

Solo Motherhood and the State:
Precarity, Agency, and Post-
Development Discourse in Aotearoa
New Zealand

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Abstract

The rise of the ‘precariat’ under neoliberalism has garnered the attention of development studies scholars. Drawing on and contributing to this literature, in this thesis I explore the lived experiences of solo mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand and their own precarity in relation to a neoliberal State. Through interviewing seven self-identified solo mothers in the Greater Wellington region, in this thesis I explore solo mothers negotiations with the State through the following areas: state welfare, child support, employment, and housing. I outline how the State often exacerbates the precarity of the research participants, but also highlight the different tactics the participants employ to enact their agency and push back against the State. Shifting the discursive focus of Development Studies from the ‘Global South’ to the ‘Global North’, the experiences of the participants highlight the very real issues of inequality manifesting in the ‘developed’ setting. Informed by the visions of the participants and the wider literature, this research contributes to scholarship in gender post-development studies, illustrating the need for a comprehensive, socialistic welfare state, and to methodologically see value in localising development research in a way that accounts for local complexities. In opposition to neoliberal discourse, this thesis calls for the valorisation of care work, to better account for the competing responsibilities of solo mothers and to lessen the precarity they experience in their everyday lives.

Key words: precarity, solo motherhood, post-development, state welfare, agency, neoliberalism.

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Prelude

What's something about being a solo mother that you wish others would understand or appreciate?

“It's OK for mums to have time on their own.” – **Maia**

“All the work you do ... I think people have this bad thing about solo parents and I think the majority of them do a great job. You know, you do the best you can.” – **Emily**

“That it's really important work. The most important work. For people to value that work. Parenting in general – especially people who are trying to do it on their own: To value the importance of that.” – **Gemma**

“Just that it's hard. It's really hard. Don't get me wrong, I'm really proud of my kids. And I think I've raised two really good young people. But its been a hard slog. And it's been really difficult at times to tell them no ... and I would have liked to have given them more.” –

Madison

“The time and the energy – like you have to do everything by yourself. You don't have another person.” - **Rachel**

“Don't be judgey. Don't assume. 'Cause I get that all the time, I had a kid young ... And I dropped out of school and still managed to get through university and here I am ... It's like, actually you don't know the other side.” – **Aroha**

“I love my babies. But you know, doing it on your own is hard work ... It's always double the heartbreak. Double the pride.” - **Emma**

Chapter 1

Development Stories and Understanding Precarity

I wanted this research to be led by the voices and narratives of the women whose stories inspired this work. I wrote the prelude with this in mind, deciding to share the thoughts of Maia, Emily, Gemma, Madison, Rachel, Aroha and Emma,¹ when I asked my final question of them during the interviews. Their responses reflect commonality in experience, and in many ways speak to some of the demands of being a solo mother in Aotearoa New Zealand.² Between January and March 2020 I met with these seven individuals. While we discussed the various pressures of motherhood, we equally talked about their careers, education, and family. I heard about how they resiliently navigated relationships with the State and learnt about their visions for a more supported and valued motherhood experience.

I had initially embarked on this project exploring the lived experiences of solo motherhood after becoming increasingly disillusioned by the Development Studies field. Seeking to challenge the dichotomous relationship between the ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ world, I thought it prudent to turn the gaze inward and consider the persistent issues of inequality manifesting in my own community. Having been raised in a ‘split family’ and having an interest in feminist theory and post-development thought, I arrived at this thesis topic. Here, with the help of the aforementioned mothers, I explore the relationship between solo mothers and the State in Aotearoa New Zealand, including how this relationship may exacerbate precarity for this group.

In order to properly situate the stories of these participants in this thesis, I will first contextualise this topic within Development Studies and literature on precarity. In doing so, I seek to reposition the discussion of inequality and underdevelopment³ by turning the gaze

¹ Aliases have been used.

² In this thesis, I use the name “Aotearoa New Zealand”. This is to demonstrate the ongoing contentions between the indigenous (Māori) and the colonial (Pākehā) State. “Aotearoa” is used when discussing the pre-colonised nation.

³ I acknowledge the problematic nature of the terms ‘developing’, ‘developed’, and of course, ‘Third World’, ‘First World’ and ‘Global North’, ‘Global South’. These are “imagined geographies” (Power, 2003, p. 6) that perpetuate power imbalances and are iterative of a sense of Western superiority. While I therefore oppose the common place of these terms in development literature, engagement with such labels is necessary in this thesis, given its situation in post-development theory. For critical analysis of this terminology, see Berger (1994) and Sparke (2007).

inward to my home in Aotearoa New Zealand. I explore this by drawing on the critically grounded term ‘precariat’ in order to unpack the complexities of ‘underdevelopment’ as it occurs in Aotearoa New Zealand. This term is a neologism combining the words ‘precarious’ and the Marxist term ‘proletariat’, and is a term used to describe a growing group of people living in increasing insecurity and uncertainty, particularly within neoliberal societies (Standing, 2011). While academics argue there are as many as one in six ‘precariat’ in Aotearoa New Zealand, the degree of precarity varies depending on different factors of social and political exclusion (Cochrane, Stubbs, Rua, & Hodgetts, 2017). In this thesis I consider the manifestation of precarity among solo mothers and how the State has exacerbated this precarity, largely through neoliberal, capitalist policies. I consider how these policies are largely incompatible with the responsibilities of solo mothers and I question how we can collectively reimagine our systems and structures to better account for these duties. This is particularly with regard to child support, benefit support, housing, employment, and agency.

Two areas of scholarship within Development Studies inform this topic: gender and development, and post-development literature. While gender and development literature often analyses women’s precarity in the Global South, it perhaps fails to account for power dynamics between the developed and developing, instead often inadvertently reinforcing stigma and deficiency-like portrayals. Moreover, gender and development scholarship does not necessarily consider the power embedded within the very concept of ‘development’ and to assess women’s needs outside of a Western ontology. Post-development literature, on the other hand, seeks to challenge the colonial nature of development studies and this very portrayal of those living in the developing context. Scholars such as Pala (1977) and Mohanty (1991) for example, condemn the outsider characterisation of women in developing nations, and the monolithic representation it all too often entails. The suggestion of many post-development scholars is to therefore localise development, so as to return autonomy and to challenge the Western representation of the ‘other’. Bringing both gender and development and post-development theories together, I consider gendered issues of development within my own ‘localised’ context in Aotearoa New Zealand. I argue this gendered post-development lens is applicable to the precarity of women in this country by looking specifically at the lived experiences of solo mothers.

1.1 Gendering Development Studies

To situate the relevance of a gendered post-development perspective on this topic, I contextualise the gender and development literature. Women in Development (WID) came into popular use alongside modernisation theory in the early 1970s (Rathgeber, 1990). WID posited the notion that women in the Global South were being treated as “passive recipients” of aid and welfare, ignoring that these women should actually be participating in the labour force and helping to grow the market-based economy (Razavi & Miller, 1995, p. 4). This theory was expanded on in the latter half of the 1970s to Women and Development (WAD). While WID focused on getting women into paid labour, WAD paid more attention to structural inequalities reproduced via capitalism (Rathgeber, 1990). Informed by a Marxist lens, WAD is focused primarily on issues of class, noting that issues of underdevelopment, and the inequality of women, is largely an outcome of global capitalism. Gender in Development (GAD) emerged in the 1980s and criticised WAD’s apparent privileging of class over issues of gender and the patriarchy (Saunders, 2002). Seeking a more intersectional approach (see Crenshaw, 1989), GAD scholars urged development discourse and practice to focus more on interrelations of both gender *and* class. They also sought to acknowledge the difference between biological sex and gender, and further, the role of ethnicity, caste, religion, sexuality and disability within the systems of oppression (Rathgeber, 1990). GAD also took into account other forms of reproduction, both within the private and public sphere, particularly in its favouring toward state welfare. Saunders (2002) writes:

Ideologically, one of GAD’s most distinguishing characteristics is its socialistic (state welfare) orientation, which is to be differentiated from conventional welfarism. This partiality to state welfare arises out of its redistributive role, and the significance of state subsidies in such areas as education, healthcare, childcare, housing and pensions, the reduction of which augments the reproductive work burdens of women (p. 11).

GAD is commonly employed as a theoretical lens in development literature and research. Many GAD scholars have argued that this is necessary because for feminist development policies to exist, feminist values must underpin all aspects of development research (Gordon, 2019; Guha, 2019; Oliveira, 2019; Rouhani, 2019). As Jenkins, Narayanaswamy, and Sweetman (2019) argue, international development research has privileged largely male and Western understandings of society, family and the division of labour, which in turn has

reproduced a development practice which is inherently colonial in its ethos. It is for this reason that they point to the importance of a GAD approach to development research.

While this suggests that development research is problematic because it has been gender-blind and Eurocentric, such an argument fails to engage with the colonial discursive focus of the development field. Despite movements to capture an intersectional feminist approach, GAD literature continues to contribute to a discourse that upholds the ideological inference that Westerners are *developed*, and the rest, *developing*. They do so by predominantly focusing their scholarship on the problems of women in the Global South alone. This in turn, reinforces a narrative that inequality and poverty are only issues for women in the developing world while also exacerbating the negative representation of women in the Global South (see Mohanty, 1991). Meanwhile, in failing to consider issues of inequality and poverty in the developed context, notions of Western superiority are inherently inferred. It is for this reason that Western society should be critically reflecting on the development field and applying such theories to issues in the West.

1.2 Post-development and the West

Arguments such as the one presented above are affirmed by post-development scholars. Post-development scholars have noted that GAD theory in particular has largely remained gynocentric in focus, despite it purporting to be concerned with issues of gender (Saunders, 2002). Meanwhile, others have noted that GAD scholarship has continued to push Western feminist practices on women in the Global South (Parpart, 1993; Singh, 2007). Escobar (1995) would note that the shift in development discourse to GAD is little more than a guise of inclusivity while the “architecture of the discursive formation... has remained unchanged” (p. 42). This is because, according to many post-development scholars, it is not necessarily the implementation or research of development that is problematic, but rather, the very concept of development itself. Rist (2008) for example, points to development’s Western ontological origins, questioning its applicability to the entire world. While turning the gaze inward to the West is not to deny that there is no poverty or inequality in the Global South, like these post-development scholars I problematise the Western ideological roots that inform the development field. Furthermore, I question the appropriateness of Western thinkers positing solutions to the problems of the Global South. As post-development scholar Rahnema (1997) summarises: “what right do I have to intervene in the life of another, whom I don’t know, when I have only a personal, egocentric impression of his or her reality?” (para

40). This in turn reveals the some of the concerns around dominant development thought and practice.

To contextualise post-development further, I will briefly draw on a few of its key arguments and criticisms. Post-development theory ultimately seeks to challenge the idea that development is good and/or natural. It also disputes the idea that the Global South can or should become 'developed' (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, & Whatmore, 2009; Ziai, 2018). This theory was born from the post-modern school. Many post-development scholars were influenced by theorists such as Sandra Harding. Using a feminist, post-colonial lens, Harding questions hierarchies of power and how they influence the (re)production of knowledge. Harding's work considers this specifically through the discussion of standard research methodologies and how such methodologies do not recognise power (Harding, as cited in Connelly, Li, MacDonald, & Parpart, 2000). The influence of this work on post-development thought is clear when considering the power dynamics between the Global North and South and the reproduction of a Western understanding of the world. The likes of Edward Said and Michael Foucault were also influential on post-development thought, particularly in the discussion of representation and power (Connelly et al., 2000).

The argument that development has not worked is a key theme across prominent post-development literature. Despite years of development practice, poverty and inequality persists (see Rist, 2008; Sachs, 1992). Post-development scholars question the true intentions of development, and indeed, whether it is as altruistic as the Global North declares.⁴ Post-development scholars also point to issues involving the representation of development. Escobar (1995) for example, draws on Said's analysis of orientalism to hegemonic understandings of development. While the 'orient' is perceived as 'exotic' and 'uncivilised' to the West, likewise, developing nations are characterised as a place of deficiencies in development discourse, using emotive words such as 'poverty', 'hunger' and 'inequality', all the while neglecting to discuss how such issues also occur in the Global North. Rahnema (1992) discusses how this hegemonic understanding of development and its representation of developing countries impacts both the Global North and South by colonising the mind. By

⁴ Academics question the motivations of the Global North in engaging in development strategies. Watt (2011) for example, draws on the British and American interference in the Middle East, pointing to their economic and strategic interest in the area. Others correlate the emergence of development in the Cold War era to the West wishing to prevent the uptake of communism in the Global South, development being the mechanism to prevent this (see Ziai, 2017a, p. 2547).

this Rahnema refers to how the West, in propagating the notions of ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ has resulted in the internalisation of superiority in the Global North, meanwhile the Global South may internalise a sense of inferiority. Similarly, Tripathy and Mohapatra (2011) argue that development does not exist outside of representation, noting that development is synonymous with a civilising mission and uses certain discourses to promote and justify Western intervention. Post-development scholars point out that hegemonic practices of development undermine others’ general ways of living and their own beliefs, cultures and practices.

In an attempt to shift this, post-development scholars often promote a localisation of development thinking and practice. Esteva (1998) for example, argues that there is too much emphasis on ‘thinking globally’. Such a discourse results in destructive colonial practices and homogenisation. Post-development scholars de-emphasise international development agendas and missions and discuss the need for grass-roots development instead. This is emphasised by Mies and Shiva (1993) who note that women in the Global South in particular are misrepresented as having lives rife with problems and are needy for Western help. They challenge this by demonstrating clear examples of women addressing issues within their own communities without the interference of the West. Such literature demonstrates that by continuing to engage in colonial development practices, we may be denying local agency, and the notion that those facing issues likely know best how to address such issues. Similarly, Singh (2007) considers alternative models of development, including the ‘identities of women’. Under this model, development is to centre the localised culture, aspirations, and needs of the women who the research addresses. Such models and research emphasise local agency and free individuals from outsider imposition.

While offering critical insight to the development field, post-development is chastised by critics. Primarily, post-development literature is considered too essentialist. The theory portrays development as a discourse of othering and the manifestation of uncontrolled Western power. This ignores, for example, that exploitation does not just occur in a linear North to South fashion (Kiely, 1999; Rapley, 2004). In fact, it has become increasingly common to see South to South development practice and agenda. Critics also emphasise that post-development thought fails to offer substantive alternatives to development (Pieterse, 2000), also ignoring that the emphasis on the local does not necessarily mean that those in the local context are working in the best interests of the marginalised. Despite such criticisms,

Ziai (2017b) demonstrates the endurance of the theory in development literature, where it is simultaneously rejected and implemented in research and practice. Similarly, while I agree that post-development thought tends to generalise, I believe the theory's critiques of development continue to hold sway. I also believe that post-development thought offers an important opportunity for critical reflection among the relatively privileged. This is a sentiment echoed by Matthews (2008). Using a post-development lens, Matthews asks how the privileged should engage in issues of poverty. Matthews' ideas situate themselves within the post-development notion of localisation. Among some of the concepts, Matthews proposes "solidarity with distant others here at home" (p. 1045). She explains:

...by 'distant others' I do not only refer to those who are geographically distant, and by 'we' I do not mean to refer exclusively to those in the West, but rather to all those who live lives of relative privilege. Likewise, 'at home' does not refer to a particular geographical space, but rather to the spaces and settings to which the relatively privileged have access and where they feel comfortable, but from which the less privileged are marginalised (p. 1045).

In practicing 'solidarity from home' the relatively privileged may alleviate focus from the Global South and acknowledge the pockets of privilege and poverty that exist everywhere. Indeed, it may force the North to reflect on its role within the perpetuation of poverty and inequality and assess how it manifests 'at home' too.

1.3 Development 'at home': Neoliberalism, the State, and the 'Precariat'

Above I have outlined the strengths and weaknesses of both gendered development and post-development theory. I attempt to draw insights from both fields to shift the discursive focus of development to 'home' within the Western setting. I note that while specific feminist post-development literature has emerged, it often remains focused on women in the Global South (see Aggarwal, 2002; Barlow, 2002; Lind, 2003; Marcos, 2002). Far from trivialising this literature, I instead seek to demonstrate how gendered post-development analysis is just as prudent in the Global North. Like with the framing of individuals living in the Global South as 'underdeveloped' the precariat in Aotearoa New Zealand faces similar pejorative discourse. Informed by notions of intersectionality within GAD and their favouring of the welfare state, WAD's criticism of global capitalism, and post-development's centralisation of the 'local', I consider gendered issues of development within the developed context. I do so

by specifically illustrating the rise of the precariat in Aotearoa New Zealand through State informed neoliberalism. As Harvey (2005) explains, neoliberalism is:

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (p. 2).

In short, neoliberalism could be described as a ‘roll-back’ of the State, with a larger focus on the open market. This creates an ideological framing that the market will provide for all equally and work towards a perfectly egalitarian society. However, in many parts of the world we have witnessed the multiple failures of neoliberal ideology. Development literature points to the deficiencies of the neoliberal structural adjustment policies (SAP’s) in the Global South. Employed as a development mechanism, SAP’s were rolled out as conditions for World Bank and IMF loans from the 1980s. Such policies could be described as austerity measures, resulting in an increase in poverty, income inequality, as well as having a detrimental impact on the social sector (see Roberts, 2014; Vavrus, 2005). Meanwhile, Western nations have also witnessed this rise in income inequality under neoliberalism, accompanied also by increasingly inequitable social outcomes in housing, education and health (see Hill, 2009; Nicholls, 2014; Peacock, Bissell, & Owen, 2014). Not only has neoliberalism contributed to factors of inequality, but the values of the ideology have arguably led to a rise in anti-democratic politics in the West (see Brown, 2019).

Aotearoa New Zealand has not been immune to some of these poor outcomes arising from the neoliberal tradition. With the rise of ‘Rogernomics’⁵ in the 1980s, Aotearoa New Zealand underwent a mass privatisation of state assets, a lowering of the upper-tax brackets, the degradation of unions and employment protections more generally, and a more penal approach to welfare provisions (see Cochrane et al., 2017; Cotterall, 2017). These neoliberal reforms in Aotearoa New Zealand catalysed the largest growing gap between the rich and the poor than in any other developed nation (Rashbrooke, 2014). Below I outline how these

⁵ The term ‘Rogernomics’ is named after Roger Douglas, the Labour Party’s finance minister from 1984-1988. Under this Government, Aotearoa New Zealand moved from a heavily regulated economy to a complete free-market reform (see The Economist, 1991).

neoliberal reforms have impacted factors of employment, child support, housing, and welfare provisions.

First, with regard to employment, Rosenberg (2016) notes: “between 1981 and 2002 wage and salary earners lost almost one quarter of their share of national income” (p. 7). This decline in wages can be attributed in part to reforms of the Employment Contracts Act in 1991, which saw the decrease of unions and collective bargaining. As a result of this decline in wages and employment protections, McNeill (2017) claims: “being in paid employment no longer insures New Zealanders against poverty” (p. 152). Indeed, 1 in 14 New Zealanders are now working in two or more jobs (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Among those most likely to be working multiple jobs include women, employed parents and caregivers of dependent children. Security of employment is also lacking. Stringer, Smith, Spronken-Smith, and Wilson (2018) note that roughly a third of the country’s workforce is employed on a temporary basis, that being in fixed term or casual roles. Further, they state that these positions tend to be gendered, with women disproportionately featured in these types of employment.

Secondly, neoliberal reforms also influenced the child support system. The development of this system occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s amid the context of the rising number of solo parent families, and the State’s effort to offset welfare expenses (Baker, 2008). The organisation of this child support system privatised childrearing expenses, ensuring that such costs were the obligation of the family rather than the State (see Keil & Elizabeth, 2017). However, much of the literature exposes how this system seemingly works for neither the liable payer, nor the receiving carer. The individual paying child support – more often the father – may note that they are having to pay too much. Meanwhile, those receiving the child support – often the mother – note issues of being paid insufficiently, and additionally, claim there are issues with regard to enforcement and collection of child support (Baker, 2008; Keil & Elizabeth, 2017). However, as Baker (2008) goes on to note, this system is particularly tough on women in post-separation families, noting that poverty among this group is particularly high.

Neoliberal reforms have equally contributed to a housing crisis. This pertains to the affordability, accessibility, and quality of housing in Aotearoa New Zealand, accompanied by the steady decline of state housing stock (Owen, 2019). Due to these factors, a large number

of individuals now spend a disproportionate amount of their earnings on rent. In addition, the prospect of homeownership has become increasingly out of reach (see Eaquad & Eaquad, 2015; Howden-Chapman, 2015). Consistent with neoliberal ideology, the State's response has been minimal. As Eaquad and Eaquad (2015) note: "The response to a housing crisis is to insist that we must just get the incentives right and the market will respond" (p. 101).

Another consequence of neoliberal reforms is that they have shifted public discourse from issues of inequality, to issues of dependency, detrimentally impacting those who rely on state welfare (Wade, 2013). Informed by neoliberal ideology, the State favours self-reliance, individualism, and safeguarding the interests of the wealthy. In upholding these neoliberal traditions, the public mindset has shifted. This speaks to the theorisation of Bourdieu and the very idea that the State "operates in and through us" (as cited in Loyal, 2017, p. 73). Rather than just the tangible State, including physical institutions and legislative bodies, Bourdieu refers to the more 'impersonal' State: "State thinking penetrates the minutest aspects of our everyday lives from filling in a bureaucratic form, carrying an identity card, signing a birth certificate, to shaping our day-to-day thinking and thought" (as cited in Loyal, 2017, p. 73). It is in effect, "both illusory as well as a set of institutions" (Hansen and Stepputat as cited in Unnithan-Kumar, 2004, p. 3). The notion of the State impacting our thought is reflected by the findings of Wade (2013). Wade's findings demonstrate that the State's neoliberal ideology has begun to permeate society, infiltrating the public mindset. Wade considers that even 'poor' electorates in Western settings are increasingly voting for neoliberal policies that largely disservice them. Indeed, Wade argues that it has become widely accepted that issues of poverty are the fault of the individual. Such notions are reflected in the neoliberal welfare state. Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot, and Tankel (2014) summarise this as follows:

Today, families receiving welfare are subject to intensified scrutiny over their lifestyles in a manner that serves to individualise welfare as a form of 'dependency', treat poverty as a personal deficit and excuse current economic arrangements and actors of responsibility for increases in poverty (p. 2037).

As a result of such attitudes and this more penal approach to welfare provision, an increasingly derogative discourse surrounding beneficiaries has become dominant. Beneficiaries are labelled as 'lazy', 'dole-bludgers' and 'burdens' on the otherwise productive society. This narrative is reproduced in public discourse (see Barnett, Hodgetts,

Nikora, Chamberlain, & Karapu, 2007). Such discourse has seemingly justified the decline in beneficiary support. Current benefit payments have failed to keep pace with inflation, with the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (2019a) noting in their report *Whakamana Tāngata* that the current benefit system is “inadequate to meet households’ reasonable financial needs” (p. 120). As illustrated in the GAD literature, women are more reliant on support from the welfare state to meet their (re)productive roles. This is reflected in Aotearoa New Zealand’s welfare system, where women are overrepresented in certain areas. The Ministry for Social Development (2019) states: “[women] make up 91.5 percent of Sole Parent Support recipients and 79 percent of Supported Living Payment - Carer recipients” (p. 20). They go on to note that women tend to experience higher levels of poverty than men. This in turn exposes the feminisation of poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand (see Winkler, 2014). Insufficient welfare support and this pejorative discourse may therefore be harming women in particular.

The aforementioned cumulative factors of insufficient wages, employment insecurity, a housing crisis, and inadequate welfare support and child support under neoliberalism have led to a rise in the ‘precariat’. As Curtis and Galic (2017) argue, “the precariat is a social stratum that is characterised by systematic conditions of precariousness (uncertainty and insecurity) in work and life” (p. 143). This definition encapsulates a broad understanding of precarity, demonstrating how economic insecurity manifests in all aspects of life. It is not just the nature of the employment (fixed-term or otherwise), nor is it just insecurity with regard to income. The term may also be used to illustrate the absence of social rights or protections, a lack of social mobility reinforced via the labour market and indeed, the State.

The term ‘precariat’ is often associated with the shift from the Keynesian⁶ economic model to that of neoliberalism (Agarwala & Chun, 2018; Humpage, 2017; Standing, 2011). This is not without contention, however, as to focus purely on the shift to neoliberalism ignores the precarious work and living that had existed under Keynesianism, and in fact any capitalist model. Agarwala and Chun (2018) for example, point to “the long history of the legal exclusion of women, Black, migrant, and other racialized workers in regulatory labor

⁶ Put simply, Keynesian theory situates the importance of government intervention to stabilise the economy. Conversely, neoliberalism is a monetary theory that sees the market as self-correcting. State intervention is therefore actively discouraged (see Jahan, Mahmud, & Papageorgiou, 2014). Both practices can be used at the same time, for example, a neoliberal approach to state welfare, but market intervention in other capacities.

frameworks” (p. 9). To this end, precarity has always existed in capitalist societies and was only ever void if one disregarded colonialism, slavery, and the patriarchy. As this thesis will explore, precarious living and uncertainty was reinforced by the State well before the introduction of neoliberalism, particularly with regard to women, Māori and other ethnic minorities.

While precarity has therefore always existed in capitalist societies, there is no doubt that there has been a surge in the number of individuals and families living precariously since the advent of neoliberalism. Having recognised that women are more vulnerable to the labour market, and more likely to need the support of the welfare state, I seek to investigate how precarity is impacting this group specifically. I do so by investigating the lived experiences of solo mothers, who may experience deeper precarity owing to the fact that they have dependents and lack the security of a secondary income from a partner. This gendered analysis is particularly important in the backdrop of neoliberalism. This is because ‘the household’, which is the core of unpaid labour, is labour that is disproportionately done by women. As Raworth (2017) claims, when the State cuts welfare payments, child support, and other community services in the name of neoliberalism, “the need for care-giving doesn’t disappear: it just gets pushed back into the home. The pressure, particularly on women’s time, can force them out of work and increase social stress and vulnerability” (p. 81). Further, as McNeill (2017) claims, family structure is typically a determinant of income, noting that solo parents are particularly susceptible to poverty and precarity:

Sole parents face a range of barriers to labour market participation and the ability to take up opportunities that enable social mobility and improvements to the household economy. These are attributable to a combination of factors, including social discrimination and the gendered nature of childcare. In 2009, 43 per cent of sole parent families were raising their children in relative poverty regardless of whether their income came from welfare payments or employment (p. 152).

This gendered nature of childcare is reflected in the statistics. With 201,804 one parent with children families in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2013, 84.2 percent of these families were headed by women (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Despite the susceptibility to precarity, recent literature has largely failed to explore the solo mother group, particularly with regard to their interactions with the State. The likes of Groot, Van Omen, Masters-Awatere, and

Tassell-Matamua (2017) have illustrated how precarious living manifests among certain population groups in Aotearoa New Zealand. In their edited book, there is an overview of precarity among older people, those escaping domestic violence, Māori, the homeless, those with disabilities, non-European immigrants, the trans-community, Pasifika, and refugees. Stringer et al. (2018) have also investigated how precarity has manifested in Aotearoa New Zealand's university institutions. They have applied a gendered lens to this research and considered the rise of fixed-term academic positions and how this has disproportionately impacted women, particularly by linking the competing demands of family and employment. The documentary series *Minimum* by Kathleen Winter also illustrates the rise of precarious work from a gendered perspective by interviewing women who work for the minimum wage in Aotearoa New Zealand (see Strongman, 2018). Missing from the precarity literature, however, is this more specific focus on how precarious living manifests among solo mothers in this country.

1.4 Chapter Conclusion, Research Questions and Thesis Outline

In providing a brief overview of neoliberalism and the rise of the precariat in Aotearoa New Zealand, I sought to challenge the dichotomy of 'developed' and 'underdeveloped'. Turning the gaze inward, I have favoured post-development's argument to localise development and practice 'solidarity from home'. Informed by GAD, WAD, and feminist post-development literature, I considered the gendered issues of inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand by exploring the precarity of solo mothers in this country. I was particularly interested in how the State exacerbates this precarity, largely through their neoliberal ideology and the degradation of the welfare state. I considered the relationship between the participants' precarity and neoliberalism by exploring three key areas: First, direct negotiations between solo mothers and the welfare state, including the child support system. Second, solo mothers' experiences navigating a neoliberal employment and housing market. Finally, the agency of solo mothers' and their everyday practices and acts of resistance to 'make things work' within these areas. Having situated development scholarship alongside issues of precarity and neoliberalism, I turn now to the specific research questions in this thesis:

1. How do solo mothers negotiate with the State?
2. How does the State increase precarity for this group?
3. How can we collectively re-imagine our State systems and structures to support solo mothers' as they negotiate competing responsibilities?

To answer these questions, I conducted interviews with the seven solo mothers who were briefly introduced at the beginning of this chapter. The findings of these interviews and discussion of the content is analysed over three chapters. First, however, I use chapter two to further contextualise inequality and precarity in Aotearoa New Zealand. Unpacking the ‘egalitarian myth’ I discuss colonialism, State violence and the welfare state. I link these factors to enduring issues of inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand, while also illustrating how this has impacted solo mothers within the capitalist landscape. In chapter three I detail my methodology for this research, providing further detail on the participants, and outlining my epistemology, positionality and methods. In chapter four, I begin the first of three findings and discussion chapters. I discuss the direct interactions between solo mothers and the State, focusing specifically on negotiations with the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) and Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ). These negotiations pertain to child support and benefit entitlements, and analysis of the participants’ experiences begins to answer research question one and two. In chapter five, I build further on these two research questions by considering how the State’s neoliberal mentality has impacted issues of housing and employment for the participants. By drawing on hegemonic mothering ideals⁷ in light of my fieldwork realities, I posit that solo mothers are being caught in a catch 22, unable to meet the demands of their paid employment in the neoliberal landscape (and often not paid sufficiently for it), while also trying meeting the idealised expectations of a ‘good mother’. I also explore the consequences of a neoliberal approach to housing. For the participants this has often meant unaffordable rent, crowded homes, and reliance on their ‘benevolent’ landlord amid the housing crisis. In both cases, the State’s lack of intervention and protections in the employment and housing market contributes to the participants’ precarity. In chapter six, I answer research questions one and three by considering how the participants subvert the State. While the participants’ agency is seen implicitly throughout this thesis, in this chapter I outline explicitly how the participants enact their agency in State negotiations. I also explore their visions for the State, including tangible policy changes. In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I weave together the findings and literature to think about possibilities for a more equitable future for solo mothers and other precariat in Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁷ Explained in detail in chapter two and five, I consider hegemonic mothering ideals with regard to the Western idealisation of the ‘good’ mother in the capitalist setting (see Hays, 1996).

Chapter 2

The State, Inequality and Motherhood in Aotearoa New Zealand

In practicing what Matthews (2008) has termed ‘solidarity from home’, it may be useful to further contextualise ‘home’. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated the impacts of neoliberalism in Aotearoa New Zealand and how this has led to a rise of a precariat class of people. While there is a particular focus on neoliberalism in this thesis, this is by no means the sole contributor to issues of inequality or precarity. In this chapter I will articulate just that. Influenced by the work of Martha Albertson Fineman, I consider how our widely held political beliefs and ideologies have obscured the reality of inequality. In the book *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* (2004), Fineman notes:

We do not begin our lives in equal circumstances. We begin in unequal ones. Society’s winners and losers become so in part because of the benefits and privileges or disadvantages and burdens conferred by family position in society with extreme and unequal distribution of social and economic goods. In such a society, the approach to a resolution to this type of inequality is not found in simplistic and hypothetical prescriptions or ideological placebos of independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency (p. 6).

Furthermore, Fineman argues that in the United States, the national political identity and ultimately, mythology, of individualism is more often “used to preserve the status quo than to inspire change” (p. 16). Comparisons can be drawn to Aotearoa New Zealand. This is not only regarding the myth of the ‘individual’ under neoliberalism, but also the mythology of egalitarianism. Many living in Aotearoa New Zealand maintain the ideology of this country being fundamentally good and equal (see Nolan, 2007). However, it is crucial we unsettle this myth because such notions may be preventing us from reconsidering our history and making changes that will properly address issues of inequality. In unpacking the egalitarian myth, I will articulate that our system has not been providing for all equally. Discussion of these enduring issues of inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand challenge the meaning of development and the essentialist dichotomy between the North and South. They also point out the blind spots of State policies. In this chapter I note that any discussion of inequality in

this country must first be situated in the endurance of colonialism and the values and practices imposed by the Pākehā State. I reflect on this egalitarian myth, also mapping colonial attitudes towards women and mothers across time. I explore how this continues today under the aegis of the State, particularly through the ideological construction of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mother, and the value placed on the nuclear family.

2.1 The Mythology of the Egalitarian State

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the capitalist system has been inseparable from the experience of colonialism in the nineteenth century and neocolonialism since the twentieth century. Our colonial history has often been obscured by myths about equality and reinventing the past. But colonisation created inequalities that are structural and enduring (Curtis & Galic, 2017, p. 145).

From the late 1800s, Aotearoa New Zealand was heralded as ‘the social laboratory of the world’ by Pākehā elites, and international commentators alike (Nolan, 2007). This was largely owing to its leadership in progressive welfare policies, including The Old Age Pensions Act 1898, The Family Allowance 1926, and The Social Security Act 1938. While not a welfare policy, the Electoral Act 1893 is also viewed as an integral part of Aotearoa New Zealand’s egalitarian title as it granted women’s suffrage, making us the first in the Western world to do so.⁸ The former welfare policies are frequently cited in literature to demonstrate the regression of the State to neoliberalism in the 1980s (see Humpage, 2017; McClintock, 1998; Peters, 2011). Such literature is typically framed as a nostalgic longing for a different time, noting the shift from an equal nation, to one suffering from increasing precarity under neoliberalism. While Aotearoa New Zealand was one of the first Western nations to implement such a comprehensive welfare state, it is imperative to acknowledge the romanticism of this egalitarian title. This is insomuch as to say that the degree of egalitarianism afforded to you was largely dependent on your gender and ethnicity. Such notions also failed to account for colonisation. It is crucial to discuss colonisation because it

⁸ The idealisation of Aotearoa New Zealand as the first country to grant the universal right to vote ignores the colonial context in which it arose. This narrative neglects to discuss the exclusionary practices of Pākehā suffragists who excluded Māori women with tā moko (see Schuster, 2017). It also ignores that Māori women and indeed children had a say in matters prior to British arrival, something that was corroded by colonisation (Hayden, 2018; Pihama, 2012). Finally, this narrative also neglects to mention that despite being able to vote in the colonial Government elections, Māori could only vote for four seats at the time, a mechanism introduced to restrict and contain Māori voices (Mathewman, 2017; Walker, 1990).

is in many ways the root of State supported inequality in this country. It is also pertinent to the story of the precarity of many Māori mothers.

First, Aotearoa's colonisation was violent and worked to wipe out Indigenous cultures. It resulted in loss of life, culture, language, and impacted local flora and fauna. Colonisation, also resulted in the violent removal of land from Māori, of which had large scale impacts, including on the family form. As Walker (1990) explains, the colonisation of Aotearoa in the 1800s meant that by the start of the 20th century, "only two million hectares [of land] remained in Māori ownership. Pākehā desire to acquire those lands was not sated by the 24.4 million hectares they already had" (p. 139). The removal of land from Māori persists today. This can be seen through the State's claim to the foreshore and seabed, and the proposed private development at Ihumātao (Webb, 2019). Webb (2019) found that this loss of land over the years that have been the largest contributing factor to rates of poverty among Māori.

This land alienation and colonisation more broadly, fundamentally shifted many of the practices and organisational structure of the family group. It challenged the fundamental interconnections between whānau, land and childrearing. As Ware, Breheny, and Forster (2018) explain:

A Māori worldview has a positive understanding of reproduction and caregiving.... There are many interrelationships between childrearing and identity. For example, hapū means to be pregnant as well as a sub-tribe, whānau means to be born and extended family, and whenua means both placenta and land. Within Te Ao Māori, the process of reproduction strengthens social structures of whānau and hapū, and connections with land (p. 19).

Land alienation therefore meant for many Māori these interconnections were disrupted, with a Pākehā framing of family organisation involuntarily forced on many. For example, in pre-colonial society non-heterosexual couples were not stigmatised (Pihama, 2012). This is in stark contrast to traditional Pākehā notions of family and coupling.⁹ As Mikaere (1994) has also demonstrated, Māori lived in a collectivist society. Wāhine Māori were

⁹ Lesbians were treated in legislation as though they did not exist. Gay sex between two males was illegal until 1986 (NZHistory, 2017).

supported by their whānau even if they were married and went to live with their husband. Divorce was no cause for reproach and if separation occurred, childcare and custody arrangements were made between the two families. Childrearing was also an inter-generational task. While the parents and grandparents had a particularly incremental role in the raising of children, the whānau and wider community also took on responsibility (Durie, A., 1997). This emphasis on collectively is also present with regard to land ownership. However, with the appropriation of Māori land and the eventual dominance of individual land title through colonisation, “Maori found they had insufficient land left to support themselves. Whanau were eventually forced to break into nuclear families and move to towns and cities in search of work” (Mikaere, 1994, p. 133). This was also actively encouraged by the State. As Webb (2019) claims, the 1961 Hunn Report argued that a solution to Māori poverty would be to ‘integrate’ them into mainstream social welfare policy. This would be done through Māori urbanisation. However, according to Webb this was a part of the State’s assimilationist agenda. This can be seen by trying to separate Māori from cultural bases, and within that, separation from whānau into nuclear family groups. Such actions denied alternative economic, cultural, and familial practices.

In essence, the very notion of a ‘single mother’ did not exist in pre-colonial society. Childrearing was a collective task, even in the case of parental separation. Further, land alienation caused a great deal of harm to the economic security of Māori. For families, particularly solo parents, this therefore raises additional issues. Separation from whānau means there is less support for childrearing, but potentially increased financial insecurity (McCarthy, 1997). Given the importance of land to personal identity, one must also recognise the broader societal and cultural impacts of land alienation for Māori. Colonisation continues today, not only through the continued removal of land but through the enforcement of an opposing ontology, including that of the nuclear family and the individualised model of childrearing under the Pākehā State. This colonisation more broadly, was first put forward by the Crown “under the banner of ‘progress’, ‘civilisation’ and ‘development’” (Murphy, 2016, p. 182). This demonstrates the justification for ‘development’ and reinforces why such notions and practices should be critically examined. The experience of colonisation and the detrimental consequences for Māori families is also illustrative of why declarations of egalitarianism should be scrutinised. While the egalitarian myth in Aotearoa New Zealand fails to account for factors of colonisation, including the impacts this has had on familial form; it also overlooks the

inequality reproduced in the key pieces of welfare legislation that are often cited in the egalitarian myth. However, these pieces of legislation imagined the world through the eyes of Pākehā elites, ignoring the reality for everyone else. The Old Age Pensions Act 1898 for example, excluded Chinese New Zealanders, many of whom had migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand during the Gold Rush. Despite paying taxes, they were unable to receive State support in their old age (Baker & Du Plessis, 2011). The Social Security Act 1938 is another example of State informed inequality for some groups. This Act implemented economic security for citizens who had entered the retirement age, were ‘invalids’, or were facing unemployment. The Act also disadvantaged Māori, who were often paid less than Pākehā. This was justified according to the State because their land was communally held (see The Ministry of Social Development, 2018). Further, as M. H. Durie (1997) notes, many elderly Māori in particular often found it difficult to receive pensions and entitlements at all because they did not have birth certificates or certificates of marriage.

The Family Allowance Act 1926 also fostered inequality. Under this Act, the allowance was not available to unmarried mothers and citizens of Asian descent (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2018a). Not only does this demonstrate State enforced inequality and racism, it also speaks to kinship and how we define family. For example, the punishment of unmarried mothers within the Act is indicative of the idealisation of the Pākehā nuclear family. As explored above, such a notion of family was introduced by the colonial State. According to Pihama (2012) the value placed on the Western nuclear family structure is representative of the colonial attitudes towards women and the introduction of capitalism to Aotearoa. The Crown introduced a structure where women belonged in the home to particular men, did the childrearing, and relied on the income of their husband. The men, conversely, were responsible for participating in the market economy. The implementation of this Act may also have been influenced by the State’s desire to grow the population. As McClure (1998) claims:

The ascendancy of Russia and Japan in the East in the early twentieth century had encouraged ideals of state intervention to strengthen the British race, but this concern had resulted in government supervision of the health of mothers and children, and the promotion of the Plunket Society and more ‘scientific’ practices by mothers, rather than in direct economic aid for mothers of poor families (p. 38).

Rather than introducing the Family Allowances Act to support families, the Act was instead used to promote eugenic measures and increase (Pākehā) population quantity (McClure, 1998). Any claims to be an egalitarian nation, particularly through citation of Acts such as the Family Allowance 1926, Old Age Pension 1898 or the Social Security Act 1938, pleads ignorance to the people who have been actively excluded and harmed by the State through these policies or by way of colonisation. It is therefore crucial that the myth of ‘egalitarianism’ is unsettled in this country. As Fineman (2004) states, unsettling such notions allows one to confront issues of inequality, and account for a more holistic approach to addressing such issues.

2.2 Ideological Constructions of Motherhood and Family

This brief overview of the above Acts has served to demonstrate the inequality enforced by the State and indeed, the mythology of Aotearoa New Zealand as an egalitarian nation. By discussing this mythology, I reiterate the importance of acknowledging the connection of precarity to colonialism, capitalism and most recently, to neoliberalism. Understanding the origins of State informed inequality are informative to understand Aotearoa New Zealand’s current socially marginalised citizenry. When considering how the State has marginalised mothers, in particular, it is important to first note that the arrival of the colonial State brought with it a patriarchal and European understanding of motherhood and family. This continues to influence society and present State ideology. As explored earlier, the notion of the single mother is a colonial construction. But as too is our current understanding of mothering responsibility and norms.

To understand this Western framing of motherhood, I note the work of Adrienne Rich who famously distinguished motherhood as a relationship between mother and child, and “motherhood as an enforced identity and political institution” (as cited in Dorothy, 1995, p. 225). This “enforced identity” has many facets, but it is one that largely serves to define women based on their (re)productive role, and indeed to dictate *how* one mothers. It is a “political institution” in the sense that the maintenance of women in this (re)productive role upholds the capitalist State. I explore this both through the dichotomy of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mother, and the systematic preference for the nuclear family. This Western motherhood ideology promotes raising and socialising children in a certain way. Hays (1996) explains:

A mother's ongoing dedication to educating the young in certain social norms helps to ensure the creation of law-abiding, tax-paying citizens, and the particularly time consuming process of training children in self-discipline and individual responsibility makes a significant contribution toward sparing the state from future pressures to widen its welfare roles or raise the minimum wage or subsidize housing, child care or medical expenses (p. 162).

The State, in wishing to uphold capitalist values, therefore has an interest in how one mothers, and how families organise. The State has long helped to mould this mothering ideology through tax laws, welfare policies, schooling legislation and the like, all of which have helped to reinforce the notion of how mothers should parent (Hays, 1996). Those who deviate from these ideologies are typically chastised. As Hays (1996) claims, childrearing ideologies, and practices of motherhood and family, tend to favour the privileged, in part because the privileged "are the ones most likely to have the cultural and economic resources as well as the time to define and engage in the form of mothering that is considered proper" (p. 164). This is reflected in the ideology of the 'good' and 'bad' mother. As with GAD theory, there needs to be consideration for how power manifests across social strata even in the so-called developed societies. For mothers in the Western setting, childrearing ideology can be particularly harsh based on a mother's "social location" (Kline, 1995, p. 120). The 'good' mother, for example, cannot be disabled, Black, Indigenous, an immigrant, lesbian, poor, young, a beneficiary, or single, as this would be contrary to the State's idealised mother.

In an essay, Kline (1995) links the 'good' and 'bad' mother specifically to ethnicity by considering how this dichotomy has associations with eugenics. For example, early birth control discourses in North America argued that birth control could ensure racial 'purity' by controlling population growth of non-white populations (Kline, 1995). As discussed earlier, comparisons could also be drawn to eugenic movements in Aotearoa New Zealand through the Family Allowance Act 1926 and how quantity and 'quality' of the population was core to the colonial mission (see Paul, Stenhouse, & Spencer, 2017). The racialisation of the 'good' and 'bad' mother is particularly apparent when considering portrayals of Māori motherhood in public discourse, of which tend to reinforce colonial discourses and vilify Māori women (see Provan, 2012; Ware et al., 2018). Dorothy (1995) illustrates this racialisation of 'good' and 'bad' mothers through the experiences of African American mothers, arguing that the

State intervenes more frequently in Black homes in part because of its culturally biased understanding of motherhood and family. Parallels can be drawn between these experiences and those of Māori, particularly with regard to the intrusion of Oranga Tamariki and the uplifting of Māori children from whānau (see Forbes, 2019; Ngata, 2019). Such issues speak to how colonisation has impacted the ideology of motherhood in Aotearoa New Zealand and how the State continues to regulate and define ‘proper’ childrearing practices.

Mothers who deviate from the construction of the ‘good mother’ are stigmatised in society, I consider this particularly with regard to single welfare mothers, who are often punished for keeping the State ‘on the economic hook’ (Fineman 1995; Kline 1995). Such a discourse is reflected throughout the history of welfare policies in this country. The Widows Pension introduced in 1911 was characterised as being paid to a “deserving group of women” (McClure, 1998, p. 31). However, even for this “deserving group of women” the pension was so insufficient that some mothers had no choice but to give up their children to institutions (McClure, 1998). Further, Māori widow rates were 25 percent less than the full rate, meaning Māori women were further adversely affected. Mothers who were divorced, or ‘deserted’ continued to have limited rights within the welfare system, largely because the State wished to uphold the notion that husbands were first and foremost responsible for their wives (McClure, 1998). The precarity of mothers in the welfare system and this emphasis on husband responsibility to the wife, is illustrative of the patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist basis of the Pākehā State. Single mothers were considered threatening because they deviated from this societal construction (Fineman, 1995). Consequently, solo motherhood is consistently framed as something that needs ‘fixing’, to return order, morality, and to negate State responsibility. As Fineman (1995) explains, the very use of the term ‘single mother’ is descriptive of the Western societal expectations placed on family and on mothering. She claims: “no one speaks of a “married mother” - the primary connection of husband and wife is assumed in the unadorned designation of mother” (p. 219).

While solo mothers have long experienced stigma and insufficient State support in their role as a solo mother, the disparaging discourse around motherhood, including who is a ‘good’ mother, has continued into the neoliberal era. For solo mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand, this discourse includes characterisation such as, “the benefit bludger, the young mother, the deliberately single mother, the difficult ex-wife, who as an individual lacks the moral dimensions required of the neoliberal citizen” (Patterson, 2004, p. 98). This is not exclusive

to Aotearoa New Zealand but is reflected in Western neoliberal societies around the world (Smart, 1996).¹⁰ This narrative of the unruly solo mother is persistent in certain welfare policies. For example, In Aotearoa New Zealand, the National Party instituted free contraception for women on the benefit and their teenage daughters (Trevett, 2012). This plan was criticised as it is descriptive of a certain narrative, largely one that paints mothers on the benefit as reckless and even sexually deviant. The policy also has an undeniably classist tone, namely, by the State interfering and discouraging women from lower socio-economic backgrounds from reproducing. More recently in October 2019, the National Party floated a policy that solo parents should not be able to receive benefits from the State if their children are not immunised (McCulloch, 2019). Again, a particular narrative of solo parents is portrayed, one that views solo parents (of which we know are primarily solo mothers) as burdens on the otherwise ‘responsible’ society.

Beyond perpetuating notions of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mother, the State also reinforces mothering ideologies by continuing to idealise the nuclear family structure. This particular family model is upheld by the State because it supposedly provides a self-sufficient household, with a gendered separation of the (re)productive and productive roles. This benefits the State as it excuses State responsibility to the family. Indeed, in the 1970s with the introduction of the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB), the rate of women beneficiaries increased rapidly, causing the then Minister for Social Development to express concern that it was “encouraging women to leave their husbands” (as cited by Kedgley in Patterson, 2004, p. 97). The State therefore has an economic interest in upholding the nuclear family and this very separation of the (re)productive and productive roles. However, such notions cause harm, as they deny alternative practice of mothering and familial organisation.

As explored earlier, such emphasis on the nuclear family group has particularly harmed Māori and their practices of raising children. However, in spite of this Māori have still resisted the nuclear family, with whānau remaining the primary way for understanding family form (see McKenzie & Carter, 2010). In reality, the nuclear family and breadwinner model fails to represent the majority of familial arrangements in Aotearoa New Zealand, even among Pākehā, who first lauded the nuclear family model in this country. Such a model of

¹⁰ In the United States, there remains the prominent ‘Welfare Queen’ discourse (see Gilman, 2014). Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, solo mother beneficiaries became portrayed as both a moral and social problem (see Kiernan, Land, & Lewis, 1998).

family was only really the ‘norm’ in Aotearoa New Zealand between the 1950s and 1960s (see Cribb, 2009). Since the 1960s, family structures have continued to shift and be diverse. This is in part due to the feminist movement, with an increasing number of women joining the workforce. It is also due to increasing multiculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand, which in turn has further diversified familial cultural practices and formations (Cribb, 2009). However, even though the nuclear family is no longer the ‘norm’, the idealisation of this family structure lives on. As the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (2019b) have demonstrated, the entitlements of beneficiaries through the welfare state continue to be assessed against the nuclear family. They note: “Any family members outside the nuclear family are generally not considered [for benefit support] even if they live in the same household, for example adult children living with their parents or extended family in the same house.” (p. 8). This actively disadvantages larger and more fluid family structures, and indeed different models of motherhood. As advocacy group, Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP) states:

Māori understandings of whānau are not understood by Work & Income. This includes Unsupported Child Benefit payment paid to those who whāngai children. AAAP had a case where a woman was not paid for looking after her grandchildren for 10 years. She was recently back-paid \$166,000. Further to this, Work & Income only consider the family unit to be immediate family meaning they resist supporting people going to tangi for extended whānau members (AAAP, n.d, p. 8).

In upholding the nuclear family model, the State continues to enforce a colonial understanding of the family onto citizenry. This harms not just Māori, but any family that is arranged outside of the nuclear form. Solo mother headed households, for example have been detrimentally impacted by the influence of the breadwinner, nuclear family model. This is because a key tenant of welfare policies is the dependent relationship it creates between women/mothers and the male parent/partner. As Rashbrooke (2014) explains, throughout history, financial dependence on a partner has been reflected in Aotearoa New Zealand’s welfare policies. Rashbrooke claims: “the welfare system has not always accommodated the position of many women. It is overly reliant on paid work - historically, male wage earners’ work - to ensure an adequate income” (p. 15). Such notions harm solo parent families who do not have this secondary income and must be both responsible for the (re)productive and productive roles.

The emphasis on relationship status within the benefit system is also problematic. As opposed to the tax system, which is based on individual income, the welfare system is assessed based on both partners' incomes (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019a). This places pressure on newly formed relationships and at worst, assumes financial support is provided to partners even in abusive relationships.¹¹ The emphasis on relationship status particularly harms solo parent beneficiaries. The Ministry for Social Development (MSD) and the courts, for example, have been accused of harsh treatment against sole parents based on these relationship status rules. Such treatment from the State harms not only the beneficiary, but the entire family, including their children (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019a).

While family structures in Aotearoa New Zealand have never been uniform, even through multiple attempts by State supported elite structures; families have continued to diversify over the years and have shifted well away from the singular narrative of the breadwinner, nuclear family model. Despite this, pejorative discourses surrounding solo mother families continue, as too does the ideological value of the nuclear family. This is perpetuated in the welfare system with the aforementioned emphasis on relationship status, and the assessments of families against the nuclear model. As explored in chapter one, the welfare system also fails to provide adequate financial support. Rather than support the position of many women and their (re)productive work, the State instead focuses primarily on market-place engagement. Fraser (2013) notes that prior to the second wave feminist movement, women's inability to participate in paid employment under the nuclear family, bread-winner model was damaging. However, equally so, Fraser argues that the neoliberal model of market-place participation has been just as harmful for women. This is because the responsibility for (re)productive work has not disappeared. Duty to the household and to childcare remains, but so too does the need to participate in the paid labour force, in a system that could be characterised for many as providing insufficient wages, unreasonable hours, and poor employee rights under neoliberalism.

2.3 Chapter Conclusion

Although neoliberalism has exacerbated issues of precarity, this chapter has demonstrated that such issues have existed since the arrival of colonialism in Aotearoa New Zealand. For

¹¹ This was highlighted in the 1997 case *Ruka and Department of Social Welfare*, whereby Ruka defended her claiming of the sole-parent benefit while in an abusive relationship (see St John, MacLennan, Anderson, & Fountain, 2014).

mothers, in particular, the colonial, Western understandings of motherhood have detrimentally effected women and limited an understanding of alternate ways of familial organisation and partnership, particularly for Māori. These same notions continue to be reflected in many welfare policies and societal understandings. This demonstrates not only the mythology of the egalitarian State, but also illustrates that under the aegis of the State, inequality continues to impact certain groups in the present day. Reflecting on how the State system does not provide for all equally allows for a more holistic approach to issues of precarity. By analysing the experiences of solo mothers in particular in this thesis, I sought to demonstrate the competing demands that have come to be placed on solo mothers across time and well into the neoliberal landscape. The deception of notions of individualism and egalitarianism in this country, as Fineman (2004) notes, must continue to be unsettled. Contextualising and localising this chapter within development thought in this thesis has served to shift the discursive focus of development and demonstrate the issues of inequality that are pervasive in Aotearoa New Zealand. Further, this also begins to demonstrate the failures of neoliberal policy as a development mechanism. By delineating the State informed inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand by way of colonisation, its welfare policies, and how it treats mothers, is a reflection on what it means to be ‘developed’ and how to ‘practice solidarity from home’. In the following chapters, I begin to demonstrate what this context means in practice for the solo mother participants in present day, by exploring their own lived experiences navigating the State.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Thus far this thesis has grounded the reader in contextual literature. I have unpacked the broad consequences of neoliberalism within Aotearoa New Zealand, and how across time the colonial State has not fully accounted for the position of mothers. In this chapter, I turn to research in practice as it was influenced by the debates aforementioned. Here I explore the lived experiences of solo mothers in the present day, within a neoliberal landscape. Using a critical theory epistemology, in this chapter I detail the justification for this research and outline the methods employed. I also discuss important ethical considerations I had as I approached this research, including factors of my own positionality and how this impacted the research production. Informed by the gendered post-development school and the need to emphasise agency and voice, I then detail a short biography of each of the participants. This is to emphasise the humanness of the research and the process of sharing that produced this thesis. I have anonymised the data, so their responses remain confidential. However, I use an alias to show the person behind the experiences as opposed to sorting participants by number or letter.

3.1 Approaching the Research: Epistemology, Positionality, and Reflexivity

My epistemological training was crucial to how I approached this research project. Epistemology broadly refers to a theory of knowledge. It considers how we perceive and justify knowledge. As research is open to interpretation, it is important to recognise how one has approached their line of inquiry. This is particularly the case because different epistemological understandings of a topic often lead to different outcomes in research. In this thesis I have used critical theory epistemology. Critical theory is the “substantive problematic of *domination*, a complex notion based on the concern with the ways social relations also mediate power relations to create various forms of *alienation* and inhibit the realization of human possibilities” (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 10). When this understanding of the social world is then applied specifically to research, Fraser (2013) argues that a critical theoretical approach would address issues of subordination and domination and aim to “demystify as ideological rival approaches that obfuscate or rationalize those relations” (p. 19). As such, critical theory approaches to research seek to emancipate one from domination by unpacking

and critiquing power relations that often make up the societal status quo. It is for this reason that it was crucial I unpacked the mythology of egalitarianism and individualism in chapter two. Such analysis is not only informative to understanding Aotearoa New Zealand's current socially marginalised citizenry, but also seeks to demystify the norms that reproduce harmful notions of motherhood in this country.

Under the broad understanding of critical theory outlined by Fraser (2013) and Morrison and Brown (1994), I have considered issues of subordination and domination by drawing on gendered post-development theory. Fraser (2013) has demonstrated the interconnection of power struggles in critical theory. She considers, for example, how “struggles against gender injustice were necessarily linked to struggles against racism, imperialism, homophobia, and class domination, all of which required transformation of the deep structures of capitalist society.” (p. 217). This understanding demonstrates the broad applicability of critical theory to any issue of subordination and the interconnectedness of emancipation.

While I have employed this critical theory approach, it is not lost on me that I write this thesis from a position of relative privilege within the neoliberal university institution. Such institutions, and academia in general, has not always been particularly responsive to transforming power structures (see Cargle, 2018; McAllister, 2019; Small, 2012; Thomas, Stupples, Kiddle, Hall, & Palomino-Schalscha, 2019). Similarly, Venkateswar (2006) notes the sense of ‘futility’ in being unable to enact change through their research, going on to question: “to what end are we advancing social change?” (p. 272). Throughout the writing of this thesis, I also sat with this contention. Indeed, I questioned how much of an emancipatory impact research can have from within academia, and particularly within the confines of a year-long Masters thesis. As my knowledge of the insular nature of post-graduate research grew throughout the thesis process, I realised I do not necessarily have the answers to these important ethical questions. Instead, I sought to focus on how I could critically approach the literature and discussion. Crucially, I sought to highlight the work of Māori scholars, particularly when trying to understand the local context in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is important because as the Indigenous population of Aotearoa New Zealand, any issue in this country is by extension an issue that impacts Māori. Inequality in this country is inherently tied to the (ongoing) colonisation of this land and people, and failure to speak to this would be providing a partial picture, particularly on issues of precarity. While I do not suppose this

research to be decolonising,¹² I have instead sought to challenge the Eurocentrism of my citations and discussion, as fitting with the critical epistemological approach. This was particularly important as I considered the colonial logics of the nuclear family, and the construction of solo motherhood discourse.

Another aspect that is crucial to critical theory epistemologies and the task of challenging power structures, is the rejection of the ‘objective’ researcher notion. I consider the work of prominent feminist scholars who have argued that a lack of recognising power dynamics and subjectivities in research has led to essentialist constructions of the world that reinforce power imbalances (see Harding, 2006; Haraway, 1988; England, 1994; Rose, 1997). Indeed, much of Western research, particularly in the Global South, has resulted in an *othering* and *exoticising* of the researched. As discussed in chapter one, this has led to many calling for research to be conducted at ‘home’ (Davies, 2008).

While in chapter two I contextualised this ‘home’, here I turn to my own critical positioning within this ‘home’. While it is fruitless to claim that one can have complete familiarity and ‘insider’ knowledge of the researched, even in their country of origin, Hoggart, Lees and Davies (2002) have stated that “the literature contains sharp messages about the appropriateness of people with particular attributes studying others” (p. 228). Tuhiwai Smith (1999), a leading decolonising studies scholar from Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, has illustrated the harmful outsider gaze on Indigenous peoples and how such a gaze has resulted in disingenuous understandings of Indigenous populations and the reproduction of misinformation. From a critical lens, this illustrates how research may perpetuate power imbalances between largely, colonial populations and Indigenous populations. As a Pākehā researcher, I am therefore an ‘outsider’ to Māori, and indeed non-Pākehā tauwiwi in Aotearoa New Zealand. So, while I elected to conduct research at ‘home’ this did not guarantee me immediate insider privileges to research in all communities.

As this thesis studies the general population of solo mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand, I was presented with a contention: on the one hand being cognisant of my position as a young Pākehā researcher and my outsider positionality to some of my inevitable participants; and on

¹² I question whether as a Pākehā scholar I could produce a ‘decolonising’ thesis, particularly within a year, and within a university institution. To state otherwise may be to contribute to the trend of scholars and university institutions using decolonisation as a ‘metaphor’ (see Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2012).

the other, my Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, and also the need to challenge what Tolich (2002) refers to as ‘Pākehā paralysis’ (see also, Fabish, 2014). By this, Tolich refers to Pākehā researchers that are increasingly excluding Māori from their research out of fear of co-opting Māori space, or presenting research that reproduces harmful information, as discussed by Tuhiwai Smith (1999). These issues are clearly of crucial consideration. In an effort to ease this tension, I employed what Tolich (2002) refers to as ‘cultural safety’. This is where one must reflect on the researcher’s identity and the influence this identity has on the research methods. This works hand-in-hand with a critical theory epistemology as such acknowledgements seek to demystify power relations in the research process. Indeed, reflecting on researcher identity exemplifies the humanness of research - a far cry from positivist approaches that refuse to situate knowledge and present their research as unbiased and all-knowing.

To further reflect on my positionality in this research, I note that I am twenty-four, able-bodied, Pākehā cis woman, and I come from a middle-income home. While I felt that being a woman, and being raised in a ‘split family’ helped to build some connection between myself and the research participants, I am careful not to essentialise our experiences. As with any human interaction, I was able to relate to some participants more so than others, at times irrespective of our ‘sameness’ or ‘difference’ in identity. The acknowledgement of my identity and positionality in this research, however, is used to highlight the perspective from which I come to this research, to situate the humanness of the research, and to illustrate the subjectivities of its analysis. Along with recognising these limitations, I also note that this is a small-scale study of seven solo mothers in an urban setting within the Greater Wellington Region. Additionally, this thesis was conducted using interviews over a relatively short period of time, as opposed to a more longitudinal study. This does not discredit the research findings, but merely demonstrates the limitations of the thesis.

In the interests of reflexivity, I also note that throughout this thesis I turned to some key questions. These were used to reflect on my own positionality throughout the research process and to hold myself accountable to my participants, and the aims of this research more broadly. These included asking of myself: Am I writing, interviewing and engaging in this research in a way that is enfranchising for the participants? Who am I giving power to and who am I taking power from? These questions were a crucial tool of reflexivity. They also helped ground the research in a clearly political project aimed at providing a nuanced reading

of experiences of the State by solo mothers.

3.2 Ethics, Interviews, and Analysis

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the seven participants. Approved by Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee on the 10/12/2019 (see appendix A), I began the interviews in mid-January 2020 and finished early March 2020. These interviews lasted between 45 minutes to over 90 minutes. I chose the method of interviewing because as Kitchen and Tate (2000) claim, interviews provide “rich sources of data on people’s experiences, opinions, aspirations and feelings” (p. 213). Seeking to learn about solo mothers’ lived experiences, I felt interviews were a fitting method for this thesis. This method also related to my critical framework. Not only were the participants able to share their stories with their own words, but I was also able to connect with the participants, build rapport, and to be upfront about the position from which I was undertaking this research. Indeed, by analysing the micro lived experiences of the individual participants, I was able to see how this fit into the larger societal picture and critique the structures that be.

When embarking on this interview process, I had some key ethical considerations. First, I ensured the location of the interview was chosen by the participants. This was so it was in a place that felt most comfortable to them. The location of the interviews varied between the participant’s own home, place of work, or at a café. While I provided food at these interviews, there was no financial incentive to participate in this project, as I wanted the participants to engage with this research out of pure interest in the topic, rather than for any other reason. I approached each interview in a semi-structured manner, taking with me an interview guide (see appendix B). This, I found, allowed for a more free-flowing conversation, providing room to ask for further elaboration, or for the participants to ask questions also of me. This not only allowed us to build further rapport, but it meant that the stories that were shared were often richer, particularly because I was able to shift away from the interview guide if the conversations naturally moved that way.

As I sought to re-balance the power dynamic between the researcher and researched, I did not push to ask certain questions if I felt some resistance from the participants. I felt this was particularly important, not only because I did not want to exacerbate the ‘extractive’ nature of research, but also because of the sensitivities of this research topic. Every interview was

conducted using informed consent, and I reiterated prior to the interview that the participant had the right to stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer a question. I also sought to minimise power imbalances between myself and the participant by answering all questions the interviewee had about the research and any questions they may have for me on a more personal level. I was also transparent with regard to the limitations of the research. These interviews were all audio recorded and then later transcribed by me. A summary of the interview was sent to the participants with the opportunity to provide feedback and make amendments. Participants have also been given a finished copy of the thesis.

I recruited the participants through general word of mouth, and a women's group in the Greater Wellington Region.¹³ I had previously attended some workshops at this organisation and had gotten to know one of the managers. I advertised the details of my project at the organisation via their newsletter in mid-January 2020. I vaguely knew two of the participants prior to interviewing them. The other participants were otherwise strangers when we met for the interview. Because of the nature of this research, I kept the sample size small, interviewing only seven solo mothers. This was because I sought to go deep into the experiences of the participants, rather than gather less in-depth responses from a larger quantity of participants. For two of the participants, I also did follow-up interviews. This was to build further rapport and gather additional detail surrounding the participants' experiences. I conducted these follow-up interviews after identifying the common themes across all seven original interviews. Where I found areas that could benefit from further elaboration, I scheduled a follow-up interview. These were initially with Emily, Madison and Emma. However, for Emily we eventually decided against a second interview, as she had since started a new job and it had become difficult to find a suitable time to meet. Once the COVID-19 lockdown hit in mid-March, it also became clear that meeting up for a second interview would not be possible.

Reflecting on the fieldwork, I found that the participants I had met prior to interviewing (and the participants who I did a follow-up interview with) were more relaxed from the beginning of the interview, perhaps because we had some established rapport. The other participants were slightly more apprehensive. However, I found that once we had gone through a couple

¹³ I have not disclosed the name of this women's group to reduce the chances of the participants' identity being disclosed.

of questions and I had shared a bit about myself (and the research), the participants became a lot more open and comfortable. These interviews each contained varying emotions, while at times we laughed, at other points there was frustration, tears, and sadness. It seemed to me (and was often articulated by the participants) that they had felt largely unheard regarding their struggles as a solo parent. My perception was that once the participants had relaxed into the interview, they found it to be somewhat cathartic to be able to talk to someone about the issues they face on a daily basis – especially when that ‘someone’ was not there to advise, judge, or provide ‘ways to make things work’. It was a relationship where I, the researcher was at the receiving end, rather than a provider of a service.

When it came to interpreting the participants’ responses, I first got familiar with the interview transcripts and immersed myself in the data. I listened back to the interview recordings immediately after each interview. This was both to become more familiar with the interview content, but also to reflect on the questions I had asked, making sure I was not leading the participant to a certain answer. I then listened to this recording again as I transcribed the interviews, later sending out summaries to the participants, and continuing to read through the interview transcripts. Through this process of getting familiar with the data, I found that key themes began to naturally emerge. Based on the common experiences and stories, I began to thematically organise the interview transcripts. These themes pertained to issues related to child support, beneficiary support, employment and housing. They also demonstrated responses to the State, and visions for the State.

Having sorted through the data and arranged it into key themes, I then considered how these findings fit alongside my secondary research and theoretical framework. I wrote my findings and discussion chapters together in a thematic manner. I thought that this method was more fitting with a critical theory approach, as I did not want to isolate the participants’ responses from the analysis. While bringing together the literature and interview content, I attempted to use a method of agency. Again, I felt this was crucial given my theoretical framework. While I felt it was essential to speak to the struggles the participants’ discussed in the interviews, I sought not to focus on ‘deficits’. Solo mothers as a group already face negative stigma in policies and the media as explored in the previous two chapters, indeed the very use of the term ‘solo mum’ is politically charged. I do not wish to reinforce or reproduce these stigmas in this thesis. Any discussion of struggle among the participants is therefore used to bring the reality of their struggle to light. By using large quotes and extracts from the interviews, I

sought to emphasise the agency of the participants and to ensure that as much as possible, the participant was telling their story with their own words. This provides a richer understanding of the participants' experiences without it being re-worded or adapted by the researcher.

3.1 The Participants

Having outlined by epistemology and research methods, I turn now to the participants themselves. As articulated at the beginning of this chapter, I have elected to introduce the participants by way of a short profile. Again, this is to further contextualise the participants and illustrate the person behind the stories. These profiles are also a frame of reference for the following three findings and discussion chapters.

Maia is in her early 20s and works full-time as a secondary school teacher. Maia is Māori (Tūranga district). She had her son at age 17. As a new mum, Maia finished high school, got a part-time job, and began studying at university to gain her qualifications to become a teacher. Maia lives with her mum, nan, and her son. However, at the time of the interview, Maia was looking to find a rental property with her son and sister. Maia has received both the Young Parent Payment (YPP) and the Sole Parent Support (SPS) in the past, and currently receives Working for Families tax credits. Maia's son still has a relationship with his father and will typically see him on the weekends. Maia does not receive financial support from the father of her child.

Emily is in her early 60s and is Pākehā. At the time of the interview she worked full-time at a security company, but has since moved into a new role. Emily has two children, both of whom have now grown up and left home. Emily was a solo mother to her two children throughout most of their lives. More recently, Emily has gained guardianship of her 10 year-old grandson. Emily rents her home, and lives with her grandson and a boarder. In the past, Emily received the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB). She now receives the Unsupported Child Benefit (UCB).

Gemma is in her mid-30s and is Pākehā/Philipino. Gemma lives in a rental property with their 10 year-old daughter. At the time of the interview, Gemma was unemployed but was about to start studying art on a part-time basis. Gemma had previously worked in web development. Gemma currently receives the SPS benefit and shares the custody of their child with the father. This custody is shared evenly between the two parents.

Madison is in her early-50s and works full-time for a government organisation, a role that requires her to travel for work. Madison is Pākehā and has two children. At the time of the interviews, her son was 18 and had recently left home to travel abroad. Her daughter was 16 and in high school. Madison became a solo mother to her two children when they were aged 8 and 10. The father of her children now lives in Australia and does not pay child support. Madison has received Working for Families Tax Credits in the past, but currently receives no financial support from the State.

Rachel is in her mid-50s and is Pākehā. She owns her home, and lives there with her two children, aged 14 and 11. Rachel works full-time for an organisation providing support and advocacy for children with disabilities. Rachel also has her own business as a business coach. Rachel had her children to a sperm donor, making her story slightly different to the rest of the participants. She has received the Accommodation Allowance from the State, and in the past has also relied on Oscar Subsidies to finance her children's school holiday care.

Aroha is in her early-30s and works full-time as a social worker. She rents her home with her 12 year-old son. Aroha's son lives with her permanently, but he will typically visit his father during the school holidays. Aroha has received the SPS in the past, as well as Oscar Subsidies, and now currently receives Working For Families tax credits. The father of Aroha's son does not consistently pay his child support. Aroha noted early in the interview that because she was raised in state care, she does not know her whakapapa or ethnic origins, however, she identifies as Pākehā.

Emma is in her mid-40s and is New Zealand Samoan. She works full-time for a health organisation that has a particular focus on Māori and Pasifika, and lives with her two children in a rental property. At the time of the interviews, Emma's daughter was 13 and her son was 12, however Emma has been a solo mother to her children since they were toddlers. Emma has been diagnosed with a lung disease and often must take time off work. She has received the SPS in the past as well as other temporary assistance, and help from Housing New Zealand. At the time of the interview, Emma only received Oscar Subsidies. Emma's children see their father sporadically, but their relationship is strained. Emma often has difficulties receiving her child support payments from the father of her children.

3.4 Chapter Conclusion

Having introduced and contextualised the participants (who are central to this thesis), in the following chapters I begin to discuss their stories. This chapter, crucially, demonstrates the research methodologies that brought these stories to this thesis. I have outlined in this chapter my justification for the research, and exemplified factors of my positionality and epistemology. Using a critical theory epistemology, this chapter outlines the important ethical considerations I had in this research, and the methods I used when approaching the interviews, analysis and write-up. I also outlined the limitations of the project in this chapter, including the subjectivities of research and the influence of positionality on the research production. Within this, I have noted the contentions of being a young Pākehā researcher in Aotearoa New Zealand, operating from within the neoliberal university institution. Such discussion is essential to acknowledge. Not only is it a self-reflective tool, but it illustrates the ongoing contentions of the research project throughout, and the key ethical questions I kept at the forefront. Having demonstrated the methodology of this project, in the following chapters, I turn to the participants as a way to hear their stories. Here, I begin to unpack the stories told by Maia, Emily, Gemma, Madison, Rachel, Aroha, and Emma.

Chapter 4

Negotiating with the State: Child Support and State Benefits

Negotiations with the State by my participants was key to this thesis and thus this first analytical chapter engages with this framing. Through the course of the research, one of the notable observations of the interview process was the sheer frustration of the participants as they recounted their experiences dealing with the State. I listened as the participants recalled the feeling of belittlement as they entered a Work and Income office; experiences where they were ‘mucked around’, neglected or ignored as they sought to claim their child support or benefit entitlements; and cases where they were denied adequate financial support, resorting to cancelling their insurance, or putting off buying essentials. The dissatisfaction with the State was clear in every single one of these conversations, and based on the experiences the participants disclosed, I could understand why. The focus on these negative interactions with the State as discussed in this chapter, is not to represent the participants as passive victims. As seen in the participants responses, they still push back against the State and exercise their agency (this is explored more directly in chapter six). The discussion of these negative interactions is also not to further vilify beneficiaries and solo mothers. Rather, the focus in this chapter is to illustrate the power of the State in shaping daily life, and to place the participants experiences navigating the State in plain sight. I begin with these direct negotiations with the State to exemplify the need for the State to do better.

As solo mothers, Maia, Emily, Gemma, Madison, Rachel, Aroha and Emma have all interacted with Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) and/or the Inland Revenue Department (IRD). In this chapter, I analyse their experiences negotiating with these two institutions. Their experiences not only demonstrate the direct failings of the State, but they also illustrate the economic and emotional implications for the participants as they sought to negotiate not only with the State, but with ex-partners and their own children to reach suitable financial support. The participants responses concerning both WINZ and IRD work to answer research question one: *How do solo mothers negotiate with the State?* And research question two: *How does the State increase precarity for solo mothers?* I begin the discussion with the participants’ interactions with IRD, before turning to WINZ.

4.1 “Why is our Government just allowing these fathers to be casual dads?”

The above quote from Emma encapsulates the frustration some of the participants experienced when seeking child support payments through IRD. Having been a solo mother to her two children since they were toddlers, Emma has been signed up to receive child support through IRD for several years. In spite of IRD’s declaration to “make sure payments happen” (IRD, n.d.a), this has rarely been the experience for Emma. Instead, she usually only receives a partial payment of her child support entitlement every month. Her frustration dealing with this over the years was clear when she said:

Why is our government just allowing these fathers to be casual dads? Here I am, I’m earning much less money than he is; I’m doing the best I can to keep my head afloat. He doesn’t contribute to outside costs as far as he’s concerned, so, my daughter’s school uniform nearly \$900, then she needed a laptop which was nearly \$400, then her stationary another \$100, then I’ve got school fees, then I’ve got catholic school fees on top of that. He’s contributed nothing.

Emma’s experience interacting with IRD is similar to both Madison and Aroha. Madison’s ex-husband moved to Australia a few months after they had separated. After unsuccessfully trying to arrange child support privately, Madison contacted IRD in 2011. Over the course of a year, Madison sought to receive child support through IRD but was unsuccessful. Madison stated:

They say [with] Australia that they have a reciprocal agreement ... But then they have to access the tax records from Australia, and they would say that he wasn’t working, or he’d moved house, and it’s voluntary if he wants to confirm his address. And I was like, surely not? They’re like, no, he has to voluntarily give his [address] - I said, “I can give you his address, I know where he is.” They said, no - he has to volunteer to. So, I said, well then, it’s not a reciprocal agreement ... It’s a voluntary arrangement that he would be entering into.

The Child Support Act 1991 supposedly facilitates child support payments between Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand by way of their reciprocal agreement, which has stood for twenty years (IRD, 2019a). However, like the case with Emma, the State’s promises have not translated in practice. Madison noted that in 2011 she contacted IRD every month to see if

they had been able to track down her ex-husband. She claims that every time she contacted IRD she was met with the same response: that they were still looking for her ex-husband. After a year, Madison received a letter from IRD stating that they had been unable to find her ex-husband. This is despite the fact that Madison knew where he was living, and also that she understood him to be in paid employment. For Madison, the State's inability to adequately follow-up on child support, and her ex-husband's unwillingness to pay it, has left her with sole financial responsibility for her children since 2011. This not only raises questions about collecting child support in Australia, but the process of collecting child support when the liable parent lives in other countries around the world.¹⁴

Aroha's experience dealing with IRD also demonstrates how the acclamations of the State generally do not translate into practice, and indeed the falsity of the State's claim to "make sure payments happen" (IRD, n.d.a). Aroha notes that she is owed between \$13,000 and \$14,000 in child support payments through IRD. She states:

"Child support is a joke ... Over the years, if I just go through statements - not paid, not received, not received. And so, even though I know that his father's been working, and I've told [IRD] that he works and all of that - not really received."

When I asked Aroha for further detail regarding her interactions with IRD on this issue, she noted:

"Yeah so I did say to [IRD], you know, they live in Tauranga.¹⁵ You just need to search their name on Facebook and it will show where they work ... he's really good at working under the table, or you know, somehow there's a slip in the system."

Under section 130 of the Child Support Act 1991, defaulters of child support payments are to pay their financial support by way of automatic deduction. For Aroha to continue to not receive her child support payments despite her ex-partner being in paid employment, suggests

¹⁴ Recently, the New Zealand Government signed the Hague Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support and Other Forms of Family Maintenance. This is expected to be ratified in April 2021 and would make it easier for the Government to track down individuals living abroad who owe child support. This is necessary, according to the Minister of Revenue, hon. Stuart Nash because for parents living outside of Australia they largely rely on voluntary payments. He notes: "Voluntary compliance is low. Around \$7.7 million in child support is currently outstanding" (IRD, 2019a, para 6).

¹⁵ Place name has been changed.

that he has been able to work outside of the tax system. This makes it difficult to track down and enforce payments. Aroha claims however, that the State does not seem to try very hard to resolve such issues. She outlined her frustration when her ex-partner went on an overseas holiday towards the end of 2019, undetected by authorities:

“He’s got this big massive tax bill but he can still fly out of the country. But let alone if you’ve got a student loan or on the benefit you can’t fly – I don’t know ... how can so many people owe so much in child support and still manage to live the life?”

This experience demonstrates the preferential treatment of the State. In this case, Aroha illustrates a State culture that applies far more scrutiny and punitive measures to beneficiaries than those who are liable to pay child support. This speaks to a wider issue where we see systematic preference afforded to certain groups. As Van Omen, Groot, Masters-Awatere, and Tassell-Matamua (2017) state: “benefit fraudsters are three times more likely to be imprisoned than tax evaders” (p. 14). This is despite the fact that tax evaders in 2014 cheated Aotearoa New Zealand of \$1.24 billion, versus benefit fraud totalling \$33.5 million (Van Omen et al., 2017). These inconsistencies in treatment between beneficiaries and tax evaders also expose the patriarchal nature of the State. We know, for example, that most SPS recipients are women, and most liable child support payers are men. The surveillance on women, particularly solo mother beneficiaries, reveal the inconsistencies in parental expectations between men and women. As Willey (2020) demonstrates, men have long been associated with the public sphere, and as a consequence, their duty to domesticity, the home and their children is not given as much scrutiny as women, who conversely have been long associated with the private sphere.

The punitive culture of the State is also reflected in an early experience of Emma’s. Prior to being in full-time employment, Emma was receiving the SPS benefit. As dictated by the State, recipients of the SPS or UCB will have their child support payments deducted and collected by the State up to the amount they have received via their benefit (IRD, n.d.b). Further to this, any remaining child support that is more than their benefit is then passed on to the receiving parent. However, this is treated as an income for certain WINZ benefits, including but not limited to childcare subsidies, and Working for Families tax credits (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2018b). For Emma, because her child support payments were in excess of her SPS benefit, the remaining child support she did receive was treated as

an income and her other benefits were reduced. This left Emma in a financially precarious position where she was largely no better off, despite getting additional assistance from the State.

For the majority of solo parents this is not a specific issue because the amount of child support they receive is not usually in excess of the cost of their benefit (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2018b). Regardless, the system is problematic because it does not recognise that the benefit is used to support the parent, as well as the children, unlike child support which is apportioned purely for the care of the child (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2018b). This demonstrates the contention as to whether the State should be retaining these child support payments to pay off the SPS and UCB; at the very least if the State should be retaining them in their entirety. In a 2010 Report, the Government noted that they would be unwilling to ‘pass on’ child support payments to beneficiaries because it would result in, “a significant fiscal loss to the Government unless benefits were netted off on the basis that the benefits included an amount for raising children” (IRD, 2010, p. 69). Further, they argued: “It is not clear what effect pass-on would have on parents’ decisions to participate in the workforce. Supplementing the benefit by passing on child support payments might discourage a receiving parent from taking up employment” (p. 70). While this report was released under a previous Government, there remains no ‘pass on’ of child support payments to beneficiaries. This suggests that the State still maintains the same stance: one that prioritises their revenue over the wellbeing of families and devalues the importance of childrearing in favour of paid work in the labour force. This preference towards labour market engagement disadvantages groups such as solo mothers, whose work as a mother may not enable them to engage in other forms of work.

The experiences of Madison, Aroha and Emma more broadly demonstrate that the State is failing to track down liable parents and ensure child support payments. Their experiences are also reflected in the wider state statistics. In the 2018-19 financial year only 69.8 percent of child support payments were paid on time by liable parents (IRD, 2019b, p. 74). Late payments or complete failure to pay child support have resulted in large amounts of debt. As of June 30 2019, total child support debt stood at 2.208 billion dollars. Of this, 1.608 billion were penalty fees (IRD, 2019b). In all cases, under section 134(a) of the Child Support Act 1991, the penalty monies incurred go directly to the Crown and not to the receiving parent. As found by Thomas Coughlan of Newsroom, in the 2016-17 financial year the Government

accumulated nearly 3 percent of its total tax revenue from child support payments. This is more than what was raised from tobacco tax (Coughlan, 2018). While on the one hand, liable payers of child support appear to receive less scrutiny than beneficiaries, this is not to say that the child support system is without issue for this group. In fact, these figures suggest that there may be problems for both recipient and liable parties. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the issues being faced by liable parents, we can see that this is a group that is often in enormous amounts of debt to the State, and potentially under increasing financial strain.¹⁶ Anecdotal evidence presented by the Welfare Expert Advisory Group suggests that the State's collection of penalty monies and collection of child support to offset benefits, may be disincentivising liable parents from paying their child support. This is because they know their payment is going to the State and not to their child (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2018b). Meanwhile, recipients of child support continue to face inconsistency in payment or no payment at all, potentially leaving many financially insecure. Crucially, the State's capacity to track down liable parents and ensure child support payments may also have been reduced by neoliberal reforms undertaken at IRD. In 2015, the department announced a transformation project that would see the loss of 30 percent of its employees by 2021 (Parker, 2019). In April 2019, the department had already culled 770 full-time roles. This supposed 'streamlining' could make it difficult to pursue tax issues, including child support (see RNZ, 2017).¹⁷

Based on the experiences of these three participants, IRD may be contributing to the precarity of solo mothers. First, by failing to do what they claim to do. Madison, Emma and Aroha all vocalised the disconnect between the State policies which affirm the ability to ensure child support payments, and their own lived experiences navigating the system. This was a great source of frustration for the participants. Being paid inconsistently, or not at all, reinforces uncertainty and financial insecurity. As the participants did not always know if they were going to get paid, it became difficult to budget and plan ahead. This is typical of the Anglo-Saxon approach to child support. According to Baylies (1996) the emphasis on the State as an enforcer, in turn treats child support as a private, individual issue. This results in many solo

¹⁶ Cartwright and Gibson (2013) note that fathers who re-partner may be under increasing financial strain because they may have responsibilities to both support children from their previous relationship, as well as potential step-children, or children in their new union.

¹⁷ While beyond the scope of this thesis, there have also been reports that IRD's restructuring has put an increasing number of their employees in precarious positions, for example the rise of fixed-term and casual contracts being used at IRD (see Pullar-Strecker, 2018).

mothers being dependent on the actions of the separated father. Scandinavian models, alternatively situate the State in a primary role of guaranteeing child support payments, in turn treating childrearing and financial support as a collective responsibility (Baylies, 1996). This collective responsibility was also demonstrated in traditional Māori societies, as discussed in chapter two. The current State however, problematically acts as an enforcer rather than supporter. This is further illustrated by how the State withholds child support payments from the recipient parent to recoup payments spent on benefits. This keeps families in a position where they must live on the insufficient amount of money provided by the State. This decreases the chance for families to get ahead and improve their financial situation. IRD also shapes uncertainty by being unable, or unwilling, to track down liable parents. This results in recipients spending undue time following up with IRD to try and receive their entitlements. This is a source of ongoing and significant stress and reinforces precarity for solo mothers. This stress is exacerbated when one considers how this system shapes the interactions with the other parent of their child. It asks these mothers to not just take care of the financials by negotiating with the State and partners, but also ensuring these negotiations do not impact the children. Below, I outline the emotional labour solo mothers have to take on, just to maintain familial ties for their children.

4.2 Playing ‘Diplomat’ and Emotional Stress

Maia cares for her son Nikau¹⁸ for five days a week. On the weekend, Nikau stays with his father. Despite the fact that Nikau spends far more time with Maia, she notes:

His dad doesn’t pay child support. But we agreed that – I agreed – that I wouldn’t do that, because I don’t really care about the money at the end of the day. All I care about is him spending time with Nikau ... So I cut that off, even though I’m entitled to it ... It just makes our relationship good, you know?

While I have previously detailed the direct negotiations with IRD, Maia’s experience demonstrates the more ‘impersonal’ influence of the State with regard to the role of the mother and how this has implications for child support. For Maia, despite the financial support she is entitled to from the father (according to the State), she is willing to put this aside to maintain amicable family relations and indeed, ‘put her child first’. Similarly, Emma

¹⁸ Alias has been used.

notes the difficulties dealing with her ex-partner and in particular, the frustration of not consistently receiving child support payments. Despite this she states:

“But hey, it is what it is ... I’d rather [my kids] have a relationship of some kind with him than not at all.”

For Madison, her role as ‘diplomat’ was also informed by emotional abuse:

I wanted him to actually have a relationship with his kids. You know he can be quite aggressive whenever I kind of raise money, and he’ll say well, I’ll just stop contacting [the children] and so, it’s just like, I’d rather that they had a relationship with him even though he wasn’t very good at it, than not, just for the sake of money.

While Madison had sacrificed the pursuit of child support payments, her role as ‘diplomat’ came with further financial detriment because her ex-husband lived overseas. Madison notes that she personally paid for her daughter to fly to Australia recently:

I recently took our youngest over to Australia to see him because I thought she’s sixteen, and she’s never going to have that relationship back if he doesn’t try now ... So I took her over for a long weekend so they could spend some time together. Which was hard work because she hasn’t seen him for ten years ... And he has no real relationship with my son at all.

Despite the financial support they are entitled to, Maia, Emma and Madison are willing to put this aside to maintain familial ties for their children. This may point to the ideological pressures of motherhood and family maintenance. Families are maintained in society by the belief that women are primarily responsible for childrearing, and they must always centre the needs of their children in their role as mother (Arendell, 1999; Hays, 1996; Smart, 1996). As explored earlier, fathers are typically not held to the same level of accountability for childrearing, nor do they face the same level of scrutiny in their role (Hays, 1996). Consequently, the burden primarily falls on the women participants to maintain the family. However, despite this gendered division of labour within the family, the participants’ responses demonstrate that there still remains the hegemonic notion in heterosexual couples that ‘children need their fathers’. While it is not for me to say if such a notion is true, it can

be problematised when the notion is wielded against mothers. The notion that ‘children need their fathers’ is also reinforced by the State. As explored in chapter two, the State has long idealised the heterosexual nuclear family, articulating the need for both mother and father (Fineman, 1995; Riggs & Peel, 2016). The prevalence of this ideology may therefore be causing undue emotional stress for mothers who are trying to centre their child’s needs, but are not necessarily met half-way by their parental counterpart. In the case of the women participants for this research, the burden falls on them to maintain the relationship with the father for the sake of their children and they navigate these relationships to the detriment of their own economic wellbeing. Further, in being the ‘diplomat’ and maintaining family relations, the participants are also undertaking continual emotional work. This demonstrates that child support issues are not only reinforcing economic precarity but may also be perpetuating emotional or social precarity for the solo mother participants.

4.3 The Dehumanisation of the ‘Client’

Having discussed the participants negotiations with IRD and how issues pertaining to child support are reinforcing precarity, I turn now to the participants’ interactions with WINZ. When I asked the participants how they felt when having to deal with the State, most participants responded with stories which elicited feelings of dehumanisation. They described these interactions as “degrading” (Aroha), noting State offices “make you feel like a criminal” (Maia), “a second-class citizen” (Emily), and often the interactions do “nothing for your self-esteem” (Madison). State services such as WINZ may have an incentive to dehumanise those who interact with them, according to Weber. Weber argues that bureaucracy logics work in such a way that “the more perfectly [it] dehumanized, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements in which escape calculation” (as cited in Gregory & Maynard, 2019, p. 36). The State therefore benefits from such dehumanisation as it supposedly acts as a tool to ensure efficiency for the ‘clients’. The mere terminology adopted by the State speaks to these practices. For example, citizens seeking State support are referred to as ‘clients’ (Gregory & Maynard, 2019). Such a term suggests a business exchange and breaks the citizen and State relationship. It also alludes to there being some level of choice in this decision to do ‘business’ – this not only undermines State responsibility to the citizen, it also downplays the situation of the beneficiary; suggesting they actively decided to seek out State services, ignoring in the process that they often do not have much of a choice.

Interestingly, both Emily and Rachel noted a distinction in their treatment by the State depending on the benefit they were seeking. Emily for example, found that receiving the UCB has been a much better process than when she was receiving the DPB:

“Yeah, WINZ - with [my grandson] they have been really nice ... Possibly because I’m not a parent. I don’t know, I just feel that when I had [my children] they didn’t treat you very nicely at all.”

Similarly, Rachel stated:

“I think because I’m a working parent I probably get treated a bit better than parents who aren’t working.”¹⁹

The differentiation in treatment depending on the benefit being sought and the individual circumstances of the beneficiary, perhaps speaks to how the State values certain ‘clients’ over others. This may illustrate the idea of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. Here, there is a particular favouring of mothers who work, and within that a favouring of certain beneficiaries. Aligned with neoliberal values, this differential treatment speaks to the State’s preference for individual responsibility. Mothers who work, or mothers who are not biological parents could be seen to be taking ‘responsibility’. Non-working SPS beneficiaries may alternatively be perceived as ‘irresponsible’ for having a child. In the interviews, the participants who had received the SPS (or formerly the DPB) had the most prominent negative interactions with the State. The punitive measures they experience are equally descriptive of neoliberalism and the shift from a more universal approach to welfare to a ‘means-tested’ welfare (Hodgetts, Stolte, Chamberlain, & Groot, 2017). The feeling of dehumanisation on the SPS benefit as a non-working solo mother is summarised by Aroha:

“I don’t want to be another statistic - I am a pinnacle statistic. State care to benefit, young mum. You just see the labels flashing. In hindsight I actually wish I’d stayed off work for a year, you know? But I couldn’t tolerate the continual going in [to WINZ],

¹⁹ Rachel also noted that she knew some of the people who worked in her local WINZ office, which could be why she found the process to be less degrading than it was for some of the other participants.

the real degrading looks you'd get in there, especially as a younger mum – a young solo mum. It's the eyeroll, everything. It was just so shit.”

This treatment Aroha experiences is illustrative of the clinical State bureaucracy and their neoliberal values which inherently view a citizen with rights as a client. Her individual personhood is undermined, and she is reduced to feeling like a “statistic”. This may be particularly because of the benefit she is seeking out as a non-working, young solo mother. This treatment eventually incentivises Aroha to return to work, thus letting the State ‘off the economic hook’. As Little (2012) explains, this is typical of the neoliberal era, noting that the single mother is now the paid employee. Indeed, the expectation is now that everyone works. While the State may universally apply practices of dehumanisation for the sake of efficiency, it is also meant to serve the purpose of removing bias: everyone is treated the same. However, it is clear in the participants’ responses that this is not necessarily the case. Working solo mothers had clearly been treated with a bit more respect and afforded autonomy, than non-working mothers were afforded. This can be seen in the disparity of experiences between that of Aroha and Rachel, and the disparity between Emily’s experience as a non-working recipient of the DPB and a working recipient of the UCB.

4.4 The Rigmarole of State Interactions

While the participants communicated that they often felt degraded when interacting with the State, they also noted many other issues. Over the course of the research, I was frequently told by the participants that when they had to deal with the State (particularly WINZ) they were also met with time consuming processes, a lack of advocacy on behalf of the State and also, frequent cases of inconsistent information. Most participants also had incidents where the State overpaid their entitlements, forcing the participants to come up with money to return to the State. While Madison and Aroha were both overpaid their Working for Families tax credits (facilitated by IRD), Maia, Rachel and Emma were overpaid WINZ benefits. Maia, for example notes:

They would always overpay me – apparently overpay me. And then I'd owe them money ... When I fully cut the benefit off, they came back to me saying I owed them a thousand dollars. And I was like, “how do I owe you a thousand dollars?” And they said it was because they overpaid me. But you can't argue. Because they'll fucking win

anyways.

Similarly, Emma recalled:

There was one time I got overpaid and I made sure, like I think even triple checked with the office down there that I had done the paperwork right ... And then sure enough after about 9 months, I had been apparently, fraudulently taking [from the State] - I wasn't fraudulent! So I rung up and explained it, and it was like, "yeah well, doesn't matter, you've got to pay it back." And I was like, "well of course I'll pay it back, I'm not disputing that ... But don't use that word when that was not the process that happened."

In these cases, there are further punitive measures being applied to beneficiaries, despite the issues being within the State's own administrative systems. The prevalence of overpayment issues across the interviews is concerning and speaks also to State informed precarity. While the State will support you financially, the support is conditional and often uncertain.

Many participants also noted the difficulties associated with maintaining State requirements including keeping on top of appointments and paperwork. Aroha perfectly encapsulated this when she said:

[I] feel like you're just being constantly harassed and hounded to meet these requirements. And then obviously when I went back to work, getting the Oscar forms and the childcare forms all signed and finding the time to then be able to drop them off to the office, and at times that they're still open, when you don't know that time. Initially I think I had to make an appointment. So, then I had to find time in my job to actually go in and make an appointment to see them and get the papers. And then I have to make another appointment to then drop them off. Until I learnt that I could post them. And then they'd lose them in the post. So then you'd have this letter of termination saying that we haven't received your things, therefore we're cancelling, then you'd have the childcare on you. It's always been a battle over the years.

In addition to the tedious and time-consuming requirements for accessing benefits, participants also noted the misinformation provided by the State. There were often disparities

in information between different case managers, or between WINZ offices and their own website. As a result, the participants said that they often found it difficult to know what they were entitled to. Gemma, for example stated in our interview:

I find there's what I would call, the outward facing generic WINZ website stuff, which is actually not that helpful. But then if you look in the right place you can find actually good information, which I think is their internal systems ... and sometimes I find it hard to find. Their outward facing information is not that informative.

Similarly, Madison stated:

You put all your stuff in [on the website], you're entitled to this. And then [the case managers] come back and say no you're not. It's like, well your website says I am. And it's the same information. So you know, that went back and forth, back and forth. Of what I was entitled to and what I wasn't entitled to.

These experiences speak to the excessive bureaucracy of the system and the inaccessibility and inconsistency of information. Indeed, as Gregory and Maynard (2019) argue, bureaucratic offices are characterised as: “profoundly impersonal systems of administration, consisting of hierarchy, an intensive division of labour, calculable technical knowledge... codified written rules and regulations, and formal records” (p. 36). The State's ‘impersonal’ hierarchies and systems of administration may be making it difficult for citizens to easily access consistent and reliable information. It also could be argued that the ‘red tape’ of State bureaucracy, where citizens are forced to carry out arduous tasks, are faced with inconsistent information, or treated disparagingly by case workers, could be tools to disincentivise engagement thus freeing the State from economic responsibility. This was the case for two participants who grew so tired of the general difficulties interacting with the State that they decided they would rather financially struggle than to continue to engage with them. On the Working for Families tax credits, Madison noted: “I kind of gave up because I would rather do it on my own then go through that.” Further, Aroha, who was receiving childcare subsidies said: “I just gave up. I was like, actually, you know what, I'm just gunna make ends meet.” From a feminist perspective, we can see how the rigmarole of interacting with the State also poses additional issues for the participants. As Vandenbeld Giles (2014) notes, mothers in the neoliberal era are under increasing financial strain, potentially engaging in low-waged,

precarious employment, and/or relying on minimal State support. These mothers are tending to their children, to elderly relatives, and the household. As the participants noted, placed on top of these stresses is the requirement to engage in onerous State requirements – appointments, forms, and applications, and indeed, degrading treatment. Instead of helping the participants, the State was contributing to stress and the long list of tasks that needed to be tended to in their busy lives.

More broadly, this system also poses difficulties for those who are not ‘literate’ in the way the State functions. In my first interview with Madison, she stated:

“This is going to sound really smug but I have a degree and you know, I can converse easily. And it just made me think, how do people who, maybe English isn’t their first language, or their schooling wasn’t as good, how do these people feel? You know? It’s just shocking.”

Madison’s point demonstrates the inaccessibility of the State system and how their practices could be resulting in many slipping through the cracks. In practicing the ‘impersonal’ system and treating everyone ‘the same’ the State may be ignoring the need for a diverse response to issues of precarity. This may be harming Māori too. Gregory and Maynard (2019) refer to the opposing practices of the bureaucratic State and that of Māori tradition, illustrating that while the State privileges written documents and statistics, Māori practice places an emphasis on oral tradition. Further, while the State bureaucracy is based on the Westminster ‘rule of law’, Māori have alternatively operated within chief and iwi authority. As Bryers-Brown (2015) argues, the interactions with the State bureaucracy (among other factors) may be resulting in re-trauma for Māori, noting that the State is an operation of structural violence (see also King, Rua, & Hodgetts, 2017; Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1988). This raises questions about the functions and practices of the State, and how their systems may be reinforcing precarity for many groups.

4.5 Not Enough Money

In addition to the aforementioned issues, all seven of the participants discussed the financial barriers they face as a solo mother. Consistent with the findings of the Welfare Expert Advisory Group report, *Whakamana Tangata* (2019a) participants noted that the benefit

system provided insufficient financial support to meet their needs. It was found in the interviews that the State also engaged in intensive financial monitoring, and further, failed to provide sufficient financial support in exceptional circumstances or crises. The findings of the interviews suggest that the State is doing little to ease financial concerns of solo mothers, instead often reinforcing social and economic uncertainty.

Maia was faced with both insufficient financial support and also, financial monitoring from the State. When she first had her son, she was on the YPP before eventually moving to the SPS. When on the former, Maia noted:

I didn't have much control over my money because I had to be 18 [to go on the SPS]. I don't know what it's like now, but they would pay my rent. They would put the rest of my money onto a payment card, which could only go on food. It was really hard. In the first like, three months of Nikau's life he slept on a changing table because I couldn't afford to get a cot. And my family wouldn't help me with that. My grandparents would of, they eventually helped me get one, but they were on fucking, the Super[annuation Scheme] – you know – so they weren't earning much themselves.

This experience demonstrates the financial monitoring of the State. Maia was unable to receive her entitlement to pay for her expenses herself, and further, any amount she did receive was insufficient to even buy her new-born a cot. The State did little to ease the stigma inflicted on Maia as a young mother, instead enforcing paternalistic policies that imply that parents under the age of 18 are incapable of budgeting and personally paying for their own expenses.²⁰ This reinforces the societal stigma that young mothers are incapable and irresponsible. As Ware et al. (2017) claim, the YPP is also counterintuitive because removing autonomy over finances does not necessarily improve one's ability to manage finances. They also note that the YPP is culturally insensitive, not acknowledging for example, the contention between Māori cultural acceptance of young motherhood in comparison to “wider societal condemnation of early childbearing” (p. 137). Aside from meeting Maia's most fundamental basic needs, the State provided inadequate financial support and otherwise reinforced the societal stigma of young mothers, particularly young Māori mothers, by engaging in these practices of financial monitoring.

²⁰ The YPP was amended in 2015 to also include 19-year-olds (Ware, Breheny, & Forster, 2017).

While other participants did not experience such intensive financial monitoring, similarly to Maia they did note the insufficiency of State financial support. For two of the participants, this included the lack of financial support in emergencies or exceptional circumstances. In the case of Emily, she was left in debt for a car that had been purchased by her ex-partner under her name. Because Emily was also receiving insufficient funding from her benefit, she was forced to cut her insurance:

“I had insurance, but I cancelled it because I couldn’t afford to pay for the car and pay for the insurance. And I’m thinking well, nothing’s going to happen to us, you know? Cancel the insurance, pay for the car. Because it had ended up coming out off the benefit as well. You get stuff all on the benefit, so we were scraping by. So we had this house fire and lost everything, and I went down to WINZ to see if they could help me and the woman said to me ... “Go and get yourself a couple of blow up couches, you’ll be fine.”

While the State has provision for funding in exceptional circumstances, Emily was effectively turned away. This experience speaks to not only to how the State belittles those who interact with it, but it also illustrates the lack of financial support the State provides, both through the inadequacy of weekly entitlements, and also in times of crisis or emergency. Similarly, when Emma’s son was a baby, he suffered from severe allergies and consequently could not have regular formula. Her son was prescribed a special formula that cost \$45 for a single small tin. Emma notes that she needed at least three of these per week for her son. She stated:

“Work and Income gave me – how much? ... I don’t even know what stupid category it fell into, but they contributed \$17 a week towards these \$45 tins ... So by the time I paid for his formula and nappies, let alone food or petrol, our money was nearly gone.”

The blind application of rules within the State system, while there to ensure consistency, loses with it the diverse understanding of individuals’ precarity, and indeed the fluidity and changeability of life. Through no fault of their own, both Emily and Emma were forced to struggle financially without sufficient additional support from the State. In any case, regardless of exceptional circumstances, the State is providing insufficient financial support

for people to meet their needs. This is summarised by Gemma, who receives the SPS and Accommodation Allowance:

“To actually pay rent, to live, to access good schools, to eat good food, to live in a warm, dry, healthy home - like all of that sort of stuff is not actually accessible, given the amount of money that people can get through WINZ. But it’s better than not getting anything.”

This demonstrates how the State maintains a form of precarity for the participants by failing to provide them with sufficient financial support in their capacity as solo mothers. Further, through the State’s bureaucratic practices, beneficiaries may slip through the cracks and fail to get additional support in exceptional circumstances. This reinforces the precarity of individuals as there becomes no room for ‘error’. Furthermore, the State reinforces precarity through financial monitoring. The requirements of the YPP perpetuates societal stigma, and discredits personal autonomy in a young parent’s life.

4.6 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illustrated the participants’ direct negotiations with the State and its functionaries. This has manifested through participants’ interactions with IRD, and how this institution is needed to negotiate personal lives and co-parenting for the children’s wellbeing. Through the research it was clear my participants saw IRD as reinforcing their precarity instead of alleviating it and helping them with their lives and childrearing. First, by failing to guarantee consistent child support payments, or any payment at all. Because of this, participants were forced to spend time chasing up IRD to try and claim their entitlements - a frustrating and stressful process for the participants. The insecurity of the participants is also perpetuated by the State retaining penalty fees and using child support payments to off-set benefit payments. These cumulative factors meant that participants were often not seeing any of the child support money. Further, participants faced undue emotional stress when it came to negotiating child support. Three of the participants prioritised maintaining amicable family relationships over receiving the financial support they are entitled to. This may demonstrate the more ‘impersonal’ influences of the State, illustrating that the current system may be forcing mothers to choose between maintaining familial ties for their children and receiving adequate financial support. This ultimately demonstrates that the State should be playing

more of a role in guaranteeing child support, moving from the ‘enforcer’ role, to acknowledging the position of many women and the collective responsibility for raising children (see Baylies, 1996).

In the second part of the chapter, I detailed beneficiary support. Through this research I found that the State reinforced the precarity of the participants through bureaucratic, neoliberal practices. This chapter suggests that the burdensome requirements of the State to access benefits is used as a tool to disincentivise engagement. This is exacerbated by State treatment and indeed cases of misinformation; whereby participants felt belittled when interacting with the State, and were equally uncertain about their entitlements owing to an inconsistency in information from case managers to State websites. At one point in my interview with Aroha she even went so far as to joke that she felt like WINZ had KPI’s or incentive bonuses for how many people they could get off the benefit. Both Aroha and Madison chose to cease their benefits, tired of the treatment and arduous requirements of the State. This chapter also outlined the lack of financial support being provided by the State. This is both through weekly payments, and in cases of financial crisis when additional support is clearly warranted. Participants also noted the intensive financial monitoring of the State, particularly under the YPP. This reinforces societal stigma against young mothers and reduces their financial autonomy. While this chapter has largely focused on the more immediate interactions with the State, in the following chapter I discuss the ‘impersonal’ affects of the neoliberal State, particularly pertaining to the participants’ employment and housing.

Chapter 5

‘The State is Inefficient’: Neoliberalism, Housing and Employment

Upon finishing my first interview with Madison, she sent me a text containing a quote by Annabel Crabb: “The obligations for working mothers is a very precise one: The feeling that one ought to work as if one did not have children, while raising one’s children as if one did not have a job.” Madison went on to tell me that she keeps this quote handy, presumably to remind her that the pressure she feels as both a mother and an employee is externally enforced, not a fault of her own. There is perhaps some comfort in this, if not to also remind her that there are clearly other working mothers that feel this way too. As I proceeded through the interviews, the participants often discussed this pressure in work and motherhood and the ‘time crunch’ of being able to meet the demands of both roles. Reflected in these experiences was also the precarity of their employment, including low remuneration and even experiences of discriminatory hiring practices, adding significant stress to the experiences of the participants in their working lives.

While the interviews revealed precarity of employment experienced by these solo mothers, it was equally clear that the precarity of housing played a significant role in creating the overall precariat. Aside from Rachel, all of the participants rented their homes. Many discussed the high cost of rent in the interviews, some noting, conversely, their good fortune in having a decent landlord amid the housing crisis. Others mentioned their interactions with Housing New Zealand (HNZ), and the experience of living in a crowded home. These experiences of both precarious employment and housing share commonality. This is because they perhaps reveal that on a more ‘impersonal’ level, the State’s neoliberal practices are impacting solo mothers. As illustrated in chapter one, the conservative ideology of neoliberalism argues that society functions best when State interference is minimal; indeed, society is more efficient when it is driven by individual responsibility and market values (Harvey, 2005). This very notion that the State is inefficient is an insidious discourse that negates the State’s responsibility to the collective (Harvey, 2005; Wade, 2013). With the State employing this more ‘hands-off’ approach, there have been detrimental impacts on the housing and labour market, contributing both to a housing crisis and increasing rates of precarious employment in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is reflected among the experiences of Emily, Maia, Gemma,

Madison, Rachel, Aroha and Emma. In this chapter, I link together the neoliberal practices of the State to the experiences of the participants when it came to their employment and housing situations. This chapter builds on what was discussed in chapter four by also answering research question two: *How does the State increase precarity for solo mothers?* While the previous chapter looked at the more direct influences of the State via IRD and WINZ, this chapter reveals the more subliminal influences of the neoliberal State.

5.1 The Demands on the Working Mum

I began this chapter with the quote from Annabel Crabb, sent to me by Madison. This quote, perhaps on the one hand, reveals the continued societal attachment to the nuclear family, male bread-winner model. On the other, it also acknowledges the pressures on the working mother. I draw connection between this quote and what Hays (1996) terms the ‘cultural contradiction’ of motherhood. By this, Hays refers to the demands of the perfect mother. In the Western capitalist setting, this perfect mother will practice ‘intensive mothering’. Among other things such a notion purports that “children are innocent and priceless, that their rearing should be carried out primarily by individual mothers and that it should be centred on children’s needs...” (p. 21). As discussed in chapter four, the participants centred their children by prioritising their child’s relationship with the other parent over their financial security. Similarly, the pressure of this mothering ideology and the obligation to always centre children may be making it difficult to meet demands in paid employment. This is because such an obligation runs in direct opposition to the role of a paid employee in the neoliberal marketplace.

The neoliberal worker typically operates in a world of increasing labour intensification, with a focus on individuality and self-interest. This in turn, creates unreasonable demands on mothers who also work outside their homes for money. As Standing (2011) claims, “the global economy has no respect for human physiology. The global market is a 24/7 machine” (p. 198). For working mothers, such as Madison, who works full time in a role that often requires travel, while also caring for her two children, she is faced with constant contradictions. In her capacity as a mother, she must devote all her time to her children and fixate on their needs; however, at work she must operate in a “24/7 machine” that favours profits and individual responsibility above all else. It is perhaps for this reason that she finds some comfort in Annabel Crabb’s words.

The burden this cultural contradiction places on solo mothers was evident all through my research. In the absence of a secondary income or a permanent additional person to help with childrearing, the participants had limited time to meet the demands of mothering and their paid work. The resulting factors include a ‘time crunch’ and difficulties keeping up with various responsibilities. Rachel, for example, who works two jobs while also caring for her two children, notes the demands of her roles. This was heightened after her parents became unwell. She notes:

“It was desperately busy for a few years with severely disabled parents, and solo mum to school age children ... We were here, there and everywhere ... Just having to manage a lot of things.”

This ‘time crunch’ has obvious impacts on one’s health. Prior to becoming a teacher, Maia described the difficulties of managing her studies, part-time employment and childcare. She disclosed:

“It was very hard when I was studying uni and working a job and looking after [my son]. And having to find babysitters and shit. I actually got real sick. Like at the end of uni I was about 45 kgs. I was pale. I was sleep deprived ... I was really unhealthy.”

This demonstrates the living conditions that women and mothers as solo parents expose themselves to in the absence of proper support. To risk their health and wellbeing, just to be able to get a degree, get ahead and provide for their children. The demands of life (work, sleep, and childcare) under neoliberalism have little regard for human wellbeing or other factors of life outside of paid work. While the ‘time crunch’ of meeting obligations both in the workplace and in the home was an issue, the interviews also demonstrated the scrutiny participants experienced for their ability to perform in these roles, as both a mother and worker. This was manifested in a sense of guilt for participants who could not always meet the demands of the idealised mother while also working within the “24/7 machine”. Emily for instance, works full-time, often having to do night shifts, while also caring for her ten-year-old grandson. She stated:

“When I do my shift work, you know, I just feel so guilty when I have to sort of farm him out to all the family. I just think oh my god. So that’s why I’m hoping to get a job that’s nine till five, or eight till five, or whatever it is. And no overnights and no weekend work.”

The feeling of guilt was also manifested for Madison when discussing how she must travel for work:

“When I was last away in Christchurch, I had an incident with my daughter. She went off with her friend to go meet some guy up the Kāpiti Coast. You know, I couldn’t do anything about it. I’m not at home.”

The guilt was tangible in these conversations, and such feelings may be a consequence of the ideological pressures placed on mothers, alongside the demands of their workplace. As Jamal Al-deen (2019) explains, mothers who are unable to live up to the intensive mothering ideology “find themselves and their mothering under public scrutiny and surveillance – hence anxiety, guilt and self-blame are brought to the lived experience of mothering” (p. 101). Emily and Madison’s sense of guilt in these instances may demonstrate the internalisation of mothering ideology, or a perceived societal surveillance of their mothering. As Jamal Al-deen (2019) goes on to note, the societal reinforcement of this ideology is problematic because it denies women’s agency to determine their own mothering experience.

Moreover, the experiences of Madison and Emily also illustrate that the neoliberal work model is not compatible with these demands of motherhood. Madison notes that her area of work attracts a lot of women employees, but that their workplace does very little to support the needs of these women, particularly those with children:

Yes, you can argue that [the employees] knew that those were the hours when they first arrived, but we also talked about how we’re a flexible working arrangement when we’re employing people. So on the one hand, they’re saying come work with us, we’re very flexible and we celebrate whānau, and you know, we do all these wonderful things to make sure you have a life outside of here. But once you are here, actually we’re not going to. We’re not going to allow any of that to happen.

Emily has similar experiences. After suddenly becoming the sole-carer for her grandson, she was forced to take annual leave from her work. Emily has worked in this role for seven years, and despite this massive change in life circumstances, her employer refused to let her temporarily cut down her hours:

Lizzy: Have [your employers] been reasonably flexible with -

Emily: No. Not at all. No, when this first happened, I asked if I could cut down my hours just until we got sorted, and they said, “no. You know what your hours are.”

Emily’s story about the inflexible workplace, even in light of new personal demands highlights the brutality which managers have to enforce to ‘maintain’ their workplace. The experiences of the participants indicate that while women may be judged against an impossible standard in their capacity as a mother, their places of work do little to accommodate their needs to meet such standards. Such competing demands naturally contribute to the precarity of this group as they are faced with limited time, inflexible working arrangements, and guilt as they seek to meet all the obligations they are put under.

5.2 Precarity of Employment

Alongside the demands of the working mother, the findings of the interviews also suggest that the participants are facing precarious conditions in their paid employment. At the time of the interviews, all of the participants were working in paid employment, aside from Gemma. Some had stories of encountering discriminatory hiring practices, contributing to the stress and difficulties of labour force engagement for the participants. Others discussed insecurity of employment reinforced via an inadequate income. This also included the double-bind of flexible labour. While the stories of Madison and Emily demonstrated the need for workplace flexibility, Rachel illustrates the downsides of this working arrangement, as explored further below. First, I note that many of the participants argued that despite earning a wage, they did not have a sufficient income, even if working full-time. Madison for example, states:

“I’m a working poor. I work. I don’t make a bad income. But it’s just me paying for three, basically adults.”

The lack of income Madison receives relative to her outgoing expenses is consistent with the experiences of the other participants. It is also comparable to the literature that illustrates the economic vulnerability of the solo mother group (Krassoi Peach & Cording, 2018; McNeill, 2017; Winkler, 2014). Indeed, many double-income households have become increasingly vulnerable in the neoliberal era, let alone single-earner households (Fraser, 2016). While in

the previous chapter, I discussed the insufficiency of welfare support, the experiences of the participants demonstrate that often paid work is providing an equally insufficient income for many.

For Rachel, the nature of her employment, and the rate of pay she receives is heavily shaped by the fact that she is a solo mother. She must work in flexible roles so as to cater for her responsibilities as a mother. However, these positions are often the most precarious and offer little in the way of upward mobility:

“I’ve deliberately had roles with flexibility ... and often those jobs that are more flexible time wise are not paid as well. Like they’re not jobs where you could progress your career a lot.”

We see the contention here regarding the importance of workplace flexibility to cater for the responsibilities of mothers, but equally how this flexibility comes at a price. Standing (2011) notes with the beginning of the neoliberal era, many economists argued that workforces needed to become more flexible. If they did not, then production, investment and jobs would simply shift away. The consequences of this has meant that employees are now increasingly vulnerable to the labour market, with decreased wage security and employment protections (Standing, 2011). It could therefore be argued that many employers have co-opted the discourse about flexibility and choice in the labour market. While arguing that this flexibility on the one hand will allow you to ‘spend time with your kids’, on the other, such work will leave one with weakened labour protections, often in expendable roles, and with very little upward mobility. As explored in chapter one, this impacts women in particular, as they largely make-up the fixed-term, part-time and casual workforce, because they require the flexibility of work to meet household and childcare obligations (Stringer et al., 2018).

Solo mothers are therefore often detrimentally impacted by the types of work they can engage in. Further, remuneration in women dominated industries (often indispensable work) also remains low (Ministry for Women, 2012). As Fraser (2013) notes, a primary feminist aim should be to decentre wage work, and to valorise unpaid care work. This is particularly important in the neoliberal era, which has brought forth the notion that everyone should work. This denies women, particularly those of lower socio-economic backgrounds, of choice in their experience of motherhood. In many neoliberal societies, low-income mothering is “no

longer a legitimate claim for State support” (Little, 2012, p. 1). As explored in chapter two however, even when it *was* a legitimate claim for State support, it was tentative, fragile, and usually only given in full to the mothers who could be classed as ‘deserving’ (for instance, Pākehā and widows). Solo mothers who do receive State support presently are ‘clients’ rather than citizens doing essential care work. In fact, they must also jump through hoops to get this State support, and are only paid minimal amounts (see chapter four).

These issues of precarious employment and insufficient State support are also reflected in Emma’s experience. When she was receiving the SPS benefit, she decided to take up work outside of the formal employment channels. This was to avoid losing part (if not all) of her benefit, which alone was not sufficient to meet her financial needs, particularly while caring for her two toddlers. Emma began working as an in-home child carer, an arrangement that suited her well. She was able to stay at home and look after her own children, while also doing some paid care work for another child. She received her State benefit, but was additionally topped-up with a small amount of money from her employer. Emma noted, however, that one day her employer decided they did not need her services anymore. She stated:

“And then when [my employers] came back, they were like, “that’s it.” I was like, “what do you mean that’s it?” “I’m a stay at home mum now.” And I was just like. Oh.... I wasn’t expecting it to happen the way that it did.”

Overnight Emma therefore lost a significant source of her income leaving her in a financially precarious position. Emma ultimately wanted to be able to care for her children. When discussing the inadequacy of State support, she recalled:

“Everyone’s like, oh well you know. Just go back to work and put your kids into care. I didn’t have my kids ... to be raised by someone else. I had my kids so I could have them. And raise them.”

Her experience demonstrates the undervalued nature of care work, and the societal expectations of engaging in paid labour. Emma pushes back against this, recognising the importance of her childrearing and by finding an arrangement that allowed her to both receive an income and continue to care for her children full-time. However, she still remained in a precarious position. Her experience as an in-home child carer demonstrates the importance of adequate employment protections when having to engage in paid labour. In this case, Emma

lives in a position of contention. She operates outside of State requirements by not declaring her working income. This is to ensure she receives her full State benefit and can continue looking after her own children. However, in operating in this informal ‘under-the-table’ employment arrangement, she is afforded no job security or employment rights vis-à-vis the State. Emma’s story in many ways highlights the delicateness of State intervention – it may be used to support and empower. But equally, it may be used for punitive and disciplinarian means.

As a final point on the precarity of the participants’ employment, I note the experiences of Emily and Maia. Their stories demonstrated the presence of discriminatory hiring practices and the issue of getting employment in the first place. While studying at university, Maia sought out part-time employment. She noted:

“After I was pregnant it was hard. Because [employers] were like: Student. Baby. You don’t have enough time. So it was quite hard to get a job.”

Maia went on to state:

“It was weird because I had learnt not to tell people that I had a child. Because that just stopped me from getting a job every fucking time. I even had one person stop the interview right then and there. Assholes.”

Emily similarly notes that as an older working woman she has difficulties with finding work:

“I’ve been looking for work since I’ve had [my grandson]. And it’s not easy. And it’s probably my age. Because you know, when they read my CV it’s like, she probably won’t be with us for long.”

Emily and Maia’s experiences demonstrate how discrimination in hiring practices continue to face many women when entering paid employment. This further exaggerates the precarity of the participants as it constrains their ability to receive an income, or to move into a role with hours that are compatible with the demands of motherhood. This section more broadly has

sought to demonstrate the participant's experiences dealing with issues of insecurity in work and income. Flexible working arrangements (when mothers are able to find them) have very little in the way of decent compensation and upward mobility. Coupled with the decline in real wages (Rosenberg, 2016), solo mothers are often not making enough income to support the needs of their families. Employment arrangements also do not tend to support the responsibilities of solo mothers. This is obvious for Madison and Emily who respectively must travel for work or do night shifts and weekend work. The State may increase insecurity and precarity of the participants by failing to intervene in the job market to create protections in employment that work with the needs of mothers and their children, and fairly compensates them for it. Indeed, the general disregard for care work fails to recognise the position of many women, but particularly women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

5.3 The Housing Crisis

While neoliberalism has produced problems for solo mother's employment, it has equally produced issues with housing. As explored in chapter one, Eaqub and Eaqub (2015) have discussed the rising costs of housing, accompanied by a decline in state housing stock, general housing inaccessibility and poor quality of housing in Aotearoa New Zealand. These factors have led to a housing crisis. Aside from Rachel, all of the participants rented their homes. Their experiences in the housing market are descriptive of how the housing crisis is impacting solo mothers. For Maia, the unaffordability of homes means she must live in a crowded household with her mother, nan, and son. She describes:

“Me and Nikau are staying in a room in a crowded house. So it's a three bedroom house. There's no lounge. It's just crowded. And we are stuffed in a little shoebox room. So, it's not really that great at the moment. The reason why I'm living like this is because I'm single, solo mum. And it's expensive to go out into the real world.”

For Madison, her rent recently went up to \$640 per week, which was unaffordable on her income. She and her children were therefore forced to move away from their suburb (where they were local to Madison's mum) to a new area with a more affordable property market. Even now, however, Madison notes:

“Most of my income goes on rent.”

In these experiences, we see how the rising cost of housing is impacting single-income households. The issue of crowded housing is a particular issue and is often correlated with heightened risk of health issues (Ministry of Health, 2019). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika are overrepresented in statistics on crowded housing, with over 40 percent of Pasifika living in crowded homes (RNZ, 2020a). Such statistics speak to the extrinsic impacts of neoliberalism and the structural inequality and racism it informs.

We also see the results of the housing crisis when analysing the nature of state housing stock. As Murphy and Kearns (1994) found, from the mid-1980s through to the early 1990s, the successive Labour and National Governments underwent an increasing corporatisation of state housing. The impacts of this have meant that “low-income households will either be encouraged to move between HNZ properties or be channelled into a private sector characterised by a very variable housing stock” (pp. 634-635). Further, over the years the number of state houses have decreased as they corporatise, despite the fact that the demand for state housing has been increasing. In 2017, for example, there was an increase of 1476 HNZ applications compared to the previous year (Fallon, 2017). This problem persists today (see also Owen, 2019). The increase in demand is informed by the housing crisis and has left already vulnerable groups in particularly uncertain positions. For Emma, she was forced to leave her home with her two children when they were very young. With the support of Women’s Refuge, Emma approached HNZ:

“Housing New Zealand were of no help. I went to my first appointment with [the] Women’s Refuge letter and the guy was amazing. I went back in - like I was told to by him a week later - and the female behind the counter was awful. She was absolutely horrible. You know, spoke down to me. Told me to take a number like everyone else ... You know, “what made my case so special?”

This experience illustrates the rising demand for social housing, leaving those who are most vulnerable in particularly precarious positions. Further, it demonstrates how the neoliberal mentality has permeated the housing market and attitudes towards it. Again, the value of individual responsibility is emphasised, perhaps justifying a State that dehumanises those who need support. This general commodification of housing shifts discourses away from housing as a fundamental right to that of a commercial business. The State’s lack of adequate

intervention in the housing crisis²¹ has meant that groups such as solo mothers are left in housing situations that reinforce uncertainty and insecurity. Individuals are being forced to live in crowded homes (like Maia); or they are forced to move away from family into more affordable areas (like Madison), only then to still spend most of their earnings on rent. Likewise, the State's lack of protections in the housing market has resulted in a decrease in state housing. This harms those who are particularly vulnerable, including those who are escaping domestic violence. While the neoliberal housing market appears to disadvantage solo mothers, and perhaps all those who are not wealthy, or property owners, the system particularly harms Māori. This is because the colonial privatised model Aotearoa New Zealand currently operates within has concurrently run in direct opposition to Māori collective understanding of land and housing (see Kake, 2019). While neoliberal reforms have increased housing precarity, the privatised model of housing and land ownership has harmed Māori since the inception of the colonial government. Consequently, today Māori are less likely to be homeowners, and are more likely to live in substandard houses than Pākehā (Kake, 2019).

5.4 The Benevolent Landlord

One of the consequences of the neoliberal housing market, as touched on above, is that it has shifted housing away from being a fundamental right, to instead being a commodity product. This in turn creates a problematic relationship between tenants and landlords. In the interviews, some of the participants noted their good fortune in having landlords that charge below the market rate for their properties. This demonstrates how renters are living at the whim of their landlords, with minimal protections from the State. Indeed, their sense of 'luck' in having a landlord that does not charge an extortionate amount in rent illustrates how distorted our beliefs around property investment have become. Describing her current home, Emma states:

“So I’m lucky. I’m lucky I haven’t had to move. I’m lucky that this is an investment

²¹ Kiwibuild is a housing programme introduced in 2018 by the State to increase housing stock. However, the price of these homes remain out of reach for many. The scheme has been criticised as “middle-class welfare” that will fail to address the housing crisis (Cole, 2019, para 1). It has only recently been announced that a more progressive scheme will be introduced as part of the Labour Party and Green Party confidence and supply agreement. Other homeownership models have now been introduced for those who may otherwise have been locked out from the scheme (see McCullough, 2020).

property for [the landlord] ... Lucky that she hasn't put my rent up too many times over the years."

Likewise, Aroha notes:

"We are really fortunate ... really good landlords which is really good ... And interestingly enough, [my landlord was] a solo mother... So, I think there was a bit of that connection when I got the rental."

Gemma and Madison discuss their current living situations noting their luck to have cheaper rent, but also the precariousness of this situation. Gemma claims:

"The house that I'm living in at the moment is unusually cheap. So that's how I can afford to just live with me and my daughter ... But over the New Year period our landlord died, so that might all change ... And then I don't know what I'm going to do."

Similarly, Madison states:

"I only pay [cheaper rent] because my friend's mother had some money and she wanted [it] invested in a property ... So she bought a place, and that's below market rent for what I would be paying. But she's happy to have a long-term tenant. But, you know, if I didn't have that I would effectively be homeless because I couldn't afford 640 on my single wage."

While grateful for having landlords that charge below the market rate; they are also aware of the vulnerability of their situation. Madison notes she would effectively be homeless if it were not for the goodwill of her landlord. Similarly, Gemma states that she will likely have to move in with roommates if her current rent increases, or if her lease is cancelled.

The landlords in these cases are somewhat characterised as doing their tenants a 'favour'. This is opposed to basic recognition of their rights as renters and the notion that everyone should be able to live in an affordable, healthy home. As discussed in chapter one, this may demonstrate how the neoliberal mindset has come to permeate throughout society, even among those who do not benefit from the neoliberal approach (Wade, 2013). However, given

how poor the situation is for many renters, it is perhaps not surprising that these participants consider themselves relatively fortunate; albeit their responses do demonstrate the issues with private philanthropy. Rather than the State providing more housing assistance and redistributing resources, housing has become a free-for-all system that relies on the goodwill of individual landlords. This is problematic because while the ‘good landlord’ can charge an acceptable amount of rent, this is not going to address the root cause of housing issues in this country, of which require public policy intervention.

5.5 Chapter Conclusion

While the previous chapter demonstrates the failures of *what the State is doing*, this chapter has sought to illustrate *what the State (and the market) is failing to do*. The findings of the chapter demonstrate the demands of mothers in the neoliberal landscape and how the State, in refusing to adequately intervene and offer support, may be contributing to the precarity of solo mothers. I began by detailing how many of the participants were operating in a ‘cultural contradiction’ in their role as an employee and mother. This illustrates both the ideological pressures of motherhood, and the demands of wage labour in the neoliberal era. For many of the participants, it was difficult to keep on-top of all their obligations, creating both stress and feelings of guilt. Rather than supporting the position of many women, particularly mothers, the State is failing to afford unpaid care work proper recognition. This leaves many of the participants in a double-bind. The precarity of the participants is further exacerbated when considering the insecurity and uncertainty of their paid employment. I discussed here the catch-22 of flexible working arrangements. Rachel, for example, correlates her low remuneration and perceived lack of career advancement to the fact that she is a solo mother. While the flexible marketplace will tell us that such working arrangements afford mothers more time with their children, we see how this may in-fact be a tool to reduce worker rights and protections. Meanwhile, the inflexibility of the workplace for both Madison and Emily demonstrated their employers’ inability to cater for their responsibilities as mothers, forcing them to travel for work, or to work on weekends or nights. The precarity of the participants in the workplace was also demonstrated by Emily and Maia’s encounters of discriminatory hiring practices. These experiences illustrated the continued issues women face when entering paid employment.

Also visible are the impacts of the housing crisis on the participants in this chapter. The participants detailed experiences of living in crowded housing, of paying expensive rent, and stories of approaching HNZ. Their experiences of the housing market demonstrate the

impacts of neoliberalism and the consequential commodification of housing. The lack of State intervention in these issues has been detrimental for people of lower socio-economic backgrounds, including most of the solo mother participants, who despite working full-time, often struggled with high rent costs. While neoliberal ideology argues that the market is self-correcting, we see how a lack of policy intervention in the housing crisis is contributing to the emotional stress and economic precarity of the participants. Further, this demonstrates how neoliberalism may have caused a societal shift. No longer is housing treated as a fundamental right, but rather a commodity product.

Chapter 6

Subverting the State: Agency and Making Space for Self

In the previous chapters I have detailed the ways in which the State has imposed many barriers to solo mother's autonomy, that reading is only part of the story. Through engaging with the participants' experiences, I also can see sites of their implicit agency. Thus, in this chapter I turn to how the participants have pushed back, challenged, and in interesting ways shaped the State. It is important to acknowledge this agency. As demonstrated in chapter one, development literature and practice has been criticised as portraying the 'Third World' as powerless, passive recipients of aid (Mohanty, 1991; Pala, 1977; Tripathy & Mohapatra, 2011). Similarly, there may be a temptation to think of solo mothers in the West as non-agentive beings because of the way the welfare state shapes their everyday lives and even behaviour. While agency is limited by factors of identity and societal structural bodies (like the State) (Kabeer, 2016), this is not to say that the participants did not still exercise their own autonomy in State negotiations. In fact, in the interviews, the participants recognised the State's power and demonstrated a clear desire for the State to do better. But concurrently, they did not think of themselves as powerless, passive victims of the State. Rather, regardless of any oppression imposed by the State or wider society, the participants continuously demonstrated their strength and autonomy. This is outlined explicitly in this chapter, demonstrating how Maia, Emily, Gemma, Madison, Rachel, Aroha and Emma maintained dignity even in the face of the State's efforts to dehumanise them and their lives. From large acts of resistance, like refusing to disclose their earnings or relationship status while receiving benefits; to smaller negotiations of taking up jobs while juggling early childcare in order to negate the State's surveillance of their lives; are all emblematic of the agency women display. In this chapter I also outline how solo mothers exercised agency before the State through performativity and ideological deviance from familial norms. Finally in discussing their visions for the State, including ideas for having a more supported solo motherhood experience, it is clear that these solo mothers do not want an absent State, but rather a more involved and humane State (and caring State emissaries). This analysis also works to answer research question one: *How do solo mothers negotiate with the State?* And research question three: *How can we collectively re-imagine our State systems and structures to support solo mothers' as they negotiate competing responsibilities?*

6.1 Performing for the State

“Possibilities for agency lie not outside of but within existing power structures. Agency is exercised with each reiteration of norms, that is, through performativity often to reinforce those norms but also in their rejection or reinterpretation” (Oh, 2009, p. 6). In this passage, Oh (2009) recognises that one of the ways agency manifests is both through colluding and subverting norms through performance. Likewise, in the interviews, the participants demonstrated how they may repeat and reject norms before the State, thus exercising their agency within the confines of structural power. When I asked the participants whether they ever changed their behaviour when dealing with the State, some noted they would get frustrated or angry. Others noted that they would shift their behaviour, speech, or actions to show a side of themselves that they felt the State wanted to see. They were then willing to ‘perform’ this to get what they needed. Their ‘performances’ could be perceived as both subverting and colluding with beneficiary and motherhood norms. Gemma, for example, recalled:

“I remember when I first got a smart phone. I was on a benefit and not everyone had smart phones I guess. And I remember feeling really self-conscious. Like if they saw that I had a smartphone and they thought, “oh well, you don’t need a benefit because you can afford to buy a smartphone.” So, I think that during that sort of time I would try and not have it out. Or something like that. Kind of making myself seem to fit more the mould of someone who is struggling financially. But, I mean, I was struggling financially, you know? I’m also really good at budgeting.”

In this case, Gemma perhaps ‘repeats’ norms. By hiding the smartphone, Gemma recognises that there is a perception that beneficiaries are ‘bad budgeters in financial strife’. While Gemma *was* struggling financially, there was a perceived need to ‘ramp up’ this perception by hiding the phone. Gemma was aware of the State’s ability to deny financial support and performed a calculated move to ensure continued monetary assistance from the State.

Similarly, Aroha claimed:

“I think when you’re going into WINZ, it’s natural. You don’t dress up, but you make sure that you’re presenting yourself relatively OK. Especially as a solo, young mum.

Because you don't want other people to think, 'oh she's not looking after her child.' 'Cause you're already walking in there with that ethos, you know? You're a single, young mum. Depending on where your mind is at as well. I was like, people are judging me already, they probably already think I'm a really bad mother ... And your child will be nicely dressed. And maybe that's why they were a little more harsh on me. But I think I'd rather that, than [WINZ saying] "hmm, right. Well, she needs to look after her child ... Or maybe I should flag this with so and so."

In the experiences of both Gemma and Aroha we see the complexity of their performances. They both do not want to appear too 'well-off' when going into the WINZ office, otherwise they might not receive their benefits. However, Aroha, certainly does not want to appear too 'poor' otherwise she might be marked as a 'bad mother' and they might call child services. We see here the competing and contradictory nature of one's appearance when negotiating with the State. You may either appear as a neglectful mother, or alternatively, someone who is taking advantage of the system. This in turn reveals the competing demands of motherhood, particularly with regard to one's socio-economic background. While Aroha performs the stereotypical ideology of the 'good mum' by making sure her and her child are both nicely dressed, In doing so, she perhaps does not present herself as 'in need' of State support. She may therefore be subverting beneficiary norms but concurrently repeating 'good mother' norms. Aroha goes on to claim:

"That also comes back to obviously having been in [state] care and things like that. You know how to put a face on. You know how to please. You know what to say and what to do. What needs to be done ... I think everybody, like the majority, would change some element of their characteristics. I think if I was doing it and I didn't have a child, I would have gone in looking more hori ... But because my mentality was like, well actually I've got a child, I need to protect that. That actually I don't get the State involved."

The State, as noted by Hansen and Stepputat (as cited in Unnithan-Kumar, 2004) is "both violent and destructive as well as benevolent and productive" (p. 3). While the State provides essential support for citizens, perhaps a "benevolent" and "productive" action; the State's support is often conditional and uncertain – hence "destructive" and "violent". The

participants' responses illustrate that the State elicited uncertainty and fear in their negotiations, and the influence of State surveillance. The State wields power to deny financial support, or to flag mothers with child services. Aware of this power, the participants exercised a complex 'performance' for the State to get what they needed to survive with their child. The participants therefore exercised their agency in understanding what the State wanted to see, and performing for them within their structures of power. The very fact that the participants felt the need to perform at all, however, demonstrates the power the State possesses and the precarity and general uncertainty the State inflicts. This act of 'performing' demonstrates both how solo mothers may negotiate with the State, while also illustrating how the State increases the precarity of the group.

6.2 Challenging the Nuclear Family and Mothering Ideology

Participants further exercised their agency by deviating from the idealised family unit, and also the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility. They did this by demonstrating their reliance on collectivity, particularly with regard to raising their children. While being a solo mother in itself is a rejection of idealised motherhood expectations, the participants further challenged dominant norms by turning to community and wider family. This in turn defies the notion of the isolated family unit (Cogswell, 1975) and the ideal that mothers are primarily responsible for raising a child (Arendell, 1999; Hays, 1996). The participants' practices of solo motherhood often demonstrated the collectivity in childrearing, rejecting the dominant motherhood and kinship 'norm', and replacing it with practices that better suited them. Maia, for example, rejected dominant mothering ideology. She pushed back against the notion of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) and the judgement she receives for not engaging with such practices when she stated:

"It's OK for mums to have time on their own. It's OK for mums to go out drinking and partying, if we want to go out ... like we don't have to stay at home and look after our children 24/7. And we aren't bad parents because we do."

As articulated by Maia, she is not a bad mother for not spending every waking moment with her child. Indeed, that it is perfectly fine for her to spend time with her friends or go to a party and that her life should not be completely absorbed in the care of her child. Maia is demonstrating that she is still human and has needs and desires that should be met, even as a

mother. More broadly, Maia articulates the need to reduce some of the pressure that is placed on mothers, and to be accepting of those who deviate from hegemonic mothering ideals. Further, she demonstrates that raising a child is not a solitary task, and that mothers can and should draw on others for help. This is also reflected in the experiences of Aroha and Emily. Aroha joked in the interview that her son had been raised by a village of various aunties, uncles and friends. Meanwhile, Emily also noted the importance of community and family support, particularly since becoming the guardian of her grandson. Emily discussed the importance of having her family living locally, and also her boarder who occasionally helped with her grandson. This was particularly important when Emily had to work. While Emily had noted that this reliance on community in her role as a mother often made her feel guilty (see chapter five), it is support that Emily is incredibly grateful for. While the Pākehā ideology of the isolated family unit has long been idealised (see chapter two), the participants have challenged this by drawing on kinship practices that do not ascribe to such ideology. Conversely, participants who did not have extended family to offer support sometimes struggled. Gemma stated:

“It is hard work in the world - in the culture - that we live in. It feels entirely unsupported, you know? We’re not living in tribes or villages where there are lots of uncles and aunties and support people around. It really is like, you’re on your own... and it’s really important work. The most important work.”

Gemma’s experience as a solo mother demonstrates that the emphasis on individualism in our society generally diminishes the importance of childrearing by not supporting those who are doing such work. While Gemma has problematised such societal sentiment, Gemma does not live in close proximity to family and therefore has little ability to subvert such notions. For these participants, it is not necessarily the support of a partner that is important, but rather, being able to draw on wider community and extended family members. The familial practices of the participants demonstrate the importance of collectiveness in childrearing, despite Western notions that such work should be a solitary task: the responsibility of the mother within an isolated family unit (Arendell, 1999; Hays, 1996). Such idealisation of kinship does not reflect the actuality of most family practices in Aotearoa New Zealand (see Cribb, 2009). Yet the idealisation of this family persists and stigma towards ‘deviant’ families, such as solo

mothers remains prevalent (Fineman, 1995; Patterson, 2004). The participants problematise this by demonstrating their reliance on community, or in the case of Gemma, the desire for such community. In doing so, they subvert hegemonic mothering ideology and the nuclear family ideal.

6.3 State Intrusion: Relationship Status and Income

While thus far, I have explored how the participants have deviated from ideological norms, and exercised their agency by ‘performing’ for the State, I now turn to how the participants’ actively decided not to disclose information. The State’s conditionality of support clearly invoked a sense of uncertainty for the participants. Suspicious of the State’s interest in their private lives, the participants often chose not to disclose personal information, with the understanding that it may be used against them to deny financial support, or to catch them for fraud. Some of the participants elected not to fully disclose their earnings or relationship status to the State. These actions of subversion were to help protect the participants from being denied the financial support they depended on. Maia, Rachel and Emma all recalled instances where they refused to disclose the full nature of their earnings to the State. This was to ensure they maintained their current rate of benefit to keep their families in a secure position. Rachel, for example claimed:

“To be honest, my dad was helping me from time to time ... And you know, you can’t declare that. If you declare that then you lose the money otherwise ... But that was the only way you could make ends meet. Sometimes he’d be paying for costs for me that I just couldn’t afford to pay.”

Rachel’s statement demonstrates the precarity of State interactions. As explored in chapter four, the amount supplied through a benefit is often insufficient to meet expenses. While in the interviews these participants expressed concern about being caught for fraud, they also had to meet the needs of their families. They subverted State rules and opted for the ability to meet such needs.

Similarly, participants refused to disclose their relationship status to the State. Maia noted:

“I didn’t declare I had a partner some of the time. But they never ever helped me with

my son. Or my money ... If I declare [my partner] then I get no help. You know what I mean? And it just makes things too complicated. Like then they'll ask more questions, then I'll get more nervous. Then I might get done for fraud. I don't know."

Aroha also did not disclose her relationship status to the State when receiving the child care subsidy. She stated:

"Because my son was a bit older, I had a partner. And [I] was still getting the child care subsidy at one point ... But I guess, my justification in my mind was [that] he wasn't contributing anything to my income or my child or what I was paying for."

Aroha went on to note: "why would I disclose having a partner when there have been no other changes other than a relationship between two adults?"

Because relationship status affects eligibility for benefits and the payment rate of benefits (Work and Income, n.d.), there was hesitation among the participants to disclose their relationships to the State. This is a particular issue as there is confusion over what exactly constitutes a relationship. The current arrangement to determine a relationship is if it is "in the nature of marriage" (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019a, p. 113). This was not the case for either Aroha or Maia given that there was no financial support from their partners. However, their reluctance to disclose their relationship statuses to the State demonstrates the uncertainty around this rule. Such uncertainty is not limited to those accessing benefits, but also among State employees. In a 2018 case, a woman had her benefit cut by WINZ because she had gone on two dates. Because her date had paid for these two outings, the case manager deduced that there was financial support from the partner (Corlette, 2018). WINZ later noted that the case manager was wrong when they told the beneficiary this was the reason her benefit was terminated. Instead, they stated it was because they had received allegations that she was living with a partner, had a job, and further, because she had not attended two scheduled appointments with WINZ. Worthy of mention is that these accusations were all dropped after WINZ could not substantiate the claims made against her. Her benefit was then reinstated (Corlette, 2018). Clearly for beneficiaries and State employees alike, there remains a great deal of uncertainty around the relationship status rule. For Aroha and Maia, it was

understandably easier and less risky to simply not disclose their new relationships with the State at all.

The case explored by Corlette (2018) demonstrates not only the issues with determining relationship status, but also the problems with the State's use of 'tip-offs'. This results in investigations into the private lives of beneficiaries, something Emily has had first-hand experience with. Emily was investigated for fraud after her ex-partner's new girlfriend 'tipped off' WINZ:

"She went to WINZ and said that he had been living with me while I was on the benefit. But I hadn't been on the benefit because I had been working ... And so, I was under investigation for that, which was crazy ... and then they weren't going to pay me the benefit for [my daughter]."

While the investigation revealed that Emily had not been claiming her benefit fraudulently, the experience illustrates that even when fully complying with the rules of the State, there remains a level of insecurity. In this case, not only did the State undermine Emily's privacy in conducting this investigation, but they also threatened to revoke her only source of income while caring for a young child. Regardless of whether or not Emily had committed fraud, threatening to rescind the only financial support being supplied to an individual and their child demonstrates just how much uncertainty can be involved in State negotiations for solo mothers and beneficiaries more widely. The constant threat that the State holds over its citizens, treats them continually as 'untrustworthy' and in opposition, as opposed to the avowed goal that outlines these State services to help and support certain citizens.

This issue of undermining citizens' privacy, as Emily experienced, is receiving heightened attention following the Privacy Commissioner Report in 2019. Here it was announced that MSD had "misused its investigatory powers while pursuing benefit fraud, unjustifiably intruding on the privacy of many beneficiaries" (Office of the Privacy Commissioner, 2019, para 1). The report notes that recipients of the SPS benefit were most likely to have their privacy breached by the State, particularly on account of not disclosing their relationship status. This occurs within growing calls to amend the influence of relationship status on the benefit system (see Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019a).

While these participants had exercised some form of agency by refusing to disclose the full nature of their earnings or their relationship status; it is clear that their agency was constrained by other factors, including their obligations to pay bills and meet expenses, and indeed, the State's own requirements for accessing benefits. Because the participants were financially dependent on the State, they had to live with the State conditions, some of which meant being subjected to intrusive investigations, as was the case for Emily. While some of the participants took back power by not disclosing information, there was still a fear of being caught. This again illustrates the duality of the State in being both 'benevolent' and 'violent'. In the participants' responses we witness the scrutiny of State surveillance. But equally, the importance of their financial support. The experiences of the participants demonstrate how they navigate the State and enact their agency within these competing factors.

6.4 Visions for the State

Fitting with the discussion of agency are the participants' own ideas for an improved State structure and a more supported solo motherhood experience. It is important to consider the participants' own insights into how the State should function. This is because those creating policy and changes within the State, particularly within WINZ, will likely have never been on the receiving end of these institutions. It is therefore crucial that the participants' own visions for an improved State and solo motherhood experience is brought to the forefront. Their experiences and ideas for change are informative and demonstrate tangible examples of how the State could do better. Among the ideas the participants proposed included the desire to have improved accessibility and consistency in State services. There were also calls for a culture shift, whereby those interacting with the State were met with respect and empathy. On issues related to stigma, the participants demonstrated their desire to see a society that valued the work of solo mothers and treated them accordingly. This is explored further below. First, as noted in chapter four, the participants often found it difficult to know what they were entitled to with regard to State support. They often dealt with excessive administrative tasks, and cases of inconsistent information when interacting with the State. These factors are obstacles for the participants. However, in their vision for an improved State structure, the participants conceived a State that was more accessible and consistent. Madison, for example, claimed:

"I think they need [a more] user-friendly approach. And I think actually being proactive about what people are entitled to."

Madison went on to state:

“If they had teams that were maybe you know, selected to work in those areas because they were either a little more compassionate or had that knowledge, as opposed to just, it’s just a job and this is a call centre and you have to take whatever call is coming, you know?”

Similarly, Aroha claimed:

“Actually having more clarity around what is defined in certain areas. I feel that there needs to be some transparency.”

This was particularly important with regard to the relationship status rule, where Aroha felt it was impossible to know what was acceptable or not by the State’s standards.

Gemma also noted:

“Not to be that people have to jump through all of these hoops and present all of these documents and do all this stuff that is really hard for some people to access, in order to live.”

The participants here are envisioning a State that creates a sense of certainty, both around accessing benefits and for understanding entitlements. Related to issues of dehumanisation at the hands of the State, and the need to have a welfare system rooted in restoring dignity and trust as opposed to a punitive experience, the participants also expressed a desire to have a system that advocated for the responsibilities of solo mothers, and indeed empathised with them. Emily stated:

“It would be nice if they treated you like a person, instead of a number ... and actually looked like they cared about what you were talking about.”

Similarly, Gemma noted:

“I want case managers to actually advocate for the people that are coming in to access

the services. Instead of it being like, you have to kind of like fight them to get the thing that you want.”

Here we see a vision for a culture shift in State services. The participants’ experiences, and their ideas for the State demonstrate that perhaps bureaucratic offices tend to have more of an emphasis on preserving order than achieving results. As discussed in chapter four, the bureaucratic State demands efficiency and the strict application of rules and systems of administration, which in turn perhaps leave little room to account for a diverse response to issues of poverty and precarity. The participants’ visions for the State demonstrate a more inclusive and less punitive experience that places less emphasis on ‘efficiency’ and focuses more on a compassionate response to the people accessing services. Their visions perhaps echo the arguments of Gregory and Maynard (2019) who note that the notion of wairua²² should underpin the State bureaucracy. They argue:

Wairua could enhance state sector efficacy, primarily by bringing people to the centre of all administrative matters, improving connections and relationships among people, enhancing performance, productivity and outcomes, and creating systems that support people to make choices that have ethical and moral integrity (p. 39).

To have the notion of wairua underpin the State bureaucracy, they argue that State services would have to make many changes. Among such changes, State services would have employees trained in people skills, as well as having the necessary technical knowledge. Further, the State would have “fewer rules but more trust” (p. 39). This would give case managers discretion to make the right call for different people, removing the strict rules that do not cater for diverse issues faced by those interacting with the State. Through implementing practices such as the ones emphasised above, Gregory and Maynard (2019) argue there would be improved outcomes for all.

Further desired change was articulated by Aroha, particularly with regard to the child support system. Aroha noted:

²² Wairua is an “integral part of the Māori worldview, which holds that all things are interconnected and interdependent” (Gregory & Maynard, 2019, p. 38). The term may also be simply translated as “soul” or “spirit” (Biggs, 2019, p. 144). For a more detailed explanation see also, Māori Dictionary (n.d.).

“I think [the child support system] needs to get overhauled... I’m not alone. I think I’ve had this conversation with like 4 or 5 different solo parents around parents not paying and things like that. But then also I’ve had the other side where people are having to pay too much in child support.”

As discussed in chapter four, this perhaps demonstrates the need for a more collective response to child support within the welfare system. As articulated by Baylies (1996) there are models that may offer some guidance here – including ones where the State plays a primary role in guaranteeing child support. This is opposed to the current model where one is “dependent on either the willingness or the capacity of the absent parent to pay” (p. 105). Baylies (1996) draws on Scandinavian child support models which demonstrate a shift away from the private, individual model, and ‘break the link’ between solo mother’s financial dependence on an ex-partner. This also acknowledges the collectivist nature of childrearing, removing what otherwise, is a burden that primarily falls on individual mothers’ shoulders.

The participants’ visions for the State, more widely, share commonality with the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (2019a) recommendations. Their report *Whakamana Tāngata* has been cited throughout this thesis and offers a broad review of the welfare system. Within this, the Group sought out the experiences of those accessing State services, using their stories to make key recommendations to the Government. The participants’ responses in this thesis largely echo the experiences illustrated in the report and reflect more widely on the need to change the welfare system, including the child support system. Among the proposals in the report, include increasing the rates of benefits, removing some of the eligibility rules (including those related to relationship status), to pass on child support payments to the carers of children, and to improve home-ownership options so housing is not so out of reach for many (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019a). They also reiterate that those who are not engaging in paid work are still contributing to society and should be valued accordingly; noting that the welfare system more generally, must be rooted in relationships, respect and dignity, rather than the current system which acts purely as a necessary minimum safety net. These significant recommendations, if enacted, would not only improve the lives of the participants, but beneficiaries more widely.

I cite this report alongside the experiences of the participants to reiterate the importance of their stories in the larger picture. These are seven solo mothers with different experiences, but

they have all shared, among many other New Zealanders, the difficulties associated with accessing the State, and similar visions for how it can do better. The report and these experiences also demonstrate the collective power in these acts of agency, which in turn shapes the State. Two of the recommended changes have been implemented by the Government, although a further 40 recommendations remain (see Robson, 2019). Recently, the Government has noted that it is looking closer at the relationship status rule, hoping to make policy changes later this year. This occurs after reports that denial of benefit entitlements have “skyrocketed” on account of relationship status (see RNZ, 2020b). While the State clearly has much work to do, this demonstrates how beneficiaries’ acts of agency, and intensified media attention also shape the actions of the State, albeit a slow process.

Beyond envisioning an improved State system, the participants also had ideas for bettering their solo motherhood experience. The participants’ articulated a desire to have less judgemental reactions towards differing mothering practices and familial forms. This included the desire to shift the derogative discourse around solo mothers to recognise the important work they do. Emily stated:

“It’s not just sitting around, smoking, drinking, parties, that people think that solo parents do ... You’ve got to keep a family going, and positive. Keep them clean and fed ... You know, it’s hard work.”

Similarly, Rachel noted:

“The hardest thing about being a sole parent is the time and energy... We’ve talked about the financial stuff – that’s always a struggle. But the time and energy. Like you have to do everything by yourself.”

The discussion here demonstrates the desire to re-shift focus, demonstrating that the work mothers do is important, and indeed that society should be recognising and valuing this work, as opposed to treating them as societal nuisances or ‘moral problems’. Rather than treating solo mothers in a disparaging way, there must be societal recognition of their work, and a movement away from stereotypes and stigma. This of course, could start in the WINZ office, with the prioritisation of relationships and trust, and by increasing the rates of benefits to reflect the value of the work that solo mothers are doing. It could equally be reflected in

protections against market-place exploitation and encouraging workplaces that properly cater for the responsibilities of mothers. Reflecting on these visions and ideas is witness to the agency of the participants. They are not blindly accepting poor treatment from the State and wider society but have their own concepts for how to improve the system. In articulating their own practices and narratives to subvert this very problematic system, they make it clear that they want a State responsive to their realities and to acknowledge the wonderful ways they make and take care of families.

6.5 Chapter Conclusion

Rather than being powerless, or passive ‘victims’ of the State, I have articulated in this chapter how the participants’ have explicitly exercised their agency in State negotiations. Gemma and Aroha demonstrated cases where they have ‘performed’ for the State. In these instances, the participants illustrate that agency is exercised everyday within structures of power, sometimes by rejecting norms, but also by repurposing, or repeating them. Often, this ‘performance’ was to ensure they received their entitlements from the State. The participants also subverted mothering and familial ideology in this chapter. Emily, Aroha and Maia demonstrated a more collective approach to childrearing, in turn subverting hegemonic mothering ideology that posits mothering as a solitary task. Indeed, community and wider family was crucial for the participants, demonstrating not only the issues with Western mothering ideology, but also the idealisation of the nuclear family. Here it was argued that the glorification of this family unit was neither useful, nor grounded in the reality of most familial forms in Aotearoa New Zealand. This chapter further explored how the participants directly subverted the State by refusing to disclose their relationship status and income.

Witnessed here was how the participants were constrained in these decisions by State rules and the need to meet their personal expenses. But equally, how the participants still exercised their agency within these constraints and chose not to disclose information to the State.

Finally, in this chapter the participants discussed their visions for the State. It was important to amplify these perspectives and ideas, as the participants are the ones that are having to deal with these institutions on a direct level. Here the solo mothers brought forth ideas for a culture shift, whereby those interacting with the State were treated with respect and empathy. Further, in detailing policy changes, including increasing benefit rates, removing the relationship status rule, and implementing more practices of trust shows their deep understanding of the ways the system works. The participants also demonstrated their visions

for a more supported solo motherhood experience, arguing that instead of perceiving solo mothers as the ‘moral nuisance’ there should instead be acknowledgment of the hard work they are doing. Through exploring these factors, we see how the participants negotiate with the State. It is not a one-sided interaction, but rather, the participants push back against the State and exercise their agency within the structures of power. By exploring their visions for the State, we also collectively explore how we can re-imagine our State systems and structures to better account for solo mothers’ responsibilities. We can make the State work for its citizens.

Chapter 7

Thesis Conclusions

I began this thesis from the gendered post-development school. Inspired by the work of Escobar (1995); Mohanty (1991); Pala (1977); and Tripathy and Mohapatra (2011), I asked, what does it mean to be developed? And developed for whom? Situating this thesis in the idea of ‘practicing solidarity from home’ (Matthews, 2008) and localising development thinking and thought, I decided to consider pertinent and persistent issues of inequality as they occur in my home. By examining the political ideology of neoliberalism and the consequential increase in precarious lives in Aotearoa New Zealand, I considered the relationship between solo mothers and the State. I recruited seven self-identified solo mothers: Maia, Emily, Gemma, Madison, Rachel, Aroha and Emma. As discussed in prior chapters, I was particularly interested in this relationship with regard to neoliberalism and the welfare state (including child support), employment and housing, and also the participants’ agency while navigating these areas. Specifically, I considered how the State contributed to their precarity within these realms. In doing so, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do solo mothers negotiate with the State?
2. How does the State increase precarity for this group?
3. How can we collectively re-imagine our State systems and structures to support solo mothers’ as they negotiate competing responsibilities?

In this thesis, I first outlined how solo mothers negotiated with the State. While the participants’ responses spoke to how the State imposed significant barriers, including the need to work within the confines of the State’s rules (particularly with regard to WINZ and IRD) - it was also clear how the participants pushed back against the State and enacted their agency, at times refusing to disclose earnings or relationship status, or by ‘performing’ for the State. Secondly, it was important to note the multiple ways the State increased the precarity of the participants, particularly with regard to their benefits, child support payments, housing and their employment. Through this research, it was clear to see that such precarity was not bound to financial status alone, but manifested in emotional and/or social precarity as well. This was often informed by the stigma related to being a solo mother, and also the pressure of

maintaining familial ties for the family, particularly for the children. Finally, the participants demonstrated tangible ideas for where and how the State structures could improve, which in turn would better account for their responsibilities. Not only did this include policy adjustments, but the suggestions also spoke to reaffirming the importance of care work and childrearing in our increasingly individualistic society. It was clear from their experiences and articulations that they want a State that supports their needs as citizens as opposed to a system where the State is absent or withdraws entirely and leaves them at the mercy of the market. In continually committing to engage with the State and its emissaries, the solo mothers who participated in this research outline their own commitment to making a better system, not just for themselves but for all future families of Aotearoa New Zealand.

In answering these questions and exploring the experiences of the participants, I have considered the relationship between solo mothers and the neoliberal State. This research, drawing on the narratives of solo mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand explicitly challenges development dichotomies, demonstrating that pockets of privilege and poverty are not bound within the constructions of the ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ world. In doing so, this research illustrates that development theory is applicable to the world over – in the ‘developed’ world as much as the ‘developing’. As I conclude this thesis, I leave the reader with three key considerations: first, the need to reflect critically on development discourse, including the need for local agency in addressing issues of inequality; secondly, the need for a comprehensive welfare state, particularly when considering the competing responsibilities of solo mothers; and finally, in reflecting on the failures of neoliberalism we can look toward our future, including the need to move away from the colonial myth of the ‘individual’. A collective commitment to families and wellbeing, in all their diversity will be beneficial for a nation and its children.

7.1 Localisation, Agency, and Development Dichotomies

Through the exploration of the participants’ experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is clear that there is a fruitlessness to development engagement in the Global South alone. By turning the gaze inward, the applicability of development theory even within the developed context allows for a challenge to the dichotomous and discursive focus to the field of Development Studies. First, this was shown in this thesis by illustrating Aotearoa New Zealand’s problematic mythology of egalitarianism. This myth seeks to disguise colonialism, racism,

and the patriarchy. Exemplifying this in this thesis has sought to challenge the notion of being ‘developed’, illustrating that there remains fundamental work to do in Aotearoa New Zealand. Focusing explicitly on motherhood allows for considering the impacts of Western familial and mothering ideology and the consequential punishment of ‘deviant’ mothers, including solo mothers (Fineman, 1995; Smart, 1996). Such punishment is reflected overtime throughout the welfare state (Patterson, 2004). By drawing on the experiences of the solo mothers, it becomes clear that under the aegis of the contemporary neoliberal State, inequality continues to be enforced against many today, particularly the ‘precariat’ class.

This inequality was witnessed through the stories of Emma, for example. She recounted experiences where after paying her basic weekly expenses, she had no money left. We also heard from Maia, who was given so little financial support from the State that she could not afford to buy her new-born son a cot. These experiences illustrated how the State was exacerbating precarity, and equally how it was imposing significant barriers to one’s autonomy. This, however, did not negate the participants’ agency. As articulated in chapter six, there is a tendency to visualise the developing world as a non-agentive place. Perhaps concurrently, the same image is conjured up when considering the precariat. But by exploring the participants’ agency in this thesis, I have illustrated that such depictions do not ring true. While their agency is constrained by structural inequalities, and of course the State, this does not negate the participants’ autonomy and decision-making. Maia, for example, challenged the hegemonic ideological construction of motherhood, noting that she does not need to spend every waking moment with her child. Indeed, she has her own aspirations and desires outside of her role as a mother. Maia articulated that she should be able to spend time with friends and be away from her child sometimes, without feeling judged because of it. In doing so, Maia challenged hegemonic norms and the notion of ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays, 1996). Maia also refused to detail her relationship status to the State, in turn ensuring that she continued to get monetary assistance. It was clear that the participants were not blindly accepting poor treatment from the State, but rather, that they had tangible ideas for where and how the State could improve. These factors demonstrate the applicability of post-development thought world over. Those who are experiencing an issue first-hand, likely know best what could be done to fix it. This local agency is key, and such voices should be central when addressing issues of inequality.

7.2 The Comprehensive Welfare State

When considering the ideas of the participants for how the State could improve, it was clear that there was a desire for a comprehensive welfare state. GAD literature details the importance of the socialistic welfare state to cater for the needs of many women (Saunders, 2002). Through the narratives of the participants, it is clear that this experience is not limited to the developing world. In spite of brandishing the title of ‘developed’ and ‘egalitarian’, in this thesis I have demonstrated the fundamental failures of our State structures and societal sentiment. This research explored how the participants’ interacted with the State, including how WINZ and IRD may be increasing precarity for the solo mother group, in turn explicitly demonstrating the flaws within our current welfare state. These failures included the inability to guarantee consistent child support payments. Madison, Emma and Aroha’s experience of navigating the child support system illustrated how excessive burdens are being placed on recipients, causing not only financial uncertainty, but social precarity. Stress and guilt become seemingly intertwined with the navigation of this system, as the participants are forced to spend their time chasing up IRD and negotiate relationships with fathers and children. Rather than child support being treated as a collective issue, involving the State, it is treated privately, with the State acting as an enforcer, rather than a supporter. Further, the State used punitive measures, including the retainment of child support payments to offset benefits. Aroha noted in our interview that this system neither works for the recipient carer, nor those liable to pay. At a societal level, we can, and should, work towards an alternative model where the State plays a more active role in ensuring financial support and particularly recognises the position of many solo mothers.

Throughout this thesis, I have also outlined the numerous ways uncertainty in entitlements, insufficient monetary support and financial monitoring contributes to economic precarity and uncertainty for those negotiating with WINZ. The general lack of State support left the likes of Emily in financial precarity. In one of her experiences, she was given so little monetary assistance that she had to cancel her insurance so she could pay off her ex-partner’s debt. After having a house fire and losing all her possessions, Emily was not given additional financial assistance from the State. For some of the participants, the difficulties associated with accessing support disincentivised engagement all together, as was the case for Madison and Aroha, who decided they would rather struggle financially than continue to deal with the State. While such experiences may demonstrate the contention of State intervention, chapter

five illustrated the importance of the State as a redistributing body, their intervention necessary. Informed by neoliberal values, the State's 'hands-off' approach also works to reinforce precarity for solo mothers with regard to the participants' employment and housing situations. Emma's experience navigating HNZ is one such example of this. The State's lack of intervention in the housing market and its inability to provide housing assistance, left Emma and her two toddlers in a particularly vulnerable position after escaping domestic violence. Another consequence of the neoliberal response to the housing crisis has been the increase in individuals living in crowded homes. This was the case for Maia who shares her room with her son and is unable to afford a rental with more space. These experiences demonstrate why the State is a necessary body to redistribute resources and provide protections. Their intervention, however, must be grounded in trust and empowerment, as opposed to the punitive measures as outlined by the participants of this research.

Again, the articulation of these largely negative experiences is not to further stigmatise solo mothers, but rather to plainly demonstrate the reality of their struggle. Such stories illustrate why there needs to be change, including the cruciality of a comprehensive welfare state. However, I recognise that more needs to be done to address issues of inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand. Indeed, as chapter two briefly demonstrated we must continue to unsettle the egalitarian myth, and work towards a system that accounts for *all* citizenry. This includes addressing colonialism and affirming the basis of te Tiriti o Waitangi (see Webb, 2019). This is crucial for a number of reasons, but pertaining specifically to this thesis, such affirmations may help to shift vilifying discourses and discriminatory practices against Māori mothers. Indeed, as Ware et al. (2018) note:

To further support a positive identification of being Māori and associating being Māori with good parenting requires decolonising Western understandings about Māori women and mothers, Māori fathers, pregnancy, birth and caregiving. This will include addressing the impacts on identity such as ongoing effects of colonisation, dislocation from land, language and culture... (p. 26).

This is a crucial endgame to keep in the forefront, particularly for envisioning an egalitarian society that exists in actuality rather than in myth. Drawing on the explicit ideas of the participants and their recommended changes to the welfare state, however, we may begin with a culture shift within the welfare system to one centred on trust, wairua and humanising

practices. Mothers would therefore not be vilified but uplifted and respected by the State. This is something particularly important given the stereotypes of ‘welfare mothers.’ Other suggestions from the participants included tangible policy changes, including amendments to the influence of relationship status on benefit entitlements, an overhaul of the child support system, and an increase in the rates of benefits. More broadly, the participants articulated a need for an increase in care remuneration and employment protections, and more interventions to subvert the housing crisis. Implementation of such changes would directly impact the lives of solo mothers for the better. The experiences of the participants and their own affirmations for how the State could do better should be used to inform this change.

7.3 Reflections on the Neoliberal State and Moving Toward an Equitable Future

The need for the comprehensive welfare state and the implementation of the participants’ recommendations is particularly clear within the backdrop of neoliberalism. Drawing on literature from Fraser (2013; 2016) and Little (2012) I argued that the neoliberal era has deceptively been framed as ‘freedom’, placing emphasis on ‘choice’ and individual responsibility. However, this has actually left many women, particularly solo mothers in incredibly difficult positions, pulled between their (re)productive roles. This demonstrates neoliberalism’s failure as a development mechanism. It further illustrates how this political ideology fails to account for the position of many women. Consider, for example, Rachel’s association with being a solo mother and her perceived lack of career progression and lower pay, or indeed, how Madison’s place of work has co-opted discourse about family values and flexible labour, when in reality, her job does very little to support her responsibilities as a solo mother. In both cases, flexible work or not, both Madison and Rachel seemingly never have time to meet the demands of their paid employment and their childrearing duties. This is a real issue. As Fraser (2013) would note, such experiences are part in parcel with neoliberalism. She states:

“The crisis of neoliberalism offers the chance to break the spurious link between our critique of the family wage and flexible capitalism. Reclaiming our critique of androcentrism, feminists might militate for a form of life that decenters waged work and valorizes commodified activities, including, but not only, carework.” (pp. 225-226).

One of the ways in which we can valorise our care work is articulated through implementing a more comprehensive welfare state. Within this, however, is also the need to move away from the neoliberal model and to debunk the colonial myth of the ‘individual’. The contradictions of this myth are present throughout this thesis, demonstrating that care work and childrearing continues to be undervalued in our society in favour of individual responsibility. Such notions ignore who clothed us, fed us, and raised us to become the ‘individual’ that we are. This thesis more broadly attests to the fact that the myth of the individual has exacerbated our socially marginalised citizenry. Indeed, it has denied the importance of our human connection, of care work, and crucially our obligations to our fellow citizens. In working towards a more equitable future, the importance of this familial care work that all depend upon, must be re-centred and valued accordingly. In listening, really listening, to solo mothers, the most precariat of our citizenry, allows for an opportunity for reimagining the State.

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Appendix A

Ethics Approval



Phone
Email



TO	Lizzy Simpson
FROM	[REDACTED] Human Ethics Committee
DATE	10 December 2019
PAGES	1
SUBJECT	Ethics Approval Number: 27974 Title: Lived Experiences: Solo-'mothering' in Aotearoa New Zealand

Thank you for your application for ethical approval, which has now been considered by the Human Ethics Committee.

Your application has been approved from the above date and this approval is valid for three years. If your data collection is not completed by this date you should apply to the Human Ethics Committee for an extension to this approval.

Best wishes with the research.

Kind regards,



Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. Age
2. Ethnicity
3. Iwi (if applicable)
4. Gender identity
5. Current place of residence
6. Number of children/those in your care
7. Could you tell me about your family structure?
8. Could you tell me about your current living arrangements?
9. What does an average week look like for you?
10. Could you tell me about your sources of income? (paid employment, child support, MSD, help from friends/family).
11. Have you ever sought help from MSD? If so, what was your experience dealing with them?
12. How do you feel when dealing with the State?
13. If you could change something about the State, what would it be?
14. Have you ever changed your behaviour when dealing with the State?
15. What are some things about being a solo parent that you wish others would understand or appreciate?