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**Breaking Barriers and Empowering Perspectives:
Centering Women's Voices in the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa**

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree

of
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by
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Abstract

Gang communities in Aotearoa New Zealand have traditionally been sites of masculinity where specific forms of 'maleness' - including resistance to authority, antisocial behaviour, and expressions of violence - are embraced, expressed, and enforced through various internal cultural norms and reactions to the outside world. The dominant narrative that informs public perceptions of New Zealand gangs is often centered on crime, poverty, and Indigeneity. Much less is known about the role of women in these communities, particularly as their voices have only recently emerged from one of the largest gang chapters in the country. This research, conducted in close collaboration with wāhine within the Mongrel Mob Kingdom's first female-only chapter, Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa, uses a participatory action research approach with photovoice methodology. Drawing on the personal narratives of six wāhine, this study aims to better understand their perspectives and experiences of contributing to a fledgling movement that privileges women within a predominantly male-centered gang environment. Photovoice is used alongside semi-structured interviews to provide depth and breadth to the data, allowing the wāhine to visually and verbally express their experiences and perspectives. Themes include navigating marginality, empowerment, and resistance. The long-range goal of this work is to inform context-sensitive policies and interventions for wāhine in gangs in Aotearoa. By foregrounding the perspective of wāhine, this study contributes to breaking down barriers and reshaping discourses around women in gangs, with implications for well-being and empowerment.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my deepest gratitude goes to the wāhine who participated in this research—Ariel, Belle, CJ, Esmeralda, Mulan, and Raya. This project is only possible because of your openness, honesty, and courage in sharing your stories. I am profoundly indebted to each of you for your trust in me, your willingness to reflect on and discuss your experiences, and the vulnerability you showed through both words and images. Your voices are the essence of this work, and I am honoured to have been entrusted with your narratives. I hope this research does justice to your experiences and serves as a platform for your perspectives to be seen, heard, and valued by a wider audience. Thank you for inspiring me with your strength and resilience, and for helping to make this work impactful and meaningful.

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To my supervisor, Associate Professor Armon Tamatea, thank you for your unwavering support, wisdom, and guidance. Your insightful feedback and patient mentorship have been essential in shaping this research. I am grateful for the time and energy you dedicated to supporting my work, continually pushing me to think critically and strive for excellence. This journey has been enriched because of your encouragement and belief in the importance of this study, and I am truly fortunate to have had you by my side every step of

the way. Your belief in me and this mahi has been a great source of strength, and your calming influence reassured me when I felt overwhelmed. I am deeply appreciative of your presence as both a mentor and a supporter throughout this journey.

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I am immensely grateful for the unwavering support of my thesis friends, who walked this path alongside me. Sharing the triumphs and challenges with those who truly understood made all the difference, and their camaraderie kept me grounded and motivated. To my family and friends, thank you for your endless encouragement, for listening to my thoughts, for lifting me up when I faced doubt or challenges, and for celebrating each step forward with me. I am truly indebted to this amazing community around me, whose kindness and belief in me made this journey not only possible but profoundly meaningful.

Lastly, to my husband, Daniel, and my children, Zac, Sadie, and Theo - words cannot fully express my gratitude for your love, patience, and support. You stood beside me through

every high and low. Thank you for your countless sacrifices, for shouldering extra responsibilities, and for believing in me. Your support has been my foundation, and I am forever grateful to each of you for being my strength and motivation.

Preface

This research has been an enriching journey, allowing me to connect with and learn from the wāhine of Wāhine Toa. It has been an honour to bear witness to their lives, their stories, and their aspirations. Through this experience, I have come to appreciate the resilience, strength, and sense of community that these wāhine possess. The opportunity to collaborate with them in co-creating knowledge has been profoundly humbling.

This mahi is not only academically important but also personal and deeply connected to my values and commitment to social justice. The wāhine stories, filled with hardship and hope, have strengthened my resolve to work toward a more inclusive, compassionate, and understanding society. I believe we can help break down barriers perpetuating stigma and marginalisation by amplifying voices often overlooked or misrepresented. Through this process, I have also grown as a researcher and person. Engaging with a hard-to-reach community such as Wāhine Toa has deepened my understanding of the ethical complexities involved in participatory research. It has reinforced the importance of building trust, nurturing relationships, and respecting participants' autonomy in shaping their narratives. These lessons will guide my future work, particularly in community psychology, where building meaningful connections is central to effective practice.

On a more personal note, working with these wāhine has deepened my understanding of the concept of survivance, which I initially encountered through theory but now feel I have witnessed firsthand. Their ability to survive and thrive in the face of overwhelming adversity has been a powerful lesson in resilience and self-determination. These experiences have also shaped my vision for continuing my work in academia and practice, ensuring that marginalised voices are at the forefront of community interventions, policies, and research.

As I reflect on this research, I realise that it has only scratched the surface of a much broader story that needs to be told. There is much more to explore regarding how gang-

affiliated wāhine navigate their identities and communities, and I feel compelled to continue this work. I hope this research can inspire others to adopt similar approaches that prioritise collaboration, authenticity, and respect for the lived experiences of those we aim to serve.

Ngā mihi nui for the experience,

Annaliese

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Glossary

The Māori terms used in this glossary are sourced from *Te Aka Māori Dictionary* (<https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>), a widely respected resource for understanding the meanings and contexts of the Māori language. Similarly, other terms, such as terms used within the Mongrel Mob, have been defined in consultation with my community advisor to ensure cultural and contextual accuracy.

Aotearoa	Māori name for New Zealand
Chapter	Series of smaller gangs linked to the main gang
Gang affiliated	Member or in close association with a gang
Gang pad	Headquarters where gang members and associates gather
Hauora	Māori view of health and well-being, to be well
Hinengaroa	Mind, thought, consciousness
Ihi	Personal magnetism, charm
Kaupapa	Topic, matter for discussion
Korero	To tell, say, speak, read, talk, address
Korowai	Traditional Māori cloak that carries importance
Kotahitanga	Unity, togetherness, solidarity, collective action
Kura	School
'lism'	Mongrel Mob reference for their gang clothing
Mahi	Work
Māori	An Indigenous person of New Zealand
Mana motuhake	Self-determination, autonomy
Mana whānau	Family empowerment
Mana wāhine	Women's empowerment

Marae	Māori meeting house
Mana	Prestige, authority, spiritual power
Manaakitanga	Care and hospitality
Mamae	Pain
Mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge
Ngā mihi nui	Thank you very much
Oranga Tamariki	Ministry for Children (New Zealand)
Patch	Gang symbol worn on the back of a jacket
Pono	True, honest, genuine
Rangatira	Noble, chief, to be of high rank
Rangatahi	Youth
Tāne	Men
Tane	Man
Te Ao Māori	Māori worldview
Te Whare Tapa Wha	Māori model of health and well-being
Tikanga	Māori cultural custom
Wairua	Spirit
Wāhine	Women
Wahine	Woman
Wehi	A response of awe in reaction to ihi
Whakapapa	Māori genealogy or lineage
Whakataukī	Proverb, significant saying
Whānau	Family, an extended notion of family
Whanaungatanga	Relationships and kinship
Whenua	Land

Chapter One: Introduction

“Me aro koe ki te hā o Hine-ahu-one - Pay heed to the power of women.”

This whakataukī speaks to the deep respect and reverence for the power and mana of women in Māori culture. Hine-ahu-one is a figure in te ao Māori, often considered the first woman, and through her, the whakataukī emphasizes the essential role of women in society. It highlights the importance of acknowledging and valuing the strength, wisdom, and contributions of wāhine in all aspects of life. The whakataukī reflects the centrality of women’s voices and experiences in the Māori worldview and acknowledges their pivotal role in nurturing, leading, and guiding whānau and communities.

This whakataukī was gifted to this research by my community advisor, who shared its significance in the context of Māori women’s empowerment. It serves as a guiding principle throughout the study, aligning with the focus on amplifying the voices and experiences of wāhine within the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa¹, and underscoring the importance of recognising their mana and agency.

Context of the Study

The word 'gangs' often triggers strong reactions, with many associating them with crime, violence, and destruction. However, not all gang members fit this stereotype. Former Black Power member Eugene Ryder explains, "When people ask me am I in a gang, I am definitely not in a gang... 'cause I know what that word does for people’s psyche you know, but Black Power is part of who I am" (Gerrard et al., 2023). This statement highlights the complexity of gang identities and the impact of labels. Ryder further emphasizes that not all

¹ This research focuses on the experiences of wāhine who are members of the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa, the first female-only chapter of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom. For this study, and in line with guidance provided by my community advisor, they will be referred to as Wāhine Toa for the remainder of the thesis.

gang members are criminals, and not all criminals are gang members (Whakaata Māori, 2021).

Despite the prominence of gang-related discussions in political and media spheres, particularly with government crackdowns on gangs, there remains a significant gap in literature regarding the experiences of women in these communities. While much has been written about male gang members (Bradley, 2022; Breetzke et al., 2022; Gerrard et al., 2023; Gilbert, 2013), the voices of wāhine in gangs are largely underrepresented. The 2023 report from the Chief Science Advisors specifically noted this gap in understanding women's perspectives (Gerrard et al., 2023). This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of wāhine in Wāhine Toa, offering a deeper understanding of their roles, challenges, and empowerment.

Thesis Structure Overview

The structure of this thesis is designed to guide the reader through the research process, from the foundational literature to the presentation of findings and final analysis. Each chapter builds upon the previous one, offering insights into the experiences of the wāhine within Wāhine Toa and the theoretical and methodological frameworks that inform this study. The following section provides an overview of each chapter of the thesis, summarising the key content and contributions while highlighting the progression from the literature review to the conclusion.

Chapter Two reviews the key literature on Māori wāhine in gangs, focusing on identity, empowerment, and social dynamics. It covers the global and Aotearoa histories of gangs, particularly emphasizing the Mongrel Mob and its shift toward positivity through the Mongrel Mob Kingdom. The review examines the role of women in gangs, both internationally and within Aotearoa, and the narratives surrounding gangs. Theoretical frameworks, including community psychology, social identity theory, and Bronfenbrenner's

ecological systems theory, provide insight into the social forces shaping gang involvement. The chapter also explores the concept of mana, focusing on mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau, and concludes with the research purpose and central question guiding the study.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology used in this study, detailing the process and rationale behind each element. It begins with explaining the research questions and aim, setting the foundation for the study. The researcher's positionality is discussed, reflecting on how personal perspectives influence the research process. The chapter then describes the research design, highlighting the qualitative approach and its alignment with community psychology principles and Kaupapa Māori research principles. The chapter further explores the use of participatory action research and photovoice to engage participants and facilitate empowerment. Thematic analysis is outlined as the approach to data analysis, followed by a discussion on sampling, recruitment, and participant selection. The data collection process, including the interview procedure and use of photographs, is detailed. Finally, ethical considerations are addressed, emphasizing respect for participants and the cultural integrity of the research.

Chapter Four presents the research findings, exploring how the wāhine lived experiences challenge and inform dominant narratives about women in gangs. The chapter highlights two primary themes: *Navigating Marginality*, which examines stigma, systemic exclusion, and trauma, and *Empowerment and Resistance*, which focuses on the wāhine efforts to reclaim power and resist stigma and marginalisation. The integration of photovoice adds a visual layer to these findings, enhancing the thematic analysis and providing deeper insight into the wāhine experiences.

Chapter Five discusses the key findings, focusing on how the wāhine navigate stigma and empowerment through group identity. It explores the ecological approach to stigma and

the interconnectedness of systems that influence their experiences. The chapter highlights the importance of belonging, empowerment, and reclaiming mana wāhine through social movements. It also reflects on the limitations and strengths of the research, offers suggestions for future research, and discusses the implications for community practice and Māori women's empowerment. The chapter concludes by summarising the main insights from the research and reflecting on its overall contribution to understanding women in gangs.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review examines the historical evolution of gangs globally and in Aotearoa, focusing on the Mongrel Mob's history and its transition toward positivity and inclusivity. It explores the marginalisation and empowerment of women in gangs, specifically focusing on wāhine in Aotearoa, and examines dominant criminogenic narratives through community psychology, social identity theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The review also delves into the cultural concepts of mana - mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau and their influence on wāhine in gang contexts. It highlights the formation of Wāhine Toa, addressing their empowerment, redefinition of identity, and challenge to gender roles within gang structures. Finally, it articulates the research's purpose: to shed light on the lived experiences of wāhine in Wāhine Toa and how their stories challenge and inform broader societal narratives about women in gangs.

The Evolution of Gangs: Global and Aotearoa Histories

The concept of a 'gang' is inherently complex and contested within academic literature, with definitions varying significantly across contexts and perspectives (Tamatea, 2015; Roguski, 2019; Davis, 2022). This definitional dissonance reflects a spectrum that places law-abiding, legitimate social groups at one end and highly organised, criminal networks at the other (Newbold & Taonui, 2020). Gilbert (2013) provides a valuable working definition, describing a gang as a structured group consisting of five or more individuals who maintain exclusive membership, often characterized by shared identifiers. Gangs are frequently defined as organised groups that engage in criminal activity (Newbold & Taonui, 2020). However, such definitions can be limiting, particularly when examining gangs in their broader social and cultural contexts. Scholars such as Hagedorn (2008) argue that gangs are not merely criminal entities, but complex social organisations born out of systemic inequalities, particularly in marginalised communities. Gangs often serve as both sources of

identity and survival for their members, offering protection and a sense of belonging (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001).

The literature on gangs covers various topics, reflecting the complexity of gang phenomena across different contexts. Scholars have debated what constitutes a gang, with varied definitions and classifications distinguishing gangs from other social groups (Tamatea, 2015; Gilbert, 2013; Dennehy, 2006). Research on gang formation and membership highlights factors such as socioeconomic deprivation, family instability, and community environments as key drivers for individuals joining gangs (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Roguski, 2019). Studies on gang dynamics and structure explore leadership hierarchies, internal roles, and social cohesion that sustain gangs over time (Hazen & Rodgers, 2014; Brotherton & Gude, 2021). A significant portion of gang literature focuses on criminal activities and violence, examining gang involvement in crime and its societal impacts (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Hagedorn, 2008). Research on prevention and intervention strategies evaluates community-based programs, law enforcement approaches, and rehabilitative efforts to mitigate gang-related harm (Howell, 1998; Spergel, 1995). Another growing focus is on cultural and social identity, where gangs are seen as sources of belonging and identity through shared symbols, rituals, and values (Davis, 2022; Hagedorn, 2008; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004).

Recent scholarship also highlights the role of technology and social media in facilitating gang communication, recruitment, and the propagation of gang culture (Behrman, 2015; Fernández-Planells et al., 2021; Melde & Weerman, 2020; Pyrooz & Moule Jr., 2019; Storrod & Densley, 2017; Warburton, 2024). Additionally, gender dynamics within gangs have gained attention, examining female members' roles, challenges, and experiences (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001; Desmond, 2009; Eghigian & Kirby, 2006). Lastly, global perspectives and comparisons provide insights into gangs' universal and localised nature,

reflecting the interplay between cultural, social, and economic conditions (Hazen & Rodgers, 2014; Hagedorn, 2008). These themes collectively provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding gangs and highlight the need for nuanced, context-specific approaches in both research and practice.

History of Gangs

Gangs have been a global phenomenon for centuries, often forming in response to social, economic, and political conditions. Early records of gang-like groups date back to medieval Europe, where urban banditry and organized criminal groups emerged in growing cities (Hagedorn, 2008). In the United States, the origins of contemporary gangs can be traced to the 19th century with the rise of immigrant street gangs in cities like New York. These groups formed as a means of protection and solidarity among marginalized communities, particularly Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants (Howell & Griffiths, 2018). In the mid-20th century, African American and Latino gangs became prominent in urban centers, shaped by systemic racism, segregation, and economic inequality (Moore & Vigil, 1989). During this period, gang culture also began to intertwine with broader cultural movements, including hip-hop and car clubs, especially on the West Coast of the United States (Howell & Griffiths, 2018). Over time, the roles and structures of gangs have evolved, ranging from loosely organized groups to highly structured organizations with significant cultural and social influence (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Despite their complex and multifaceted nature, gangs are often stigmatised and associated with violence and crime, overshadowing their historical roots in survival, resistance, and identity formation.

Historical Context: Aotearoa

The emergence of gangs in Aotearoa during the 1960s and 1970s (Gilbert, 2013; Dennehy & Newbold, 2001; Bradley, 2020) is deeply intertwined with the country's colonial past and the socio-economic challenges that Māori communities have faced as a result of

colonisation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Beginning with land seizures in the mid-19th century and exacerbated by policies like the Public Works Act, which displaced Māori from their land (Cleaver, 2004; Wynyard, 2019), colonisation led to the erosion of cultural and linguistic heritage and laid the foundation for ongoing marginalisation (Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019). Following World War II, the period saw significant rural-to-urban migration as Māori sought better opportunities in urban centres (Shilliam, 2012). However, this urban drift often resulted in disconnection from traditional support networks and cultural roots, leaving many Māori vulnerable to socio-economic disparities and gang involvement as a means of seeking belonging and support (Roguski, 2019). This historical dislocation, combined with systemic marginalisation, contributed to the emergence of Māori gangs like the Mongrel Mob and Black Power in the 1960s and 1970s (Newbold & Taonui, 2020). While other gangs, such as the Head Hunters, King Cobras, and Tribesmen, have also established strong presences in Aotearoa, the Mongrel Mob and Black Power remain the most prominent ethnic gangs, deeply rooted in the Māori experience of marginalisation and resistance. Unlike gangs in other parts of the world, these gangs have a unique multi-generational and familial membership, often spanning five generations within families (McKeich, 2024).

Furthermore, socio-economic factors such as poverty, limited educational opportunities, and inadequate housing have contributed to the allure of gang membership as an alternative pathway for survival and success (Gerrard et al., 2023). These factors, coupled with a sense of marginalisation and societal exclusion, have led individuals to seek belonging and identity within gang communities (Roguski, 2019).

A significant portion of gang members, including those from the Mongrel Mob, have a history of being in state care facilities, highlighting the failure of the care and protection system and the systemic issues that perpetuate cycles of marginalisation and gang

involvement (Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2019a). The state's role in the emergence of these gangs is notable, with punitive child welfare policies disproportionately affecting Māori and Pasifika communities and leading to the formation of protective gang clusters as a response to institutional abuse (McKeich, 2024). The impact of maltreatment and neglect in state care has left a lasting mark, particularly on Māori youth, who were disproportionately affected (Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2020a). Jackson (Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2019a) highlights that two decades ago, 85% of Mongrel Mob and 88% of Black Power members had been State wards, reflecting a stark link between the care system and gang involvement. While these statistics may seem dated, they underscore how children abused in state care during the 1970s–80s became entangled in gangs and the justice system as adults. Sir Kim Workman (Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2019b) further emphasizes this reality, stating:

No one was concerned that the offenders of today were almost always the victims of yesterday – but the moment they were old enough to be held accountable for a criminal act, their history of victimisation and neglect became of no account (p. 5).

Rangi Wickliffe, a former ward of the state, echoes this sentiment, noting that what society often sees as criminality stems from a system that fails to recognize the “deeply traumatized child created by other state agencies” (Smale, 2021). From the mid-20th century to the 1990s, many endured horrific abuse—physical, mental, and sexual—while in state care, with Māori boys particularly sent to borstals and other institutions (Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2020b). For many individuals, joining a gang became a form of resistance to a society that had failed them (NZ On Screen, 2017; Wiltshire, 2020). Gangs provided a sense of belonging, identity, and camaraderie denied to them by the system (Andrae et al., 2017). This connection reveals the enduring consequences of institutional neglect and its role in driving marginalized youth, both tāne and wāhine, toward gang affiliation.

The historical and systemic factors contributing to the emergence and persistence of gangs in Aotearoa, particularly the Mongrel Mob and Black Power, reflect a legacy of colonisation, socio-economic marginalisation, and institutional neglect. Displacement from land, urban migration, poverty, and systemic failures—such as the abuse experienced within state care—have disproportionately impacted Māori communities, creating environments of disconnection and vulnerability. For many, gangs became spaces of resistance, identity, and belonging in response to societal exclusion and institutional betrayal.

History of the Mongrel Mob and the Mongrel Mob Kingdom

Emergence and Evolution of the Mongrel Mob

The Mongrel Mob, New Zealand’s largest ethnic gang, originated in the Napier–Hastings area during the early 1960s (Gilbert, 2013). Its beginnings can be traced to groups of predominantly Pākehā youth who referred to themselves as “mongrels.” By the early 1970s, this group had shifted to being predominantly Māori, adopting the name “Mongrel Mob” and developing distinctive symbols, such as the bulldog patch with a German Second World War helmet, which became markers of group identity and defiance (Newbold & Taonui, 2020). Over time, these symbols, facial tattoos, and red bandannas grew into powerful signifiers of a collective identity, fostering a sense of belonging within the group (Newbold & Taonui, 2020; Gilbert, 2013). A key distinction in New Zealand is the family-based nature of ethnic gangs, with many Mongrel Mob chapters being oriented around whānau. In some families, this can involve up to five generations of gang membership, encompassing the Mongrel Mob and other gangs (McKeich, 2024).

The gang’s evolution was shaped by broader societal forces, including the socio-economic disparities and alienation experienced by Māori youth amid mid-20th century urbanisation. As Māori migrated from rural areas to urban centres, many were met with systemic discrimination, poverty, and disconnection from whānau and cultural roots. This

sense of exclusion and marginalisation drove the search for alternative communities, with the Mongrel Mob offering a form of belonging and identity in the face of societal rejection (Gerrard et al., 2023). Prisons became significant recruiting grounds for the Mongrel Mob, with a chapter even forming in Auckland Maximum Security Prison in the late 1970s (Isaac & Haami, 2007). The gang's growth and transformation over the decades were marked by violent clashes with its main rival, Black Power, and a reputation for antisocial behaviour. This period saw many young Māori criminalised and institutionalised (McKeich, 2024). In 2018, the Mongrel Mob comprised a collection of loosely affiliated, independent chapters without a national organization or president. As New Zealand's largest gang, it had over 1,000 patched members spread across more than 30 chapters (Newbold & Taonui, 2020).

The Mongrel Mob Kingdom: A Shift Towards Positivity

A notable development within the Mongrel Mob's history is the emergence of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom, a chapter led by current president Sonny Fatupaito. After 33 years as a member and 22 years as a Rangatira, Fatupaito initiated a significant shift in the chapter's direction (Hollingworth, 2019). In 2017, he led the Kingdom away from the broader gang network to focus on positive, constructive goals, prioritising education, health, and employment while addressing issues that gang members have both caused and experienced, such as suicide, violence, and substance abuse (Hollingworth, 2019). Fatupaito describes the Kingdom as a "kaupapa," or family name, that inspires members to strive for better outcomes. He envisions the Kingdom as an umbrella organisation that supports individuals in achieving positive and productive goals, transcending traditional gang activities (Fantail Studios, 2023). Fatupaito states that the Mob is prioritising initiatives in education, health, and employment, while also addressing issues that gang members have both experienced and contributed to, such as suicide, violence, and substance abuse (Hollingworth, 2019). This

transformative approach contrasts sharply with the public's entrenched views of gangs based on the violent and chaotic history of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Hollingworth, 2019).

The Mongrel Mob's evolution from a reactionary group of marginalised youth to an organisation with chapters like the Kingdom reflects broader social dynamics and the potential for change within even the most entrenched subcultures. The Kingdom's efforts to reframe the gang's purpose and activities illustrate a significant departure from its origins, aiming to address and ameliorate the social disadvantages that contributed to the gang's formation.

Women in Gangs: An International and Aotearoa Perspective

International Research

From an international standpoint, research on women in gangs has been significantly overlooked (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003; Davis, 2022; Peterson & Panfil, 2017; Sutton, 2017). Previous studies often portrayed women primarily as sexual objects or peripheral members, with an underlying assumption that female gang membership was rare (Sutton, 2017). However, Brown's research (1977, as cited in Sutton, 2017) illustrated that women played integral roles within their gangs. Additionally, Quicker (1983, as cited in Sutton, 2017) discovered that in some Mexican gang contexts, women formed their own distinct satellite groups, operating autonomously.

Anne Campbell's research, "The Girls in the Gang" (1984), aimed to address the gap in literature regarding women's roles in street gangs. As a social psychologist, Campbell spent six months with three diverse gangs in New York, focusing on individual women within each gang: a thirty-year-old mother of four, a fifteen-year-old, and a twenty-six-year-old mother of two (Campbell, 1984). Her study critiqued previous research for its inadequate coverage of women's experiences, often based on single-purpose studies, social workers' problem-solving perspectives, or second-hand reports through male speakers. Campbell's

ethnographic approach provided a detailed account of the daily lives and experiences of women in gangs, highlighting the diversity and complexity of gang life from an international perspective in the 1980s.

Sutton (2017) further delved into this subject through their literature review, exploring factors influencing female youths' gang involvement, the nature of violence and criminality among female gang members, gender dynamics in gang victimization experiences, and pathways to desistance from gang life among female members. Peterson and Panfil (2017) introduced an alternative viewpoint on female gang participation, advocating for a multiracial feminist framework to understand this phenomenon better. Coughlin and Venkatesh (2003) delve into the advancements in research on female gang members and female gangs since the 1970s. In their article, particularly in the section titled "Gendering the Gang," they emphasize a significant shift in the field: female gang members and "girl gangs" are now being considered as subjects in their own right rather than mere appendages to male gangs. They highlight that the most recent research focuses on analyzing female perspectives and experiences within gangs, exploring how feminine and masculine identities are reproduced, and comparing female and male gangs to understand gender-based differences (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003).

According to the 2012 data from the National Gang Center, there were roughly 30,700 gangs in the United States, comprising an estimated total membership of 850,000 individuals (National Gang Center, 2012). Despite a rising concern regarding female gang involvement, there has been little to no change observed in the percentage of female members across survey years, with females still representing less than 10% of the total membership (National Gang Center, 2012).

Aotearoa Context

There is a noticeable dearth of research on women and gangs, as well as women *in* gangs, particularly in Aotearoa, New Zealand (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003; Gerrard et al., 2023). Much like international research, studies within the Aotearoa context predominantly focus on men. This limited research on women and gangs can be attributed to the secretive nature of gangs, restrictive access, and male gang members' refusals to allow their partners to participate in research (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001).

Prior to the 1960s, gang literature rarely acknowledged the presence or roles of women, treating gangs as predominantly male domains and largely ignoring the involvement of women (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001). During the 1960s and 70s, some attention shifted towards independent female gangs, but this interest was often framed in relation to male gangs, portraying women in a marginal and secondary capacity (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001).

Two of the most prominent contributions to this field within Aotearoa are the works of Glennis Dennehy and Pip Desmond. Dennehy's book, 'The Girls in the Gang' (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001), which originated from her master's research, offers a unique perspective grounded in lived experience. Dennehy's study explores the lived experiences of ten women involved in gangs in Aotearoa, New Zealand, during the 1990s. The key findings from her research highlight the intricate interplay of social, economic, and personal factors that lead women to gang affiliation (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001). These women frequently encountered severe socio-economic hardships, histories of abuse, and marginalisation. For many, gangs provided an alternative community and a source of protection and security. One participant described her need for protection: "...it was a security thing for me. You know...this tough fella who would look after me, and love me, what I never had when I was young" (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001, p. 81). However, their involvement also subjected them to further violence, crime, and instability, perpetuating a cycle of struggle and survival. Of

the ten women interviewed, nine recounted instances of extreme violence directed at themselves or their friends. The study noted that "Often the violence was only mild or did not occur at all at the beginning of the relationship, but once a pattern of violence had commenced, it tended to become more regular and more severe as time went on" (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001, p. 108).

Another significant contribution comes from Pip Desmond. In her book, 'Trust' (2009), Desmond details women's experiences in Aroha Trust, an organization she co-founded. Many of the women associated with Aroha Trust were affiliated with Black Power. This work underscores the resilience and strength of these women, emphasizing their efforts to escape the cycles of violence and crime through the support of Aroha Trust. Desmond highlights the transformative power of community support, trust, and empowerment in aiding these women to rebuild their lives, fostering a sense of agency and hope.

Power dynamics within gangs have traditionally been heavily imbalanced, with women frequently relegated to subordinate roles under men (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001; Desmond, 2009; Roguski, 2019). Women in gangs have described their roles as unstable, contradictory, and constantly changing. Their accounts depict gang culture as a realm of conflicting experiences of power and powerlessness, loyalty and betrayal, and security and profound vulnerability (Dennehy, 2006). Eugene Ryder echoes this sentiment: "There was a time when it wasn't gangster to hold a hand of your partner. It wasn't gangster to allow them to speak up" (Whakaata Māori, 2021). Te Atawhai Nayda Te Rangi shares her perspective in Bradley's (2024) chapter: "In the 1970s, members' attitudes towards female partners were that you were expected to stay at home, keep the house, and look after the children. Women were not invited to the 'gang pad'." However, recent shifts in gang dynamics have led to significant changes in gender roles. Te Rangi continues,

Today, attitudes and the treatment of women in the gang space have changed; wives and partners are inclusive in the daily involvement of their partners' chapter. Members organise alcohol and drug-free sports events and celebrations with their families and fellow patch members. The whanaungatanga and comradery among members and their families are the highlights of the occasion. Mongrel Mob wāhine maintain and continue to strengthen their roles as wāhine within their respective chapters and communities. In my view, Mongrel Mob women don't seek acknowledgment or praise because they know their roles are as important as that of their partners (Bradley, 2024, p. 176).

As women gain more visibility and voice within gangs, power dynamics begin to shift. Desmond (2009) highlights the pivotal role of the Aroha Trust in challenging the status quo and demanding respect for women. Their advocacy efforts led to concrete changes within gangs, such as Black Power formally banning practices that perpetuated violence against women (Desmond, 2009; Davis, 2022). Through initiatives like Waka Moemoeā (Roguski, 2019), emphasising whānau development and the recognition of women's contributions, there has been a notable transition towards gender equality. Women are now viewed as significant voices within the community, actively participating in decision-making processes and sharing domestic responsibilities with their male counterparts. This shift has empowered women within gang communities and fostered supportive relationships among female members, reflecting broader societal changes and highlighting the potential for positive transformation within traditionally male-dominated spaces (Roguski, 2019).

The contributions by Dennehy & Newbolt (2001) and Desmond (2009) provide a nuanced understanding of the lives of women in gangs in Aotearoa, shedding light on the often-overlooked female experiences within gang culture and outlining pathways towards rehabilitation and empowerment. However, these notable studies were conducted 20-25 years ago, highlighting the need for contemporary research to address the current social and

cultural landscape. This current research will explore women's experiences in Wāhine Toa, allowing them to share their perspectives within today's context. By examining their daily lives, experiences of stigma, challenges, and empowerment, as well as their future aspirations and manifestations of mana, this research aims to provide a current and relevant perspective on the lives of these women.

Gangs as Social Movements

A social movement is a collective effort aimed at societal change, driven by shared grievances or a desire to challenge existing structures (Tarrow, 2011). Social movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement and feminism, work towards social, political, or cultural change through collective action and protest (Della Porta & Diani, 2015). Similarly, gangs can be understood as social movements. Although often viewed through a criminological lens, gangs share key characteristics with social movements, including a collective identity, group culture, and a desire to challenge social conditions (Vigil, 2002). Like other movements, gangs emerge from systemic inequality, marginalisation, and the need for solidarity. For instance, the Mongrel Mob's formation in Aotearoa responded to poverty, discrimination, and cultural dislocation (Andrae et al., 2017). While gangs may not have explicit reformist goals like traditional social movements, they seek to assert control over their environments and identities, reframing them as complex entities striving for change (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Narratives and Discourses About Gangs

Narratives Surrounding Gangs

Dominant narratives in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and much of the Western world primarily portray gangs as criminal and disruptive forces, often emphasizing their association with violence, drug abuse, and social disorder (Glasgow-Palmer, 2020; Roguski, 2019). Shaped heavily by media sensationalism and political rhetoric, these portrayals contribute to

widespread public fear and stigmatisation, painting a one-dimensional picture of gangs as inherently harmful (Hagedorn, 2008; Fraser, 2015). Internationally, particularly in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, gangs are frequently represented as organised crime networks or racialised groups that exacerbate societal problems (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

In Aotearoa, these dominant narratives are reinforced through a focus on high-profile incidents of gang-related crime and conflict, with gangs such as the Mongrel Mob and Black Power often positioned as symbols of societal dysfunction (Bradley, 2020; Gilbert, 2013). Political discourse and punitive “tough-on-crime” policies have amplified these portrayals, sidelining opportunities to explore rehabilitative approaches or the underlying causes of gang formation (Dennehy, 2006; Pratt, 2007). As a result, this framing perpetuates stigma and marginalises gang whānau while failing to account for the structural inequities that shape their lived realities (Brittain & Tuffin, 2017). This narrative often overlooks the role gangs have played in providing identity, protection, and belonging for those alienated from mainstream society. For many, particularly Māori, gangs emerged as a response to systemic injustices, such as intergenerational trauma, state care abuse, and socioeconomic marginalisation (Glasgow-Palmer, 2020; Wiltshire, 2020). Despite these complexities, the public discourse tends to prioritise a criminogenic view, focusing on deviance rather than understanding gangs as part of a broader sociocultural response to exclusion and disconnection (Gilbert, 2013; Roguski, 2019).

The Criminogenic Approach

The criminogenic approach aligns closely with dominant deficit-based narratives, framing gangs as drivers of crime and antisocial behaviour. Rooted in traditional criminological theories, this perspective views gang membership as inherently linked to criminal activity, often emphasizing individual pathology or deviance (Klein & Maxson,

2006). It adopts strategies of suppression, control, and enforcement under the 'law and order' framework, positioning gangs as a deviant 'other' that must be separated from mainstream society (Roguski, 2019; Roguski & McBride-Henry, 2020). This combative stance often focuses on punitive measures and law enforcement tactics as primary tools to address gang-related issues, promoting control and eradication rather than rehabilitation (Roguski, 2019).

In Aotearoa, this criminogenic discourse remains deeply embedded, with political rhetoric reinforcing the portrayal of gangs as inherently criminal entities. National Party leader Christopher Luxon exemplifies this rhetoric, declaring that "Gangs are not nice people... They peddle in misery... We are going to be tough on gangs" (Desmarais, 2023, para. 8 & 9). Such statements leverage deficit-based narratives to consolidate a tough-on-crime agenda, emphasizing state authority and societal discipline, while framing gangs as a pervasive threat to public order. The Gangs Act 2024 came into effect on November 21. It introduced a law-and-order approach by banning gang patches, prohibiting public meetings, and enhancing police powers to issue dispersal notices and conduct searches (Gangs Act, 2024). It further allows authorities to enforce non-consorting orders, limiting gang members' association with specified individuals for up to three years (New Zealand Police, 2024).

These measures highlight the government's commitment to a punitive stance aimed at reducing public fear and perceived intimidation associated with gangs, exemplified by the first arrest made shortly after the Act's implementation for displaying gang insignia (Kim, 2024). However, critics argue that such policies oversimplify the complex socio-cultural realities of gang membership, potentially marginalising gang-affiliated individuals while infringing on civil liberties (Gilbert, 2013; Roguski, 2019). Moreover, the amplification of criminogenic narratives by media sensationalism fuels public fear, contributing to moral panics that justify extreme measures (Gilbert, 2013). While these measures may address immediate concerns regarding crime, they fail to account for systemic factors such as

socioeconomic inequities, intergenerational trauma, cultural dislocation, and experiences of abuse within state care (McIntosh & Workman, 2017).

To move beyond the limitations of the criminogenic discourse, it is essential to adopt more holistic frameworks that situate gang involvement within broader socio-historical, cultural, and systemic contexts. Approaches such as community psychology, social identity theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offer alternative perspectives that help unravel the complexities of gang dynamics in Aotearoa New Zealand. These frameworks not only challenge the deficit-based narratives but also emphasize the need for policies that address the root causes of gang formation, supporting rehabilitation and social reintegration rather than focusing solely on suppression and control.

Community Psychology

Community psychology emerged in the 1960s as a field dedicated to understanding individuals within the context of their communities, emphasizing social change through collective action and empowerment (Riemer et al., 2020). This perspective is grounded in the belief that to foster well-being, it is essential to address individual needs and broader social systems and structures that shape people's lives. By focusing on resilience, strength, self-determination, and empowerment, community psychology aims to promote transformative social change through collaboration with key stakeholders and developing competencies within communities.

In the context of gang involvement, community psychology challenges traditional criminogenic perspectives by viewing gangs not merely as criminal organisations but as complex communities with their own norms, values, and practices. This approach recognises that gangs are shaped by socio-historical contexts, economic hardship, and systemic racism, and moves beyond simplistic labels of criminality to focus on collective well-being (Tamatea, 2018; Gerrard et al., 2023). Rather than solely seeking to suppress gangs, community

psychology emphasizes promoting the well-being of individuals within these communities (Riemer et al. 2020), ultimately reducing the allure and impact of gang influence.

At the heart of community psychology is recognising the centrality of relationships and the importance of working with, not just studying, individuals. Gangs are not monolithic; they consist of individuals with lived experiences who are uniquely qualified to guide conversations about reducing crime, minimising harm, and implementing protective and preventative measures within their communities (Gerrard et al., 2023). A community psychology approach promotes respect for human dignity, reciprocity, collaboration, and health promotion (Riemer et al., 2020), which are key to creating environments that foster resilience and support communities in building pathways that align with their strengths and aspirations.

This holistic, strengths-based approach resonates with the perspective of the Māori Party, which argues that punitive measures fail to address the root causes of gang involvement. Te Pati Māori's police spokesperson, Tākuta Ferris, emphasizes that,

Being tough on gangs is just addressing the system... but they've got to be honest about the root cause of gangs. It's well-known that gangs are a product of the state from the 70s and 80s. Until a government owns up to that responsibility and starts investing back into those communities... you're never going to fix the problem (RNZ, 2024, para. 6 & 7).

This view aligns with community psychology's emphasis on understanding the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts that contribute to gang membership, including poverty, lack of education, and systemic inequality. Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, co-leader of Te Pati Māori, further critiques the current approach, stating,

Gangs exist because of the failed education system, low income, poor housing, cultural profiling, urbanization, and a failing health system. [...] If we are serious about curbing gang violence in this country, then we need to get serious about looking at the causes, not

the symptoms. As long as we continue to talk about gangs without ever talking to them, we are only going to further entrench trauma in their whānau and their community (Ngarewa-Packer, 2023, para. 4 & 8).

This highlights the importance of engaging with those directly affected by gang involvement, a key tenet of community psychology, which stresses collaboration and the need for a community-driven approach to social change.

By shifting from a deficit-based to a strengths-based approach, community psychology encourages understanding gang dynamics not just as individual failings but as responses to broader social injustices. It calls for understanding power dynamics and the structural forces that contribute to gang formation, advocating for upstream preventative measures that focus on social equity and community support (Riemer et al., 2020). In doing so, community psychology offers a valuable alternative to the punitive, law-and-order approaches that dominate the current discourse. It promotes long-term social change by addressing the root causes of gang involvement rather than simply managing its symptoms.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), asserts that individuals define themselves based on their belonging groups, which can foster in-group loyalty and out-group prejudice. For gang members, social identity theory discusses how membership in a gang provides a sense of identity, belonging, and status, especially for those marginalised by mainstream society (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). Gang affiliation serves as a powerful source of self-esteem, as members derive pride from their collective identity, which can be more affirming than what is offered by conventional social structures. The gang becomes a place of shared values and norms, creating strong group cohesion and loyalty. This sense of belonging often leads to an "us versus them" mentality, where gang members view outsiders, including law enforcement and rival gangs, with suspicion or hostility (Tajfel, 1979; Goldman et al.,

2014). Social identity theory also explains how gangs perpetuate behaviours to protect and enhance their group's status, as gang members feel compelled to defend the in-group's image. For individuals facing social exclusion or economic hardship, gangs offer protection and an opportunity to gain respect and recognition that might otherwise be inaccessible (Goldman et al., 2014).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) posits that human development is shaped by interactions across various environmental layers, from the immediate settings (microsystem) to broader societal influences (macrosystem). Applying this theory to gang involvement highlights the complex, multi-layered factors that contribute to gang membership, suggesting that societal and environmental conditions play a key role in shaping individual behavior. Gang involvement is not solely an individual choice but a product of systemic factors such as poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion (Riemer et al., 2020). Through an ecological lens, gang involvement is seen as a societal issue, requiring a comprehensive approach that involves stakeholders from all levels of society. This includes families, communities, schools, and policymakers working together to address individuals' immediate needs and the broader structural inequalities that drive gang membership (Riemer et al., 2020). Focusing only on individual behaviour and punitive measures ignores the social determinants that contribute to gang involvement, such as inadequate education, limited employment opportunities, and exposure to violence.

Moreover, this approach encourages shifting the narrative around gang members from viewing them as deserving of punishment to understanding their circumstances and challenges. Empathy, compassion, and a focus on social inclusion are key components of this ecological approach, which aims to reduce stigmatisation and foster societal change (Riemer et al., 2020). By addressing gang involvement at all levels—from personal to structural—

ecological systems theory advocates for long-term, transformative change that supports both individuals and communities, promoting well-being and reducing the factors that lead to gang affiliation.

Theories such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and social identity theory provide valuable frameworks for understanding the interconnectedness of individual, social, and structural factors that influence gang communities. These perspectives emphasize the dynamic interplay between personal experiences, group identity, and societal structures, offering insight into the complexities of gang involvement, identity formation, and social stigma. However, while these theories provide important tools for analysis, they do not fully account for the culturally specific knowledge systems that shape the lives of Māori wāhine.

To address this gap, it is essential to consider the concept of mana, a foundational element of Māori worldview encompassing notions of authority, autonomy, and empowerment. Mana, particularly as expressed through mana motuhake (self-determination), mana whānau (collective strength and authority), and mana wāhine (female leadership and empowerment), offers a culturally grounded framework for understanding the lived experiences of the wāhine and their efforts to reclaim and assert their identities within a gang context. This exploration of mana provides a bridge between universal theoretical frameworks and Indigenous knowledge systems, situating the wāhine experiences within both global and culturally specific contexts. The following section explores these expressions of mana, linking them to Māori cosmology, cultural practices, and their significance for this research.

Mana Motuhake

Mana Motuhake is a foundational Māori concept symbolizing self-determination, autonomy, and sovereignty. "Mana" denotes power and prestige, while "motuhake" conveys independence and distinctiveness (Durie, 1998). In Māori cosmology, mana motuhake is

reflected through creation narratives and whakapapa, which highlight the interconnected relationships and distinct roles of deities and ancestors, emphasizing balance, autonomy, and interdependence within the natural order (Marsden & Royal, 2003). Traditional Māori society embodied this through the self-governance of iwi and hapū, enabling diverse cultural practices to thrive under Rangatira and tikanga (Walker, 2004).

Mana Motuhake remains vital to Māori struggles for political autonomy, cultural preservation, and identity reclamation (Mutu, 2021). As Walker et al. (2023) articulate,

In the modern context, recognising mana and mana motuhake involves acknowledging and respecting the autonomy and self-determination of Māori people. It involves creating spaces and opportunities for Māori people to express their cultural identity and exercise their sovereignty. It involves challenging the structures and systems undermining Māori sovereignty and working towards a more equitable and inclusive society (p. 3).

For Māori women in gangs, mana motuhake serves as a framework for reclaiming agency, challenging stereotypes, and asserting cultural identities within complex social dynamics (Gerrard et al., 2023). It affirms collective sovereignty and personal empowerment, supporting Māori women's roles in their communities while resisting societal stigma.

Mana Whānau

Mana Whānau represents the power and authority vested in the family unit, encompassing values such as trust, support, loyalty, respect, and care (Sullivan, 2023; Durie, 2001). While "whānau" refers to extended family, mana whānau extends beyond familial relationships to include broader human connections, fostering community, well-being, and a sense of belonging in today's fast-paced world (Sullivan, 2023; Pihama, 2001, as cited in Simmonds, 2011). In Māori cosmology, mana whānau is rooted in whakapapa, which connects individuals to gods, ancestors, and the collective identity of whānau. This grounding fosters a sense of belonging and purpose (Marsden & Royal, 2003). Traditionally, whānau

were central to Māori society, responsible for nurturing members, transmitting knowledge, and ensuring collective well-being.

In contemporary Māori society, mana whānau remains vital for cultural preservation and resilience, particularly amidst colonisation and ongoing social challenges (Durie, 2001). For Māori women in gangs, Mana whānau holds specific significance. Gangs often serve as surrogate families, offering belonging, identity, and protection to those disconnected from traditional whānau structures. Within this context, mana whānau adapts to foster resilience, cultural identity, and collective strength (Roguski, 2019; Gerrard et al., 2023).

Mana Wāhine

Mana Wāhine represents the authority and prestige of Māori women, where ‘mana’ signifies authority or prestige, and ‘wāhine’ refers to women (Rarere, 2022, p. 4). While female authority has always existed in te ao Māori, it gained theoretical recognition in the 1980s and 90s, largely through the discourse of Māori women (Te Awekotuku, 1991; Pihama et al., 2019a, 2019b; L.T. Smith, 1992, as cited in Rarere, 2022). This development aimed to address the effects of colonisation on Māori women's status and reaffirm Māori identity (Pihama, 2001, as cited in Rarere, 2022). As a framework, Mana Wāhine centers Māori knowledge systems, methodologies, and epistemologies specific to Māori women, acknowledging their unique ways of knowing and knowledge creation (Jahnke, 1997; Pihama, 2001; Simmonds, 2011, 2014; L. T. Smith, 1992, as cited in Rarere, 2022). In traditional Māori society, mana wāhine was deeply embedded in cultural and cosmological frameworks, reflecting women's strength, leadership, and authority. As Duff (2021) articulates, Māori culture traditionally esteemed women as bearers of mana wāhine, acknowledging their pivotal societal roles and authority. This reverence was both cultural and cosmological, with goddesses like Hine-tūtama and Mahuika embodying power and creation, further underscoring the esteemed status of women (Duff, 2021; Stewart, 2021). The

presence of 13 female signatories at the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 further demonstrated women's leadership. However, colonisation began the erosion of mana wāhine, as patriarchal norms marginalised women's roles, confining them to limited societal functions (Duff, 2021; Mikaere, 2022). Colonisation imposed Western patriarchal structures that denied Māori women their rightful authority. Māori women were excluded from decision-making processes and relegated to ceremonial roles, undermining their societal contributions (Duff, 2021; Mikaere, 2022). The denial of their agency and marginalisation reflected a broader effort to disrupt the traditional gender balance that existed in Māori cosmology, where men and women were seen as complementary, rather than hierarchical (Stewart, 2021).

Despite colonisation's centuries-long impacts, mana wāhine resilience continues in contemporary Māori society. Efforts to reclaim cultural heritage and challenge patriarchal norms have brought increased recognition of Māori women's contributions. Wāhine Toa exemplifies this resilience. For instance, Paula Ormsby and Cherie Kururangi made history in 2020 by lodging the first-ever Treaty of Waitangi claim by an all-female gang chapter, addressing the Crown's failure to support Māori women and children involved in gangs (Harris, 2020). This claim highlights the intergenerational trauma experienced by these women and advocates for increased recognition, understanding, and intervention (Harris, 2020). Through these efforts, mana wāhine continues to embody the fight for recognition, empowerment, and justice for Māori women in Aotearoa.

Formation of the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa

The Waikato Mongrel Mob Kingdom made history by establishing the first female-only chapter of the Mongrel Mob in late 2019. President Sonny Fatupaito announced the creation of this all-female chapter (Gerrard et al., 2023), based in the Central North Island region of Aotearoa, with plans to be operational by 2020 (Harris, 2019). Rangatira Paula Ormsby emphasized that Wāhine Toa chapter rejects the label of a gang (Whakaata Māori,

2021). Instead, it seeks to redefine the role of women within the gang environment, focusing on empowerment, leadership, and creating a supportive space for wāhine in an often male-dominated context.

Empowerment and Redefining Gender Roles

The establishment of Wāhine Toa represents a significant shift in addressing women's lack of representation and recognition within gang structures. Traditionally, women in gangs have been marginalised, occupying lower ranks despite contributing significantly to the group's activities (Davis, 2022). The formation of Wāhine Toa challenges these traditional gender hierarchies by providing a platform for wāhine to lead, actively participate, and have their voices heard in shaping the future of their community. By rejecting the typical gang label, Wāhine Toa emphasizes the importance of empowerment, asserting that the women involved are not merely participants in the gang culture but are leaders and active agents of change (Bradley, 2024). Paula Ormsby's insights into the hierarchy of women in gangs reveal the marginalisation and discrimination that often characterises their roles (P. Ormsby, personal communication, June 13, 2024). Despite their essential contributions, Māori women in gangs face multiple layers of oppression, including gender discrimination and racial stigmatisation, resulting in disproportionate levels of incarceration and gang affiliation (Bradley, 2024). The creation of Wāhine Toa allows these women to reclaim their mana, asserting mana motuhake and mana wāhine, thus reshaping the power dynamics within their community and providing a foundation for women to assert themselves in leadership roles.

Redefining Identity and Representation

The formation of Wāhine Toa chapter reflects a broader societal shift towards inclusivity and empowerment, particularly in areas where women's voices have historically been silenced. Wāhine Toa challenges the hyper-masculine and patriarchal norms that dominate gang culture (Gerrard et al., 2023), where women's roles have often been relegated

to subservient positions. By advocating for the visibility and recognition of wāhine within the gang space, Wāhine Toa seeks to dismantle these gendered expectations and create a more inclusive environment. Wāhine Toa aligns with the broader efforts to address gender inequality and promote diversity and inclusion, not just in gangs but across all sectors of society (Bradley, 2024).

In asserting their mana and leadership within the Mongrel Mob, Wāhine Toa is redefining what it means to be a wāhine in the gang context, reclaiming agency, voice, and representation. The chapter's formation is a powerful example of how women can challenge systemic oppression, reshape their identities, and assert their role in shaping the future of their communities.

Purpose of the Research and Research Question

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of wāhine in Wāhine Toa, focusing on how these experiences challenge and inform dominant narratives about women in gangs. It aims to provide insight into how wāhine navigate their identities and roles within Wāhine Toa while examining perceptions of stigma, their challenges, their sense of empowerment, and their future aspirations. Additionally, the study will investigate how the concepts of mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau manifest in their lives, contributing to their sense of empowerment and self-determination.

The research question guiding this study is:

How do the lived experiences of women in the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa Movement inform dominant narratives about women in gangs?

By centering the voices of wāhine in this unique context, this research aims to break down stereotypes, challenge stigmatisation, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of women's roles in gangs.

The Current Study

The research being undertaken seeks to expand on the seminal work by Pip Desmond, whose work *Trust* stands out as an account of women in Aotearoa who were involved in the gang scene in Wellington during the 1970s but who fought for their rights in that milieu (Desmond, 2009). Other notable research within this area is from Glennis Dennehy; as part of her master's research, she also co-wrote the book, "Girls in the Gang," which depicts women's experiences within the gang scene in the early 2000s. As not much has been done since these prominent pieces of work, this research seeks to understand women's experiences within the Mongrel Mob, specifically their experiences in the first female-only chapter in Aotearoa, the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter provides an in-depth overview of the methodological framework employed to explore the experiences of wāhine within Wāhine Toa. The research is grounded in a qualitative design, aligned with community psychology principles, and draws on participatory action research to guide its collaborative and reflective processes (Eruera, 2010). Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary methodology, providing a detailed exploration of the lived experiences of the wāhine. Photovoice complements this approach, adding depth and breadth to the findings by enabling the wāhine to capture and discuss their experiences through visual means (Wang & Burris, 1997). Together, these methods create a rich, layered understanding of the wāhine perspectives, fostering empowerment and meaningful engagement.

Following the discussion of the research design, the chapter details the sampling method and recruitment process used to engage the wāhine in the study. It describes how the semi-structured and photovoice interviews were conducted, including the procedures for obtaining consent and ensuring confidentiality. Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's approach (2006), is outlined as the method for analysing the data, focusing on how themes were identified and refined in collaboration with the wāhine.

Ethical considerations are thoroughly addressed, covering informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation (Baum et al., 2006). The chapter concludes by summarising how the chosen methodologies and ethical practices contribute to the study's aim of generating meaningful, culturally grounded insights and ensuring the research process aligns with the study's goals and values.

Research Questions and Aim

This research is distinctive in its focus on the first female-only movement of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom, providing a rare and in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of

the wāhine within this unique context. The overarching research question guiding this study is: *'How do the lived experiences of women in the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa Movement inform dominant narratives about women in gangs?'*

To address this overarching question, the study explores several specific research questions:

1. What does daily life look like for the wāhine?
2. In what ways do the wāhine perceive stigma, and what impacts has it had on them?
3. What has changed for the wāhine since their involvement within Wāhine Toa?
 - a) What is empowering about being in Wāhine Toa?
 - b) What are the challenges of being in Wāhine Toa?
4. How do the principles of mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau manifest within Wāhine Toa?
5. What future directions do the wāhine envision for Wāhine Toa?

Through these research questions, the study seeks to unveil the narratives of the wāhine, aiming to both deepen understanding and spark transformation. By contributing to a broader understanding of how their stories can challenge and reshape dominant narratives about women in gangs, this research aims to break down stigma and stereotypes, offering valuable insights into a world that remains largely inaccessible to many. It aims to highlight the complexity and resilience of these wāhine, paving the way for a more inclusive and accurate narrative.

Researcher Positionality

As a Pākehā woman in her early 40s conducting research within a community where all the wāhine are Māori, I occupy a complex position of both insider and outsider. While I am not affiliated with any gang and thus approach this research as an outsider in that respect, my identity as a woman allows me to share a gendered perspective with the participants, positioning me as an insider conducting research solely with women. Additionally, the

Wāhine Toa community is often considered hard to reach (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Flanagan & Hancock, 2010; Raifman et al, 2022), requiring a research approach that prioritises relational engagement, trust, and cultural responsiveness. With my background as a practitioner in community psychology, I approach this research with a deep commitment to social justice. This commitment is a guiding principle and a driving force, aiming to amplify marginalised communities' voices and honour and value their contributions. This lens informs my methodological choices and my interactions with the wāhine, guiding me to create a research environment that is collaborative, respectful, and culturally appropriate.

Building whakawhanaungatanga, or the process of establishing relationships and trust (Bishop, 1996), is particularly important in this context, as the Wāhine Toa community is often hard to reach (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Flanagan & Hancock, 2010; Raifman et al, 2022). Developing strong, trust-based relationships is essential for meaningful engagement and ensuring that the research is conducted in a manner that respects the experiences and perspectives of each wāhine. I recognise the inherent power dynamics in the researcher-participant relationship and acknowledge my power and privilege in this context. To mitigate these dynamics, I strive to engage in reflexive practice, continuously reflecting on my positionality and its impact on the research process and outcomes. Corlett and Mavin (2018) describe reflexivity as always self-monitoring and responding to our thoughts, feelings, and actions as we engage in research projects. This involves being mindful of my biases and assumptions and how my background and experiences shape my interpretations and interactions. Throughout this process, I adopted a participatory action approach, ensuring that the voices of the wāhine were involved throughout the research process. Their perspectives were respected and valued during data collection, and they were kept informed and updated at each step of the data analysis process, reinforcing their agency and ensuring transparency in the research.

I am committed to taking a culturally sensitive approach, informed by Māori values and principles, to ensure that the research process is respectful and aligned with the community's cultural norms. This approach is essential for fostering respectful and ethical research practices when engaging with Indigenous communities (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). It includes seeking guidance and feedback from my community advisor throughout the research process to ensure cultural appropriateness and sensitivity (Bishop, 1996). By acknowledging and addressing these aspects of positionality and reflexivity, and by prioritising the building of whakawhanaungatanga, I aim to conduct research that not only contributes to academic knowledge but also supports and empowers the wāhine within Wāhine Toa.

Research Design

Qualitative Design

In this research, an exploratory, interpretive philosophy is adopted, grounded in a qualitative approach that aligns with the study's objectives of understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of the wāhine within Wāhine Toa. Qualitative research aims to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of real-world issues by gathering participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Unlike quantitative research, it does not involve manipulating or quantifying predefined variables, and the generation and analysis of data are not reducible to numbers (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015). Instead, it addresses the "how" and "why" questions that explore the complexities of human interactions and social phenomena (Fossey et al., 2002). The emphasis on qualitative research is essential when working with hard-to-reach communities, where capturing the richness of their stories and perspectives is more valuable than attempting to quantify their experiences. This approach is valuable in research grounded in Māori principles, where relationality, whanaungatanga, and respect for participants' mana are central (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). By

centering the voices of the wāhine from Wāhine Toa, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced and deeply personal narratives often overlooked or misunderstood in mainstream discourse.

Community Psychology Approach

The research is grounded in the values and principles of community psychology, which emphasize social justice, empowerment, and the importance of context in understanding individuals' experiences (Riemer et al., 2020). Community psychology advocates for approaches that study and actively contribute to the well-being of communities, particularly those that are marginalised or disenfranchised.

Community psychology explores how individuals are influenced by their social, cultural, economic, geographical, and political contexts. It emphasizes the role of external systems in shaping behaviour and well-being, focusing on promoting social justice and empowering communities. By adopting a holistic approach to addressing issues, community psychology seeks to enhance individuals' and groups' quality of life (Riemer et al., 2020).

Honouring Kaupapa Māori Research Principles

Central to this research was an alignment with Kaupapa Māori research principles, ensuring the research was conducted in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner. While I am not Māori, the wāhine involved in the research are, and it was crucial for me to honour their Māori tikanga and approaches to research. Ongoing collaboration with Paula, my community advisor, ensured the research aligned with these principles. Additionally, upholding the values of Te Tiriti o Waitangi was integral, ensuring the research reflected partnership, protection, and participation throughout the process.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research emerged from the social science research paradigm as a response to the limitations of traditional, positivist methodologies (Eruera, 2010). It was designed to address complex human and social issues better, making it especially useful

when engaging with marginalised or hard-to-reach communities. Participatory action research is built around three core principles: participation, action, and knowledge development, enabling it to tackle issues of social justice, inclusion, and empowerment for communities often overlooked or disadvantaged (Eruera, 2010).

What sets participatory action research apart from other methodologies is its recognition of community members' expertise in the research process. Their lived experiences and perspectives guide the research, ensuring the outcomes are relevant and meaningful (Eruera, 2010). At its heart, participatory action research is a collective, self-reflective inquiry that produces knowledge and creates social change, empowering communities to take control of the issues that affect them (Baum et al., 2006). This empowerment is critical, as it allows participants to influence both the research process and their own lives. In this research with the wāhine, participatory action research is essential in building trust and ensuring that the wāhine direct the research according to their needs and priorities. Rather than positioning myself as the expert, I act as a facilitator, helping to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives. This approach ensures that the knowledge produced is grounded in their lived realities and contributes to a more authentic and socially just outcome (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

Photovoice

Photovoice, as a complementary participatory action research tool, plays a significant role in enhancing this research. Photovoice enables the wāhine to capture and share their own images, using photography to document and reflect upon their lives. Photographs are a powerful tool in research, offering unique opportunities to uncover hidden or overlooked knowledge (Smith et al., 2024). They allow us to see the world from new perspectives, often leaving lasting impressions. By conveying information in a holistic manner, photographs evoke stories, raise questions, and foster knowledge creation. This approach resonates with

the traditional Māori practice of storytelling, which has been a way to sustain and protect knowledge within Indigenous communities (Mark & Boulton, 2017).

In this research, Photovoice serves as a secondary methodology through which the wāhine can express their perspectives on their terms, contributing to co-creating knowledge that respects and honours their mana. This method is powerful because it allows the wāhine to communicate their experiences visually, which can be especially effective in conveying complex or deeply personal aspects of their lives that might be difficult to articulate through words alone (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The data collected through Photovoice is presented as case narratives accompanying the thematic analysis. These case narratives are drawn from the photographs and the reflections shared by three wāhine, offering a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. Each narrative provides insight into how the wāhine navigate trauma, resilience, empowerment, and healing. By incorporating these narratives into the thematic analysis, the research enriches the findings, ensuring that the wāhine voices remain central and their experiences are fully represented. The case narratives preserve the essence of the wāhine stories, grounding the analysis in their personal reflections and showcasing the transformative impact of their journey. This approach honours the principles of participatory action research, allowing the wāhine to actively contribute to the co-creation of knowledge while also staying true to the cultural values embedded in the photovoice methodology.

Thematic Analysis

The data analysis for this research employs thematic analysis, a qualitative method focused on identifying patterns, meanings, and themes within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly suited to this study's objective of understanding the experiences and perspectives of the wāhine within Wāhine Toa, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of both language-based and visual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mooney et al.,

2023). This research applies thematic analysis to the verbal narratives shared by the wāhine, with the Photovoice images supporting and adding depth to the analysis. Photovoice is typically analysed using methods like thematic analysis, which identify themes across visual and verbal data, or content analysis, which focuses on coding visual content. In this study, the images provided additional layers of meaning, capturing deeply personal aspects of the wāhine lives that might be difficult to express through words alone. Integrating the visual data into the thematic analysis process ensured a holistic understanding of their experiences, enriching the thematic insights (Wang & Burris, 1997; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This study takes an inductive approach to thematic analysis, utilising a bottom-up, data-led methodology where codes and themes emerge directly from both verbal and visual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach is advantageous because it ensures that the analysis remains closely tied to the participants' narratives and visual representations, allowing for a more authentic representation of their lived experiences. The inductive nature of this analysis also permits flexibility, as codes and themes can be adjusted, added, or removed as the researcher becomes more familiar with the data, ensuring that the final analysis is comprehensive and reflective of the wāhines voices (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A strength of thematic analysis is its relative simplicity, which facilitates the derivation of codes, themes, and conclusions. This makes the identification of patterns and themes more accessible, particularly in studies like this one, where the focus is on understanding the thoughts, beliefs, perspectives, and visual expressions of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Marks & Yardley, 2004). Thematic analysis' flexibility also contributes to its effectiveness, as it can be applied across various research topics and data types (Nowell et al., 2017). Whether the research is small or large, thematic analysis is helpful in identifying similarities and patterns across diverse data. It is a suitable choice for

this study, which centers on uncovering patterns of meaning expressed by the wāhine (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of thematic analysis. The same flexibility that makes it an attractive method can also lead to results that may be perceived as vague or imprecise (Nowell et al., 2017). The broad applicability of thematic analysis can sometimes result in patterns and themes that lack the sensitivity to capture the full complexity of the data, including potential contradictions within the text or images (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Additionally, the simplicity of thematic analysis, while a strength, can sometimes lead to a lack of nuance and rigor in the analysis, potentially resulting in inconsistent findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Despite these limitations, thematic analysis remains a robust and effective tool for this research. By focusing on the identification of patterns, codes, and key themes within the thoughts, beliefs, perspectives, and visual expressions of the wāhine, this method ensures that the analysis remains grounded in their lived experiences, contributing to the overall aim of amplifying their voices and honouring their cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Marks & Yardley, 2004).

Sampling Method

A non-random purposeful sampling technique (Kelly, 2010; Palinkas et al., 2013) was employed to specifically engage with the Wāhine Toa community, with wāhine selected solely from within this community. Women from other gang affiliations were excluded from the sample, as the research aimed to focus exclusively on the experiences of wāhine within the first female-only gang movement in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This approach ensures that the participants represent the community being studied and that their narratives are central to the research objectives (Kelly, 2010; Palinkas et al., 2013). Focusing solely on this

community ensures a unique sample. The existing professional relationship between Paula Ormsby and Associate Professor Armon Tamatea facilitated access to Wāhine Toa.

Recruitment

Engaging with hard-to-reach communities like Wāhine Toa requires a culturally sensitive and relationship-driven approach (Raifman et al., 2022). Recognising the importance of whakawhanaungatanga (Bishop, 1996), discussions with Paula Ormsby, Rangatira of Wāhine Toa, began at the outset of the research process. These early conversations laid the foundation for trust and mutual respect, essential elements within a context of Te Ao Māori, and this relationship was nurtured throughout the study.

In Te Ao Māori, whakawhanaungatanga is a fundamental principle emphasizing the importance of relationships and connectedness (Durie, 1998; Komene et al., 2024). I built trust within the community through this principle, facilitated by Paula's endorsement. Paula's role as community advisor was pivotal in bridging the gap between myself as the researcher and the wāhine, as her support reassured the community of my intentions and integrity. This relationship-building process underscores the necessity of respecting and integrating Māori cultural practices in research methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021; Walker et al., 2006). It ensures that the community feels valued and understood, fostering an environment where participants are more likely to engage meaningfully with the research. I prioritised whakawhanaungatanga to honour the community's perspectives and create a collaborative and respectful research partnership.

Recruitment Process

The recruitment process prioritised a culturally sensitive and relationship-driven approach to engage with wāhine from Wāhine Toa. My supervisor facilitated an initial connection with Paula, leveraging their existing professional relationship. This initial engagement laid the foundation for collaboration, trust, and mutual respect. Paula's input was

integral in shaping the research design to align with the community's needs and values, incorporating a community psychology approach that emphasized whanaungatanga and genuine community engagement (Bishop, 1996).

To establish connections with wāhine, I hosted a hui that served as an introduction to the research and an opportunity to build relational ties. Attendees participated both in person and online, reflecting the diverse geographical locations of the wāhine. The hui included key elements of tikanga Māori, such as opening and closing karakia, and I introduced myself through my pepeha. During this meeting, I explained the research purpose, outlined the voluntary and confidential nature of participation, and invited questions to ensure clarity and informed decision-making.

After the hui, recruitment materials, including a 'Recruitment Flyer' (see Appendix A) and a 'Research Information Sheet' (see Appendix B), were shared via a Facebook Messenger group created by Paula to facilitate ongoing communication. Wāhine expressed their interest in participating directly with me or through Paula. A snowball sampling technique was also used, where additional wāhine were invited to participate through referrals within the group. This iterative and flexible process ensured that recruitment accommodated the wāhine circumstances and needs while fostering ongoing dialogue to maintain trust and respect. (Raifman et al., 2022). This streamlined process enabled the wāhine to feel empowered in their decision to participate, while maintaining the relational focus central to the research approach.

Participants

Six wāhine participated in this research. Their ages ranged from their mid-20s to mid-50s, and they were located in various parts of the North Island, Aotearoa New Zealand, specifically within the Waikato, Bay of Plenty, and Hawkes Bay regions. All wāhine are members of Wāhine Toa, affiliated with the Mongrel Mob Kingdom. All wāhine are Māori,

with one also identifying as Aboriginal. They all brought a diverse range of life experiences to the research. Some have endured childhood and/or adult trauma, including physical and sexual abuse, while others have faced the challenges of state care, and the abuse associated with it. In contrast, some wāhine come from secure and stable upbringings. Currently, several wāhine are navigating the effects of their trauma and are in the healing phase of their journey.

Of the six wāhine who initially completed the semi-structured interview, one chose to withdraw from the research at this stage but later re-engaged through a collaborative and relational approach, opting to participate only in the Photovoice interview. Ultimately, three wāhine completed the Photovoice process, while the remaining three were unable to participate due to personal circumstances.

Data Collection

Selecting the appropriate data collection method is crucial when engaging with a hard-to-reach community. Semi-structured interviews were chosen over structured interviews, focus groups, or surveys due to their flexibility and potential for building rapport with the wāhine. Unlike structured interviews, which are often rigid and limit spontaneous responses, semi-structured interviews provide a more conversational approach, allowing the wāhine to share their experiences in their own words (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This method creates space for topics to emerge naturally, making it well-suited for exploring complex and sensitive issues. Although useful for generating discussion, focus groups can limit individual voices, particularly in settings where personal experiences or group dynamics might discourage open sharing (Smithson, 2000). While efficient for gathering quantitative data, surveys would not have allowed for the depth of insight necessary to understand the wāhines unique perspectives. Semi-structured interviews, by contrast, enable researchers to collect open-ended data, offering a deeper exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The strength of semi-structured interviews lies in the depth of information they provide and their flexibility. Researchers can adapt questions as needed and pursue new lines of inquiry that arise during the interview process, ensuring that the conversation remains relevant to both the research focus and the participant's lived experiences (Wilson, 2014). This adaptability makes semi-structured interviews particularly valuable when working with communities whose experiences may not conform to predefined categories, enabling a more authentic representation of their voices.

Interview Process

Interviews were facilitated with the support of Paula, who coordinated scheduling and communication with participants. Before each interview, consent was obtained either in writing or verbally (see Appendix C for the consent form). Six semi-structured interviews were conducted, guided by an interview schedule (Appendix D). After each interview, participants reviewed their transcript as part of the consent process. While one wāhine withdrew her initial interview data after reviewing the transcript, she later chose to participate in the Photovoice process.

The second round of interviews utilised the Photovoice methodology, which encouraged wāhine to explore their experiences through visual storytelling. Following the semi-structured interviews, wāhine undertook a photography mission, capturing images based on prompts designed to align with the research focus (Appendix E). Each wāhine selected 5-10 photographs for discussion in the second interview, which provided an opportunity for in-depth reflection on their images and experiences. The photovoice interviews incorporated the SHOWED technique, a widely used framework in Photovoice research that encourages participants to reflect deeply on the significance of their photographs (Wang & Burris, 1997). The guiding questions, adapted to suit this study, were shared with participants beforehand to facilitate thoughtful responses:

- **S:** What is Shown here?
- **H:** What is really Happening here?
- **O:** How does this relate to Our (your) lives?
- **W:** Why are things this way?
- **E:** How could this image Educate or Empower People?
- **D:** What could be Done about this?

These questions supported the wāhine in leading the discussion, allowing them to articulate both the personal and social meanings behind their photographs. This approach emphasized the wāhine agency and aligned with the collaborative and participatory goals of the research. To ensure accessibility and foster trust, the photovoice interviews were conducted in person. Each wāhine was thanked for their contributions with refreshments and kai during in-person interviews, a personalized card, and a \$30 Prezzy card, acknowledging the time, effort, and stories they shared.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis Process

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach was employed for the thematic analysis of my research. This approach is widely recognized for its flexibility and rigor in analyzing qualitative data. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for exploring the rich, narrative-driven data generated in participatory research.

Braun and Clarke's approach involves the following six steps:

1. *Familiarization with the Data:* The first step involved immersing myself in the interview transcripts, listening to the audio recordings, and reading through the written transcripts multiple times to become deeply familiar with the data. This stage was crucial in identifying initial ideas and potential patterns emerging from the wāhines narratives.

2. *Generating Initial Codes:* I systematically coded the data, paying attention to repeated words, phrases, or concepts that stood out in each wāhine korero. This step ensured I captured surface-level meanings and deeper, underlying themes related to the research questions.
3. *Searching for Themes:* After generating codes, I began grouping related codes, identifying broader patterns or themes that encapsulated key aspects of the wāhine experiences. This phase involved organising the data into meaningful clusters that reflected the participants' collective insights while acknowledging individual nuances.
4. *Reviewing Themes:* During this phase, I reviewed the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data and were distinct yet interconnected. I also checked if any themes needed refinement, combining or splitting them as necessary to ensure coherence.
5. *Defining and Naming Themes:* Once the themes were refined, I worked to define and label them clearly. Each theme was linked to the research focus, such as how the lived experiences of the wāhine informed narratives about women in gangs, stigma, empowerment, and cultural identity.
6. *Producing the Report:* In the final phase, I wove the themes into a coherent narrative, illustrating the key findings of my research. The themes offered insights into the lives of the wāhine, challenged dominant stereotypes, and reflected the complexities of their realities.

Collaboration with the wāhine was integral to the thematic analysis process. Once I had identified the preliminary themes, I shared these with the wāhine to ensure their voices were accurately represented. This collaboration reinforced the participatory approach of the research, allowing the wāhine to be active contributors in sharing their stories and shaping how those stories were understood and framed.

Ethics

Principles of Relational Accountability

This research was conducted with a strong commitment to ethical and culturally responsive engagement, aligning with Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles and values such as manaakitanga and kotahitanga. To guide the ethical engagement with wāhine in this study, the framework of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001) was applied. *Respect* was fundamental in ensuring that the wāhine voices and lived experiences remained central to the research process. *Relevance* ensured that the study was meaningful and beneficial to them, rather than being solely an academic exercise. *Reciprocity* recognised the knowledge-sharing process as mutual, valuing the insights offered by the wāhine while ensuring they received something in return - whether through personal reflection, advocacy, or the potential for future applications of the research. Finally, *Responsibility* underscored the ethical obligation to honour their contributions and ensure their narratives were represented with integrity and care.

This ethical approach informed all aspects of the research, including how relationships were built, how data was collected and shared, and how the wāhine well-being was prioritized throughout the process. The following sections outline specific ethical measures undertaken to ensure informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from the wāhine at the beginning of the initial interview. They agreed to follow the photovoice guidelines and were informed that participation was voluntary. They could withdraw at any point without obligation. The consent form included their preferences regarding the research process: they could request to view their interview transcript, consent to have their interview transcribed by a third-party service (rev.com), and receive a copy of the study's findings. They also had the option to

have a support person present during the interviews. The wāhine were encouraged to ask questions about the research at any time and were informed that they had a two-week window after receiving their transcript to withdraw from the study if they wished. Confidentiality of the interviews was assured, and they could decline to answer any questions, pause the interview, or request that the recording device be turned off. While they retained ownership of their interview contributions, they consented to their use for research purposes.

Confidentiality

Measures were taken to ensure participants' privacy and data protection. All identifying information was removed from the data, and the wāhine chose pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Data was securely stored on password-protected devices and encrypted databases. Access to the data was restricted to the primary researcher, and all physical documents were kept in locked cabinets. Additionally, the wāhine were informed about their rights to confidentiality and how their information would be used and protected throughout the research process.

Anonymity

Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms for all wāhine, ensuring that their real names and identifying details were not disclosed. To further protect their identities, any potentially identifiable information shared in the interviews was removed or generalized in the research findings. However, anonymity presented unique challenges in the Photovoice process. Some photographs captured by the wāhine included facial images or other identifiable features, which were difficult to avoid given the deeply personal nature of the project. To address this, any photographs included in the research that contained identifiable faces were edited to blur or obscure these elements, ensuring the wāhine privacy was upheld. This approach balanced the authenticity of the images with the need to maintain strict confidentiality, reflecting the ethical considerations inherent in Photovoice methodology.

Voluntary Participation

Voluntary participation was emphasized at the hui and the beginning of the two interview processes during the consent-giving phase, ensuring that all wāhine were fully informed of their right to withdraw without penalty.

Risk Management

Any potential risks to the wāhine, such as emotional distress from discussing sensitive topics, were mitigated by providing access to aftercare support from myself and Paula, as some of the wāhine did not trust external support services. After each interview, I checked in with the wāhine to ensure their well-being and address any concerns. Additionally, each interview concluded with a discussion about their experience, allowing them to provide feedback and express any emotional impact they may have felt. The wāhine were informed of their right to pause or withdraw from the research at any time during the interviews and up to two weeks after receiving their transcripts, without penalty, and interviews were conducted in a safe, comfortable environment to ensure their well-being.

Approval

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Health) at the University of Waikato (Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato) in May 2024, ethics number HREC(Health)2024#16.

Summary

The methodology employed in this research is deeply rooted in the principles of participatory action research and guided by a commitment to Mātauranga Māori and the values outlined in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. By utilizing participatory action research, photovoice, and thematic analysis, the research positioned the wāhine as active collaborators, ensuring their voices and lived experiences shaped the outcomes. The photovoice methodology, supported by the adapted SHOWED technique, enabled the wāhine to create powerful visual

narratives that authentically reflected their lives (Wang & Burris, 1997). This participatory method encouraged deeper reflection and empowered the wāhine to explore and share their perspectives. The thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, emphasized collaboration by involving the wāhine in reviewing and providing input on the identified themes. This process ensured their voices were represented in the analysis while maintaining flexibility and alignment with the relational and participatory nature of the research.

Overall, the methodological choices made for this study are consistent with its aim of amplifying the voices of Māori wāhine in Wāhine Toa and informing dominant narratives about women in gangs. These methods provided a robust data collection and analysis framework while upholding the values of trust, reciprocity, and collaboration central to working with marginalized communities. Through this approach, the research generates culturally grounded insights that contribute to both academic discourse and practical social change.

Chapter Four: Findings

This section presents the findings from the research, guided by the overarching research question: *How do the lived experiences of women in the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa inform dominant narratives about women in gangs?* This chapter explores how the wāhine experiences both inform and challenge dominant stereotypes about women in gangs. Through in-depth interviews and the use of photovoice, the wāhine shared their stories of navigating stigma, marginalisation, and trauma, while also expressing their resilience, empowerment, and aspirations for the future.

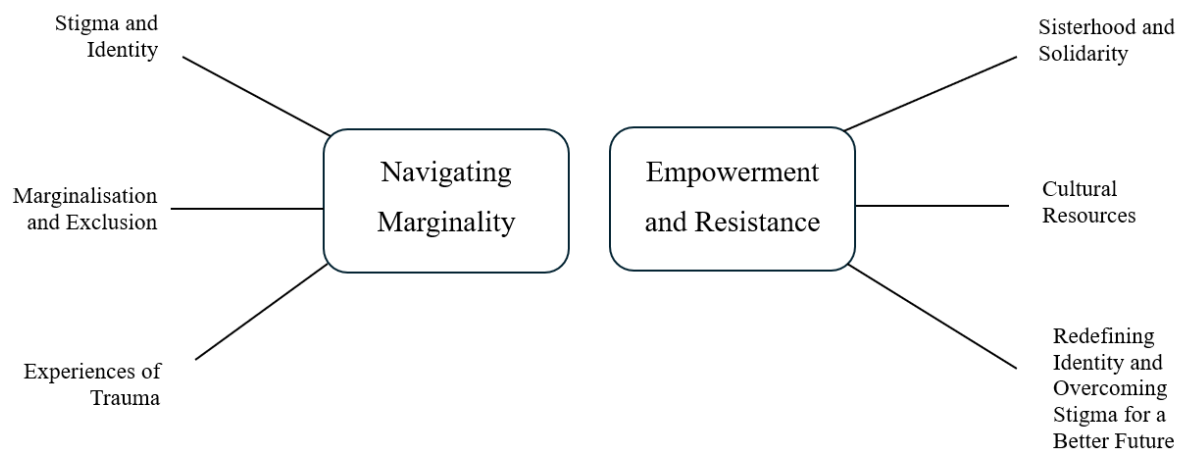
The integration of photovoice adds depth and breadth to the thematic analysis of the findings, providing a rich, visual dimension to the narratives. The images included in this chapter were selected based on their connection to the themes identified in the data. By situating the photovoice data at the end of each theme, the visual and narrative elements combine to enhance the analysis and provide a deeper understanding of the findings.²

To protect the identity of the wāhine who participated in this study, pseudonyms have been used throughout this chapter.

² Due to the limitations of thesis research, it was not possible to include all the images captured by the wāhine. These limitations are discussed further in the Discussion chapter's 'Limitations of the Research' section.

Figure 1:

Primary themes and their sub-themes



As shown in Figure 1, two primary themes emerged from the data, each offering valuable insights into the lived realities of the wāhine and their collective strategies for resistance and empowerment. The first theme, *Navigating Marginality*, captures the everyday challenges faced by these women, particularly concerning public judgment, systemic exclusion, and personal trauma. This theme is divided into three subthemes:

- *Stigma and Identity*: The wāhine experiences of being judged and labelled by society, leading to feelings of being treated as second-class citizens and excluded due to their perceived gang affiliations and Māori identity.
- *Systemic Marginalisation and Exclusion*: The barriers the wāhine face in accessing essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment, and the lack of support provided by institutions perpetuating their marginalisation.
- *Experiences of Trauma*: The individual and intergenerational trauma experienced by the wāhine, influenced by both personal histories and broader structural forces.

The second key theme, *Empowerment and Resistance*, shifts the focus to the wāhine efforts to reclaim their power and resist the labels and marginalisation imposed upon them. This theme reveals the strength and solidarity within the Wāhine Toa Movement, highlighting how

the wāhine draw on cultural resources and collective empowerment to create empowering narratives. The subthemes under this theme include:

- *Sisterhood and Solidarity*: Emphasizes the importance of belonging, mutual support, and community initiatives in empowering the wāhine. These connections foster resilience and create a foundation for growth within their community.
- *Cultural Resources*: The importance of accessing and practicing Māori traditions, alongside the concepts of mana wāhine, mana motuhake, and mana whānau, reinforcing their cultural identity and autonomy.
- *Redefining Identity and Overcoming Stigma for a Better Future*: The wāhine reclaim their power by redefining their identities, challenging societal stereotypes, and striving toward personal goals, aspirations for their tamariki, and the collective vision of Wāhine Toa.

These themes, together, provide a nuanced understanding of the wāhine lived experiences and their strategies for empowerment, contributing to broader conversations on Māori identity, gang culture, and the resilience of marginalized communities in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Theme 1: Navigating Marginality

The first primary theme, *Navigating Marginality*, provides a critical lens into the daily challenges these wāhine face. Through their korero, it became evident that their experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of public judgment, systemic barriers, and personal histories of trauma. These factors not only influence how they are perceived by society but also affect their access to essential services, their sense of identity, and their opportunities for healing and growth.

Three subthemes emerged within this theme: *Stigma and Identity*, *Systemic Marginalisation and Exclusion*, and *Experiences of Trauma*. Each subtheme illustrates different dimensions of their lived realities, providing insights into how external forces impact their lives and how they navigate these challenges.

Stigma and Identity

Stigma and identity capture the wāhine experiences of being judged and labelled by society based on their perceived gang affiliations and Māori identity. The public often reduces their identities to simplistic and negative stereotypes, contributing to feelings of being treated as “second-class citizens.”

The wāhine shared compelling accounts of the stigma they experience daily as Māori women and gang-affiliated members of the community. Ariel described the public perception of their gang whānau as rooted in profoundly negative stereotypes:

Their perception of us is that we're all criminals. We come from criminal backgrounds. We are not anything. We are the scourge of society. We make Māori look bad. We're below that level. We're at the bottom of the pile. The absolute bottom... We're at the low-ass end of it all. (Ariel)

Ariel's account shows how entrenched these perceptions are and reflects the weight that such societal stigmas carry in her life. Ariel also described an instance where stigma became particularly evident in a public setting. After Cyclone Gabrielle, she attended a community event but felt her community was unfairly targeted, with many people blaming gang members for looting. “People were making all sorts of statements,” she said. ““The gang members are nasty. The gang members are looting.’ No, they weren't. The people that were looting...were young teenagers, not gang members.” When asked why this situation was related to stigma, Ariel simply replied, “Because the whole community hates us. They hate us. They don't even know us.”

Belle echoed these sentiments, noting how she faces harsh public scrutiny for her appearance and identity as Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa. “I can't even go out for dinner with my family because of the way I look... I get called junkie cunt. So you get called all sorts of names. You just get side eyes as well.” This experience of stigma often isolates her from society, where even simple outings are reminders of the judgment she faces.

CJ emphasized her commitment to working with gang whānau despite facing constant criticism. She stated, “I make it very clear that these are the whānau that I work with, and they're my priority. Whether you accept it and/or acknowledge it, I'll not come away because of your prejudiced ideas against the gangs.” This statement reflects her resilience in navigating the frequent prejudices encountered in her professional environment.

Esmeralda spoke about the symbolic weight of wearing her Wāhine Toa jersey in public, a visual marker that amplifies the stigma she feels.

If we walked down the street together as a group...in a black jumper with a sunflower emblem, we'd be getting asked if we'd like a cup of tea and bikkies. If we turn up with our Wāhine Toa...top on, we'd get looked at like pieces of shit. (Esmeralda)

Esmeralda's words underline the intense judgment she endures, where even clothing can evoke assumptions about her character, status, and worth. This stigma, she shared, “ruins a lot” for gang-affiliated wāhine, reinforcing stereotypes of “thugs” and “nobodies” and unfairly characterizing their lives and parenting.

Mulan observed that much of the public still views gangs through a lens anchored in the past, ignoring the evolution and diversity of gang identities today. “It is not the same era as when it first began,” she pointed out. Reflecting on her experience while pursuing a diploma, she encountered presumptions that those associated with gangs lack ambition and are merely “dole-bludgers,” relying on government assistance without any aspirations. “People perceive us to have no goals, no aspirations... to sit here and just use taxpayer's

money when that's not the case at all." Mulan's words reflect her experience of being stereotyped in ways that disregard the realities and aspirations of wāhine in the Wāhine Toa movement.

Across their stories, the wāhine expressed an intense frustration with how society views them. Raya said, "We're just people. We're human. We're just like everyone else. Why do we get attacked more than other people?" The overarching message from all the wāhine was clear: "Come and get to know us, and don't judge a book by its cover." This theme will be explored further in Theme 2 as a source of empowerment, highlighting ways the wāhine combat these negative stereotypes.

Marginalisation and Exclusion

Marginalisation and exclusion reveal the wāhine experiences of systemic marginalisation and exclusion, particularly across education, healthcare, and justice sectors. A recurring theme identified in this research is the significant lack of support the wāhine experience across these sectors, which is closely linked to systemic marginalisation and exclusion, as reflected in their interviews.

In her second interview, Ariel shared insights from the Mongrel Mob Strategic Plan, highlighting systemic barriers across sectors—education, healthcare, and justice—that affect gang-affiliated whānau. In education, Ariel discussed how whānau often feel unwelcome in schools, with tamariki facing challenges re-entering the system once they leave. "Once students leave school, it's very hard to go back. They can't get back in," she noted. This gap led her to start a school at the pad, citing the Ministry of Education's truancy response as punitive rather than supportive. Ariel also emphasized the gap in practical support for rangatahi, as many parents struggle with the school curriculum, highlighting the intergenerational challenges of limited education. "One of my mums is dyslexic. She never

finished school herself. She left school at 11, bro, and now she's in shit because she can't do the schoolwork with her kids.”

The Strategic Plan also emphasizes low participation in early childhood education (ECE) among gang-affiliated whānau, who feel isolated and unsupported in community ECE settings. Ariel observed that this exclusion reinforces feelings of disenfranchisement, “They don’t want our kids to go to school, then they moan at us for it.”

The Strategic Plan further addresses healthcare gaps, highlighting a lack of support for gang-affiliated parents. For instance, it notes that only “one in 19 women” receive first-trimester pregnancy checks, with many parents missing essential child health information. Post-birth, those labeled ‘hard-to-reach’ often experience isolation from local agencies, deepening their disengagement. Ariel highlighted systemic failings in sexual education, which she believes inadequately serves vulnerable young people. Citing the Strategic Plan, she stated, “Sex education doesn’t seem to effectively shift attitudes and behaviour, especially in our most vulnerable young people.” Ariel agreed with the report’s conclusions, emphasizing the need for education that genuinely addresses consent, a critical gap highlighted by her own experiences, “We need to teach whānau about consent, and that’s in bold, consent,” she stressed. Her perspective underscores the need for accessible, respectful education that fosters safer, more supportive environments for gang whānau.

Barriers in accessing health services, particularly alcohol and drug rehabilitation, were also highlighted. The plan notes that existing programmes are “inaccessible, inappropriate, or ineffective,” which led the Mongrel Mob to establish its own rehabilitation services. In the justice sector, Ariel described ongoing challenges, including stigmatisation by police, which complicates access to services. Recalling her experience with the Dove course, she mentioned that police had warned facilitators about her gang affiliation before her arrival, reflecting systemic biases that contribute to further exclusion. Ariel’s insights into the

Strategic Plan underscore the extensive barriers and marginalisation faced by wāhine and gang-affiliated whānau across essential systems, illustrating the need for more inclusive and supportive services.

Describing her treatment whilst in police custody, Ariel revealed further discrimination and maltreatment:

I got stripped naked that whole weekend in the cells. They wouldn't even let me have my clothes. That's what we call giving me shit ... I had no medication; I ended up in hospital. They didn't care. I had my tooth knocked out, there was no medical training or medical help for me, whatsoever. (Ariel)

In her work, she mentioned that a wahine would only receive assistance if she cooperated with police by providing information. Ariel created a safe space in her crisis where as an alternative to calling the police, explaining that wāhine often prefer to come to her because they distrust law enforcement and feel unsupported, “Rather than have to call the police and then make some report and then get harassed by the police later or anything, they'd rather just call me and come here.”

The wāhine experiences with police are also underscored by stories of victim-blaming and a lack of support for those in abusive situations. Ariel recounted, “We don't get help when we want help for family violence. If we don't fucking take the cunt down or help police, I won't get help from victim support. These stupid organisations, they are the police.” When she sought assistance for a personal experience of sexual assault, the police response further eroded her trust, “They didn't come over to actually help or get accurate recordings or things like that, they came over to interrogate me as to why I didn't bring the charges up sooner.” This lack of trust is echoed by Belle, whose history of police abuse has shaped her view,

We can't run to the fucking pigs. Well, I'm not going to because they rape me ... Having them do that to me, you are going to make me hate you even more. And also putting me into such a fucked up situation where I'm already a gang member on assault charges. If I'm going in here with an elder, and he's going to touch me, and I go to attack him, who are they going to believe? (Belle)

Belle's experiences reflect the additional stigma she carries as a gang member and victim of abuse. She stated, "We're trying to go forward, not back, but they're to bring us back. I hate pigs, fucking hate them."

Esmeralda also spoke about the mistrust and feelings of betrayal towards the police and government, citing unfulfilled promises from authorities. She referred to a public offer from the Minister for Corrections and Police to provide housing for wāhine wanting to leave gang life, which she states has not been followed through:

There was an article not long ago with Mark Mitchell, the Minister of Police, about how wāhine wanted to get away from gang life and all that sort of stuff. Mark Mitchell made a public thing saying that anyone that wanted to get away from the gang life, they would make sure that that person was settled in a house and support them. Now, that didn't happen from him. (Esmeralda)

Esmeralda also noted that gang affiliations can prevent wāhine from accessing services like Women's Refuge, "Social services, like women's refuge and stuff like that, if you were to tell them you've got gang connections, a lot of them won't put you in their safe houses." CJ's experiences reflect this sense of exclusion, encapsulated in her comment, "There is a lack of services that are available for our whānau."

CJ, Ariel, and Raya shared the impact of racism on their lives, specifically how their Māori heritage adds to the stigma they already face. For these wāhine, racism is not just an occasional encounter but a persistent aspect of their lives. Raya, for instance, shared how she

encounters racism “all the time” in her community. Reflecting on her experiences, she recounted an incident at an event where an older Pākehā man refused to share an ashtray with her, which she attributed to her appearance as Māori “...because I was a different color than them.” Similarly, CJ described this dual barrier as “a downfall of being Māori,” particularly when seeking funding and services. She highlighted that her Māori identity often serves as an additional hurdle, intensifying the challenges she faces. Ariel further emphasized the compounded disadvantage by referencing a societal hierarchy that, in her view, positions gang wāhine, who are predominantly Māori, at the very bottom. According to Ariel, this hierarchy places Pākehā men at the top, followed by Pākehā women, Māori men, and Māori women, with gang wāhine “at the bottom of the heap.” This perceived hierarchy underscores the double marginalisation of gang wāhine and the intensified sense of exclusion they face within society.

Experiences of Trauma

Experiences of trauma captures the depth and breadth of both individual and intergenerational trauma shared by the wāhine, revealing how their personal histories intersect with broader structural forces. Five of the six wāhine openly discussed their trauma, recounting harrowing experiences of sexual abuse, rape, and the enduring physical and mental health challenges that followed. These accounts highlight the profound impact of historical trauma, with two wāhine sharing that their pain had driven them to attempt to take their own lives. Their narratives emphasize the emotional weight they carry, and the strength required to confront such deeply rooted scars.

For many, Wāhine Toa has become a vital sanctuary for healing and empowerment. Belle reflected on how the chapter has provided her and others with a safe space to share and heal from trauma:

What's the purpose of Wāhine Toa? Honestly, it's saving so many lives. Not only has it saved my life, but it's going to save so many other wāhine. And it gives other wāhine, also myself, a safe place to talk about your trauma, and then also not just talk about it, but heal. (Belle)

Belle also described the sacredness of the wānanga where wāhine share their experiences:

It's hard to speak about it. It's scary to speak about it. So for somebody to speak up about it, it gives them the floor to open to come forth, you're not alone. And it's sad to say that there are others out there, unfortunately, and they aren't alone. We're here. Because when we go into wananga, it's a very sacred space. What happens in there, stays in there. And you get to see people, especially me. That is my safe place to talk about my traumas. (Belle)

Compassion and solidarity also emerged as significant themes, with Belle highlighting the importance of understanding others' struggles:

No one's trauma is badder than anyone. We've all got trauma. Just like you said, it doesn't matter how, it could be little or you've got trauma. And that's what I've learnt throughout Wāhine Toa—you don't know what that person beside you is holding, what their trauma is. Yeah, and they could have the world on their shoulders right now and you don't know. (Belle)

The trauma experienced by the wāhine extends beyond the personal, touching intergenerational cycles. Mulan spoke to the transformative potential of belonging to Wāhine Toa:

That's part of Wāhine Toa too. We go through this whole cycle, but when we become a part of something, that trauma stops. It doesn't continue with our next generation. It doesn't continue with our children, our grandchildren, and so forth, and that is the most important thing. (Mulan)

For some, physical expressions such as tattoos became ways to process and channel their pain. Belle shared:

But what's behind it was I actually got beaten up really, really, really badly. I got set up. We didn't know this was going to go the way it went. ...I liked the pain, if that kind of makes sense. It takes away from other pain. (Belle)

The testimonies also reflect their resilience and determination to move forward. Esmeralda noted:

It's been really positive. Positive and encouraging, and I'm getting a good education back under my belt. I've always tried to educate myself, but after all that trauma, mental health really plays with your brain and just having the confidence to go and do things again. (Esmeralda)

CJ acknowledged the ongoing challenges of violence within some gang whānau but stressed that many perpetrators are themselves grappling with their own unaddressed trauma, often rooted in historical injustices like colonisation and state care:

There should be zero tolerance to any violence. There should be no violence whatsoever against our wāhine, our tamariki, our mokopuna. But most important, our elderly. ... I've encountered that on many occasions, that trauma, historical trauma with a lot of our whānau. ... It makes that person who they are today. (CJ)

Together, these narratives illustrate the journeys of pain, solidarity, and healing, highlighting the transformative role of Wāhine Toa in breaking cycles of trauma and fostering hope for future generations.

Case Narrative 1: Ariel

Ariel’s photos reflect aspects of trauma, resilience, and survival. Each image captures different dimensions of her lived experiences, offering insight into how wāhine navigate and process personal and intergenerational trauma. Ariel’s story highlights the significant impact her experiences in state care had on her life. During the interview, Ariel became emotional as she reflected on these images, pausing several times to gather herself. At these moments, she was comforted by a simple hug, which provided grounding as she continued to share her experiences. By the end of the conversation, Ariel expressed that revisiting these memories, while challenging, was also a “very healing” process for her.

Figure 2

Ariel (Age 3 Years) Drinking From a Water Fountain (Source: Ariel)



We began with a photo of Ariel as a three-year-old, drinking from a water fountain. “That was me before, the before,” she said, looking at the image. “Pure, untouched by the system, loved, wanted.” She quickly shifted to the next photo: her Plunket book, pointing to the notes indicating recurrent urinary infections. “Those are big signs that somebody’s messing around. Hello? Also, ulcers on the vagina. But the advice was just to make sure the child gets plenty of water to drink.”

When asked, “What does this photo represent to you?” She paused, her voice heavy with emotion. “It reminds me of the little girl that's inside here.”

I probed further about her circumstances leading to entering the system. “There was a bust on the pad at home for prohibited weapons and drugs,” she recalled, her expression turning somber. “They rounded all us kids up, like little pigs. I remember we were sitting in the back seat of a car, and we all thought we were going to jail.”

“Were you all together, or were you separated?” I asked.

“At first, we were together, then we all ended up in different places. We thought at least we were together, we could go to jail with Dad. Really naive,” she replied, reflecting on the innocence of that time.

“How does this image relate to your life now?” I inquired.

“It reminds me of the little girl that's inside here. I feel so sorry for her. I just don’t think I can trust anybody to look after her like me. Who could I ever trust to look after her? I used to think that my purpose in life was for men to use and abuse me. It’s been happening all my life. Even when I find somebody nice, I don’t think I deserve them.”

I asked her, “In what ways do you feel stigma plays out in this situation?”

“Because they were arresting my whānau,” she replied. “We got caught up in that. We’re affiliated; we’re family members, so we’re absolutely part of it.”

“What could be a way that this could educate others or empower people?” I asked.

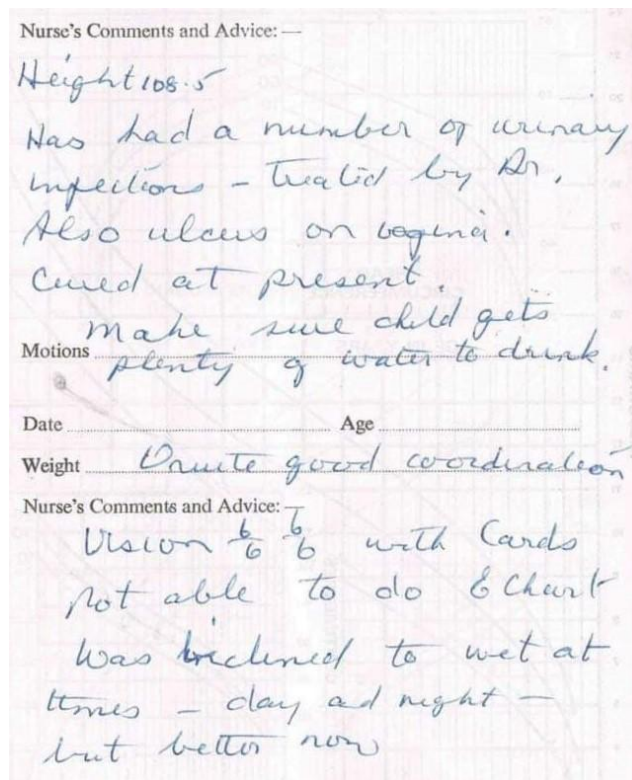
“Before they make decisions about a child, actually look at where the child is. Instead of using stigma,” she emphasized.

“Do you mean services, the police, and government departments should have training?” I asked.

“Absolutely. Because the kind of police training they have about gangs isn’t helpful to us. They see us all as criminals,” Ariel said, frustration evident in her voice.

Figure 3

Ariel’s Plunket book (Source: Ariel)



As we moved on to her Plunket book image, Ariel delved deeper: “What is shown here is my Plunket book and the lack of care for me as a little girl. What’s really happening is a little girl being abused, and the system is letting it slide. It’s like they’re saying, ‘Let’s make sure she gets plenty of water to drink.’ Weight? It doesn’t even give my weight. I’m

wetting myself all the fucking time. Those are classic symptoms. This caused everything that started to go downhill. Why are things this way? Because nobody gave a shit about me.”

“What could be done about this?” I asked.

“There definitely needs to be training on what the symptoms of child abuse are. I want to talk to the Plunket Society. They’ve been promising me for years they’d send somebody to talk to me about this. I want to know they’re doing things better because organisations like SUP and SUPFA use places like Plunket Society to hide what was going on.”

Figure 4

Ariel as a teenager (Source: Ariel)



The next image showed Ariel as an early teen, standing in front of a tree. “That’s me before I ran off in care, before I was pregnant.” she recalled. “I felt lots of anger. I’d been used and abused so many times; I felt like an adult. But I’m not a kid anymore. Guys were treating me like an adult all this fucking time. In reality, I was full of fear; I didn’t know who

to trust and had no real friends. Everything was surface level. I never made any connections with anyone.”

I asked, “Do you feel as though that’s impacted you in your adult life in terms of making connections with people?”

“Very much so,” she admitted. “I haven’t been able to connect in intimate relationships very well. I’ve always felt like I’m in a submissive position, and I’ve often ended up in relationships where I’ve been beaten.”

“You mentioned you didn’t have many friends. How do you see the space of Wāhine Toa in your life?” I asked.

“That’s where I made real friends because these sisters had been through similar experiences. When I talked about things like rape, I wasn’t looked at like, ‘Oh, and what did you do to deserve that?’ Because that’s how ya feel,” she replied, her voice softer, but still resonating with strength.

“What do you think could be done about this?” I asked.

“I think there should be more voices for tamariki when it comes to family court and when it comes to where they’re being placed and what’s happening,” she said, advocating for change with determination.

Ariel’s journey through trauma is marked by resilience and a desire for systemic change. Her story highlights the urgent need for understanding, support, and education to ensure that children like her are seen, heard, and cared for with the compassion they deserve. At the same time, her experiences reflect the broader theme of navigating marginality, as she grapples with not only personal trauma but also the societal structures that often overlook and stigmatize those from marginalized communities, compounding their struggles for recognition and support.

Theme 2: Empowerment and Resistance

The second primary theme, *Empowerment and Resistance*, provides a counter-narrative to the challenges the wāhine face. Rooted in their lived experiences, this theme captures how the wāhine resist stereotypes and societal judgments, asserting their strength, resilience, and agency. Their stories highlight how they navigate and challenge adversity, drawing on personal and collective resources to empower themselves and their communities. This theme underscores the transformative power of their actions, relationships, and cultural connections in reshaping their identities and creating pathways for change.

Three subthemes emerged within this theme: *Sisterhood and Solidarity*, *Cultural Resources*, and *Redefining Identity and Overcoming Stigma for a Better Future*. Each subtheme offers a nuanced lens into different dimensions of empowerment and resistance, illustrating how these wāhine embody the principles of mana wāhine and truly stand as Wāhine Toa. Together, these subthemes showcase their ability to overcome barriers and foster strength within themselves, their whānau, and their broader communities.

Sisterhood and Solidarity

Sisterhood and solidarity, highlights the powerful bonds that unite the wāhine of Wāhine Toa, forming a foundation of strength, healing, and empowerment. These connections not only provide a safe and supportive space for wāhine to recover from past experiences of trauma and adversity but also foster a sense of pride and purpose. This sisterhood enables the wāhine to resist societal stigma and create new, empowering narratives for themselves and their community.

Ariel speaks to the hope this sisterhood offers, especially for wāhine who have experienced “hurt, mamae, abuse, [and] relationship issues,” describing how it shows them there is a pathway to recovery and a “life after” such experiences. She emphasizes the sisterhood’s role as a crucial safety net, explaining, “We look after each other. And can

advise each other. Like it's a safety net for many of our sisters ... Many of them don't even have a safety net of any other kind. We're it." Esmeralda echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the unwavering support of the group: "The sisters get you, and they've got you. It doesn't matter what it is, they've got you."

Belle shares how being embraced by this collective helped her learn to love and adapt to others, revealing the sisterhood's transformative power to heal emotional wounds and reshape identities. Reflecting on her personal journey, she says, "Just seeing a change in myself was empowering in itself. That's a big change. That's a massive change." Belle also challenges the media's misrepresentation of their group, contrasting its true mission—healing their people—with negative stereotypes. "We're a sisterhood, we're a family," she asserts, "and it is more than what the media makes it out."

This unity and sense of purpose are also expressed by CJ, who views the wāhine as essential leaders and a source of balance within the gang structure. She emphasizes their role as mana wāhine and Rangatira, highlighting how they defy traditional gender roles and contribute equally to their kaupapa. Mulan builds on this idea, describing how the sisterhood "fills your cup" and inspires her to "be a better person" and "do better." The collective identity they share empowers each wāhine to grow and support one another, transcending societal labels and limitations.

For wāhine like Raya, the sisterhood is a source of safety and empowerment. She reflects on how it has transformed her self-perception, stating, "I thought I didn't have a voice" until she decided to "do something about it" with the support of her sisters. She adds, "It just makes me feel I'm safe. I feel safe." This shared sense of security and confidence enables wāhine to resist external judgment and stand proudly in their identities.

The wāhine resistance towards societal stigma is perhaps most poignantly reflected in their collective redefinition of gang identity. By framing themselves as a "whānau or

sisterhood,” they reject the negative connotations of gang life, instead emphasizing the positive, family-like aspects of their unity. Ariel encapsulates this idea with a powerful metaphor: “We’re the hull of the waka. You know? All the dogs can grab a paddle all they like, but at the end of the day, the hull of the waka is what keeps it afloat.” This statement underscores the wāhine pivotal role in sustaining their kaupapa, embodying resilience, strength, and love as they navigate a world that often misunderstands them.

In their words and actions, the wāhine demonstrate the transformative power of sisterhood and solidarity, offering a counter-narrative to stigmatized perceptions and reclaiming their identities as Wāhine Toa. As Ariel aptly summarizes, their unity is rooted in a simple but profound principle: “We have a saying in the mob, it's called ‘Love us,’ because no one else will.”

Cultural Resources

Cultural resources explore how the wāhine engage with Māori values and traditions and use these as sources of empowerment and resistance. This includes the manifestations of mana - mana wāhine, mana whānau, and mana motuhake - as well as connections to whakapapa and Māori health models, which provide a foundation for their work and well-being.

Mana Whānau.

The wāhine of Wāhine Toa consistently highlight that their movement is first and foremost about their whānau and tamariki, embodying the values of mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau. Their shared narratives challenge societal stigma and articulate a collective vision for creating a brighter future for their families and communities. Esmeralda emphasized, “We’re non-drugs, our children come first. Our babies come first. We don’t tolerate drugs around our kids... You deal with your babies, your whānau comes first.” This focus on whānau and tamariki lies at the heart of their kaupapa, ensuring their children grow

up in an environment where they are safe, supported, and empowered.

For Mulan, her children represent her daily motivation and future aspirations: “Our babies are the most important things in our lives. They're our world. They're the reason why we still breathe... We've created something different for them.” She challenges stereotypes, explaining that despite societal judgments, she is no different from other parents. “It’s just the stigma of being gang-affiliated that somehow makes me feel different,” she shared, while affirming, “They are my future. They are the future generation... I just hope my babies understand that although we’ve come from rough upbringings, they never got to see that same sort of life.” Similarly, Ariel highlighted the centrality of whānau within the kaupapa, emphasizing the shared commitment to creating a brighter future for tamariki. “Making it a bright future for starters. Making it a future where they're not going to be vulnerable or where they're not going to be hurt or lost or anything like that,” she explained. Ariel’s words echo the collective vision of Wāhine Toa, where the well-being and aspirations of the next generation remain front and centre.

CJ underscored the importance of collective well-being, noting that her work with whānau goes beyond individuals to ensure families thrive:

When I was working with dad, I was also working with mom and the family and healing the family at the same time. And I think, for me, it was seeing our whānau grow... There was no relapse, no more reoffending. (CJ)

Her commitment to mana whānau is deeply personal, as she reflected on investing in her own children’s future whilst also studying herself, “During that period of time, I educated my kids. I put all of them through boarding school.”

Esmeralda further highlighted the holistic support within Wāhine Toa, stating, “There was a family, there was support, there was counselling, there were things there for your children too. It wasn’t just a me thing, it was a family, a whānau thing.” This collective ethos

aligns with CJ's belief in supporting not just individuals but entire whānau: "Keep moving forward for you, but most importantly for your family. Don't forget, our whānau, our children, our tamariki, our mokopuna... their health and well-being is paramount, number one."

The wāhine dedication to their whānau challenges the traditional notion of gangs, reframing Wāhine Toa as a sisterhood or whānau deeply rooted in the principles of mana whānau. Raya encapsulated this sentiment, explaining, "I personally don't see them as a gang. What I see them as is family. That's what it is. No matter what." This perspective was echoed by others, with Belle affirming, "We're just a big family." Raya further emphasized, "If you take away just that gang thing there and put it as a whānau or sisterhood... then no one would have a problem with it."

Belle expanded on this, challenging external labels and societal stigma: "We're only labeled a gang because the government calls us a gang. This is whānau. It's my whānau." Her words highlight the strength of their interconnectedness: "No matter what, we're always going to be connected. So you can do the triangle and do the gangs, but at that top, family." This interconnectedness extends beyond their immediate circle, driven by a collective vision of uplifting not just themselves but their wider community. As Belle expressed,

We're not just about our own, we're about our people ... At the end of the day, it goes back to the, 'We're all family.' It's not just for us because that'd be selfish as fuck if it was just for us. We can keep us growing, and if we are coming up, we're bringing everyone up. (Belle)

Together, these wāhine articulate a vision of healing, strength, and collective care that challenges misconceptions while embodying the core values of Wāhine Toa. Esmeralda highlighted these values during her korero, emphasizing their significance,

Our values, we've got to keep to all those values. Honesty is paramount. Honesty, and then loyalty. Loyalty to one another, and loyalty to ourselves first and foremost. Because if we're not loyal to ourselves, we're no good to everyone else. (Esmeralda)

This unwavering commitment to their kaupapa is driven by a shared determination to ensure their tamariki and whānau thrive, guided by the principles of mana motuhake and mana whānau. Rooted in care, connection, and collective aspirations, their kaupapa redefines traditional narratives, embodying a steadfast commitment to the well-being and growth of all.

Mana Wāhine.

Interconnected with mana whānau is mana wāhine, the powerful expression of women's resilience, leadership, and role as the foundation of their community. Many wāhine describe women as the "hull of the waka," essential to keeping everything afloat. Ariel reaffirms this in her photovoice interview, reflecting on the strength of wāhine in gang contexts, "Women are extremely resilient, and we are the hull of the waka. At the end of the day, when our men fuck off to jail and everything, guess who's looking after everything back home? It's us." She emphasizes the overlooked importance of women in gangs, stating, "It could show them how important women are in gangs. Even the police forget that."

To empower wāhine further, Ariel highlights the value of initiatives like wānanga to support healing and address trauma. For Ariel, mana wāhine is also deeply personal, earned through her work and integrity, "I think I've got a lot of mana, ihi, wehi. And I think a lot of it is that I've actually earned that over time... I'm not an asshole. That's it. I'm just not an asshole."

This ethos of leadership and respect is embodied collectively within the movement, particularly in their leader, Paula. The wāhine universally spoke of Paula with profound admiration, seeing her as the embodiment of mana wāhine. Belle describes Paula as both staunch and awe-inspiring, "She has loved me, she's nurtured me. I've never been loved before, and she's so fucking staunch and intelligent, and I get blown away by her all the

fucking time... She is a walking ancestor goddess.” For CJ, Paula’s leadership was a key reason for joining Wāhine Toa, and she admires her boldness in challenging the gang’s traditional dynamics:

I admired her leadership. And her guts to tell you how it is, especially in the gangs. And I thought, well, if I can become part of the organization and use my skills and my qualifications to help our whānau, I’d like to be part of that organization. (CJ)

Since working with Paula, CJ describes her deep respect for her and acknowledges Paula’s leadership:

I have a lot of respect for our sister. I have to give her that acknowledgment... Particularly the mahi that they do is outstanding. And this is the story that needs to be told from our perspective as mana wāhine, Wāhine Toa he Rangatira because we are the balance to the males. You can't have one without the other. (CJ)

Esmeralda credits Paula’s leadership with empowering the wāhine to find their own paths, whether within Wāhine Toa or beyond:

Without her, we wouldn’t be where we are... She doesn’t push it upon us. We choose to stay here. We could go at any time. There’s no repercussions for us women to leave at all. She would give anyone her blessing that you go do what you think is right. (Esmeralda)

Raya shares her admiration, calling Paula the ‘queen of all of it’, “I look up to her a lot. Literally, she’s the queen of all of it. That’s her. And all I want to do is to make her proud, and I do that, and that’s awesome.”

Mulan echoes these sentiments, describing Paula as an unparalleled force within the movement:

She is a huge, huge force. This lady is the leader through and through. The amount of things this woman does behind the scenes, helping with the homeless, helping children in general,

our rangatahi, helping our men, helping our women. This woman is like an octopus. She's got her hands helping everyone. (Mulan)

Mulan also highlights other wāhine within the movement who embody mana wāhine, acknowledging their vital role in supporting whānau and the community:

She runs a whare for domestic violence. She helps our children with playdates, helps women going through court, helps the homeless, helps men. Anyone that needs help, these women are here. Without them and without the sisterhood, this would not be possible. The thousands of people they've helped would not have been possible had it not been for Mana Wāhine to be established. (Mulan)

Her reflections emphasize the contributions of wāhine in the movement and their role in providing support and leadership within their communities.

Complementing this is a recognition of the crucial role of tāne in supporting the mana of wāhine and contributing to the collective union, a cornerstone of a traditional te ao Māori worldview. Mulan highlights the essence of mana wāhine, emphasizing the pivotal role wāhine play as the 'backbone' of their whānau, . At the same time, she acknowledges the important contribution of tāne, reflecting the interconnectedness of mana wāhine and mana whānau. She explains:

We are the backbone to our family—without us, our babies may not grow to their full potential...Without a good background, without a good partner, without that strength beside you, sometimes you kind of waver...Our men are our korowai, they are our protectors. We are nurturing our youth, we are nurturing all these other aspects too. Not just our males' mentality. We're also trying to heal them, at the same time, they're healing us. It's a very equal partnership. (Mulan)

Through her kōrero, Mulan reflects how mana wāhine is deeply rooted in nurturing, healing, and sustaining their whānau, while also acknowledging the vital role of tāne in providing

strength and protection. This interconnected relationship between wāhine and tāne demonstrates the essence of mana whānau, where mutual respect and collective union uplift and sustain the entire whānau. Mulan's words embody the balance and reciprocity required for a thriving whānau, showing how mana wāhine and mana tāne work in harmony to uphold the mana of all.

Mana wāhine is deeply embodied within the Wāhine Toa movement, transcending the individual and extending into the collective strength of sisterhood, whānau, and community. For the wāhine involved, mana wāhine is not solely about personal empowerment but also about the unity and purpose derived from their collective identity. As Belle says, "But Wāhine Toa, it says it all in the name, we're warrior women." Ariel explains, this collective vision is foundational to the movement: "I wanted it to be completely separate. And wanted the calibre of our members, you know? High quality." Her statement reflects a commitment to fostering a strong, empowered sisterhood that upholds the principles of mana wāhine, ensuring that members are supported and safe while striving for excellence in their shared purpose. CJ reinforces this notion of collective empowerment, stating, "It's just to identify that this is who we are. We're a collective of mana wāhine, Wāhine Toa. We have come together for those purposes... And we come together and we share our skill set and our qualifications to help support the most vulnerable within our communities." This highlights how mana wāhine within Wāhine Toa is a source of strength for its members and a driving force for uplifting and supporting their wider communities.

Mulan situates mana wāhine in the historical and cultural context of Wāhine Toa, describing it as a "rebirth" built upon the foundations laid by the sisters, partners, and aunts who came before. She reflects:

We just went and made a sisterhood, put a jersey on, put our korowai on, put the bulldog on there from the kingdom. So it was re-established through that way. And it was much needed.

And it is still much needed because without our sisterhood, there would be a heck of a lot of things that didn't happen or would not have happened had it not been for Mana Wāhine to be implemented. (Mulan)

Through their korero, it is clear that mana wāhine within the Wāhine Toa movement is not only about individual identity and empowerment but also about creating a unified collective that provides strength, support, and purpose. This embodiment of mana wāhine ensures that the wāhine uplift one another and contribute to the well-being of their whānau and communities, fulfilling a much-needed role in both their personal and collective lives.

Mana Motuhake.

Mana Motuhake is a cultural resource embedded in the lives of the wāhine, serving as a cornerstone of their identity, resilience, and empowerment. Ariel highlights that mana motuhake, alongside mana whānau and mana wāhine, forms “an integral part of why our movement is as strong as it is.” This sense of self-determination is personal and collective, encompassing their whānau and the broader community. It fosters pride, integrity, and a “shared power that uplifts” and connects them, empowering the wāhine to lead and inspire future generations. For them, mana motuhake provides both strength and accountability—guiding their actions and reinforcing their commitment to cultural and personal growth.

CJ exemplifies mana motuhake in her work by incorporating the Te Whare Tapa Whā framework, a holistic Māori health model that considers the interconnected dimensions of an individual’s well-being. She explains how this framework supports whānau in reclaiming their self-determination:

I always apply the Te Whare Tapa Whā framework... It’s not only to keep myself safe, but also it shows the background of the individual or the whānau that we’re working with. It’s used as a guideline, but also in adherence to te ao Māori, our tikanga, values, practices, beliefs, and principles. (CJ)

Through this approach, CJ not only upholds her own mana motuhake but also supports others in realizing their potential. She emphasizes the importance of Māori leading the charge for collective change, standing firmly in their self-determination to create transformative shifts, "We already know where changes come from, but for us, it's to play a very important role in those changes."

Esmeralda reflects on how mana motuhake drives her to be a role model for her children, demonstrating that determination and belief in oneself can break barriers and inspire others. Her self-determination motivates her to continually improve and empower other women to do the same:

My self-determination is what keeps me going ... to be an even better person than I was the day before. To get other women feeling that way... showing my daughters that just because you're a woman, you can do anything... You can do anything you want. (Esmeralda)

For Esmeralda, mana motuhake is not only about personal growth but also about instilling confidence and resilience in her children, showcasing the boundless potential of wāhine.

Raya further captures the essence of mana motuhake, describing how her growth is both individual and collective, drawing strength from her sisters and their shared journey, "I grow every day, and it is because I've got the power from all of them in me."

This collective empowerment reinforces the connection to each other, highlighting how mana motuhake intertwines with cultural values and shared strength to sustain their journey toward self-determination and leadership. Through mana motuhake, the wāhine embrace their roles as agents of change, embodying a powerful cultural resource that fuels their resilience and aspirations.

Redefining Identity and Overcoming Stigma for a Better Future

Redefining identity and overcoming stigma for a better future highlights the wāhine efforts to challenge societal perceptions and reshape how they and their communities are

viewed. The wāhine of Wāhine Toa challenge the stigmas attached to their identities with resilience and determination, breaking down stereotypes that label them as ‘dole bludging thug bitches.’ Throughout the kōrero, the wāhine demonstrated that they are far from these reductive labels. They spoke proudly of their work, commitment to their children, and significant community contributions. For instance, they described their active involvement in initiatives that promote whānau well-being and their dedication to creating safe, nurturing environments for their tamariki. These actions stand in stark contrast to the public narrative about gang members, showing that the wāhine are not defined by societal assumptions but by their actions and values. Through their strength, service, and collective efforts, they are not only dismantling stigma but also paving the way for a brighter future for themselves and the generations to come.

Belle shared how Wāhine Toa is involved in multiple community initiatives, underscoring that they are committed to helping those in need. She spoke about "The Serve," a 365-day service for feeding those in need, particularly the homeless. "The Serve is for our homeless, our rough sleepers in New Zealand. That never shuts, that's open every day." Belle highlighted the wide-ranging work done with Mongrel Mob Kingdom and Wāhine Toa, including hauora days, dental and medical checks, and even organizing community days at the ‘pad.’ These initiatives not only challenge the negative perceptions of gangs but also highlight the compassion and commitment of the wāhine to serve their communities.

Furthermore, Esmeralda emphasized the need to resist the tendency to ‘taint us all with the same brush,’ especially when individuals make poor choices within the gang context. She stated, “If we were out doing crime and stuff like that, I can understand it, but they don't want to see what we're doing is a good thing.” This sentiment reflects the common experience of being unfairly judged based on the actions of a few, and it sheds light on the disconnect between the perception of gangs and the reality of the work done by Wāhine Toa.

It's a delicate balance—acknowledging that some gangs can and do cause harm, while also recognizing the positive impact that these women have within their communities.

The wāhine themselves repeatedly shared that their involvement in these initiatives is empowering. Esmeralda spoke about the significance of giving back, particularly during the Christmas runs and with the homeless community, “It feels really good to be able to get out and do something. For the whole community, not just our community, but the whole of society. We're not judging anyone.”

This sense of empathy and non-judgmental support is echoed by Mulan, who highlighted the transformative power of simply engaging with those who are often ignored:

Being able to sit there with somebody that is down on their luck and just having that time to talk to them goes a long way and understanding them and trying to help them. That goes a long way too, because we've actually become really close with someone. One of our bros that is homeless... had disclosed the reason why he kept going and the reason why he never gave up is because he knew that there was someone that cared. (Mulan)

Mulan's story of providing emotional support demonstrates how small acts of kindness—such as sitting down with someone, sharing food, or simply listening—can have a profound impact. The emphasis on empathy and community support reflects a deep understanding of what it means to care for others, particularly those who may not have any other support system.

The work undertaken by the wāhine was not limited to everyday support; they also played a vital role in emergency response. During Cyclone Gabrielle, they mobilized quickly, showcasing the collective strength and resilience of the Mongrel Mob community. CJ shared how they were the first to set up an emergency response team, with over 10,000 volunteers:

During Cyclone Gabrielle, we came together as a team. We had sponsorships coming in, we had food coming in. We were the first emergency response team that was set up. We ended

up with over 10,000 volunteers. And some of those volunteers came up with the trucks, equipment, food, first aid, everything that you can possibly think of. So we played a huge role in it. (CJ)

Mulan's reflection on the media coverage of the event further emphasized the dissonance between public perception and reality:

It made me really mad to go on social media, and people have just lost all their homes, and all they're sitting there talking about is someone wearing a red hat or a blue hat that committed a crime... Instead of telling them about all the good things, like there are amazing people in the community. (Mulan)

Through their efforts, the wāhine not only provided immediate relief but also challenged the negative media narratives that often paint gangs as a source of harm rather than a source of aid. This shift in perception—moving from criminality to care—aligns with their larger mission of challenging the stigma they face and proving that they are capable of making meaningful contributions to society.

As the wāhine continue to challenge stigma, their sense of identity and resilience shines through. They recognize that the hardships they've faced, including the trauma, exclusion, and systemic challenges, have shaped them, but they have not defined them.

Mulan's powerful words exemplify this resilience:

Yeah, just to keep going. Regardless of what people say, regardless of what people think, regardless of what you've been told your entire life, you can always change things. Tomorrow is a new day. And even though we're not promised tomorrow, you can still get up and keep going. (Mulan)

This statement captures the essence of their collective strength—a refusal to be held back by external judgments or historical trauma. It also speaks to the broader theme of redefining

their identities, not just as ‘gang members’, but as wāhine who are empowered, resilient, and committed to making positive change.

The wāhine also shared how their physical markers—such as the Wāhine Toa jerseys and emblems—represent love and a deep connection to their Māori heritage rather than the fear or intimidation that they might invoke in the public. Belle explained: “That might be intimidating to others. But to me, I walk in and that’s my love.” These symbols are redefined in the context of their identity, embracing the strength of their whakapapa and the mana they carry as Māori women. Ariel spoke similarly about their “korowai,” drawing a parallel between their gang affiliation and the cultural significance of Māori cloaks, showing how they reclaim the narrative surrounding these symbols.

The wāhine repeatedly emphasized the importance of being understood and not judged based on surface-level perceptions. Belle urged, “Come to the Thirteens, come to the wananga, come see what we do. Don’t just look at it from the outside. You’ve got to come and see what we do”. Their invitation calls for deeper understanding, for people to engage directly with their work and the principles that guide their actions. CJ reflects on the need to ‘change the narrative’ because of the constant assumptions people make about her identity, affiliations, and work. She proudly shares, “As soon as I started opening up, they couldn’t believe it. The lesson for this was never judge a book by its cover.”

In these moments, the wāhine challenge others to see them beyond the stigma and stereotypes associated with their gang affiliation. They call for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and motivations—an understanding rooted in their lived realities, their values, and their aspirations for a better future. As Esmeralda states, “We are educated women. We’re highly intelligent women. That’s the biggest thing. Take us seriously. Don’t judge us.” This emphasis on intelligence, education, and self-worth calls attention to the complexity and depth of their identities, beyond the narrow confines of public perception.

Ultimately, the wāhine of Wāhine Toa are redefining what it means to be part of a gang. They are challenging stigma not through confrontation but through action, service, and the strength of their community. In doing so, they are creating a better future for themselves and those around them—one where they are recognized as powerful, compassionate, and resilient wāhine who stand with mana and pride.

Future aspirations for the wāhine, individually and within Wāhine Toa, reflect their shared commitment to creating better lives for themselves and their tamariki. Mulan articulates this vision, stating,

They're our future generation and children pick up things that other people can't. And if children can see the beauty in someone, why can't other people? And this is who we've created Mana Wāhine for, not just for us, but for our children, for our families, for the sisters that need the love, for our babies that need the love. So that they grow and they be confident leaders, that they grow and they have a huge family surrounding them, full of love, full of protection, full of hope. (Mulan)

Personal goals such as starting a business and mentoring youth illustrate their drive for self-determination and the desire to create opportunities that benefit themselves and their whānau. Within Wāhine Toa, collective aspirations include creating gang cultural training, having input into changes at a systemic level, building supportive networks, and contributing to the broader community. These goals emphasize the dedication to breaking cycles of disadvantage and creating a legacy of empowerment, resilience, and hope for future generations. Table 1 highlights these aspirations, illustrating their personal and collective visions.

Table 1*Personal and Collective Aspirations*

Name	Personal Aspirations	Collective Aspirations
Ariel	Create scholarships for our wāhine Greater access to funding so our wāhine can get scholarships and apprenticeships More Mana Wāhine, Wāhine Toa events - invite Polynesian sisters Create an Indigenous Wāhine Conference, support Hawaii sisters also fighting for the rights of Mana Wāhine Organise a Women's Health event for vulnerable wāhine	Gang Cultural Training Create Gang Liaison Officers to work alongside gang whānau Have regular hui with gang whānau - "work with gang whānau" Connections with Wahinetanga services to build whanaungatanga with wāhine Submissions to Parliament for wāhine in gangs to have a voice
Belle	Have wananga for our wāhine Run Poutama Healing wananga To support wāhine out of domestic violence situations and know that there is life beyond this Heal the broken	"I hope we're in the history books, and in a good way."
CJ	Connect with other organisations that are Mana Wāhine, Wāhine Toa, to bring everyone together, in a collective sense Collective action because everyone has a story to be told Mentor young wāhine and tāne	Have input into changes with Oranga Tamariki, especially regarding how gang whānau are treated Have input into how the police and court system support gang whānau Have the means and capacity to provide ongoing services, whether government-funded or not. For this current research and future research to inform policy and create change for our whānau. "Research does influence policy."
Esmeralda	Get as many qualified and educated wāhine as possible Empower more women to have a voice Have our own educational programmes and funding for our wāhine	Reduce stigma so that people know the kaupapa behind what we do Greater funding opportunities for our community
Mulan	Start own business that will empower wāhine within the community Tamariki led – "Want better for our tamariki and future generations." Create the next generation of leaders More women involved in the sisterhood Support each other to flourish, grow, and be mana wāhine	Public perceptions to recognise that the wāhine have aspirations A hope and wish for everyone to come to a place of understanding, whereby the public spend time with gang whānau to reduce the stigma and get to know them
Raya	Follow in the footsteps of the wāhine within the movement that have been positive role models	Help out in the community

Case Narrative 2: Mulan

Mulan's story is deeply intertwined with her cultural resources, which play a vital role in her journey of personal trauma, resilience, and empowerment. The following images reflect this connection, showcasing how her Māori heritage provides strength and mana. The first image captures a glimpse of her daily life, symbolizing her commitment to mana wāhine and mana whānau, and her drive to create a brighter future for her tamariki. The second image highlights Mulan's marae, which grounds her in her whakapapa, reinforcing her connection to her roots and heritage.

Figure 5

Family Time (source: Mulan)



Mulan's photo of her daughter playing at her aunty's house provides insight into her daily life and highlights the importance of whānau to her. This image captures a moment of family connection and represents Mulan's dedication to mana whānau. Through her korero,

Mulan emphasizes that her role as a mother is central to her sense of purpose, grounding her and her family amidst life's challenges. This daily focus on family time is essential for her children's growth and stability, allowing them to thrive in an environment filled with love and support. As Mulan explains, "This is us having family time. It's always important for us to have that time with our children and obviously with our wider family because it helps ground us." For her, this moment captured in the photo is about more than just play—it is about nurturing her children in ways that break the intergenerational cycles of trauma that she experienced in her own upbringing. Reflecting on her childhood, Mulan shares, "I didn't come from a big home. I didn't have a sense of stability. We didn't stay in the same place for very long, and my childhood wasn't always happy." In contrast, her commitment to spending intentional time with her children is driven by her desire to give them the stability and love she lacked.

One key aspect of Mulan's approach to mana whānau is creating opportunities for open communication and emotional connection with her children. She describes how she and her partner foster this through simple daily rituals like sharing their highs and lows at the dinner table:

We had this thing where our kids will tell us their highs. What's something they loved about the day and then we'd go around in a circle and we'll talk about what we loved about the day. Then we talk about something that we didn't like... Then we had what can we improve for tomorrow?

Mulan shared how these moments of reflection are a way to bond with her children and an opportunity for them to learn about emotional growth and self-awareness. By encouraging her children to express themselves freely, Mulan ensures that they feel heard and valued, something she deeply craved as a child. "Providing that opportunity for them to feel heard

because if that maybe was something that you didn't experience in your childhood, it's providing the opportunity for your children to feel safe to say, 'Hey, this is going on.'" Mulan demonstrates how this practice of open dialogue helps her children feel safe and secure. This strengthens the family unit and reflects the values of mana whānau—nurturing relationships, providing care, and fostering communication. Through these practices, Mulan is actively creating the kind of supportive environment that she was denied as a child.

Her reflections on the photo illustrate how mana whānau is connected to leadership and personal growth. Mulan highlights the importance of modelling vulnerability and openness for her children, saying:

Also, us sharing our highs, our lows, things that we can improve on. It shows that leadership from us too. It shows that we're not perfect. It shows that we have room for improvement. So just like them, we're all on a journey together.

Through this approach, Mulan describes a family dynamic where everyone is learning and growing together. She explains that the goal is not about exerting control but about supporting her children to become the best versions of themselves, "We do things because we want you to grow, we want you to achieve. We know you can do better... So yeah, these types of moments are very important."

At the centre of Mulan's story is her focus on breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma and creating a new legacy for her children. Reflecting on the photo of her daughter playing, she explains:

Even in this little picture, it may just be my daughter sitting down on the ground playing. That was not me at that age. So, I was able to change that type of situation so that my children don't have that kind of experience.

Her kōrero reflects her commitment to providing her children with a different upbringing—one centered on stability, love, and positive cultural values. She emphasizes this by saying, 'They're the reason why we still keep going and aim higher. That's for them.'

Mulan's words demonstrate how mana whānau and mana wāhine are interconnected in her life. Her role as a mother and her efforts to provide opportunities for her children highlight her dedication to fostering a future free from the cycles of trauma she experienced. Through this photo, Mulan's narrative reveals how cultural connections, family, and resilience form the foundation of her daily life and how these values guide her in breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma. For Mulan, the image of her daughter represents hope, growth, and the continuation of mana whānau, ensuring that the legacy she leaves for her children is one of love, stability, and empowerment.

Figure 6

Mulan's Marae (source: Mulan)



This image is of Mulan's marae, a place that holds deep significance, connecting her to her people, whakapapa, and the whenua. It is a grounding space that became central to her identity and healing. Mulan speaks with pride about her upbringing on the marae, sharing how it shaped her worldview, particularly in relation to te ao Māori and the values of respect,

family, and community. Here, she learned invaluable life lessons—about caring for whānau, honouring elders, and staying connected to her roots.

This is where I'm from. This is where I grew up. I learned so many valuable lessons in life from this one place. I learned that our elderly, they come first, our children, they're on that same wavelength. I learned a lot about myself. I learned a lot about respect. I learned a lot about catering to our whānau and things like that.

Mulan's connection to the marae became a source of healing as she navigated difficult times in her life, particularly during her time with Oranga Tamariki. The lessons and grounding she found at the marae helped her heal from past traumas she hadn't fully understood.

Because of my upbringing here, when I went into Oranga Tamariki and things like that, this place actually helped me heal in ways that I never thought that I needed. So it wasn't until I got older, I realized the importance of knowing where you're from, of knowing who you are, of being connected to your marae.

This connection extends to her role as a mother, where Mulan emphasizes ensuring her children grow up with the same grounding in their culture and heritage.

Now when I think about the marae, I think about my children and having that connection when they go through education. Because of that same connection and that same belief and that same knowledge that I learned on the marae, they have those same values and beliefs and things like that at their kura.

Mulan reflects on how, after her great-grandmother's death, she lost touch with the marae and her roots, which led to feelings of disconnection. However, this loss was later reconciled through her children, as she returned to the marae and found renewed purpose.

When I moved away, I moved up here. Not being around the marae definitely gives you a whole different perspective... you get influenced and you're involved in a whole lot of different things that you wouldn't if you were back home, if you were around the marae.

For Mulan, the marae is more than just a place—it's a deep spiritual connection to her ancestors and lineage.

People need to understand that it's the love that you feel when you're at these places. It's the spiritual connection that you get when you're there, knowing that it wasn't just you that walked on here, it's your great-great-grandparents, it's your great-grandparents. It's your grandparents. It's your lineage that have all come into this one place.

This ancestral connection fosters a sense of identity and belonging, grounding Mulan in her heritage. She emphasizes that it is not just the physical marae but the people and their shared memories that bring it to life. “It's the people that come from the place. It's not so much the building itself... Our building is only as good as the people and the memories that you have there.”

For Mulan, the marae is integral to her healing journey, and a space that continues to shape her sense of identity. As she speaks about returning home, Mulan highlights the significance of the marae not just for her, but for future generations. “When you know who you are, when you know where you come from, when you know who your whānau is... It's a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, and it's who we are. It's our connection to home.”

These images from Mulan illustrate multiple themes central to this research, including mana whānau, mana wāhine, cultural connection, trauma, and resilience. They reflect how deeply her identity is intertwined with her role as a mother and the importance of staying connected to her culture. Mulan's grounding in te ao Māori and her ancestral links to the marae have been fundamental in her healing from past traumas and fostering resilience for herself and her children. This sense of connection and purpose mirrors what she finds within the Wāhine Toa—the collective empowerment, shared experiences, and strength among like-

minded wāhine, who, like Mulan, share in their traumas but do not let them define their futures.

Mana Wāhine to me is ... that everyone is nurtured from sisters that come from the same walk of life, the same mentality, the same type of thinking. It gave me security, a sense of belonging. It gave me a home because when I first joined Mana Wāhine, I was so lost. My sisters, they also ground me in a way that they're real. You're only going to get real things. If you want this cotton candy version, don't bother asking our sisters. And that's the type of sisters they are. So it's very much home.

This sentiment of resilience and community is similarly echoed in Belle's own experiences, further reinforcing the broader themes of belonging, healing, and empowerment within Wāhine Toa.

Case Narrative 3: Belle

Belle’s story highlights the role of belonging, sisterhood, and empowerment in her life. Through her photo and reflections, she shares how Wāhine Toa has offered her a sense of safety and support after experiencing systemic failures and personal trauma. Her account demonstrates how the collective strength and solidarity within this sisterhood have contributed to her healing and sense of purpose. Belle’s narrative challenges societal stereotypes by presenting an alternative perspective on gang life as a source of resilience and empowerment.

Figure 7

Belle’s room and her lisms (source: Belle)



Belle’s photo captures the inside of her room, where the walls are adorned with gang insignia, or “lisms,” representing Wāhine Toa, and other Mongrel Mob chapters in Aotearoa. For Belle, this image is striking, as each lism carries deep significance, reflecting her identity and sense of belonging. It is not just a decoration; it is a daily reminder of the support, strength, and solidarity that the gang provides. Belle spoke of these symbols with pride and

joy, her voice filled with empowerment. For her, this space represents protection, connection, and the life-changing role that Wāhine Toa has played in her life.

As Belle reflected on the image, she expressed how being part of the gang has been a pivotal force in saving her life:

I surround myself with as much love as I can so I feel at home. I wake up to it every day. It's watching me. That's my protector. This lot, they saved me. They've changed me into who I am right now. If it wasn't for this, I wouldn't be here, sitting here. I wouldn't be as calm, and I wouldn't be, like I said, who I am. They've changed my life for the better.

Her words demonstrate her deep sense of safety and belonging within Wāhine Toa. While many may view gangs through a lens of stigma, for Belle, they have provided the protection and support that she never found in societal systems. She openly shared the trauma she endured at the hands of individuals within these systems, highlighting the failure of institutions meant to protect her, particularly during her most vulnerable moments:

Some people run away from the gangs, but I ran to Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa because they protect me. I've been abused, abused by the government. Also, even at the court panels, I've been abused—not just verbally, but sexually, too. Did they protect me? No. They didn't protect me when I was a little girl. They didn't protect me as a wahine. And I was in their court, they don't protect me. This (speaking to the photo) is my protection, and it's not in an intimidating way.

Belle's story highlights how the gang became her sanctuary after being let down by those who should have safeguarded her. The photo symbolises the sisterhood she found within the gang—a community that offers protection and a pathway to healing. The connection she shares with the wāhine is deeply meaningful to her, as she describes them as her 'soul food,' giving her a reason to live:

You's are my soul food, you's are my everything. You's are what keep me going." We do wananga. We serve the community. And it's given me a purpose to live. I've never wanted to live before, but now I just want to keep on living. I want to heal myself to help heal others. That's what it's about.

This photo and Belle's reflections combine several interconnected themes of empowerment and resistance, whereby sisterhood and solidarity is embodied, and resilience born from systemic injustice and trauma. Through this image, Belle illustrates how her journey within Wāhine Toa has given her a sense of belonging and a purpose to live and heal. It reflects how the solidarity and support she finds in this sisterhood have been instrumental in helping her overcome the trauma she experienced, offering an alternative narrative to the often negative societal perceptions of gangs. This sisterhood has empowered her not only to survive but also to thrive, and in turn, she is now committed to helping others heal as she continues her own journey of healing.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Reflecting on Key Issues

This research explored the lived experiences of wāhine in Wāhine Toa, centering their voices to address the overarching question: *How do the lived experiences of women in the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa Movement inform dominant narratives about women in gangs?* By engaging participatory and visual methods, the study revealed how these wāhine defy societal stereotypes of gang-affiliated women. Through a community psychology lens, the research offers a counter-narrative to traditional criminogenic approaches to gangs, which often adopt a deficit framing, marked by strategies of suppression, control, and enforcement under the umbrella of 'law and order' (Roguski & McBride-Henry, 2020). The findings highlight how the wāhine embody resilience, agency, and transformative journeys grounded in Māori principles of mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau. In contrast to traditional criminogenic frameworks, the research underscores Wāhine Toa as a transformative, empowering collective that fosters belonging, self-determination, and whānau-centered well-being. These wāhine stories resist societal stigma and affirm their roles as active change agents within their communities.

Reflecting on these narratives, it becomes clear that the intersection of multiple, complex social phenomena shapes the lived experiences of wāhine within Wāhine Toa. As Tamatea (2015) observes, this intersectionality is a fundamental feature across the gang landscape in Aotearoa. The wāhine stories reveal diverse life experiences influenced by systemic, historical, and personal challenges. These narratives are often intertwined with socio-economic hardship, stigma, marginalisation, and histories of trauma—factors that contribute to the broader context of their lives. However, what is equally evident in these stories is collective resilience and resistance, where wāhine reframe their circumstances as a

source of strength (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dennehy & Newbold, 2001; Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003).

To fully understand the significance of these experiences, the findings demonstrate that it is beneficial to move beyond criminogenic frameworks and adopt an ecological systems perspective. This perspective offers a holistic understanding of the multi-layered factors influencing gang dynamics. The study's findings align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), illustrating how various systems intersect to shape the experiences of wāhine in Wāhine Toa. For instance, the socio-economic challenges and histories of abuse faced by these wāhine at the micro-level are compounded by broader societal stigma and marginalisation at the macro-level. Additionally, policies that impact their communities at the exosystem level further exacerbate these lived realities. By taking a systems approach, the research highlights the need for support systems affirming wāhine agency, challenging stigma, and preventing further marginalisation.

This analysis reveals the complexity of the wāhine lived experiences and reinforces the transformative potential of Wāhine Toa as a social movement. As the wāhine demonstrate, belonging to this collective enables them to reclaim their mana motuhake, find empowerment, and contribute to the collective well-being of their whānau and communities. Their stories not only challenge the dominant narratives about gang-affiliated women but also highlight the need for a more nuanced and supportive understanding of gang culture in Aotearoa.

Navigating Stigma and Empowerment Through Group Identity

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers an insightful lens in understanding how the wāhine of Wāhine Toa navigate stigma, marginalisation, and empowerment through their affiliation with the Mongrel Mob. According to this theory, individuals derive significant aspects of their self-concept from their group memberships,

shaping how they see themselves and how others see them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this study, the wāhine experience of stigma - due to their gang affiliation - parallels the historical patterns of marginalisation faced by ethnic minority communities in different global contexts.

Drawing on research by Vigil (2002), which explores how marginalised communities in Los Angeles were historically segregated due to racial and socio-economic factors, we can see parallels in Aotearoa. In Los Angeles, immigrants were often pushed into low-paying jobs and isolated into segregated neighbourhoods, resulting in limited access to essential resources needed for upward mobility. The desire to live among people of similar backgrounds, combined with racist attitudes from the dominant group, compounded their marginalisation (Vigil, 2002). In Aotearoa, this theme of marginalisation manifests in different yet related ways, primarily influenced by the colonial history and the urban drift of Indigenous Māori communities (Roguski, 2019). Similar to the immigrant communities in Los Angeles, Māori in New Zealand were subjected to historical displacements, forced migrations, and the erosion of their traditional ways of life through colonisation. This displacement led many Māori to urban centers searching for employment, where they encountered poor housing conditions, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to resources. These structural disadvantages have left many Māori communities marginalised, particularly in working-class areas, contributing to the development of gangs as a way for individuals to find belonging, protection, and collective identity (Andrae et al., 2017).

In the context of Māori gang formations, there is a similar search for solidarity, particularly among Māori men, but also among Māori wāhine, as is seen in the formation of Wāhine Toa. While much of Aotearoa's gang literature has focused on the experiences of men (Bradley, 2022; Breetzke et al., 2022; Gerrard et al., 2023; Gilbert, 2013; Roguski, 2019; Shillian, 2012; Tamatea, 2015; Tamatea, 2018; Tamatea & Henry, 2024), this research can be expanded to understand how wāhine experience marginalisation differently. The wāhine of

Wāhine Toa find strength in their shared experiences of trauma and struggle, which aligns with the principles of mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau. Their solidarity is rooted in their desire to build better futures for themselves and their tamariki and mokopuna, positioning Wāhine Toa as both a resistance to societal labels and a movement of empowerment.

This drive for betterment and collective resilience reflects a broader framework of marginalisation and the creation of identity within oppressed communities. Similar to Vigil's (2002) argument that gang formation is a response to exclusion and poverty, the wāhine in Wāhine Toa reframe their marginalisation as a source of strength. They seek to break the cycle of trauma and stigmatisation by asserting their autonomy, challenging stereotypes, and fostering a sense of pride and unity that resists the negative labels imposed upon them. For the wāhine of Wāhine Toa, their group affiliation serves as both a response to these societal exclusions and a form of collective empowerment. Esmeralda's statement, "The biggest empowering thing is actually getting someone to understand that we're not thugs. That's huge," reflects this process of challenging external assumptions and reshaping public perception. By asserting their identity as wāhine in the Mongrel Mob, these women resist the stigmatisation imposed by society, much like marginalised groups in other parts of the world have used collective identity to reclaim their dignity and humanity. As Esmeralda notes, "If they'd just stop and see how much we are doing... and how intelligent some of these women are," she highlights a central aspect of empowerment: resisting the narrative that casts them as inferior or unworthy. In doing so, they assert their mana motuhake and mana wāhine, emphasizing their autonomy, intelligence, and hard work.

Social identity theory, in this context, helps explain how stigma and empowerment can coexist. Despite being labelled by society as "outsiders," the wāhine find strength within Wāhine Toa, using their group affiliation as a tool for solidarity and resistance. Their

collective identity allows them to combat the stereotypes that limit their opportunities and reshape the dominant narrative about their worth. Just as marginalised groups around the world have found empowerment through group solidarity, so too do the wāhine of Wāhine Toa reclaim their identity and, in doing so, transform their sense of belonging and self-worth.

An Ecological Approach to Stigma: The Interconnectedness of Systems

Introducing Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in the context of stigma provides a useful framework for understanding how stigma operates across multiple levels of influence, particularly when linked to criminogenic approaches. Criminogenic perspectives often simplify gang affiliation into a deficit model, focusing on negative behaviours and attributes, such as criminality, exclusion, and marginalisation (Roguski, 2019). In this context, stigma can be seen as a byproduct of these reductive frameworks, reinforcing negative assumptions and societal stereotypes. However, understanding stigma through Bronfenbrenner's theory allows for a more nuanced exploration of how stigma is not just an individual experience, but one that is shaped by broader systemic factors.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides a framework for analysing how stigma operates across interconnected systems. At the microsystem level, wāhine face stigma in their interpersonal relationships with colleagues, family, and community members. At the mesosystem level, the interactions between their work environments and social circles often exacerbate feelings of exclusion and alienation. Finally, at the macrosystem level, systemic stigma is perpetuated by societal norms, policies, and cultural narratives that fail to recognise the wāhine as multidimensional individuals with rich cultural identities. This ecological framework highlights the need to understand stigma at all levels of influence, from personal encounters to societal structures, and offers a counter-narrative to criminogenic perspectives that emphasize suppression and control.

Stigma, therefore, operates within these interconnected systems, impacting both wāhine personal lives and professional roles. Several wāhine spoke of the barriers stigma created in their workplaces, where they felt judged or undervalued due to societal assumptions about gang affiliation. This systemic stigma reflects broader structural inequities, as institutions and policies often perpetuate negative perceptions and unequal treatment of marginalized groups (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013). For example, CJ shared how her commitment to working with gang whānau led to unfair discrimination in her workplace. A media article, later found to be incorrect, caused her to lose credibility, significantly affecting her work life despite her qualifications and dedication. This aligns with Link and Phelan's (2001) assertion that stigma operates by labelling and separating individuals, associating them with undesirable characteristics, and creating justification for their devaluation and exclusion. Major and O'Brien (2005) further highlight that such processes reinforce inequities by lowering the status of those who are stigmatised, perpetuating social hierarchies and exclusion.

Stigma is not merely a personal challenge but a systemic issue that requires systemic solutions. An ecological approach that addresses stigma at multiple levels—such as public education campaigns to reduce stereotypes, workplace policies that promote inclusivity, and institutional reforms to counter systemic marginalisation and discrimination—can help create a society where wāhine feel valued and understood. Link and Phelan (2001) suggest that effectively addressing stigma requires interventions that fundamentally transform attitudes and beliefs or disrupt the power dynamics that enable dominant groups to act on discriminatory attitudes. By fostering mana motuhake and whānau-based support, such initiatives can empower wāhine to navigate and resist stigma more effectively while contributing to broader societal change.

While stigma profoundly affects the wāhine sense of self and their interactions with society, it is within Wāhine Toa that they find a powerful antidote: a sense of belonging, purpose, and solidarity. This collective space enables wāhine to reclaim their mana motuhake and resist the stigmatizing narratives imposed on them, thus fostering a renewed sense of agency and self-determination.

Belonging and Empowerment

A central theme emerging from the wāhine narratives is the importance of belonging. Wāhine Toa functions as a collective providing connection, safety, and acceptance, particularly for wāhine who have been marginalised or excluded from society. For many of the wāhine, belonging to Wāhine Toa restored their sense of whānau and mana motuhake.

The findings of this study correspond with community psychology's emphasis on contextualized, strengths-based approaches (Riemer et al., 2020). By reframing Wāhine Toa as a site of belonging and empowerment, this research offers a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant criminogenic lens often imposed on gang-affiliated individuals. This perspective is essential in community psychology, which advocates for a more holistic and strengths-based approach to understanding marginalised groups.

For example, the wāhine discussed how the collective provides support systems often absent from mainstream services, emphasising that Wāhine Toa is not simply a gang but a movement that fosters healing, self-determination, and well-being. This aligns with the community psychology principle of empowering individuals and communities by recognising and building upon their strengths rather than focusing on deficits (Prilleltensky, 2001). The wāhine experiences highlight the importance of community as a source of resilience and solidarity, offering a powerful counterpoint to the stigmatising narratives often accompanying gang affiliations.

The narratives shared by the wāhine highlight the influential role of sisterhood and solidarity within the Wāhine Toa community. The wāhine describe Wāhine Toa as integral to shaping their sense of identity and purpose. This corresponds with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), which posits that connection and belonging are foundational to individual well-being. For the wāhine, Wāhine Toa extends beyond a gang affiliation; it functions as a supportive community that uplifts them and provides a space to strive to be their best selves—for themselves and their whānau.

Gangs, while often framed negatively within societal discourses, can also serve as critical sources of belonging for individuals who experience marginalisation or exclusion from dominant societal structures (Davis, 2022). The formation of Wāhine Toa can be understood as a response to these exclusions, creating a space for wāhine to connect, uplift one another, and resist societal judgments. Durie (1998) highlights how group affiliation can enhance well-being by fostering connection and support, particularly when such groups offer personal growth and empowerment opportunities. The wāhine experiences within Wāhine Toa illustrate these principles, demonstrating how collective solidarity can nurture individual and group resilience.

The findings counter dominant public perceptions of ‘gang women,’ which are often rooted in deficit-based stereotypes. The wāhine narratives demonstrate that, while affiliated with a gang, their lives reflect broader societal experiences of womanhood. Many are mothers balancing caregiving responsibilities and employment, while others actively pursue education and personal goals. These accounts reveal aspirations for themselves and their tamariki, emphasising their commitment to breaking cycles of hardship and creating better futures for their whānau. The wāhine strong connections to Māori culture further underscore their pride in their identity and their embodiment of mana motuhake. Additionally, the wāhine roles within their whānau reflect the concept of mana whānau, which highlights the importance of

family and collective well-being. Their commitment to fostering a supportive, resilient whānau is a source of empowerment, offering personal fulfilment and strength to their communities. These lived realities offer a counter-narrative to dominant stereotypes, presenting the wāhine not as deviants but as empowered individuals asserting their right to live authentically.

The establishment of Wāhine Toa also reflects a deliberate focus on creating safer spaces for wāhine and their communities. This challenges mainstream narratives that associate gangs exclusively with criminality, instead foregrounding the wāhine emphasis on empowerment, connection, and community well-being. A recurring theme within the narratives is the wāhine drive to provide the support they often lacked during their formative years. This focus on giving back to their communities reflects both resilience and the power of solidarity.

Solidarity within Wāhine Toa is intricately linked with empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 1995), which suggests that individuals and groups can enhance their sense of agency and well-being through supportive and empowering communities. The wāhine involvement in Wāhine Toa serves as a mechanism for reclaiming their narratives and resisting external stigma. By asserting their mana motuhake, they actively challenge societal expectations and internalised deficit-based discourses. The embodiment of mana wāhine also emerges as central to their agency.

Rappaport (1977) underscores the importance of understanding naturally occurring support systems, stating:

In the future [we] will need to study, experience, and understand...the communities and naturally occurring helping systems that evolve in families, neighbourhoods, and social networks in which people find meaning in life and a psychological sense of community. By understanding these systems we may be able to do more to provide alternatives for those

who do not ‘fit in’ than by trying to force such people into the existing limited options developed under professional control (p. 8).

The findings of this study reflect Rappaport’s perspective, as Wāhine Toa operates not merely as a gang but as a movement for collective empowerment and cultural reclamation. It offers a vital alternative to mainstream services that often fail to accommodate the wāhine needs or experiences. Wāhine Toa positions wāhine as active agents in their lives and communities, fostering belonging, self-determination, and well-being.

Reclaiming Mana Wāhine Through Social Movement

The Wāhine Toa movement is both a reclamation of mana wāhine and a contemporary social movement addressing systemic inequities and colonial legacies. Historically, mana wāhine affirmed the authority, leadership, and spiritual essence of Māori women, rooted in cosmological and cultural traditions (Duff, 2021; Stewart, 2021). Women held roles as leaders, negotiators, and guardians of whakapapa, with their contributions central to the collective well-being of Māori society. This balance was disrupted by colonisation, which imposed patriarchal norms that marginalized Māori women and diminished their status within their own communities (Mikaere, 2022). The Wāhine Toa movement seeks to restore this traditional mana wāhine. Through acts of cultural reclamation, such as asserting leadership in whānau and community contexts, Wāhine Toa embodies the principles of mana wāhine in practice. For example, wāhine participants in this research used photography to connect their experiences with concepts like mana whānau and mana wāhine, anchoring their narratives in traditional and contemporary Māori frameworks.

The Wāhine Toa movement aligns with global social movements that challenge systemic injustices and redefine marginalised identities. For example, in 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi founded Black Lives Matter (#BLM) to confront police violence and anti-Black racism, creating a platform for collective advocacy and

empowerment (Black Lives Matter, 2017). Similarly, Wāhine Toa is rooted in reclaiming identity and addressing systemic oppression, amplifying the voices of wāhine as cultural and social change agents. Like BLM and other feminist movements, Wāhine Toa resists systemic inequities and advocates for equity through grassroots activism and cultural reclamation. This mirrors the transformative potential of movements such as Black Power, which Davis (2022) highlights as vital for reshaping societal narratives and reclaiming marginalised identities.

Wāhine Toa challenges deficit-based discourses that depict gang-affiliated Māori women as lacking agency, instead reframing them as leaders, caregivers, and advocates for social justice. Their Treaty of Waitangi claim exemplifies this activism, directly addressing systemic discrimination and intergenerational trauma (Harris, 2020). Through the principles of mana motuhake and mana wāhine, Wāhine Toa builds on the rich history of social movements that transform individual and collective identities, highlighting their role as cultural and social change agents. This dual role as a cultural reclamation initiative and a broader social movement positions Wāhine Toa as a powerful change agent. By integrating mana wāhine into their advocacy, the wāhine demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of Māori values in confronting contemporary challenges. Their movement exemplifies the principles of mana motuhake, blending Indigenous knowledge systems with participatory approaches to advance cultural and societal transformation (Mikaere, 2022).

Integrating these concepts creates a dynamic narrative showing how Wāhine Toa operates at the intersection of cultural revival and global activism. This structure avoids repetition by framing mana wāhine as the foundation and Wāhine Toa as its modern embodiment within a social movement context.

Limitations and Challenges

This research encountered several constraints that impacted the full realisation of its intended methodology. The primary challenges were time, financial limitations, and logistical

restraints, particularly in conducting a robust Photovoice approach. Despite these barriers, the study was able to generate meaningful insights, though future research could expand on these areas with greater resources and flexibility.

Logistical Restraints

This research sought to capture the depth and breadth of the wāhine experiences through an authentic Photovoice approach. However, due to the constraints inherent in a Masters project—particularly the limited timeframe—this research could not fully honour the intended process and potential of Photovoice. While Photovoice was included as a secondary data source, its power to provide a rich, layered dimension to the research was somewhat curtailed by time and logistical limitations. Nevertheless, the photographs selected by the wāhine and their reflections contributed a unique visual and emotional layer to the findings from the semi-structured interviews, enhancing the depth of the narratives shared and capturing perspectives that text alone could not convey.

Financial limitations also posed significant challenges. Conducting Photovoice research with participants dispersed across various locations required resources for travel, accommodations, and technology—funds not fully available for this project. These financial constraints, coupled with the dispersed locations of the wāhine, restricted the capacity to engage with the Photovoice method fully.

Time proved to be the most significant barrier. The photovoice method thrives when it allows participants to deeply explore, reflect on, and share their experiences. Future research could address these limitations by adopting an immersive methodology, as demonstrated by Dr. Robert Henry, who travelled alongside participants to capture their selected photographs (Henry & Gabel, 2019). This approach allows for active, real-time engagement, building rapport, and creating opportunities for shared storytelling. This method aligns more closely with the original Photovoice principles developed by Wang and Burris

(1997), which emphasize participant empowerment in representing their experiences. An immersive approach would allow researchers and participants to co-create the narrative in real-time, enhancing the authenticity and depth of the Photovoice process.

While the current project achieved meaningful insights, an extended timeline and increased resources could allow for a more comprehensive exploration of the wāhine experiences, capturing a fuller, richer perspective on their lives and stories.

Working with a Hard-to-Reach Community

Engaging with Wāhine Toa, a hard-to-reach community, presented unique challenges and invaluable learning opportunities. Wāhine Toa are hard to reach for good reasons; many have been let down by structural systems and remain cautious when engaging with outsiders. Initially, there was wariness about participating in the research. However, building a relationship with Paula, our community advisor, supported my ability to connect with the wāhine and begin fostering trust.

Despite this foundation, some wāhine remained reserved, highlighting the importance of building meaningful relationships and trust. If conducting the research again, I would ensure that all interviews were done face-to-face. This approach would strengthen rapport, creating a stronger connection that might encourage greater engagement with the Photovoice element. It is important to note that many of the wāhine live in survivance mode, where meeting immediate needs often takes precedence. Understandably, engaging with a researcher was not always a priority for them.

While these dynamics posed challenges, they also underscored the importance of conducting ethical research with hard-to-reach communities. The experience provided opportunities to embody principles of manaakitanga and respect for the wāhine lived realities, emphasizing the importance of relationship-building. Approaching the wāhine with genuine care and respect helped navigate these challenges and created a space where their voices

could be shared authentically. This highlights the critical need for researchers to prioritize trust and relationship-building when working with hard-to-reach communities. By engaging ethically and collaboratively, researchers can ensure that the research process honours the mana of participants while fostering more profound and meaningful insights.

Strengths

The principles of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility, as articulated by Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001), provide an essential framework for engaging meaningfully with Indigenous peoples and communities. Within the context of this research with Wāhine Toa, these principles underpinned my relational approach and were critical in building trust. This relational foundation created a respectful and safe environment where the wāhine felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Trust, however, is not granted automatically but earned through intentional efforts to engage ethically and relationally. By centering these principles, the research prioritised meaningful connections, allowing the wāhine to determine the depth of their participation while fostering safety and agency. As a researcher, I was mindful of my position as an outsider entering a space where outsiders are not always welcome, and a degree of guardedness was to be expected. While I never encountered overt feelings of being unwelcome, some of the wāhine were understandably cautious at the beginning of our engagement.

This guardedness highlights the importance of respecting relational boundaries and acknowledging what was not said. While the wāhine shared significant insights into their lived experiences, certain sensitive topics, such as gender roles, were not explored in depth. This cautious sharing reflects the agency of the wāhine to decide how much to disclose, aligning with ethical research practices that prioritise relational trust. Some wāhine spoke of shifts in gender dynamics while others noted that tāne continue to harm their wāhine,

pointing to ongoing challenges. Such careful disclosures demonstrate the significance of creating spaces where participants feel empowered to share at their own pace.

The consideration of silence or guardedness speaks to the relational dynamics at play and the need for ongoing trust-building. While the principles of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility helped foster a safe and welcoming environment, full trust cannot be assumed, particularly when working with communities that historically faced harm and misrepresentation. Acknowledging these silences reflects an ethical approach that honours and protects the wāhine narratives, respecting their agency to share or withhold as they see fit. Recognising what was not shared is as important as acknowledging what was. These silences point to systemic and relational complexities that warrant deeper exploration, while also affirming the importance of sustained relationships over time. By prioritising respectful and reciprocal engagement, this research lays a foundation for future work, where wāhine may feel ready to engage more deeply with sensitive topics. Identifying these gaps without imposing or extracting further information reflects a commitment to ethical integrity and relational care.

In addition to respecting boundaries and fostering relational trust, the research was strengthened by meaningful community engagement. This process was supported by individuals who brought valuable expertise and connections to the research. My community advisor, Paula, played an integral role in facilitating relationships and providing guidance throughout, ensuring the research remained grounded in the realities of the wāhine experiences. Further support came from Dr. Robert Henry, an expert in Photovoice research with gang communities in Canada, whose insights informed and enhanced the research process. Additionally, the knowledge and experience of my supervisor, whose work has focused on gang research in the Aotearoa context, ensured the research aligned with culturally and ethically appropriate practices.

The involvement of these trusted individuals demonstrated a commitment to relational ethical principles, ensuring that the research remained grounded, respectful, and reflective of community-informed perspectives. Their contributions supported the process of engaging with the wāhine and reinforced the importance of working alongside the right people to navigate the complexities of this research context. This approach reflects a deeper engagement with community as partners rather than subjects, further underscoring the integrity of the research process.

Future Research

Building on this study, multiple avenues for future research could deepen the understanding of gang-affiliated wāhine, tāne, and their broader communities, ultimately contributing to culturally informed and respectful support practices.

One potential area of focus is exploring the experiences of tāne within gang communities to provide a fuller understanding of gendered roles, resilience, and challenges. Future research could examine the impact of systemic trauma, social stigma, and cultural identity on tāne, employing an ethnographic approach to foster a nuanced understanding of how they navigate social and structural challenges within gang culture. Similarly, a longitudinal study on the effects of gang affiliation on whānau and the wider community could offer valuable insights into intergenerational trauma, resilience, and healing, guiding the development of long-term, culturally sensitive support services.

Further research could also focus on the mental health challenges faced by both wāhine and tāne, particularly in relation to anxiety, depression, and intergenerational trauma. Identifying the mental health needs specific to gang-affiliated individuals would support the development of culturally responsive, trauma-informed services. Additionally, evaluating existing culturally grounded interventions—particularly those aligned with Mātauranga

Māori and Te Tiriti principles—could help refine best practices that foster better mental health, personal empowerment, and positive social outcomes.

Another valuable research direction is exploring identity transformation within gang life, including the processes of joining, being part of, and potentially leaving gang affiliations. Research could examine how gang involvement shapes identity through belonging, cultural connections, and self-determination. Methods such as Photovoice or narrative storytelling could document these transformations, providing deeper insights into the personal and social factors influencing these shifts. Relatedly, examining the role of whakapapa (genealogy) and cultural identity in gang affiliation could offer a better understanding of how traditional values and ancestral ties shape an individual's decision to join or remain in a gang. This knowledge could inform interventions that utilize cultural strengths to foster personal growth and community healing.

These future directions offer meaningful pathways to build on this study, with the potential to inform policies, develop targeted interventions, and promote culturally respectful practices that support individuals and communities associated with gang culture.

Implications

Based on the findings of this research and the insights shared by the wāhine, several key implications emerge for supporting gang-affiliated individuals and their whānau, while fostering understanding and reducing stigma within the broader community. Grounded in a community psychology approach and informed by an ecological perspective, these implications emphasize the importance of collaboration with gang whānau to ensure their voices, experiences, and expertise guide meaningful change. Authentic engagement with those most impacted has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of public services, offer a counter-narrative to negative perceptions surrounding gang culture, and address the social,

cultural, and systemic factors influencing gang involvement. Recognising that gang whānau hold the knowledge and capacity to support their communities, these implications prioritise approaches that avoid perpetuating power imbalances. Implementing such strategies contributes to building resilient, inclusive, and empowered communities.

1. **Gang Cultural Training for Public Services:** Comprehensive gang cultural training would benefit public services, including the police, Oranga Tamariki, and the Family Court. It would enhance understanding and equip professionals to engage effectively and respectfully with gang-affiliated whānau.
2. **Authentic Community Engagement:** Effective engagement requires building relationships grounded in trust, respect, and transparency. Prioritising authentic dialogue with gang whānau can lead to more impactful support systems.
3. **Tailored Mental Health Support:** Culturally responsive and accessible mental health services are needed to address the unique challenges faced by gang-affiliated individuals, including trauma and stigma.
4. **Collaborative Research Partnerships:** Ongoing research prioritising collaboration with gang whānau can amplify their voices and inform policies and interventions reflecting their lived realities.
5. **Youth Development Programmes:** Programmes focusing on mentorship, leadership, and skill development can provide positive pathways for rangatahi in gang-affected communities.
6. **Incorporating Māori Cultural Perspectives:** Ensuring that interventions align with Māori cultural values and practices enhances their relevance, trust, and impact within gang whānau communities.
7. **Increased Funding for Community Initiatives:** Greater investment in community-led initiatives, including trauma healing workshops and wānanga, can foster healing,

empowerment, and resilience among gang whānau. Gerrard et al. (2023) argue, “If the goal is to reduce harm, communities need to be empowerment to create programmes catered to their specific needs” (Gerrard et al., 2023, p. 61).

8. **Access to Trauma Healing Workshops:** Facilitating access to trauma healing initiatives is critical for fostering well-being and connection within gang-affiliated communities.

These implications provide pathways to address systemic barriers, reduce stigma, and support gang-affiliated whānau in ways that are grounded in their realities and strengths. Public services and organizations can contribute to more inclusive and empowered communities by prioritising collaboration, cultural responsiveness, and meaningful engagement.

Conclusion

This research explored the lived experiences of wāhine in Wāhine Toa, addressing the overarching question: *How do these experiences inform dominant narratives about women in gangs?* By challenging stigmatising stereotypes and amplifying wāhine voices, the study sought to illuminate themes of stigma, empowerment, and mana principles, guided by a participatory action research informed methodology. Through semi-structured interviews and the photovoice method, the study co-created knowledge with the wāhine, providing a platform for their stories to be shared authentically.

The findings reveal that the wāhine actively challenge dominant narratives about women in gangs, presenting stories of resilience, community, and survivance. Their experiences highlight the protective and empowering aspects of their gang affiliation, as well as the persistent stigma and socio-economic challenges they face. Mana principles, such as mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau, emerged as central to their identity and self-determination. Although constrained by the project's scope, the photovoice method added a powerful visual and emotional dimension, illustrating their personal and collective aspirations.

This research contributes significantly to the literature by centering wāhine voices in a context often dominated by deficit-focused perspectives. It aligns with Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles and Mātauranga Māori by respecting the wāhine as knowledge holders and co-creators in the research process. The study also advances participatory methodologies and community psychology approaches by emphasising relationship-building, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration.

The findings carry important implications for policy and practice. Context-sensitive interventions that respect gang whānau as key contributors are essential for fostering well-being and empowerment. Public services must engage authentically with gang-affiliated

individuals and communities, recognising their agency and leadership. Theoretically, the research underscores the interplay between individual and systemic factors, as articulated in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and deepens understanding of survivance within Indigenous contexts.

While the research achieved meaningful insights, limitations such as time constraints, financial challenges, and participants' dispersed locations shaped its scope. Building relationships with wāhine, particularly in a hard-to-reach community, was both a challenge and a strength, underscoring the importance of trust and ethical engagement. Future research could adopt more immersive and longitudinal approaches, such as traveling alongside participants during photovoice missions, to deepen the richness of the narratives captured.

This thesis concludes by reaffirming the importance of centering marginalised voices in research. By amplifying the stories of wāhine in Wāhine Toa, this research highlights their resilience and transformative potential, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of gang communities. Moving forward, these findings can inspire more inclusive and respectful research, policy, and practice approaches, fostering an environment where all voices are heard and valued.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Are you a wāhine who is a member of the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa?

We Want to Hear Your Voice!

ABOUT THE RESEARCH:

Join us in shaping the future of gang-affiliated research by sharing your unique experiences and perspectives.

This research aims to shed light on the lived experiences of women within the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa chapter, providing valuable insights into gang dynamics, community psychology, and empowerment.

This transformative research is a collaborative journey, embracing Participatory Action Research and photovoice methodologies to honour your voices and lived experiences.

Together, we delve into the heart of your narratives through photography and in-depth interviews, exploring empowerment, challenges, and informing prevailing narratives.

YOUR CONTRIBUTION AND RIGHTS:

- Your involvement is **voluntary**, and you have the **right to withdraw** at any time.
- Your **confidentiality** will be maintained throughout the research process.
- Your **consent** will be obtained before participating in any aspect of the research.
- Your contribution will enrich our understanding of women's experiences within the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa and gang literature in Aotearoa, New Zealand.
- You will guide interventions fostering positive change and empowerment within your community.
- Participation involves confidential interviews with researcher Annaliese Arnold, utilizing photography to tell your story.
- You will receive food and refreshments during the interviews, and a \$30 Prezzy card as a koha.
- You have the option to receive a copy of your transcript.



JOIN US

If you would like to participate, contact Annaliese:

annaliesearnold11@gmail.com

NEXT STEPS:

1. Annaliese will provide you with a sign up form to complete.
2. Annaliese will be in contact to arrange the first initial interview.



ANNALIESE ARNOLD

Principal Researcher

My Why:

At the heart of my mission is uplifting others. I believe everyone's story matters. As a connector, I empower hard to reach communities to share their lived experiences. Let's advocate for social justice and positive change together.

Appendix B: Research Information Sheet

What is the research about?

The research aims to explore the lived experiences of women in the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa chapter, using participatory action research and photovoice methodologies to understand their impact on dominant narratives within gang culture.

The main goal of this research is to give you, as women in the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa, a chance to share your stories and insights. We want to understand what your life is like in gangs here in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This study is unique because it focuses on the first all-female chapter of the Mongrel Mob, where you can tell us about the challenges you face and ways you feel empowered within your community.

By hearing your experiences, we hope to learn more about what it's like to be a woman in a gang and how your stories fit into the bigger picture of gang life in New Zealand.

Ultimately, we want to paint a clearer picture of what life is like for you and how your experiences can help us understand gangs better.

Can you explain the research methodology being used in this study?

In this study, Annaliese is using a method called participatory action research along with a technique called photovoice. Participatory action research means that the people involved in the research, which includes you, play an active role in the research.

Photovoice is a way for participants to express their thoughts and experiences through photographs they take themselves. By combining these methods, Annaliese hopes to create a space where you as the participant can share your stories in a way that's meaningful to you and helps us all learn more about your lives and community.

Who are the researchers?

The principal researcher is Annaliese Arnold, supervised by Dr. Armon Tamatea (Rongowhakāta; Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki).

Why am I being asked to participate in these interviews?

Your participation in the interviews will contribute valuable insights to the research, helping to deepen the understanding of women's experiences within the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa

chapter and inform interventions aimed at fostering positive change and empowerment within the community.

What will you ask about in the interview?

The interview will cover topics related to your experiences within the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa, including challenges, empowerment, cultural manifestations (mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau), and personal stories.

How many interviews will there be?

There will be two interviews, each lasting approximately 90 minutes.

The first interview, aims to build relationships, discuss overarching research questions, and prepare participants for the forthcoming Photovoice process and photography mission.

Following the first interview, you will engage in a photography mission over a two-week period, capturing images based on provided prompts.

The second interview, conducted after the photography mission, focuses on discussing the photos you selected and delving deeper into their meanings and significance.

What will happen to my information?

Your interview conversations will be audio-taped, transcribed, and used as data in Annaliese's thesis. Your information will be securely stored, and pseudonyms will be assigned to safeguard confidentiality. You can withdraw from the project within three weeks after the second interview if you choose not to receive a copy of your transcript.

Will other people know who I am if I participate?

By default, pseudonyms will be assigned to maintain anonymity. If you prefer not to remain anonymous, your preferences will be discussed with you to decide how you wish to be represented in the research.

What if I agree to participate and then change my mind?

If you agree to participate and later decide to withdraw, you can do so within three weeks after the second interview if you choose not to receive a copy of your transcript. If you opt to receive a copy of your transcript, you can withdraw within three weeks after receiving it.

Simply send an email to Annaliese, provide your name, and she will remove your information. However, once data analysis has begun, it may not be possible to easily remove

or separate your information. Still, Annaliese will do her best to accommodate any changes in participation.

How can I find out about the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the research project, there will be a hui where Annaliese will outline the research findings and engage in dialogue about the research process with participants and their wider community.

Who can I speak with about my participation in this project?

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this project, you can contact Annaliese, the Principal Researcher.

Alternatively, you can reach out to Dr. Armon Tamatea, who is Annaliese's supervisor, for assistance or clarification.

Dr. Oleg Medvedev serves as the Convenor of the Division of Arts, Law, Psychology, & Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato and can also address any inquiries you may have regarding your involvement in the research. Contact details for Annaliese, Dr. Armon Tamatea, and Dr. Oleg Medvedev are provided below.

Will I be asked to sign anything?

Yes, you will be asked to fill out an ethical consent form at the start of the interview process, which includes options to review the transcription and receive a digital copy of the final report.

What do I need to do now?

If you're interested in participating, please inform Annaliese, who will arrange a meeting to discuss the next steps with the research participants.

Contact details

Annaliese (principal researcher)

ams31@students.waikato.ac.nz

Dr Armon Tamatea (research supervisor)

tamatea@waikato.ac.nz

Dr Oleg Medvedev (convenor of ALPSS committee)

oleg.medvedev@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix C: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW, PSYCHOLOGY, AND 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 been invited to participate in research conducted by Annaliese Arnold in the Masters of Applied Psychology - Community Psychology Thesis Programme at the University of Waikato.

By signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of and understanding of the Subject Matter Expert Information Sheet about the research. I am committed to following the photovoice guidelines. I understand that my participation in the research is voluntary, and I am under no obligation to continue if I choose to withdraw at any point. I have been invited to have a support person in the interview process. I can inquire about the research during my participation and have a two-week window after receiving my transcript to withdraw if I no longer wish to participate.

I understand that the interviews are confidential. During the interviews, I can decline to answer questions, stop at any time, and request to turn off the recording device. I retain ownership of my interview contribution but consent to its use for research purposes outlined in the Information Sheet.

Please complete the following checklist. Tick the appropriate box for each point.	YES	NO
I wish to view the interview transcript.		
I agree to have my interview transcribed by a third-party service (rev.com).		
I wish to receive a copy of the findings.		
I wish to have a support person/s with me during the interviews.		

Participant : _____
Signature : _____
Date : _____

Researcher : _____
Signature : _____
Date : _____

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Introduction:

Introduce yourself (who you are, where you are from). Briefly outline how the interview will be structured:

- Interview Overview
- Gain consent – interview to be recorded
- Gain consent – verbal/written
- Karakia
- Opening Questions – building whanaungatanga
- Main Questions – relate to key research themes
- Concluding Questions
- Explanation of the next steps – photography mission
- Karakia

Interview Overview:

Before we proceed with the interview, I want to emphasize that your consent is paramount. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you have the power to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. We respect your autonomy in this process.

The purpose of this interview is to have a conversation with you as a woman in the Mongrel Mob Wāhine Toa, to build whanaungatanga, ask questions relating to the main themes of the research, and go over the photo voice process.

This study is committed to respectfully and ethically exploring your lived experiences and perspectives as a woman within Wāhine Toa. We assure you that your confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly maintained throughout the research process, ensuring your security and protection.

Any information you provide will be exclusively used for this study's purposes and will remain confidential. The collected data will support academic endeavors, including thesis completion, scholarly publications, conference presentations, and dissemination during a hui with participants at the research's conclusion. Your consent will be sought before engaging in any public forums.

Additionally, if you feel uncomfortable or wish to pause or stop the conversation at any point during the interview, please don't hesitate to let me know. You can refuse to answer a

question or leave the interview anytime. This is your interview, and your comfort is our priority. Do you have any questions or concerns about the research or your participation before we proceed?

Go over the guidelines for the interviews:

- No right or wrong answer; this is your opportunity to share your perspectives through your lived experiences
- Mobile phones – silent/turn off if possible to reduce interferences

Opening Questions:

Understanding Expectations:

- What are your expectations or hopes for our discussion today?

Introduction:

- Can you please introduce yourself? Tell me about who you are and your background.
- Could you share about your family and community background?

Main Questions *NB: These questions will be asked depending on the time frame.*

Wāhine Toa Questions

1. Introduction to Wāhine Toa:

- How would you describe your journey leading up to your involvement in Wāhine Toa?
- What brings you to Wāhine Toa? How did you become involved in this movement?
- How long have you been a member of Wāhine Toa, and what initially attracted you to join?

2. Daily Life and Activities:

- Can you describe a day in your life?
- What are your roles and responsibilities within Wāhine Toa, and what has your experience been like?
- What challenges or opportunities have you faced in your role within Wāhine Toa?

3. Purpose and Values:

- What is the purpose of Wāhine Toa?
- What are the values within Wāhine Toa?
- How would you describe Wāhine Toa to an outsider?
- What does it mean to be a Wāhine Toa?

4. *Experience and Impact:*

- How has being part of this group impacted your life so far?
- Are there any specific experiences or moments within Wāhine Toa that have been particularly meaningful to you?
- Reflecting on your involvement in Wāhine Toa, what notable changes have occurred?
- Can you discuss any positive or empowering aspects of being part of Wāhine Toa?
- Conversely, what challenges have you faced since joining Wāhine Toa?

5. *Envisioning Future Directions for Wāhine Toa:*

- Looking ahead, what future directions or aspirations do you have for Wāhine Toa?
- How do you envision the growth and development of Wāhine Toa in the coming years?
- Are there any specific goals or initiatives you want to see implemented within the group?
- What legacy do you hope Wāhine Toa will leave behind?

Perception of Stigma and its Impacts:

- Is there a stigma attached to being affiliated with Wāhine Toa/MMK?
- In what ways do you experience stigma?
- How has this stigma impacted you personally and within Wāhine Toa?
- How can we destigmatise women in gangs/the mahi you do within Wāhine Toa?

Manifestation of Mana Motuhake, Mana Wāhine, and Mana Whānau:

I will briefly discuss each of these terms as I understand them*, then will ask:

- What does mana wāhine/mana whānau/mana motuhake mean to you?
- Who are some mana wāhine you look up to?
- How do you apply the principles of mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau within Wāhine Toa?
- Can you provide examples of instances where these principles have been demonstrated within the group?
- How do these principles influence your actions and decisions within Wāhine Toa?

****Mana Motuhake:***

Mana Motuhake embodies individuals' self-determination and autonomy, enabling them to shape their own destinies, foster personal growth, and exercise control over their lives.

Mana Whānau:

Mana Whānau encapsulates empowerment within the family unit, promoting well-being, cultural connections, and mutual trust while honouring differences and valuing each member's contribution

Mana Wāhine:

Mana Wāhine represents women's empowerment and well-being. It acknowledges their dignity, unique needs, and experiences and ensures their voices are heard, respected, and supported.

Concluding Questions:

1. What is the most important of all the things we discussed?
2. Based on our discussions, Is there anything else you'd like to say?
3. Do you want me to know anything we haven't touched on today?
4. How has this interview experience been for you today?

Next Steps – Photography Mission

I will now introduce you to the Photovoice process. Photovoice involves using photography as a tool for self-expression and storytelling. Over the next two weeks, you will be provided with a camera/or you can use your phone and prompts to guide you in capturing images that reflect your experiences and perspectives within your life and Wāhine Toa. You will capture between 5-10 images.

Instructions:

- Use the cameras provided to take photos that resonate with each prompt.
- Feel free to interpret the prompts uniquely and capture images reflecting your experiences and perspectives.
- Please focus on capturing images that reflect your personal experiences. For ethical reasons, please avoid capturing identifiable images, such as faces.
- Take your time over the next two weeks, explore different settings and moments that speak to each prompt.
- Once you've completed the photography mission, we'll discuss the photos you selected (minimum of 5 and up to 10) in detail during our second interview, exploring their meanings and significance together.
- Discuss the photography guidelines and give a copy to each wāhine.

Appendix E: Photo Topic Prompts – Photography Mission

As the Subject Matter Expert, you will be given a camera (or you can use your phone) to take up to 10 photos (minimum of 5) using the suggestions below to guide your photography. Once you have taken your photos, select the ones you wish to discuss and email them to Annaliese, [\[email address given\]](#). We will then arrange our second interview for you to discuss the images.

Image 1: *Daily Life*: Capture images that represent a day in your life. It could link to your home duties, mahi duties, or duties within Wāhine Toa.

Image 2: *Personal Stories*: Capture images that represent your personal experiences, struggles, and triumphs within Wāhine Toa/your life, providing insights into your individual journeys and perspectives.

Image 3: *Strength and Resilience*: Take photos that symbolize strength and resilience, showcasing moments of determination, perseverance, and overcoming challenges.

Image 4: *Sisterhood and Solidarity*: Capture moments of camaraderie and support among the women in Wāhine Toa, highlighting the importance of sisterhood and solidarity.

Image 5: *Perception of Stigma and its Impact*: Take photos illustrating moments where stigma is experienced. Document how stigma affects your interactions with your community, family, and the wider society. Show instances where you challenge or confront stigma through your actions or expressions.

Image 6: *Creating Safe Spaces*: Document spaces within Wāhine Toa/your life where you feel safe, supported, and empowered to express yourself freely without fear of judgment or discrimination.

Image 7: *Manifestations of Mana Motuhake, Mana Wāhine, and Mana Whānau*: Document instances where you may demonstrate self-determination, leadership, and resilience. Capture scenes highlighting strength, unity, and support among Wāhine Toa members and their families. Show how your understanding of mana motuhake, mana wāhine, and mana whānau has evolved through your participation in Wāhine Toa.

Image 8: *Changes Since Involvement with Wāhine Toa*: Capture moments that showcase your empowerment through your involvement with Wāhine Toa. Document challenges you may face within Wāhine Toa. Examples could include personal growth, conflict resolution, or community integration.

Image 9: *Aspirations and Dreams*: Capture moments that demonstrate your aspirations, goals, and dreams for the future of Wāhine Toa.