Good Mothering in Precarity: The Societal Expectations of Solo Mothers in Aotearoa

An exploration of the food sourcing, providing and preparing practices of three low-income solo mothers.

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Dedication

For my great grandmothers.

That you may know your sacrifices were not in vain.

Abstract

This thesis examines the intersection of food insecurity and solo motherhood in Aotearoa New Zealand, focussing on how low-income solo mothers navigate the challenges of food sourcing, preparing, and providing for themselves and their children, with particular attention to the role of the school or ECE lunchbox. Using a qualitative case study methodology, grounded in social and feminist constructionism, this research explores the lived experiences of three solo mothers, Helen, Constance and Melissa, through semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation, and shop-along interviews.

The findings of this research suggest that food insecurity for solo mothers represents just one layer of broader precarity. In each of the cases, systemic barriers related to welfare, employment and housing significantly shaped their food providing practices. Beyond financial constraints, societal expectations of intensive mothering and the nuclear family unit further compounded their experiences. The pervasive nature of these ideals created conditions of unattainable self-sacrificial parenting that negatively contributed towards the solo mothers' abilities to thrive.

This research underscores the importance of examining the broader social, cultural and economic contexts of solo mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand when exploring food insecurity and marginalisation for solo mothers.

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Glossary of Māori Terms

This glossary lists the Māori words used throughout this thesis. The definitions have been taken from Te Aka Maori Dictionary (Moorfield, 2024).

Aotearoa	Māori name for New Zealand.
Kaupapa Māori	Māori approach, Māori principles, Māori ideology - a philosophical doctrine, incorporating the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of Māori society.
koha	gift, present, offering, donation, contribution - especially one maintaining social relationships and has connotations of reciprocity.
mana	Prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma - *mana* is a supernatural force in a person, place or object.
Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent.
tāngata whenua	Local people, hosts, indigenous people - people born of the whenua.
te reo Māori	Māori language.
whakawhanaungatanga	Process of establishing relationships, relating well to others.
Whānau	Extended family, family group. In modern context the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members.

Glossary of Terms for Social Services in New Zealand

Sole Parent Support – Sole Parent Support is a weekly payment for single parents or caregivers who are New Zealand Citizens or Residents aged 20 or older with one or more dependent children. The payment and associated regulations of receiving the payment are designed to help single parents find part-time work or get ready for future work. Only one parent or caregiver can get Sole Parent Support and how much you get depends on your situation (i.e number of children) and how much you earn (Ministry of Social Development, 2024c)

Working for Families – Working for Families Tax Credits are payments from the Inland Revenue Department for families with dependent children aged 18 and under. The payments are for low-income families and designed to help raise a family. Entitlements are based on yearly income and family circumstances. There are three types of Working for Families tax credit payments that are relevant to the participants in this research. 1)Family Tax Credit – Paid regardless of income source. You can be on salary and wages or receiving a welfare benefit. 2) In-work tax credit – A payment available to families who have some form of paid work each week. 3) Minimum family tax credit – A payment to make sure families are getting basic income where the parent or parents work a required number of hours for salary and wages (Inland Revenue, 2024a)

Child Support – Child support is money paid by parents who do not live with their child/ren or who share care with someone else. The money is to help with the cost of raising a child (Inland Revenue, 2024b)

Student Allowance – A student Allowance is a weekly payment for people between the ages of 18-65 years who are studying full time in an approved course or training. It is designed to help with living expenses while you are studying. You do not have to pay the money back. A student allowance is means tested either on the student's parents income (if under the age of 24) or a partners income (if you are over the age of 24 or have a child) (Ministry of Social Development, 2024d).

Early childhood Education (ECE) Subsidy – A governmental payment for children aged between 3-5 years that covers up to 20 hours of early childhood education each week. It can only be used for up

to 6 hours a day. The funding goes directly to an early learning service so should reduce the fees that are paid (Ministry of Education, 2024)

Child disability Allowance – A fortnightly payment made to the main carer of a child or young person with a serious disability. It is paid in recognition of the extra care and attention needed for that child. The payment is a set amount of $59.23 per week for each child who qualifies. It is not income tested and is paid separately from any other assistance received (Ministry of Social Development, 2024a).

Out of School Care and Recreation (OSCAR) subsidy – a payment for low-income families which helps with the costs of before and after school care for up to 20 hours a week and school holiday programmes for up to 50 hours a week. Eligibility requires either working or studying in an approved training course and the subsidy is income tested. Money is paid directly to the after school or holiday care provider (Ministry of Social Development, 2024b).

Chapter One: Introduction

Solo mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand represent a dynamic and diverse group whose experiences are influenced by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, sexuality and physical ability (Domett et al., 2023). Despite this diversity, solo mothers face significant structural inequities in the area of food provisioning where families headed by solo mothers make up nearly half of all food-insecure families (Pannekoek & Ree, 2019).

Although poverty is a key determinant of food insecurity (Ministry of Health, 2019), broader societal pressures related to motherhood compound these experiences for solo mothers (Macaulay et al., 2023). International research, such as that by Arlinghaus and Laska (2021), has highlighted that food-related practices for mothers experiencing food insecurity often intersect with idealised notions of 'good motherhood'.

In Aotearoa, solo mothers are deeply impacted by societal expectations to maintain a good mother status (Longhurst et al., 2012). However, the influence of these expectations, along with other gendered norms related to food providing practices, remain an underexplored area in research (Carter et al., 2010; Macaulay et al., 2023).

This thesis addresses the research gap in Aotearoa through a detailed case study exploration of the experiences and perspectives of three low-income solo mothers within the context of sourcing, preparing, and providing meals for themselves and their children who attend school or Early Childhood Education (ECE). This study aims to highlight the different ways that wider structural factors shape experiences by using a social constructionism and feminist constructionism framework. In examining food providing practices within these contexts this work aims to highlight the intersection between individual experience and wider societal expectations, offering broader insights into the realities of being a solo mother in Aotearoa.

Research Questions

To comprehensively explore the experiences of food sourcing, preparing and providing for low-income solo mothers in Aotearoa, the following key research questions guided this case study investigation:

1. Using the ECE or School lunchbox as a focal point, how do low-income solo mothers navigate societal expectations of food sourcing, preparation, and providing for themselves and their children?
2. How do socially constructed norms related to motherhood impact on food sourcing, providing, and preparation practices for solo mothers?
3. How do food-insecure solo mothers navigate food sourcing, preparation, and providing activities?
4. What intersecting factors contribute to experiences of food insecurity for solo mothers in Aotearoa?

Each case study that makes up this thesis utilises multiple data elicitation techniques including, semi-structured interviews that allow for in-depth insights, photo-elicitation to capture visual narratives, and 'shop-along' interviews to observe real-life decision-making processes.

To explore the topic, this thesis is broken into five main sections: an introduction, literature review, methodology section, presentation of the three case studies, and finally a discussion chapter.

This **introduction chapter** outlines the research objectives and provides the background information necessary to understand this topic within the context of Community Psychology.

Following on from this a **literature review** offers historical context to the lives of solo mothers in New Zealand today, as well as giving an overview of current literature on the topics of food insecurity and associated precarity for solo mothers in New Zealand.

The **methodology section** will provide the comprehensive details explored within the study. Ethical considerations are discussed, along with a detailed description of the recruitment process and empirical data engagements. Finally, the data analysis process is outlined to provide the reader with a transparent view of how research conclusions were derived.

The **three case studies** are each individually presented. Each case study begins with an overview of the woman's journey to becoming a solo mother. This is followed by an examination of her current life and that of her child or children, focusing on the various social and personal aspects of solo motherhood that significantly impact their daily experiences. Additional social and aspects outside of food providing were included as it was discovered throughout the research process that food providing practices could not be untangled from these wider influences. For each case, their experiences with food sourcing, preparation, and provision are analysed to illustrate the realities faced by both mother and child. The chapters are organised to provide the reader with an understanding of how each case integrates into the broader social structures that either support or hinder thriving as a solo mother in Aotearoa.

Finally, the **discussion chapter** brings the three cases into conversation with each other as well as current literature on the topic. In doing so, this chapter presents the findings on how food insecurity is deeply intertwined with wider aspects of ongoing precarity. It provides two key sections to explore this: *Intensive Mothering Expectations in Aotearoa* and *Structural Disadvantages*. The research strengths and limitations are evaluated, along with implications and recommendations for future research in this area. The chapter concludes with a summary of the thesis and its findings.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this research the term *solo mother* has been used to refer to the participants who lived without the co-parent of their child. In context this term is understood as interchangeable with the terms *sole mother* and *single mother* which are often found in literature. The term *solo,* however, was defined as important by the participants in this research as it encompassed more of

an inclusive understanding of their lived realities and diverse backgrounds. For example, they felt that the term *single mother* was not inclusive of a mother who may have a new partner that they did not share a home or parenting responsibilities with. Similarly, the term *sole mother* was felt that it excluded a mother who may have had input from a co-parent at some point throughout their children's lives. As such the term *solo mother* is used exclusively throughout this thesis.

It is important to acknowledge that while all the participants in this study identified as cisgender, heterosexual women, this does not mean that all solo mothers fall into these categories. Throughout this research, the terms *woman*, *women*, and *mother* are used to reflect the identities of the participants, with the understanding that these terms are rooted in specific cultural and historical contexts. Gender itself is understood as fluid, represented differently across cultures, and as something that evolves over time (InsideOUT Kōaro, 2024). As such gendered terms in this research are merely understood as representations for how each individual contextualised and described their own roles and experience within their social and cultural context.

It is also critical to recognise the dominance of cisnormativity and heteronormativity in literature related to solo motherhood. These assumptions marginalise as well as fail to represent the broader realities of solo motherhood. The study's findings unwittingly reflect the assumption of a gender binary and heteronormativity due to the sample's composition, not the author's views. As such this research recognises the need for inclusive studies, literature, and analysis that acknowledge and amplify the experiences of solo mothers across a range of gender identities and sexual orientations.

A Note on Researcher Positionality

Acknowledging researcher positionality is a fundamental aspect of community psychology research principles (Suffla et al., 2015). From a community psychology standpoint, complete impartiality is unattainable; instead, it is understood that both researcher and participant biases actively contribute to the co-construction of knowledge. I approach this project with multiple

identities that influence how I engage with and interpret the world. These have impacted all phases of the research process, including planning, participant interaction, data collection, and analysis. Therefore, it is essential to disclose and outline these influences as they have played a significant role in shaping the research outcomes.

As a solo mother myself I came to this research process as an insider researcher with first-hand experience of many of the lived realities of the participants. Insider researchers are often subject to criticism by being seen as too close to achieve objectivity. However, we all belong to various systems, families, communities, organisations, with rich, complex knowledge of them (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). This insider knowledge has been both beneficial and impactful. It has guided the types of interactions participants have had with me and actively contributed to rapport through a shared understanding. Many participants openly acknowledged they would not have felt comfortable disclosing information to an outsider researcher which has made this project a success in many ways. At the same time, my lived experience has shifted the research questions in directions that an outsider researcher may not have done which has implications for the research at all stages. In actively acknowledging this positionality it is hoped that my positionality is explicitly understood as an influencing factor in the knowledge created throughout.

Within this positionality it is also important to acknowledge the ways in which this has influenced the power dynamics throughout the researcher-participant interactions. As a solo mother I too encounter daily many of the precarious situations that the solo mothers in this research have experienced. Managing limited food budgets as a sole provider is frequently on the forefront for me. However, this has never necessitated that I routinely go without food myself. As such, this has placed me in a position of relative privilege when conducting this research. Additionally, being a postgraduate researcher rather than a participant inherently positions me within a dynamic where I experience many social privileges associated with higher education that may not be accessible to the participants in this study. Although extensive care has been taken at all stages to present the

participants' stories from a strengths-based perspective and remain aware of my own biases and interpretations, it is undeniable that this positionality has influenced the research throughout.

The University of Otago Food Cost Survey

Throughout each case study chapter in this thesis reference has been made to the University of Otago Food Cost Survey to provide some perspective for the reader on how the participants food spending contrasted or compared to national food costs. Each year the Department of Human Nutrition at the University of Otago completes a Food Cost Survey designed to provide a framework regarding the cost to feed New Zealanders of different age and gender groups. Data reported from this survey is designed to reflect the absolute minimum amount of money needed to be spent on a week-to-week basis to achieve adequate nutrition levels.

In using this survey as a baseline for the reader, it is important to outline multiple caveats that come with these figures that have been presented in this thesis. Firstly, people who have completely run out of food and have not maintained an average spending over previous weeks will not be able to meet their needs by spending this basic amount (Department of Human Nutrition, 2023). Secondly, these minimum costs do not include condiments, raising agents, flavourings (e.g. spice, gravy and stocks) nor does it include travel costs associated with food shopping which can be significant when exploring food costs. Thirdly and most relevant to the cases in this research is that the minimum costs do not account for nutritional needs of people with special dietary requirements such as food allergies (Department of Human Nutrition, 2023).

A Community Psychology Approach

To fully situate and understand the women’s experiences in this research, a community psychology framework has been drawn upon. Community psychology places an emphasis on understanding individuals as existing within multiple social systems ranging from close individual relationships to the influence of wider sociopolitical structures (Reimer et al., 2020). In other words,

this means that for the solo mothers in this research their experiences and behaviours cannot be understood outside of the relationships and social and cultural environments they exist within.

A useful tool for understanding the impact of systems is Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Theory of Ecological Systems. This model provides five theorised circular layers of social interaction that influence on an individual's life. Beginning from the middle and spanning outwards, the microsystem reflects direct interactions closest to the individual, such as family, school, or peers. The mesosystem reflects interconnections between various microsystems, such as the relationship between family and school. The exosystem reflects external settings that indirectly influence the individual, for example, the influence of a parent's workplace on a child. The macrosystem reflects the larger cultural and societal context, including laws, norms, and traditions. The chronosystem reflects the dimension of time, reflecting changes and consistencies over the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This model presents a visual way to understand that individuals do not exist in isolation but are embedded in and shaped by these interconnected systems within society. It also recognises the power dynamics within these systems that influence access to resources, opportunities, and support.

These layers of influence are important to this thesis to help understand some of the women's experiences particularly when understanding the power dynamics embedded in the societies that solo mothers exist within. For example, historically information about women has been presented from a perspective where it has been attempted to be removed from the contexts and cultures that women live within and the strong influencing impacts these have (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000). Within this thesis, when exploring the solo mothers' perspectives, mentioning the wider societal influences, means it is referencing those found within the macrosystem. A description of this understanding is important as shared narratives outside of this wider context cannot provide a full picture.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review examines concepts and theories that inform the understanding of solo mother's experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand, focusing on how broader systemic factors influence their everyday realities. Beginning with an exploration of the social expectations of motherhood this review explores the influence of the nuclear family paradigm and establishes some of the historical, cultural and political foundations contributing to the marginalisation of solo mothers. Next the ideal of intensive mothering is explored with a discussion on how this is related to class and an explanation for how this pervasive set of parenting ideals results in strong social consequences for those who cannot achieve these rigid set of standards. Additionally, the impacts of neoliberal policy are discussed to demonstrate how these are intertwined with these ideologies. The concept of precarity is discussed to display how solo mothers' lives are impacted by these wider systems on a tangible level. This includes a discussion of welfare systems, employment and housing which together create the economic barriers towards contributing to ongoing food insecurity for solo mothers in New Zealand.

The Nuclear Family Unit

The concept of the nuclear family, comprising a heterosexual couple and their dependent children, became central to New Zealand society with the influx of European settlers in the 19th century amidst practices of ongoing colonisation (Te Ara, 2024). This structure has since become embedded into the country's hegemonic norms, shaping family life, legal frameworks, social structures, and motherhood experiences (Dwyer, 2015). These norms are fundamentally rooted in White, patriarchal, and socially classed concepts of family (Minnotte, 2023) and are characterised by rigid gendered roles that tie women to caregiving, household duties, and child-rearing (Cribb, 2009).

While this structure remains the dominant model, the realities of family life in New Zealand have become far more diverse over the past 75 years. Today, the country comprises various family

types, including solo-parent families, blended families, and multi-generational households (Cribb, 2009; McAnally et al., 2022; Stats NZ, 2023). Solo-parent families now account for around 21% of all families in New Zealand, with approximately 62% of these households headed by solo mothers (Stats NZ, 2023).

Despite these demographic changes, public policies continue to prioritise nuclear families (Cribb, 2009; Dwyer, 2015). As a result, solo mother families are frequently perceived as deficient and as deviations from the nuclear family norm rather than being acknowledged as valid family structures within their own right (Trail & Goedeke, 2019; Nicolson, 2015). This results in significant social stigma and economic challenges (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017; D. Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017), limited support systems (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017; Winkworth et al., 2010), workplace discrimination (Perry-Jenkins & Gillman, 2000), and psychological and emotional strain (L. D. Robinson et al., 2016).

These challenges do not stem from inherent limitations but rather arise from entrenched societal norms that privilege nuclear family ideals (Maitri Jain & Venus Mahmoodi, 2022). Like most Western societies, New Zealand upholds the notion that a stable family requires both a mother and a father (McAnally et al., 2022). Consequently, this results in both internal and external expectations that solo mothers must fulfil a ‘dual’ role of ‘mother as caregiver’ and ‘father as provider’ in a society that presumes the necessity of two parents.

Intensive Mothering

This view of solo motherhood as deviant from the norm is intertwined with expectations to adopt intensive mothering ideals (Hays, 1996). These ideals stem from patriarchal constructions of the nuclear family unit and the framing of mothering as an all-consuming role women should desire to fulfil. Adrienne Rich (1995), first articulated the foundations making up this ideology based on the ‘Institution of Motherhood’ in her book “Of Woman Born” in 1976. In her work she distinguished between two forms of motherhood: motherhood as an experience and Motherhood as an Institution. Whilst motherhood as an experience may differ from individual to individual, the

Institution of Motherhood is a universal socially defined role (Green, 2015; Rich, 1995). Founded on rigid gender roles the Institution of Motherhood positions women as the rightful primary caregivers of children. This has the effect of devaluing women's work outside the home while simultaneously providing justification for exploiting unpaid labour within the home. Together these ideas form a foundation for societal expectations and public policy which prioritise the family unit and children's welfare over the individual freedom and wellbeing of mothers (Green, 2015).

Whilst it can be argued that gender roles have evolved since the 1970's, the Institution of Motherhood today is still reinforced by an evolving motherhood role set out in the expectation of the practices of 'intensive mothering' (Green, 2015). First described by Sharon Hays (1996), intensive mothering is a socially constructed and historically specific set of ideas which require mothers to engage in a style of parenting that is both time intensive and expensive (Cappellini et al., 2019; Klimor Maman et al., 2024; Minnotte, 2023). Intensive mothering holds the ideal that mothers be deeply engaged in their children's lives as not just caregivers, but as educators and emotional anchors. It is grounded in the belief that children's outcomes are primarily determined by the level of a mother's efforts and the depth of their sacrifices (Smyth & Craig, 2017).

The ideals and social regulations that make up this notion of intensive mothering are characterised by three major components: 1) the idea that caregiving work should be performed by individual mothers as opposed to fathers or groups of women, 2) an expectation that mothers should place their child's needs above their own at all instances and, 3) a belief that child raising and employment are guided by a different set of principles i.e motherhood is a sacred role while employment is more rational (Minnotte, 2023).

These ideals are expected to be performed through two key modes. Firstly, intensive mothering practices are expected to be 'expertly' guided making it a profession that needs to be learned. This is seen for example in the litany of child raising books or expert parenting advice available. Secondly, child raising is viewed as in investment and in this sense, it requires a considerable amount of time and economic resources to achieve the expected standard (Klimor

Maman et al., 2024). This economic investment includes extracurricular activities and loss of wages due to mothers leaving the workforce and/or reducing paid work hours to devote more time to mothering (Minnotte, 2023). Combined, this set of social norms has led to a form of mothering that requires considerably more energy for women than other mothering norms throughout history (Brenton, 2017).

Solo mothers face unique challenges under the norms of intensive mothering which demand such significant time, energy, and resources (Maitri Jain & Venus Mahmoodi, 2022). Unlike dual households, solo mothers do not have access to the same time and economic resources. This makes achieving these standards an inequitable task.

These concepts are deeply linked to ideas about social class. An underlying assumption is that all mothers have the resources and social support to devote themselves entirely to their children. In reality, it is only White, educated, middle-class mothers within a nuclear family unit whose economic and social standing allow for these types of practices. These classed ideals also offer a blueprint for what constitutes 'good' mothering while simultaneously leaving space for labelling anything outside of this as 'bad' mothering (Green, 2015). This creates an inequitable paradox for solo mothers who lack these resources but face even harsher scrutiny for failing to conform (Nicolson, 2015).

Social surveillance is one of the key mechanisms in ensuring that these practices are conformed to (Henderson et al., 2010). One of the strongest forms of social surveillance is mother to mother monitoring where mothers observe and evaluate each other's practices in line with these standards (Henderson et al., 2010; Smyth & Craig, 2017). This can be intensified in social settings such as schools or playgroups (Harman & Cappellini, 2015). As well as peer to peer surveillance, schools, healthcare providers and other social institutions serve as additional sites of scrutiny where mothers are evaluated based on their children's performance health or behaviour. Labelling of bad motherhood in these realms frequently leads to institutional intervention into parenting behaviour including the removal of children from care (Minnotte, 2023).

Over time external surveillance leads to an internalisation of these norms causing individual mothers to place pressure on themselves to conform to these ideals (Brenton, 2017; Henderson et al., 2010). Solo mothers often go to great lengths at high personal cost to protect and shield themselves and their children from the impacts of this labelling (Elliott et al., 2015). This internalisation often leads to shame and guilt which become drivers of modified parenting practices maintaining the cycle and perpetuating class inequalites (Longhurst et al., 2012).

Neoliberal Discourses

Neoliberal discourses further influence ideals of intensive mothering practices for solo mothers in New Zealand. Since the mid-1980s, New Zealand's political history has been defined by the reinforcement of neoliberal policies. The primary aim of these policies has been to create an environment where individuals are expected to take greater responsibility for their well-being rather than relying on state support (Cotterell & Von Randow, 2016). This has been implemented through market deregulation, privatisation of state assets and interventions, and a reduction in state welfare provisions (Roper, 2024). This shift has transformed the country's social and economic foundations, resulting in a dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' citizenship; distinguished by those who can meet these expectations and those who cannot (Cotterell & Von Randow, 2016).

For solo mothers these impacts have been profound. Within neoliberal society, children are viewed as future investments for economic productivity (Sims, 2017). Simultaneously, focus has shifted from the more collective ‘it takes a village approach’ to one where it has become the responsibility of individual families to raise children to succeed in this type of investment. Failure in this role of either mother or child has become not just an economic failure but a sense of moral failure. The intersections of individual responsibility, and intensive mothering, place the full responsibility of this success on the solo mother (Lavee, 2016).

Central to this responsibility for success is the concept of individual autonomy and choice. If motherhood is perceived as a choice made by women, then the inability to meet its ideal standards

as solo mothers is interpreted as a poor individual decision, thus justifying the label of a 'bad' mother. This system is self-serving, as this notion of choice removes the spotlight from the unrealistic standards themselves onto the individual women (Williamson, 2023).

Under neoliberal policy, good mothering has also become to be directly related to consumption and consumerism (Banister et al., 2016). Competence and devotion are displayed through visible, market-based actions, such as purchasing educational toys, 'safe' parenting aids like strollers and cots, and a myriad of child-focused products. In this sense, intensive mothering ideals intertwine with neoliberal forces, positioning consumption as a tangible marker of care and love (Banister et al., 2016; Lavee, 2016). When solo mothers lack the financial resources to meet these consumer-driven expectations, their mothering practices are often scrutinised rather than the validity of consumption ideals themselves (Williamson, 2023). This discourse reinforces harmful stereotypes portraying those who cannot consume in this way as irresponsible or neglectful, leading to social exclusion and a sense of devaluation within society (Banister et al., 2016) (Dwyer, 2015).

Further intensifying social exclusion, neoliberalism has reshaped ease of access to social capital for solo mothers. Social capital is understood as encompassing networks and relationships of reciprocity that enable individuals to function within society (Labonte, 1999). Diverse social capital comes with benefits such as enjoyment of life and flow on effects to access to other resources through these connections (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017).

Access to social capital can mediate parenting stressors for solo mothers (Winkworth et al., 2010). However, access to sufficient social capital as a solo mother is becoming increasingly difficult (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017). Low-income solo mothers frequently lack access to 'natural' social networks that facilitate this type of growth due to barriers such as cost and transportation issues (Winkworth et al., 2010). Additionally, social capital relies on reciprocity, but solo mothers are frequently already stretched thin by caregiving and financial pressures, so are often excluded from networks when they cannot reciprocate (Widan & Greeff, 2019). Research also suggests that social

stigma related to solo motherhood status has negative impacts on building social capital for solo mothers (Winkworth et al., 2010).

Neoliberalism does not recognise the social or the community and works on the assumption that individuals should have personal networks to lean on (Peters, 2000).With a focus on individual responsibility and self-reliance, the public sector has undergone a shift to privatisation for many previous public services. By significantly downsizing public services, responsibilities for social welfare have become delegated to local communities and non-profit organisations. These sites are frequently overrun and lacking enough resources (Peters, 2000). Without a partner, and access to publicly funded resources, solo mothers often have to rely instead on their own individual resources and social networks such as immediate family for survival. These support networks however are frequently conflicted in the level of support they provide and concurrently work to reduce visibility of the need for external social supports for solo mothers (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017). Combined these factors disproportionately limit solo mothers access for childcare supports, emotional and mental support as well employment opportunities and ongoing employment support (Winkworth et al., 2010).

Economic Precarity

According to Standing (2014) the combining factors found with the neoliberal model has led to the emergence of a new type of inequitable social structure unseen before in history. At the top, a global elite holds most of the world's wealth, exercising significant power and political influence. Below this elite is the salariat, and proficians, comprising of individuals in well-paid, stable, full-time employment who benefit from ongoing job security and thrive well in neoliberal society. Beneath this lays the traditional working class which is increasingly diminishing; in its place, a new class known as the precariat is emerging.

The precariat is defined by three dimensions: 1) unstable living conditions, 2) existential insecurity, and 3) a lack of occupational identity or narrative. This group endures insecure labour

conditions, has limited control over their time and choices and experiences chronic feelings of deprivation, alienation, and anger (Standing, 2011). The precariat is unique in being the first class with higher levels of education than their jobs require, yet they are unable to utilise these skills due to systemic barriers and status limitations imposed by neoliberal society. Subsequently they rely on fluctuating wages without non-wage benefits like pensions, sick leave, or annual leave. This leads to chronic financial uncertainty. Members of the precariat often live right on the edge of unsustainable debt, where even small financial shocks can result in poverty (Groot et al., 2017). Deprived of full citizenship rights, the precariat are treated as "denizens," reliant on discretionary judgments for access to limited public services and denied the opportunity to build a life of dignity and fulfilment (Standing, 2011).

Solo mothers in New Zealand frequently fall into this precariat class characterised by difficulties faced across measures such as economic instability, limited access to resources and social challenges specific to being a solo mother (Stats NZ, 2023). Solo mothers in New Zealand face high rates of poverty, with 2013 statistics outlining 56% living below the poverty line compared to just 11% of two-parent families (Dwyer, 2015). In 2023 statistics nearly one fifth (18%) outlined they lived precariously without enough money for basic everyday needs as compared to only 5.2% of partnered parents. Moreover, a further 43% stated they routinely had only just enough money to survive (Stats NZ, 2023).

Economic precarity for solo mothers is frequently impacted by a lack of sustainable employment that recognise barriers such as need for flexible work or childcare responsibilities. Consequently, many solo mothers must rely on insufficient welfare options, trapped into poverty cycles as they cannot easily transition into higher-paying, secure employment (Dwyer, 2015). This economic precarity translates further into other areas for solo mothers, most notably a lack of housing and a lack of food stability.

Insufficient and Limited Welfare Provisioning

In 1973, following increasing feminist movements, New Zealand introduced the Domestic Purposes Benefit (now called the Sole Parent Support Benefit), a welfare payment specifically for solo parents in need of financial aid. Under the influence of neoliberalism, this system once designed as a safety net has evolved into a punitive mechanism perpetuating precarity for many solo mothers (Gray, 2019). Defined by fiscal restraint and behavioural compliance, penal welfare emphasises stringent conditions and policies, impacting access to basic necessities such as food and clothing (D. Hodgetts et al., 2022).

A penal welfare system is increasingly modelled from a system similar to that seen in correctional systems in New Zealand. The primary function is to adopt surveillance on beneficiaries and recondition those accessing support using behavioural methods and procedures (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017). Solo mothers are required to comply with increasing demands in order to access diminishing welfare provisions (A. Martin et al., 2024) and receipt of this welfare by solo mothers has become inherently tied with social ideals about moral value and worthiness (Gray, 2017).

A penal system has resulted in the framing of poverty in solo mothers as result of personal failure rather than systemic or gendered inequities (D. Hodgetts et al., 2022). Solo mothers seeking welfare support are often stereotyped as irresponsible, unmotivated, lacking in some way, and needing state intervention into their lives regarding decision-making processes related to themselves and their children (Gray, 2017). Welfare policies specific to solo mother beneficiaries reflect this ‘tough love’ ideology, focusing on correcting perceived behavioural flaws through state obligations such as work and childcare responsibilities rather than providing genuine support (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017).

Solo mothers accessing sole parent support must work a minimum of 20 hours per week once their youngest child turns three (Ministry of Social Development, 2024c). Frequently, barriers to meet such work obligations for solo mothers are ignored, leaving many women balancing impossible restrictions (Dwyer, 2015). In June 2024, the Minister of Social Development directed

WINZ to implement a ‘traffic light system’ for beneficiaries including those in receipt of Sole Parent Support. The colour indicates how well a client is meeting their obligations and subsequently moderates access to resources based on behaviour. If a client is in the Green, they are meeting their work and social obligations and thus entitled to continue receiving their benefits. If a client falls into Orange, benefits may be reduced and if a client is in Red due to not meeting their work or social obligations, benefits may be stopped altogether (Ministry of Social Development, 2024c). Policies such as these tied into the obligation to work once a child is three ignore the impact of caregiving responsibilities or other barriers towards meeting obligations for solo mothers.

Simultaneously they disregard caregiving as a valuable role that can be completed by the solo mothers themselves. Paradoxically WINZ fund external childcare through policies such as the Out of School Care and Recreation (OSCAR) subsidy to enable forced working conditions for solo mothers (Gray, 2017).

Employment

At the political and social level, solo mothers are actively encouraged to remove themselves from welfare and to engage in paid employment. This comes with the view that this will have multiple economic advantages (Peterson et al., 2018). However, solo mothers are rarely actively supported in the workplace in ways that recognise the additional barriers they face to support them to thrive economically (L. D. Robinson et al., 2016).

In 2018, nearly 60% of solo mothers were employed, with paid work being their primary financial source (Ministry for Women, 2022). However, solo mothers encounter significant challenges that compound working life such as limited access to affordable childcare services, poorer health, and transportation difficulties. Often these barriers translate to a reliance on unsustainable lower paid or part time jobs that allow for greater flexibility in managing childcare responsibilities (Dwyer, 2015).

Society itself has failed to address such notions of gendered or motherhood status inequity in the workplace (L. D. Robinson et al., 2016). Despite much change in the makeup of the workforce, expectations for workers are still grounded in an androcentric 'ideal worker' narrative which prioritises workers who can put work above all else in their life, including caregiving duties (Brumley, 2014; Cobb et al., 2024; Longhurst, 1996; Smyth & Craig, 2017). This disadvantages solo mothers in tangible ways as these gender stereotypes are intensified in solo motherhood (Albiston & Correll, 2024). Embedded stereotypes about solo mothers prioritising caregiving over work limit their professional potential (Brumley, 2014). Solo mothers also face a 'double bind' where they are penalised for focusing on caregiving while being criticised if they fail to do so (Albiston & Correll, 2024). This is compounded by systems such as the education system where employment annual leave and school holiday schedules do not align leaving solo mothers with difficulties in navigating these periods (Dwyer, 2015).

For many solo mothers, despite working and managing these many difficulties, the phenomenon of in-work poverty is a reality of their lives. In work poverty is becoming an increasing phenomenon in general in New Zealand with 61% of households with children living in material poverty being in paid work. Full-time paid employment on its own no longer provides enough for a household even at a basic level when there are children in the home (Perry, 2022). For solo mothers this risk is increasingly more so, with solo parent families making up the highest group rate of in-work poverty at 12.3% of the total population. This is as opposed to couples with children who make up only 4.8% (Plum et al., 2019).

A high rate of in-work poverty among solo parents, compared to other household structures, aligns with observations from other countries that indicates low-paid and precarious employment does not effectively lift solo mothers out of poverty (Plum et al., 2019). Furthermore, government financial assistance aimed at supporting such households in employment is frequently inadequate in helping them meet their needs (A. Martin et al., 2024). For example, although the government provides 20 hours free Early Childhood Education (ECE) subsidies for children under the age of 5,

these are limited to only 4 hours per day. Solo parents frequently need more than 20 hours of ECE to engage in 20 hours paid work. Further, the OSCAR subsidy which is available for up to 50 hours care per week for those in work with school aged children is not a full payment for actual costs. This leaves a shortfall that for many, is too difficult to pay (Dwyer, 2015).

Housing

Housing is a further issue that impacts solo mothers in New Zealand. Many solo mothers are living in overcrowded or substandard conditions due to the high cost of rent and limited housing support (Domett et al., 2023). Home ownership rates for solo mothers are amongst the lowest in the country (Goodyear, 2017). While home ownership comes with an increased sense of agency and control, long term renting is associated with greater instability, lower quality of housing, frequent moves and lack of control and agency (Goodyear, 2017).

New Zealand currently faces a housing crisis which disproportionately impacts solo mothers. As some of the most vulnerable members of society they are left paying monopoly rents at the hands of the wealthy. Rent prices are largely unregulated, and landlords are in a position to turn a social necessity into their legal right to charge based on the market economy (Malva, 2016). Within this rental market landlords often prefer professional couples and view solo mothers as undesirable tenants. Landlords can, and frequently do, openly refuse tenants with children, advertising properties as unsuitable for families (Group Think, 2018). This prejudice relegates solo mothers to the bottom of the tenant hierarchy (Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017).

As a result, solo mothers are often forced into ‘affordable’ or available housing that is unhealthy. Usually this means they must rely on overcrowding and shared housing situations (Malva, 2016). Whilst common, shared housing is regularly an insecure option, offering little more than a basic roof without the sense of security, autonomy, or belonging (Baek & Kim, 2022; Maalsen, 2020).

In line with neoliberal ideology, the State's response to these known factors for solo mothers has been minimal (Simpson, 2020). This is despite research which highlights that availability to state

housing for vulnerable low-income populations such as solo mothers could greatly help to provide security, reduce the need for frequent moves, as well as provide access to higher quality housing (Group Think, 2018).

Interest in providing housing for solo mothers has not been a priority in governmental housing policies and provisions historically or currently. Although by the mid-1960s solo-parent families led by women were eligible for state housing, this was only provided if their ex-husband or a solicitor signed the application form. At the time, the New Zealand Government widely expressed concerns that an availability of state housing might incentivise more women to leave their husbands. Things have not shifted far from this and current opportunity for solo mothers to apply for state housing support has been impacted by a marked increase of state houses being sold to the private market coupled with a declining number of new state houses being built (Mills et al., 2015).

Consequently, solo mothers with dependent children represent the largest group among New Zealand's homeless population, constituting 43% of those without homes (McClure, 2017). The traditional image of homelessness often overlooks these women, who may not be visibly on the streets but are nonetheless experiencing severe housing deprivation (McClure, 2017).

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is defined as the lack of reliable access to sufficient and nutritionally adequate food, often accompanied by stress about obtaining food in socially acceptable ways (Graham, Hodgetts, et al., 2018). This issue is becoming increasingly prevalent among solo mother families in Aotearoa (Macaulay et al., 2023). The most recent New Zealand health survey data suggests that in families with children aged 0-14, almost 1 in 4 children lived in households that did not have enough food on a regular basis. This is an increase of 21.3% from the previous year (Perry, 2022). Families headed by solo mothers represent nearly half of all these households experiencing food insecurity (Ministry of Health, 2019). This is significant given solo mother families constitute around 15% of all families in Aotearoa (Stats NZ, 2023).

Food insecurity is associated with various adverse health and wellbeing outcomes for both children and parents. These include increased rates of obesity, asthma, behavioural or developmental difficulties, higher psychological and parenting stress, as well as poorer self-rated health status, higher rates of chronic disease and lower energy and nutrient levels (Macaulay et al., 2023;Ministry of Health, 2019). Food insecurity also negatively impacts mental health, reducing resilience and increasing stress. This can lead to social marginalisation and a disrupted sense of belonging (Graham et al., 2019).

People experiencing food insecurity often are forced to rely on inexpensive, highly processed foods that fill hunger but lack adequate nutritional value (Begley et al., 2019; Belachew et al., 2013; Graham, Hodgetts, et al., 2018). When individuals are facing food insecurity the struggle to provide food becomes distressing, compounded by stigma and shame over the inability to secure healthy, nutritious meals (Graham, Stolte, et al., 2018).

A primary known driver of food insecurity is low income relative to essential household expenses, with nutritious foods like fruits, vegetables, and quality proteins prohibitively expensive (Macaulay et al., 2023). Consequently, food budgets are often reallocated to cover essential expenses while items such as toiletries become classed as luxuries (Jackson & Graham, 2017).

Recent research has revealed the severe impacts of this experience for solo mothers in New Zealand. Solo mothers have been found to forgo their own meals, medical needs, and personal care to ensure their children are fed. The physical and emotional toll of their sacrifices includes hunger, physical exhaustion, and emotional distress (Macaulay et al., 2023).

Overseas research (e.g., Arlinghaus & Laska, 2021) has identified that along with poverty, food-related practices when facing food insecurity are strongly tied into idealised notions of motherhood. Mothering practices have always been synonymous with food labouring practices and understood as a means of expressing love and care (Brenton, 2017; DeVault, 1991). Feeding in the context of solo motherhood then is understood as not merely a functional activity but a deeply cultural and emotional act (Macaulay et al., 2023).

Within Aotearoa solo mothers are strongly impacted by societal expectations to maintain 'good mother' status (Longhurst et al., 2012). Solo mothers already constrained by financial and time limitations face heightened feelings of guilt and shame when unable to meet these ideals around food providing (Arlinghaus & Laska, 2021; Macaulay et al., 2023). This dynamic exposes the need for greater understanding and research regarding the intersecting sociocultural factors related to motherhood, family structure, and feeding for solo mothers in New Zealand.

Lunchboxes

A site where social expectations related to food providing frequently plays out is in the school or Early childhood education ECE lunchbox. Lunchboxes are held to a stringent set of social standards of what does or does not constitute appropriate, 'healthy' or loving provisions of food (Bathgate & Begley, 2011; Graham, 2018; Harman & Cappellini, 2015). Lunchboxes are understood to symbolise good parenting, embodying cultural norms of care, nutrition, and effort (Harman & Cappellini, 2015). Research suggests that mothers view lunchboxes as public representations of their competence, subject to judgement from teachers, peers, and other parents (Bathgate & Begley, 2011; Harman & Cappellini, 2015). For solo mothers experiencing the constraints of food insecurity, not only then is the lunchbox a site of material status but also a moral one.

In 2020 the New Zealand government rolled out the *Ka Ora, Ka Ako* programme providing free lunches in schools for around 27% of New Zealand students in low advantage schools. Early studies exploring the impacts of this programme have found that not only has the provision of school lunches reduced stress related to food insecurity but has also created greater equity and enhanced 'mana' for both children and families (McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2023). However, further research is needed to explore food provision experiences among families not covered by this initiative, with a focus on the specific challenges faced by solo mothers.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the social, economic, and systemic challenges that solo mothers in New Zealand face. It has highlighted the persistent influence of the nuclear family paradigm, which despite changing family dynamics, remains the norm. Such a model marginalises solo mother families positioning them as deviations from the norm while reinforcing stigma and lack of access to adequate social supports. Combining with neoliberal policy and influence, the pressures related to intensive mothering have also been explored, highlighting how informed by this policy such classed ideals discriminate against solo mothers who lack the time, energy or resources to conform to these unachievable standards.

Barriers to thriving in employment, and housing have also been explored with an exploration of the insufficient and penalising nature of welfare supports available. It has been shown how combined these work towards keeping solo mothers living in precarity and poverty.

Food insecurity has been identified as an additional critical issue that disproportionately affects solo mothers. Whilst Government initiatives such as the Ka Ora Ka Ako programme which provides free school lunches have been introduced to attempt to mediate this, research related to families not eligible for this and the experiences of the mothers themselves is lacking. Looking at all these factors, it has been identified that significant gaps appear in the literature related to wider social drivers that may contribute to food insecurity for solo mothers in New Zealand.

Chapter Three: Methods

This chapter outlines my research approach, which was designed to create an ethical and participatory approach towards exploring food insecurity within the context of solo mothering. The theoretical frameworks of social constructionism and feminist constructionism underpinning this research process will be described with rationale given as to the appropriateness of these when working to explore social issues within context.

The qualitative, case study methodology employed to achieve the research aims and objectives will be outlined, with a rationale provided for the suitability of the various data elicitation techniques used in the case studies. Specifically, this includes semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation, and 'shop-along' interviews. Ethical considerations are discussed along with a detailed description of the recruitment process and empirical data engagements. Lastly, the data analysis process is discussed to provide the reader with a clear view of how research conclusions were met.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Within this thesis, social constructionism and feminist constructionism approaches provide the ontological and epistemological basis for the research approach.

Social Constructionism

As an ontology, social constructionism posits that social reality is not an objective, naturally occurring state waiting to be uncovered. Rather, reality is continually and mutually co-constructed by people living within societies through language and their daily interactions. As many different realities exist as people do. The construction of these realities occurs simultaneously on both individual and collective levels (Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012).

Berger and Luckman (as cited in, D. Hodgetts et al., 2020) highlighted three distinct dialogical moments that produce this dance of co-construction: externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. Externalisation is the process of taking internal ideas and turning them into tangible

practices or material form. Objectivation occurs when these ideas become seen as naturally occurring independent of the people who created them. Internalisation refers to the process in which people become socialised into a society where these ideas already exist. The amalgamation of these ideas forms an individual's conscious way of existing within the world (re)constructing the realities experienced around us.

Adopting this ontology means recognising that no individual is ever the sole inventor of their reality as realities do not exist outside of these complex social relationships.

As an epistemology, a social constructionist framework takes a critical stance on knowledge production, believing that a purely objective truth does not exist (Miller, 2017). Within the context of this research, knowledge is understood to follow the same process described by Berger and Luckman of being both created and sustained through social practices and ongoing social interactions (Reimer et al., 2020).

Language and the production of shared discourse are key tools in this process. Shared discourse occurs when an agreed upon set of meanings, or stories, provide a way of making sense of the world and offer a blueprint for interpretation of social reality (Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012). As shared discourse's require ongoing negotiations within social groups, awareness of this can help to understand how hegemonic norms often become considered as legitimate knowledge forms (D. Hodgetts et al., 2020).

As highlighted by Bohan (1993) knowledge is really only what we collectively agree to call truth at a point in time. Consequently, discourses that sustain through time are therefore always historically and culturally situated (D. Hodgetts et al., 2020; Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012). These discourses are often laden with prejudices and stereotypes reflecting the power dynamics of the societies in which they were created (Reimer et al., 2020). Therefore, the methodological techniques in this research focus particularly on the social meanings found within and beneath the language and storytelling process used by participants.

It is important to critically examine the power dynamics within negotiated norms and shared discourse (R. G. Nelson, 2021). Power shapes knowledge production and determines whose voices are heard. Foucault (as cited in Riemer et al., 2022), described power as a relative and omnipresent force present in all social interactions. In addressing these dynamics, it is possible to reveal and critique accepted knowledge on topics like motherhood and food insecurity. In turn this contributes to discussions on social justice for marginalised groups, such as solo mothers (Riger, 1992) Examining power also acknowledges human agency and the influence of social structures on our perceptions and experiences (Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012).

Feminist Constructionism

Feminist research is directly invested in exposing the social oppression and inequality that presents for women within patriarchal societies (Taylor et al., 2016). Within patriarchal societies, such as Aotearoa, social issues are inherently gender issues (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2024). Exploring topics related to women therefore requires an acknowledgment of the ways in which knowledge productions, hegemonic norms and power structures are derived from structures of power and dominance (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2024).

One way to examine hegemonic norms and power dynamics is through feminist constructionism. Like social constructionism, feminist constructionism posits that reality is not something to be discovered but is instead socially invented and deeply rooted in gendered norms (Fiaccadori, 2006). It challenges the essentialist view that gender is biologically determined and inherent to individuals. Instead, it sees gender and gendered behaviours as socially constructed and enacted through ongoing social interactions (Bohan, 1993).

Feminist constructionism facilitates the exploration of these diverse representations of gendered experiences, rather than attempting to understand them as naturally occurring phenomena. In utilising this framework, it can be understood that the experiences of the women in this research do not reflect an external or universal truth about ‘women’ or motherhood but rather

are representations of an ordering and organising of social situations, reflected through language (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988).

As an epistemology, feminist constructionism is highly critical of knowledge production about women. It recognises how knowledge production within Western, patriarchal societies serves to maintain and reinforce androcentric knowledge structures (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000). Historically, traditional scientific methods of knowledge production have distorted women's experiences by attempting to separate them from the social conditions and impacts of societal structures (Riger, 1992). This epistemology emphasises the importance of context in understanding where and how knowledge is generated and recognises that dominant viewpoints about women or women's issues do not always fully capture these complexities (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2024).

Feminist constructionism is also critical of unexamined androcentric biases in research design and processes. These have historically led to women's experiences being understood from a deficit perspective, as well as being pathologized and 'othered' (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000).

Feminist constructionism research approaches therefore aim to liberate women from oppression rooted in research based on essentialist views and patriarchal devaluation (Bohan, 1993). Cosgrove and Mchugh (2000) outlined five key approaches to address these androcentric biases in research which have informed the methodology of this project. These are: "(1) giving voice to women's experiences, (2) moving away from dichotomous and other forms of simplistic thinking, (3) incorporating reflexivity, (4) adopting a collaborative approach, and (5) Using research as a tool for emancipation" (p. 816).

Adopting these approaches helps address the complex relationship between epistemology and methodology in research, recognising the impact of unexamined androcentric biases at both the epistemological and methodological stages. By incorporating these approaches, this research aims to avoid biased and discriminatory conclusions that render women as 'other' and contribute to their continued marginalisation.

Why Case Studies?

As the research focused on the minority group of solo mothers, it was important to use methods that allowed for participant input and facilitated research 'with' rather than 'on' this cohort. Therefore, a qualitative, in-depth case study approach was adopted.

Qualitative research focuses on understanding the meanings individuals attribute to the experiences in their lives (Taylor et al., 2016). They are exploratory in nature and take a relativist approach towards knowledge production, meaning, understandings gained throughout the research process are not focussed on uncovering an objective 'truth' but are used to directly capture the rich and complex subjective human experiences of participants (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010; Hammersley, 2013).

Qualitative research methods allow for participants to directly contribute towards the research process and talk more freely about a subject. Encouraging participants input on methodologies is one way of creating a richer understanding of women's lives by allowing for descriptions of the research topics to be told from the from participants points of view (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010). Encouraging active participation in the research process was viewed as directly keeping in line with the feminist research principles as participants were encouraged to share their own ideas on the research topic which may not have initially been anticipated.

Such an approach also aimed to ensure that the study did not inadvertently contribute to deficit-based knowledge about solo mothers in Aotearoa. Research on minority groups too frequently silences or devalues participant stories and perspectives that diverge from dominant discourses (Sonn et al., 2019). This research was therefore intentionally designed to validate the everyday experiences and descriptions of solo mothers' experiences, recognising their value outside of conventional norms.

Case studies involve observing and interacting with participants within their own environments and understanding them as embodied, socially and culturally situated participants

(Crowe et al., 2011). Participants are seen as active contributors to knowledge production rather than simply research 'subjects' (D. J. Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). This approach recognises the inherent expertise and knowledge that participants hold. Case studies were chosen for this research to respect and highlight the unique perspectives each participant offers without the need to generalise what was found in each case.

Typically, case studies are comprised of a variety of sources of data such as interviews, observations or object analysis. Using multiple forms of data allows for an in-depth dive into the taken for taken for granted, mundane everyday activities that make up a participant's life and allow these to be examined more closely (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). The use of several different methods of data collection also allows for triangulation where information collected can be compared increasing depth as well as validity (Mills et al., 2010).

Case study research which required ongoing interaction between participants and researcher, meant mutual trust would also be a significant part of the research process. Such an approach can counteract the power dynamics often present in researcher-participant dynamics completed on women and minority groups (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000; Sonn et al., 2019).

This research approach also aimed to create positive social change for participants in multiple ways. Firstly, through recognition of their own valuable insights, expertise and knowledge, participants can then feel validated and seen in their positions within society (Sonn et al., 2019). Secondly, through creating a safe space to share stories, these can become emancipatory in the sense that by actively sharing their words participants can contribute to a pool of knowledge that could also help to validate other solo mothers' experiences (Williams et al., 2003). Thirdly, by incorporating the use of koha within each case (outlined in further detail below), participants could use these to directly ease their current financial situations.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Waikato's School of Psychology Ethics Committee. The application process involved following their ethical application procedures and guidelines to ensure a responsible approach to the research process. Although not a formal requirement, the research was also conducted in alignment with the 2002 Code of Ethics for Psychologists in Aotearoa/New Zealand, particularly regarding informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and active participation. Additionally, the Te Ara Tiki guidelines were followed to ensure culturally safe practices.

Throughout the research, care was taken to maintain participant confidentiality. All data was stored securely on a password-protected private network (Microsoft OneDrive), with only the researcher having access to it. Devices used in the project were also password protected, and any hard copy data, such as field notes, were scanned and stored securely. Audio and video recordings were deleted from personal devices and uploaded to the protected network. Participants were referred to by pseudonyms in all transcriptions, and no identifying information about organisations or workplaces was included in the analysis or final write-up to maintain anonymity.

Koha

In recognition of the time taken to complete each interview, as well as recognition of their expertise of the subject matter, participants received a koha in the form of a $100 supermarket voucher for each interview they completed. At each face-to-face interview I also provided refreshments such as a hot drink (or equivalent), fresh fruit, and biscuits or muffins.

The koha provided was intentionally set at this rate to recognise that the case study research activities required additional time, energy, and effort to standard research interviews. As the process involved repeat engagements with the same participants, and required participants to complete a range of activities, it was particularly important to tangibly recognise and acknowledge the time and effort invested by participants.

Research engagements with groups such as solo mothers also need to acknowledge the time it takes for participants to engage in research; not just the interview itself but also the time required to prepare for and respond. In this research context, the giving of a koha was the appropriate way to demonstrate gratitude and respect.

Reflections on Ethics

Research on marginalised groups historically has a high harm rate (Lovo et al., 2021). Feminist research places a high importance on reducing this harm rate through viewing participants as the experts of their own lives, allowing them to tell their stories in their own words and for these stories to be within the confines of their own levels of comfort (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000). There is a level of vulnerability in being a solo parent in that many of the participants were already facing constrained circumstances. Moreover, participants also often experienced various levels of emotional distress or discomfort around providing food provisioning for their child(ren).

Given this level of vulnerability, priority was always given to the human nature of the participants versus the research outcomes. At times this meant not actively probing further questions when participants displayed forms of emotional distress. Although this impacted some of the research outcomes, such as clearer recordings or deeper responses, this approach kept in line with the ethical responsibility of the researcher from a community psychology perspective, feminist perspective and an in-group perspective.

Taking this approach meant that interview lengths were often determined by the participants. At times, interviews were cut short due to time constraints experienced by the participants, and this was respected. Examples included participants completing interviews between additional jobs or amidst childcare duties. It is hoped that acknowledging these additional situations brings light to the multifaceted and dynamic situations that solo mothers experience.

Of further note to this research was the use of koha. As these were supermarket vouchers and participants all identified as struggling to provide for their families, in some cases the receipt of

the koha served as the motivation for participation in the research. This extrinsic motivation towards completing this research is important to mention as motivation for research participation can influence research outcomes and rigor (Hoerger, 2024). The koha of supermarket vouchers may have also influenced participants' weekly shopping habits.

However, it is also argued that researchers have a moral obligation to fairly compensate research participants for their time and effort put into a research project. Moreover, fair compensation can help to reduce research fatigue, and both boost recruitment and ensure retention rates (Różyńska, 2022). Failure to provide koha that acknowledged the time, energy, and effort to participate in interviews that contributed towards these case studies could have contributed to difficulties in recruiting research participants in a project that required ongoing participation. It is hoped that in acknowledging this influence this can mediate any perception of undue bias, recognising it as a contributing factor to the creation of the case studies rather than an external, unbiased influence.

Case Study Composition

Typically, case studies are approached differently depending on the epistemological standpoint of the researcher. Within the context of this research both a critical and interpretivist approach have been woven together to create case study research that explores the impact of wider cultural, political and social environments on participants experiences. This approach not only questions assumptions but also attempts to understand the shared social meanings surrounding food insecurity and solo motherhood.

The case studies in this research are comprised of four separate data collection points made up of an initial semi-structured sit-down interview, a shop-along interview where I accompanied participants on their regular shop, a photo elicitation sit-down interview discussing photographs kept by participants, and a final semi-structured exit interview.

Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview is a commonly used qualitative data collection method involving a verbal exchange between two individuals, where the interviewer collects information from the participant by asking questions. Although it is common for prepared questions to be included, a semi-structured interview is conversational in nature and allows for the participant to direct the conversation where they would like it to go and explore topics that are important to them. Semi-structured interviews therefore allow for a participant's response to be open and voiced in their own words (Longhurst & Johnson, 2023).

A key benefit of semi-structured interviews is that they can be both focussed on a particular topic, as well as leaving open the opportunity to explore new ideas further that might arrive during the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Asking open-ended questions allows for participants to contribute as many details as they wish as well as enables for the researcher to be able to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up (Turner, 2010).

Throughout each of the interviews a summary of key topics was utilised as a rough guide to keep the interviews focussed and consistent across participants (See Appendix A). However, participants were welcomed to speak about other topics that came up for them during the process, or, about things they felt were relevant. A core component of the interviews was for participants to feel free to tell their stories about their experiences of motherhood and food providing rather than to simply answer set questions.

Shop-Along Interview

Case studies were also comprised of a go-along shopping interview where I accompanied participants on their weekly shop. The go-along interview draws its roots from other commonly used qualitative research methods in the social sciences such as field observation (Carpiano, 2009). During a go-along interview, a researcher accompanies a participant during their normal everyday activities with the objective of observing, listening, and asking questions within context. Throughout this

process a researcher is then able to first hand explore the dynamic relationship between place and space for the participants and observe the way a participant interacts with their regular environment (Kusenbach, 2003). The use of this method is particularly valuable where research has a focus on making visible what are more often viewed as the ordinary or mundane experiences of participants lives. These can then be brought to light and have meaning made of them. Studying the ordinary allows for a participant to be understood holistically bringing extra depth to a case study than interviewing alone (DeVault, 1991).

Photo-Elicitation

Participants also completed a photo elicitation interview. The use of photo elicitation techniques has become increasingly common within qualitative research (Padgett et al., 2013). Photo elicitation is particularly useful as it can allow for images to be used as cues for further verbal discussion as well as to explore the depth found within the visual content itself (Bridger, 2013).

The use of photograph elicitation can encourage new thoughts or memories prompted by visual data within the photographs. Photographs within the research context hold both surface visual data as well as deeper 'invisible' data in the ways in which they evoke feeling states, memories or thoughts that are then able to be verbalised by participants to the researcher. With this added dimension of sight, researchers have access to this deeper reflexive level of data from participants (Padgett et al., 2013). Photo elicitation is also useful as it allows greater access to many of the more of the mundane 'private' details not usually present in research situations (Bridger, 2013).

Recruitment

Recruitment for participants was advertised via social media pages and in particular the closed Facebook group "Solo Mums NZ". Group admins were contacted for approval and advertising for the research was posted with the approved flyer (See Appendix B), which included my contact details. Initial participation criteria was highlighted through the following blurb:

> Kia ora mums, I am a fellow solo mum working towards my Masters in Psychology. As part of this, I am completing research and am looking to hear from solo mothers in the Bay of Plenty or Waikato regions whose child/ren attend a school or childcare where they are required to provide a packed lunch each day! If you fit these criteria, I would love to hear from you!! Participants who complete interviews will receive supermarket vouchers as a thanks for their valuable time!

Similar posts were also posted to the researchers own individual Facebook account as well as emailed to relevant contacts that may have known eligible participants.

Following these postings, participants who were interested made contact directly with the researcher by either commenting with their interest on the posts, via Facebook messenger or via email.

Once a participant had shown interest in the research, I followed up with an email giving further information about the research, as well as an initial check they fit the research criteria of (i) living within the areas specified (ii) had a child attending a place of education where a packed lunch was required and (iii) being in a low income bracket in receipt of a form of governmental welfare such as Working for Families Tax Credits, or Sole Parent Support.

Following ensuring eligibility criteria was met, the information sheet (See Appendix C) was sent to participants outlining what would be required of them in the research. This also highlighted the koha they would receive for their time.

Once a participant had read through this information, and was given the opportunity to ask any further questions, a mutually agreed on time and place to meet for the first interview was scheduled in.

Initial Interviews

Where and how an interview is held can make a difference to the interview experience. An interview held in a neutral place such as a café will vary as compared to completing an interview

within a participant home, as will an interview completed face to face or online (Longhurst & Johnson, 2023). A key focus of the first sit down interview held with participants was to ensure the participants felt as comfortable as possible within the environment. As such, the location of the interview was determined by the participant.

In all three instances the initial interviews were conducted face to face. This proved to be an important step in fostering rapport and developing trust in the research process for participants. Entering the research process with the right spirit was an important aspect of my research approach. This included viewing participants first and foremost as dynamic human beings rather than just research participants (Rua et al., 2023).

The location of initial interview varied from meeting in a café, in a participant's home, as well as at a local playground. As such the lengths varied somewhat based on the conditions of where we met. In two of the cases the participants also had their children present with them which somewhat limited the flow of the interviews as they were frequently stopped or interrupted to deal with the child/ren.

As an important first step at each first interview time was taken to complete whakawhanaungatanga. This helped to build rapport, explain my own positionality as a solo mother and set the scene of providing a safe and comfortable, judgement free environment in all interactions.

Before the formal part of the interview began, participants were given time to ask any further questions as well as gave their formal consent in writing via the consent form (See Appendix D). During this time confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms was discussed with participants. Participants were also made sure they understood the purpose of recording interviews and how this would be used throughout the process. Once, it was outlined that a participant was willing to engage in the interview permission to begin recording was given and interviews began.

The general purpose of the first interview was to gain initial insight into participants individual situations and experiences, to introduce the participant to the rest of the research

process, as well as gaining understandings into their family structure, food sourcing, preparing and providing activities for themselves and the children in their care. The interview was based on prompts in the interview schedule however in all instances the interviews remained free flowing and conversational in nature. In most cases question prompts were inductive and based on participant lead of a topic. This interview time was also used to discuss the requirements of the upcoming interviews and schedule the following interviews. All interviews were audio recorded.

Go-Along Interview

The purpose of the go-along shopping interview was to allow for a firsthand account into the experience of food shopping for the participants as well as further prompt for discussions about their experiences of food providing for themselves and their family. Go-along interviews can be comprised of two forms: ad-hoc interview techniques where no formal question agenda or topic occurs and participants are free to discuss whatever comes up for them during the time, or a more semi-structured format where some pre-prepared questions or topics are directly discussed throughout (Carpiano, 2009).

The shop a long's I conducted all followed a semi-structured format in that they utilised a combination of both ad-hoc techniques as well as some pre-prepared specific topics/questions to cover. Throughout the interview the participants and myself, walked along and talked whilst they conducted their regular shop. The tone of the go along interview was informal and in all cases conversation flowed freely based on what was happening around us or the items they may have been getting. Any pre-prepared topics or questions were mainly used if there was a break in the natural flow of conversation. These interviews were audio recorded as well as handwritten notes taken following the shop-along.

The go along processes were co-constructed in that at times I assisted in the shopping by helping to get items, pushing a trolley, interacting with participants child/ren as well as packing shopping bags and helping put these away into vehicles. This approach was in line with the concept

of go-along's as hands on experiences where researchers are understood to take an active stance towards understanding a participant's behaviours within a particular environment (Kusenbach, 2003).

Each participant decided the location of the supermarket that we visited together and once a mutually agreed upon time had been arranged, I met the participants outside of the supermarket. Recording of the interviews with a handheld device began once we were inside together.

The use of the handheld recorder was an awkward event for both participants and researcher at times. In some situations, it was obvious the level of discomfort felt by a participant due to curious glances of onlookers whilst the researcher was holding the device attempting to maintain clarity of the recording. In one instance I placed the recorder into my handbag due to the perceived discomfort of a participant leaving the recording to be difficult to hear in places. This type of situation offered a curious first-hand experience into the ethics of eliciting research data versus viewing a participant as a dynamic human being.

The background noises of a supermarket were also an issue throughout the recording process. In many places it blocked out some of the participants comments and conversations. The possible use of discreet Bluetooth air buds could have been a workaround for both issues in hindsight.

Photo Elicitation Interviews

Following the shop-along interview, participants were given a photograph information sheet (see Appendix E) and asked to keep photographs for a one-to-two-week period. Photographing mundane everyday task and exploring the content of this together through the photographs enabled for discussions that could highlight the greater meaning beneath these tasks that may not have otherwise been seen or discussed.

The focal point of the photographs was asked to be around providing school or ECE lunch boxes however participants were also advised they could provide photographs of anything related to

their food providing practices for either themselves or their children. The quantity of photographs was determined directly by the participants. This particular approach was chosen in that it was seen as working towards the participatory goal of this research. Such techniques can allow for greater input and autonomy for the research participants when it comes towards topic agenda (Bridger, 2013). Given the nature of the research and the already busy lives of participants, this approach was also deemed as the most ethical to ensure that it did not provide any extra stress or overwhelming tasks for participants.

Once the participants had finished taking their photographs, we met for a further sit down semi-structured interview to discuss the content. Participants all used their phones to capture their pictures. During our subsequent interview the photographs were either emailed or sent via Facebook or Zoom Messenger to then discuss together. Two of these interviews were conducted online and one was completed in person.

Throughout the in-person interview we both looked at digital images on the participant's phone. At some points the participant was able to zoom in on images and focus on certain points which proved to be useful in adding to the depth of discussion. The photo elicitation interviews conducted via zoom proved to be a somewhat more difficult way to discuss the photographs. Upon reflection this may have taken away from the possible depth of discussions. During these interviews, screen sharing meant that photos were viewed on different devices by participants and the researcher. This setup did not permit the same level of interaction with the images as in-person interviews.

Exit Interview

Once all the other data collection points had been concluded, I met with participants a final time for a last semi-structured interview. The purpose of this interview was to conclude the interview process and allow the participants to address any additional topics they wished to discuss. Additionally, it provided an opportunity to formally thank the participants for their involvement in

the research process. In all but one of the interviews, the final interview was conducted face to face with one being completed via zoom due to scheduling issues.

The final interview provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on the interview process and share insights about what they had learned about themselves while discussing their daily experiences. These interviews were very informal although some structured questions were asked. These interviews in particular offered valuable and insightful observations and reflections from all the participants. It appeared that having the opportunity in a final interview to reflect on the daily experiences they had more closely witnessed provided significant insights to each participant on a personal level. This was incredible to witness the emancipatory goal of the research coming to life. At the end of each interview, participants were given their final koha. They were informed about the option to review transcripts and reminded of their right to withdraw from the research up to two weeks after the final interview.

Data Analysis

The analysis process in these case studies has taken an interpretivist and constructionist approach which acknowledges the significance of the context in which the participants shared their worldviews. It has viewed all data collected as holding meaning in and of itself (Sena, 2023).

To interpret participants' stories and experiences, a general inductive approach based on the concept of bricolage was used. This method incorporates various techniques to let the data speak for itself, rather than adhering to a single theory (Thomas, 2003). Bricolage, from the French “bricoleur", means using any available tools creatively and flexibly for the task (Kincheloe, 2001 p.680). This approach is creative and flexible and thus avoids the limitations of linear or prescriptive methods, which can miss social phenomena's nuanced realities (Kincheloe, 2001).

Data collected within each case study was considered as a ‘whole’, rather than treating each interview as a separate data set or data point. This method allowed emerging ideas to be identified

across multiple interviews or sources (such as photographs or notes taken from the shopping experience) (Kincheloe, 2001; Thomas, 2003) (Kincheloe, 2001).

Interpretation about what was meant in the data occurred right from the beginning of the data collection. Familiarisation with the data was crucial (Sena, 2023) and all interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcribing the data verbatim preserved participants' language and experiences in their own voices, aligning with the analytic intention and feminist research approaches (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000; Sena, 2023). All transcripts for each case were collated along with any notes taken. Any photographs collected were added to a password protected folder specific to each case study.

All transcripts were read several times. Upper-level concepts derived from the research aims were identified, however lower-level concepts also emerged from multiple readings of the data. These took into consideration the multiple meanings within the participants contexts.
Following this, emergent concepts were placed into larger categories relevant to the research aims and objectives. Text segments that were understood to contain meaning were categorised and collated then reviewed and revisited to check for any other underlying meanings.

Following review, using gridded mapping, larger more refined concept categories which helped to reduce overlap or redundancy were developed. These categories were then re-read and analysed further to refine into key concepts to present within each case. Appropriate quotes that then conveyed an essence of a concept were reviewed and chosen. Finally, each quote or description was cross-referenced with relevant literature or theoretical concepts to provide an initial explanation for the phenomena observed.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the research methodology for exploring the research aims of this thesis using social and feminist constructionism frameworks. A qualitative, case study approach was

employed, incorporating semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation, and shop-along interviews, with ethical considerations central to the process.

Case studies were chosen to provide an in-depth understanding, using multiple data sources for triangulation and depth. Ethical approval, confidentiality, informed consent, and culturally safe practices were prioritised. Empirical engagements for each of the data points have included justification for each of the data points as well as detailed explanation for how these have been carried out in such a way that prioritised participant voice and expertise. The data analysis followed an interpretivist and constructionist approach, allowing emerging concepts to shape the findings. Using a bricolage approach the rich data from the participants has been condensed and used to provide the foundation for the following case study chapters.

Chapter Four: Introduction to the Cases

The following section presents the three case studies used to make up this research project. The names and identifying information within each case have been removed and pseudonyms are used throughout. Each case study begins with a background on the woman's story of how they came to become a solo mother. I then go on to paint a picture of what life currently looks like for them and their child/ren. This includes an exploration of the different social and personal aspects of solo motherhood that have had significant impacts on their lives and day to day experiences. Within each case their experiences of food sourcing, preparing, and providing are discussed to show what the reality of this looks like for both mother and child/ren.

De Certeau (1984) offered a philosophical viewpoint to understand the different ways that ingrained social systems normalise power structures that keep the marginalised from being able to move away from these dynamics. In each of these cases this presents in the levels of precarity seen for the mothers shaped by the perceived need to maintain middle-class or intensive mothering ideals. However, each of the mothers within these cases employ multiple tactics in the realm of everyday life to varying degrees as a way to resist these structures (Certeau, 1984). As such, each case study presented displays the levels of adherence or variance from these norms that each sole mother adopts to navigate their individual situation. The chapters are ordered to give the reader an overall picture of how each case may fit into the wider social structures that either support or present barriers towards thriving as a solo mother in Aotearoa. To conclude each case, a short summary of each case is provided.

Chapter Five: Helen

Helen is a 30-year-old solo mother with one child who identifies as a New Zealand European. Her four-year-old daughter, Eva, is of New Zealand European and Pacifica descent. They live jointly in a house owned by Helen's mother Julie, with Helen paying nominal rent. Helen's experience of the living arrangement is that her mother does not 'co-parent' nor offer other forms of parenting or social support. Consequently, Helen feels that her parenting journey is one of surviving on her own. Intensifying this sense of isolation is an ongoing injury that limits Helen's ability to move about easily and makes activities such as grocery shopping difficult to manage.

Helen had been in a long-term relationship prior to conceiving Eva however, once she announced her pregnancy, her partner exited the relationship. Helen reports receiving no child support and outlined that her daughter has never met her biological father.

At the time of our research interviews, Helen was employed full-time at forty hours per week. Her annual salary fell just below the living wage. In 2024 the accepted living wage in New Zealand was $57,824 (Living Wage Aotearoa New Zealand, 2024). Being employed means Helen also receives Working For Families Tax Credits (see glossary).

Helen describes her financial situation as sustainable due to the combination of paid employment and state supports. However, she feels constrained as this sustainability is primarily dependent upon the affordable housing arrangement with her mother Julie.

Helen's daughter Eva attends a local early childhood education centre (ECE). Eva qualifies for the ECE subsidy of 20 hours (see glossary), leaving Helen with the remaining costs for Eva's care. While this local ECE provides some fruit, Helen is required to send Eva with a daily packed lunch.

The Dream of Middle-Class Motherhood

Prior to becoming a mother, Helen lived a middle-class New Zealand lifestyle, signified by financial stability and participation in consumer culture (Curtis et al., 2020; Haddon, 2015). She was

working in a well-paid career, owned her own home and reported having a good disposable income. In describing her previous lifestyle Helen outlined, “I had so much money that I didn't know what to do with it.” Helen relished the social freedom and stability that came with these circumstances. She enjoyed living in her own apartment in a large city while financially supporting her mother by co-signing a property. Helen also enjoyed being a generous giver to her family, highlighting, “My niece and nephew talk about how I used to come up and spoil them with lots of presents. My sister banned me from buying them toys.”

Given Helen's previous social standing, it is understandable that she anticipated her journey into motherhood would follow this path. However, when her partner unexpectedly left, Helen faced pregnancy and childbirth alone, which left her feeling isolated and deviating from the anticipated trajectory of motherhood. The birth of her daughter, Eva, was particularly challenging, as Helen had to recover from a caesarean section at home without support. Without a partner at any stage of the process, Helen felt disconnected from the standard family paradigm, distinctly different to other mothers who had input from a partner at different points in their child/ren’s lives. Moreover, she frequently encountered assumptions from others that she had a partner, necessitating repeated explanations of her circumstances. Helen shared what these early days were like for her,

> I recovered from a C-section on my own. When I was in the hospital and the doctor was making it clear that you cannot pick up a plate, empty the dishwasher it was like, I mean, I did have a friend who lived close by that would occasionally drop off food but it wasn't the same . . . It's not the same as having a partner . . . to have that kind of vulnerability with, to breakdown and be like I'm not coping, especially with the physical recovery that was really hard. . . . I don't think I enjoyed the newborn stages, I didn't get to be just look at my baby, look at my baby it was survival, Yeah, It was survival mode completely. . . . and when we did stuff like playcentre . . . I was an odd person out, they just assumed I was married, and they told everyone oh, this is Helen, her daughter and her husband is, and I was like, I don't have a husband like what are you talking about

While motherhood is often seen as a pinnacle achievement for women in patriarchal societies, solo mothers like Helen expose a gap between idealised, socially approved versions of motherhood and the more challenging, isolated experience of solo motherhood (Longhurst et al., 2012; McArthur & Winkworth, 2017). Helen herself contrasted her lived reality with the social narrative middle-class ideals often take for granted. While she held the expectation that this time would be filled with joy and being able to present herself and her baby to others in a particular way, she was instead placed in a position where her day-to-day survival was all that was paramount.

Helen's encounters with other mothers at the playcentre (a child-centred play group for mothers and babies) also underscores further the societal assumptions tied to middle-class norms. Coming to such a group there was a presumption of a married, nuclear family. Simply by showing up to these groups Helens presence exposed these norms leaving her to feel like an outsider.

Despite having a widely different lived reality, solo mothers frequently use hegemonic norms as their reference point. This can lead to an ongoing sense of difference or lack in their motherhood experiences (Banister et al., 2016; Skeggs & Loveday, 2012). Helen expressed the sentiment of how these ideals had influenced her experience of parenting on both practical and emotional levels,

> He was the one who wanted kids and then bailed. Yeah we'd been together for a while, but, you know, some things just don't work out. . . . at that time I felt like I didn't get to have the chance to have that nesting experience of going out and researching and picking the cot and you know, choosing the nursery theme. But I think that's more of a kind of a TV thing that you know, they decorate the nursery. When it was time to kind of, like set up her bedroom as she got older then. . . I could go, OK, I've got these stickers off Ali express to put little like little rainbows on the wall . . . but that took like six months of planning before I could set up her room. It wasn't the same as just going, OK, let's paint your walls pink. I mean the bed she's on It's like 30 years old. It's the spare bed from my grandparent's house from when I was a kid

Helen's vision of motherhood, shaped by middle class expectations, clashed with her sense of loss and disappointment in not being able to participate in what she believed were the culturally expected processes such as 'nesting' or room decorating (Banister et al., 2016). Even though Helen recognised that these expectations are largely unrealistic for all women, as they are shaped by idealised portrayals of motherhood in the media, she still appeared to go to great lengths to meet this ideal standard as much as was possible within her own budget.

She referenced sites such as Ali-Express which are online websites where products can be purchased directly from China decreasing the usual cost but requiring a 6–8-week period of time to arrive. Waiting months to gather inexpensive items and repurposing furniture reveals how Helen's experience still starkly contrasted with the consumer-driven ideals of middle-class motherhood, where newness, spending power, and the ability to purchase and display material goods are often equated with success and good mothering (Banister et al., 2016; Cotterell & Von Randow, 2016; Skeggs & Loveday, 2012).

Employment Precarity

Helen's desire to maintain middle-class ideals of parenting influenced her decision to leave her employment to stay home with Eva full time following the birth. Helen recalled that at the time, her employment had required her to work shift work from 5pm-1am which was not conducive towards solo parent childcare responsibilities. She conveyed that due to the absence of a partner, and limited childcare options she felt compelled to resign after her six months of paid maternity leave had finished.

She elaborated on what this experience had been like for her,

> I couldn't go back to that job and work those hours with her or sacrifice all my time with her. Even if they could move me to a day shift, I would be sacrificing all this time with her never seeing her. Like I don't judge people who have put their babies into childcare they do what they have to do, but, because it's not a two parent thing where someone else could help like,

> she's only going for half a day, the other picks her up, you know, balancing that schedule, having that quality time, because it would have been her in there for like 50 plus hours for me to work, 40. Yeah, I just needed to give her my time, access to that strong emotional foundation

Intensive mothering beliefs suggest that mothers are central to their child's psychological well-being and uniquely capable of providing such care (Green, 2015). Although intensive mothering ideals are non-achievable for most mothers, they particularly demonise good enough mothers such as Helen, attempting to navigate and juggle demands to the best of their ability (Green, 2015; Longhurst et al., 2012). As is seen in Helen's case this deeply permeated her own notion of what was needed to ensure her child had access to a healthy emotional wellbeing. Helen equated providing emotional support for her child with dedicating significant one-on-one time, rather than having Eva spend extended periods in a childcare centre while she worked.

Solo mothers, like Helen, face a double bind where societal expectations dictate they should prioritise family over work, yet if they fail to meet these expectations by attempting to fit into a worker model, they risk social penalties for not adhering to traditional caregiving roles (Albiston & Correll, 2024). For Helen, this sacrifice resulted in both the loss of her home (described below) and her career which sufficiently provided for her financially.

Once making the decision to leave her job, Helen experienced a dramatic shift towards increasing levels of precarity becoming dependent on others around her, social financial supports and on much lower paid jobs which allowed for certain levels of flexibility in working around childcare options. Helen described this contrast as drastic and frustrating, particularly when dealing with social supports such as Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ).

Helen outlined the difficult lengths she had to go to when dealing with these systems which had many strings attached. This was particularly evident when trying to access part time work to be there for Eva and still receive some level of welfare support. She shared,

> When I got the new job originally last January and I was trying to do the right thing and declare everything [to WINZ], but it was full time training and then moving to part time hours and everything had to get cancelled and then reapplied, and then moved and then deductions and I ended up working 20 hours a week being away from her [Eva] longer. Because I had to work two night-shifts and thankfully family took her. But you know it was still time away from her and to wind up earning the same amount because it got taken in tax because of the sole parent support, so it kind of felt annoying to be working and not be better off. I wanted to be better off financially

Helens experiences reflect a common notion related to welfare support where while there is an increasing focus on finding or returning to work, little attention is paid to the realities of the tax-benefit interface for people trying to navigate these supports (Wilson et al., 2013). Sole Parent Support is income deducted meaning that any income received reduces benefit payments (Ministry of Social Development, 2024c). Moreover, individuals receiving sole parent support are subjected to paying secondary and thus higher tax on these part time incomes often resulting in the same or lower net financial gains (Dwyer, 2015). In Helens case this left her financially no better off than had she not been working. For many solo mothers, attempting to transition from welfare support back into work poses difficulties such as these and social supports such as WINZ frequently do not acknowledge these financial barriers (Baker & Tippin, 2002).

Currently, Helen predominantly works from home full time and has flexible working arrangements. This allows her to manage both her care and her employment responsibilities. While on the surface this appears to be a good solution, the reality is far more complex. For Helen, the juggle of managing working commitments around limited childcare hours means Helen is often working late at night and/or in the early hours of the morning, leaving her feeling “tired and burnt out”.

Helen currently earns half of what she did in her previous role before becoming a mother, despite possessing the same skill set. She feels that she has been judged based on her perceived

inability to conform to the 'ideal worker' model discussed in chapter two. Helen noted that since becoming a solo mother, she has had to restart her career from the bottom and accept low-paid work that accommodates flexible childcare hours. Before motherhood, Helen's financial success and social standing were contingent upon her adherence to this ‘ideal worker’ model. After losing these privileges however, she has found herself in a cycle of low-paid work with minimal life balance, burdened by the stigma of being perceived as less capable due to her childcare responsibilities.

Helen explained some of the stigma she had received in the workplace related to this,

> When I first started out with them, I was on the phones and I feel like, what, I mean, It was a job at the end of the day, like they weren't hiring me to be nice, but there was kind of an emphasis on if we let you work from home, that's not a substitute for childcare. And I'm like, do you say this to the other parents? Because there are other parents who have partners who struggle to afford daycare. Why are you singling me out saying this?

Helen noted that she felt that other parents in her workplace were not subjected to the same scrutiny as her when discussing her working requirements. It appeared that despite her skills or own individual work ethics, Helen was judged more on her ties to motherhood than anything else. An assumption and bias that is amplified for solo mothers within the workplace (Albiston & Correll, 2024).

For Helen, her awareness of these ties meant that she stated she had presumptive fears around how she would manage work commitments around school holiday schedules even before her child was at a school age. As a result, she felt she needed to only accept jobs that would offer future flexibility around their expectations of when and how work could be completed. She explained,

> I used to get stressed about school holidays even before they happened because I didn't know how 4 weeks of annual leave per year to 12 weeks of school holidays [would work]. But I'm really grateful I’ve got a really flexible job that lets me work whenever…because it's not live work. She's [boss] realistic. She's like, well, as long as it gets done who cares. Work at

> 3:00 AM, work at. 12 like just, yeah, work gets done… cos [sic] I know that, you know, everyone wants to have annual leave at different times of year, but I would always have to have school holidays off. So that was kind of a concern of am I gonna [sic] have to quit when she turns 5?

Helen's appreciation for her flexible work arrangement, despite its impacts on her work-life balance, highlights the disproportionate consequences that are associated with gender bias in the workplace affecting solo mothers (Verniers & Vala, 2018). While Helen's job allows her to accommodate Eva's schedule, this flexibility entails numerous sacrifices concerning her own well-being. Her proactive planning for school holidays underscores the expectation of the priority given to being present and available during these periods, even though it adversely affects her career prospects. Helen's case ultimately exemplifies the realities of how the culturally defined ideal worker model and intensive mothering ideals intersect to persistently disadvantage and marginalise solo mothers who have no real way of meeting the standards of either of these constructs fully.

Housing Precarity

Helen has been residing with her mother for four years. Unable to return to her previous job, this resulted in the loss of her own home due to her reduced income. Helen's ideas around living in a family-owned home also appeared to have impacted on this sense of forced decision making. During her time of well-paid employment, she co-signed her mother's mortgage. This resulted in Helen viewing the property as a family home, despite her mother being the only named owner. Whilst this vision of living within a co-owned family home led Helen to believe she would be able to retain the stability, autonomy and independence that often comes with home ownership (Broome, 2008), in reality, Helen has become dependent on her mother for the cheap rent to be housed and participate in activities with her daughter.

This dependence leaves her feeling powerless and with reduced ability to make independent choices regarding her parenting approach, feeling constrained to her mother's rules and sense that it

is not really “her house”. For Helen, this loss in independence has also meant she has been kept in a loop of staying in what she feels is unsuitable accommodation that is not conducive to her own mental wellbeing and impacts deeply on her parenting practices. She explained,

> Well I worry that she's missing out on her childhood cause [sic] I wanna [sic] give her a house with the backyard and we only have a tiny little courtyard and I want to be able to like, do stuff the way I wanna [sic] do stuff like not care about her [Eva] painting or blowing bubbles in her milk and stuff . . . my rules, rather than keeping Nan’s house nice and neat. All that kind of stuff. So, yeah, I wish we were in our own place so that I could parent independently. . . . I feel like because we're not in our own home and I can't run the house completely how I want then I'm not giving her the full childhood experience and I wish I could. . . . I think my mental health would be so much better if I could get my own place and then she (Julie) can just be a separate entity

Helen’s expressions deeply align with neoliberal principles and intensive mothering ideals that prioritise this type of idealised ‘backyard childhood’ experience (Williamson, 2023). Helen believed that owning her own property again one day would mean she could provide for Eva a childhood closer to what she felt was the standard for what constitutes a ‘good’ childhood. For Helen however, her deep belief in these values appeared to have left her in a paradox. While she thought that living in a ‘co-owned’ property would help her achieved these ideals, her reliance on this had instead trapped her in a cycle which had prevented her from accessing an independent home outside of someone else’s rules and regulations.

Solo-parent households placed in the situation of having to share housing are an increasing demographic and little attention is often given to the flow on effects this has on wellbeing (Maalsen, 2020). In Helen’s situation, Julie is unconsciously involved in the way that Eva is raised but not in a way that is helpful for Helen or alleviates any of her responsibilities. Although Helen recognises the impacts this has on her, she feels unable to change this situation due to the reliability of the

subsidised rent she receives and the unaffordability and low quality of independent renting situations available on her new income.

When reflecting on whether she had considered other housing options in the interim Helen explained that the goal of purchasing a property in the future remained in the forefront of her present decision making,

> Interviewer - Would you consider renting or house sharing with, you know a flatting sort of situation?
>
> Helen - Flatting. No. Just because I see it as a safety concern with my daughter, and I mean renting, is so expensive. And it feels like dead money. It feels like if I could spend the same amount on a mortgage, I would rather do that because if I start renting, I would never get in my own home. I'd never save enough to get in the right time frame, so. I don't know. We'll see. I have considered it a few times when it kind of reached my limit here . . . but again it depends on, you know before when she was two and I'd play with calculators online. I could borrow a lot more than now, cause the interest rates are so high. So, I'm hoping that it comes down as well. So, we'll just see.

For Helen, renting outside of her mother's home is seen as a fruitless, insecure, and even an unsafe option despite the tension it causes her. Instead, she continually strives for the future goal of security through independent homeownership. Although Helen knows that this is out of reach for her short-term future, she continues to aspire to this middle-classed ideal. This is even though it is possible that looking outside of this option could possibly alleviate some of her present stressors.

The Loss of Social Capitol and Support Networks

When Helen made the decision to shift to live with her mother, she did so with the expectation that a shift would also mean increased support and a sharing of the responsibilities associated with parenting Eva. The practical support received however has differed to Helen's expectations. Although she acknowledges her mother's presence in her and Eva's life, Helen still

feels isolated, alone, and without tangible supports. Helen's mother Julie does not express a desire to help Helen parent Eva in any type of way that Helen may have expected a live in co-parent or grandparent to. Rather, Julie appears to view the arrangement as a shared housing agreement, more than a family sharing resources. Helen explained,

> Even though my mum spends time with her, she's not a coparent. She isn't that level of support … I feel like if I didn't live [with my mum], I would have better support because I think my mum thinks that she's being so supportive just living in the same house. Whereas she doesn't have the same bond she has with my daughter as the other kids [grandchildren] because she defers to me. She's like Oh Eva won't do this … she just equates being in the same house as being supportive. But it's not I have to still do everything.

Although her mother lives with her, this relationship does not include emotional and practical support. Julie believes that by allowing Helen to reside in the house she is providing sufficient support however Helen held expectations that this support would be more hands on. Helen also noted that her living situation had significantly altered the grandparent-grandchild dynamic she expected, compared to the experience of her siblings' children, which may more closely reflect the middle-class ideal of proximal family support as equivalent to love and care (L. Robinson et al., 2014).

Helen explained that the presence of a live-in grandmother, often gave outsiders the impression that she was neither parenting alone nor experiencing difficulties. This was not the reality. As witnessed, family and neighbourhood networks that are perceived as available for solo mothers are often conflicted in the level of support they actually provide (Widan & Greeff, 2019).

This can lead to an increased sense of isolation for solo mothers. As outlined in chapter two, social isolation has the flow on effect of a loss of social capital which often determines the type and quality of networks that people have access to (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017). For solo mothers already

existing with limited social supports, isolation from other wider social supports may be even more detrimental in worsening their parenting stress (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017).

In neoliberal societies such as New Zealand where there has become reduced availability of public services (Labonte, 1999) support networks are expected to exist through independent nuclear family units (Mooney, 2007). For many solo mothers such as Helen however it is often the very people whom they are forced (through circumstances) to rely on for support that undermine their sense of efficacy and confidence the most (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017). For Helen, the combination of her living situation, paid work and solo motherhood responsibilities leaves her without supportive networks and lacking the reciprocity and shared load of more collective communities or neighbourhoods. This acts as a constant reminder that she is living outside the confines of her expectation of middle-class mothering that comes with a supportive partner and subsequent social and relational networks. Helen's living situation highlights the perpetual inequities that can occur through reduced social nets for solo mothers (Labonte, 1999).

Food Precarity and the Intersection of Class

Helen's experiences since becoming a solo mother have affected her short and long-term financial position. Helen currently lives week to week without any savings available to her. While this impacts her in all domains of her life, the most tangible effects are noticed in her food provisioning practices for herself and Eva. Although living together, food purchases in the household are largely kept separate between Helen and her mother, with Helen responsible for her and Eva's meals and any shared meals split 50/50.

Helen has available in the region of NZ$90 per week to spend on groceries and toiletries for herself and Eva. For comparison, the University of Otago Department of Human Nutrition food cost survey notes that, to adequately provide enough nutritional value from food purchases, the 'basic' cost for a family consisting of a woman and 4-year-old child is NZ$131 per week (Department of Human Nutrition, 2023). Living on tight budgets, Helen is routinely forced to make resourceful

decisions on how money is spent. There isn't enough money from what she earns to adequately provide in all of the areas of basic needs such as clothing, toiletries and housing. As such she is frequently left with little option but to employ a restriction in the types and quantity of food eaten within their household.

Food precarious households such as Helens are often skilled in a great deal of working knowledge about stretching food and shopping for bargains (Jackson & Graham, 2017). For Helen this presented in many ways. She described routinely shopping at the supermarket that provided the lowest cost of items, purchasing similar foods each week, being highly cognisant of prices, and extending items across multiple meals.

Throughout her shopping, Helen placed an emphasis on the cost-to-quantity ratio of her purchases. This meant purchasing items such as cheaper cuts of meat, repeatedly purchasing the same items, and having a more rigid approach to meal planning than she had done before becoming a mother. In the below quote she explains her process,

> So these sausages will be for this week, but it will also last a few extra weeks. At least 2 or 3 weeks ... that's got two [chicken breasts] in there so that's two different nights. Even though one's small, it will be fine … that's the cheapest

The sausages that Helen purchased consisted of a 1kg bag of pre-cooked processed sausage meat which she then used to stretch out over multiple meals and weeks. Planning ahead for at least 2 or 3 weeks suggests the careful management required and her awareness of the uncertainty around being able to top this up again each week.

The smaller (and thus cheaper) chicken breasts were chosen as they would provide for two dinner meals. In this way food purchases were based on cost and quantity with lesser priority on whether the amount of food would be able to adequately provide nutritional or energetic value.

Helens experiences align with much research on families experiencing insecurity and precarity around food provisions which include the tactics of reducing the variety of foods consumed

(Belachew et al., 2013; Duke, 2021; Graham, Hodgetts, et al., 2018; McClain et al., 2019), purchasing greater quantities of food irrespective of the nutrient value (Duke, 2021), and increasing consumption of more processed foodstuffs (Begley et al., 2019).

Helen also described keeping "an eye on the specials" when determining her food purchases. She explained that outside of the supermarket specials she is highly disciplined in her approach as a tool for managing and maintaining a limited budget. She writes her shopping list in order of where things are placed within the supermarket and conforms without deviation to the list each week.

There is often an assumption that those living in poverty or food precarity do so because they are poor at managing their money (Howden-Chapman et al., 2011), however Helen's experiences outline that this is not the case. In her situation, money management is always at the forefront of her mind. Moreover, her situation highlights the added and unseen work that often goes into budgeting on a low income (Begley et al., 2019).

Self-Sacrificing

A core way in which Helen manages to maintain her limited food budget is through restricting her own eating. The only way Helen can stick to the $90 per week amount is by skipping eating lunch herself each day. For Helen, this has ongoing impacts on her day-to-day life, meaning she often feels hungry and lacks the energy to go through the day. She outlined,

> It's not hard to stick to it [shopping budget], umm like I don't eat lunch so that makes it easier. But I mean it goes on the credit card so it makes it concerning long term but . . . then also it does save a lot so it makes it easier . . . but it's hard when we are doing activities like if were going for a swim. Yea it gets hard. . . . it's harder to . . . you know, start eating properly again and then also have the energy to do extra work to earn more

Helen's food providing practices reflect multiple layers of precarity (Groot et al., 2017). Not only is she required to skip a meal each day to maintain her limited budget, but she also

acknowledges the toll this takes on her energetic ability to maintain participation in her daughters' activities such as swimming as well as the impacts on her working life. It is also important to acknowledge the long-term impacts this is having on her by spending on a credit facility each week possibly highlighting that the $90 budget she sticks to is even less representative of what she can realistically provide each week.

In the following quote Helen highlighted how skipping a meal further flowed into her workplace,

> And again, it comes back to the fact that I can work from home. Like if I'm sitting here lacking energy, grumpy guts, you know, it's not a big deal. But when I was in training last year on a different role and I was not eating throughout the day, they were noticing, they were like why don't you come to lunch with us? Why aren't you eating? Like it was more of a pressure thing. Even now we have a team day and they're like, let's go out to lunch every week and I'm like, I'm gonna [sic] stay in the office

Helen's reflections illustrate the loop of precarity that limited food budgets has kept her in. The longer she is unable to afford an adequate amount of food, the more these impacts continue to keep her there. Moreover, the bearings this has on her ability to network and socialise with work colleagues has limited her to situations where this was not a factor isolating her even further than she already is.

To stretch her budget even further Helen frequently employs the tactic of reliance on leftover uneaten parts of Eva's meals for her own food rather than purposefully portioning food for herself at times. She described that often in the evenings she will wait and see what Eva has eaten to try and actively spread food out,

> Yeah. And I mean, some nights it will be that I make her dinner and wait to see what she's finished before I make anything because if she's only had a little bit and she's not that hungry, then I will just have that and then I don't have to make extra food. Or if I want something different from her, if it's like an easy night, and we're just having, like, pasta or something, you know, then I'll wait until she finishes, because if she sees I have something

> different, even if it's something she doesn't like, then she's not going to eat. So I kind of have to wait

Helen's reflections show just how carefully food is required to be managed within the household in order to survive on her limited food budget. Helen's experiences clearly describe how much this tangibly limits her and takes over nearly all aspects of her day managing this. Skipping meals and relying on scraps is not conducive to her own thriving yet these are tactics she frequently must rely on to manage the balancing act between ensuring her child's needs are met and managing the household's constrained resources.

Throughout our final interview, Helen reflected on this notion and discussed that prior to completing this research she had not really been aware that she was doing this highlighting just how normalised this self-sacrificing had become to her,

> The fact that last time we met, that night we happened to have a chicken breast for dinner and I noticed I didn't eat my chicken, because she wanted more, so I ate everything else on my plate because I was waiting to see if she wanted more and I didn't realise that it was something that became second nature to me because then she wanted it she ate all my chicken. I didn't have chicken that night. And I just had my salad and stuff, so it was like it was kind of like bringing to the forefront of my thinking of like, oh, you're doing it. It just was what I needed to do. I didn't think about it like that until then.

Helen's self-revelation of this pattern seemed to somewhat disrupt her previous normalising of this behaviour and created a dissonance in what seemed to have become ongoing practices. Her reflections outline the immense pressures that come with intensive mothering as the standard despite the cost to mothers (Cappellini et al., 2019; Green, 2015). In realising her own agency however Helen was able to come to and provide even greater awareness of how these internalised notions impact on her day-to-day life.

Despite the financial pressures that Helen mentioned as leading to her missed meals or limited eating, she also at times described her actions as a deliberate choice rather than solely

dictated by circumstances. Helen outlined that she positioned her experiences within the context of intermittent fasting or weight loss,

> Yeah. I mean, there's always something, I mean. You know, I can. I'm trying to lose weight with fasting and stuff, so then I can use that as an excuse probably more than I should, but Yeah, I mean, there's always scraps on her plate sometimes as well. It's yeah, the primary function is to get her fed. I'll live… It [Skipping a meal] was a relief when the doctor suggested it as a method of weight loss

Weight loss and intermittent fasting are both ideals heavily influenced by middle-class concepts related to healthism and social ideas around thinness (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022). As opposed to the forced choice that Helen found herself in, middle-class fasting ideals emphasis the moral virtue of self-discipline and control that come with restricting food. These ideals are also deeply gendered as patriarchal norms hold women to heightened expectations to embody this thinness and control (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022). By aligning herself with this narrative, Helen was able to remove herself from the implications implied with forced restricted eating versus the social rewards that come with maintaining self-control within a socially accepted model. This was clearly expressed in her relief of the doctor's suggestion which reframed her circumstances for a position of 'lack' to one of social acceptance.

Food Providing for Eva

When it came to providing meals for Eva, in contrast to her own eating, Helen's food practices were more closely aligned with middle-classed parenting ideals that focussed on variety, preference and abundance (Harman & Cappellini, 2015). Although she preferred to shop on her own, juggling work commitments with limited childcare hours often meant Helen had to take Eva supermarket shopping with her. During the shop along Helen explained that this meant she was required to skilfully navigate her budget alongside with making sure her daughter felt she was involved and able to negotiate things such as treats.

During our shop-along interview, Helen purchased multiple treat items for Eva. Throughout the process Eva would point and ask for items which Helen would skilfully navigate to ensure that Eva was receiving something but not exceeding the budget. This included buying a cheaper pre-made pancake mix instead of ingredients to make pancakes, a small $1 milk, and one lolly treat that was on special but had multiple small, wrapped items in the bag to spread out over time.

Despite her limited resources, the emphasis Helen placed on making sure Eva felt she wasn't missing out was notable. Helen's desires for this deeply aligned with expectations of intensive parenting food providing ideals (Brenton, 2017) where great lengths are gone to avoid the stigma of lacking or not being a good parent to her daughter (Liebe et al., 2024).

In addition to catering for treats, Helen described much of her meal providing as being based around what Eva would or wouldn't eat. Helen spends a considerable amount of time and energy planning for this. This is made particularly difficult however due to what she described as Eva having limited preferences and having been a picky eater since she was just a baby. Compounding this, she outlined that Eva would often eat a food one day then not be willing to eat it again the next which made it difficult for budgeting purposes as she didn't have the means for trial and error that are usually expected in these types of circumstances.

> I don't have the resources to experiment and throw out….I need to know that she's gonna [sic] eat something before I buy it. But I can't always guarantee what she'll try and like…it's hard having limited money not being able to kind of experiment with different flavours of stuff to see. Will you eat this? Will you eat that? Because yeah then eventually she gets sick of it

Pressures under intensive mothering that outline good mothers should provide multiple and varied food options, particularly to combat boredom or repetition meant Helen was left in a state of striving knowing she could not easily provide this (Harman & Cappellini, 2015). Her sentiments instead reflect the ongoing tension she experienced between wanting to meet the ideals of

providing her child with a variety of food she likes versus the reality of her limited food budget. It appeared that for Helen this caused persistent worry for her adding to her already layered levels of stress as a solo mother.

Lunchboxes

Middle-classed intensive mothering ideals also flowed into Helen's approach towards Eva's lunchboxes. It was important to Helen that Eva was provided with full lunchboxes that she enjoyed. However, Helen frequently had to go to great lengths required to maintain this. She discussed that to manage on her limited budget often she would be required to recycle any food sent home in Eva's lunchboxes for the next day,

> Half the snacks will come home … even though I don't like her coming home with a full lunch box, part of me then too is also like well that makes it a bit easier

While her main priority in lunch box providing was for Eva to never go hungry and have enough "energy to thrive", being able to recycle the food often brought some relief. When uneaten food came home this then allowed for Helen to make choices around how the rest of this food may be used and maintain survival on her limited budget.

Figure 1

A collage of Eva's lunch boxes before and after attending ECE

Note: Image supplied by Helen

Eva's ECE somewhat participated in this process through their willingness to send uneaten food home such as the Potato Stix which can be seen in Figure 1. This process was however largely limited by Eva as Helen explained she would only eat pre-packaged foods that had been unopened the next day. To negotiate this and make sure nothing was wasted, Helen would offer opened foods on the same day which would be left out for a snack for Eva that afternoon.

Despite her limited time and means Helen also prioritised Eva's lunchbox preferences often shopping at multiple supermarkets if a snack Eva liked for her lunchbox was not available at her usual shop. Eva's preferred snacks readily included pre-packaged novelty foods such as fruit gummies as seen in Figure 2. When money was available, Helen outlined she would bulk purchase these items for her daughter when they were on special as a mechanism to create surplus supplies for leaner times. She explained, "When the stuff is on special or if it's like 2 for like I'll bulk up … so I will have that backlog stock in preparation. . . . it's only for [Eva's] food that I do it".

Figure 2

A collage of Eva's weekly lunchbox

Note: Image supplied by Helen

Helen clearly showed the level of time and effort that goes into providing for Eva, going so far as to spend extra funds on food she prefers whilst going without herself. Her narrative highlights how the pressure to meet expected intensive mothering food providing ideals in the lunchbox intersected with her lived reality. Regardless of effort and desire she wasn't able to meet these

standards with the level of ease that is assumed in middle-class motherhood (Begley et al., 2019). In reality too as can be seen in figure 2, Eva is given a limited variety of foods and each purchase for them is meticulously planned.

Case Summary

Helen's case presents an example of the lived reality of precarious living as a solo mother in Aotearoa versus a construct of middle-class mothering as the ideal standard. Since becoming a solo mother, Helen has fallen outside of this paradigm yet both internal and external pressures to conform has permeated all aspects of her life regardless. Helen is frequently living on the edge yet still held to stringent social standards that make her already stretched life even more difficult. This has been most tangibly seen in her employment experiences where she has been required to take flexible yet low paid jobs, her housing experience where she has become trapped in a living situation that she feels is not conducive to her wellbeing, and in her food providing practices where she is chronically required to go without in order to feed Eva in line with these norms. Whilst striving to meet these ideals, this tension must be realised somewhere. For Helen, this presents as ongoing self-sacrificial behaviour and exhausting efforts. As a result Helen is left isolated in her situation and unable to equitably thrive within the individual experiences of motherhood she so clearly places deep care, love and effort into realising.

Chapter Six: Constance

Constance is a 28-year-old New Zealand European solo mother with two children (Joseph, aged 3 years, and Dylan, aged 5 years). Constance shared that she became a solo mother upon discovering she was pregnant with her second child at which time her children's father decided to exit the relationship. At this time her eldest child was 11 months old.

Contributing to her situation, Constance's eldest son Dylan was born with a congenital medical condition with immediate and long-term health complications. As a result, Dylan has ongoing health challenges. Nevertheless, he is well enough to attend his local primary school, with his brother, Joseph, attending kindergarten four days a week. Both the school and the kindergarten require Constance to provide packed lunches and snacks each day.

Although Constance has been the primary caregiver for her children since separating with their father, she outlined he has maintained regular contact with them for one day a fortnight. However, over the course of our interviews she shared the initiation of a significant change in this schedule with them going to stay with their father for increased regular overnight care.

Constance lives with her two boys in a three-bedroom house that she owns (with a mortgage). She holds qualifications for work in the health sector that she acquired prior to having her children. At the time of interviews however Constance's primary source of income was the Sole Parent Support Benefit (See glossary). Constance also receives secondary income from Working For Families, Child Support and Child Disability Allowance. Across all her income sources, Constance is able to create the equivalent of earning a living wage each week (Living Wage Aotearoa New Zealand, 2024).

The Precarity of Solo Motherhood

Constance' s experiences of motherhood have been characterised by social isolation and emotional stress. Although she has found a marked sense of identity in solo motherhood, she has

grappled with the heavy burden of parenting two children alone while living in an ongoing state of extreme uncertainty and vulnerability. Constance reflected on her feelings of sadness at being alone with two small children. She found her second pregnancy particularly lonely. Compounding this was the impact of the COVID-19 related restrictions. During this time New Zealand underwent level four restrictions which meant families were isolated into bubbles within their home. Leaving the home was only allowed for grocery or emergency health care (RNZ, 2021). Throughout this time, Constance was pregnant, restricted to her home, caring for a toddler with serious health issues, and managing a separation with her partner. Unsurprisingly, Constance found this period of mothering difficult. The last month of her second pregnancy was especially stressful as there were concerns that this second child may also be born with the same medical condition as his sibling.

Constance described feeling intense worry regarding these potentialities and a sense of carrying a heavy emotional burden on her own. She shared, “It was horrible . . . I was very alone and very low and and very much just struggling”.

Caring for a child with a disability provides multiple extra challenges for all parents but particularly so for solo parents who already lack the resources available to coupled families (Cole et al., 2016). Solo parent families face poorer parental wellbeing, including physical and mental health, lower participation in employment and a markedly greater financial strain (Kim et al., 2023). For Constance, these factors have all lead to an ongoing sense of precarity as she faces the double burden of managing Dylan’s medical cares as well as trying to maintain the everyday household tasks related to having small children. This extra responsibility has also left her with little time or energy to nurture any other relationships or participate in social activities. This has led to social isolation that is particularly multifaceted which is known to be frequently experienced by familial caregivers (Kittay, 2021).

For Constance, the isolation is compounded by a lack of understanding or support from others, as friends and extended family frequently cannot fully grasp the complexities of her ongoing situation. Constance expressed how this felt for her,

> Everyone else, friends with children, they've got husbands…they just don't get it. Yeah. They just don't understand…They just can't wrap their head around it. Like one, the loneliness and just like I mean to do everything … It's like you're just alone with everything and you don't have that support … you've got someone coming. I've never had that because I've been alone since I was pregnant with my second and even then, I was alone

Constance vividly shared the emotional toll that is experienced through being a solo parent without an adequate support network. This has led to experiences of invisibility and reduced social capital. As was already seen in the case of Helen, such social isolation is a hallmark of precarity where individuals are cut off from social networks or have limited connections due to their circumstances (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017). In Constance's case this is clearly accentuated due to the additional challenges she faces parenting a small child with ongoing health issues.

Financial Precarity

While on the surface Constance's living situation appears somewhat stable supported by her ability to maintain homeownership and piece together a living income, a closer examination of her situation reveals a life marked by bare-minimum survival. Her financial stability is fragile, heavily influenced by unpredictable social support policies that directly impact her well-being and that of her children.

Constance's incomes which come through multiple streams vary in timing and amount, often creating uncertainty and requiring significant planning for. Uncertain income is a hallmark of precarity which fundamentally undermines the ability to plan, secure and maintain stability in everyday life (Groot et al., 2017). Constance's income is unpredictable, for instance, Child Support depends on the paying parent's income, while Sole Parent Support is subject to criteria set by WINZ. Constance's situation reflects the thin line between perceived security and actual vulnerability. She holds no control over the consistency of her resources leaving her with no ability to build a financial

buffer and at the mercy of situations around her. As a result she lives in a constant state of financial and emotional tension (Groot et al., 2017).

Constance described her weekly financial situation as “sustainable” but delicately balanced, with any unexpected expense or slight variation threatening to destabilise her finances completely. She lives week to week and must prioritise increasingly unaffordable mortgage payments above any other purchases. Essential expenses like utility bills are a source of stress, and unplanned costs related to these are nearly impossible to accommodate. Frequently she runs out of money for basics such as food and toiletries (described in further detail below).

During interviews, Constance expressed heightened anxiety about an imminent increase in her mortgage payments coming within the next few months. Knowing how thinly she was already stretched she knew she lacked the funds to cover it and was deeply worried about how this would impact her ability to survive. She shared,

> I make sure that every week everything comes out weekly as a direct debit, so like instead of having a monthly bill come in, I do like $50 for power. It just all goes out each week, and then whatever’s left is food, petrol, and anything else you need... But I’m also freaking out because in a month’s time my mortgage is going up, so my benefit is not going to cover it. I don’t know how I’ll be able to eat, buy groceries, I don’t know

For individuals living precariously, external factors like rising housing costs, entirely outside their control, exacerbate their vulnerability (Groot et al., 2017). Constance knew that this looming increase in her mortgage payments would jeopardise her ability to maintain her carefully balanced budget and push her into a deeper state of emotional and financial stress translating into difficult daily decisions about which essential costs to prioritise. Although in theory homeownership might symbolise stability, in reality it has become the source of her financial strain. The rising mortgage rates represent a challenge she cannot manage, illustrating the paradox of owning a home while living in persistent precarity.

Systemic Barriers to Support

Whilst there had been periods of time since having her children that Constance had gone back into paid employment, difficulties associated with managing her child's medical condition and juggling solo parenting with work led Constance to being financially reliant upon the Sole Parent Support benefit up until the time of interviews. This means that Constance is left at the whim of policy requirements to receive this money. This has many impacts on her ability to parent her children in the way she would like to, her stress levels and her sense of autonomy and choice.

Welfare support in New Zealand is fundamentally an economic exchange, however as discussed in chapter two, receiving welfare is also inherently connected to ideas about social worth and value. The more closely a person is associated with this need, the less social worth they are deemed to hold (Gray, 2017). Reliance on welfare support is also frequently associated with forced choices despite the impacts on the lived realities for those who need this support (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017). During our interviews Constance acknowledged that based on her experiences, choice related to parenting appeared to be a privilege not afforded to welfare dependent solo mothers like her.

Once the youngest child of a Sole Parent Support recipient reaches the age of three, there is a requirement to secure part-time paid work each week to maintain any payments (Ministry of Social Development, 2024c). Consequently, Constance was in the process of seeking a minimum of 20 hours of work per week to continue receiving her benefit support. Although she held previous lived knowledge on the absolute difficulties associated with juggling her parenting responsibilities with work, this did little to increase her level of agency around this decision making. She outlined an experience,

> And like you're going in there [to WINZ], like I found, you know with Joseph being 3, they're very much like you need to work. And that's been fine because I was looking for it anyway, but it's also like, OK, well, if you didn't have any family support, or anyone else to help, what do you do with your children after school, before school? You know what if, like I said to

> them, well, what if I need to do night shifts or any kind of shifts? Like what happens with kids like you know? They're not very supportive you know what I mean?

While on the surface, Constance held skills and qualifications that could assist with finding a job, the reality of finding work around her childcare responsibilities was very limited. Constance felt unsupported in a practical way by WINZ to meet these new part time work obligations and felt that they didn't understand nor care about the additional pressures she experienced as a solo mother. There was a strong disconnect between policy expectations and the reality of her capabilities. This increased her sense of pressure and left her feeling as though she held little to no worth both within these interactions as well as in relation to other mothers who were not reliant on state welfare supports.

While she expressed that she actively wanted part-time work for her own mental well-being, she was uncertain how to make it feasible given her situation. In Constance's case WINZ demanded that she find employment, but policy did nothing to provide the necessary resources to enable her to meet the realities of work obligations and parenting duties. Nor did these policies offer any awareness of the higher-level complexities faced by solo mothers (Gray, 2017). Moreover, Constance felt the realities of her children's lives did not factor within this paradigm.

Many jobs, have rigid hours that do not align with the needs of parents including school starting times and school holiday commitments. It is interesting to note that whilst WINZ offer an Out of School Care and Recreation (OSCAR) subsidy payment for up to 50 hours a week, Constance highlighted that she had not been made aware of this support despite being told she needed to find work. This example reflects even further the impacts that a focus on the fiscal constraint of the welfare system has on need for solo mothers like Constance. Moreover, her experience illustrates the aspects of neoliberal social policies concerning the value assigned to child caregiving by mothers (Gray, 2017). Governmental policy allocates funds to pay others to care for her children but does not acknowledge the value and worth of the care that she was already providing herself.

Reliant on welfare Constance is caught in the cycle where it is seen as somehow pertinent to her success as a worthy citizen that she not be continued to be supported in this way financially by the government. Constance explained a recent interaction she had had with WINZ that highlighted this sentiment further,

> I had a meeting with them [WINZ] before Christmas and like without them asking me anything like a senior manager came up and was very much, I think he was you know, visiting for the day or something like that, and he, like, kind of pushed himself in the conversation. Like, OK, great. You're gonna [sic] get off the benefit, and you're gonna [sic] be working full time. And I'm sitting there, OK? And then he's like, OK, go look for a full time job and, you know, see you later. And he walked off and my case manager was like OK. And then I walked away from that kind of being like, hey, well, how am I meant to do that? I've got the school holidays, like, how am I meant to have full time work and like you know have the kids.

The welfare system's rigid structures and punitive financial mechanisms place undue burdens on solo mothers like Constance. Instead of supporting pathways to sustainable employment, policies that are defined by worth and value only through becoming a tax paying citizen exacerbate precarity (D. Hodgetts et al., 2022). In ignoring the inequitable barriers faced by solo mothers within these systems, welfare policies undermine solo mothers' efforts to achieve stability through individual autonomy and choice (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017).

The Conflicted Identity of Motherhood

Despite facing financial challenges, Constance is acutely aware of the expectations associated with middle-class intensive mothering ideals. Intensive mothering ideals emphasise the importance of providing children with ideal experiences which can include gifts and celebrations as well as stress the importance of the emotional experiences that are involved in this (Banister et al., 2016). Constance stated that when it came to purchasing gifts for birthdays or Christmas, she did not want her children to feel deprived of the gifting experience or become aware of her financial

constraints. Consequently, she frequently utilises Afterpay, a type of credit facility, to afford these commercialised experiences for her children. She explained,

> Well, this Christmas was a big struggle. I took out, well, I used Afterpay to pay for most of my stuff for Christmas and I'm still kind of having to play it off because yeah, I had no spare money to you know buy stuff. But anyway, that's that. And then I got birthdays coming up. It's just. Yeah, lucky there's Afterpay. . . . It's like a childhood thing, isn't it, you know? You remember those types of things I feel. You remember the like the feelings you had. Like, I don't feel like you remember the gifts per say, but I still feel like you remember the feelings that you had on those days and like if you were happy and stuff. So I just don't want them to like, I want them to be happy and I want them to like you know, have joy and not miss out on anything so…. Yeah, I just want them to be, you know, happy and have a good childhood and, you know, there's money shouldn't be a stress for them

Afterpay allows for purchases to be paid off in four equal instalments interest free. However, if purchases are not paid off within the four instalments high interest rates begin to occur. Such high interest credit facilities often exploit those already in poverty due to their reliance on them to afford everyday needs (Saunders, 2021). As can be seen in the case of Constance despite her inability to provide this in an easy way she still maintains an expectation that she should be able to provide these things for her children. Her expectations are heavily influenced by the consumptive values associated with intensive mothering ideals (Banister et al., 2016). Unable to easily access these types of resources, internal and external pressures to provide these types of experiences meant she worsened her financial situation by becoming reliant on debt.

Although using Afterpay can be seen as a coping mechanism to temporarily meet the material needs of her children it also reflects the wider systemic pressures to meet these ideals regardless of a practical ability to be able to do so (Banister et al., 2016).

Constance also voiced a sense of lack around her perceptions of how her family structure fell outside of these intensive mothering middle-classed norms. She expressed a deep desire for a

different family structure, one that more closely aligned with traditional formation of a two-parent family. She expressed longing for the practical and emotional support that she felt a partner could provide. She also reflected feelings of inadequacy, believing her situation was not a "proper" family. She shared, “I feel like I'd love to be like in a family situation with a partner, you know. It would be nice to have support and stuff. . . . to have someone and to not be lonely”.

Constance’s internalisation of societal norms around family structures is common among solo parents, especially in cultures where the traditional family model still predominates (Maitri Jain & Venus Mahmoodi, 2022). Solo mothers face unrealistic expectations in light of this and, as was seen in the case of Constance, this led to her a sense that her family itself was somehow lacking for not meeting this norm no matter what amount of striving she could do in other areas.

Such norms do not involve a mother staying long periods of time away from her children. During our interviews Constance outlined that her children were going to be moving from seeing their father one day a fortnight to having regular overnight care with him. This marked a significant change in her and the children’s lives as well as a drastic change to her sense of identity as a mother. Constance reflected that while she thought the change would be good for the children, it felt “weird” and marked a deep sense of loss for her. When reflecting on what this felt like she commented,

> I think it's because it's just, I've been like fulltime, You know, I've had them six days a week since they were born so its just kind of like, not like losing myself, but it makes me feel like what am I ganna [sic] do now? Who am I without being a mum all the time you know? So that’s a change. Yeah so I kind of feel a bit lost I think.

For Constance it appeared that due to the enforced intensity and ties to her role as a mother under the expectations of intensive mothering she no longer knew who she was outside of this role. Her experience deeply reflects the notions of the Institution of Motherhood where outside of the role women’s value and worth are left questioned (Rich, 1995). For Constance, having adhered to

this all-consuming ideal of motherhood, being removed from it suddenly without free will threatened to topple her identity.

The meaning of 'doing motherhood' or 'being a mother' can change drastically with the integration of a co-parenting situation (Eikrem & Jevne, 2022) and contrasts from a hegemonic norm of intensive motherhood where it is expected that a mother is the most qualified person to parent children (Green, 2015). For Constance the emotional isolation experienced when dealing with these changes brought an additional strain while already experiencing high levels of stress (E. Robinson, 2009).

Food Precarity

Constance's positionality as a solo mother impacted largely on her food sourcing, providing and preparing practices for herself and her children. She explained that because of her precarious financial position she frequently struggles to source enough food with the money she has available. Moreover she routinely relies on alternative sources of food to substitute what she can afford to buy each week such as sources of gifted 'homekill' (privately farmed and sourced meat) as well as "raiding her mum's cupboard". She explained,

> Luckily I've got I just use my mums. I just take her food… even just like the last two weeks…its been quite tough so I just like raided her fridge for like vegetables and milk and butter and bread. So yeah, she's happy to support in that way.

Relying on alternative sources of food is a common feature of solo parent food insecure households (Macaulay et al., 2023). The fact that Constance frequently needs to take food from external sources however points to broader issues of her vulnerability.

Constance routinely has to make difficult and pre-planned decisions that lead to food expenditure being the first thing to go (Jackson & Graham, 2017). Her ideal budget to provide groceries and toiletries for herself and Josheph and Dylan is $200 per week. In reality however, she regularly does not have this amount as other expenses such as petrol or bills have eaten into her

shopping budget. Consequently she is left to get by on whatever she has available each week which fluctuates.

The University of Otago Department of Human Nutrition 2023 food cost survey notes that the 'basic' average cost to adequately provide enough nutritional value from food purchases for a family consisting of a woman and two children is NZ$175 per week (Department of Human Nutrition, 2023). However as outlined previously, this cost does not include dietary requirements from any allergies or medical conditions such as is the case with Dylan.

To manage without being able to consistently meet this budget, Constance outlined that, like Helen, she resorts to skipping meals to manage. She explained that she usually skips breakfast and lunch and relies on dinners with the children that are subsided by the gifted meat to fill herself up for the day. Constance noted that she has employed this tactic of skipping meals to some extent since becoming a solo parent, but it has become a regular practice over the past few years as her finances have become increasingly more constrained and food prices have increased. She explained what this was like for her,

> Well, for me, for me, like they will eat. My children will eat and then I'll probably like, usually for like the last year and a half, I won't. Ill only have like one meal a day and I'll have coffee. Cause it's like, well, I can't afford to like buy extra food. But it's just something that I've lived with its fine, I've gotten used to it but yeah it's just kind of the reality of it.

Constance's admission to not eating reflects the reality of her financial instability and the added emotional management of this which affects her daily life. She feels left with little option but to prioritise her children's needs over her own and sacrifices her well-being to ensure her children are fed while maintaining her ability to pay for a mortgage and other necessary bills.

Over time, individuals facing continuous financial challenges adapt to having fewer resources, adjusting their perceptions of what constitutes an adequate living condition (Groot et al., 2017). It appeared that for Constance, her acceptance of this chronic situation indicated that living in precarity itself has become normalised for her.

Skipping meals regularly meant Constance described “always feeling tired” and it usually being a struggle to get through the day. As a result, Constance outlined a heavy reliance on coffee and toast to maintain her energy levels and curb her hunger,

> I mean, I don't really get hungry in the mornings, I just have the coffee and then . . . bread or whatever and like coffee . . . I eat toast and like coffee, most of the time . . . so, ah yeah, bread and coffee and then I’ll eat with the kids. But it's, yeah, I don't know, It's probably not the best, but It's still, I'm not skinny, so I'm not, like deprived of anything. . . . I do get hungry, but I'm not, I don't know, yeah, it's not like I'm starved . . . like it's always been like that really so it's like It's fine, yeah

Constance's experiences illustrate common issues related to food insecurity, where affordable foods like bread and toast are overly relied upon to manage hunger, along with limited access to diverse foods (Graham et al., 2022). It is interesting to note that despite experiencing hunger and low energy throughout the day, like Helen, Constance also sought to reposition her circumstances alongside social norms regarding body weight (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022). For Constance however this reframing served to downplay the gravity of her situation, contrasting a lack of autonomy and choice with a normalised selfless behaviour (Van Der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017).

Barriers to Support

Throughout our shop along interview, Constance highlighted that for the past three weeks she had been in a particularly difficult situation where she had no money for food for herself and her children due to an unexpected vet bill. She shared, “I haven’t been able to go grocery shopping for three weeks just recently”. As a recipient of a WINZ benefit, in times of emergency such as these Constance was eligible to apply for temporary additional assistance which can help with the cost of necessities such as groceries. However, when Constance reached out for support, she explained this was not deemed as emergency enough for WINZ to financially help her throughout this time. She explained,

> Each week I applied for the WINZ thing[food grant], they denied me each time because I get my benefit on a Wednesday and then on a Monday I get my disability allowance for Dylan and so they denied me on the terms that oh you're going to get this money coming in but that money is for that [disability costs].They just said to me like you're already on the maximum. Because I did it last week I did it online and I had to take my dog to the vet so that was all my money gone and then they said to me that wasn't a necessity bill so they can't help me. So then I reapplied without putting that and I said it was like a power bill instead of a vet bill and it went through…I guess it's probably not, I shouldn't say that but yeah it's kind of necessary.

Constance's experience reflected the many layers that can appear when being reliant on social welfare. These systems are complex and frequently gate keep access to necessary resources based on policy versus an emergent need (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017). Even when she was doing everything required of her and applying regularly, the system failed to offer sufficient help. Moreover, despite being eligible for the Child Disability Allowance based on an accepted need for this additional money, it appeared that this support acted as a deterrent for Constance getting the immediate help she needed.

In refusing to support Constance based on the grounds that a vet bill was not deemed as necessary it is possible to see how a narrow definition of necessity fails to recognise the scope of need when living with limited resources and trying to provide food (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017). Constance's forced decision to misrepresent her needs in the more acceptable form of a power bill also paints a clear picture of the way necessity can shape practices in precarious times. Although Constance expressed knowing this was not something she wanted to do, having been denied on the grounds of her actual need she felt left without any other options to have access to food. These techniques employed by Constance fall in line with the concept of tactics which are necessary to navigate the inequities faced within organised social systems (Certeau, 1984).

This situation of dependency can also be emotionally and socially challenging. Constance's experiences highlight the lack of autonomy and the pressure of constantly needing support to manage basic living expenses. For Constance this felt completely outside of socially acceptable norms of motherhood and living within neoliberal societies (Cotterell & Von Randow, 2016). Constance discussed the level of shame and stigma that came with applying for and being reliant on this type of help.

> Yeah, at least with the WINZ one you don't have to see anyone you can just like do It online and you can shop and it's still embarrassing having to use a WINZ card when you're at the shop … I feel like there's a lot of judgement for people, you know I don't really understand it…., Yeah that oh why can't you, like, make it work? I don't know. You know?

Constance was clearly aware of the level of social judgement that came with her situation of dependency, both through her embarrassment of using these sources of finance at the shop (a WINZ shopping card) and the judgment from others for being in a state of needing.

In New Zealand outside of social support services such as WINZ local food banks allow for the ability to go in person for food parcels free of charge for those experiencing emergency food needs. Food banks, although sometimes partially government funded, are understood as charity organisations largely run off food donation and food rescue (Wason, 2019). Despite her situation Constance felt it important she was still able to contrast her experience of having to apply for help with WINZ to the last resort of having to access food parcels through a charity such as a food bank. For Constance the connotations that come with the idea of charity felt too much for her meaning she would rather go without completely than resort to this. Her awareness of the sense of shame and stigma (even if this meant misrepresentation), meant that this would be a barrier for her in a time of food emergency.

Food Providing within the Context of Intensive Mothering

In contrast to her own eating, Constance placed a high priority on nutrition and adequate food when it came to providing for her boys. Food providing for her children deeply aligned with intensive mothering food providing expectations (Brenton, 2017). She outlined that she strived to make sure they were fed as well as nourished emotionally by the food and food experiences she provided for them. She expressed placing an emphasis on family mealtimes and seeing these as a space where she could connect with her children. Constance's ideals however contrasted often with the reality of her limited abilities,

> I find I don't have a lot of time to like, sit there and make it like a big meal. I think yeah, I just make easy stuff like meat and just vegetables or yeah, pasta. It's just easy stuff... You know, it's just because you got everything else, so much else to do. It's kind of the last thing you wanna {sic} do is spend lots of time cooking. And then I feel guilty if I do spend a lot of time cooking and being in the kitchen and not like spending time with them. So yeah, it's just easy to do quick stuff.

Constance articulated an awareness of how her limited time as a solo mother differed with the expectation to provide for and engage with her children in the manner she desired. It appeared that for her this led to added feelings of guilt around her mothering and food providing practices. Due to her restricted schedule, meal preparation often became hurried, resulting in the choice of quick and simple dinners. This needed practice however clearly contrasted with her aspiration to conform to intensive mothering ideals.

When it came to food purchases, Constance placed an emphasis on food that actively met her children's preferences above cost. Each shop she would buy the exact same vegetables regardless of cost because she knew that they would be enjoyed by her children. While this aligned with intensive mothering expectations, meeting these preferences was becoming more difficult for Constance to manage in light of her increasing limited budgets. Instead of changing these foods to

align with this budget, Constance described instead a reliance on the tactic of spreading out foods over two weeks by limiting portions. Figure 3 outlines an example of resources for two weeks' worth of meals. She stated "I'm kind of going shopping every two weeks now and . . . I've seemed to stretch it and it's fine".

Figure 3

Two weeks' worth of grocery shopping for Constance.

Note: Image provided by Constance.

Lunchboxes

Intensive mothering ideals also spread into the domain of the lunch boxes. When it came to shopping Constance prioritised above all else making sure there was food in the cupboards available to make her children's lunches each day with foods they liked. This meant she did additional shops if needed to prioritise the snacks and often times shopped around different supermarkets to make sure the items they needed were available. She outlined the typical types of items that she provided for her children in their lunch boxes,

> They're kind of pretty much, they always have a sandwich, cracker, some fruit…I have to do white bread cause of [Dylan's] like bowels and stuff so they always have white bread. They always have like protein or salami. So they've got eggs in one of them, but most of the time I, like get them sausage and like this one they've got salami. They kind of had different crackers, like chips and stuff like that. But yeah, they're pretty much the same same…It's not

something I really like think about too hard. I just make a sandwich and just put whatever in and just rush out the door

Figure 4

A collage of Dylan and Joseph's lunch boxes.

Note: Images provided by Constance.

Figure 4 highlights an example of the types of food that Constance provided for her children's lunchbox. In contrast to her routine reliance of only having only just coffee and bread for herself or completely going without, Constance's descriptions illustrate a large effort to provide for her children. Constance also placed emphasis that these were nutritionally balanced ensuring their lunch boxes included protein, fruit and foods that allowed for Dylan's additional health needs.

It appeared that for Constance, the care she took with their lunchboxes was not just understood as a way of providing food but as a way of tangibly displaying her care and devotion towards her children. Fitting the narrative of a good mother entailed showing this care through their lunchboxes while simultaneously managing the required efforts and sacrifices to do so without resentment (Harman & Cappellini, 2015). While this achieved the desired social recognition, her efforts paradoxically masked to those around her the financial and emotional sacrifices that she lives with. By hiding the reality to outsiders this form of artificial affluence leaves her unseen contributing unwittingly to the invisibility of the perpetuation of these inequitable mothering ideals for solo mothers in Aotearoa.

Case Summary

Constance's experiences sit at the intersection of intensive mothering ideals and solo motherhood realities that show up the disproportionate burden placed on solo mothers when living in precarity. Her story is particularly layered when including the additional aspects of parenting a child with a disability unsupported. Although on the surface, Constance's life reflects a certain level of stability through her status of owning a home and holding higher education qualifications, the reality of her circumstances cannot keep up with this image. She is limited in employment options that work around her childcare responsibilities and has become reliant on social supports to survive that do not value her choice or autonomy. As a result, she lives week to week with unpredictable finances at the whim of social policies and regulations to receive these supports.

Prioritising mortgage payments leaves her with very little left for basic needs such as food. As a result, Constance regularly limits her own food intake to be able to manage with what she has. Despite these circumstances, Constance however goes to efforts to present herself as maintaining intensive mothering appearances through her children's school lunch boxes. Her efforts reflect the level of artificial affluence she is able to achieve, yet these create a flow on effect of invisibility. While she maintains this outward appearance, she simultaneously obscures the unrealistic nature of intensive mothering standards for solo mothers in Aotearoa.

Chapter Seven: Melissa

Melissa is a 30-year-old solo mother of a six-year-old son (Isaac). Melissa identifies as New Zealand European. Melissa and Isaac live in a rented two-bedroom house which is located as part of a joint property. Although she was previously married to Isaac's father, Melissa became a solo mother when Isaac was two years old during a period where her husband decided to leave the relationship.

Whilst Melissa had been left with the main responsibility for caring for Isaac in the separation, she stated that over the four-years since, Isaac's father had remained a consistent presence in his life and looked after him every second weekend.

At the time of interviews Melissa had just finished a three-year time of undergraduate study in a healthcare profession. When we met, she was awaiting the start of a new job and further postgraduate qualifications. Over the course of her study, Melissa's main source of income had been a student allowance from Study Link, however, during the period of our interviews Melissa was in receipt of a Sole Parent Support Benefit from WINZ and Working For Families' payments.

Once Melissa transitioned from the Sole Parent Benefit into her new work, she was earning around the living wage In New Zealand for 2024 (Living Wage Aotearoa New Zealand, 2024). As part of her income bracket, Melissa was also eligible for top ups from Working for Families Tax credits and In work Tax Credits (Inland Revenue, 2024a).

Melissa describes her financial situation as strained but sustainable through adopting a philosophy of simplicity. Whilst she can afford basic necessities for her and Isaac this does come with stringent financial planning and a paring down of life expenses to functionality only.

Melissa's son Isaac attends a local rural school five days per week as well as before and after school care full time. To pay for this, Melissa receives an Out of School Care and Recreation Subsidy (OSCAR) from WINZ for Isaac which covers most of the cost of this care. While the before and after

school care provide snacks for Isaac, Melissa is required to provide Isaac with a packed lunch each day.

The Intersection of Precarity with Good-Motherhood

Although Melissa appears outwardly to others as upholding many middle-classed ideals such as through her higher education and career (Haddon, 2015), Melissa's experience of solo motherhood has been marked by an ongoing sense of precarity both on a practical as well as emotional level. Her outward success has come at many costs invisible to those around her and remains contingent on her ability to conform to exhaustive intensive mothering notions.

Melissa defined the experience of becoming a solo mother as unexpected, traumatic and extremely difficult on all facets of her wellbeing. This time represented a stage of poignant change for her transitioning from experiencing motherhood within the confines of a stable coupled relationship to facing the realities of solo motherhood. Throughout this phase, she experienced a period of severe mental distress and overwhelm as well as financial shock.

Prior to her separation, Melissa reported working in a managerial position within the personal services sector. However, in experiencing the trauma surrounding her separation and newfound pressures as a solo caregiver, Melissa felt she could no longer tolerate the intensity of the "superficial" nature of her work. Eventually, she left this job and became a full-time student.

Going from being financially stable in a career, to unwell and unsure if she could continue in her work Melissa found herself in a state of needing mental health supports. Despite this need, Melissa expressed she was able to gain access to only very minimal assistance. Unable to pay for private support, Melissa was eligible for only four funded counselling sessions which did little to relieve her situation. She explained,

> Yes. It's terrible . . . It's just access to that . . . when I hit my rock bottom, there was no, I mean, there was four free counselling sessions and that puts you off everything. So if you don't have the money or you're not suicidal, yeah unfortunately you're a bit stuck.

Melissa's experience reflects an ongoing inequity in access to mental health supports in New Zealand with gaps in care for mild to moderate mental illnesses (Kulshrestha & Shahid, 2022). While public services are often overwhelmed, private mental health services are prohibitively expensive creating a two-tiered system where only those with financial means can access timely care (Clark et al., 2014). As a result, Melissa outlined that she was largely required to recover and parent alone contingent upon her individual level of coping skills.

Once recovering however, this experience proved to be transformational for her, as realising how little support there was for solo mothers this inspired her towards pursuing a career towards helping others. Melissa shared however that her new life of solo motherhood consisted as a constant juggle between her parenting and study responsibilities resulting in an ongoing stress of just surviving each day. Compounding this Melissa constantly felt she was assumed to be coping based on outdated scripts of others viewing her situation through the same lens as they had previously. She explained,

> I think people maybe don't really think about how hard it is and that it doesn't get easier. I think people just assume ohh, you know, ride the wave and it'll get easier. But it doesn't. Yeah, it really doesn't. And I've felt it has genuinely impacted everything in my life. Every, single, thing. My health, my physical health, my emotional health, my mental health, my spiritual health, my relationships in my life. My total well-being is influenced I feel in every single aspect. I think that is absolutely underrated. People just assume that you have support. People assume that ohh your mum and dad are there like you know they are around. That doesn't mean that they're willing or able to do whatever some other people are, you know. And just that whole assumption, yeah. . . . they see your kid going to school, They see you showing up at work and they see, you know that you're doing all the normal things. But they don't see the processes of how you get there or the impact. The sacrifices that are made for those things to happen

Melissa poignantly shows the level of invisibility that she continually experienced. Her ability to pass as high functioning despite a lack of support meant she constantly felt overlooked in the actual efforts it took to cope as a studying, working, solo mother. This invisibility had and continues to have many flow-on effects, marked by a persistent instability in virtually all facets of her life. As can be seen in Melissa's expressions, precarity, as a condition, extends into multiple facets of life, emotional, physical, social and financial (Groot et al., 2017). Insecurity across personal and social domains left her without secure foundations to rely on, lack of reliable support networks resulted in isolation and practical day to day stress, while emotional, mental or even spiritual health stress conjointly worked to destabilise her sense of self leading to ongoing feelings of vulnerability and exhaustion.

Although others around her assumed the difficulties associated with parenting alone can be measured against the same standard where despite difficulties motherhood is expected to be rewarding and enjoyable (Banister et al., 2016; Rich, 1995), this does not reflect the reality of Melissa's life. Instead, she lives with chronic stress and a physical and practical inability for much else to occur. Melissa's lived reality widely challenges the belief from others that her difficulties will diminish over time if only she just survives the 'usual' ups and downs that are associated with this fulfilling role.

Housing Precarity

Melissa's transition to solo motherhood also marked a period of instability when it came to housing for her and Isaac. Having previously had housing stability within her relationship, Melissa did not expect to have the type of difficulties she has had. She highlighted,

> when it came to getting housing though, that was a completely different story like the second I was a single mother and the second that I was a student and on a benefit, I never once got a rental. . . . I did eventually, but it was because another single mum and I ended up renting together. So there's definitely stigma around that.

The stigma of being a solo parent diminished Melissa's ability to present herself as an appropriate tenant, eroding her agency and highlighting the enforced precarity of her situation. Motherhood experienced in any form of deviancy from the hegemonic script is frequently socially punished in tangible ways such as these (Green, 2015). Despite research suggesting the increasing need for stable housing, discrimination for solo mothers within the rental market is getting worse with time (Domett et al., 2023). Solo mothers often face greater scrutiny in the rental market because landlords assume they are financially unstable or unable to balance caregiving and tenancy obligations (Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017). In Melissa's case, the intersectionality of her multiple identities also worked towards this discrimination for her.

As a result, Melissa and Isaac have experienced large amounts of housing transiency. She recounted,

> Yeah, we've lived in a lot of houses. We've gone from living with family to having our own place to living with another solo mum and her son to living with my ex-partner, to then living back with family and to now living in our own little place. . . . like living with another solo parent like it was cool to be able to help each other out in that way, because you understand how hard it is. But like, it's not ideal and like living with family is shit, you feel shit. I never felt like I was providing, you know, even though that's just a stupid thing in your own head, but it makes parenting harder . . . and just made everything really unhealthy for me in my personal experience.

While she had been able to be resourceful throughout this process, these living arrangements all lacked any long-term stability and have had varying impacts on her sense of self. Melissa's experiences again highlight too the discrepancies in her lived reality versus an ideal about riding the 'parenting wave' seen earlier. In the four years since becoming a solo mother, she has resided in multiple properties with multiple lots of other people.

Her reflections on the autonomy that she also believed was lacking due to her absence of housing stability are profoundly intertwined with hegemonic intensive mothering ideals. Good

mothering ideals place significant emphasis on mothers providing a stable home as a foundation for children's wellbeing (Green, 2015). For Melissa being in a position that required a constant need for adaption to new houses and living situations left her feeling outside of this good mothering norm.

Despite her efforts to create a functional living situation, intensive mothering ideals that position living in an independent household as the accepted standard for raising a child, made reliance on shared or familial housing arrangements feel like a failure or a level of regression (Smyth & Craig, 2017). In this way even though her reality necessitated alternative living arrangements, her deviation from the societal scripts of good mothering appeared to cause her additional guilt or self-doubt. The impact this had on her mental health shows further the multifaceted nature of precarity (Groot et al., 2017).

The Influence of Social Supports

In the areas of her life where Melissa was unable to fully align with hegemonic good mothering norms due to her status of being a solo mother, she experienced varying levels of social discrimination, barriers, and internal self-doubt. However, in places where she has been able to more closely align with these norms, she has received many positive benefits and social rewards. Her experiences imitate closely the system of social reward and punishment that exists for solo mothers within the confines of patriarchal societies informed by intensive mothering practices (Henderson et al., 2010).

A core part of Melissa's success towards retraining had come from ongoing practical support from her academic institution. Melissa explained that over the course of her studies, she felt a strong sense of her institution wanting her to succeed. To do this they supported her holistically within the context of her status as a solo mother. Although she had received stigma in other spaces which disadvantaged her, Melissa described the academic institution as an environment where her achievement despite this was paramount,

> The [academic institution], they were fantastic . . . you were looked at as an individual and your personal circumstances and treated like an adult and a mother and all the rest of it. . . . so three years, they did everything, they pulled all the strings and went above and beyond to make sure that it worked for me, and with me, and we all got across the line in the end. So, I didn't have to do any shift work, the latest I ended up having to work was till 6:00 O'clock

Melissa outlined she was treated with understanding and respect for her role as both a mother and a student. This was evidenced particularly through the removal of any shift-work placements. As a solo mother without any support networks this would have been a barrier to her completion. However, Melissa received tailored support from her academic institution who went above and beyond to make sure she could still complete the required training.

The flexibility she received from the school can be viewed within the context of being a form of social reward, where systems recognise and adapt to the needs of middle-class presenting mothers who are striving to balance their personal, professional, and caregiving roles in ways that align with hegemonic motherhood expectations (Henderson et al., 2010). Moreover, Melissa's aspirations aligned with middle-class intentions where a career is seen as meaningful (in contrast to welfare dependents or the working class) so worked to position her towards a higher passing class of motherhood.

Following her success in retraining Melissa has subsequently been able to find full-time work for herself. In the interim Melissa described receiving readily available supports from WINZ which she felt she may not have received had she not been transitioning into work. Melissa found her interactions within the system to be a positive experience and felt congratulated on her success as a solo mother and her ability to remove herself from the welfare system. As outlined in chapter two, typically benefits in New Zealand are increasingly focussed on limiting access to supports (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017), however Melissa shared that she did not have to seek out or advise herself on any additional supports. Instead, she was openly offered things such as food grants, clothing grants and petrol grants without even requesting them. She explained,

> So I just went in to check when my appointment was before I start work . . . and they're apparently giving me like a grant for clothing cos [sic] I don't wear a uniform. And again they told me that, I didn't ask them. . . . she [WINZ worker] said that "yeah oh it's not like you're not trying and you have got a job and you've just finished [studying] and you know you should be so proud of yourself" la dah dah dah dah and that's when she was like "oh we can help you we can get up to $600 worth of clothing grants, is there anything else you need, do you need a computer?". . . . I think if they can see that you are trying and you are going off a benefit and you are going into full-time employment and you know, I think that that makes a difference in how you speak and hold yourself and all of those things. They do matter.

Rather than being viewed as failing morally for her reliance on a benefit (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017), Melissa's transition from welfare to full-time employment resulted in positive state support and recognition. Melissa also appeared to internalise a sense of pride in no longer relying on these support systems herself. She felt that her self-worth was higher compared to if she had needed long-term welfare assistance, reflecting internalised awareness around the lack of value that is ascribed to welfare recipients (Gray, 2017).

Whilst it is positive that Melissa received this treatment, her experience simultaneously highlights the conditionality of this system of reward. If at any point she fell out of this paradigm, she likely would not receive this same type of treatment. Her positive experiences reinforce both the societal pressures on solo mothers to maintain often unachievable lifestyles that embody these good motherhood ideals and the precarious nature of success within this realm.

It is also interesting to note that once moving into full time work Melissa's level of precarity did not exponentially improve as would be expected. Although she outlined things had slightly improved financially for her, living on one income still did not improve her circumstances past the point of being only able to afford the basics for her and Isaac. Nor did it improve her levels of social support or stress.

She outlined that she still needed to heavily rely on budgeting tactics to maintain living on her new income,

> Yeah, I got my first pay. . . and it was a little bit less than what I was expecting. . . so I had to just to be conscious of making sure that I can get my bills out, that I pay weekly. I like set up heaps of different online little accounts so that as soon as I get paid I can put like rent, bills, car, you know, petrol, food into separate accounts. So that I don't spend it. And then if there's anything left over then that's all good. But I'm still budgeting . . . I'm not changing anything

Despite notions that moving into paid work is immediately more financially beneficial for solo mothers in New Zealand this is not always the reality and does not reflect the flow on effects experienced in other domains of life (Gray, 2017). As outlined in chapter two, full time work itself is no longer sufficient to raise a family in New Zealand (Perry, 2022) . For solo mothers, full time work also comes with additional pressures on both mother and child that are unrecognised particularly for those already experiencing high levels of stress and who are time poor (L. D. Robinson et al., 2016). As a tangible example, when outlining Isacc's need for full time before and after school care Melissa stated, "Poor little boy just gets exhausted having to go to after school care and you know on the bus every morning. And yeah, he's tired".

Food Providing

Melissa's realities since becoming a solo mother, both positive and those more difficult, intersected to impact on her experiences of food providing for herself and Isaac. Melissa toggled between conscribing to intensive mothering food ideals and simultaneously rejecting these to maintain a sense of autonomy and choice which acted as a protective factor for her both financially, practically, and mentally.

In contrast to the previous two cases, Melissa's food providing was not impacted to the point where she felt she felt required to limit her own eating as a result. It appeared for Melissa that

the way of avoiding this food insecurity revolved around purposefully ‘not’ adopting intensive mothering ideals related to food. She outlined that sticking to a philosophy of “keeping things really basic” when it came to providing meals helped her to maintain food provisions on a low income. This also helped to maintain stress levels. For Melissa this simplicity presented itself through the tactic that largely involved reducing food to its nutritional value and not ascribing to the pressure of providing anything more elaborate. This meant preferencing items based on their nutritional value such as fruit and vegetables which she described as “non-negotiables” and avoiding things deemed as extra’s or treats such as “juice or cheese’s”. This tactic also included eating seasonally and purchasing what was on special. She also highlighted that she structured meals around hunger or preference levels rather than arbitrary meal ideals.

Melissa shopped weekly and budgeted around $130 per week for groceries and toiletries for herself and Isaac. This was at times also supplemented by external sources of food from friends with vegetable gardens and fruit trees. For reference the University of Otago Food Cost Survey for 2023 outlines that the ‘basic’ cost to provide food for a woman and one child in New Zealand is $131 per week. She shared,

> So for me it's just understanding like what food is designed to do. You know, food is designed to be a fuel for our bodies and we aren't supposed to constantly be eating and our bodies don't actually need that much food . . . I buy the same things every week at the supermarket. Like I'm happy with that, I don't need cheeses and crackers and all the stuff you know . . . it’s never been something I’ve done even when I potentially had the money to it’s just not been something I choose to spend my money on you know?

Melissa openly challenged middle-class food ideals by rejecting norms of increased variety, abundance and viewing food as a marker of social status. Instead, she prioritised practicality, framing this as a choice, whilst opposing the aspirational consumption patterns associated with middle-class and intensive mothering (Banister et al., 2016).

Self-determination theory maintains that choice and autonomy are fundamental universal psychological needs crucially important for well-being (Van Der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017). Despite living on a limited budget and realistically not being able to afford these treat items, by reframing this as a choice this seemed to act as a protective mindset for Melissa. Even when she potentially had money to buy more luxurious or diverse foods, Melissa made a choice not to.

While Melissa outwardly rejected a middle-class aspiration for food shopping it is interesting to note that this standard still appeared to be used as the norm for her to which she compared herself to. She outlined how she made decisions around what meals to make,

> Yea and I just eat what's in season. I'm not strict in the sense of like we need to have meat and 3 vege [sic] every night. I'm just kind of like what do we feel like and we'll cook it. . . . we're very basic like that and I've always been like that . . . we eat very much the same things every day

In this sense, her food providing practices were not merely neutral but stood in contrast to the otherwise implied expectation of a structured, cooked meal comprising meat and three vegetables, which is a typical middle-class standard in New Zealand. Melissa's active awareness of this difference however served as a buffer, particularly regarding meal structure and composition. The simplicity of meals allowed Melissa, as a solo mother, to better manage her limited time resources. Although she expressed a desire to occasionally prepare more elaborate meals, she felt that the makeup of her family, consisting "only" of herself and Isaac, removed any pressure to provide anything beyond a nutritionally basic meal,

> so I might be a little bit relaxed and again we're not like a whole family so its not like it's mum and dad and the kids sitting down and having dinner at the table its just naturally a little bit different. . . . He [Isaac] like, loves rice and tuna, so if he's hungry as, I'd sometimes buy those microwave rice just to have as back up for moments like that. And like, you know, 40 seconds, that's dinner, and it's a healthy meal, and it gives some protein and carbs.

Melissa viewed her family structure as different from the typical nuclear family, which granted her the freedom to approach meals differently. For solo mothers in societies that normalise heterosexual nuclear families, feeling like an outsider is common (Longhurst et al., 2012). They often judge their family life against these norms instead of seeing it as complete on its own (M. K. Nelson, 2006). However, Melissa's contrast to this was framed as a positive. In not feeling the same pressures to adhering to gendered food providing norms this allowed her to happily rely on simpler, cheaper sources of protein, like canned tuna, which is inexpensive and requires no cooking.

Lunchboxes

Whilst in other areas of food providing Melissa actively appeared to reject middle-class food providing ideals, when it came to providing lunchboxes these good parenting notions were more at the forefront of Melissa's mind. Although, unlike the other cases, she did not exorbitantly adapt her financial tactics towards this, this task still took more of her time and energy than she extended to other meal providing throughout her day. Moreover, whilst Melissa outwardly expressed values related to food providing for Isaac that reflected simplicity, she simultaneously experienced a tension around fear that what she was providing for school lunches may be judged as too basic.

In expressing how ideally, she wanted her food providing to be for Isaac she described,

> Basic food, like keeping things really basic. I want Isaac to understand that life is simple and it is meant to be simple and that our land and our God provides everything that we need and all these man-made things in life are not actually things that we need. So it's really just a balance

In contrast, when describing what providing a packed lunch was like for her Melissa expressed,

> Yeah, I think with the food [school lunch box], another big thing, is that like that judgement. That fear of judgment If like, yeah, if he opens up his lunch box at school and like other kids have got all this fancy stuff or things that he doesn't have . . . you know these days some kids have got some crazy bento lunch boxes with all this stuff in them

Whilst Melissa's ideal values rejected reliance on the expected consumer culture that accompanies intensive mothering to bring meaning to her role as a parent to Isaac (Banister et al., 2016; Cappellini et al., 2019) the fear of judgment for this impacted her emotionally as well as her actual practices. Melissa acutely was aware that she did not want to present as lacking as a parent based on the simplicity of the food provided. Melissa went so far as to contrast herself with particularly high-intensity intensive mothering ideals such as the 'craze' of the Bento lunchbox seen on social media sites like Facebook and TikTok. These lunches showcase multi-compartment lunch boxes that are aesthetically complicated, often focused on colours and shapes rather than practicality (Wynn, 2016). Despite not valuing these norms personally, Melissa still knew that these ideals were the benchmark for which her food providing would be judged against (Bathgate & Begley, 2011; Harman & Cappellini, 2015).

Where Melissa felt able to reject these pressures at home, she found it challenging to escape them in the public realm of the school. Her experiences align with the concept of mother-to mother social surveillance outlined in chapter two (Collett, 2005; Henderson et al., 2010). In a school environment, lunchboxes are subject to increased scrutiny through this direct assumption they are an extension of family relationships (Harman & Cappellini, 2015). For Melissa, this meant it became a space where the validity of this could come into question. Her apprehensions reveal her struggle between wanting to be perceived as a good mother while still maintaining her sense of autonomy and personal values.

Melissa explained that Isaac’s lunches were often repetitious focussing around fruit, vegetables and a source of protein. If other items were included this was usually considered a rare situation. Melissa described avoiding buying too many pre-packaged snacks such as small chip or cracker packets and instead purchased bulk items and portioned these out as seen in figure 5.

Figure 5

A collage of Isaac's school lunches

Note: Images provided by Melissa

Melissa did highlight however that Isaac's preferences came into this at times and purchasing more expensive things such as pouch yoghurts over larger ones was a "battle" she had to pick. Part of this was considering the practically around a school day. She explained,

> My boy is like a very on the go, so I have to be conscious of the school lunches. It's hard for him to actually sit down at school and eat his lunch so I try and do things that maybe are a bit more interesting. Even if that means squeezing yoghurt because he won't have the patience to sit with a spoon at school. . . . so yeah, his lunch box is kind of just like that to a variety every day. Some form of protein . . . veggies . . . and then he chooses one form of fruit . . . and those things, that blue packet on the side, is one of those lolly thingies [sic], which was a bit of a treat. I didn't necessarily always buy them, but if they're on special, I'll grab them.

While there was a focus on simplicity, there is also clearly thought put into Isaacs lunches that aligns with principles of intensive mothering practices (Brenton, 2017). Keeping things interesting was deemed as important and individualised attention was given through the adjustment of items such as the squeezable yoghurt. Isaac's lunchboxes also had a clear focus on balanced nutrition reflecting ideals around health and eating that are tied into food providing for mothers (Brenton, 2017).

Case Summary

Melissa's case presents a curious example that toggles between the precarity of solo motherhood and the social rewards and benefits that come with meeting more of the middle-classed ideals of motherhood. Her case represents an important reflection of the need for lived realities of solo mothers to be heard in their own voices and explored through their own mundane day to day realities.

Cases such as Melissa's offer insight into this especially when presenting as doing well. Whilst Melissa was able to move into some facets of life that are reserved for middle-class mothers, her intersectional identities prevent her from ever really receiving any of the tangible social benefits that usually come with this. Despite receiving extra supports to retrain and enter a meaningful career, Melissa still largely lives precariously and unseen in the efforts it takes to do these things.

When it came to her food providing, Melissa's values that went against the grain of middle-class abundance and variety seemed to matter and act as a protective factor for common experiences of food insecurity. While she toggled back and forth, her conscious rejection of intensive mothering food ideals as well as ideals related to the nuclear family norm appeared to keep her from needing to resort to riskier tactics to provide food. Moreover, this appeared to positively impact her well-being by maintaining a sense of choice and autonomy.

School lunches however provided a window into a social space where this tension between pressures to meet intensive mothering ideals and lived reality can impact food providing practices. Melissa's experience directly outlines the impacts that social surveillance related to good motherhood can have on food providing practices for children. Her case emphasises how these ideas about good mothering standards are not universal but shaped by ongoing social negotiations and interactions (Henderson et al., 2010).

Chapter Eight: Discussion

As witnessed in the previous chapters, the solo mothers in this research project drew upon diverse experiences that provide the foundations to discover the core research topic of this thesis: ***to explore the experiences and perspectives of low-income solo mothers within the context of sourcing, preparing, and providing meals for themselves and their children who attend school or ECE.*** Within this topic four key questions were used to understand this in depth **1)** Using the ECE or School lunch box as a focal point, how do low-income solo mothers navigate societal expectations of food sourcing, preparation and providing for themselves and their children? **2**) How do socially constructed norms related to motherhood impact on food sourcing, providing and preparation practices for solo mothers? **3)** How do food insecure solo mothers navigate food sourcing, preparation and providing activities? and **4)** What intersecting factors contribute to experiences of food insecurity for solo mothers in Aotearoa?

Although this research sought out to focus on food insecurity and food providing practices, the data revealed that food insecurity could not be understood outside of broader issues of economic and social precarity experienced by the solo mothers. Subsequently, the analysis of the cases and this discussion addresses precarity as a whole condition.

Returning to the concept of the 'precariat' introduced by Guy Standing (2011), each of the participants lives were defined by unstable living conditions, ongoing financial insecurity and a lack of ability to create a sustainable occupational identity for themselves. Each case also highlighted the impacts that precarity has on social isolation.

Precarity for the solo mothers presented in two main ways. Firstly, their deviation from the hegemonic norm of a two-parent family that makes up the foundation of intensive mothering ideals, meant that they had to work disproportionately harder to meet these expectations. To avoid any 'bad mother' discourses this resulted in increased levels of financial, emotional and time strain. Secondly, due to systemic inequities, despite their repeated efforts they still fell short of these

standards regardless. This caused lasting feelings of inadequacy, making their realities invisible while simultaneously decreasing meaningful support networks.

This discussion is presented in two key sections: *Intensive Mothering Expectations in Aotearoa* which includes a discussion of how these middle-class intensive mothering standards increase precarity related to food providing for solo mothers, and *Structural Disadvantages* which includes a discussion of how the wider systems of welfare, employment and housing, influenced by the nuclear family unit expectation, laid the foundations to create unstable lives for the solo mothers.

First however, each case is briefly summarised to illustrate how the mothers' experiences placed them within the social class of the precariat. Following on from this the stories and experiences of Helen, Constance and Melissa are examined together under the two headings to situate and understand their experiences within the wider social context. Research strengths and limitations will be discussed as well as implications and suggestions for further research in the field. Finally, the chapter will be concluded with a summary of the overall thesis and findings.

Case Summaries

Helen

Helen's case highlighted a drastic shift from the stability of the salariat lifestyle to precarity after becoming a solo mother. Previously benefiting from job security, housing stability and financial freedom, Helen now struggles to balance caregiving with unsustainable, flexible, low-paid employment. As a result of her childcare responsibilities, Helen is left juggling work and parenting around the clock. She has no time to parent in the ways she would like to and no concept of work/life balance.

Discrimination in the workplace has exacerbated her precarious employment situation further. Although she makes the equivalent of a living wage Helen lives week to week, reliant on credit-card debt to maintain necessities.

Her living conditions intensify this precarity as she is reliant on subsidised rent from her mother which leaves her stuck in a shared living situation that drastically impacts on her mental wellbeing. Moreover, the assumption of support from her mother leaves her struggling to grow other significant support networks or social capital outside of this relationship.

Despite limited resources, intensive mothering ideals pervade Helen's decision making where she selflessly prioritises her child's needs over her own. This frequently leads to sacrifices in her own well-being and food eating behaviours illustrating how providing for her child is seen as the most important endeavour.

Constance

Constance's case underscores the compounding effects of precarity when systemic inadequacies come into play. Despite holding qualifications that should place her into a salariat lifestyle, Constance's caregiving responsibilities, intersecting with having a child with a disability, leave her unable to use these to provide for herself and her children. Subsequently, Constance is reliant on social welfare that penalises her, ignores her lived reality as a solo mother and subjects her to dehumanising surveillance and conditions that limit her autonomy.

Although she owns her home, financial strain leaves her on the brink of unsustainable debt. Constance is left constantly struggling to maintain a mortgage at the cost of all other necessary expenses in her life, including food.

Constance's food providing practices for herself as compared to her children contrasted greatly. Despite her limited ability to do so, she consistently worked hard to maintain variety and abundance in her children's lunchboxes. Her case reflects just how strongly external and internal societal expectations that emphasise maternal responsibilities and intensive mothering ideals can be.

Melissa

Melissa's case offered a unique perspective, where her transition from study to employment meant she straddled the line of precariat and salariat living. However, her role as a solo mother continues to present significant challenges to this stability preventing her from realising many of the expected benefits that should come with this lifestyle.

Ongoing housing discrimination has meant that housing stability has been difficult for her and she has frequently been forced her to rely on short term or family or shared living arrangements. The combination of frequent relocations has left her isolated, with limited support networks.

Although Melissa earns a living wage, she is still not able to move past the exhausting basic survival mode towards thriving. Moreover, she is reliant on state childcare support and struggles juggling work and parenting alone. Melissa's challenges underscore the often-invisible burdens of solo motherhood even when presenting as coping well.

Unlike the other participants, Melissa adopted a simpler approach to food provision, focusing on practicality and nutritional value rather than the abundance associated with intensive mothering ideals. This tactic meant that she was not placed into the same position of having to choose between her own eating and that of her child. Nevertheless, she remains vulnerable to societal judgment and the pressures of intensive mothering ideals, which influence her lunch box providing practices.

Intensive Mothering Expectations in Aotearoa

Intensive mothering is a child- centred parenting model that demands mothers selflessly devote themselves to their children, through extensive amounts of time, energy and resources (Green, 2015). This 'selfless' discourse dominates parenting culture in New Zealand and holds large sway on individual parenting practices and wider societal expectations for mothers (Williamson, 2023). As discussed in chapter two, intensive mothering ideals are reinforced through cultural

messaging based on the notion of expert advice (Klimor Maman et al., 2024), media portrayals (Henderson et al., 2010), and institutional policies that perpetuate the belief that intensive mothering is the one benchmark of successful motherhood (Cappellini et al., 2019; Green, 2015). Intensive mothering also relies on traditional gendered norms of parenting which assumes the role of child raising is best assigned to mothers rather than fathers (who are expected to financially provide) (Cappellini et al., 2019).

The cases in this research all reflected the notion that intensive mothering standards were the expected norm within Western societies such as New Zealand (Cappellini et al., 2019; Green, 2015; Klimor Maman et al., 2024; Minnotte, 2023; Smyth & Craig, 2017). Woven across all three cases we witnessed that this included dedication to their roles as mothers, emotional self-sacrifice and material abundance for their children. It was assumed by the solo mothers that part of their motherhood role was to diligently, and without complaint of the cost, allocate time, energy, and resources to reaching their children's needs.

In the case of Helen, we witnessed her expectation to parent according to these consumption standards, with her holding the belief that motherhood should involve the television portrayed version of a nursery decorating and nesting period. Unable to easily access this as a solo mother we saw the effort put in where she spent dubious amounts of time trying to mimic these ideals through time consuming activities such as purchasing birthday party items from cheap overseas sites often up to six months in advance.

In the case of Constance, it was apparent that child-centred parenting had led to a normalising of self-lessness which impacted her daily routines and guilt for spending undedicated time away from her children. She also prioritised using debt to maintain special events such as Christmas and birthdays rather than allowing her children to miss out, emphasising that these events were an important part of a 'good childhood'.

Although at times it was witnessed that Melissa appeared to actively deviate from this value set through adopting a parenting philosophy of simplicity, she still used this value set as her measuring stick for motherhood.

Intensive mothering ideals operate as a powerful marker of class and social inclusion (Cappellini et al., 2019). These values are deeply rooted within middle-classed concepts that involve a certain amount of discretionary income and time (Klimor Maman et al., 2024; Banister et al., 2016;Green, 2015). In contexts such as New Zealand where intensive mothering is the dominant discourse, it becomes the only framework through which 'good motherhood' is defined (Williamson, 2023). While this is problematic for all mothers, this becomes particularly problematic for mothers who lack the necessary resources including time, finances, or social support to fully realise these unattainable standards (Cappellini et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2010; Smyth & Craig, 2017).

For the mothers in this research, facing limited resources and multiple constraints meant that the ideals of intensive mothering were incredibly difficult to come by. As a result, they experienced ongoing emotional strain, financial pressure and required constant inequitable effort to meet these ideals. Helen and Constance both significantly lacked any discretionary income to abide by these ideals meaning they each had to sacrifice their own well-being to afford to provide for their child/ren in this manner. Each admitted they forego purchases such as their own clothing, toiletries or haircuts. In contrast, Melissa did not prioritise consumerism but the lack of time to maintain the standards of intensive mothering led to significant burnout.

When putting children first is the moral imperative of good motherhood, cutting back on self-expenditure or self-care is seen as a necessary act of upholding motherhood standards (Cappellini et al., 2019) . Yet having fewer resources to begin with perpetuated the evident class inequalities and reinforced marginalisation for these lower-income mothers (Cappellini et al., 2019; Green, 2015; Minnotte, 2023; Smyth & Craig, 2017; Williamson, 2023).

Food Provisioning Practices

Feeding children is considered a direct reflection of classed motherhood and is central to the construction of a culturally and socially valued motherhood identity (DeVault, 1991). Within the context of intensive mothering, food provisioning has become a tangible marker of love, care and 'good' parenting (Bathgate & Begley, 2011; Harman & Cappellini, 2015). When extending this to the lunch box, studies have found that middle-class mothers view providing food in this way each day as a symbolic display of their commitment to such ideals (Brenton, 2017).

While middle-class mothers may view food provisioning as a symbolic display, this ideal often extends to mothers outside of middle class as well. Even those with fewer resources feel the pressure to adopt these same practices and view food providing as this same extension of love (Brenton, 2017). Despite not having the means to easily provide extensive lunchboxes for their child, all three of the mothers in this study used intensive mothering ideals as the baseline to inform their lunchbox practices and strived to maintain these middle-classed standards. In a practical sense this meant that all the mothers felt immense pressure to provide a lunch that was nutritious, met the child/ren's preferences, and was deemed as socially acceptable within the school/ ECE environment.

In Helen's case we saw that she went out of her way to provide snacks that she knew her daughter would eat, and the childcare would approve of, despite the difficulty in playing trial and error with foods she couldn't afford. Constance prioritised her children's preferences ensuring that each of her two sons received different foods in their lunchboxes despite the additional strain on her budget. Melissa purchased items, such as easily eaten pouch yoghurts, to make sure that her son's lunchbox fit his active school lifestyle. This was even though such purchases went against her own preferences and usual shopping style.

Due to their limited ability to easily provide these items, the consequences of abiding by these norms came with high costs. For Helen this meant deeper levels of debt, as she had to rely on credit cards to purchase groceries each week, hoping to pay them off later. To ensure there were snacks her daughter liked, she had to plan extensively purchasing items in bulk or on sale to stretch

her budget. Helen was also required to carefully manage food supplies recycling uneaten food for future lunches. In the cases of both Helen and Constance, we saw how despite being limited in time, energy, and finances each meticulously planned shopping around their children's preferences going so far as shopping at different supermarkets to maintain preferred lunchbox snacks.

Adhering to these ideals also negatively contributed towards the mothers own physical wellbeing. For Helen and Constance, this meant routinely and chronically sacrificing their own dietary and nutritional needs by going without food themselves. Sending a child to school without a full satisfactory lunch box was unthinkable yet, in the realm of their own eating, they regularly went without. In the case of Constance, we saw an honest reflection of how she routinely relied on basics for herself such as coffee and toast yet contrastingly focussed on fully nutritious as well as varied and medically approved lunches for her children. Her case in particular highlighted the extent to which solo mothers can go to meet these ideals.

While these cases are not food insecure in the traditional sense, their experiences reflect food insecurity research that has found that when precarious households are managing limited budgets, mothers frequently go without to control supplies and ensure that their children are sufficiently fed first (Jackson & Graham, 2017; M. A. Martin & Lippert, 2012; McIntyre et al., 2003). This study extends on this notion by showing how this practice is confounded by social pressures related to motherhood not just poverty alone.

Intensive mothering is not only about putting a child's needs first but about being able to display this to others through everyday practices (Cappellini et al., 2019). Social environments such as schools and school lunchboxes become heightened spaces for this display (Harman & Cappellini, 2015). This research supports previous studies (Graham, Hodgetts, et al., 2018), suggesting that solo mothers will go to great lengths to conceal the severity of their situation in order to avoid stigma and judgement for not providing suitable food for their families. Within this research the pressure to conform to intensive mothering ideals in the domain of the lunchbox routinely led them to hide their struggles to such an extent that it negatively impacted their own ability to eat. In Constance's case in

particular, it was witnessed that even when food budgets may have been close to allowing enough food for all in the family to eat (as per the University of Otago Food Survey) priority was placed on maintaining intensive mothering food providing practices. Helen's experiences too reflected this. Although food budgets were much tighter, priority was still given to the lunchboxes and her daughters food before her own eating.

As outlined in chapter two, social surveillance of intensive mothering practices plays a key role in maintaining these standards as the norm (Henderson et al., 2010). Research indicates that mother-to-mother surveillance may be one of the most significant drivers of these norms, overtaking even state or policy surveillance (Henderson et al., 2010). Notions of this are exacerbated for solo mothers, where the idea that requiring assistance to feed and/or raise their child(ren) are a result of individual failure (Macaulay et al., 2023). This dynamic held significant implications for the mothers in this research. They each knew that those perceived to fall outside of these standards risked social sanctions within their own communities (Smyth & Craig, 2017).

For the mothers in this research adhering to food provisioning norms offered much needed benefits, such as inclusion and cohesion. However, uneven distribution of resources was not considered within this social identity leaving a risk of bad motherhood status looming. As witnessed, an awareness of this risk seemed to pervade the mothers' identities and was witnessed through their food providing practices. All the mothers went to great lengths to ensure they did not fall into a category associated with a bad motherhood label through their lunch box providing practices. In Melissa's case we witnessed this in particular where she was able to shake many of the expectations of intensive mothering in other areas of food providing but when it came to school lunchboxes, she openly feared judgment that could come for either her or her child.

Mother to mother social surveillance frequently extends into practices of self-surveillance where guilt and shame become strong drivers of practices (Cappellini et al., 2019; Longhurst et al., 2012). The mothers in this research all used self-surveillance to moderate their own food providing practices in line with this. Living in extreme self-sacrifice appeared to be more palatable than the

fear of bad motherhood status. For Constance in particular, we saw the lengths she would go to hide the reality of her financial situation constantly normalising or minimising her situation. Cutting back on self-expenditure however created artificial affluence which had the flow on effect of obscuring her true reality of living on a low income to outsiders.

In all the mothers, their self-surveillance and moderation of practices worked together to further reinforce a system that worked to marginalise their ability to thrive. In moderating their practices in this way, their realities were not noticed or validated. This left a deep sense of invisibility and isolation. To the outside these were simply mothers providing food for their children, yet, digging below the surface, the pressure to maintain these norms required exponential self-abnegation.

Literature suggests that as long as mothers are exposed to intensive mothering ideologies, they will continue to be constrained by them (Cappellini et al., 2019). Whilst on the surface it could be understood that these expectations related to food providing are arbitrary, for the mothers in this research, they were omnipresent and extremely powerful. Their efforts to meet these ideals therefore do not reflect an entirely voluntary choice, instead they were shaped by a socially regulated society that imposes extremely negative consequences on those who do not conform to established mothering standards (Henderson et al., 2010). By framing child feeding as an individual responsibility within middle-class intensive mothering ideals, society shifts the focus from systemic issues of failure to ones of personal failure. This creates an environment where solo mothers are judged more harshly and must continually strive for approval and validation of their parenting worth (Longhurst et al., 2012; Williamson, 2023).

Structural Disadvantages

Societal pressures and the harsh judgment placed on those who fail to meet intensive mothering ideals hold their roots in broader social structures. Solo mothers face unique systemic challenges as intensive mothering expectations are aligned with patriarchal and neoliberal norms

that privilege the nuclear family model (Green, 2015; Minnotte, 2023). In Aotearoa, this model has traditionally been regarded as the standard, influencing policy and structures that assume a mother is available at home to provide unpaid labour (Cribb, 2009; McAnally et al., 2022; Te Ara, 2024). As a result, solo mothers are often required to fulfil the responsibilities of two parents while navigating systems that may not fully address their specific needs (Lapinske, 2018; Maitri Jain & Venus Mahmoodi, 2022).

Systems built around the nuclear family disadvantage solo mothers in employment, education and housing which exacerbate their precarity impacting their food providing practices (Dwyer, 2015). These are further intensified by consumer-driven norms which equate good parenting with further material provision, amplifying the emotional, financial, and social toll of living outside this family structure (Banister et al., 2016).

Constructed on patriarchal, White, neoliberal and capitalist ideologies the nuclear family norm privileges male power and establishes many of the gendered norms which make up the 'good mothering' narratives that disadvantage solo mothers economically (Green, 2015; Klimor Maman et al., 2024). Limited specific local research on the economic pressures for solo mothers existing within the nuclear family paradigm is available (Trail & Goedeke, 2019) yet research on women and children leaving abusive relationships highlights the level of power and control that is afforded to the nuclear family unit in New Zealand; legally, socially and economically (Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017). Moreover, research highlights the heterosexual nuclear family paradigm is still socially perceived as fundamental to society structure shaping support policy (Green, 2015; Klimor Maman et al., 2024; Mustasaari, 2015).

For the mothers in this research, systems built around the nuclear family ideal failed to support them when already living precariously. The underlying assumption was that families in New Zealand should exist within a two-parent framework leaving them feeling excluded, stigmatised, and burdened with impossible expectations. At no point throughout any of the mothers' experiences was solo motherhood considered as valid or normative in and of itself. Moreover, the mothers

encountered numerous instances where they experienced active discrimination due to their status as solo mothers. Additionally, they were regularly challenged with social policies that subtly discriminated against them because they lacked the alternative support systems available within a nuclear family unit.

Welfare Structures

An area where this typically presents heavily for solo mothers is when accessing welfare supports (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017). Fundamentally neoliberal social policies hold the expectation that the nuclear family unit, as opposed to the state, is responsible for financially providing to maintain family life (Cotterell & Von Randow, 2016). Socially then, there are perceptions that solo mothers who are state dependent financially leach off society, are a failure of this normative unit or even require suspicion for why they do not have a partner and how they spend their money (Longhurst et al., 2012; Marriner, 2013; Trail & Goedeke, 2019). In this research, it was observed that such perceptions often left the solo mothers feeling inadequate or ashamed of their reliance.

Under neoliberal agenda an emphasis on self-responsibility has led to a concept of a type of aspirational citizenship where self-worth is tied into levels of dependency. Not only should a good citizen not rely on the state, but they should expect less assistance for all which in turn helps the state to shrink under such a model (Cotterell & Von Randow, 2016). For solo mothers who are left with little choice but to be state dependent in order to survive, as was witnessed particularly through the case of Constance in this research, this neoliberal belief system marginalises and destroys their sense of self-worth.

Recent local research indicates that for the most vulnerable this can limit access to entitlements, enable complex and compliance-driven administrative processes and drive procedural unfairness (A. Martin et al., 2024). These were all mirrored by the experiences of the solo mothers in this research. Constance in particular, as a long-term beneficiary, appeared to be justified in

receiving punitive administrative commands over just social conduct and humane support when needed (Marriott, 2018).

In returning to the concept of welfare in New Zealand as falling under a penal umbrella introduced in chapter two, we can come to see how this social net contributed towards experiences of precarity (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017). A correctional approach that perceives recipients of assistance as individuals with moral deficiencies, including criticism for not having a financial partner, exacerbates the stigmatisation of solo mothers' family structures. This can lead to additional internalised shame and fear. Instead of helping them the system framed them as 'bad' citizens and destroyed their sense of self (Gray, 2017; D. Hodgetts et al., 2017; Marriott, 2018).

Moreover, we witnessed that individual autonomy and decision making too was regulated based on these ideas of morality (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017). For Constance, despite possessing many prior skills and working knowledge of her own family life, she appeared to be framed as somehow needing state intervention into her family and working decision making. In contrast to this, the many rewards received by Melissa exemplify this system of conditionality further (D. Hodgetts et al., 2017).

What is most interesting to note in Melissa's case however was that her lack of reliance on state supports did not shelter her from the realities of her childcare responsibilities on her own. Whilst financially independent, she still relied on WINZ to provide for the costs for her son to attend afterschool care permanently. What contrasts with this however is that while Melissa's reliance on this financial support was necessary, it was not viewed as a sign of failure. Unlike in Constance's case where her state support was seen as indicative of personal failure. Aligning with previous research (Gray, 2017) these cases display how social welfare supports in New Zealand reinforce the devaluation of solo mothers' own caregiving capabilities.

School and Employment Structures

All the mothers participating in this research project identified schools as institutions operating under the assumption of nuclear family which perpetuated their precarity. The impact of school systems on solo mothers remains largely unexplored, yet it is known that living without an additional co-parent to help manage school term and day structures significantly impacts on career advancement or secure sustainable employment for solo mothers (Macaulay et al., 2023).

While the standard work week in New Zealand usually operates from 9am to 5pm, school structures generally span from 9am to 3pm. Moreover, standard full time employment conditions allow for four weeks of paid annual leave per year, while school holidays encompass 12 weeks (Ministry of Business Innovation & Employment, 2024). This leaves a considerable gap to manage. This also does not account for part-time employment conditions which frequently impact solo mothers (Dwyer, 2015).

This research was able to provide direct insights into some of these challenges and how they contributed to precarity. Helen, Constance, and Melissa all reported anxiety concerning the challenge of aligning school schedules with their current or future work schedules. In Helen's case, fears related to this school structure influenced her employment decisions before her child even reached school age. The lack of any available support meant Helen felt deep pressure to consider how her future work schedule would align with her caregiving responsibilities. Ultimately this led her to prioritise future school schedules over career advancement and employment that would adequately financially support her.

Further impacting economic precarity for solo mothers, within the workplace they are subjected to an androcentric ideal worker model, which holds the expectation an employee has the ability to remove themselves from the confines of childcare of familial duties (Brumley, 2014). This pervasive idea disadvantages all mothers but its' effects are felt even more so for solo mothers who are seen as more deeply tied to their caregiving duties (Albiston & Correll, 2024; Brumley, 2014). Those best able to imitate this model are rewarded the most financially and through career

advancements. Those who cannot, face significant consequences (Albiston & Correll, 2024; Brumley, 2014). In Helens case it was witnessed her status as a solo mother pervaded into the workplace so much that it unfairly disadvantaged and stigmatised her due to her employer's awareness of her lack of a partner. Throughout New Zealand there is a rhetoric that working is the most viable way to get out of poverty and to be able to thrive (Groot et al., 2017; A. Martin et al., 2024). Yet as we have seen in these cases this does little to alleviate the intersecting factors that are present for solo mothers. Their experiences highlighted that access to jobs without an understanding of the disproportionate and isolated burden of raising a child alone does little to alleviate precarity.

Housing Structures

Each of the solo mothers in this research experienced ongoing housing stability in one form or another. Housing costs intensified their precarity and impacted on their available food providing budgets. As previously, unstable living conditions are one of the core features of the precariat class (Standing, 2014). While housing independence is crucial for stability, for solo mothers, financial, and social barriers make it particularly challenging to achieve (James et al., 2022). New Zealand currently faces a housing crisis driven by neoliberal ideologies which disproportionately impacts solo mothers. Limited government intervention, rising housing costs, and the expectation for families to rely on private markets exacerbate the challenges (Malva, 2016). Solo mothers face low home ownership rates (Goodyear, 2017) subject to often unstable and expensive renting conditions (Domett et al., 2023; Mills et al., 2015). Compounding this, solo mothers are habitually perceived as undesirable tenants, relegating them to the bottom of the rental hierarchy (Robertson & Masters-Awatere, 2017). This discrimination contributes to frequent relocations and precarious living situations (Group Think, 2018) correlating with reduced well-being (D. Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017). Recent Ministry of Social Development data simultaneously shows an increase in low-income households spending a large portion of their income on housing costs (A. Martin et al., 2024).

The precarious housing conditions faced by mothers in this research aligned with these findings. Melissa's situation showed that regardless of whether having the economic means to do so solo mothers often struggle to secure housing due to being less desired as tenants. For Melissa this led to frequent moves and a reliance on family or shared housing situations.

Helen too relied on subsidised family rent due to a lack of affordable housing. This situation deeply affected her emotional and mental wellbeing.

Despite owning a property, Constance's homeownership did not shield her from financial strain or housing instability. Her limited financial resources meant she struggled with mortgage payments prioritising this cost above all other expenses leaving her susceptible to crisis at any point.

Social Capital

Access to social capital for solo mothers is understood as an essential component to mediate stress and assist with the demands of parenting alone (Winkworth et al., 2010). Social capital refers to the reciprocal benefits that come from connections through relationships in social networks (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017). Frequently however, social capital is only readily available to partnered parents who already have access to more resources that support them in their parenting journey (Winkworth et al., 2010).

Prominent Australian research exploring the extent of social capital available to a large population of low-income solo mothers outlined that over half the participants stated they did not know someone well enough to watch their child for them, 60% did not have someone to turn to borrow money from in an emergency, and a further half of participants did not have someone to talk to when they were feeling down (Winkworth et al., 2010). Common barriers towards this included, cost of attending social groups or playgroups, transportation issues, a lack of time constraints to be able to invest in reciprocal relationships, judgment from other non-solo mothers and a lack of knowledge of services available (Winkworth et al., 2010).

The experiences of the solo mothers in this research highly aligned with these findings. In Helen's case we witnessed that attempts to make connections at playgroups were thwarted due to her 'differentness' as a solo mother. For all three of the mothers, it was witnessed that a lack of financial and especially time resources prevented them from accessing these important connections. Moreover, each identified they had no capacity for reciprocation leaving them feeling isolated and alone in their parenting.

Access to social networks and social capital for solo mothers can also be compounded by what is often a forced reliance on immediate family networks for survival. As witnessed, for many solo mothers these very networks become the barrier to access to external support systems. Moreover, it is common in these situations for the level of familial support that is provided to be highly conflicted and act as an additional source of stress and pressure rather than support (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017).

The experiences of Helen and Melissa reflected this. For Helen in particular, living with her mother where there was an assumption of support from outsiders meant she was cut off from much needed wider support networks. Moreover, the relationship whilst living with her mother negatively impacted on her stress levels and impacted her ability to parent in the way she would like.

In Melissa's case, reliance on family for housing too had caused her to become isolated where there was an assumption that having family members nearby meant she was not struggling alone. In reality, this was not a reliable support network that she could reach out to for help when needed.

For all three of the mothers, what had become the normalcy of this loneliness and reliance on limited unsupportive networks appeared to make it increasingly difficult to ask for or expect any different type of experience. As discussed in chapter two, neoliberal discourse has a significant role to play in this isolation. When a system removes access to public social services solo mothers are left reliant on their own limited personal networks. This privileges those who already have access to these and further marginalises the most vulnerable (Peters, 2000).

Research Strengths

This research contributes to both the fields of community psychology and feminist research through its wider systemic perspective and research approach (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000). Minority groups such as solo mothers are frequently either excluded from the research process altogether or researched 'on' not 'with'. Moreover, conclusions that are made in academic publication about solo mothers are largely presented from a deficit-based perspective all which reduce trust and ongoing participation in the research process (Crowley, 2007; Sonn et al., 2019).

This research has re-centred these solo mothers' perspectives in a way that rejects the dominant norm where they are presented as somehow lacking in their family structure or associated with negative parenting outcomes (Gray, 2017, 2019).

A further strength of this research was that it was opened to low-income solo mothers who were experiencing in work poverty not just low-income beneficiaries. In work poverty is becoming increasingly prevalent in New Zealand (A. Martin et al., 2024; Perry, 2022), yet experiences of this group of solo mothers are often overlooked. This research has been able to provide a far wider picture for working and non-working solo mothers to unmask the invisibility of how complex systems impact both groups in more than just financial ways. Moreover, giving voice to this group of in-work solo mothers who are frequently told they are not experiencing precarity allowed the participants to open in great depth when sharing their stories which was emancipatory in nature.

Research Limitations

A key limitation of this research is that the research sample has not been able to provide perspectives outside of the Eurocentric model of understanding. In doing so this research has implied a type of 'universal' or Pākehā dominant worldview, and understanding of motherhood, food providing and precarious living for solo mothers in Aotearoa. Not only does this not reflect the diverse realities of solo motherhood in New Zealand but it unwittingly contributes to research that

further makes invisible the many intersecting factors that solo mothers who are Māori or represent other ethnic minorities in New Zealand face.

The limitation of having participants only from European descent also excludes increasingly important discussions from the research such as the significant role that culture and ethnicity play in shaping access to resources, social expectations and systemic barriers (van Meijl, 2020).

Research Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

This research indicates that, beyond limited means, social pressures to conform to intensive mothering influence solo mothers' food providing practices, including the levels to which they go without food for themselves. What was also witnessed was that food providing could not be understood outside the context of wider precarity which presented as structural disadvantages in the areas of employment, welfare, and housing influenced by nuclear family norms and neoliberal policy.

These findings hold significant value. Very little research has been conducted on a local level specifically exploring the impacts these wider systemic and social structures have on the day to day lives of solo mothers in Aotearoa (Macaulay et al., 2023).

The importance of these influences can be comprehended by revisiting the ecological systems model introduced in the first chapter. Interventions aimed at improving lives are usually approached from an individualistic perspective, seeking to address the mothers' lived precarity at a microsystem level, separate from wider constructs (Crawford, 2018; Reimer et al., 2020). Moreover, policy implementations rarely extend past an exosystem level (Crawford, 2018).

Considering these findings however, we can witness that food provisioning and precarity for solo mothers may be more significantly addressed through taking a much wider macrosystem perspective. Although impacts are present at all levels, broader social norms, values, and beliefs held significant influence over food related practices. These included societal expectations of intensive

mothering and influences related to the nuclear family structure as the expected standard for child raising.

As already witnessed in chapter two, the New Zealand government has a history of fearing the liberation of solo mothers (Mills et al., 2015). When policy or research is kept below this macrosystem level this is sustained. Moreover, invisibility of the lived realities and day to day struggles of solo mothers remain the norm. The insights from this research however could help to shape the need for policies that specifically works on this macrosystem level instead of silencing the impacts of these much broader systemic influences.

Whilst arguably changing ingrained social beliefs and values that lead to discrimination is a difficult task, challenging existing norms is possible. Public campaigns which highlight the lived reality for solo mothers in society is one way to do so. Further, increased visibility of family diversity in media can shift old paradigms that no longer serve the lived reality of family structure in New Zealand. Increased research from strengths-based perspectives that continues to give voice to solo mothers and views their experiences as valid and normative is also important. Solo mothers should not be continually portrayed as deviations from deficit-oriented hegemonic norms. Research into social needs for solo mothers should be re-centred. Just by participating in research that was centred around them the solo mothers who participated in this research were able to engage in an emancipatory process both bringing their stories to light in the hope of working for greater change for solo mothers as a collective.

Further research should include a broader range of participants not limited to only New Zealand European participants. It is important to include this in future research as mainstream psychology is already heavily reliant on Eurocentric knowledge productions (Sonn et al., 2019). Including a broader range of ethnic experiences would enhance the research process by providing a more comprehensive understanding of solo motherhood in New Zealand.

Whilst it is outside the scope of this research, further investigation specifically into the role of the possible ‘rejection’ of intensive mothering practices as a mediating factor for precarity in solo

mothers could also be beneficial to explore. The case of Melissa where she appeared to actively deviate from many of these norms highlighted an interesting contrast.

It is also interesting to note that all the mothers in these case studies reported making a living wage, yet this did not seem to be enough to comfortably raise a child as a solo mother in New Zealand. Increasing data is suggesting that full time work is no longer enough to sustain family life (Perry, 2022). As such, future research exploring the relationship between living wage poverty and solo motherhood in more depth could be beneficial.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the much under-researched intersection of food insecurity and solo motherhood in Aotearoa New Zealand. It has delved into how systemic structures and societal norms shape the experiences of food sourcing, preparing and providing for low-income solo mothers. Using qualitative case studies this research has brought to life the voices of three solo mothers, Helen, Constance, and Melissa.

The narratives of these three mothers have highlighted that food providing practices for low-income solo mothers are deeply intertwined with wider and deeper levels of precarity. This precarity appeared to be linked to intensive mothering pressures while attempting to thrive in a societal framework that devalues family structures that fall outside the normative nuclear family model.

These findings were discussed in two main categories *(1) Intensive mothering expectations in Aotearoa* and *(2) Structural disadvantages.* Within social expectations of motherhood, the influence of intensive mothering pressures were shown to deeply impact on day-to-day food providing experiences particularly in the realm of the school or ECE lunchbox. Meanwhile, systemic barriers related to employment, welfare, housing and related social capital appeared to exacerbate economic insecurity further.

This research contributes to a broader understanding on the impacts of food providing and precarious living for solo mothers in Aotearoa. By re-situating these individual experiences within the cultural and social contexts they exist within it has hoped to display that day-to-day experiences cannot be understood outside of these broader social and systemic influences which occur on the macrolevel.

As such, this thesis calls for a critical reflection on the policies as well as social norms that continue to marginalise solo mothers in a day and age where incredibly varied family structures are more common than rare. Whilst once classed a progressive country, New Zealand fails to allow solo mothers to thrive in society, calling into question any 'real' social progression since pre- 1960's.

Future studies should build on these insights by exploring the intersections of ethnicity as well as possible influence of flexibility of reliance on social norms such as intensive mothering practices. The phenomenon of in-work poverty for solo mothers too should be much more comprehensively examined.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates the critical role of understanding systemic and social influences on solo motherhood, offering a foundation for meaningful change in New Zealand.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Semi-Strucutred Interview Schedules

Introduction Interview:
The interview will begin with introductions. Participants will be asked if they have any further questions prior to commencement and consent forms will be completed if they have not already done so.
The questions listed below are examples of topics which may be discussed. The sharing of information and stories relevant to the participants will not be interrupted and will largely be based on the flow of participants experiences.

- How many children do you have and what are their ages?
- What is your source of income?
- Who else lives in the household with you?
- As a sole mother what are your experiences of providing food for your family?
- What is your experience of being a sole parent in a school/childcare space?
- What are your experiences of providing packed lunches for school/childcare?
- How do you source the food for this?
- How do you source the food for your family for other meals?
- Where do you usually source food from?
- Have you ever worried about how you would source food for your family?
- Have you ever felt there wasn't enough food to go around?
- Does the cost of food impact on your food purchases?
- Do you or your children have any particular dietary requirements or restrictions?
- Do you feel pressure from school or childcare to provide certain types of foods for your child or children's lunchbox?
- Have you ever been contacted by the school regarding the content of your child or children's lunchbox?
- Have you ever had to rely on emergency food supports or grants such as food banks?
- If yes, what was the experience of relying on emergency food supports like for you?
- What are your experiences of being a sole mother?
- Do you feel like your identity as a sole mother impacts on your food providing practices? If yes, in what ways?
- Have you ever gone without food in order to be able to provide for your children? If yes, why do you think you did this?
- Is there anything else related to your food sourcing, preparing or providing practices that you would like to share?
- Is there anything else related to being a sole mother that you would like to share?

Photo elicitation Interview:
This interview will begin with an opportunity for participants to ask any further questions or offer any reflections that they may have on the process so far. The participants will then be invited to share the photographs they have collected over the research period.

The questions listed below are examples of topics which may then be discussed. The sharing of information and stories relevant to the participants will not be interrupted and will largely be based on the flow of participants experiences.

- Why have you chosen these particular photographs?
- Can you tell me about the content of these photographs?
- What is the relevance of these photographs to you?

Final interview:

This interview will begin with an opportunity for participants to ask any further questions or offer any reflections that they may have on the process so far.

The questions listed below are examples of topics which may then be discussed. The sharing of information and stories relevant to the participants will not be interrupted and will largely be based on the flow of participants experiences.

- Do you have any further reflections on this research process?
- What has participating in this research brought up for you?
- Has participating in this research changed the way you think about providing food for your family at all?
- Has participating in this research changed the way you provide school or childcare lunches for your family?
- Is there anything else related to your food sourcing, providing and preparing practices that we haven't covered that you would like to discuss?

Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

Exploring your experiences of food providing as a sole mother

I am a masters student at the University of Waikato completing research on the different ways sole mothers' source and provide food for their families. If you are interested in being involved in this research, please contact me at:

cm111@students.waikato.ac.nz

As compensation for your valuable time, particpants involved in this research will receive a supermarket voucher.

Research approved by HREC 2023 #

Appendix C

Participant Information Sheet

PARTCIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Research topic: Experiences and perspectives of sole mothers in Aotearoa of sourcing, providing and preparing meals for their families.

Researcher: Caroline McKinnon **cm111@students.waikato.ac.nz**
Supervisor: Dr Rebekah Graham **rebekah.graham@waikato.ac.nz**

Kia ora! My name is Caroline McKinnon, and I am a master's student at the University of Waikato where I am studying towards becoming a registered community psychologist. As part of my study, I am completing research which seeks to explore the different experiences of sole mothers in the ways they source, provide and prepare meals for themselves and the child(ren) in their care.

As a sole mother myself, I am familiar with the many complexities and challenges that can be faced in raising a family alone. For many sole mothers, sourcing and providing food is becoming increasingly challenging to navigate. In Aotearoa, there is very little research that explores this experiencing of providing food for a family from the perspective of sole mothers. The purpose of this research is to help fill this gap and provide a space where these experiences can be seen as valid and important.

If you are a sole mother over the age of 18 living in the Bay of Plenty or Waikato regions, I would love to invite you towards sharing your experiences towards this research project!

Is there a criterion for me to participate?
Yes. In order to be eligible to participate in this research you would be required to be a sole mother receiving any type of assistance from work and income, or a working for families tax credit. The child(ren) in your care would also need to be under the age of 18 and attending a childcare or School that requires them to take a packed lunch from home each day.

What your participation will involve:
This research project will consist of case studies occurring over a period of approximately two-weeks in total. As part of this, I will complete four different interviews with you to gain a wide understanding of your situation and perspectives. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into a written record. Once this has been completed you will get the chance to change or edit any of the information. Your information will be kept completely anonymous (unless you would like to be identified) and any information that could identify you such as a school or place of work will also be made completely anonymous.

Below I outline the different tasks these interviews involve and the timeframes it may take to complete.

- **Introductory interview:** This interview will take approximately 45 minutes of your time. The purpose of this interview will be to get to know one another and for me to learn a bit about your situation and the different ways you go about providing food for your family. It will also

give an opportunity to discuss any questions you may have about the research project or complete any consent forms as well as discuss appropriate times and locations for future interviews.

- **Photo elicitation interview:** Over the case-study period, you will be asked to keep photographs of the different ways you provide your child(ren) with school or childcare lunches each day that are meaningful to you. You can choose to provide as many, or few, photographs as you decide. It is not expected to take more than 15 minutes in total. Once you have done this, we will arrange a time to meet to discuss the content of the photographs. This will give you the opportunity to tell me the relevance of the photos to you. This interview will take approximately 60 minutes of your time.

- **Shop along interview:** Throughout the period of the case study, I would arrange to accompany you on one of your usual shops where you source food for your family, particularly related to the food you source for the school or childcare lunch boxes. I would meet you at this location and then come with you as you shop. The purpose of this is for me to get a wide picture of what it is like for you to provide food for you and your family. The length of time this would take would depend on your shopping schedule.

- **Final interview:** At the end of the case study period, I would complete a final interview with you. This would be a space for us to reflect on the process together as well as gain any further insights from the experience. This interview would take approximately 45 minutes of your time.

Where will the interviews be held?
You can decide where you are most comfortable with the interviews being held. I can travel to you to complete these in your home, or we can arrange to meet somewhere suitable that works in for you. This could include a university campus or a community centre that is near by to you. If you need to travel to attend the interviews, you will be compensated for your travel and parking expenses. Interviews will be planned around your schedule. You can also arrange to have a support person with you. Ideally interviews would be completed face to face but if you would prefer for the interviews to be completed online via zoom this can be arranged too.

Can my child(ren) be with me during the interviews?
Absolutely! You are welcome to bring your children with you to attend any interviews outside of the home and it is fine for them to be present if the interview is completed in your home. However, throughout the interview process I would only be discussing any interview questions with you.

What will I be asked?
The focus of this research project is broad and has the overall goal of understanding and highlighting what it is like for sole mothers to provide food for their families. There will be a particular focus on questions surrounding your experiences of providing a packed lunch for your child(ren), but you will also be able to discuss a range of topics related to motherhood, being a sole parent, and what it is like for you to source, prepare and provide food for you and your children. Some of these things can be hard to talk about and it is important to me that the research space will be comfortable and judgement free. Throughout the research process you will have the right to stop the interviews or refuse to answer any questions at any time. You can also request to withdraw from the research at any time throughout the process. You don't have to give any reasons, you can simply just make contact and let me know that you do not wish to continue. Once the interviews have been completed they will be transcribed into a written document, and you can request to receive a copy and make any changes that you wish. Upon completion of the research period, you will have up to

two weeks to request to withdraw. I will make contact with you after that period to check if you are still ok for the information you have provided to be used in the research.

Privacy
All data will be stored on a password protected secure drive accessible only to myself. Any consent forms with your information on them will be digitalised and uploaded to this drive. Physical copies will be destroyed. If you choose to provide physical photographs these will be stored in a locked cabinet, digitised and then returned to you. I will be the only one with access to any of this information.

How will this research be published?
The findings of this research will be submitted as a written thesis to fulfil the requirements of the Master of Applied Community Psychology Degree. If you choose to, you will also be provided with a research summary highlighting the key findings upon the completion of the thesis.

How will you be compensated for your time.
As recognition for your valuable time spent participating in this research you will be provided with a $100 supermarket voucher for each interview that you complete. This can be for a supermarket of your choice. During the interviews I will also provide hot drinks (or equivalent) and fresh fruit or biscuits to share.

What happens next?
If you would like to participate in this valuable research please contact me on the email **cm111@students.waikato.ac.nz** from here I will make further contact with you to arrange a time to meet and start the interview process.

If you have any further questions not answered on this sheet, please do not hesitate to contact me. I appreciate you taking the time to read through this information and look forward to hearing from you.
"This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email alpss-ethics@waikato.ac.nz , postal address, Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences , University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240."

Appendix D

Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

FACULTY OF ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

[A completed copy of this form should be retained by both the researcher and the participant]

Name of person interviewed: _____

I have received a copy of the Information Sheet describing the research project. Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation, and that I can withdraw my participation at any time throughout the process and up to two weeks after the interviews have been completed.

During the interviews, I understand that I do not have to answer questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the interviews at any time, and I can ask to have the recording device turned off at any time.

When I sign this consent form, I will retain ownership of my interviews, but I give consent for the researcher to use the interviews for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Sheet.

I understand that my identity will remain confidential in the presentation of the research findings.

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [✓] the appropriate box for each point.	**YES**	**NO**
I wish to view the transcripts of my interviews		
I wish to receive a copy of the findings		

Participant :	_____	Researcher :	_____
Signature :	_____	Signature :	_____
Date :	_____	Date :	_____
Contact Details :		Contact Details :	
	_____		_____
	_____		_____
	_____		_____

Appendix E

Photo Information Sheet

Information For Photographs

The purpose of taking the photos for this research is to help capture the everyday parts of your life related to sole motherhood and providing food for your family that we sometimes forget about as they're so ordinary, like providing a lunchbox every day for your child/ren!

So, over the next week or two if you wanted to take some photographs of your child/ren's lunchbox and anything else that might be meaningful to you related to providing food for them, yourself (or anyone else in your home) that would be great!

It's up to you how long you would like to take the photos for as well as how many you would like to take. This is not designed to be a time intensive task; it's all just about capturing another part of your journey of being a sole mother. That way, when we meet up again for our next interview, we can talk about the photographs together and discuss the different ways they are meaningful to you.

Hopefully this clarifies the process further but if you have any other questions, please get in touch any time!