at school; maybe the kids are under peer pressure at school, so now she has to keep up with those children. She has to do the cooking, she has to clean the house, she has to spend time with the children by herself, so often the stress goes up.”

According to Avison (1997), single mothers are more susceptible to higher levels of emotional stress not because they are prone to mental health problems or have character defects but rather due to balancing multiple commitments such as family finances, household and caregiving duties and have a far greater number of barriers to overcome. Avison (1997) also cited that it is important to recognize that although family and economic stress is slightly more common among single mothers, it does not vary considerably from the stressors that impact families in the general population.

There is a lack of recognition in society of the unpaid work at home that women, including sole support mothers perform, particularly caregiving functions and maintaining a household. This devaluing of women’s care work, places them at an ultimate disadvantage and further marginalizes their economic status in society (Christopher, 2004). The prevailing psychological stress that single mothers undergo in their attempts to deal with the realities of their lives, alone (Avison, 1997; Himmelweit,



et al. 2004) coupled with the lack of value attributed to the essential work that they do in caring for the next generation needs to be addressed. It is no wonder that they experience mental health issues and emotional fatigue with balancing these conflicting priorities on a daily basis. Fatigue, depression, distress and exhaustion were similar comments made by both of the participants interviewed.

Ann commented,

“She’s pushing to 100%, I would say as a single mother in jobs, we try to push 100%, 350%, especially we are women because you know what’s back behind it. If we lose this job, there is not something there. You put more effort, more energy, you’re using and then you come home exhausted. There’s kids homework, housework, cooking, your own personal life. So, it’s not one job, It’s a job of children, school, work, cooking is a job, housework is a job, besides you have to catch up with your own personal papers and things like that. So what life do you have? Why do you think so many women go into depression, why do you think so many women have nervous breakdowns?”

Interestingly, both women did not see themselves as experiencing this strain or emotional fatigue in their lives. Perhaps by reflecting on the hardship of others, they found an inner strength in their ability to cope with their own challenges. Mary attributed her success in handling the daily responsibilities in her life due to having a solid support system, specifically her family.

She stated,

“Like I’m lucky to have a support net, my parents said you can live here and just pay minimum rent, but a lot of single mothers don’t have that. They have nobody. So they don’t have a choice whether to leave their kid in a daycare and no wonder they are like ready to break!”

Emotional support from family and friends is shown to be an important factor in the success of lone women with children in their ability to manage and maintain the daily stressors of family demands while attempting to either get or sustain a job (DeBord et al., 2000).

### **Attitudes in Society about Single Mothers**

Both women in the study expressed their views of feeling isolated from the mainstream of society as a result of their lower economic status and the negative societal attitudes about single mothers. Being deprived of the economic advantages and the multitude of choices that other individuals have in society leaves single mothers feeling helpless and powerless (McIntyre, 2003). Although, a common theme was the feeling of a sense of isolation, this aspect was expressed differently for Ann. Feelings of isolation were experienced due to the lack of material items and financial status.

Ann, a newcomer to Canada commented,

“A single mother is very standard. I live in this building. You feel very isolated because you don’t have a car. You don’t live in a good house, you don’t have a good career, you don’t have these flashy jewelry and the big Gucci bags and clothes. You don’t fit into society here. It is very much a materialistic place.”

Impoverishment and economic deprivation is an ongoing battle and a stark reality for single mother families (Gucciardi et al., 2004) regardless of their divorced status (Pulkingham, 1995) as it has its source based in institutional and structural conditions (Albeda et al., 2004) that create inequality and inequities in the allocation of materials resources (Pulkingham, 1995) leaving women in a one downward position and struggling to advance upward.

Similar experiences were shared by the two participants regarding their feelings of isolation and not fitting into the mainstream of society, as they did not ascribe to the typical two-parent family that was the standard norm within their community.

Ann stated,

“It is a lot about family.”

Mary shared similar sentiments,

“If you are not married there’s something wrong with you and that’s still around. I mean especially at church, that’s the worst place. Oh, they pretend that they are all nice to you, but then when it comes to inviting you to anywhere, oh no, they’re all couples. I think that there’s two churches in Mississauga that have a singles group and that’s it.”

Institutional organizations such as churches promote the marriage of heterosexual couples and usually do not sanction divorce, therefore, isolating and polarizing individuals who do not maintain the status quo. Not only did these single mothers express their sense of isolation regarding their poor economic position and not conforming to the nuclear standard family but they also felt that being a single-parent mother meant that one was “different” or “unique” and ran the risk of being misunderstood by members of society. Mary cited her own experience of being a divorced woman with children and it’s challenges particularly as it pertained to her frustration in not being accepted by other individuals and blamed for her circumstances. Stereotypical views and negative perceptions of divorced lone mothers continue to stigmatize women and their situations creating undue strain, lowering their self-esteem and hindering their ability to take control of their lives.

Mary commented,

“You know cause it is really isolating when you become a single mom. It is isolating if you’re not around them (single mothers) because no body else thinks like you. No, I don’t think that they (society) understand because they think that it is the (single mother’s) fault that she is in the situation.”

Interacting with other single mothers and sharing their experiences breaks down the feeling of isolation and is a source of support and encouragement for women. The ability for women to recognize that they are not alone in their situation and to find others who share similar perspectives and a common understanding can help to reduce feelings of rejection and stigmatization and empower them to work collectively in challenging the

societal structures that oppress them.

Being a lone parent mother in society was not only seen by the two participants as being a barrier or obstacle in acquiring a job in the labour market but more significantly, being a woman also presented as a factor. Gender inequality is evident and witnessed in society in several aspects, firstly with women earning considerably far less money than men (Himmelweit et al., 2004; Albelda et al., 2004) performing the same job and secondly with the unequal balance in the sharing of family life responsibilities in caregiving. Mary commented that in an effort to move back into the job market in order to secure employment, that her status of being a single mother in conjunction with being a woman lessened her opportunities two-fold.

Mary reiterated,

“Being single is one of them. It is horrible. Just being a woman to start with is an obstacle, but being a single mother is another obstacle.”

Socioeconomic, gender and ethnic/racial inequalities are structural barriers that women encounter on a daily basis that affect their path to financial success (Alfred, 2005). Ann, a newcomer to Canada, expressed her disagreement with an employer, after sharing sentiments about being new immigrants, when he purported that “Thank God, she was a woman” and that being a “woman was better for her.” Ann responded by saying, “I don’t think so.” It would appear that Ann did not perceive any advantage to being a woman amongst the many struggles that she had to contend with, firstly as a single mother and secondly, given her status as a new immigrant. Dominated by a patriarchal society, women strive to move beyond their present circumstances but have difficulty doing so as a result of their unequal position. There are few advantages to being a woman in society

in comparison to a man and this is evident not only in the attitudes held by others in the general public, but also in the workplace.

Both participants expressed concerns about how they were perceived by employers, specifically regarding their attitudes towards hiring lone mother families and their desires to work.

Mary stated,

“And then, I just thought of this too, is that people see oh single moms, they’re not reliable because their single, they have no one else, so they’re not going to be at a job for long anyway, so I am thinking maybe that’s part of it. Just like when women, very young a long time ago...oh were not going to hire them for a good job because they are going to be gone when they are pregnant.”

The opinion of this participant was that employers perceived sole support mothers as not being responsible and dependable in the workplace, yet failed to recognize that lone women with children have (Alfred, 2005) unique situations and are alone in carrying for dependent children when unforeseen circumstances arise. Alfred (2005) noted that employers need to take into consideration the situations of single mothers and provide a flexible and supportive work atmosphere in order to sustain long term employees. In addition, employers need to be educated on the benefits of hiring single mothers and be open to recognizing that single mothers, like other potential employees, portray a strong work ethic, have career goal aspirations and make for loyal employees.

Ann responded,

“I am not ashamed to say it, but I was a single mom I says and I will tell you something back in my country, I worked two jobs to put my kids through their studies so that they can be independent and give back to the community.”

Stereotypical attitudes generated by employers towards single mothers regarding their desires and motivation to work can impact their self-perception and level of self-esteem.

In addition, it lessens women's opportunities to reap the benefits of material resources that they are entitled to and deserve in a male dominated society. However, despite these prevailing attitudes, this single-parent mother expressed her opinion of feeling proud and confident in her social status and noted her strong commitment to work as a means of providing an adequate living for both her and her family. Both women interviewed responded favorably in wanting to find employment and saw returning to the workforce as being a viable option to gaining economic independence and earning an income.

Youngblut et al. (2000) cited that "single mothers had positive attitudes towards employment regardless of their degree of labour force participation" (p.127).

### **Part-time Employment – Labour Market Conditions**

At the time of this research study, both participants were employed on a part-time basis and wanted to increase their hours of work in order to improve their financial situation, however, they experienced challenges in doing so. Ann was seeking a full-time job in order to take her off of social assistance while Mary planned to supplement her income being self-employed.

In reviewing the literature, research studies have shown that there has been an substantial increase in the number of social assistance recipients participating in the paid labour force, (Alfred, 2005; Christopher, 2004; Evans, 2007) including lone mothers (Cancian & Meyer, 2000; Dworsky & Courtney, 2007) however, there is equally as much evidence to support the fact that although single women with children may secure jobs, they encounter systemic barriers in the labour market that prevent them from becoming self supporting and earning an adequate livelihood (Alfred, 2005; Evans, 2007). Finding a job with higher earning capacity and possibilities for advancement is challenging in a

labour market where low paying wage jobs are pervasive and of which women, including single mothers are typically employed (Alfred, 2005). This research appears to be consistent with the experiences shared by both single mothers in this study and their responses to workplace obstacles that they faced in their efforts to access employment. Mary expressed her concern that the jobs that were available did not meet her needs or provide a high enough income to support her daily living expenses.

Mary said,

“You go to the job bank and you see these really crappy jobs. \$10.00 an hour they want 40 hours per week and you’re going I’m making the same now working half or quarter of the hours. So making \$10.00 or \$15.00 an hour isn’t going to pay the rent, isn’t going to help anything. It is just going to put everybody into (more) chaos than they already are (in), because I wouldn’t be there.”

Conversely, despite the prevailing unequal labour market conditions and the potential of finding themselves in precarious work situations, Ann expressed a strong desire to take any type of job, even if it was low paying as this was perceived as being better than being dependent on social assistance and not employed. Pressured by caseworkers to take any job that is available (Dean, 2003) coupled with the realities of the job market, creates undue stress forcing them to resort to desperate measures in order to support themselves.

Ann stated,

“I need to support myself... I cannot live on this (social assistance). How do you expect me to live on it (social assistance)...and not even survive...We take whatever (job) we can just to survive but then the next month you are downsized.”

In an effort to increase their financial independence and manage on their own, single mothers are compelled to take precarious work and therefore, run the risk of being subject to intolerable working conditions or discriminatory practices by employers.

Mary stated,

“A lot of people get into jobs like that where the bosses they pay you nothing and expect everything and they have no clue what is going on.”

As echoed by Mary, women appear to be taken advantage of in the labour market by employers and are expected to work extra hours providing no compensation for the additional time spent to complete the tasks assigned. Further, being a new immigrant woman merely compounds the potential risk of being exploited and oppressed in the workplace by employers. Ann, expressed her feelings about obtaining work when she first arrived in Canada as a new immigrant.

She stated,

“While working in Canada, I was exploited. Working 80 hours and I was getting paid for 30 hours... and that was because I was a new immigrant to the country, they exploit every new immigrant.”

New immigrants are subject to poor working conditions as they are desperately trying to break into the Canadian labour market and are willing to take low paying jobs that are below their skill level and experience in order to support themselves and their families. Ng (1990) cited that immigrant women predominantly hold jobs within the lower end of the occupational stream and are far more likely to experience employment situations whereupon proper labour standards and practices are not enforced. For Ann, her ethnic and cultural background posed as a significant challenge. Ethnicity and racial discrimination play a key role in lessening the economic opportunities for marginalized immigrant women by adhering to the status quo. Having a lack of Canadian work experience and fewer job skills created considerable hurdles for her in accessing the labour market. The lack of acknowledgement by employers of the credentials and qualifications that new immigrants do bring to the country, compel them to upgrade their



skills and training, which is no guarantee against the discriminatory practices or poor treatment that they can encounter in the workplace (Grant, 2007). Ann was discriminated against by employers when looking for work as a result of having no previous work experience in Canada.

Ann stated,

“What happen to all the skills we had? What happened to all our experience? Our skills are not valued, we have so much skills they think we are stupid in... When you say you come from... it is like a long story, here comes a stupid, Yet we have many skills that we can show...”

For this participant, the skills, abilities and experience that she had acquired in her country of origin were not recognized or valued in Canada, which placed her at a formidable disadvantage. Racist attitudes and stereotypes filter down from society and penetrate into the work environment. The attitudes that employers project about newcomers can influence the opportunities that new immigrants have in penetrating the job market and moving towards self-sufficiency. New immigrants, ultimately encounter greater obstacles in obtaining the economic materials and resources than “white” individuals have secured in society (Alfred, 2005). Despite efforts made by the government to allocate public monies towards providing enhanced language training and skills upgrading to newcomers, (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2005) greater efforts are needed in educating employers as to the benefits of hiring newcomers and how the skills that they bring forth can add value, richness and diversity to the workplace.

Gender segregation in addition to ethnic/racial discrimination hinders women’s potential avenues to re-entry into the labour market. Mary expressed another opinion regarding looking for work in the job market and noted how women tend to be segregated into traditional careers that do not pay well, which presents as a barrier to acquiring

upward mobility.

Mary stated,

“so one of the things that women automatically think of to go into is low paying jobs (professions) because they know kids, they can do the job, it is not hard, right? so they automatically think ok well teacher, ECE or something like that which doesn’t pay the bills. Other jobs like the daycare profession or traditional teller are easy for women. But like me, I raised the kids and I can do, I can do daycare, but the reality of daycare, is it will be low pay.”

Lower end secondary jobs are most commonly seen in occupations that are female dominated such as the helping and caregiving professions as childcare (Beckers, 2005) and social services (O’Toole, 2006) or in the business sector in clerical/assistant positions (Beckers, 2005). Young girls are socialized at a very early age in the school system that they are best suited to pursue careers in traditional fields such as social services or healthcare (Lupart & Cannon, 2002) while young boys are encouraged to target their career aspirations towards math and science occupations (Curry, Trew, Turner & Hunter, 1994). According to Curry et al. (1994), this early socialization lowers women’s expectations, opportunities for economic success and potential earning power which perpetuates inequality in their accessibility to deriving economic benefits.

Another challenge experienced by the women interviewed was the need to upgrade their skills and gain additional training in order to access the higher paying jobs in the labour market that would improve their income level. Zhan & Pandey (2004) concluded that having advanced levels of education beyond high school had a positive impact on the opportunities for single mothers securing jobs with higher earnings. However, restrictions on accessing training dollars, the philosophy of “work first” by the government (Zhan & Pandey, 2004) and the lack of social supports (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003) to assist with family responsibilities make it a challenge for women to

compete for jobs in society that can take them out of poverty and provide an adequate income.

Zhan and Pandey (2004) cited that single mothers' poor economic status is attributed to consistently lower levels of education and training resulting in low earning capacity, fewer job opportunities and lack of upward mobility. Both participants expressed similar views regarding the importance of education for obtaining future success in the workplace.

Ann made this reference about other single mothers,

“They need to be referred to a place to upgrade skills for a small fee so that they can survive and educate their children.”

Mary stated,

“The lack of education or knowledge it is just one big obstacle.”

Access to education and training is more difficult for immigrant women or women of color than for white women due to limited financial resources, childcare responsibilities, discriminatory practices and language issues (Bok, 2004). Education and training are needed for all women including new immigrants and women of color (Bok, 2004), and requires government to provide strategies to improve the economic conditions for women. Poor single mothers are consistently blamed for their ethnic/racial differences, lack of motivation, family problems and their deviation from the traditional two-parent family (Bok, 2004), yet the government and society endorses the solution to single mothers problems through increased labour force attachment. How does the government expect single-parent mothers to improve their situations and move away from financial dependency when they continue to reduce programs and services that can be of long-term benefit to lone mother families and can enhance real structural change?

As cited in the literature review, single mothers tend to find themselves struggling within a cycle of dependency. Societal institutions and individuals encourage this dependency cycle by promoting women's reliance on a man as a means of financial support (Himmelweit et al., 2004) or through exiting government assistance by finding work in a harsh and unjust labour market (Christopher, 2004). Women are given contradictory messages in society and are caught in a double bind. In other words, they are encouraged to rely on a man for support and be dependent, yet conversely, should they leave an abusive relationship and find themselves on their own, they are discouraged from staying on the welfare system or being unemployed and are compelled to get a job. Thus, they are in a "no win situation." Mary indicated that becoming a single mother meant a change in her economic status as well as a heightening of her personal growth.

She stated,

"I always had a boyfriend who always paid the rent... so I'd never taken care of myself before. I had no clue how much rent was."

Women are socialized to believe that by finding a man and getting married ensures that their economic status will improve and these notions of dependency are reinforced by the social service delivery system (Christopher, 2004) and society at large. Ann was exposed to similar attitudes held by the medical profession wherein she was encouraged to apply for disability income after experiencing a short term health concern, yet felt well enough to get a job.

She stated,

"I don't want disability... I am fit to go to work. Don't just think about disability and social assistance... there may be people who want to be on disability and there may be people who want to live on social assistance, but I am not one of them."

Feminist thinking purports that institutional, social and political structures strengthen the notion of women's dependency on the state or on a man (Christopher, 2004), and takes away their power through negative messaging yet, forces them to strive to become economically self-reliant without the resources and tools to help them to do so.

### **Strategies for Finding Work**

Finding a job can be extremely challenging and requires a variety of strategies in order to facilitate job prospects and opportunities that secure employment. Networking is a concept whereupon individuals develop contacts and build relationships in the labour market that will help them to augment their re-employment faster and lessen the gap in their absence from the work force (Hatala, 2007). Learning the techniques of networking requires skill that can be obtained from engaging in job search programs or by working with a mentor. If individuals remain absent from the labour force for long periods of time due to personal circumstances or the inability to find work, their possibility of developing and building relationships that will link them to potential job prospects declines (Hatala, 2007). Each of the participants shared similar views on the value of networking as a means of increasing their opportunities of getting work.

Mary attributed her success in finding work to,

“mostly meeting people and word of mouth. That seems to be the best way to get stuff (work). So the more networking you do the more you get out there... the more likely you are to get something.”

Ann made a similar comment,

“I will tell you how I got this job. I was at church and this lady said to me, Are you looking for a job? I was volunteering at the church and I said yes, I am looking for a job. She said to me bring me your resume. You will see, you will get a job because you have been volunteering at the church.”

Although, family and friends are direct ties to networking contacts, social networking

can also occur through cultivating relationships with individuals in one's community. Obtaining job search related materials and information from one's networking contacts improves one's knowledge and awareness of the labour market while at the same time increases one's probability of getting a job. Although, networking is highly encouraged as an effective tool for re-employment, it is important to recognize that the stigma and social isolation attached to being unemployed or being in receipt of financial benefits that are experienced by women, including single mothers, can have a formidable impact on their level of confidence and self-esteem, and their ability to engage in meeting individuals that can be of benefit to them in their job hunt. Additionally, race, culture, class, disability and language may affect a woman's capacity and opportunity for networking.

Ann stated that she was overwhelmed with the struggles in her life and sought personal counseling to gain support to learn to how to cope with her difficulties and to feel better about herself.

"I went to (...) because I felt I was so despondent of everything going on around me and waited for the workshops. I went to those workshops to get my self-esteem back again."

Personal counseling services can be an important source of support as well as a resource for individuals who may not have anyone else to go to within their community or among their circle of friends or family to give them encouragement and advise when they are unemployed or experiencing other major issues in their lives.

Employment support and training programs cover a broad range of skill development and job search activities to assist the unemployed in order to help them re-enter the job market (Hatala, 2007). Job and career related programs provide career

assessments, labour market information and teach job search techniques such as resuming writing, interview and networking skills in order to aid individuals in their search for a job. One of the employment-related supports programs that were commonly identified by each of the participants in helping them gain employment was the job preparation/Career Explorations program. Both participants spoke positively about the Career Explorations program and felt strongly about the benefits that they derived from participating in the course, although, their comments may have been influenced by the identity of the researcher. Having a passion for and finding satisfying work appeared to be a similar theme that both women took away from the program. The course not only helped them to understand themselves better and identify their passion related to obtaining a job but also motivated them towards pursuing the right fit.

Ann stated,

“Going to Career Explorations was one of the best things to do because then you know and it shows you your passion and you go for your passion.”

Similarly, Mary stated,

“Career Explorations... that was a very good thing...push you to find employment right away, when you are done...and look for work...whip you and make you find like it's a full-time job, but they make you go out there and get the job that you want.”

The women said that they gained valuable insights about themselves and what career that they would be best suited, however, deeply ingrained within the program is a philosophy that getting a job is of foremost importance and is depicted by the strong level of messaging directed towards finding a job as quickly as possible. Program workers are subject to internal and external pressure perpetuated by both the agency and the government sponsoring the program to meet expected outcome targets in order to secure

future funding for the program as well as their own jobs. The program workers find themselves in a dual role of being in a position of power governing over the disadvantaged while at the time being a part of an coercive structure, thus placing them in a bind. The oppressive government structure that social workers work in result in them oppressing others or ascribing to the dominant structure within their place of employment and not doing "real" social work (Ng, 1990). Social workers may or may not be consciously aware of how the government mechanism of forms and documentations, accountability and performance measures impact their interaction with the individuals that they are serving but feel trapped in finding ways and strategies to overcome the external structures that keep them oppressed and integral players in the "game." Although, women are encouraged to participate in programs that will help them find work and are made to believe that getting work will improve their sense of well-being and self-esteem, the actions and philosophy endorsed the government does not support the development of personal growth and strengths, but rather is punitive and dehumanizing (Bok, 2004). The strong emphasis on achieving results and outcome measures in government sponsored services overrides the workers intentions of doing good work and the sense of helping others, and leads to coercive practices (Evans, 2007).

### **Strengths possessed in Securing Work**

The single mothers in the study displayed a high level of strength and personal resiliency in their abilities to cope with the daily challenges and struggles experienced in their lives. Given the stressors of dealing with the demands of family and work life, negative attitudes and behaviours exhibited by employers and society at large, the stigma attached to being a single mother and unequal labour market conditions, it is remarkable



that these women are persistent in moving forward with their work-oriented goals in becoming financially independent. Having a positive outlook at the events in one's life and altering one's perspective can help to minimize feelings of hopelessness and a loss of control. Recognizing that they may have (McIntyre et al., 2003) fewer choices in their lives as a result of being economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged, their level of self-awareness regarding their own strengths and ability to change and improve their lives can ultimately heighten their personal resolve and resiliency. For one of the participants, having a positive attitude was associated with having an internal sense of value and self-worth.

Ann stated,

“I am a very positive person. Be positive and just remember that you are valuable in this world. Human beings are criticized and not are talked about and not valued.”

Projecting self-esteem appeared to be associated with inner feelings of self-worth and value, self-respect and the ability to help and empathize with others (Brody and Flor, 1997). The same participant shared these sentiments that enhancing one's self-esteem and building character could best be acquired through helping others who are less fortunate than oneself. Putting oneself in another individual's shoes can often alter one's attitudes in a positive and constructive manner by recognizing that there are others who are in greater need.

Ann stated,

“If you want to build your character, help others and build your character.”

Her internal sense of self-awareness regarding her own character strengths, values and the ability to care and nurture her own self, provided a sense of control and personal tools

for coping and developing resiliency. Self-respect, self-nurturing and honesty were deemed important characteristics for obtaining work and personal success.

Ann stated,

“You’ve got to love yourself first. If you cannot love yourself first, you will never be able to love anybody else. Respect yourself. If you cannot respect yourself, you will never be able to respect anybody else. Thirdly, to be honest with yourself and then you will be honest with others.”

As cited in the literature previously, job success for single mothers was highly attributed to maintaining a positive perspective exhibited by character traits such as self-determination, perseverance and persistence. Bachey and Cingel (1999) found that an internal locus of control over one’s life, strong spiritual beliefs and the ability to recover quickly and maintain a positive outlook during times of adversity were essential ingredients in heightening resiliency. Society tends to generate negative messages that stigmatizes and segregates individuals in society and it is critical for women to develop inner strength and qualities to enhance their level of resiliency to deal with the difficulties experienced in their lives.

The same participant found comfort in drawing upon her faith as a means to endure the hardships that she encountered in achieving her personal and work-related goals. Bachey and Cingel (1999) noted in their study on resiliency, that regardless of ethnic origin, having a strong sense of spirituality was an important factor emphasized by the women in their success. The belief in a power greater than oneself as a source of help, comfort and strength is an avenue and approach that many individuals in society adopt in order to work their way through and cope with difficult moments of adversity.

Ann stated,

“I always believe in the spiritual... I have a very strong faith and I believe in

God almighty. I said, God you know... you are the only one that can make a door open... Lord, I need to take this job.”

Mary held a slightly different opinion. She indicated that the personal strengths that impacted her getting work were feelings of pride in being acknowledged for performing a quality job and high standard of work.

Mary stated,

“I guess I do a good job. I guess it just shows through because I keep accumulating these people.... When you work at something that you seem to be good at, at least you get told you are.”

This acknowledgement by external sources in society about one's accomplishments or the value of the work that they do, validate one's own perception of oneself which further increases one sense of self-esteem and self-image. The aspects of personal growth, achievement and better economic status derived from having a job are strong factors in strengthening one's overall well being.

The concept of resiliency does not set out to negate the oppressive structures that act as barriers to women, including single mothers, in accessing the labour market or the need to bring about social and structural change, but it does, however, provide a source of optimism and an alternative approach for women in dealing with the complexities in their lives.

Similarly, as indicated in the literature review, less attention has been directed towards the strengths and personal characteristics of single mothers reflected in their ability to succeed. Rather attention is focused on their weaknesses and personal vulnerabilities. Exploring women's strengths as they relate to their ability to handle and cope with the multiple challenges in their lives needs to be emphasized. Adopting a strengths-based approach to helping disadvantaged single mothers who are moving from

financial assistance to economic independence rather than a problem and character deficit focus, can provide an insight into the qualities and strengths they draw upon in order to maintain a sense of composure and to manage life while facing the ongoing struggles of stereotypical attitudes and prevailing structural barriers. Using an individual's strengths and competencies to assist them in achieving their goals, aspirations and to cope, can yield positive results and bring about personal change and growth (Feeley & Gottlieb, 2000).

#### **Four Month Employment Target**

Is it realistic for unemployed single mothers to find a job in four months? Government funded programs are specifically designed with the goal of employment in mind. Contractual agreements are made between the funder and the service provider that establish outcome targets at three, four or six month intervals that measure the number of unemployed individuals who have acquired a job. The Career Explorations program is one of these programs. Participants are advised when they start the program that the goal of the three week course is to gain career direction and that they are expected to have secured employment within four months upon exiting from the service. The program curriculum is designed to meet employment objectives and individuals are assisted by the program workers with tools and information to facilitate this process as quickly as possible. Although, training and upgrading is clearly an option promoted to program participants, many individuals are not eligible or do not qualify to apply for funding. Additionally, the type of training that is offered, often does not meet their needs. Avenues to facilitate the pathway to training for disadvantaged individuals is restricted and with tight controls such as limited availability of funds and short timelines for submitting

applications.

Both participants in the study shared common views regarding four months as not being a reasonable time frame to get employment, however, they varied in their perspective as to the length of time needed to actively secure a job. How long it took to find a job varied between six months to one year in duration. The participants indicated that there were many factors that contributed to the length of time that was appropriate to get work such as finding the “right job” that yielded an adequate income and having a passion for their work.

Ann stated,

“Four months is not reasonable. I am sure that I can find work. But I believe I would say six months. The reason why I say six months is because it gives you a broader perspective of what you really want to do.”

“I want to be into a job that I know I’m going to have the passion for it.”

Mary stated,

“No, I don’t think four months is enough time to be able to meet the people in the right places to find a job that fits you. I would say a year. It’s a lot of work finding the right places and what area you’re going to go into that is going to make you the right amount of income. So I think a year would be more realistic.”

Finding a passion for the type of work that is best suited for an individual ultimately leads to greater job satisfaction and enhances productivity. If one can find full-time employment that capitalize on one’s strengths, offers work-related activities that improves one’s job skills and provides an adequate income, then one is more likely to be an effective employee and contribute to the organization. Based on my experience in the field, finding suitable work environments that provide a living wage with permanent/regular hours is a full-time job in itself, as it requires perseverance, effort and considerable energy on the part of the job seeker.

An additional factor that impacted the length of time in finding work for Mary was family responsibilities. Although, part-time employment may be a viable option and easily obtainable verses full-time work, it fails to accommodate the life style and family demands that this single mother endures.

Mary commented,

“You can find any job. I could go over to (...) and probably find a job today, but it would be \$8.00 an hour, working weekends and who would take care of my kids? It needs to fit your lifestyle.”

The obstacles and challenges confronting women with children are enormous in attempting to handle a job that is inflexible and uncertain, with trying to secure reliable and quality childcare. This ongoing hurdle that women encounter in the labour market places them in an unfavourable and marginalized position (Evans, 2007), one which they are unlikely to move out of.

### **Suggestions for Future Programming**

The government has developed an array of employment-related services to assist job seekers, including single mothers, in their movement towards re-entry into the workforce as cited in the literature. Although, the two participants indicated that the Career Explorations program and personal counselling services were extremely beneficial to them in their efforts to look for work, they responded similarly in their suggestions as to what additional services or supports would be helpful to other single mothers in their attempts to get a job. The participants' ideas went beyond the traditional form of employment-related services presently offered in their community. One participant responded with the need to “start with an organization for single parents,” that included both women and men. Although, this participant suggested an inclusive centre, her

comments primarily concentrated on services strictly designed for female single mothers. Similarly, the other participant suggested, “a single’s coffee house” that addressed the concerns relative to only single mothers. Embedded in this theme was a concern to support and help out other single mothers who experienced similar difficulties as themselves, which could be best achieved by bringing women together to a common place where they could meet and have an opportunity to “socialize” as one participant stated. Both women suggested having a daycare on the premise so that “the kids can be taken care of, or even one’s older kids because you can’t leave teenagers alone that much.” As discussed in the literature review, providing increased access to safe, affordable and reliable childcare can alleviate the family demands that women confront on a regular basis as well as assist (Youngblut et al., 2000) with enhancing their opportunities to attend school or search for sustainable work. Lack of childcare continues to be a long-standing issue for women’s labour force participation that reinforces their unequal and one down status in the job market (Youngblut et al., 2000). Childcare at the café or coffee house provides women the opportunity to focus on their needs instead of their children’s needs and can enhance support, learning and networking. This social café or coffee house would be a unique place where single mothers could find specialized workshops, support and advise in a variety of aspects of their lives.

The women envisioned this coffee house as providing a series of life skills workshops to sole support mothers that covered topics such as budgeting, parenting and steps to gaining financial independence. Ann stated that workshops were needed to,

“educate women on gaining independence and not relying on welfare. Workshops to teach all these different skills like budgeting, parenting workshops.”

Free legal advice and how to operate a business were also workshop topics cited as being

relevant by one of the participants.

Mary stated,

“Just ideas on self-employment, what businesses they could network with and get people together.”

“Good lawyer advice, at a reasonable price or even through Legal Aid.”

Another workshop topic that varied between the women included providing information and resources about government programs that were available to unemployed individuals.

Based on my experience in the field, government funded programs are not often well advertised or publicized. Program contracts administered by service providers in the community fail to have enough advertising money built into their operating budgets as the government does not deem it as being a necessary expense in running a program.

Mary stated,

“I know that there is a lot of money, the government puts out a lot of money, but nobody knows about the programs. You just have to find them and usually its by accident that somehow you’re talking to somebody and they go, oh yes, you just have to apply for it.”

Although, there is an expectation within government sponsored programs that unemployed individuals will participate in employment support services as part of their obligation in receiving social assistance/employment insurance benefits (Breitkreuz, 2005), some individuals do not find out about employment services available in their community until they are close to or have exhausted their benefits.

A common theme was that the coffee house or social café would act as a meeting place for women to engage in a type of barter system. For example, a single mother with a particular skill set or expertise would exchange her skills with another woman to get help in an area that she might not have strength in. It would be a type of trading of



services with no exchange of money in order to provide support and assistance to one another.

Mary stated,

“You know you probably don’t have a car. So you can car pool, with somebody who does have a car, just help each other out that way.”

Ann stated,

“So, I might be good in budgeting, you might not be good at budgeting. My kids see me helping you with your budgeting. You are going to the store. I might not have a car. You ask, Do you need anything at the store? I can give you a lift or you can give me the money. One hand washing the other is working, is working as a community.”

This trading of services would allow women the opportunity to use their personal resources and strengths to help out other women and in turn learn skills, build relationships and develop support to help them move towards greater independence.

Another suggestion that was offered that differed between the two women was to invite women from the community into the coffee house who had successfully achieved economic independence. These women would act as role models or mentors for other women and provide insights as to how they succeeded and overcame their barriers.

Mary stated,

“They’d bring in other women that have made it good and are reliable on their own their own.”

“At this social network, at this social café, I think it would be an amazing idea to bring professional people in even maybe professional counsellors that are single themselves, but just want to donate their time to kind of socialize these women back into the world.”

Women who are moving in and out of the workforce can benefit from having a mentor or coach to advise them in both their career aspirations and their social and economic needs (Alfred, 2005). Single mothers who have achieved personal and professional success can

be a source of inspiration and motivation to other women and can share their knowledge regarding strategies for coping with everyday stressors, give support and encouragement (Alfred, 2005), provide advice on workplace culture and heighten awareness of educational and training requirements for career advancement.

Amidst the personal and individualized needs expressed by the women, larger societal and structural change was advocated by Mary. She opted for a “guaranteed annual income” as a means of financial support that is primarily distributed to the mother of the children in addition to receiving the child tax benefit.

Mary stated,

“I think single moms should get a ... because they’re already down low because they’re woman to start with. They should get a subsidy for being a single mom.... An (income) subsidy ... Because the child tax credit helps a little bit with the kids but what do the single moms get? They get nothing.”

Eichler advocates strongly for an annual guaranteed income that provides a standard level of income that would be available and equally accessible to all single-parent mothers (as cited in Pulkingham, 1995). This publicly funded initiative, which operates in several northern European countries, has deemed to be highly successful (as cited in Pulkingham, 1995). However, although a viable option and one that would help to begin to alleviate the structural inequalities encountered by women in society, it is questionable as to what would be considered a reasonable standard of support that would ultimately raise a single mother’s income above the poverty line and promote economic self-sufficiency. Similarly, Pulkingham (1995) concurs that the proposed income scheme, although a positive step for women, does little to alter the “patriarchal model of family”(p.15), address inadequate child support payments (Pulkingham, 1995, p.15), the insufficient access to affordable childcare (Christopher, 2004), low wage earning capacity (Alfred,

2005) or discriminatory practices by employers (Danziger et al., 1999).

The women in this research project contributed unique and challenging programming ideas for researchers, the community and the government at large to bring forth into the political arena. Employment support services appear to merely tap into a small range of needs that single mothers require and that they must go beyond short sighted programming and interventions in order to address the broader complexity of women's issues in the labour market. Far more attention needs to be paid to listening to and hearing the voices of women with children, as they are the best assessors of their own situations.

## **Chapter Five**

### **DISCUSSION**

Current welfare reform policies enforced at both the federal/provincial level were designed to cut costs in income benefit payments and reduce expenditures while moving individuals off of the government purse strings and into employment. This emphasis on reducing individual dependency on the social service delivery system has been viewed as a positive measure by the neo-liberal state (Uttley, 2000). It reduces the government's responsibility in providing a financial safety net while placing greater onus on the individual to take personal ownership for her/his circumstances (Henman, 2004). Employment support services have been developed as tools in providing job search assistance to help the unemployed, including single mothers to re-enter the labour market (Hatala, 2007). However, these welfare policies have had the adverse affect for single mothers in that they blame them for their personal failings and not being employed, create strict timelines for finding work that are unachievable, perpetuate dependency and employ caseworkers who act as policing agents of state policies and procedures (Moffat, 1999). Unemployment for single mothers becomes a personal problem rather than a societal concern and permits government to force women into an unfair labour market that encourage gender segregation, discriminatory practices by employers, stigma and stereotypical attitudes, precarious work that does not provide an adequate income, the devaluing of skills and the invisibility of women's dual role of work and family responsibilities.

The findings from this study gathered from the two single mothers interviewed, are consistent with other research studies regarding the significant barriers that single

mothers face in gaining employment (Danziger et al., 1999; Dworsky & Courtney, 2007; Kalil et al., 1998). For one of the women who was actively looking for work to improve her economic situation and had found part-time employment, balancing parenting and household duties with securing work posed as major difficulty as she struggled to maintain her caregiving priorities while sustaining an adequate income. This dual role is cumbersome for single mothers as they are alone to cope with no one else to fall back on.

The emotional and mental stress attached to dealing with the complexities of their lives for single mothers were perceived as leading to fatigue and burnout. Although, the two women interviewed had not identified this stress as a major barrier for themselves, they saw it as a factor for other single mothers. Single mothers have limited resources and supports to draw upon in order to deal with their multiple family obligations in comparison to two-parent families.

Stereotypical attitudes held by society towards single mothers and the stigma attached to not fitting into the traditional nuclear family structure, left these women feeling isolated, polarized and segregated from the economic and social benefits of the main stream of society. Being different and not ascribing to societal values penetrated downwards into the workplace and were witnessed by employer's negative behaviour and attitudes in hiring practices and working conditions. Experiences of ethnic discrimination, poor perceptions held by employers about single mother's work ethic, lack of recognition of skills and low wages rates were social, cultural and economic obstacles reported by the women.

Government funded programs that endorse finding work as the foremost priority,

force unemployed single mothers into the labour market where they are subject to precarious work conditions that do not yield permanent full-time work or meet the family demands and responsibilities of single mothers. Skills training and upgrading, although strongly indicated as a need by the women in the study, were difficult to obtain due to the lack of family and financial support available to help deal with the responsibilities of parenting while attending school.

The women stated that they clearly benefited from the various community support services that they received particularly the Career Explorations program and gained valuable insights about themselves and the type of work they were best suited for. Engaging in personal counselling was also deemed a helpful intervention by one of the participants in assisting her with finding strategies to learn how to cope. Their own personal talents, resourcefulness and networking sources coupled with the techniques they learned, resulted in them finding part-time employment. They displayed strength, resiliency and a sense of pride in their efforts to persevere among the many hardships that they encountered. Having a positive attitude, a strong work ethic, spiritual faith and being good at the job they performed, yielded positive employment outcomes as well as enhanced their general well being.

The expectation of finding work in four months upon graduation from the Career Explorations program appeared to be unachievable for the single mothers interviewed, particularly in securing work that fit with their family obligations, produced an adequate income and yielded a high level of job satisfaction. Further, for the women, job support programs were merely part of the equation in their struggle to find work and noted that there were gaps in services that failed to address their needs. The participants suggested

that a program (perhaps in the form of a café or coffee house) specifically targeted for single mothers would be helpful. They suggested a program where there were workshops on life skills, career related information as well as a daycare and mentorship services. The women in this study felt that they were a unique group of individuals with specific needs that required attention. These program suggestions give way to considerations for future planning of employment related services that can have a direct benefit to single mothers.

The findings from this study yield important implications for the field of social work practice and research.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

An important finding in the study that came to light was the incredible strength and resiliency that the women displayed in persevering with the adverse conditions that they encountered in their efforts to get work. A closer examination of the women's strengths particularly their positive attitude, strong sense of self and personal achievements are important for social workers to explore in order to understand how these women continue to deal with their daily stressors and move forward with their goals. This sense of hope may be attributed to the fact that by comparing their struggles to other women facing hardships, they find strength in knowing that things could be worse (McIntyre et al., 2003). Yet, their sense of hope may be derived from an inner self-awareness, confidence and a belief in oneself. Society assigns fault to women for their family breakdown and blames them for their difficulties. This focus on the individual pathologizes personal difficulties. As Saleebey (1996) suggests, far too much focus is directed by society, institutions and the medical profession on personal deficits resulting in "psychological approaches" (p.296) to treating individuals. Therefore, applying a

strengths-based approach to practice, would require social work practitioners to change their perspectives from looking at what individuals don't have or are lacking, to shifting towards an approach that examines their capabilities, resources and personal strengths (Saleebey, 1996). Focusing on the inner talents and skills that single mothers have does not deny the true struggles that impact them, but rather provides an opportunity to help women find alternative methods to deal effectively with their circumstances. It is clear that women suffer from higher levels of stress due to their multiple burdens and that structural conditions contribute to this, however, it is important to recognize that through a strengths-based approach, that women can feel empowered and motivated to take control over their lives (McIntyre et al., 2003).

Another way to foster personal strengths and positive self-perception is by encouraging individuals to tell their personal stories and recount their experiences (Saleebey, 1996). Narratives or story telling is a vehicle through which individuals can share their experiences and impart meaning to them (Saleebey, 1996). For individuals who are oppressed and marginalized, the device of story telling can provide avenues for expression, empowerment and vision against the very institutions that have kept them invisible (Saleebey, 1994).

For practitioners working within the Career Explorations program these findings provide insight into how they can use a strengths-based approach to work more effectively in helping disadvantaged single mothers succeed and find solutions to their situations. In addition, by workers drawing on an individual's personal resources, it can help to minimize the negative attitudes held by society towards single mothers. Social workers are exposed to and work within systems that perpetuate this negative perspective



(Saleebey, 1996) and it can influence how they perceive single mothers and engage with them (Saleebey, 1996). Single mothers already feel vulnerable, have low self-esteem and portray a negative self-image when they seek help during periods of unemployment and come into the Career Explorations program. A victim mentality closes down the possibilities of hope and vision, however, social workers can help single mothers reconstruct a positive story for themselves and reframe their situation, which can be empowering in aiding them in overcoming their barriers (Saleebey, 1994). In turn, they can capitalize on the capabilities and personal resources of single mothers and help them to explore viable options and time lines for gaining employment that work with balancing personal and family obligations. In essence, social workers can be proactive in inducing change by adopting new forms of practice such as a strength-based approach that challenge the oppressive structures that they work in that marginalize individuals.

Another important finding that occurred in the study was that both participants confirmed that it was not feasible to find employment in four months that met their needs and suggested six months to one year was a far more reasonable time frame.

Social workers are embedded in organizational structures that adhere to procedures, standards and documentation that conflict with the (Evans, 2007) humanitarian values that are core to the helping profession. State practices are oppressive and dominate the operations of the agency moving them further away from their mission statement and goals (Ng, 1990). The program workers are engulfed in coercive practices that filter down onto the individuals that they are trying to help. This attention on the unemployed getting jobs within four months, compels the program workers to find whatever means to alter the statistics in order to meet targets, therefore, counting all

forms of employment including part-time, casual or temporary. Subsequently, the workers' actions merely perpetuate and encourage precarious work situations for participants, a condition that is already rampant in the labour market. Further, the pressure to conform to produce outcomes leads to clients' experiences becoming (Campbell & Gregor, 2002) categorized and objectified making them the same and their unique differences ignored. This has serious consequences for single mothers who have multiple needs and issues. Social workers are caught in an organizational structure and are set up for failure in their efforts to meet the demands of the clients they serve as well as the governing agents. Similarly, the unemployed, including single mothers are unable to succeed as they are blamed for their shortcomings if they have not secured work. Should they fail to comply with the requests of their caseworker or not be actively looking for work due to personal difficulties, they run the risk of losing financial assistance (Dean, 2003). The four month restriction to find employment adds another barrier to the lives of single mothers who are already struggling with unequal labour market conditions. These unrealistic expectations endorsed by the funding body do not serve the interests of single mothers but rather work to the advantage of the status quo.

It is imperative that social workers become aware of the difficulties that single mothers face and work towards breaking down the structural and institutional barriers that exist. They can use small acts of resistance and take practical action to support the client and work together to formulate employment goals that are achievable. Social workers must increase their awareness of existing institutional forces and practices in order to strengthen their ability towards enhancing change (Ng, 1990). It is essential that social workers band together and formulate alliances with other service providers within

the community (Eakin, 2007) to take action and put pressure on government to alter work-related targets in order to enhance the well being of those who are marginalized. For example, social workers can work jointly with employment counselors, case managers and frontline workers who belong to interagency employment networking groups and develop strategies that include lobbying or petitioning the government in order to induce changes to program outcome measures. Similarly, social workers can express their concerns to the Ontario Alliance of Career Practitioners, the governing body for employment counselors in Ontario and encourage their support in making recommendations for change.

Another important finding is that both of the participants gained valuable insight and knowledge about themselves and the workplace from the employment programs that they attended. It is evident that government funded employment services are successful in generating positive results in preparing individuals for the job market (Evans, 2007), and help them to seek and retain employment in the short run, however, it is uncertain as to how effective job preparation programs are in the long term in maintaining sustainable employment (Evans, 2007; Bok, 2004), and may only yield immediate short term benefits. The question arises, “Is the government spending money on services that are not addressing the real needs of female sole support families?”

As the research indicated in the literature review, there already exists a variety of generic employment-related services offered within the community where the women reside, however, there does not appear to be a program that is similar to what they suggested, specifically a coffee house, for single mothers that offers specialized workshops to assist them with achieving their personal and economic goals. Some

programs that reflect Ann and Mary's suggestions exist in other parts of Canada (see Appendix 5 for descriptions of programs).

A feminist approach to programs for sole support mothers provides an opportunity to unite women and break down the social isolation that they are feeling. Through this process, the single mothers learn that they are not alone in their situation and find strength in bonding with other women who share a common understanding and concern. By gaining insight into the contributors of structural gender-based oppression, they become empowered and their consciousness raised (Neysmith, 1995). Feminist critical theory strives to make women's experiences visible within the social context and helps them to come to see that their personal problems are political moving them towards enhancing social change (Neysmith, 1995).

These findings have important implications for future social work research. Feminist research can enlighten government and social workers to the real experiences of women's lives, give them a voice and draw attention to the oppressive structures and conditions that keep them down. Through the research process, both social worker and participants are engaged in consciousness-raising (Neysmith, 1995) and can work together to eliminate gender inequality and inequity. Given the gap in the literature regarding alternative employment programs for single mothers, more research is necessary to determine whether other single mothers would also advocate for a change in employment programs to meet their unique needs.

As indicated in the literature review, little research has been done on exploring the strengths and competencies of single mothers who have succeeded in the labour force and how they have achieved personal success. Little is known as to how personal strengths

and inner qualities contribute to a single mother's ability to cope and be resilient when confronted with adversity. It is not certain what components of any employment program can highlight and develop women's strengths. These unexplored areas open up possibilities for future research.

Research is needed to determine whether the four month time constraint for single mothers to get employed is realistic. It is important that the views of service users are an integral part of the equation. Croft and Beresford (1989) note that user involvement in services needs to be two fold. It must incorporate both consumers having a voice in expressing their experiences and "defining their needs as well as forming collaborative judgments of what is wanted and negotiating their decisions with other key actors involved "(p.16). It must move beyond the "personal" to the "political" arena. Social workers can be an instrumental force in bringing about organizational change in order to improve the lives of the clients that they are ultimately designed to help.

Although, the findings have important implications for social work practice and research, it is also imperative to note that as more single mothers continue to enter the workforce (Gucciardi et al., 2004), radical structural and systemic changes need to occur in the labour market in order for single mothers to rise above the economic hardships and social inequities that oppress their lives.

In light of the findings, there are several limitations and shortcomings in this study that must be addressed.

### **Limitations of the Research**

A potential limitation in this research was that the sample group of single mothers consisted of Caucasian women only, and therefore, no women of color. However, one

single mother was a newcomer to Canada. The Career Explorations program at the Mississauga site location was purposively selected for this research project due to the diverse nature of the participant groups. However, as noted in the methodology section, women of color did not come forward to participate in the study, which could be attributed to their experiences being involved in previous research studies wherein their voices and opinions were not heard giving credence to the dominant white culture. In keeping with an anti-oppressive, social inclusion and social justice framework, it is important to gather data about the experiences of single-parent women of color in order to gain a more comprehensive picture and a better understanding of both their personal struggles and successes.

Another limitation of the study was that the number of participants interviewed resulted in a small sample size, and therefore, like all qualitative research cannot be generalized to the overall population. Conversely, it might have been beneficial to use case studies. The small sample size may be attributed to several factors, firstly, that the women may have experienced difficulty responding to the mail outs due to the impersonal nature of them and secondly, given the complexity of their lives, making the effort to read and respond back to the mail out may have been both time consuming and cumbersome. Using a focus group might be a better methodological approach and yield a larger sample size, should future studies be done of this nature. Further, a larger sample of participants varying in age, race/ethnicity and culture would have provided a broader range of insights into the experiences of single mothers and their challenges in re-entering the labour force. In addition, although only two women were interviewed and were both Caucasian and older in age (47 and 55 respectively), one can speculate as to

whether the findings may be typical of other single mothers' experiences within this age category. It is important to note, however, that despite the fact that fewer participants were interviewed, the uniqueness of each single mom's experience was recorded and a richness in data acquired.

A third limitation was that the study was designed to interview single mothers within four months of completing the Career Explorations program, in order to assess the validity of the employment outcomes established for the program. The lapse in time for the women being interviewed was necessary in order to measure their success or lack of in obtaining employment as well as to allow ample time for them to attempt to get a job. Extending the length of the research study and not having time constraints might have generated a larger sample size. In addition, as the study progressed into the summer months, single mothers with school age children might have experienced difficulty in making a commitment to participate in the study due to a lack of childcare and trying to make arrangements for extracurricular activities while school was not in session.

Lastly, a final limitation was that the sample group of single mothers was taken from only one site where the Career Explorations program was facilitated. Although, the program operates at an alternate location, because of my affiliation with the site as a Project Coordinator, ethical issues arose that required consideration and thus, prevented a sample group from being drawn from that location. However, in the future, a study of this nature could be duplicated at alternate sites where the Career Exploration program is held and yield pertinent and valuable results.

In summary, government funded employment support services are designed to help single-parent families in their transition from financial assistance to work,

yet women with children are still experiencing hardships. Although, employment-related programs provide a multitude of job search, career planning and job retention services that are beneficial to job seekers such as the Career Explorations program, the question arises, “Are they doing more harm than good?” The restrictions on finding work in four months and the enforcement of work-related goals, forces single mothers who want and are motivated to work, into unequal labour market conditions where they continue to be at a disadvantage and have little hope of improving their economic situation. Further, social workers find themselves working in social service agencies trying to serve those in need while compelled to adhere to restrictive program goals and targets that serve the interests of government and the agencies they work in. Social workers can play an active role in adopting creative approaches to the delivery of employment-related services and move away from practices that keep individuals in a one down position. They can strive to find ways to initiate and enhance programs that are liberating and better meet the needs of the sole support mothers that they serve.



## **Chapter Six**

### **CONCLUSION**

This qualitative feminist research study set out to explore the experiences of sole support mothers in accessing the labour market upon leaving a government funded Career Explorations program. It has provided insight into the ongoing barriers and struggles that single mothers still encounter in the job market such as inflexible and inequitable working conditions, lack of acknowledgement of women's unpaid work, low wages and a devaluing of job related skills. Stereotypical attitudes held by society towards single mothers both in and out of the workplace coupled with government initiatives that emphasize a work first philosophy maintain women's lower economic status and access to material benefits in society. It also shed light on potential gaps in the literature and where research is required to understand the strengths and competencies that single mothers exhibit in their efforts at getting work and managing their lives as well it also suggests possibilities for future programming that best serves the needs of single mothers. The single mothers felt that their experiences were unique and that programming needs to reflect the social, cultural and economic challenges that they face in their lives. This study provides suggestions for consideration for innovative approaches to assist and support single mothers. Adhering to a feminist approach in undertaking the project gave the women an opportunity to voice their opinions and speak about their experiences in gaining access to the job market and what services that they need to move them beyond their hardships and towards economic independence. The question arises, Are service providers, government and social workers ready to hear the voices of sole support parents? Are we as social workers promoting social justice or merely perpetuating the

system and creating dependency by recycling single mothers to and from assistance and into an inadequate labour market? I believe that social workers are finding small ways to make change and to promote justice but need a more collaborative approach with government, consumers and professionals to alter the structural, social and economic conditions that single mothers experience in order to enhance long term and effective change.

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## **APPENDIX 1 – Information letter & Consent form**

### **INFORMATION LETTER & CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

**PROJECT:** A study to explore the barriers experienced by single-parent mothers and the strengths they possess in attempting to gain employment four months following graduation from a Career Explorations program.

**INVESTIGATOR:** Kim Bortolotto  
Social Work Department  
Masters Student in the Social Work program  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4M4  
(905) 544-3863

**THESIS SUPERVISOR:** Sheila Sammon  
Social Work Department  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4M4  
sammon@mcmaster.ca  
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23780

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

I am a Master's student in the Social Work Department at McMaster University doing a thesis supervised by Sheila Sammon in the Social Work Department.

You are asked to participate in a research study to explore the experiences of single-parent mothers in obtaining employment four months following their graduation from a Career Explorations/job preparation program. The career explorations/ job preparation program is not conducting this study. It is a study conducted by me, Kim Bortolotto. The Career Explorations program has merely sent out these letters on my behalf.

In this study, I am interested in learning about the experiences of single-parent mothers in their attempts at gaining/keeping employment. I am also interested in what kinds of social and community supports are available to help single mothers to become financially independent.

## **PROCEDURES INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH**

If you choose to take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in an in depth interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. The interview will cover a variety of questions and follow an interview guide. Enclosed you will find a copy of the interview guide for your review.

Prior to the interview, you will be asked several general questions, including your name, age and number of children.

The interview will be audio taped with your permission so that nothing that you say is missed. You may choose to turn off the recorder at any time and end the interview. The interview will be arranged at a location of your choosing.

## **POTENTIAL RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS**

It is not likely that you will be harmed as a result of your participation in this study. You may worry about what others will think if they know what you said. Below I explain how I will protect your privacy. I am enclosing a copy of the questions that will guide our conversation so you will know what to expect. Some of the questions may get you to think about things that you find stressful. You do not need to answer any question you would prefer to skip. If you feel that you would like to talk to someone about your stress, I can provide you with information about local resources.

## **BENEFITS**

There is little research on the strengths and barriers contributing to single-parent mothers in their attempts at obtaining employment. This study provides an opportunity to investigate these factors and gain a better understanding by professionals in the employment and training field as to the needs of single-parent mothers in their efforts to re-enter the workforce as well as to identify potential gaps in services.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your participation in this study and anything you say will be treated confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. The only people who will have access to any of the information you provide will be my supervisor and myself.

The audiotapes of the interviews and the transcripts will be stored in a safe place and locked in a filing cabinet to ensure confidentiality. All documents will be destroyed after the research is completed.

## **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You can choose to participate in the study or not. No one at The Centre will know whether you have participated in the study or not. You can skip any questions you prefer not to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable while still remaining a participant. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences. Your access to or relationship with The Centre will not be affected in any way. If you decide to withdraw, any information you provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.

## **STUDY RESULTS**

If you are interested in the results of the research project, then you get in touch with me in September 2008 and I would be happy to provide you with a copy of the summary.

## **RIGHTS OF PARTICIPANTS**

Should you have any questions about the research study or want more information, please contact:

Sheila Sammon  
Social Work Department  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4M4  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23780

Kim Bortolotto  
Student in the Masters of Social Work Program  
Social Work Department  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4M4  
(905) 544-3863

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

**McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat**

**Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142**

**C/O Office of Research Services**

**E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)**

### **CONSENT**

I have read the information presented on this consent form about the study being conducted by Kim Bortolotto, of McMaster University. I have been allowed the opportunity to discuss my participation in the study and to have answered any questions about the research to my satisfaction. I give my consent to volunteer in this study. A copy of this form has been given to me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name Giving Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **APPENDIX 2 – Information Letter for Research Participants**

### **INFORMATION LETTER FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Hello:

I am Kim Bortolotto, a Masters Student in the Social Work Department at McMaster University and I would like to **invite you** to be a participant in a research study to investigate **the experiences of single-parent mothers and their attempts to gain employment four months following their graduation from the Career Explorations program at The Centre for Skills Development and Training – Mississauga location.**

In this study, I am interested in learning about the difficulties experienced by single-parent mothers and the strengths they possess in their attempts at gaining/keeping employment as well as what kinds of social and community supports are available to help them in order to become financially independent. The information that you provide will help me to better understand the difficulties, strengths and supports faced by women searching for employment. This study will increase awareness about single-parent mother's experiences in their struggles and personal strengths in accessing the job market as well as how to improve employment and training services, such as the Career Explorations program, in order to better service their needs.

I am sending this letter to sole support mothers who completed the Career Explorations program since August 2007. This is not a research study conducted by the Career Explorations program, but it is approved by The Centre for Skills Development & Training.

Participation in the research project is voluntary. Refusal to participate in the study will not in any way jeopardize your involvement in The Centre's services. No one at The Centre's Mississauga location will know whether you agreed or not to participate in the study.

**The enclosed letter of information and consent form explains the research in detail.**

If you are willing to participate in the research study or have any questions, please contact me:

Kim Bortolotto  
Student in the Masters of Social Work Program  
Social Work Department  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4M4  
(905) 544-3863

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

**McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat**

**Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142**

**C/O Office of Research Services**

**E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)**



## **APPENDIX 3 – Interview Guide**

### **Interview Guide Questions**

#### **Demographic information:**

Name:

Age:

Number of children:

Ages of children:

- The interview guide questions will be flexible and act as a means of conversation so that the participants are allowed to share their ideas and insights.

**Interview questions addressing the barriers that sole support mothers experience and the strengths they possess in accessing employment.**

#### **Lead question for all participants:**

Thinking about your attempts at getting into the workplace since leaving the Career Explorations program four months ago, can you speak about what your experiences have been?

#### **Employed Participants:**

1. If you are employed, can you tell me how that has been for you?
2. What personal planning or preparation did you use to help you make the transition from home to the workplace?
3. Looking for work can be emotionally and mentally stressful, what has been your experience?
4. What obstacles/challenges did you face in your attempts to gain employment?
5. What kinds of responsibilities do you have? Do they interfere with or complicate you working?

6. What kinds of social supports would help or did help in your efforts to gain employment?
7. What kinds of strategies did you use to obtain employment?
8. What kinds of information have been helpful in your efforts to gain employment?
9. What are the factors or personal strengths that have contributed to your success at gaining employment?
10. Do you feel that four months is a reasonable time frame to get employment?
11. What advice or suggestions do you have for programming, specifically to support other single-parent mothers who are attempting to obtain employment?

**Unemployed Participants:**

12. If you have not been employed, can you tell me how that has been for you?
13. What personal planning or preparation have you used to help you make the transition from home to the workplace?
14. Looking for work can be emotionally and mentally stressful, what has been your experience?
15. What kinds of responsibilities do you have? Do they interfere with or complicate your attempts at getting work?
16. What obstacles/challenges have you faced in your attempts to gain employment?
17. What kinds of social supports would help in your efforts to gain employment?
18. Do you feel that four months is a reasonable time frame to get employment?
19. What advice or suggestions do you have for programming, specifically to support other single-parent mothers who are attempting to obtain employment?

**Participants employed, but unable to continue:**

20. Since leaving the Career Explorations program four months ago, thinking back to when you were employed, but were unable to continue, what factors led you to leave the workplace?

- 21.** Were there any responsibilities that you have that interfered with you keeping your job?
- 22.** Were there any obstacles/challenges that you faced in keeping employment?
- 23.** What kinds of social supports or information would have helped you in maintaining your job?
- 24.** Do you feel that four months is a reasonable time frame to get employment?
- 25.** What advice or suggestions do you have for programming, specifically to support other single-parent mothers who are attempting to obtain employment?

**APPENDIX 4 - Poster**

**Are you a single-parent mother?**

**Do you want your voice to be heard about your  
experiences of re-entering the workforce?**

Interested in *participating* in a research study?

**The purpose of the study** is to explore the barriers experienced by single-parent mothers and the strengths that they possess in their attempts at gaining employment following graduation from the Career Explorations program. Your views are valuable in helping to improve employment and training services within the community.

You will be asked to participate in a **60 – 90 minute interview**

For more **information** about the study or how to **get involved** contact:

Kim Bortolotto, Master's student  
School of Social Work, McMaster University  
(905) 544-3863

## **APPENDIX 5 - Community Centres and Support Groups in Ontario**

### **Toronto**

Jessie's Centre and Massey Centre are two unique facilities within the region of Toronto that serve young single mothers at risk. They offer long-term housing in addition to life skills, employment, educational upgrading, health and recreational programs. They provide a drop in family resource centre to young single mothers or mothers in the community and support a library and newsletter ("Jessie's Centre", n. d.; "Massey Centre," n. d.).

### **Vancouver**

YWCA in Vancouver provides a host of single mother support groups open to women of diverse backgrounds that are available within local neighbourhoods. These groups offer community resources and information covering a broad range of topic areas such as housing, fitness, health and employment to enhance a single mother's well being and success ("YWCA," n. d.).

### **Kingston**

The Single Mothers Support Network in Kingston is comprised of local community agencies working collectively with single mothers to provide resources, workshops and information on women's issues such as budget planning, child custody matters and addictions. The network also produces a newsletter that is distributed to single mothers in the community ("AWARE," n. d.).