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Supporting Single-Parent Women
An Exploration of the Changing Meanings of Single Motherhood in Canada

by

Fanny Duquette, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in **Canadian Studies**

Carleton University

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submitted by Tammy Duquette, B.A.
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the degree of Master of Arts

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July 1996

Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the changing meanings of single motherhood in Canada from a feminist perspective. Focusing on Ontario, I provide an overview of the historical shift of responsibility for the welfare of single-parent families from communities to the state, and consider how this shift was facilitated by the political activities of women. International trends in woman-headed families are highlighted, as are trends in family types in contemporary Canada. I report the experiences of 12 single-parent women on issues that directly affect their well-being, such as housing, child care and employment. Based on their critiques of community and government supports, I argue that many of the changes required to help single-parent women lie outside the social policy process. While acknowledging the importance of long-term policy goals in areas such as employment and child care, I argue that community supports are in many ways more sensitive to the diversity of women's experiences than are state supports. I conclude that a feminist approach to community development, which places women at the centre of the planning process, is best suited to bridge the gap between community and state supports for single-parent women and their families.

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Jill Vickers, for her guidance, advice and patience as I struggled with such a challenging thesis.

My interview research brought me into contact with many interesting and generous women, who taught me a great deal about the trials and tribulations, as well as the joys, of single parenthood. I owe a large debt of gratitude to all of them.

A special thank you to the Big Sisters Organization of Ottawa-Carleton for their assistance in contacting some of the women who participated in my study. I also thank them for facilitating my relationship with my Little Sister, Karla, whose friendship has been a constant source of fun and support.

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CHAPTER ONE

Toward An Understanding of Single Motherhood: A Qualitative Study.

In 1994, the leader of the Progressive Conservative party in Ontario, Mike Harris, publicly supported the decision of a divorced woman, earning a \$41,000 salary, to quit her job, arguing that she could provide equally well, if not better, for her family on social assistance, thus suggesting that welfare incentives for single-parent women were too high. This public ruse, an affront to the integrity of the majority of single-parent women in Ontario, did not go unchallenged. It is worth quoting in its entirety a letter from Helen Berry (a graduate student in social work) to the editor of the Ottawa Citizen, in which she eloquently expresses the anger the stunt provoked in many women:

Every day I count my blessing that I am able to stay at home on welfare, as opposed to having to pay taxes on a \$41,000-a-year income..

As I walk into my local grocery store, the one where I cannot cash a personal cheque because I'm on welfare, I am so grateful not to be burdened with a corporate pension plan.

As I see the expression on my child's teachers' faces when they find out his mother is single and on welfare, I thank my lucky stars that I don't have to deal with tax-deductible child care of my choice.

As those soliciting credit cards to just "anyone" turn me down because I'm on mother's allowance, I am thrilled that I don't have to decide which RRSP suits me best. As I avoid the dentist office's phone calls reminding me how long it's been since my teeth were cleaned, I fully appreciate not having the hassle of a dental plan.

The list goes on of the many ways in which I'm truly grateful not to have to deal with the terrible life I would have if I had a \$41,000-a-year job.

Both Berry and the woman earning the \$41,000 salary are single parents. Underlying both perspectives is the view that welfare policies fail single-parent women, working or not. These conflicting perspectives capture the essence of the broader schism in Canada with regard to motherhood. Although these women probably face many similar problems in parenting alone, their experiences have caused them to interpret the meaning of single motherhood differently. The views expressed by the woman in the higher income bracket reflect the conservative position that individuals are responsible for their economic problems, and that the state should be less involved in the private realm of the family. Berry's views reflect a changing political consciousness, which sees the existing welfare system as contributing to the 'feminization of poverty.'

Dissatisfaction with the existing welfare system has caused individuals from across the ideological spectrum to look for new options, and many are looking to the realm of the community. The measures now being taken by Ontario's Conservative government to transfer

¹ Ottawa Citizen, "Letter of the Month", Saturday, October 23, 1994.

In Canada, women make up a greater proportion of the poor than they do of the overall population: the incidence of poverty among women has increased by more than 34% since 1975. See Brigitte Kitchen, "The Political Economy of Poor Mothers," *Canadian Woman Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, (Summer), 1992: 12.

Peter Boothroyd, "Community Development: The Missing Link in Welfare Policy", Ideology, Development and Social Welfare: Canadian Perspectives (Bill Kirwin (ed.), Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 1991).

responsibility for welfare issues to the community have important implications for all women, not only those who are mothers. Little will change for women if the problems endemic to the existing welfare system are simply transferred to the community level. I believe that many of the support problems faced by single-parent women could be resolved by better opportunities for women and families with young children in general. The following study supports this view.

Dr. Susan Clark (1994) recently reported on a 10-year study of 600 young mothers in Nova Scotia begun in July 1978. The study was initiated in response to concerns about the increasing tendency of never-married mothers to raise their children, rather than placing them for adoption. In order to understand the problems facing never-married mothers, the researchers in particular sought to explore differences between never-married and married mothers of comparable age. Therefore, approximately half of the women interviewed were unmarried during the first phase of the study.

Results of interviews conducted during the first 18 months of the study revealed that never-married mothers were considerably disadvantaged in terms of housing, educational attainment, employment and income. For example, only 19.6% of never-married mothers, compared with 65.6% of married mothers, had completed high school, and approximately half of the never-married mothers were receiving social assistance. Ten years later, only 18% of married mothers were living in poverty, compared with 53% of the never-married mothers. Although 71% of the never-married mothers by then had married, they were still disadvantaged.

Clark summarizes the results: "Becoming a mother after marriage and marital stability are

strongly associated with financial and social well-being."⁴ When the issue was examined in a different light, however, new information surfaced. Instead of focusing on the supposed shortcomings of single-parent women (i.e., lack of education), Clark focused on how poverty, and not family form, is directly responsible for the problems experienced by low-income families. Her policy recommendations linked children's poverty to the disadvantages faced by women who mother in our society, and argued that "we must address the needs of their families and seek to reduce the waste of human resources that will occur if mothers continue to be disadvantaged."

Clark's findings suggest a position which most feminists and other activists on poverty issues have generally understood: single-parent families are not the problem; it is welfare policies, and their assumptions about the nature of 'the family', women and work that are problematic. Yet these assumptions continue to dominate the policymaking agenda as well as the broader public understanding of single-parent women. Clark calls for "expanded government education and training opportunities for women, and requests that such opportunities be expanded to the working poor in general, quality, affordable day care and adequate financial assistance for those engaged in training, improvements in pay equity legislation, implementation of the recommendations from the 1983 federal Commission of Inquiry into Part-time Work, and renewed government commitment to extend programs for affordable housing. She also recommends government action which could provide better opportunities for children, such as

⁴Susan M. Clark, Mothers and Children: Additional Analysis (Summary). Prepared for the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services. 1994, 5.

⁵Ibid. 6.

special supplementary education programs for children at risk as a result of poverty. These recommendations will not likely translate into government action in the near future.

Although single-parent women do not comprise the only group in society disadvantaged by labour market conditions and parental responsibilities, it is arguable that they feel the pressure of these factors most intensely. Understanding their lives can reveal significant insights into how to change our future approaches to policy. It can also help us begin to reconceptualize all women's roles as individuals within families and the work force. A closer examination of the experiences of single-parent women doubly marginalized because they are immigrant, Aboriginal or lesbian women also is required. The current welfare system can and should be changed. But this will require a collective understanding of what needs changing. This demands more than persuading governments to select appropriate policy, and possibly a broader focus than the policy domain provides. Given the devolution of many welfare programs to municipalities (and the private sphere) by the federal and provincial governments, I am interested in the relevance of communities as sites of expanded political activity for women. It is important to understand the changing power relations within communities, and how feminist practice can influence these relations. I argue that grass-roots community politics has an increasingly important role to play in changing the way social supports are provided to women and their families.

My goal in this thesis is to expose the changing contemporary meanings of single motherhood in Canada, particularly in relation to shifts in welfare provision. I explore the following propositions.

1. The state plays an important role in the changing meanings of single motherhood; yet the Canadian state's concern with the welfare of single-parent women and their families

throughout its evolution has been beset with contradictions. The result has been unsatisfactory state support for most single-parent women, who must then turn to their communities for help.

An understanding of the historical tension that existed between ideas of community and state responsibility for vulnerable groups, such as single-parent families, is an essential starting point for this analysis.

2. The diversity of single-parent women's experiences because of class, ethnicity, race, recent immigration, and sexual orientation contributes to different experiences of single motherhood. These differences affect the way single-parent women interact with the state and their communities.

3. A feminist approach to community development can best bridge the gap between state and community supports for families. Such an approach deconstructs ideas about "community", "economy" and "state". It also provides the conceptual tools necessary for understanding diversity within and among communities, and for searching out new strategies that will assist single-parent women.

In this analysis, I assume that single-parent women are active and informed agents in the struggle to provide for their families. For them, bridging the community-state gap is a necessary part of survival. If expanded community involvement is to be a source of strength for families, it is necessary to build on the experiences of single-parent women through a better understanding of their priorities. It is possible to move forward with a strong, community-oriented feminist politics which helps to redefine popular understandings of community participation in a way that values the work of caregivers. Such a political approach should complement the policy and theoretical work of Canadian feminists.

1.1. Methodology: A Qualitative Inquiry Into the Experiences of Single-Parent Women

Because I believe that single-parent women are in a unique position to expose the contradictions between the world as women see it and the patriarchal norms embedded in the welfare state, I chose to focus on this category of motherhood in my research.⁶ Using in-depth interviews, I was able to explore contemporary ideas about motherhood from the point of view of 12 single-parent women, who generously shared with me information about their parenting experiences. Through my analysis of their experiences, I sought to understand how these women perceive and bridge the gap between their communities and the state.

There are potential methodological pitfalls in focusing research on vulnerable groups, such as single-parent women. One is that these groups can become objects in the eyes of the researcher, rather than the active agents that they are in the broader social world. Feminist researchers emphasize the political relevance of women's everyday activities. Beginning with women's experiences, they subsequently turn their gaze upon the state and the institutions which influence our daily lives.⁷ A feminist approach involves shifting the focus from the supposed

⁶According to Judith Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow, it is useful "to examine situations that typically produce changes in consciousness, such as divorce, unemployment, [and] widowhood ... The rupture with normalcy serves to demystify the 'naturalness' of patriarchal relations and enables the subject to view reality in a different way." See Cook and Fonow, "Knowledge and Women's Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research," Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 56, No. 1, 1986: 7.

⁷For example, Dorothy Smith provides an analysis of the relationship of Canadian single-parent women to the education system based on her own experiences as a single parent. She reveals the implications for woman-headed families of normative assumptions about the "homework" mothers must do to help their children progress academically. See Dorothy Smith, "Institutional Ethnography: A Feminist Method," Resources for Feminist Research, Vol. 15, No.

shortcomings of single-parent families, particularly as clients of the state, back onto the institutions that have, in many respects, failed them: "It means shifting the language beyond welfare to rights, and beyond culture to politics."⁸ From this perspective, we assume that, although single-parent families face increased pressures from a contracting economy and a growing neoconservative political climate, this family form is not intrinsically problematic.⁹

While the interviews are the central focus of my analysis in this thesis, a comprehensive understanding of the changing meanings of single motherhood in Canada which links single-parent women's experiences to the broader structures affecting them is not possible without also reviewing many government documents, books, articles and studies about single-parent women and their families. As I expected, very few of these sources began from the experiences of single-parent women, although there are notable exceptions.

Tuula Gordon (1990) includes single-parent women in her study of feminist mothers. Her analysis is useful because she considers the effects on women of mothering within specific "structures and cultures" and provides new insight into the options consciously pursued by women who are aware of the constraints on women's choices as mothers.¹⁰ She reveals that, for many feminist women, single motherhood is a choice. Yet many women do not, or cannot, choose to become single parents. Although several of the women in my study revealed that the

1. 1986: 6-12.

⁸Jan Pettman, Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia, Allen & Unwin Pty. Ltd. North Sydney, Australia, 1992, 105.

⁹Margrit Eichler, Families in Canada Today: Recent Changes and Their Policy Consequences, Toronto: Gage Educational Publishing Company, 1988 (Second Edition).

¹⁰Tuula Gordon, Feminist Mothers, London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1990.

decision to parent alone was their own, this was not always perceived as a real 'choice'. Only one of the women I interviewed indicated that she views herself as a feminist, although, as I will show, many revealed that they are politically aware. I am less concerned with how feminist women choose to parent alone, however, than with how and why single-parent women choose to become politically aware.

Sheila Baxter (1988) focuses on single-parent women compared to other poor women.¹¹ She includes views of women from minority ethnic groups and races. Her methodological approach is somewhat different from mine. In some chapters, she lets the women speak for themselves, and does not interrupt with her own analysis. For example, in one chapter, political activist Jean Swanson, a single parent, reports on how poverty, and social policies that contribute to this poverty, undermine women's abilities to be effective parents. She encourages single-parent women to transform their everyday experiences into political questions and action. My own research demonstrates my interest in political questions, but I feel that my approach in this thesis is more academic than action-based.

Poverty is an important focus, but I aim to provide a broader analysis by contrasting the views of poor single-parent women with those of relatively well-off single-parent women, in order to see how their economic status changes their perceptions of themselves and each other, despite the fact that they share the label 'single mother'.

There are many terms used in the literature which 'label' women who parent alone. Although it is quite a mouthful, I have opted to use the term 'single-parent women' throughout

¹¹Sheila Baxter, No Way to Live: Poor Women Speak Out, Vancouver, New Star Books Ltd., 1988.

my study in order to maintain a distinction between women and their role as 'mother'. In the context of the interviews I used the more familiar term 'single mother'. The definition of 'single mother' provided by Levine and Estable (1981) best captures my intended meaning in every case. "We use this term to describe all mothers [women] living on their own with children, regardless of current or past legal status in relation to marriage."

The 12 women I interviewed for this study included widowed, divorced separated and never-married women. Some are recent immigrants, while others are from long-established Canadian families. All now live in Ottawa. Most are in their 30's, although two are 26, and a few are in their early 40's. Several enjoy economic security, while others struggle with poverty. Some, but not all, have received or continue to receive government assistance of some sort.

The women were made aware of the study through personal contacts, or community organizations. In fact, several of the participants are employees of community organizations, and have direct knowledge of the range of community supports available for mother-led families. Women were encouraged to participate based on their ability to contribute a new perspective to the discussion.

The goals of my research required me to interview women from a variety of backgrounds. The complex relations of gender, class, ethnicity, race, culture and sexual orientation -- to name only a few -- form our experiences of the world, and have created the boundaries within which we are able to comprehend the politicization of single motherhood. The

¹²Helen Levine and Alma Estable, The Power Politics of Motherhood: A Feminist Critique of Theory and Practice, Occasional Paper, Centre for Social Welfare Studies, Carleton University, January 1981, 5.

different perspectives these women bring to the discussion offer opportunities to reconceptualize some of the issues. Because the few single-parent women I already knew shared my own cultural background, I approached various agencies and individuals for assistance in obtaining interviews with women who were different in some respect from me and from the women I interviewed previously. The snowballing technique I used meant that the participants were selected both by design and by chance: they were often referred to me by other single-parent women or agency workers, therefore it was impossible to predict what each interview would reveal.

The women in my study come from diverse backgrounds which meant that, in describing and interpreting their experiences, I encountered the limitations of categories such as 'immigrant woman' and 'visible minority'.¹ I use the term 'immigrant women' to refer to those foreign-born women who have recently moved to Canada. Two of the women in my study immigrated to Canada more than ten years ago, and I maintain a distinction between their past experiences as immigrants and their current experiences as Canadian single parents.

There are differences among immigrant women, both within and across cultures, and I acknowledge these whenever their comments seem to suggest such differences. One of the women recently immigrated to Canada from Russia, for example, and her comments indicate that she shares many mainstream Canadian cultural norms, and has less in common with immigrant women from Third World countries. Because she is white, the term 'visible minority' is also problematic when linked to stereotypes about immigrants. The same is true for the woman in my

¹ Didi Khayatt, "The Boundaries of Identity at the Intersection of Race, Class and Gender," Canadian Woman Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1990.

study who is second generation Japanese-Canadian. Although she could be classified as a member of a 'visible minority' group because she is Japanese in appearance, she makes it clear that she identifies with mainstream Canadian culture and considers herself "the norm"

While I made a concerted effort to ensure diversity, the participants in this study are not meant to represent a cross-section of single-parent women in Canada. Considering that this study emphasizes the diversity of single-parent women's experiences, it is needless to say that there are many perspectives which could not be included. The primary focus of this study is Ontario, and all of the women interviewed for this study live in Ottawa. There are two important absences in my interviews, since I cannot report directly on the experiences of francophone women¹⁴ and Aboriginal women.¹⁵ This is a weakness because: a) both groups have a higher than average proportion of single-parent women within their populations; b) women from these groups represent very different elements of the broader women's movement in Canada; and c) experience with community development initiatives is more extensive both in Franco-Quebec and Aboriginal communities. Research from the perspectives of single-parent women in these communities would contribute significantly to this topic. Accepting the limitations of graduate

¹⁴As the women's movement in Quebec has proved, the experiences of francophone women in Quebec are considerably different from those of women in English Canada. Tension between the individual and collective rights of women and the collective interests of francophones has forced them to approach motherhood issues somewhat differently. For an analysis, see Heather Jon Maroney, "'Who has the baby?' Nationalism, pronatalism and the construction of a 'demographic crisis' in Quebec 1960-1988," *Studies in Political Economy*, 39, (Autumn) 1992: 7-36.

¹⁵One of the women I interviewed is Scottish, but has three children whose father is Aboriginal. Although she is sensitive to her children's experiences of 'bi-raciality', an Aboriginal understanding of motherhood is not part of her own cultural history.

research, however, I restricted my focus to Anglophone Ontario.¹⁶

The length of the interviews -- each lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours -- no doubt precluded the expression of some valuable ideas or insights. The richness of the interview material I collected for this study, however, far outweighs any methodological vulnerabilities. To provide a point of entry into discussion, I allowed the women to consider a list of questions which I prepared in advance (see interview schedule, Appendix A). These questions were based on my understanding of the issues feminist and non-feminist researchers have found important in shaping the experiences and well-being of single-parent women and their children. To keep the process as open-ended as possible, I told the women the list of questions was only intended as a guide. If they felt a question was irrelevant I encouraged them to discuss issues they felt were more meaningful.

It is my premise in this thesis that experiences of motherhood change considerably over time; therefore, the views presented are historically contingent. Each woman's interpretation of

¹⁶Because there is a sizable population of Aboriginal women in Ontario, I contacted several Aboriginal resource centres within Ottawa in an effort to include the views of Aboriginal single-parent women in my interviews. I was advised by representatives of these centres that few Aboriginal women are willing to discuss their experiences as 'single mothers' out of concern for the possibility of stereotyping the experiences of all Aboriginal women. I respect this position, however, there are strong Aboriginal cultural traditions regarding the power of motherhood and I think we have a great deal to learn from such understandings. There is also evidence that most Aboriginal women experience difficulty reconciling the often contradictory roles set out for them as women and mothers within non-Aboriginal cultures and their own specific Aboriginal cultures since European contact. These women also face the dilemma of reconciling their own personal politics as women with the collective interests of their communities. See Patricia Gunn Allen, The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions, Boston: Beacon Press, 1986; Dolores and Irene Poelzer, In Our Own Words: Northern Saskatchewan Metis Women Speak Out, Saskatoon: Lindenblatt and Hamonic Publishing Inc., 1986; Alanis Obomsawin, Mother of Many Children, National Film Board of Canada, 1977.

her experiences of single motherhood and my re-interpretation of those experiences within a feminist framework (and the reader's reception of my re-interpretation) are constrained by our respective understandings of the world. Because self-analysis is a political activity with transformative power, the interview process itself may have acted as a consciousness-changing event for some. It certainly did in my case. My own perceptions of single motherhood changed considerably as a result of my interviews with these women. It is inevitable in interactive interviews that each participant's priorities and responses will influence the other's in some way. The goal of my research was to develop a shared construction with the women which would provide new meaning about single motherhood. I respect the way they see their own lives. In order to ensure that my interpretation is reasonable, I asked the women to review and verify their own comments as I report on them in my analysis (see "Agreement to Participate" and "Check-Back Procedure" forms, Appendix B). A few noted changes in their lives, or expanded on their views in order to assist me in my interpretation of their comments. I footnote these additional changes in the relevant sections. I anticipated that some women would be concerned about the potential consequences of allowing their private experiences to become public knowledge: to ensure anonymity, I have changed their names and have left out personal details by which they could be identified.

1.2. Organization of the Thesis

In Chapter One, I have provided a rationale for my interest in single motherhood as a research topic and a political issue. In this chapter, I have also outlined my methodology and

provided an outline of the organization of the thesis

In Chapter Two, I provide a context in which to understand and interpret the experiences of these English-Canadian single-parent women. Concepts such as "motherhood", "family", "community", are deeply ingrained in our social consciousness, and are not easily understood as socially constructed and politically determined. Many feminists, however, work to reveal how such concepts reflect the underlying assumptions and ideologies that have structured women's experiences. I explore how feminists view the relationship between women, their communities, and the state. Because this relationship is dynamic, and not static, I also examine how meanings of single motherhood in Canada have changed over the course of the last century as a result of state and community politics.

In Chapter Three, I begin by highlighting international trends with regard to single motherhood. I then provide a demographic profile of Canadian single parents, in which I consider their economic position relative to other Canadian family types. In the second part of this chapter, I provide profiles of the women interviewed for this thesis, exploring their diverse backgrounds and motivations as single-parent women

In the first part of Chapter Four, I consider basic support challenges facing single-parent women (housing, employment, and child care), and provide statistical information and examples of policy approaches that reflect the state's contradictory attitude toward mother-led families. The views of the women I interviewed are included in each category of analysis.¹⁷ In part two, I

¹⁷ While I did not directly raise policy issues in the interviews (unless the women's comments moved our discussion in that direction), their insights and perspectives often reflect the impacts which these policies have had, including the stigma attached to social assistance.

examine their views on community supports, and their ideas about better ways of supporting single-parent women.

In Chapter Five, I turn more fully to the matter of community. I outline some of the arguments made by researchers in the community development field and assess the potential of communities as areas of expanded political activity for women. I consider recent examples of community-based efforts to empower single-parent women and immigrant women.

In the conclusion, I consider why it is difficult to organize women on issues concerning single-parent women. This includes an overview of how contemporary Canadian feminists have approached motherhood issues at the policy (institutional) and grassroots levels. Historically, community politics have been an important part of Canadian women's movements, and a better understanding is required of what these politics mean for women, particularly as single parents. I argue that, while social and economic policy must remain important arenas of political action if we are to attain long-term equality for all women, it is not necessarily our only option for creating alternatives for families that are mother-led. Community supports can be cost-effective, efficient ways of ensuring the well-being of families. Programs planned "close to home" can reflect a more sensitive understanding of need and can contribute to women's empowerment via participation. But first the community care which women traditionally have provided also must be valued by society and the state. I argue that the interviews I conducted demonstrate a need for a better understanding of the relevance of community care for vulnerable groups such as single-parent families, and I emphasize the need for further community-based research. Feminists, most of whom are English-speaking and white, need to be more in tune with the changing and different meanings of motherhood in Canada. New meanings may suggest

possibilities for reconceptualizing our political options, if not immediate courses of action. If feminists are to continue playing an effective role in Canada's changing political culture, we must champion the value of community care in a way that empowers women and families while respecting the cultural differences so central to community support.

CHAPTER TWO

From Community Aid to State Welfare:

An Historical Overview of Single Motherhood in Canada

Ideas about families and motherhood change over time; therefore, it is important to consider how understandings about single motherhood have changed in Canada, and why. Through their research and political activity, feminists have exposed how a capitalist economy and patriarchal ideology reinforce each other in a way which prevents full equality for women, particularly in their roles as mothers.¹ Patriarchy can be understood as "a male-defined system, with a variety of structural institutions which maintain power and dominance by men over women in family, workplace and society."² One of these institutions is motherhood. Although many women enjoy the experience of mothering, the structural aspects of this role prevent women from full participation in public life.³ Within capitalism, women's primary responsibility in childrearing is imposed by patriarchal norms which maintain a public/private split. Experiences of motherhood occur primarily within the private sphere of the patriarchal "family".

¹ There is theoretical debate amongst feminists about the relative importance of patriarchy and capitalism in determining women's experiences. For an analysis of this debate, see Dorothy Smith, "Women, Class and Family," Women, Class, Family and the State, Varda Burstyn et al., Toronto: Garamond Press, 1985.

² Helen Levine and Alma Estable, The Power Politics of Motherhood: A Feminist Critique of Theory and Practice, Occasional Paper, Centre for Social Welfare Studies, Carleton University, 1981, 8.

³ Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood and Experience and Institution, London: Virago, 1981.

which at present normatively consists of husband, wife and children. Because single-parent women do not fit this norm, their experiences of motherhood are different. The artificial distinction between public and private spheres supports a gendered division of labour in our society which is problematic for all women, but which is especially obvious in the lives of single-parent women, who must be both childrearer and breadwinner for their families.

In Canada's recent history, when single-parent women have been unable to fulfil the breadwinner role through paid employment, they have relied on state (usually provincial and/or municipal) support. This has not always been the case, and may again be changing.

Privatization of welfare services and erosion of family support payments may eventually mean single-parent women must try to be fully self-sufficient through employment, and, where employment is unavailable, must rely again on communities for support.

Women have not been able to rely totally on the state for support. According to Arnlaug Leira (1992), "conceptualizing mothers as earners and carers and as welfare state citizens highlights what the theoretical debate often neglects, that in welfare state citizenship, 'carer' [is] not included on the same basis as 'worker'."¹ Because of this, the state does not adequately account for (let alone compensate for) the extra work involved for women in providing care in their homes and communities. As Leira writes:

Theoretically and methodologically it is worth observing that the mediation between the child's vital need for care and nurturing on the one hand, and on the other available resources produced by family members or by outside agencies such as relatives, friends, shadow labour markets or state-sponsored services is evidenced in women's everyday schedule more than in men's. Caring for children

¹Arnlaug Leira, Welfare States and Working Mothers: The Scandinavian Experience, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 12.

creates an interlinking between an emotional, individual and private sphere, and the public domain that exposes the 'public-private' distinction as hazy, as mothers commonly commute between public and private arenas and authorities, and integrate resources provided by formal and informal, public and private agencies in the management of everyday life."

Although I agree with Leira's statement, I feel it reveals only one aspect of the work women do to acquire resources for their families. Historically, women have not only secured supports for their families by choosing among existing resources, but they have also created supports where previously none existed. In the early years of Canada's development, the state had little or no involvement in providing supports. Women organized first by looking to the public realm of their communities for support. In fact, state welfare activities evolved historically out of the co-ordinated efforts of women within their communities."

While problematic, the idea and reality of care within the community requires more attention, particularly at this time, when increased responsibility is being placed on this sector to provide care, and as community-level programs are being re-evaluated and proposals for new community structures developed. If we are to understand the implications of a return to community responsibility for welfare, we must first consider the historical origins and consequences of community care activities on women's lives.

The goal of this chapter is to highlight historical patterns of support for single-parent women and their children in Canada. Focusing on Upper Canada, or Ontario, I examine some of the key social, political and economic forces that changed how communities and governments

¹Ibid., 13.

"Caroline Andrew, "Women and the Welfare State," Canadian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 14, No.4, December 1984.

approached their responsibilities for single-parent women and their children. I examine the role of communities in providing support for and community politics in making change for single-parent women and their children, and consider the state's historical relationship with single-parent women, and its role in shaping contemporary meanings of "single motherhood".

2.1 Pioneers and Separate Spheres: The Changing Roles of Women

An understanding of women's relationships to the state and their communities and families must begin prior to Confederation. Errington (1988) notes: "The year 1867 was a watershed in the political development of the country but it heralded little change for the nation's women... It was not so much the political but rather the economic and social developments -- the transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy, and the movement from a rural to an urban society -- that provided the rough benchmarks in the history of women."⁷

The separation of public and private spheres is a distinct characteristic of capitalism. The transition from feudalism to capitalism in England begun at the end of the sixteenth century meant the family was no longer the main economic unit; no longer were "the essential components needed for survival -- land, tools and labour --... present within each household."⁸

⁷Jane Errington, "Pioneers and Suffragists," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada. Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code, and Lindsay Dorney (eds.) Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988, 53.

⁸Roberta Hamilton, "Women, Wives and Mothers," Reconstructing the Canadian Family: Feminist Perspectives. Nancy Mandell and Ann Duffy (eds.) Toronto: Butterworths Canada Ltd., 1988, 7.

Under feudalism, "the distinction between 'real' work and housework was meaningless."⁹ With the rise of capitalism came the philosophy of liberal-individualism, which espouses "rights of individual freedom, personal independence, achievement through merit, and equality of opportunity."¹⁰ This ideology permits individuals to be viewed as autonomous actors within the economy and their family relationships as private matters. Within the context of early capitalism, "individual" was conflated with the husband and father: "The family became a corporate economic unit identified with an individual man."¹¹ The economic interdependence of family members dropped from view, and women and children were seen as dependants.

This European understanding of family did not catch hold in New France, which was essentially a pioneer society. The dangers and difficulties of frontier life, and the scarcity of women, meant marriage and motherhood were usual, because the labour of women was essential to men if they were to survive on the frontier. In the event of widowhood, women remarried quite quickly. Communities were not well-developed, therefore the family was of central importance to survival. "Women, by reason of their sex, were expected to bear children, see to their upbringing and education, and maintain the home and the garden."¹² From a very early age, children participated in the household economy, reducing the burden on women somewhat.

The Canadian frontier was remarkably progressive in many ways. Women, especially

⁹Ibid., 8.

¹⁰Zillah R. Eisenstein, The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism. New York: Longman, 1981, 6.

¹¹Smith, op.cit., 11.

¹²Errington, op.cit., 55.

those who were wives of fur-traders or military men, often found themselves parenting alone for extended periods of time. They played an active economic role in the colonial economy, carrying on their family's business activities. Some participated with their husbands in fur-trading, especially aboriginal women in Western Canada, where the first white woman did not arrive until 1811.¹³ As New France became more settled, some widows chose not to remarry, but continued to manage the family business and raise their children. Until 1834, such women were allowed to vote.

The frontier was changing, however, as more British settlers arrived after the British Conquest. The first statute adopted by the Legislature of Upper Canada was an act to establish the main body of English civil law, with the exception of the English poor law. Richard Splane (1965) offers several probable explanations for this omission, including idealistic expectations about the prosperity of Upper Canada, the practical problems of implementing English poor law administration in a new colony which lacked a stable social structure, and "the strength of the view that any necessary assistance, not merely for the survival of the population but also for the economic development of the province, should come from the British government."¹⁴ The British authorities could only provide sporadic assistance, however, and eventually the province and its municipalities increased their responsibilities and capabilities in the care of the poor.

Because there were no provincial provisions for the welfare of orphans, the *Orphans Act of 1799* was introduced. Splane notes that the objective of the act "was that of binding the child

¹³Ibid., 61.

¹⁴Richard B. Splane, Social Welfare in Ontario, 1791-1893. A Study of Public Welfare Administration. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965, 67.

as an apprentice."¹⁵ Children's welfare was determined by the benevolence of their appointed masters. Under the act, the child had little power, but the master was provided with a great deal of protection. Splane also notes that in the early years of the province, the only payments unmarried mothers and orphans received from the state as charity cases were voted by the courts of quarter sessions, which had administrative responsibilities and, therefore, functioned as local governments.

A move towards institutional care throughout the 1800s meant that unmarried mothers and orphans received less assistance from their local government, which was sporadic in any case. Prior to the development of institutions, the only "welfare" available was that offered by municipalities through outdoor (temporary) relief programs or privately sponsored houses of refuge, which were often established and operated by women.¹⁶ A push for institutional care came from the province because of the temporary and unsystematic charity characteristic of municipal relief programs. Most viewed permanent forms of assistance as unnecessary, particularly for destitute men, because jobs were available. However, there were cases of "deserving poor", and most widows and their children fell within this category.

Institutional "care" meant separation of children from their families and communities, although municipalities were expected to pay for dependants from the communities over which they had authority. The province became involved only when increasing numbers of poor immigrants, with no attachment to communities, were also in need of assistance.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 110.

After 1815, British immigrants streamed into Canada, bringing their ideas about family life and women's roles, including the separation of private and public spheres, with them. Under British common law, women were subordinate to men. Errington notes that "Between 1820 and 1860, as British North America developed economically and became socially more stratified, economic opportunities for single and married women outside the home constricted."¹⁷ During this period, however, middle- and upper-class women became involved in their communities by organizing and joining Bible and charity societies aimed at looking after the orphans and destitute widows who comprised the "deserving poor".¹⁸

At the same time that the liberal democratic state was forming in Canada, social ills associated with industrialization convinced many reformers that broad-based action was necessary. Increased urbanization fostered a "breakdown of reproductive relations".¹⁹ Divorce was rare in the nineteenth century, and divorce laws passed in the early twentieth century favoured men.²⁰ Although single motherhood generally was equated with widowhood prior to World War II,²¹ the number of reported illegitimate births was on the rise. In 1874, for example,

¹⁷Errington, op.cit., 60.

¹⁸Ibid., 60.

¹⁹Jane Ursel, Private Lives, Public Policy: 100 Years of State Intervention in the Family. Toronto: Women's Press, 1992, 64.

²⁰Sandra Burt, "Legislators, Women, and Public Policy," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988, 130.

²¹Records from both 1931 and 1941, for example, indicate that 75% of single mothers were widowed. See Michelle Clarke, Oppression Through Neglect: An Examination of the Assumptions and Meanings Behind Three Social Policies Affecting Canadian Single Mothers. M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1992, 53.

only one in every 144 reported live births was illegitimate: by 1900 this number had increased to 1 in every 55 live births.²² Because they are perceived as being more "at risk" than children born in wedlock -- the low status of illegitimate children often made them vulnerable to abuse²³ -- the state traditionally has intervened more directly on their behalf.²⁴ The purpose of the first piece of legislation regarding unmarried motherhood, passed in Upper Canada in 1826, was to punish single women who murdered or attempted to conceal their illegitimate children. Clearly, women feared the stigma attached to single motherhood and knew they would not have the resources to raise a child on their own. In 1827, an act was passed which allowed illegitimate children to be placed legally with guardians, although this did not necessarily ensure the physical, social or economic protection of these children.²⁵ They were often judged to be morally inferior because they were conceived out of wedlock. It was the moral character of the mother, not the father, which was in question. In fact, very little attention was paid to the father's role in the child's conception.

'Illegitimacy' stems from notions of property rights and is therefore a concept which emerged historically amongst the propertied, or upper-class. It is an ethnocentric concept.

²² Jane Ursel notes that "[these] statistics were particularly alarming because, although the Registrar General complained throughout the 1800s that births tended to be underreported, the most underreported births were the illegitimate ones." See Ursel, *op.cit.*, 63.

²³ See Shaughnessy Cohen, "Family Law in Canada," The Family: Changing Trends in Canada, Maureen Baker (ed.) Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1984.

²⁴ Margrit Eichler, Families in Canada Today: Recent Changes and Their Policy Consequences, Toronto: Gage Educational Publishing Company, 1988, 353.

²⁵ Benjamin Schlesinger, Families: Canada, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1979, 1972, 26.

reflecting prescribed European norms of property and sexual behaviour. For example, it has distorted our understanding of Aboriginal cultural norms of family life and sexuality.

Traditionally, Aboriginal peoples have always viewed childbearing and childrearing as activities of communal concern. As a result, concepts such as "single motherhood" and "illegitimacy" have no meaning for Aboriginal peoples except within the context of norms imposed by the dominant white culture.

Under early Canadian law, legitimate children were born to two people who were legally married to one another, and were expected to inherit their parents' estate. Since illegitimate children had no inheritance, they had nothing to offer in the event of marriage, and therefore their life opportunities were curtailed considerably. The stigma of illegitimacy also impeded their advancement. Often these children were left in the care of the many foundling homes established between approximately 1884 and 1912 to deal with orphaned children. Their chances in such homes were not good:

In 1883, the Ontario inspector of Charitable Institutions reported without comment the sombre record of 199 deaths in a year in which there had been 224 admissions in the Bethlehem Home for the Friendless in Ottawa. The problem was two-fold: abandoned children usually entered the home in poor physical condition, and the inability to provide breast milk made matters worse.²⁶

Although they must have known the consequences of leaving their children in foundling homes, most single women simply had no choice. Not only were they faced with the disapproval of their communities, they also usually could not manage to both provide and care for their children. Opportunities for work for these women were limited to the worst-paying sectors of the labour

²⁶Ursel, *op.cit.*, 66-67.

market. On the one hand, employers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were more than happy to employ women and pay them lower wages, keeping the surplus; on the other, this threatened men, who did not want to compete with women for jobs, felt their traditional status within the patriarchal family being eroded, and demanded a 'family wage' big enough for a man to support his family on. It is at this historical moment of conflict between the interests of capitalism and the interests of patriarchy that the state intervened and passed legislation in the 1880s restricting women's participation in the labour force.²⁷ These restrictions were ostensibly in the interests of women, i.e., limiting the amount of physical exertion required of them by their employers. Yet many working-class families needed women's wages; while the increased breadwinner (i.e., family) wage may have offset this need somewhat, women's economic dependency on men was further entrenched.

Such economic dependency was disastrous for women, especially as mothers, if male breadwinners no longer contributed to household finances. Without welfare assistance, some turned to relatives for assistance. However, in urban centres, families were less likely to be living in close proximity and women often turned to their communities for support. Community support offered mixed blessings for women. Although sometimes they and their families benefited, it was often at the expense of autonomy.

Because women -- particularly, middle- and upper-class women -- felt isolated in the private sphere of the home, these women increasingly involved themselves in welfare activities within their communities, and often imposed their norms and judgments on the disadvantaged

²⁷Burt, op.cit., 133.

women they sought to help. Increasingly, these privileged women looked to the public sphere beyond their communities, and began forming national political organizations devoted to making social reforms:

By the 1870s the province was rich enough to support a significant number of middle-class women with sufficient leisure to devote themselves to concerns other than the immediate ones of raising a family and of managing a home... Those women who did seek other channels for their energies usually applied them to social welfare causes, thus fitting the model of "maternal feminism". This activity extended from Women's Institutes to temperance organizations and found a central focus in the 1890s, with the founding of the National Council of Women.⁸

Probably the most important force in changing the state's attitudes toward women, and encouraging its willingness to aid single-parent women, was women's political activities as exemplified by the suffrage movement. Motherhood was a concept employed by many Canadian women to gain entry into the public sphere of politics during the period of social reform which began in the 1880s. Although suffrage came to be seen as the primary goal of women during this era, their attention to the social importance of motherhood changed the way the state perceived women. Deborah Gorham (1976) argues that feminists were forced to emphasize their maternal role to counter the arguments made by anti-feminists, who sought to keep women out of public life. She argues: "Canadian feminists of the period cannot be categorized as belonging to one or another clearly delineated group: both equal rights feminism and maternal feminism were realities in Canada."⁹ Regardless of their motivations, women's politics had a clear effect on the

⁸Deborah Gorham, "The Canadian Suffragists," Women in the Canadian Mosaic. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1976, 30.

⁹ Ibid., 26.

state's involvement in motherhood issues. Considering the political culture of the suffrage era, demand for the vote was a radical activity which would have significant import for women's equality, and would eventually shake the foundations of motherhood. As Deborah Gorham notes, "resistance to women's suffrage was everywhere based not so much on fear of the effects women might have as voters but on the fact that the woman voter challenged the ideal of womanhood which formed an essential part of the social order that many saw slipping away from them."¹⁰

From the very beginning, women's groups found it necessary to build coalitions with each other and with other social and political groups to achieve their goals. In the early 1900s, a wide spectrum of women's groups took up the cause of mothers' allowances in most provinces.¹¹ As Veronica Strong-Boag explains, "social critics and feminists employed the predicament of mother-led families to initiate Canada's first experiments with formal income support programs."¹² Support for mothers' allowances reflected a dissatisfaction with institutional care for children, and a convergence in attitudes about the importance of community (i.e., maternal) care:

Ministers, social workers, feminists, patriotic fund workers and doctors were unanimous in condemning the infant mortality and juvenile delinquency which so often shipwrecked mother-led families. They insisted, too, on the community's responsibility to hapless women who, through no fault of their own, were denied

¹⁰Ibid., 29.

¹¹Veronica Strong-Boag, "'Wages for Housework': Mothers' Allowances and the Beginnings of Social Security in Canada," Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 14, No. 1, (Spring) 1979: 26.

¹²Ibid.: 24.

minimum security and dignity. Many drew on their own experience to mount a sustained attack on custodial institutions such as orphanages which they proclaimed completely inadequate substitutes for domestic supervision and affection.³³

Some women's groups had already experimented with income supplements for needy mothers, but many could not afford such responsibilities on a long-term basis. The first Mothers' Allowance Act was passed by the newly elected Liberal government in Manitoba in 1916. There are good reasons why Manitoba implemented mothers' allowances before Ontario, and why criteria for eligibility were more liberal there. Ursel explains:

Ontario had a much more highly developed system of municipal and private charitable institutions dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. While the system was clearly inadequate to meet the demands of the twentieth century, its existence ameliorated some of the immediate crises of relief delivery and forestalled the development of a more modern system.³⁴

The federal government's decision to provide financial assistance to widows, particularly to those who had been married to men killed while serving in World War I, set a precedent which caused citizens to accept the legitimacy of state support and supervision of fatherless families. Initially costs were shared with local municipalities in most provinces, but gradually provincial governments assumed full responsibility for costs.³⁵

Margaret Little (1994) comments that the Ontario Mothers' Allowance (now referred to as the Family Benefits Act) provided a "neat solution" to the social, economic and gender problems

³³Ibid.: 26.

³⁴Ursel, op.cit., 156.

³⁵Total welfare expenditures in 1913 were \$15 million, most of which was paid by municipalities. By 1939 responsibility for welfare costs, which had increased to \$235 million, had shifted to the provinces. See Ursel, Ibid., 169.

being experienced in Canada following World War I.³⁶ Many women had participated in the work force during the war, and women also had received the vote in 1918. As a result, Canadian women had an emerging concept of their rights as citizens and workers. At the same time, returning soldiers needed jobs and there was a general "desire to replace the losses on the battlefield with healthy future citizens, particularly of Anglo-Saxon stock."³⁷ The state sought ways to persuade women to leave the paid work force. This was accomplished by granting public value to the role of motherhood through policies such as mothers' allowance acts, the implementation of which seemed to buttress and legitimate the political efforts of maternal feminists, who championed the importance of women's roles as mothers.

Moral regulation of motherhood, first by charities, then increasingly by the state, has been an on-going reality for single-parent women in Canada. With the introduction of state support (i.e., mothers' allowances) women still could not achieve full autonomy. The professionalization of social work, and the substantial influence of state-sponsored agencies such as the Children's Aid Society, meant that the activities of single-parent women were under constant scrutiny.

In view of the desperate situation of so many sole-support mothers, supervision was a price they might well willingly pay for new security. Certainly the prior existence of so many of them with local charities would have been little better. Nevertheless, for all its undeniable advantages, such supervision constituted an extension, through the state apparatus, of the middle class's ability to control the behaviour and development of working-class Canadians.³⁸

³⁶Margaret Little, "Manhunts and Bingo Blabs," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1994: 235.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Strong-Boag, *op.cit.*: 28.

For those women who were members of the "deserving poor", mothers' allowance likely was an important source of support which to some extent affirmed the value of the caregiving work they performed in the home. For those who did not qualify as "deserving" according to the norms of the time, the state attached no value to their role as mothers. There were variations in the amount paid to mothers, and not all mothers were eligible. Burt notes: "Most provinces disallowed divorcees or unmarried mothers, for this was not a move to sanction marital breakdown."³⁹ Ursel explains:

Mothers' Allowance was conceived of not as charity but rather as a salary. While the concept of salary was designed to remove the stigma of charity from the recipients, it also removed destitution as the major criterion for qualification. Thus, two categories of most frequently destitute women, unwed mothers and deserted women, were automatically excluded from coverage. In the former case, unwed mothers had in the eyes of society and the law already proved by virtue of their condition that they were unworthy of state support. In the case of deserted women, they were seen to be the responsibility of their husbands.⁴⁰

In fact, in Ontario, divorced women did not become eligible to receive mothers' allowance until 1951. Unwed mothers, along with unemployable single fathers and mothers whose husbands were imprisoned, became eligible in 1955.⁴¹

There is legislative evidence that the state was modifying its views about never-married

³⁹Burt, *op.cit.*, 136.

⁴⁰Ursel, *op.cit.*, 158.

⁴¹Little notes: "Initially a two-year waiting period was enforced to ensure that these [unwed] mothers were 'fit' to care for their children and that they did not continue their 'improper' sexual practices. Eventually this was reduced to three months, but only in October 1991 was this time restriction removed." Little, *op.cit.*: 236.

women with children. In Ontario, the Illegitimate Children's Act, introduced in 1914, finally recognized paternity in relation to children born out of wedlock, although it still did not make the father legally responsible for his child. It was not until 1921, after women had the federal vote, that The Child of Unmarried Parents Act was introduced, reflecting a significant shift in the state's views on never-married women's rights as mothers:

The Act, no longer referring to such children as illegitimate, focused on aiding the unmarried mother to provide for her child. Affiliation orders made between the Province of Ontario and the putative (supposed) fathers were now legally binding, requiring the father to contribute to the cost of his child's maintenance. In practice the mother was also financially responsible; however, the new Act provided her with the right to appeal for statutory guardianship with a provincial child welfare officer. If she were still unable to care for her child, or in the case of abandonment or neglect, the Children's Aid Society was given a mandate to assume guardianship. In turn, it could transfer the guardianship role to adoptive parents.⁴²

Although an improvement, the act did little to empower single-parent women.⁴³ Many were forced by law to bring paternity suits against the fathers. This process was complicated, and it is likely that many women sought to avoid the stigma of the court process. Still, the act reflected a broader shift in society's views about women and motherhood.⁴⁴

⁴²Schlesinger, op.cit., 27.

⁴³Some provinces were slower to change than others. For example, in Quebec, the views of the Catholic Church on premarital sex still held great sway until the secularization of that province in the 1960s. As Andrée Lévesque reports, during the Depression era, many never-married mothers continued to seek asylum at institutions which would conceal the birth of their children, such as the Hôpital de la Miséricorde in Montreal. See Andrée Lévesque, "Deviant Anonymous: Single Mothers at the Hôpital de la Miséricorde in Montreal, 1929-1939," Delivering Motherhood: Maternal Ideologies and Practices in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Katherine Arnup, Andrée Lévesque and Ruth Roach Pierson (eds.) London: Routledge, 1990.

⁴⁴It is only recently, however, that the legal status of the children of never-married mothers has improved. In 1980, Ontario passed The Children's Law Reform Act, allowing

Most of the legislative gains made by women during the reform era were in their capacity as mothers, not as women. Speaking of mothers' allowances, Strong-Boag concludes: "In an ironic fulfillment of the feminists' maternalist ideology, the most important reform legislation passed after the woman suffrage campaign in English Canada subsumed the cause of women under that of children."⁴⁵ Urbanization and industrialization had changed childrearing values considerably, making the interests of children paramount. As children's work was no longer needed, they were treated as future workers and were expected to be the central focus of mothers' lives.⁴⁶

There are very few first-hand historical accounts of the experiences of women who were the working poor, such as immigrant women. The ethnic and racial composition of Canada's population in the pre-World War II era was considerably different from what it is now. It is likely that most single-parent women were white since only a small proportion of the population was non-white. The state actively restricted expansion of a multi-racial population through its exclusion of Blacks, Asians and Jews.⁴⁷ Abella and Troper comment:

illegitimate children to inherit on the same basis as legitimate children. While some legal barriers have been removed, I disagree with those who argue that the social stigma has also disappeared. Non-legal factors have also disadvantaged these children, and continue to do so today.

⁴⁵Strong-Boag, *op.cit.*: 31.

⁴⁶Katherine Arnup, Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth-Century Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, 33.

⁴⁷Anges Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from Caribbean, 1900-1932," Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Winter) 1993-94. She argues that "immigration policy was structured by a dialectic of economic, political and ideological relations: the demand of employers for cheap labour and the state's desire to exclude Blacks as permanent settlers. The immigration branch perceived black people as likely to cause

These 'non-preferred' immigrants were acceptable as long as they were out of sight, risking life and limb in the mines and smelters of the west and north, holed up in lumber camps deep in the forest or farming the more marginal areas of the western wheat frontier. Those who escaped this life for perhaps the even worse one in Canada's urban centres, where they competed for jobs with native- or British-born artisans, were less acceptable.⁴⁸

Most of these immigrants were men. In the case of Chinese, for example, women were prohibited by law.⁴⁹ But for those immigrant white women who did settle in Canada, their experiences were quite different. They were mostly channeled into domestic services and were expected to marry.⁵⁰ This was particularly true for British immigrant women. Many non-British women brought with them their expectations regarding motherhood, and the state's relationship to the family. This is particularly evident in the activities, for example, of Finnish women who became active in socialist and feminist movements.⁵¹

The woman's movement was not uniform: the women's rights movement in Ontario, for example, was quite different from that in the prairie provinces. As Deborah Gorham notes of the suffrage movement: "Feminism in the prairies won the whole-hearted support of important

difficult economic and race-relations problems in the country. Thus, the immigration of Caribbean Blacks was severely restricted. Only 2,378 Caribbean Blacks were admitted to Canada between 1904 and 1932 mostly as labourers to work in the steel plants and coal mines in Nova Scotia and as domestics.

⁴⁸Irving Abella and Harold Troper, None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948, Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys Ltd., 1982, 5.

⁴⁹B. Singh Bolaria and Peter S. Li, Racial Oppression in Canada, Toronto: Garamond Press, 1985: 81-104.

⁵⁰Marilyn Barber, Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada, Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991.

⁵¹Linda Kealey, "Women in the Canadian Socialist Movement: 1904-1914," Beyond the Vote, Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster (eds.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989.

interest groups including the farmers' organizations. Women were active in the political and social life of the prairies, in the radical movements, in the temperance movement."⁵² In Ontario, "the women's rights movement would appear to have been largely middle-class in origin, allied to the temperance movement and centred in Toronto."⁵³

Not only middle- and upper-class women were involved in the public realm of politics. The poverty experienced as a result of the Great Depression (1920s-1930s) brought many women together politically within democratic political movements, as represented by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which was particularly strong in the prairie provinces:

Underlying women's activism lay certain common themes: women's experience of working-class or farm life, or witnessing of social inequalities, combined with exposure to new socialist ideas, led them to the CCF. Economic insecurity and arduous working conditions were the lot of most working-class and farm women in the 1920s; the Great Depression only worsened their lot. Single and married women working for wages faced wage reductions, speed-ups, and job loss; women workers were often forced to resort to the only alternative open to them -- despised and poorly paid domestic work.⁵⁴

2.2. The 'Double Day' and the Diminishing Value of Caregiving

Although provinces continue to operate their own family support programs aimed at assisting single-parent women and their families, in 1944, the federal government implemented a

⁵²Gorham, op.cit., 36.

⁵³Ibid., 35.

⁵⁴Joan Sangster, "The Role of Women in the Early CCF: 1933-1940," Beyond the Vote, Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster (eds.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989, 119.

universal program, which allowed all mothers with children aged sixteen or younger to receive an allowance. Women's caregiving activities in the private sphere were still legitimated by the state, therefore, but for changing reasons:

Family allowance cheques, payable to the mother, would make it easier for women to stay at home and raise these citizens. Clearly the value of women's labour in the home had changed from the time of Confederation. Whereas the nineteenth century mother was viewed as the moral guardian of the nation, the twentieth century mother was viewed as the producer of workers for an expanding economy. The language of social purity and morality, which dominated the legislative discussions about women's roles in the early 1900s, was replaced by the language of healthy babies, strong soldiers, and better workers.⁵⁵

This effort to encourage women to stay at home did not stall the new pattern of women's labour force participation that emerged after World War II. Because of expanding work opportunities, married women were more likely to work until the birth of their first child and then re-enter the labour force once their youngest child was old enough to attend school. Like today, the majority of available jobs were often in low-paid sectors, such as clerical, sales and service, although many also found jobs in the higher paid but still ghettoized female occupations such as teaching, nursing and lower management.⁵⁶

This change in women's labour force activity fostered the perception that the Canadian middle class had expanded. Conservatives and liberals debated the desirability of middle-class white women working for wages.⁵⁷ The conservative view reflected a "strong sense of the

⁵⁵Burt, *op.cit.*, 138.

⁵⁶Veronica Strong-Boag, "Canada's Wage-Earning Wives and the Construction of the Middle Class, 1945-60," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3, (Fall) 1994: 7.

⁵⁷This debate ignored the fact that single women, and poor women across the racial spectrum usually worked for pay. Rural women, too, were often overlooked; the work they

continuing value of household labour and the essential all-encompassing nature of women's duties as wives and mothers..."⁵⁸ Unaccustomed to the consumption patterns of middle class, two-income households, they perceived women's work as unnecessary, and saw working for "frills" as a reflection that families were living far beyond their financial means. In this context, women's paid work was viewed as optional, despite the fact that it was necessary if they were to attain the standard of living that had swiftly become the middle class norm.⁵⁹

Despite mixed reviews about the benefits of paid work, many Canadian women began to expect that they could "have it all": that they could work outside the home, perform domestic tasks and successfully care for their children, with little outside help. This attitude continues today. As Susannah J. Wilson (1991) points out, "women today have much more control over decisions about education, employment, marriage and motherhood than their mothers or grandmothers had. But these choices are circumscribed by conditions over which women have little control: financial need, the availability of child care, employment opportunities, and household responsibilities."⁶⁰

Many women were realizing the barriers they faced in the labour market, and they lobbied the federal government to investigate the problem. In 1968, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was established, but its purpose again reflects a contradictory relationship

performed on their family homesteads was not waged or salaried, which set them apart from urban working women.

⁵⁸Strong-Boag, 1994, op.cit.: 11.

⁵⁹Ibid: 7.

⁶⁰Susannah J. Wilson, Women, Families and Work, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., Third Edition 1991 (First Published in 1981), 34.

between the state and women: "The request for a royal commission was ideally suited to the double purposes of getting the necessary information about fully integrating women into the work-force while appeasing and possibly defusing any feminist activism."⁶¹ Whatever its motive, the state provided a forum (and some funds) for women to collectively discuss the common issues they faced.

Single-parent women did not figure prominently in these discussions about women's labour force participation. This period represented another major shift in the government's perception of single-parent families. In an ironic twist, the legitimacy of single-parent women's rights to care for their children at home was undermined by the higher rates of labour force participation of women in general. Most women were concerned with expanding their activities beyond the private sphere, and therefore arguments in favour of assisting women to stay in the home seemed counter-productive and were unpopular.

As welfare programs became overburdened with clients, and as the demographic composition of single-parent women changed -- most were divorced, and did not fit as nicely into the ideological category of "deserving poor" as widows once had -- governments increasingly sought to understand how to deal with single-parent families. As early as October 1971, the Canadian Council on Social Development published a report on the 'one-parent family'.⁶² The report was co-sponsored by a number of associations representing single parents, such as the

⁶¹Naomi Black, "The Canadian Women's Movement: The Second Wave," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada, Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code, and Lindsay Dorney (eds.), Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988.

⁶²Canadian Council on Social Development, Report on the One-Parent Family, October 1971.

Toronto Single Parents Association and Parents Without Partners (Hamilton chapter). Financed under the Welfare Grants Program of the Department of National Health and Welfare, the report called for a better understanding of single parents' lifestyles. They did not have to look far. Single-parent women were more than ready to provide information about their lives and to work for change. For example, in their report "Telling It Like It Is," the Mothers' Action Group (MAG), a Toronto-based advocacy organization for single-parent women, stated that they were "swamped by requests" to set up groups like their own.⁶³ This group made recommendations for increases in day care, training of social assistance staff, educational and job training programs for single-parent women, and the official formation of a Social Assistance Advisory Committee, on which they intended to be representatives of their own interests. At that time, they opposed the Ontario government's position that single-parent women were 'employable' and that responsibility for their maintenance should be shifted to the municipalities.⁶⁴ Today, single-parent women still face the same needs and obstacles. Similar requests for change could be made, but they would receive even less support from the state than they did in the 1970s and 1980s. In Chapter Four, I examine some of the policy options the Ontario government chose to pursue during the 1980s and explain why they failed.

The state has protected patriarchal interests at the expense of women's interests, mainly

⁶³MAG, Telling It Like It Is, Presentation Paper, 1983, 8. (Available in resource centre of National Anti-Poverty Organization.)

⁶⁴Ibid., 7.

by reinforcing the public private distinction through its policies and programs.” Many women lament the inequality which still clearly exists in Canadian society despite the progressive changes recommended in the Royal Commission's report. At least in theory, capitalism has provided women with access to the financial resources necessary for autonomy, and has even provided some with the ability to parent alone. Single motherhood, however, in no way guarantees autonomy. Many women must continue to depend on their ex-partner's income through child support payments.⁶⁶ Others currently are supported by the state through paternalistic welfare programs. Although this may spare these women the stress of being dominated by individual males (and, in fact, many single-parent women choose to parent alone in order to escape such domination), their lives are still structured by broader relations of male dominance. Most single-parent women, like other women, form part of the low-paid, part-time reserve labour force which serves the interests of capitalism and patriarchy.⁶⁷

One of the biggest changes to single motherhood that has occurred in the post-World War II era is the increasing number of immigrant and visible minority women experiencing this status. While feminist scholarship on motherhood has worked to expose women's experiences of class and gender within the family, it is impossible to understand such experiences without also

⁶⁵Norene Pupo, "Preserving Patriarchy: Women, The Family and The State," Reconstructing the Canadian Family: Feminist Perspectives Nancy Mandell and Ann Duffy (eds.) Toronto and Vancouver: Butterworths, 1988.

⁶⁶It is unfortunate, however, that this is construed as dependency, within a different value system, the father's dependence on the mother to care for the child would mean that the relationship must actually be understood as interdependent.

⁶⁷Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work. (Rev. ed.) Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1984, 49.

examining how they are constituted through racial, ethnic and cultural difference. The institution of motherhood "exists in diverse social and political systems,"⁶⁸ and women from ethnic and racial minority groups may have their own set of values and norms concerning motherhood that conflict with those of the dominant culture in Canada.

Probably the most vociferous response to feminist efforts to reconceptualize family politics has been provided by black feminists who point out that, for black women and their communities, the family historically often has been a source of political strength and solidarity. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, argues that, while women's oppression within families should be more fully examined, the nuclear family norm should not be taken as the only point of departure for analysis. Issues of physical survival, power and identity are much more intense for women who are neither white nor middle class and who parent outside of the nuclear family model.⁶⁹ Criticisms have been aimed, too, at white feminists' concerns about their own experiences of 'forced motherhood' (e.g., lack of birth control and access to abortion), rather than about sterilization of racial minority women, whose babies were seen as less valuable and who were also often treated as inadequate mothers because of their race.⁷⁰ For many minority women, the right to have children, and to keep them, has been at least as important as the right to choose not to have children. Because racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in poverty, with

⁶⁸Levine and Estable, *op.cit.*, 6.

⁶⁹Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood," in Donna Bassin et al. (eds.) Representations of Motherhood, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

⁷⁰See, for example, Rikki Solinger, "Race and 'Value': Black and White Illegitimate Babies in the U.S.A., 1945-1965," Gender & History, Vol. 4, No. 3, (Autumn) 1992.

fewer resources, the state has, in the past, been able to justify removing children from their families to state agencies. Many Aboriginal children, for example, were taken from their so-called 'unfit' homes and cultures and placed in Christian institutions or adopted by white families.⁷¹ This has had serious consequences for the understandings of motherhood internalized by Aboriginal women growing up in these generations.⁷² Within a capitalist economy, furthermore, many Aboriginal women also face the 'motherhood as institution' dilemma, including the 'double day' imposed by their entry into wage labour.⁷³ For Aboriginal women who have left reserve life to live on their own, poverty and isolation have often been the result, particularly for those parenting alone. As a result of the critiques of main-stream feminist theories of family and motherhood, most feminists no longer take for granted the existence of the 'universal woman', who is white and middle-class.⁷⁴

Increasingly, visible minority women have been informing the Canadian public about their experiences. According to Roxana Ng, in the mid-seventies, "the term 'immigrant women' was not part of the everyday vocabulary of Canadians."⁷⁵ Today, however, there are many local

⁷¹Alanis Obomsawin, Mother of Many Children, Canadian National Film Board, 1977.

⁷²Sylvia Van Kirk, Toward a Feminist Perspective in Native History (Occasional Paper No. 14, Toronto: Centre for Women's Studies in Education (OISE), 1988, 5.

⁷³Dolores T. Poelzer, In Our Own Words: Northern Saskatchewan Metis Women Speak Out, Saskatoon: Lindenblatt and Harmonic Publishing Ltd., 1986, 18.

⁷⁴Michèle Barrett and Mary MacIntosh, "Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory," in Feminist Review, No. 20, (June) 1985.

⁷⁵Roxana Ng, "Finding our Voices: Reflections on Immigrant Women's Organizing," in Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada, Jeri Dawn Wine and Janice I. Ristock (eds.), Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1991, 185.

groups, as well as representation at provincial and national organizations like the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada.⁷⁶ One of the biggest issues confronting these women is abuse because of their dependency on their families, a situation fostered by discriminatory immigration policies. Of course, single parenthood is a related issue, since to avoid abuse, women must have the resources to leave oppressive marriages and relationships, and thereby be provided with the choice to parent alone. This is true, of course, for all women. But our knowledge about single motherhood is incomplete, and our ability to develop alternative approaches for supporting single-parent families constrained, if the unique circumstances of the lives of racial and ethnic minority women continue to be obscured. At the same time, it is inappropriate to search for a common approach to motherhood amongst women, regardless of racial and cultural background. Gender, race and class affect all women's experiences in unique ways.

Many feminists also question the heterosexual norms enforced through the institution of motherhood. Lesbian women have only recently been able to disrupt the silence regarding their experiences. As mothers, lesbians have often been denied the opportunity to parent alone; for example, they have lost their children in custody disputes or have been denied access to artificial insemination by clinics providing such services.⁷⁷ Those who do manage to raise their children on their own face the double isolation of single motherhood and lesbian motherhood.

This chapter has provided some important ideas to think about when considering the

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 185.

⁷⁷Katherine Arnup, "'Mothers Just Like Others': Lesbians, Divorce, and Child Custody in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, Vol. 3, 1989.

situation of single-parent women today. As some feminist literature has revealed, throughout Canada's history, the separation of private and public spheres has meant certain poverty for most women without husbands. Very little exists concerning the lived experiences of single-parent women in early Canada, although we can clearly draw conclusions from the underlying assumptions evident in the policies adopted. Many contemporary policies continue to entrench these assumptions.⁷⁸ From the beginning, the state has taken a "crisis management" approach to policymaking, and has never made a full and real commitment to helping women.

Before state involvement in welfare expanded, communities provided some sources of support to poor women and their families, mostly in the form of charity, but these sources were unreliable and often stigmatizing. The blind neo-conservative belief that communities can manage in the absence of state financial support is senseless and naive; such a move would have extremely deleterious affects on poor women and their families, as well as the rest of society. It is true that communities have changed, and are able to co-ordinate appropriate supports for themselves, but they cannot manage this task without state support.

At the same time, increasing women's power within communities and within the political structure more generally is clearly an important part of changing the way welfare is structured. Women have played extensive roles in promoting the welfare of their communities and in meeting the needs of women and their families. Because they did not have the resources necessary to care for the vulnerable groups within their communities, women turned to the state

⁷⁸Michelle Clarke, Oppression Through Neglect: An Examination of the Assumptions and Meanings Behind Three Social Policies Affecting Canadian Single Mothers, M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1990.

to provide more universal programs such as mothers' allowances. Yet with state assistance came increased state control, and women were no longer able to respond directly to their own needs or those of their communities. For the most part, women were outside state power processes and had to struggle to make change. Although women have made great political gains, women continue to struggle for a stronger voice within the state.²⁰

Although early state programs sought to eliminate stigma within their programs for mothers by emphasizing the value of the caregiving role, the increasing emphasis on the employability of women has undermined single-parent women's entitlement to state support, and attached a new kind of stigma. In the end, single-parent women have been inadequately supported by both the state and their communities, and have been burdened with the task of coordinating supports from different sectors. The ways in which women manage this task may depend on factors such as education and employment (i.e., class) and ethnic background. I explore this possibility further in Chapter Four by considering the experiences of the women in my study. In the next chapter, I introduce these women by providing profiles which emphasize their diverse understandings of single motherhood. But first, I highlight some international trends in single motherhood, as well as changing trends in Canadian family forms.

²⁰Burt, *op.cit.*, 155.

CHAPTER THREE

Stats and Stereotypes

3.1. International and Domestic Trends

How women are treated, and the extent to which they can organize, is determined by the social and political cultures in which they live. Because the conditions faced by single-parent women in Canada today represent the unique convergence of political, economic and social factors under capitalism, their experiences are qualitatively different from those of single-parent women living in other countries. Canada is one of many countries within the mid-range in terms of number of single-parent families. Compared to the U.S., for example, where more than 24% of all families are mother-led, or Jamaica, where out-of-wedlock births are the norm, Canada's 13% appears more moderate.¹ At the same time, the number of mother-led families in Canada seems high if you consider countries such as Japan, for example, where such families are rare.

In a comparative analysis of reported out-of-wedlock births between the late 1960s and the late 1980s, Burns and Scott (1994) found that Japan reported virtually no out-of-wedlock births in any year.² Despite the economic similarities between Japan and other industrialized and

¹Canada: Statistics Canada, A Portrait of Families in Canada. This is the percentage recorded for 1991 (955,000 lone-parent families, 83% of which are headed by women. This number is noted as being more than double the number recorded in 1971 -- 478,000, or 9% of all families.)

²Ailsa Burns and Cath Scott, Mother-headed Families and Why They Have Increased (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1994), 57.

highly urbanized countries, divorce is not common, with a divorce rate in 1980 of only 1.22 per 1000 population.³ Although imported ideas about the "nuclear family" have influenced traditional Japanese family systems, providing women with considerably more power within the family than before, strict cultural practices continue to prevent single parenthood from becoming a realistic option for most Japanese women.

In Jamaica and other areas of the Caribbean, the high "out-of-wedlock" birth rate means that single motherhood is the norm. Citing an international study, Burns and Scott (1994) reveal that in 1974 almost 75% of all births in Jamaica were "illegitimate."⁴ They further note that this number had increased to 84.3% by 1983. Although poverty plays a role in making non-marital unions the norm, since formal marriage is expensive, there are many other factors involved. Value systems regarding parenting and sex roles in Caribbean culture reflect a unique intermingling of African and British traditions as they evolved under slavery and in the activities of ex-slaves following their emancipation in 1830. In African cultures, for example, extended family or clan groups hold property in common, and children usually are viewed as a valuable addition to the community. Under slavery, traditional clan and extended family relations were disrupted permanently, and slaves were forced to conform to the reproductive expectations of plantation owners (mostly British), who viewed the children born to slaves as property, making marriage and family life illegal. Following emancipation, the ex-slaves and their descendents

³Ibid., 30. This rate is further compared to that of the U.S., which recorded 5.30 divorces per 1,000 population in 1980.

⁴Ibid., 31. The concept of "illegitimacy" is quite different, however. The community often recognizes paternal obligation, whether a marriage takes place or not.

faced the tasks of creating an identity, establishing standards of respectability, and distancing themselves from the deprivations and brutalities of slavery. People who had been free before emancipation were ready-made role models, and the marriage ideology of the plantation owners was adopted in absence of alternatives. Marriage today is often delayed until later years, and is viewed as a sign of prestige, class and accomplishment, not as a prerequisite for reproduction.

The best way to view Canada's treatment of single-parent women is to compare it with other Western industrialized countries. In 1993, Yin-Ling Wong, Irwin Garfinkle and Sara McLanahan published a comparative study of the relative economic status of mother-headed families in eight countries -- Australia, Canada, France, Germany (the Federal Republic), Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Their data was taken from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) data base, for the years 1979 - 1984. The economic status of the single-parent women in their sample "is measured as the ratio of the mother's net disposable income to the average net disposable income of two-parent families in the same country. Net disposable income is defined as the aggregate of market income, private transfers, and public transfers minus payroll taxes and income taxes."⁵

The data had limitations for comparative purposes: Scandinavian definitions of "family" were not consistent with those of the other six countries; public child-care benefits were not included in the survey's measures of income transfers; records of the women's educational attainment, marital status (i.e., divorced, widowed, never-married), wage rates and total hours worked vary across countries and were not available for all eight countries; and information on

⁵Yin-Ling Irene Wong et al., "Single-Mother Families in Eight Countries: Economic Status and Social Policy," Social Service Review, The University of Chicago, June 1993: 179.

private-transfer income for Canada and Sweden was absent."

Despite these weaknesses, the study concludes that universal programs⁷ have the best effect on the economic situation of mother-led families. Although single-parent women in all eight countries were economically disadvantaged relative to two-parent families, in Scandinavian countries, where universal programs are strongest, they had net disposable incomes approximately 85% of those of two-parent families. Single-parent women in the other European countries did not fare as well, with incomes that were only 65 - 70% those of their two-parent counterparts. Canada's record, along with the U.S. and Australia, was worse, with single-parent women having incomes that are on average 60% that of the average two-parent family.⁸

The differences between the countries are explained in part by demographic variables.

⁶ For Canada, the information was simply missing, although this may be changing now that some provincial governments are more actively involved in monitoring child support payments. In Sweden, however, "child support is provided in the form of advance maintenance payments, funded by collection from noncustodial parents and government revenue, and paid to custodial parents as tax-free social insurance benefits. In other words, maintenance payments from noncustodial fathers are integrated into the social insurance system and are counted as public transfers." *Ibid.*: 180.

⁷ Universal programs refer to those programs which provide for all individuals or families. The Family Allowance program and the Old Age Security Act were two of Canada's earliest universal programs. See Margrit Eichler, Families in Canada Today: Recent Changes and Their Policy Consequences. Toronto: Gage Educational Publishing Company, 1988 (Second Edition).

⁸ Canada and Australia have both built a portion of their population base through immigration policies. Both also have aboriginal populations with a relatively high proportion of mother-headed families. Because of their poverty, women from these groups are more likely to define themselves as single parents to receive government assistance, despite their strong ties to their aboriginal communities. (The need to seek employment in urban centres has broken or reduced the strength of these community ties for many women parenting alone, in both countries.) Jan Pettman provides an excellent analysis of the social, political and economic history of women in Australia in Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia. North Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty. Ltd., 1992.

Single-parent women in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom had the youngest children in the sample. In the U.S., single-parent women were (and still are) younger than elsewhere. When results were controlled for demographic variables, Germany did not fare much better than the United States. During the period under study single-parent women in Germany were older and had older children, allowing them to work and therefore attain higher incomes. Labour force participation in all countries meant a big boost to economic well-being for mother-led families: "the reason single mothers with young children are relatively worse off than other single mothers is that they are less likely to be employed."⁹

Once demographic composition was taken into account, the authors set out to prove their hypothesis that social assistance programs which use income-testing as a means of determining benefit entitlements are detrimental to the well-being of single-parent women and their families because they discourage work. They state that

overreliance on income testing is a very important determinant of the relatively low economic status of single mothers in the United States. The absolute level of transfers is also important in explaining differences between the United States and other countries. The reliance on income testing can be reduced and the absolute level of transfers can be increased by enacting non-income-tested programs such as child allowances, child support assurance, national health insurance, and universal child care. Enacting these sorts of universal programs will reduce both the economic insecurity and dependence on welfare of single mothers and their children.¹⁰

Numbers themselves, therefore, do not provide an accurate picture of how mother-led families fare in any given country. A clear understanding of their position requires knowing their

⁹Wong et al., op.cit. :190.

¹⁰Ibid.: 191.

economic status relative to other family types in their own country. It requires an understanding of the political culture and the policies that are in place to support women.

In Sweden, 17% of all families are single-parent families, 85% of which are woman-headed. This is not much higher than in Canada (13% of all families, approximately 82% are woman-headed). Yet, as the Luxembourg Income Study revealed, Sweden is more successful than other countries in its efforts to provide a high quality standard of living for single-parent families. The Swedish state's centralized policy-making structures make it easier for women to organize and represent their interests at the national level. Concerns over the declining birth rate have fostered a pro-natalist policy environment, making women's demands for support well received. There are many factors, however, which prevent Swedish welfare policies from being transposed to the Canadian context. Sweden's small size, cultural homogeneity, and unitary state, for example, enable it to accommodate a variety of political agendas while at the same time achieving consensus on key welfare issues. Canada's vast geography results in many regional differences and its diverse population results in conflicting social policy goals. Canadian federalism, furthermore, requires Canadian women to fight political battles at local, provincial and federal levels, with only limited success in securing support at the federal level on issues affecting single-parent women.

In Sweden, policies are made at the national level and delivered at the local level. In Canada, responsibility for policies affecting women is divided among federal, provincial and municipal governments. Less formal support is available at the community level, and informal supports are probably the most important in determining the well-being of mother-led families.

Post-World War II Canada has experienced a permanent rise in single-parent families.

We certainly know much more about contemporary single-parent women than we do about those prior to World War II, thanks to Statistics Canada and the fact that a majority of these women are now clients of government assistance programs. Still, the matter is not as straight forward as it may seem. Margrit Eichler (1993) made an apt analogy when she wrote that "looking at lone parent families is like looking at a hologram picture: holding it one way, you see one thing, holding it another way you see another thing."¹¹ One thing that is evident in the contemporary era is that family structures are dynamic, often breaking down and reconstituting themselves, for example, through re-marriage of one of the parents. For many, single parenthood is a temporary, or transitional situation, something which the statistics do not adequately capture. In fact, Eichler notes that the cross-sectional nature of official statistics obscures the fact that "an estimated 34% of mother, will have experienced single parenting at some point in their life times."¹² Although the married-couple family form is still the mainstream choice, it has lost ground to the less normative common-law family (in which the family heads are not married)¹³

¹¹ Margrit Eichler, "Lone Parent Families: An Instable Category in Search of Stable Policies," Single Parent Families: Perspectives on Research and Policy, Joe Hudson and Burt Galaway (eds.) Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1993, 139

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ten percent of Canadian families are headed by common-law couples, representing a 4% increase in this family type since 1981. The majority of these couples -- 58% -- do not have children living at home. The number of unmarried couples raising children is higher in Quebec than in the other provinces. In 1991, for example, such families made up 16% of all families in Quebec, but only 7% in Ontario. For those who do parent within common-law relationships, it is likely that they encounter many of the same issues that married-couple families face in raising their children. It is worth noting, however, that children born into these family forms are more likely to experience living with a single parent, usually their mother, at some point in their lives. See Nicole Marcell-Gratton, "Growing Up with a Single Parent, A Transitional Experience? Some Demographic Measurements," Single Parent Families: Perspectives on Research and Policy, Joe

and single-parent family (both mother- and father-headed) forms. Some types of parenting relationships defy even these distinctions. For example, statistical records and government programs may classify one partner in a gay or lesbian relationship as a "single parent", failing to take into account the shared parenting responsibilities of partners in some same-sex couples.

Canada had 7,820,500 families on July 1, 1994. The overall family growth rate had declined from the previous year (from 1.3% to 1.0%), largely because of a drop in the number of immigrants and non-permanent resident families. The number of single-parent families grew more quickly (1.5%)¹⁴ than husband-wife families (0.9%) in all provinces except British Columbia and Quebec.¹⁵ There have been significant changes in the demographic composition of Canadian single-parent women in the post-World War II era. Although widows still form an important component of the single-parent population, the percentage is now much lower. The number of recorded births to never-married mothers has continued to increase as a proportion of total births. The projected number of total births for 1993 was 388,394, with just less than half (147,848) occurring in Ontario.¹⁶ When the total number is broken down according to marital status of the mother, the results are: 259,059 married; 98,761 single; 1,094 separated; 5,600 divorced; and 573 widowed.¹⁷ Today it is estimated that 66% of mother-led families exist as a

Hudson and Burt Galaway (eds.) Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1993, 77.

¹⁴ This rate is virtually identical for both sexes.

¹⁵ Canada. Statistics Canada, Lone-Parent Families in Canada, 8.

¹⁶ Of these births, 9,836 were in Ottawa-Carleton. See Statistics Canada, Annual Demographic Statistics, 1994, Ottawa, Minister of Industry, Science and Technology, 1995.

¹⁷ For 22,497 of the births, marital status of the mother was not stated. Ibid., 156.

result of separation or divorce. The number of mother-headed families grew to five times the previous number following the introduction of the 1968 *Divorce Act*, with an additional surge of divorces occurring subsequent to the 1985 *Divorce Act*. While the divorce rate has stabilized and is somewhat lower now, it is still the main avenue into single parenthood for most women.

Because a high percentage of single parents are divorced, they tend to be older than parents living in common-law situations. Fifty-seven percent of single-parent women are aged 35 or older. This figure is even higher for men parenting alone, who usually are widowers or divorced.

In 1991, there were approximately 976,100 single-parent families in Canada compared to 6.5 million husband-wife families.¹⁸ Seventy-seven percent of all Canadian families were married-couple families in 1991, down from 83% in 1981.¹⁹ This number represents all married-couple families: 38% of these families do not have children living at home. Of those who have children, they have the highest average number of children per family of all family types.

Statistics Canada estimates that both single-parent and two-parent family types will continue to grow at roughly the same pace. This will mean approximately 1.3 - 1.6 million

¹⁸Although just over 14% of all families in Quebec are single-parent families, this is not much higher than the 13% recorded in Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island, or the 12% recorded in Alberta, British Columbia, Newfoundland and Saskatchewan. However, Quebec and Ontario have the highest populations of all provinces and therefore a correspondingly higher number of single-parent families

¹⁹This number appears to represent an average taken from all provinces. The number of families headed by married couples is notably lower in Quebec, at 69%. For the remaining provinces, the figure ranged from 78% (e.g., Nova Scotia) to 81% (e.g., Ontario).

single-parent families, and 8.8 - 9.8 million husband-wife families, by the year 2016.²⁰ Barring extraordinary circumstances then, single parenthood will not go away, and Canadian society will have to adjust to this reality.

I have argued that dominant Canadian norms regarding motherhood may affect the experiences of visible minority women who parent alone in this culture. The policy literature revealed very little on the relationship of race and/or ethnicity to single motherhood:

Of the 701,815 female lone parent families in 1986, only 50,770 were designated as being members of a visible minority. The comparable total for males was 9,115. These tabulations also show relatively few lone parent families in which there were children under the age of fifteen years who had immigrated to Canada (only 22,695 in total).²¹

In 1986, 15% of all Aboriginal women aged 15 or over were single parents, and 15% of all Aboriginal single parents were men. Of all Aboriginal families living off reserves, 23% were headed by a single parent. Nine percent of all visible minority women are single parents, a rate somewhat higher than the 7% recorded for all other Canadian women. A break down of the 9% reveals that 18% of Black women are single parents, accounting for half of all single-parent women from visible minority groups. Only 6% of other visible minority women in Canada are single parents. This represents an average in which women of Latin American and Southeast Asian origins were also somewhat more likely than other Canadian women (i.e., over 7%) to be single parents, while women in the remaining visible minority groups were well below the

²⁰Canada: Statistics Canada, Projections of Households and Families for Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1994-2016, Ministry of Industry, October 1995, 51.

²¹Craig McKie, "An Overview of Lone Parenthood in Canada," Single Parent Families: Perspectives on Research and Policy, Joe Hudson and Burt Galaway (eds.) Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., 1993, 59.

Canadian average. Interestingly, for visible minority groups, men make up a larger than usual share of the single parent population, 20% or more in some groups.

Within the various categories of single motherhood -- widowed, never-married, divorced and separated -- there are considerable variations. While the statistics are not sensitive to the diverse experiences of family life, they do provide a useful point of entry into understanding the contexts in which diversity exists. In the next section, I present profiles of the single-parent women in my study. In order to demonstrate the diversity among these women, I include evidence from our interviews that reveals how not all women experience "motherhood" and "family" in the same way.

3.2 Single-Parent Women and Diversity

I have established that, both historically and demographically, single-parent women experience motherhood differently from married women. Experiences of motherhood vary by class, race and culture at the same time. As the following profiles reveal, the backgrounds of the women I interviewed differ considerably. So do their views on motherhood and identification of issues of concern to themselves. These women participated in different kinds of family structures throughout the course of their lives. Several of the women in the interview sessions discussed their own need to reconceptualize "family" now that they are parenting alone.

For each of the following profiles I include comments made by the women which I feel best capture their perspectives as single parents as they were expressed to me throughout the interview process. This will help to contextualize the views which they express on other subjects

discussed in Chapter Four. Because some factors, such as work and education, partly define the women's attitudes and expectations, some of the comments included in their profiles touch on these subjects but will be analyzed in more detail in Chapter Four.

Profiles of 12 Single-Parent Women

1. Celia³³, in her mid-30s, immigrated to Canada from Uganda in 1984. After abandoning her goal of being a registered nurse because of parental responsibilities³⁴, she instead earned an undergraduate degree in sociology from Queens University, and now works full-time as a community outreach worker in the Ottawa area. She has three children: two daughters -- 16 and 9 years old -- and a 5-year-old son. She has been a single parent for five years, having left her abusive husband after ten years of marriage. Her self-confidence and common sense are often reflected in her comments.

Celia is the fourth of nine children (all girls before her). She believes the unconventional relationship she had with her father, who died in 1978, partly explains her self-confidence:

My father happens to be my role model in my life. My father was a man who was so enlightened in his own way, that he defied social norms in my family context. And he always told me, "You go. I want you to study and get an education. And if you choose to get married, you may, but if you choose not to get married you don't have to get married." So I grew up knowing that I had a choice of being married or not being married, and I could still be myself. I was raised...knowing that I could do anything that, supposedly, only men can do.

³³Personal interview, April 25, 1995.

³⁴Her program required field placement in northern regions of Ontario.

Some of her goals are temporarily on hold because she is a single parent:

My long-term goal is to raise my kids to the best of my capability and then I will live my own life when I grow old. But now I don't have a life of my own (she laughs). I plan to go back to school, perhaps on a part-time basis. I want to do a Master's degree in political economy.

2. Nora²⁵, in her early 40s, is also a community outreach (or immigrant services) worker, although she was a doctor in Somalia. The war in her native country caused her to immigrate to Canada, without her husband, in 1992. She has been raising her five children on her own since that time. Because she is married, Nora did not immediately self-identify as a single parent. Moreover, because I was interviewing her at work, in her capacity as an outreach worker, she initially seemed reluctant to discuss personal issues. Eventually, she expressed powerful views regarding the plight of immigrant women who are parenting alone.

I know that women who have even grown up here in Canada and know the system, it's difficult for them, being a single parent. Especially economically. Even with one child it's an enormous problem when you have to work long hours and try to provide. Add that to the problems of being a new immigrant, the problems of being unemployable.²⁶

3. Sarah²⁷, in her mid-30s, is also from Somalia. Her situation is similar to Nora's in the sense that she also is separated from her husband unwillingly as a result of the war in her home

²⁵Personal Interview. May 29, 1995.

²⁶Nora's comments often highlight the obstacles poverty causes for Somalian women and other recent immigrants in Canada. After reviewing her comments during the check back process, she asked me to emphasize that many Somalians speak English fluently and have university degrees. As I stated in Chapter One, generalizations about the experiences of immigrant and visible minority women should be avoided. The different perspectives offered by the women in this study should illustrate this fact.

²⁷Personal interview. May 25, 1995.

home country. At the time of the interview, she had been on her own with her children for five years -- two years in Ethiopia, and three in Canada. She has seven children, but one, her eldest daughter, is still with her father, who, at that time, was living in Ethiopia. She had not heard from her husband for an entire year, and is grateful now that she knows that he and her daughter are both alive and well. She was receiving social assistance, but her youngest child has started school, and now she is looking for a job.

Before the war, Sarah and her husband owned and worked at their own business -- a hotel -- where she had a beautiful garden with many delicious fruits that you can't get in Canada. She misses her native land, and its beautiful coastal waters, but her children do not:

When we came here, we were running from war. We didn't know how long we would stay here. But when you have kids -- all they know, my kids is the bad side of Somalia. Because my eldest daughter was 10 years old, and all she remembers now is the bad things of what is Somalia. The war started 5 years before, from outside the city. In the city, there was a lot of fired guns at night time. So when they came here they see different. So they don't like to go back. And the younger ones, they have no idea about Somalia right now. When they saw the T.V. [they said] "Mom, we are not going back to that country. Here in Canada, we are going to be true Canadians". I know Somalia was good before. It's a beautiful country.

So what do you do when you are a parent? You have to stay with your kids. So I try to learn more and find a job and support my kids. So that I don't think they're going back to Somalia. Everything is destroyed. There's no schools. There's no universities. There's no future for us to go back to Somalia. Almost, my kids will finish university at that time. And they don't know Somalia, they don't understand. All that they know is the bad side.

Many immigrant women have trouble adjusting to Canadian ideas about women.

Because Sarah had mentioned wanting to return to Somalia, I asked her if, in her view, there was any benefit to parenting in Canada. She was quick to answer: "Yes. Of course, you know, here

everybody's rights in Canada. Back home, women, they were not treated as equal as the men."

Curious about how Somalian cultural norms would affect her perception of single motherhood, I asked Sarah to discuss how single-parent women would be treated in Somalia:

It happens -- your husband mostly sometimes marry another woman. And they marry at the most difficult time, when your kids are teenagers, and that's a kind of family breakdown. Because you go to that house one day, and discover that lady in your house. And some women, you know, they don't like that. So they say, don't come stay here. It's a kind of single mother. If he chooses to go to another family, if he makes another family, there's no care with your family, so that's difficult (she laughs)

I then asked her how the broader community, particularly the supporting family, would view the matter:

The family, they contribute to the first one. Always. They don't like it. But the men, they still do. They are always saying, "I'm allowed to marry", but it's not like that. It's not religious, and it's not culture. It's something that comes from the men. Both the families, they don't like the next marriage if it is not reasonable. They like children. If the first wife has no children -- even if you are not sure whether he has the problem, or whether the lady has the problem (who knows that?) -- he tries to marry another woman. They accept that. But they don't like it, the parents. They always support the first woman. And if separation happens, she gets the support. She's the one who gets the support because they don't like to lose the kids. They don't like it.

4. Rosa²⁸, now in her early 20s, emigrated to Canada from Mexico when she was 23, to work in Ottawa. Her father was a lawyer and her mother worked in the home full-time, rearing Rosa and her four brothers. Her father paid a local woman to help her mother with household chores. Her parents struggled with financial problems, but she was not aware of this for many years.

²⁸Personal interview, January 11, 1995. I was unable to contact Rosa to complete the check back procedure. There is no phone listing in her name, and she no longer lives in the housing unit where I interviewed her.

By the time Rosa came to Canada, her mother had died. Rosa had finished three years of college -- a technical college -- where she studied accounting. After working for External Affairs in her native country, she applied for an embassy job in Canada. She moved to Canada to work as a secretary at that job. She met her (ex)husband five years later.

Of all the women I interviewed, Rosa is the only one who I knew personally prior to the interview, although I had not seen her for almost two years. We had worked together in the same government department, where she always added a lively spark to conversations. I was aware that she had divorced her husband, and had been living alone with her three children -- two sons (ages 12 and 6) and a daughter (8) -- for almost a year and a half. Because of my previous relationship with Rosa, I was not prepared for the situation in which I found her. I had always perceived her as being a resourceful person, and instead I met someone who was nearly defeated by the pressures of single motherhood. At the time of the interview, she was still experiencing the transitional pressures of divorce, and her greatest problems were financial and personal. She felt that helping her children, particularly her eldest son, adjust to their new lifestyle was a priority:

The decision has come to that [my son] has to make up his mind that he has to stay with us and follow the rules, or go to live with his dad, or go to foster home. I tried to get Children's Aid to help me and they said no. But finally I got them and they said they were going to call me back. I have so many financial problems that now I don't even have a phone. But that is me, I just cannot manage [on] a small quantity of money. That's not a way I'm used to living.

I get so upset that I don't look after things that are important, like paying the phone bill. I should be able to pay the phone bill. But obviously I'm so stressed out that little things seem like a mountain to me. And now I'm in a position where my health is not good.

She links her inability to cope with stress to her family background in Mexico:

I was sheltered all my life until I came here to Canada. And even if there were big problems in my family, I never knew, they didn't tell me. I came here like a lamb about to be slaughtered (she laughs)

Even when they were married, however, Rosa and her husband were not wealthy. The transition from two low-wage earners to one low wage earner (although by this time she was receiving social assistance) made life very difficult for her.

Because Rosa was experiencing recent and severe changes in her family's emotional and economic stability, an element of immediacy is evident in her comments throughout most of the interview dialogue. It is possible that our personal history allowed Rosa to provide me with a more emotional and unveiled account of her difficulties than some of the other women could. Some of the participants had been parenting alone for longer periods than others, and those with more experience parenting alone may have already overcome many difficult obstacles and have had time to adapt to and reflect upon their circumstances. Still, Rosa's situation clearly demonstrates the importance of transitional help for families, particularly low-income families.

5. **Nadia²⁹**, in her late 30s, is a widow. She was raised in a small town in the Ukraine, but moved to Canada from Russia in the summer of 1994. She has been raising her 9-year-old son practically on her own since his birth, despite the fact that her husband died when the child was almost two. She met her wealthy Canadian husband in Moscow, where she worked as a chemist. They married despite the fact that Nadia could only get temporary (six-month) visas to visit him. In return, he visited her twice a year, for approximately one month at a time. She was in Russia

²⁹Personal interview. May 8, 1995.

when he died, and could not attend the funeral. His first wife, and children from his first marriage, inherited most of his estate. The amount she received permitted her to buy (and completely pay for) a small, one-bedroom apartment, where she sleeps in the dining room. She and her son live exclusively on government pensions (i.e., survivors' benefits). She does have a small emergency savings, but is reluctant to spend it:

I can't be on welfare because I still have some money left, and [I have been told] "Oh, I should spend all this money and get welfare " I find it's really ridiculous when they force you to do it and you don't want to do it. Of course, I could buy furniture and a car, and I would have no money in the bank -- I could get welfare. But I don't want to do it. Some people do it. And this is just the whole system. I think it works improperly.

Having been raised in country with a centralized economy, Nadia held critical views on Canada's welfare and education systems.

Nadia was able to return to Canada with her son in 1994 because her son has dual citizenship. She had always felt that it was important for him to understand Canadian culture. The unstable political situation in Russia confirmed her decision. However, Nadia is still a permanent resident of her native country both in law and in spirit:

Unfortunately, I am not quite sure if I would like to stay here [in Canada] forever or not. Because for me, my life is more convenient in Russia than here. Because I have, like, old friends, old relatives there. And my cultural life, my spiritual life is much better than here.

Nadia was referred to me by her friend Diana, who I had interviewed earlier.

6. Diana³⁰, in her early 40s, is an artist and a full-time graduate student. She has been a single parent since her divorce 3 1/2 years ago, and lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment with

³⁰Personal interview. March 23, 1995.

her 6 1/2 year old son. Her ex-husband, a carpenter, lives in Nova Scotia, which means her son must travel between them for visits. She has discovered that her family background makes the stress of parenting alone an especially difficult challenge for her:

Both my parents worked. My mother was a switchboard operator, and my father was a salesman. And I have a brother and a sister. So I guess they're like working class, although my mother reads a lot and sort of has ideas about things. A lot of aspirations, I guess. But they fought all the time and they actually ended up being separated. They separated right after we were in our teens. We all ended up going to live with different people. My brother went with one aunt and my sister went with another aunt, and I went to live with this person I used to babysit for. So I had a guardian in my teens. And then shortly after my father and mother split up. And my mother's now on her own, and my father's with somebody else. So that's certainly my experience of family. And also, my memories of growing up with my mother was just being hit a lot, basically. So I guess they call that child abuse now (she laughs). They didn't call it that then. So I don't think I had a really good image.

Despite the fact that she is highly educated -- she was working on her second Master's Degree at the time of the interview -- she fears that poverty, combined with her abusive upbringing, will cause her to abuse her son:

I find whenever my money gets really low, like when I get down to \$36 or something like that, all this anxiety comes out in me, and then he starts misbehaving. And misbehaving probably because I'm totally stressed.

Chronic disability makes parenting alone particularly difficult:

I would say disability has made a difference in my experiences as a parent. Disability has made a difference in my ability to keep up with the rest of the world in terms of my work at school. It has changed my whole life. It has changed my ability to earn income. It has changed my ability to have enough slack to deal with a child. Everything I have to kind of plan everything around it. And sometimes I'm fine and other times I have a hard time moving around. So that has made the biggest difference. And I find also you don't want to tell people that you have it because then you're not considered "in the race" in a way, in what's going on. So it becomes a problem. But if you're trying to keep at the same pace, and you're not able to, at some point you have to say that this is happening.

Of all the women I interviewed, Diana was the least hopeful about her ability to be an effective single parent:

I would never choose to be a single parent. I think it's the hardest thing that has ever happened to me. The worst and the hardest. And along with getting sick, the two things together. Some people do choose to be a single parent, and I guess in a way because we separated I chose to be a single parent, but I didn't feel like I had much of a choice

7. **Beth**¹, in her late 30s, is also a full-time graduate student. She has a gutsy, matter-of-fact attitude, and a keen sense of ironic wit. She was born in Scotland and later moved to Canada with her parents (her mother died when she was 12). She married (and later divorced) an Aboriginal man and therefore gained Treaty status. They have three children -- two daughters, aged 10 and 17 -- who live with her in the three-bedroom suburban townhouse they rent, and also a 20-year-old son, who lives with his father in Manitoba. She described the ongoing process of defining "family" in her own life:

My experience of family is not quite how society defines family. My mother passed away when I was 12. My father very shortly after that re-married, and they were together for 14 years. They divorced, and he re-married again. So, I have one biological brother, I have a half-brother, 3 stepbrothers, and a stepsister. So the whole notion of family has really been deconstructed, and not because of my own doing. I'm in the process, actually, of deconstructing it even again, so that I can fit into my idea -- and that my girls and I can fit into our idea -- of what family is

Beth's ethnicity is affected by her children's; here she comments on the complexity of interracial relations within her family:

I don't know if my race plays a role. In fact, in raising of the children, my race -- my culture, my heritage, my ethnicity -- has been obliterated. The children identify with their Aboriginal side. Which at some level is O.K., but that negates

¹Personal interview, January 12, 1995.

me, that makes me an invisible parent, culturally. Not physically, emotionally or any other way, but culturally it makes me invisible. So, again, I'm in the process of sort of restructuring my understanding of my Scottish heritage, and trying to educate the kids, knowing that they are not just Aboriginal people. They are also Aboriginal-Scottish people.

Beth's Treaty status has helped her considerably in attaining her educational goals. As she explains, it still was not easy:

Everybody likes to talk about themselves and brag, so I'm going to take this opportunity to do that very thing! I quit school in Grade 9. Got married at 16. Started pumping out babies. By the time I was 18, I had already had one. I'd always sort of aspired to go to university, so after some sort of superficial training as a hairstylist, and then [as] an aerobic instructor, and finding out that that's not really what I wanted to do when I grew up, I decided to apply to university. And I was really, really frightened, because I only had a Grade 9 education. I thought I'd have to go to upgrading, and all this stuff. So I took the GED (General Equivalency Development) exam. And I passed it, giving me the equivalent to a Grade 12. But all it is is a piece of paper. It is really of very little value. And so I entered my first year of university with a Grade 9 education. That's how I see it.

The first year was hard. It was horrid. But I managed to get through with a "C", which, given the background that I had, I thought wasn't too bad. And I finished my undergrad four years later with an "A-" average, and entered into graduate school. So I think intestinal fortitude has a lot to do with my circumstances. And the fact that I'm now a single parent. I always seem to be able to draw on that intestinal fortitude to get me through those sort of "trying times" as it were. But that's sort of my education in a nutshell.

Like most of the women I interviewed, Beth finds single parenthood to be an empowering experience. She described how single parenthood has been a positive experience for her, despite the economic constraints involved:

If anything, it has made me a far better person, for sure. It has caused me to draw on parts of me that I didn't know even existed. I now know that I am independent. And I can do whatever the hell I want to do, because I can do it. I have no one to hold me back. The other side of that is there is always the money issue. That is always an issue. I don't know if it's synonymous with single parenthood. Economics being the way they are in the world today, it's an issue.

for everyone. And obviously because of the 'feminization of poverty', it is, I think, a really big issue for women. But it was the best thing I could've done

8. Rachel¹² is 26 and has been a single parent for three years, since her divorce. She recently moved to a co-operative housing community, where she lives with her 6-year-old daughter. Although she claims that her cultural and socioeconomic background "didn't encourage young marriage" (she is Jewish and both of her parents have doctorates), she was married and pregnant by the time she was 19. However, she views this, and her later decision to become a single parent, as personal choices which have helped her find direction in her life. Her work experiences as an organizer of community programs frame her discussion throughout the interview.

Becoming a single parent was a lot my choice. But that was part of the process of knowing where I wanted to go and who I was, and what I needed in life. So I think that everything sort of came together. Yeah, I was aware of maybe some of the poverty issues, and issues around childhood education, issues around day care. But I wasn't in a position where I was really able to think about it a lot, or really able to deal with it, or want to do something. Then I became a single parent, and it took about half a year to focus all that. And for the last 2 1/2 years, or whatever, I've really had a fairly clear idea of where I wanted to go. I probably wouldn't focus on single parent issues as much if I wasn't a single parent, but I'm sure I would've found something to do, because that's what I enjoy doing

Throughout the interview, Rachel often stressed her belief that societal attitudes toward single-parents must change:

If you read the newspapers, there's a very wrong portrayal of single mothers, and single parents. In the media, and in the world, the whole conception is, you know, these stay-at-home moms who don't take care of their kids and just spend their money on bingo, or who smoke. Not to say that there aren't, but I think that

¹²Personal interview, February 25, 1995.

[stereotype] is wrong . there's a lot of different single parents

9. Miriam³³, now in her late 30s, has been a single parent since 1988. She had been living in a cooperative housing community for less than a year prior to the interview, and seemed extremely pleased.

Miriam transferred from a Nova Scotia high school in Grade 9 to a vocational school, where she received secretarial training. After working to put her (ex)husband through university, they divorced. She finds one salary still isn't quite enough, but at least she has a relatively secure, full-time job, which she values:

I've found that most of my experience is more work-related experience than education . I've worked outside the home basically ever since before, and since, having my daughter. As a secretary, I work at the present time [with the federal government] . It's a 9-5 job, 5 days a week, and it keeps you really busy . But I don't do overtime or anything, which works out really well for me

Miriam believes she was able to adapt to single parenthood because of the strong role model her mother provided:

I look back on my mom and the amount of time that she would work -- the different shift work . She worked at the hospital and a lot of long hours . My mom was the consistent breadwinner and my dad was one who would be between jobs all the time. So I saw her as stability in our life, although I didn't really realize it at the time . But she was the one that was the disciplinarian and the breadwinner, and the whole she-bang, which is basically what I am doing now, and so I can relate more to what she went through when I didn't realize what she was going through . Now I can sense all the difficulties that she had and the burden that she had to carry

Miriam recommended me to her friend, Ellen, who happened to call during our interview

³³Personal interview, February 24, 1995

10. Ellen³⁴, now in her early 40s, became a single parent following her divorce in 1987.

She has a Library Science Degree (MIS) and works full-time. With some financial help from her ex-husband and her mother, she owns her own home, where she lives with her 10-year-old son.

She describes herself as a very conservative person:

When I was growing up, I never considered that it would be necessary for me to support myself. I assumed that I was going to marry and probably work because I was very interested in different fields. But certainly not raising a child by myself, it's not something I'd ever dreamt of.

But I guess I have found that relying on myself as a breadwinner has not been too difficult of a role to take on because that's how I viewed my father and all my brothers. And so I've just stepped into that role. Every once in a while I'm struck by the idea that this isn't what I imagined life would be like. But other than that it's as if I know how to do it, because I observed it being done by my father and my brothers. And I was fortunate to go to university. It was just assumed that I would.

Ellen, of all the women interviewed, had one of the most supportive ex-husbands in terms of caring for her son, although their parenting arrangements are still less than perfect:

My son's father is very caring of my son. We have a relationship that is quite tolerable. We often speak on the phone about my son, and care for him. He goes to his dad's 4 or 5 nights out of every 14. Sometimes [my son] finds that difficult because I think he considers my home more his home, and he misses it. But he and his father have a very -- a growing relationship as the years go by, and they have a lot of things in common. So it's beneficial for him to go over.

Given the high level of support she receives from her former husband, I asked **Ellen** to consider whether she is a true "single parent":

I think there are variations on the theme for sure. [However] the amount of effort, and time, and thought, and concern that I've given to my son has been far, far greater than what his father has given. I think if we were living together, there'd be much more effort on his part, because I would draw his attention to a lot more

³⁴Personal interview, June 15, 1995.

things than he cares to notice or think about, or do. So I've done all the educational arrangements, all the sport arrangements, all the friends, all the health, all the day care. Everything has been my responsibility. So in that way and the isolation and the effort and the energy -- I would call myself a single parent. The other parent is just somebody to visit. It's as if I were the parent, and he were a grandparent that my son visited once in a while. Financially, however, I am given support. So in that way, I'm not "going it alone."

Ellen's change in marital status was later affected by another life experience which has altered the way she perceives motherhood:

What's peculiar to me is that, I guess in 1991, I discovered that I'm a lesbian. So I'm more inclined to relate to women than to men. It took me a long time to find out (she laughs). But that has made a big difference in my experiences as a parent.

Her primary concerns are not so much related to her status as a single parent, but more so as a lesbian mother. She is concerned about the effects that other people's prejudices may have on her son. Despite her concerns, she makes a point of involving herself in the activities of her child, and of ensuring that her son has an ongoing attachment with the community in which they live. Although she claims not to participate in political activities in any kind of sustained way, Ellen expressed strong political views:

I'm really very scared by the movement to the right. Both the head of the Conservative party, Mike Harris, and the people speaking for him, sound like they don't know the first thing about everyday life. I've been down in the States, and it's very scary, the whole Republican point of view. And of course, all the issues over gay and lesbian parenthood, and rights in terms of employment benefits and so on. I feel very strongly about it. There's a pretty big campaign in the States trying to stereotype gays and lesbians as real perversions of nature, and it's really sad to see that happen. Because there's such a good movement in the other direction, where people are learning who in their lives are gay and lesbian, and they're realizing that it's a very common thing to be, really.

11. Natalie¹⁸ is in her mid-30s. She introduced herself to me in a local pub, after she learned that I was in the process of interviewing single-parent women. She promptly plunked herself down in the chair beside me and exclaimed, "I'm a single mom, and I love it!" We arranged for an interview on her next weekend "off" (her 4-year-old daughter spends every second weekend with her father, Natalie's ex-husband).

Natalie is second generation Japanese-Canadian, and does not hold traditional Japanese values regarding motherhood. She was raised in a household with four siblings, and both parents worked. Her grandmother also lived with them and helped with childrearing.

Natalie attended college in Toronto, and then worked as a sales co-ordinator. She married her high school sweetheart at the age of 24. They moved to Ottawa, where her husband became a highly paid professional, and she found work as a receptionist. They enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. At 30 she had gave birth to her daughter; at 32 she felt she had no choice but to divorce her husband because of his infidelities. She is now an executive assistant to a vice-president of a large, telecommunications company. Her ex-husband now lives with another woman, and they also have a young child.

Natalie's ex-husband pays support, but she feels it is much less than he could afford. Although her situation is much better than that of most of the other women I interviewed, she still feels uneasy about her financial future:

I want to become a little more financially stable. I'm taking steps towards that. I'd like to change my career in about 5 years. I just got into the secretarial field, but I want to leave that and go more into a technical background within the company—like product management, or program office type of work. . . I thought

¹⁸Personal interview. April 2, 1995.

of going back to school myself, but I don't really know what I want to do

Despite her negative experiences of marriage and divorce, Natalie has been able to achieve an extremely positive and objective outlook on her experiences as a single parent:

A lot of it is mental state of mind. If you don't feel good about yourself, then you're not going to feel good about anything -- raising the kids, keeping the house, keeping up at your job. Once I got that positive mental attitude back (which I always had, but I lost it for quite a while there), once I got it back I was able to see things more clearly. And it's good having other friends who are in the same situation and who support each other.

For Natalie, single parenthood caused a "shift in perspective" regarding the concept "family":

I think I've learned more about life in general in the last few years of being single, just meeting people and learning that not everyone comes from a middle-class background. Not everyone is the norm -- you see, I was very much the norm. So I'd like [my daughter] to see that there are other situations. I think that living with a single mom and going and visiting with her dad, she already knows that that's a different type of family. Whereas when I grew up, nobody did this.

Natalie recommended I talk to her friend, Erin, who happened to call during our interview.

12. Erin³⁶ found herself accidentally pregnant when she was 22, and has lived as a single parent since that time (she is now 26). However, she has had good examples of how to cope as a single parent:

I come from a single-parent family. My father died when I was 9 years old. So my mother raised three kids by herself -- held down a full-time job, went to school full-time and raised three kids. Her mother was a single mother. She divorced my natural grandfather before my mother was even born. So she raised two kids by herself. So we come from a long line of single-parent families.

Erin understood that not all single parents are "going it alone" to the same degree. She made a distinction, for example, between the experiences of those with sole custody and those with joint

³⁶Personal interview. April 17, 1995.

custody.

I'm the true definition of a single parent. [My son's] father, for the last year, has been providing support, but I'm still a single parent. I have sole custody; he's not involved in any of those decisions.

The money the father provides goes directly into child care costs, and the father's visits are supervised by her in her home. To Erin, the father's participation is unnecessary and possibly undesirable.

I don't allow him to be a part of it. That's my own choice. He wasn't there when we needed him. He backed out. Just because he has all of a sudden discovered the joys of being a father doesn't mean that he's not going to back out again. So I'm not giving him the lee-way to become a big part for fear that he disappears again.

Erin is much more financially stable than many of the other women I interviewed. Talking about her childhood, Erin provided evidence that, although she came from a single-parent family, she had some benefits of a middle-class upbringing.

We cashed in my father's insurance policy. Bought a house. My mom spent 2 years full time at Career Canada College. Got her RL, which is a registered technologist in hematology. Started working a nightshift. So she wasn't home until ten or eleven o'clock at night, after we were in bed. But she was up every morning with us, getting us off to school. As soon as things started to go better she moved into marketing. She kept more regular hours, but it meant she was on the road as well. Things got better and better, and eventually we moved downtown. And the story that she tells me is that she bought a condo downtown, just off the canal, that I think was \$143,000 at that time. And she said she was

In reviewing her profile during the check-back procedures, Erin seemed quite amused by the irony of this particular comment: Her son's father is now living with them. She agreed that the comment should remain as part of her profile, not only because it is an accurate reflection of her feelings at the time, but also because she still has ambivalent feelings about the relationship.

Several of the other women also had new partners in their lives. As I emphasized before, single parenthood is often a transitional experience, and my interviews with these women captured only a moment of that experience.

making \$18,000 a year and had to fight tooth and nail to keep the mortgage payments under \$1000 a month, while still raising 3 kids

Erin inherited a strong work ethic from her mother, and her work history is a testament to her determination:

I left high school when I was 16. I completed Grade 10. I took some courses after that at [college] and at [university]. And I've completed numerous through-work training courses. I've been with the same company for 8 years this month. I'm a computer specialist. So I've managed fine without an education

Despite the odds -- having been raised in a single-parent family, having dropped out of school when she was 16, and having become a single parent herself at a young age -- Erin is very successful.

Knowing the difficulties of single parenthood, her mother (and several others) encouraged her to put her son up for adoption at the time of his birth. Because she refused this advice, she feels that she must succeed on her own, without any government assistance and few community supports:

I think that was what kind of set me off on the road to prove that I was going to do it by myself, too -- with so many people telling me how I had screwed up three lives, that I was destined to failure, and did I not know how selfish I was being and what I was going to do to this poor little boy.

As a result, she sometimes seems to hold contradictory values about single motherhood.

It often seemed that she at once embraced and struggled against stereotypes of single-parent families. When I asked her if she would prefer people didn't know she is a single parent, she replied:

No. No. I have no problem with people knowing that I'm a single mom. If anything, I'm proud that I'm a single mom, and I'm very proud of [my son]. I could not dream of having a better child. [It] just seems to me like I run into so many brick walls by being a single mom, period. Some unknown, non-faced entity

out there is now telling me that I'm impoverished because I'm a single mom. That's not me, period. There's a lot of two-parent families out there that are a lot worse off. I mean, people can feel as sorry for me as they want to about having to go out and work everyday, but that's my choice, and I don't want [my son] seeing me in any other eye. I want him to grow up with a real sense of who he is, and how he got to be who he is. To be able to look to me and see the foundation that he came from.

Despite her aversion to the stigma of single motherhood, Erin strongly believes in the legitimacy of different family forms:

Everybody keeps putting the emphasis back on the family, and how the family unit is dying out and is becoming a thing of the past. And I don't necessarily see that as being true. If you look at [my son] and myself, we are a family. And no matter how much people try to say that we are not the nuclear family, well fine. I mean, I've never fit the role of anything, so why would I fit the role now.

At the end of our interview, Erin was very generous in providing me with information about an article she had just read which listed a local community centre that was providing English language training to Somalian women. This was how I subsequently met Celia, who had organized the classes.

In summary, women's experiences of single motherhood clearly are determined by the context of their lives. The brief overview of international and domestic trends in single motherhood provided in section one of this chapter, coupled with the profiles of the women in my study, more than illustrate this point. In the next chapter, the women profiled above discuss their experiences of government and community sources of support, and offer their perspectives on key issues that must be addressed in developing stronger supports for single-parent families.

CHAPTER FOUR

Treading Murky Water: The Support Strategies of Single-Parent Women

Dorothy O'Connell, a leader in the women's anti-poverty movement in Ottawa, applies a humorous touch as she depicts the ups and downs of the lives of low-income women in her novel Chiclet Gomez.¹ The main characters, Chiclet and Tillie, create informal networks of support with the other women in their housing community, and demonstrate inventive ways of meeting their families' basic needs. In this chapter, I reveal how the women in my study, like the novel characters, create their own systems of support.

In section one, I consider some of the main challenges single-parent women face in providing for their families by looking at key areas of support for single-parent families (employment, housing and child care) to provide a clear portrait of their impact on women's lives today. These sections are partly descriptive, including statistical information about families and these supports, and partly explanatory, taking a woman-centred approach to understanding how these supports relate to women, particularly as single parents.

Although it is a well-known fact that mother-led families are more vulnerable than other family types (approximately two-thirds [62%] of all mother-led families fell below the poverty line² in 1991, compared to only around 11% of non-elderly two-parent families with children³), I

¹Dorothy O'Connell, Chiclet Gomez, Ottawa: Deneau & Greenberg, 1978

²The Vanier Institute of the Family explains that "[when] Canadians refer to the poverty line, what they usually mean is Statistic Canada's Low Income Cut-Offs (LICOs, pronounced

consider the views provided by the women I interviewed and demonstrate how their experiences of these supports differed considerably. Choices are more constrained for some women than others and their views on issues such as state assistance for single-parent women differed, reflecting their ethnic and class backgrounds. For some, more than others, community support is integral to successful employment, child care and housing strategies. In this sense, although communities are "public", some aspects (e.g., housing co-operatives) allow women to bridge the public/private dichotomy.

In section two, I explore how the women in my study view their own efforts to bridge the public/private split, including the relevance of community supports such as personal networks and volunteer activities. I conclude with the views they offer regarding government and community supports.

4.1 Support Challenges for Single-Parent Women

A. Work and Welfare

Probably the factor most supportive of the well-being of families is the presence of

"like-ozes"). LICOs vary according to size of community and size of family. [Statistics Canada] attempt[s] to gauge the amount of money families need in order to live adequately. While not an official measure of poverty, LICOs are popularly interpreted and used as such. See Vanier Institute of the Family, 1994, 87.

¹Canada, Statistics Canada, A Portrait of Families in Canada, Ottawa, Supply and Services Canada, 1993, 35.

multiple earners in the household. Since 1975, the proportion of families with more than one earner has increased steadily: 63% of all families had more than one earner in 1991, reflecting the fact that more women in husband-wife families are working outside the home. In 1991, 64.6% percent of married women with children under 16 were employed, compared with 52.2% of single-parent women.⁴ Differences in work patterns between single-parent women and women in two-parent families is greatest when they have young children. When their youngest child is less than three years old, 30.8% of single parents work. This is much lower than the 56.9% of women in two-parent families with a child less than three years old who are employed. When their youngest child is in the three to five years old age range, 47.4% of single parents work, a significant increase for this group. For women in two-parent families with their youngest child in the three to five years old age range, 62.3% work. When their youngest child is in school, 62.2% of single parents work, compared with 70.3% of women in two-parent families. The gap closes considerably as age of child increases.

Still, the overall number of single-parent women in the labour market has remained steady since 1981 (it dropped slightly from 54.2% in 1981 to 52.2% in 1991), while the percentage of women in two-parent families has increased from 48.9% to 64.6%. In fact, statistics indicate that mother-led families contribute to the increased proportion of families with no earners, with severe consequences for these families. As a Statistics Canada report concluded:

⁴Canada, Statistics Canada, Lone-Parent Families in Canada, Target Groups Project 1992, Ottawa, Supply and Services Canada, 27

⁵Ibid.

The presence/number of earners in a household is particularly critical to lone-parent families headed by women. For instance, non-elderly female lone-parent families with no earner, representing about a quarter of all non-elderly female-headed lone-parent families in 1991, had an average income of just \$13,500. As a result, almost all of these families (95%) were classified as having low incomes. Female-headed lone-parent families with one earner did somewhat better: still, in 1991, almost half (48%) of these families had incomes below the Low Income Cut-offs.⁶

As the statistics reveal, single-parent women are working for pay when they can. But they must also work to care for their children everyday. For these women, the absence of full-time, well-paid employment opportunities means that the benefits of receiving social assistance clearly outweigh the benefits of working.

One of the primary ways single-parent women are affected by the state is through its social assistance policies. These policies are established mainly by the provinces. In a sense, it would be more accurate to say "welfare states" when considering the different approaches to work and welfare in Canada. Single-parent women in Canada have not been as vulnerable to the extremes of compulsory work programs (i.e., workfare) as have women in other welfare states, such as the United States, however, because the provinces have relied on transfer payments from the federal government through the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), which required them to provide assistance based on need.⁷ In the absence of CAP transfers, provinces have less

⁶Statistics Canada, A Portrait of Families in Canada, 38.

⁷In 1982, for example, the Government of Alberta introduced its "Community Self Help Project", a compulsory workfare program which attempted to operate exclusively on provincial funding. In the absence of federal funding, the program proved to be too costly and Alberta later dropped the compulsory condition. Andrew Armitage, "Work and Welfare: A Conceptual Review of the Relationship Between Work and Welfare," in Ideology, Development and Social Welfare: Canadian Perspectives, Bill Kirwin (ed.) Toronto: Canadian Scholars' press Inc., 1991, 41.

resources and are more likely to implement restrictive welfare strategies

Armitage (1991) distinguishes between the 'institutional' and the 'residual' welfare state.⁸

The primary objectives of the 'institutional' approach, which is based on liberal ideology, are social justice and relieving poverty. The emphasis is on adequacy of benefits to the least capable members of society. It assumes that people want to work and will if jobs (and the necessary training) are available. In contrast, the primary objectives of the 'residual' approach, which is based on conservative ideology, are reducing program costs, reducing pressure on the deficit, and restoring work incentives. It assumes that people will not work unless required to by necessity. The emphasis is on lowering benefits levels.

Although the institutional view was dominant in the post-World War II era, the residual approach to social policy planning increasingly gained legitimacy during the 1970s as deficits grew, unemployment rose, and demands on welfare programs intensified. Armitage argues:

In both the residual and institutional views the existing social and class structure of western industrial society is undisputed, including the existence of poverty. The task of social welfare is defined in terms of the "management" of welfare in the context of the work required by society.⁹

He outlines a third approach, the social development approach, which examines the structural aspects of society. Within such an approach there are program proposals at both the social-structural and community level. He argues that feminists and native peoples critique the assumptions of the residual and institutional models, and adopt instead the principles of social development.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 39.

I have already argued that existing welfare programs fail to provide adequate support for women. In the post-World War II era women entered the labour market in record numbers, which had liberating effects. But this change in expectations led to a change in government policymaking, and some provinces began targeting single-parent women for employment (i.e., "workfare") programs.¹⁰ Single-parent women continue to face the contradictions of the 'work ethic' and the 'family ethic' in their relationship with the government:

The development, form, and content of social assistance policies have been shaped by the family ethic and the work ethic, and single mothers have been subject to their conflicting requirements. Over time, the dictates of social assistance programs have ebbed and flowed between supporting single mothers to care for their children at home and encouraging them, or pressuring them, to enter the labour force. The history of income support to single mothers reflects society's views about families, beliefs about the appropriate division of roles and responsibilities between the sexes, and notions of "worthiness."¹¹

Evans (1988) has evaluated many programs which are aimed at moving single-parent women off social assistance and into the job market. She reveals the underlying assumptions behind Ontario's Work Incentive Program (WIN) and Employment Supports Initiative. WIN was a financial strategy, which included wage supplements for low-paying jobs¹² and allowed participants to retain the premium-free medical care, and prescription drugs and dental care benefits that they had been receiving through social assistance. It also allowed participants to

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Patricia M. Evans, "The Sexual Division of Poverty: The Consequences of Gendered Caring," Women's Caring: Feminist Perspectives on Social Welfare, Carol Baines et al. (eds.) Toronto: Mclelland and Stewart, 1991: 184.

¹²Now that single-parent women are viewed as employable, allowing them to maintain benefits while earning income is perceived as discrimination against the "working poor". The value of their caregiving activities is completely overshadowed by the (paid) work ethic.

a financial strategy, which included wage supplements for low-paying jobs¹ and allowed participants to retain the premium-free medical care, and prescription drugs and dental care benefits that they had been receiving through social assistance. It also allowed participants to return to previous benefit levels if they were unable to continue employment for any reason. The WIN approach (correctly) assumed that single-parent women could not afford to participate in the labour force because of their inability to support their families on the low-wage jobs which are available.

The Employment Services Initiative (ESI), implemented in 1982, was a service strategy, which instead focussed on the parent's lack of preparation for participation in the labour market. "(This shift in emphasis from a financial to a service strategy redefined the major employment obstacles facing single mothers on social assistance from that of low wages to inadequate preparation for employment."²) In her analysis of the efficacy of the ESI program, Evans suggests that a more holistic approach is needed:

One explanation for the failure of the ESI program to reach its employment target, and its apparent ineffectiveness in altering the types of employment the participants obtain, may rest in the program's emphasis on pre-employment services rather than skill development. During the first year, the majority of participants were involved in services such as goal clarification, self-esteem building, and educational upgrading. Programs which focus on job readiness and general employability may well be the needed initial step for single mothers without recent labour market experience. Without the second step, however, which ensures relevant skills for the job market, employment opportunities are

¹ Now that single-parent women are viewed as employable, allowing them to maintain benefits while earning income is perceived as discrimination against the "working poor". The value of their caregiving activities is completely overshadowed by the (paid) work ethic.

² Patricia Evans, "Work Incentives and the Single Mother: Dilemmas of Reform," *Canadian Public Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1988: 131.

unlikely to be significantly altered.¹⁴

Despite their different emphases, then, each program was partial in its evaluation of the obstacles facing single-parent women. Neither program completely addressed the overwhelming need for accessible and affordable child care, and the absence of adequate employment opportunities for women. Both ultimately were unsuccessful whether as a work incentive strategy, or as a poverty-reducing mechanism for single-parent women and their families.¹⁵ In the end, the insecurity created by the direct and hidden costs of employment made women reluctant to leave the stability of social assistance.

Aside from the financial and service strategies exemplified by WIN and ESL, Evans proposes that governments may choose restrictive strategies, such as "workfare", which require recipients to work for benefits. While it has been demonstrated that such programs are ineffective in the absence of appropriate child care and employment opportunities, they "do help to erode the legitimacy of the single mother's entitlement to social assistance and may increase receptivity to further restraints in social assistance spending."¹⁶ As Evans demonstrates, workfare policies have been ineffectual in the U.S., where few single-parent women already work for pay. They are also totally inappropriate in the Canadian context, because most single-parent women already work outside the home, and volunteer training programs are always full. Such policies also assume women who choose to stay home and provide their own childcare are not working

¹⁴Ibid.: 132.

¹⁵Ibid.: 129.

¹⁶Ibid.: 133.

their goals would apparently be in line with the government's stated goal of reducing welfare dependency among single-parent women. For this reason, it is important to investigate what supports, such as childcare or income supplements, might best enable them to integrate work with their parenting responsibilities, and what systems might best provide such supports. As the federal government reduces unemployment benefits and transfer payments to the provinces, and as provinces cut welfare benefits and limit funding for social programs, concomitant cuts are being made by the municipal governments. This trickle-down effect will result not only in the loss of social assistance benefits for many poor mother-headed families, but also in the elimination of the many programs and community supports on which even relatively well-off families rely.

In summary, single-parent women face greater challenges than other parents in their attempts to gain employment opportunities and escape the stigma of welfare programs. In the following section, I examine this topic further based on the experiences of the women I interviewed, and consider their specific situations in light of the evidence presented above.¹⁷

¹⁷ It is important to note that most of the women in my study are in their mid-30s to early 40s. The earning power of single-parent women in this age group is usually much higher than that of single-parent women under 35, who have had falling or constant market earnings and rising transfers. See Martin D. Dooley, "Recent Changes in the Economic Welfare of Lone Mother Families in Canada: The Roles of Market Work, Earnings and Transfers," Single Parent Families: Perspectives on Research and Policy, Joe Hudson and Burt Galaway (eds.), Thompson Educational Publishing Inc., 1993, 115-136.

Single-Parent Women / On Work and Welfare

The concept 'financial security' had different meanings for the women in my study.

Natalie, for example, enjoyed an upper middle-class lifestyle prior to her divorce. After explaining her employment goals to me, in a half-joking tone she described her continued desire for upward social mobility:

I'd like to "get by" plus. The norm is O.K. I don't mind being the norm, or average, but I'd like "norm plus." (She laughs) And I'll probably do it too. If I can accomplish this much in 2 years, who knows what I can do in 10.

She admitted, however, that her priorities have changed drastically since becoming a single parent:

I've gained something, because I've got my daughter. But materially, and financially, I don't have the big house anymore with the central vacuum and the central air and the garage door openers, the new car every few years and the vacations. That's all gone. It's really funny. It was really important to me, too, at the time. But I've found in the last couple of years, I don't miss what I had to put up with to have it.

Erin's comments also demonstrated an awareness that the financial (and other) sacrifices she has made have not threatened her family's well-being:

Okay, if I didn't have a child I probably would own a home, by now, of my own. Or I'd be living downtown or something. I wouldn't be driving a station wagon, I'd be driving a little two-seater Miata. I wouldn't be home every night, I would've had a date in the last 4 years. I've made those sacrifices willingly and I don't look upon them [with] any kind of regret. By the same token, I don't find that the money is a sacrifice either. He didn't have to have a top-of-the-line crib, I could've bought used stuff. But I didn't. That was my own choice. It would probably be a different issue if I didn't have the money. I don't know -- if you read the newspaper now, [it seems that] if you go on welfare you get new furniture.

anyway. I don't know if it would be a big issue even then.

Although **Erin** perceives her choices as constrained, many single-parent women face severe poverty and may see no way out. Several women emphasized the role of poverty in the lives of single-parent women. As **Rosa** puts it, "*The single mothers that are working, I'm telling you that they are suffering*." Clearly, she is referring to those women like herself, who work in low-paying positions. **Rosa's** view is that the constraints of class make success impossible for her:

The only people who are going to succeed at raising a family are people who are highly educated, who get a good job, who have a good husband -- supportive husband. And then they have a network -- they have their parents, who have made it. Who can think, who are educated. For them, everything is not a problem. They know how to exercise their minds. Those are the people who are going to succeed.

Nora believes that the main problem for most women is poverty, not single parenthood. Most of the poor women she is talking about are visible minority women, particularly recent immigrants:

If you have money, it doesn't matter whether you are a single parent -- it doesn't matter. The ones that are really at risk are people who are very poor. And being poor and a single parent is a problem. If you are rich, it doesn't matter, you can hire domestic people to take care of your children. It's o.k. It's the [poor] people I am talking about who are really in need of help. And being a single parent, they're being condemned for being poor, just like people are being condemned for being a single parent.

Child support payments from a non-custodial parent may make a considerable difference in the financial security of a single-parent family. MacDaniel wrote in 1988, "Canadian courts have made little attempt to enforce court-ordered child-support payments. In a society that claims to value women as mothers and to put a high premium on reproduction and children, one

cannot help but wonder what the poverty of divorced mothers suggests."¹⁸ In 1990, approximately one-third of single-parent women with children under age 18 reported having received either spousal or child support payments.¹⁹ By implementing the Family Support Plan in 1992, Ontario attempted to enforce support and custody orders. Still, for those women whose ex-partners are unable or unwilling to pay, the existing system can be frustrating. At the time of our interview, **Natalie** and her ex-husband had been to court twice on the matter of child support. Given his high level of income, she felt he was not paying enough. **Miriam** recounted her experience of the bureaucratic obstacles she faced in trying to obtain the child support payments which she and her daughter are owed.

Basically, I'm a number in a filing cabinet. And I call a recording and it gives you your grand total every month of how much is still owed to you. And that's basically all family support is, really. It's a system that's put into place, and I don't know what the heck it's there for. You can't talk to anybody. You can't talk to a human being. You talk to Mr. Plexiglass, that's what I call him. And one day, I actually used a few foul words at him, and I felt really bad, but you get so frustrated that you cannot sit and talk to somebody. You have to stand. And a line-up behind you. I guess it's almost as bad as being on the welfare line -- I don't know, I haven't been there yet. But I'm sure I'll have my chance. It's very degrading, very degrading. To have to go and try and get someone to solve your problems, and to help you solve your problems.

Government programs aimed at training single parents to increase employability also fail to help many single-parent women. **Celia** feels that one of the main reasons is because the 'clients' of government services are not involved in the planning process. Describing one of her

¹⁸Susan MacDaniel, "The Changing Canadian Family," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada. Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code, and Lindsay Dorney (eds.) Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988, 115.

¹⁹Statistics Canada, A Portrait of Families in Canada, 38.

several efforts to change the way the government 'does business', she reveals her belief that government should be held accountable to its clients

There's a program called ACT program (Action for Career and Training). It has been designed for single parents -- men and women -- that have mature children to kind of assist them to get back into the workforce. I checked it out with them, and guess what they told me. They told me "You have to go back to school again and acquire some skills." I said, "Do I look like I really need to acquire more skills?" I made it to the top to speak with the director of the program and we had a big discussion. She said, "You know what, I wish we included people like you in the designing of the program." I said, "Well, it's your responsibility. It's up to you to make me a part of it."

One of her biggest criticisms was that these programs do not respond properly to the immediate needs of women. She expressed this criticism to the director of the same program

Anyway, after you go through that preliminary screening, they put you on a waiting list for 2 years before you can be considered to see any counsellors. I told her that things don't work like that because single women [parents] have a lot of frustration in their lives. If you're going to give them any service, you have to deliver it right then, when they're ready to receive it. But if you keep them on a waiting list for 2 years, a lot of things happen. They can change their minds. They can be so devastated and disillusioned and give up.

Happily, **Celia's** efforts met with some success

they created a position of somebody, a counsellor, to kind of provide telephone support and counselling for people on the waiting list. So at least I made a change. And again, it's just because of one person doing it all. If we had been 5 or 6 women, we could have changed the social services.

Although none chose to discuss specifically how their class status had changed as a result of their move to Canada, many immigrant women found their past work experience devalued by the Canadian labour market. **Nora**, who was a doctor in Somalia, can no longer practice medicine; **Sarah** owned her own successful motel in Somalia and looks forward to the day when she can again start her own business; **Celia** was a registered nurse in Uganda but returned to

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school because she could not find work in Canada equivalent to her qualifications. **Nadia** was a chemist in Russia but has not yet found work in Canada, in any field; **Rose** trained as an accountant in Mexico, but has only found work in low-paying government positions in Canada.

Seventy percent of the approximately 11,000 Somalians living in Ottawa are single-parent women and their children.² Many of these families are large. Raising six children alone has been a challenge for **Sarah**, particularly when she first moved to Canada:

How you raise children is different from here. That's why we have so much children. Life is different from here - we have a lot of support, a lot of family. And we live together, family - and we are large families. So if you have many babies, it is not problem. You are not worried about financial [matters survival] because all that we have, we share. But here, it's divided - it's hard to raise kids. Back home, even long work hours are shorter. Sometimes we come back home and we go back to work. So it's easier to raise kids when you have your own work (i.e. business).

Moving from social assistance into the labour force is not easy for her. But now that her children are older, more opportunities are available:

But my problem is it's very difficult - when you want to upgrade yourself and find a job... sometimes you have to get a job... But still I try to manage my time and it's getting better because there are no kids at home. All of them, they are in school now, so I have plenty of time to myself. I used to go to school 1-2 a day, and then I'd stay at home. And then I'd take night courses. Of course, my daughter is going to be 17 now, and she can babysit.

Single parenthood has employment opportunity costs: "childrearing responsibilities put restraints on availability of overtime, shiftwork, job-related travel, job choice, and job

²⁰Sylvia Thomson, "One Hundred Names: One Hundred Solitudes," MRP, Carleton University, School of Journalism, March 1995.

location " **Rachel**, for example, continues to work, but within a constrained schedule:

The shifts that I take are affected by being a single parent. Because I could probably be working a lot more but I choose not to work evenings. I work one evening a week and I try hard not to work weekends primarily because I'm a single parent. I think if I had a partner then I would feel less guilty about being away.

Often, potential employers would rather not hire employees who are at risk of having high absentee rates or other problems associated with the 'constraints' of single parenthood. This may explain, in part, the higher unemployment rate of single-parent women, which was 19.1% in 1992. For women in two-parent families, the rate was only 9.8%. **Rosa's** situation illustrates the lack of control some women feel about their ability to combine breadwinner and childrearer roles, particularly during the first year of single parenthood when emotional stress often is high:

I worked all the time until this time. Until I knew I was going to get a divorce and I knew I was going to have a lot of emotional problems. That's when I stopped working. Because it's just too hard for me, I just don't know how to handle it. Because they (my children) get sick all the time and I don't have anybody here. And I don't have money to pay a babysitter. So what do I do? I get stuck. I have to stay with them and at work they don't like it and I feel bad. I know it's not my fault but I still feel bad.

For some women, however, job training programs do not offer opportunities appropriate to their needs. This was true in **Diana's** case. She had a Master's in Fine Arts, and was struggling to find work in her local economy. What she really wanted to do was further her university education. She turned down an opportunity to enrol in another Master's program, in a distant city, however, because she was reluctant to separate her son from his father. Instead, she

¹Ellen B. Zweibel, "Child Support Policy and Child Support Guidelines: Broadening the Agenda," Canadian Journal of Women and the Law, Vol. 6, 1993: 394.

²Statistics Canada, A Portrait of Families in Canada, 31.

enrolled in a job training program that was of little help. When that ran out, she applied for social assistance:

as soon as I went on that I felt like I was going to have a breakdown because I was so upset. I went and told them I wanted to be employed so they put me on another job training [course] through that [social assistance] so I was working one month after I was given assistance and went to an art gallery and worked as an assistant. And then I realized that I really regretted having turned down going to school. So I reapplied and got accepted again although with less money than the first time -- the first time I'd been offered a scholarship. And then I just decided that I would come no matter what and my mother was very encouraging for me to do that.

In Canada today, many families lack appropriate child care and job opportunities. Single parents are doubly disadvantaged. Yet the ideology of motherhood means that any choice that single-parent women make will fall short of society's (and their own) expectations. **Rachel** explains:

You're wrong if you stay at home, and you're wrong if you go to work. You're neglecting your child if you go to work. You're draining society if you don't go to work. That's problematic.

She describes the powerlessness she experienced when she first became a single parent and had to rely on social assistance:

It was a very hard decision to decide to separate. I was in my last semester of college and I felt very, very powerless. I wasn't empowered to do anything. Finding a job was impossible. Trying to schedule a job around my daughter was very difficult. I didn't have the support that I needed established with my parents. It made a big shift in friendships. I was living in a place where I'd lived with my husband. There were a lot of outside factors. I didn't have a lot of money. I had to go on social assistance, which was really not maybe the most positive experience a person can go through (she laughs). I felt very, very powerless. And I worked very hard to set goals for myself and to accomplish them.

Later she was counselled by a social worker to turn to welfare again. She explains why she refused this advice, when struggling to meet her own employment objectives:

I was working part-time and I only got 3 hrs week plus a couple of others here and there. And my daycare costs were being higher than what I was making. And my social worker told me to quit my job because it wasn't worth it. Well, what she didn't understand was that this was an investment in my future. So I think that there's got to be a change in that attitude and understanding. I maybe started at 3 hours but now I'm at 25 hours at that place. And it took a couple of years.

The women I interviewed held different views regarding the use of social assistance.

Most, like **Diana** and **Rachél**, resisted using it themselves, but understood that some women have no choice. Many single-parent women who must depend on social assistance experience long-term poverty. After their children leave home, these women lose their entitlement to family benefits, and they may find themselves unemployable except in low-paid, unskilled jobs. It is important that they be allowed to develop skills, without long-term breaks in employment.

Both **Celia** and **Erin** are employed outside the home, and earn average incomes.

However, these women reach different conclusions about single-parent women and welfare dependency. **Celia** prefers to work, but is sympathetic to women who receive social assistance.

In fact, she views government support as a childrearer's right:

If it was not for my big-headedness, I think I would choose to stay at home and raise my kids. But I can't do that. 'Cause it's too hard for me to sit at home. If a woman feels that she can't do that [work] as well as raising her kids, I think she should sit at home. I don't mean literally sitting. They should be informed. You should be informed about your rights, you should be informed about whatever's happening out there. So that you can have your say. You should be able to ask informed questions. So I think what is really detrimental is that single parents who are on social assistance programs are not empowered. They don't know their rights. They might believe that they are dependent on the system -- that's not true. They are doing a tremendous favour to the system by raising kids who will be future leaders of tomorrow.

Erin's views on social assistance, on the other hand, are similar to those shared by many conservatives:

I think that some people see it [social assistance] as a way to exist without having to put forth the effort that working people do. They also have a child, so they use that as the excuse to stay at home and collect mother's allowance. And I don't think that's necessarily right. I'd love to be able to stay home full time, but it's not a reality to me. It's not a case of not getting enough money from mothers' allowance. But I think, first of all, if I didn't work I'd go crazy. And I also think [my son] is being raised in a single parent family, so he's already going to have that strike against him as he's growing up. I want him to grow up to at least see that I fought to keep us off. So that he's been raised with that will to fight. That will that says, "Okay, maybe I do have to take a job that only pays me a minimum wage, but I'm not always going to be there." Instead of relying on the system, and saying, "If I don't get a minimum \$35,000 a year income, I'm just not going to work because the system will give me that anyway." I want to make sure that I'm setting a good example.

I know that most of the people in the country that are below the poverty line are single-parent families. I know that 58% of children from single-parent families are below the poverty line. I think it is that kind of number. And I do think it's outrageous. I think it's terrible. But I don't necessarily like being painted with the same brush, because that's not us. We've been very fortunate.

Why the difference in perception? Although she did not mention receiving family benefits, in her early years in Canada, as a recent immigrant, **Celia** sought assistance from community outreach programs, women's shelters and government-sponsored job training programs. Her background in Sociology, and her work in community services also bring her into contact with poor women on a daily basis. **Erin**, on the other hand, has not sought government assistance, and with the help of her mother she found good, unsubsidized daycare for her child (her child's father has made some contributions toward day care costs). She also works for a company that is very supportive, and, therefore, the work ethic is reinforced.

The fact that **Erin** does not favour social assistance, and the dependency that it can foster, does not mean she is insensitive to the difficulties that most single parents face. Many of her comments reveal her awareness that supports are not available to childrears, and that things

B. Child Care

Child care is a central issue that must be dealt with if women, especially those who parent alone, are to participate fully in the labour force. In 1990, 44% of single-parent women with children under age 14 used some form of child care, compared with 31% of two-parent families with children. Because of their lower incomes, single-parent women spend nearly three times as much of their annual income on child care than two-parent families.²

Relatives, as well as unrelated care-givers such as friends, neighbours or private babysitters, are the most important sources of child care for Canadian families. Single-parent women are generally less likely than two-parent families to use less formal child care arrangements such as sitters, neighbours, or relatives. They are more likely to use day care centres,³ although in 1988 organized regulated facilities served as the main method of care for only 11% of all children under age 13 for parents who worked or studied.⁴

In 1986, a National Task Force on Child Care, chaired by Dr. Katie Cooke, reported to the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women. The report

proposed changing the welfare nature of the federal government's child care approach by creating a universal childcare system modelled after the education system. Cooke recommended universally accessible, government-funded, childcare services sufficient to meet the demand for spaces, and an expanded

²Statistics Canada, A Portrait of Families in Canada, 26.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

single-parent women lack the necessary education or job training. This is particularly true for women who have immigrated recently to Canada. As **Nora** explained in her profile, although the problems faced by many Canadian single-parent women are severe, these problems are exacerbated for women experiencing cultural and language barriers:

Being a woman, especially for women from a different background, different culture, being a single parent and at the same time not being able to have any educational background or any marketable skills, it's very difficult. I mean, most of these women have been forced to go on social assistance. That's the most damaging part, because the children see that there's no way out, you know. And the women, although they try, it's a very competitive market. So especially the women I work with, who have a different cultural background, who don't have the skills to market themselves, on top of that [they] have to be a single parent and deal with the children and their problems, it's an enormous problem.

Sarah and **Nadia**, both new to Canada, had not yet found paid work at the time of the interviews. But **Sarah's** children were finally all in school, and she recently had started looking for a job. This was difficult for her, because her background did not prepare her for the Canadian labour market. The following comments reveal how gender, class, race, culture and displacement through war have affected **Sarah's** work opportunities in Somalia and Canada:

I am trying to get a job. I'm beginning. I have no choice.

When I finished high school, my family, they made an arranged marriage. That's why I stopped [school]. My husband was doing fine. The family of my husband, they are rich. So I married early and had babies, and I stopped working and was just raising my kids. [and] we started a business of our own. And when you have a goal, it's okay, you don't need to go to school. So my goal was to look after my motels and we'll do fine. But the war happened and we [lost] the money. (she laughs). So I always say, "Why didn't I continue my education?" (she laughs). Because you know, education doesn't lose -- they can't take it from you. But the money, yeah. And so, I want to now, to start again. I don't like to give up. (she

² Susan Clark, Mothers and Children: Additional Analysis (Summary). Prepared for the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, 1994.

however, the few who still did seemed comfortable with their arrangements. **Frim** has avoided subsidized child care, and is satisfied that caregivers in the private sector can organize their activities to provide quality care:

I have a private (home) day care through a local organization. I had a very bad experience with the first caregiver, and when I was starting to look for a new one my mother put me in touch with a woman who is head of a support group for caregivers. They are their own organization. They're not recognized by the City or anything like that, but they are all caregivers in the west end. And I got in touch with one of them who had a space available and I've been there ever since. For two years now. [My son] just loves it. It's a fantastic place.

Natalie's comments about her need to use subsidized child care reveals a fault-line in the way the subsidy system works:

I have [my daughter] on subsidized day care because I can't afford anything else. And I honestly believe it's appalling that my daughter is on subsidized day care when combined her parents make over \$100,000."

Both women's experiences seem to provide support for the argument made by conservatives that child care ought to be fully privatized.

Not all women are in a position to choose, however, as **Rosa's** situation demonstrates. Because she seemed so isolated, I asked her if she had thought of attending a support group. She explained, "*The problem is that I cannot even go to a group because who would babysit my children. So right now I cannot go anywhere.*"³⁰ She had checked out programs at the local community centre, but found little support there:

The community centre, they have [a program] after 4:00, but they don't have subsidies. So I cannot afford it. So even if I get a job, I couldn't send them there.

³⁰During the check back process, Natalie indicated that she has lost the subsidy now that her daughter only attends day care on a part-time basis. Her ex-husband willingly re-negotiated child support payments with her.

freely. I can speak freely but because I don't have enough experience to speak to talk to somebody and if you don't use the language you just stop [expressing] yourself freely because it makes it difficult. They should have something for people who already have a high [level of] education like me.

She also studies French, but finds the programs are not diversified enough to deal with the needs of immigrant women with different levels of education and cultural backgrounds.

Because when they go for French courses, you have people from Third World countries who have practically no English at all. And their language experiences and cultural experiences are different from mine. So like my cultural adjustment is just fine because I know, like movies -- quite a lot of stuff. So it doesn't make any sense for me to spend 3 hours sitting in this classroom discussing really silly topics.

In summary, employment and child support payments from ex-partners created significant financial differences among the women in my study. Although they agree that not enough is being done to help single-parent women and their families, not all single-parent women agree about the legitimacy of women's rights to welfare or family benefits (i.e., Mothers' Allowance). Those who have received social assistance prefer working for pay. The stigma of social assistance caused many of the women to experience low self-esteem, and some seemed to fear the impact long-term use of such benefits might have on their children. This is particularly true for recent immigrants such as the Somalian women in my study, who already face stereotypes based on their cultural and racial difference.

Programs aimed at helping recent immigrant single-parent women to gain skills they need to enter the labour force are insufficient. Immigrant women require more supports in general, but those who are single-parent women face the greatest barriers and are in urgent need to support themselves and their families.

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²Statistics Canada, A Portrait of Families in Canada, 26.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

system of parental leave. By reiterating the [Royal Commission on the Status of Women's] assertion that childcare was both a public and private responsibility Cooke argued that all children should be guaranteed high quality care regardless of their family's makeup or economic situation.

Such a program never became a reality because of lack of political will, public distraction over constitutional issues and the Free Trade Agreement, and an overall conservative fiscal climate. Right-wing forces also worked to plant seeds of doubt in the minds of Canadians about the adequacy of institutional care. In their arguments they drew on deeply entrenched norms and beliefs about the overriding importance of maternal care for children, implying that institutional care would be a substitute, rather than a support, for care within families. This argument denied the reality that women are working more than ever, and that child care is a serious issue which every Canadian family with young children faces.

While both sides seem to agree that the availability of different forms of child care provision is beneficial to women, who may have different child care needs at different times, their conclusions are quite different. Yet these different forms of child care are divisive for women:

...divisions in the delivery of child care and the differing monetary values attached to caring for children fail to provide women with a common understanding of women's caring. Resentment and hostility often emerge between different groups of women: between mothers in the paid labour force and caretakers who care for their children; between mothers who are employed and those whose work is confined to the home; and between licensed and unlicensed, trained and untrained caregivers.²⁸

²⁷Andrea Shaver, "The Parliamentary Politics of Childcare," Research Essay, School of Canadian Studies, Carleton University, 1992, 19.

²⁸Evelyn Ferguson, "The Child-Care Crisis: Realities of Women's Caring," Women's Caring: Feminist Perspectives on Social Welfare, Carol Baines et al. (eds.) Toronto: McClelland

At the very least, child care is now viewed as a political issue, an important first step if it is to be transformed.

Currently, the Canadian welfare state takes a residual role in the provision of child care. All child care is undervalued in our society, whether in the sphere of the home or in public child-care services. Many feminists advocate a broad-based restructuring of child care so that men and women share responsibility. Like the Cooke Report, they argue for a universal, flexible child care program. In the absence of a universal program, many women will be disadvantaged by their primary responsibility for child care. Evelyn Ferguson explains:

As long as the affectional component in child care is believed to be exclusively the domain of the unpaid mother or poorly paid mother substitute, parents will undermine public calls for universal child care and women's labour will be exploited in the name of love.¹

For single-parent women more than for other women, access to adequate child care is essential for survival. A double standard exists which makes it acceptable for women with children to depend on a spouse financially, but single-parent women have no such luxury. The state has made it clear through changes in law and welfare policies that this group of women must be independent, providing for their children both materially and physically.

Single-Parent Women: On Child Care

Most of the women I interviewed no longer had children young enough to be in day care.

and Stewart, 1991.

¹Ibid., 92.

however, the few who still did seemed comfortable with their arrangements. **Erin** has avoided subsidized child care, and is satisfied that caregivers in the private sector can organize their activities to provide quality care:

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Not all women are in a position to choose, however, as **Rosa's** situation demonstrates. Because she seemed so isolated, I asked her if she had thought of attending a support group. She explained, "*The problem is that I cannot even go to a group because who would babysit my children. So right now I cannot go anywhere.*" She had checked out programs at the local community centre, but found little support there:

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done. It's wonderful to own a house, but it's a lot of work too."

In summary, those women living in public and co-operative housing seemed to be in greater need of financial and community support. Availability and quality of such housing varies, leaving many single-parent women and their children in precarious circumstances. For women who have recently arrived in Canada, public housing is a crucial source of immediate support, one that provides them with access to community and personal supports. For women who are more financially secure, their family's welfare is not threatened, but they struggle to maintain the standard of living they once had and/or would prefer.

4.2. Single-Parent Women and 'Community'

One of the common threads throughout the women's comments on employment, child care and housing, is the community aspects of these supports for most of them. For some, there is a gap between what the government has been willing to provide and what the women are able to secure for themselves. Financial assistance goes a long way toward helping single-parent women and their families by helping to mediate this gap. Most of the problems experienced by families are a result of poverty.

I have argued that the existing welfare system is seriously flawed, and does not take into consideration other ways of supporting families. There are many problems in single-parent women's lives that existing government programs cannot or have been unable to resolve, such as the absence of emotional support or adequate respite care. **Rachèl** discusses some aspects of these kinds of support:

I chose it consciously because I think that it would be wasting their time. Because they're not going to use this information anyway. If they choose to learn their culture, and understand it, they can do it when they're older, but not now. So, anyway, that has been my experience.

In the absence of alternatives, it is likely that many immigrant women accept Canadian norms of child care, although this may not be their preference.

Although many immigrant women may value community childrearing (i.e., kinship supports) they may question government intervention in their families. During our interview, at the end of one of her longer statements on employment obstacles faced by recent immigrants, **Nora** commented: *"And the risks that these women take just by coming to service-providing agencies to talk about these problems!"* Somali women, like many women from non-Western cultures, do not always have the same views about the appropriateness of government intervention in the family that most Canadians have.³¹ State agencies and most professionals in the social services field do not have the training to understand how to approach recent immigrants and their children without imposing majority norms about childcare. Furthermore, language barriers may prevent immigrant women from understanding the state's intent toward their families.

Understandings of childrearing are different cross-culturally, but so too is the availability of services. **Sarah's** comments suggest, for example, that there are economic differences among Somalians between who can procure or provide child-caring 'services':

Here services are expensive, but back home, service is cheap. It's difficult to get materials, like raw materials, but service is cheap... We used to have servants

³¹Sylvia Thomson, "One Hundred Names: One Hundred Solitudes." MRP, Carleton University, School of Journalism, March 1995.

You can hire a lady. She stays with you all day and night. [Child care] is very cheap where we come from. And that makes it easier to raise the kids. They will stay, even they sleep with the kids. They raise the kids and it's not expensive.

Although the lack of support has been a big shock, **Sarah** feels that she has been luckier than most other Somalian women in Ottawa, who have younger children and no family in the area to help them:

Luckily, when I came here my youngest one was 4 1/2 years old.. if the kid is 4 years old after that he can go to school part time and day care is available in the school. So I had only one child to stay at home. And he started part time. And I know a little English too, to manage in office, or I can go shopping... And my older sister is with me...and she has only one baby. So she used to help me out

Through her work in a multicultural environment, **Rachel** has learned to appreciate cooperative forms of child care. In the following passage she talks about the experiences of Somalian women:

I work in a multicultural community.. And they can't imagine how "alone" we raise our children.. They're used to...you have things to do, your kids go out and play and people watch them for you. When it's time to go home, they'll walk them home for you. And family helps each other.. And there's just none of that [in Canada]. As a single parent in Canada, you're just totally alone...You can't go to your neighbour and say, "I'm about to kill my kid if I don't walk out of here for an hour and calm down. Help me." And I think it causes so much stress..So I think those are all things that need to be worked on.

The ideology of liberal-individualism allows us to believe that we should be able to cope with our problems within the private realm of the family. Any failure to do so is a sign of weakness or incompetence on the part of the parent. As **Diana's** comments demonstrate, single parents often feel they must be very careful about sharing their private problems with others:

In my position I felt I couldn't really go to somebody and talk to them about it... you realize quite quickly that if you do something like that, they might actually take your child away from you. So you can't actually talk to somebody about it and say, "I'm having a hard time." Like I went to the doctor at school and said

I'm really stressed and sometimes I don't always feel that I'm dealing with my son very well. And she wrote it down. And as soon as she wrote it down, I wouldn't talk to her about it. Because I felt that it could be used against me.

There's an anonymous phone line and I did call that quite a few times last year. You just call up people and talk to them. And I tried to talk to another parent, but she'd never been hit as a kid, and the thought of hitting her kid just seemed really wierd.

Courts often have deemed it necessary for lesbian women to prove their competence as parents.³² As a result, seeking help for parenting problems is even more problematic for them than for other women. Lesbian women also face more obstacles than other women in searching for suitable child care. **Ellen** found this to be one of the biggest differences in her experiences as a single parent:

My personal experience is that it's very different to be a single parent and lesbian. It's a very different experience than that which I observe among women who are heterosexual mainly because it's a very isolating factor. For example, when I'm looking for a babysitter for my son, I have to come out to every single one that I interview because...I feel that it's only fair to the babysitter to know what the state of the family is. And also to my son, because if the babysitter notices my books or whatever -- I don't hide it in my home (or outside) -- if they are homophobic, then they might react strongly, and that wouldn't be good for my son, who's not homophobic...It's very tough, because it's a very difficult thing to do.

In summary, child care remains one of the most central concerns for single-parent women. Not only does it affect women's employment and training opportunities, but also their ability to get the personal support they need. The isolation that results from the public-private split childrearing and undervaluing of caregiving activities for women in Canada is especially problematic for women from countries where collective childrearing is the norm.

³²Katherine Arnup, "Mothers Just Like Others': Lesbians, Divorce, and Child Custody in Canada," Canadian Journal of Women and the Law, Vol. 3, 1989.

C. Housing

Although 74% of Canadian families owned their homes in 1992 (almost half mortgage-free), 68% percent of households headed by single parents were renting their accommodations. Of those single parents who were homeowners, only a third did not have a mortgage. Husband-wife families with children were more likely to own their own homes but were also less likely to be mortgage free.

Although single parents pay significantly more of their gross income towards rent and home-ownership costs, almost one-half of children in single-parent families lived in substandard housing in 1991.³³ Single-parent families are more likely to live in older homes than their two-parent counterparts. They are also more likely to rent their accommodations, which usually require repairs more often than permanent dwellings.³⁴ Because single-parent families often have fewer children than married-couple families, and because there is only one adult in the household, they sometimes are actually in a slightly better situation in terms of living space.

Public and co-operative housing have been important sources of support for low-income

³³Canadian Council on Social Development, Countdown 93: Campaign 2000 Child Poverty Indicator Report. Prepared by the Centre for International Statistics on Economic and Social Welfare. November, 1993.

³⁴None of the women discussed the state of repair of their homes and, although I did interview some of them in their homes, I feel that any attempt to judge the quality of housing would be inappropriate.

single-parent women.³⁵ Government cuts to this sector jeopardize the future availability of adequate housing for single-parent families.

Single-Parent Women On Housing

Despite the assessment by Statistics Canada (noted above) that single-parent household have more living space on average, several of the women I interviewed revealed that lack of living space was a cause for concern. **Nadia**, **Rose** and **Diana**, for example, all sleep in their living rooms because of lack of space. In **Diana's** case, housing has been one of the biggest setbacks for her as a single-parent. She described her past arrangements: *"We lived in a big house. [My son's] father's a carpenter. He built a big house. It was very nice. It has been quite a change. A big change."* Her current arrangements are considerably different:

*We live in a one-bedroom apartment. I sleep in the dining room (she laughs). It's a big one-bedroom. I picked it because it has got facilities in the building. If I run out of milk I can get milk in the building, and I can do laundry and things like that, because we don't have a car."*³⁶

³⁵Aron N. Spector and Fran Klodawsky, "The Housing Needs of Single Parent Families in Canada: A Dilemma for the 1990s," in Single Parent Families: Perspectives on Research and Policy, Joe Hudson and Burt Galaway (eds.) Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., 1993.

³⁶Several of the women I interviewed mention the problems associated with not having a car. Access to a vehicle can affect work, recreation and housing opportunities. Although single parents spent a higher proportion of their income on transportation (12.9%) than two-parent families (11.8%) in 1990, only 66% of single-parent family households had at least one vehicle, compared with 95% of two-parent family households. Moreover, those single-parent women with cars often do not have the funds for insurance or repairs.

Single-parent family households are also 15%-30% less likely than two-parent family households to have the following amenities: video cassette recorder, microwave oven, automatic

Her previous situation was even less satisfactory:

It was just smaller than the apartment that I'm in now but it was a 2-bedroom. It was a really, really tiny little apartment. It was like living on a boat. In a way, it's much more spacious where I am now (she laughs). So basically, it hasn't been good since we left his father. It has been terrible housing.

Rosa and her ex-husband did not own a home during their marriage. Her comments suggested, however, that she found it strange to think of herself as being poor enough to live in public housing, and that she perceived her housing situation as temporary:

When I got my separation, I applied here to City Living, and it's very hard to get in. But I finally got a space -- I waited. Here it is according to income, so that's good. This is for low-income people, you know. But for now that I know that I'm not in a position to get myself together, I'm okay.

Rosa, in particular, seemed to feel that having a room of her own was an unreasonable expectation:

I would like to have an extra bedroom. But no, that's asking too much. I'm okay. This is perfect for what I need. It's just that I don't have a bedroom of my own. Because there are three children and they're always fighting and they all want their [own] room. So for me, that's my room (she points to the couch and laughs). But no, I shouldn't complain, that's just being picky.

Diana's experiences of public and co-operative housing reveal that these facilities vary according to location, security and quality of housing available:

we lived in a housing co-op in Halifax -- it was kind of a rough district ... I moved in, and apparently just that year some drug dealers had moved in just two doors down and so there were police raids all the time, and there was just always chaos going on. So I asked for a transfer to another unit. And the next unit that we got was on a much quieter street and it was much closer to shopping and buses and laundry and things like that [which] I needed to get to because I didn't

washing machine, clothes dryer, freezer, and dishwasher. They are also less likely to own computers, or important safety devices such as smoke detectors or portable fire extinguishers. See Statistics Canada, A Portrait of Families in Canada, 45.

have a car

Still, several of the women made positive comments about co-operative housing. **Diana** viewed housing as key to community support:

it's very good for community. That was excellent. Actually, that was one of the reasons why we wanted to be in that housing co-op. Besides the financial thing. It was a long house, it was an old house, and they had made some entry ways between the units. And the children would go back and forth. And some people would babysit the other people's children. So there was one common backyard and people would play together. It just was really, really helpful. That was a very good thing about that. And then, in the second place that we moved to in Halifax, that was part of the housing co-op, but was on a different street, the people upstairs had children and they let my son go up and visit them all the time on a very spontaneous basis. It was a lot like having an extended family. So that was really helpful for contact with people. An apartment building is not very good for that.

Some co-operatives also provide women with financial flexibility that they would not have otherwise: *"I lived in a co-op, and they are giving me equity, some equity, so that (financial stress) is going to change. It's not a very large amount of money, but it just will give me enough to make me feel not poverty stricken. And it will just be enough to be safe."*

Private housing is not an option for many low-income families:

I think that the housing co-operative is probably the best thing for a single parent to be in. In the open housing market it is really hard, if you have a low income, not to end up being really poor. The only way to get ahead is if you can be in a housing co-op. It can be geared to your income and give you just enough money to be able to do things that would allow you to get in a better position. It's amazing how \$100 or \$200 a month can make a big difference to somebody.

Miriam described the sense of freedom and autonomy provided by co-operative housing:

Just this July, we moved into this garden home. This has been the biggest move for the both of us, I guess, and I think the healthiest move we could have done. It was scary for me to make a move like this because I don't get child support payments, so it has been my salary or nothing. So it's really hard to shift when you really don't have the cash. But this has a safety net, this complex, because

it's a co-op which means that I have to do X amount of hours [of work] a month and go to meetings and that kind of thing. But the safety net is I can get subsidy. You have to be here a year. You have to apply. You have to meet all the criteria. But if I was to lose my job and this system was still in place, I can get subsidy. So that makes me feel really good. That gives me that little safety net that if things go tough with the way the economy's going, then I know that I have that to fall back on. So I feel really confident.

For [my daughter] it has been a real eye-opening experience. The freedom. The sense of community to know other children in the complex. There's a little playground. There's lots of families around here. She has now met a good friend who lives across the way. For me, the sense of space is incredible. She can be upstairs doing her homework, our TV is in the basement. It's wonderful. It was tough to get here. It has been one of my goals, and now that I'm here I'm just going to sit back and relax and enjoy it. But it took us both a lot.

For recent immigrants, public housing is an important source of community support.

Sarah viewed it as an important requirement for survival:

In our community, it is comfortable to stay in Ottawa [public] housing. There are a lot of people, like Somali or other immigrants, that have the same problems as you. And you have many supports from the community centre. But if you rent a house from anywhere, there's no support like that. So that's why I choose to live [in] that area. Because there's a community centre so you can tell your problem, and they can help.

Still, public housing is not for everyone. Several of the women indicated they value privacy and feel public housing has a stigma of poverty or lower class values. The perception that public housing would be bad for children was reinforced by several of the women. For example, **Celia** does not have positive ideas about public housing:

All along I have lived in some kind of private housing. I have not been in some "public housing." Yes the rent is low, but I figure that I would have to do much more work in terms of raising my children. I do understand that it was my choice that I would avoid situations that would expose my children to habits that I'm not interested in. And one of the things that I've chosen to do is to live in some kind of private housing, so that I mind my own business.

The expectation of owning a house seemed to be an indicator of class background. Several owned, or aspired to own, their own homes, something unusual given the fact that such a small percentage of single-parent women in Canada own their own homes. **Ellen**, a homeowner, admits to having received help to maintain her standard of living.

I own my own home, thanks to my mother and the help she has given me. This is the second home I've had. I had a townhouse in an area that turned out to be very poor for raising a child. So I moved into this neighbourhood because I knew that there were a lot of children here and it feels like home to me. It's very similar to the neighbourhood that I grew up in.

Natalie also received some help, from her brother, in buying her townhouse. While her new home is not as luxurious as the one she once shared with her ex-husband, it is enough to boost her self-esteem and provide her with a sense of security.

It was really important to me [owning my own home]. It always has been. Having a base. I like that. I like the security. I like walking in the door [and] saying 'it's mine.' I rented for a year. It was okay, but it wasn't mine.

"Neighbourhood" was an important concept for **Natalie** as well. "[My daughter's] daycare is down the road, and it's a quiet neighbourhood. It's very family-oriented."

For **Erin**, owning her own home remains a goal. For now, low maintenance is an important factor in choosing housing. She explains:

I have a 3-bedroom condo with a finished basement. I rent, right now. I was looking to buy, but, bad time. So we're renting. And we're very happy here. We're comfortable. I don't have a driveway to shovel, I don't have a lawn to mow. All I have is a front walk to shovel and a backyard to whippersnip. So it's low maintenance, which is good.

The work involved in owning a home was also an issue raised by **Natalie** ("This is a condo, so I don't have to worry about the outside maintenance, which is something I didn't want to get involved in.") and **Ellen** ("I find it's very hard to relax, because there's so much that needs to be

done. It's wonderful to own a house, but it's a lot of work too."

In summary, those women living in public and co-operative housing seemed to be in greater need of financial and community support. Availability and quality of such housing varies, leaving many single-parent women and their children in precarious circumstances. For women who have recently arrived in Canada, public housing is a crucial source of immediate support, one that provides them with access to community and personal supports. For women who are more financially secure, their family's welfare is not threatened, but they struggle to maintain the standard of living they once had and/or would prefer.

4.2. Single-Parent Women and 'Community'

One of the common threads throughout the women's comments on employment, child care and housing, is the community aspects of these supports for most of them. For some, there is a gap between what the government has been willing to provide and what the women are able to secure for themselves. Financial assistance goes a long way toward helping single-parent women and their families by helping to mediate this gap. Most of the problems experienced by families are a result of poverty.

I have argued that the existing welfare system is seriously flawed, and does not take into consideration other ways of supporting families. There are many problems in single-parent women's lives that existing government programs cannot or have been unable to resolve, such as the absence of emotional support or adequate respite care. **Rachel** discusses some aspects of these kinds of support:

Emotionally, you don't have the same kind of support that hopefully you do if you have a partner. And I think that those are things that these programs don't account for. They don't account for how hard it is to get your homework done when you have a child. They don't account for how tired you are because your kid didn't sleep all night, and you still have to go to class. They don't account for [the fact] that it's hard to get [ahead] in the workforce when you have a child, and you can't do all those extra things like go play golf or dress as well as other people do. Your appearance, your self-esteem. Things like having time to cook and clean. They don't account for the help you need with that. Going to school or being retrained takes a lot of energy.

Celia puts it quite succinctly:

Now the problem is what about the single parents who are working so damn hard and they're doing it by themselves. And they get no respite care?

Caregivers do not receive the care they require. This is true for all women, but is particularly important for women parenting alone. In order to get the support they need, single-parent women often develop a system of personal supports, and may combine this informal system with more organized supports such as those provided by churches and voluntary organizations.

A. Personal Supports

Beth finds that her children are a great source of support:

My 17-year-old daughter has been one of the biggest helps I ever thought possible. Not only does she help me nurture her younger sister, she also helps the younger sister nurture me. So that's really nice to have that. I'm not prophetic, but I really don't think that, if the marriage had remained intact, my daughters would feel the need, the desire, or even aspire to having the ability of wanting to take care of and nurture their mom. Because that would not necessarily be their role. I almost regret not leaving their father earlier, so that I could instill that sort of nurturing, caring, sensitive, human faculty in my son.

Her friends, too, understand the importance of involving her children in activities

I have a number of friends here now that when they invite me to do stuff, the kids are included too. It's not just me in isolation, because I come "with children," they always make sure that there's something for the kids to do. We go hiking in the Catskills - just stuff you know, if you have couple of bucks to put gas in the car, you can do it.

In the absence of alternatives, many single-parent women turn to each other for support. This is particularly true of low-income women living in subsidized housing, where they live in close proximity and have the opportunity to network. **Miriam** and her daughter have made friends with another single parent and her child since moving into co-operative housing, she cautions, however, that it is usually very hard to meet other single-parent women.

Sometimes you're so busy, you don't know there's other single parents. You come in [to daycare] and take your child and you go. And you go into your own little environment and you don't know that there are other single moms out there. It's very hard to find out who they are.

At the beginning of my interview with **Diana**, she had mentioned that she had more time available for the interview than she had originally thought, because her son was visiting a friend, who also lived in a single-parent family. Later, she expressed that she does not usually receive support from other single-parent women. Wondering why she did not consider the invitation for her son to visit his friend to be a supportive gesture on the part of the other woman, I asked her if this was a regular arrangement.

Oh, actually, it's really interesting. You might want to interview her. She's a widow. She's from Russia. I just met her at the park. But she wants her son to get to know people. She's kind of in the same situation that we were in last year, where we were isolated, just living in an apartment by ourselves. So she just invited him over. It had nothing to do with this interview. And that had never happened before. So it was very nice. She's giving him dinner and then they're going to see a movie. That's the first time that's happened. That makes a lot of difference, actually, something like that.

I accepted **Diana's** suggestion, and several months later contacted **Nadia**, hoping to see if a more

consistent support relationship had developed. **Nadia** revealed that she did, on occasion, still see **Diana**; she recalled one instance, in particular, when **Diana's** ex-husband was visiting and agreed to care for the boys for an evening while the two women went out. For the most part, however, she and her son remained isolated, as **Diana** had described.

As her profile in Chapter Three revealed, **Natalie** finds the support of friends who can identify with her situation as a single parent essential to good mental health. Here she describes how she manages to integrate recreational activities with her parenting responsibilities, while gaining the support she needs from a friend:

We're in such a cute little routine, it's so much fun. The weekends I have her. I'd say 75% of the weekends I have her, maybe even more -- the Saturday night we always get together with this other single mom and her kid, and we rotate houses for dinner. So we go there in the afternoon at around three or four o'clock, and our kids play. One of us is cooking -- we don't both have to cook. And we eat our dinner. And then after dinner they're allowed to watch a movie or whatever, and then we go.

Each month, **Natalie** also meets with a group of single women (not all of them parents) to share experiences and laughter over dinner. She has met several of her single-parent friends through her large workplace, which functions as a community for them. **Erin**, for example, works for the same company, and sometimes attends the dinners. Yet the support she receives from those friends who are also single parents is understandably limited.

Most of the people I know, they're kind of split into two sides. Either there's the single parents, or the ones with no kids. I find, actually, that single parents are not as good [at] support. And the reason I say that is they've got so much on their own plates, that they're not in a position to be a moral support for anybody. The friends that I have that have no kids of their own, they're always there.

Erin's inability to gain from other single-parent women the emotional support she needs is likely exacerbated by the fact that many of their problems revolve around strained relationships with

their ex-husbands, whereas she has never been married, and therefore does not share their woes.

Erin also could not identify with those parents who claim they don't have enough time and energy to raise their children:

Time One of the things that I have found with single parents and with two-parent families is that they always complain that they don't seem to have a great deal of time to do things. To keep the house clean, to play with their kids, etc. Frankly, I don't find that as a single parent. From the moment I pick [my son] up, until 8:00 at night, I'm his. 100%. I don't do any cleaning. I cook dinner, I play with him, he has a bath. We watch a little bit of T.V., he's off to bed. That takes up about 3 hours in the night. Between the hours of 8 and 10, is my time. I can clean the house if that's what I want to do. Or I sit and watch T.V., or I can read, or do whatever I want to do. But for 3 solid hours, it's just him and me, one on one. And for all the complaints about quality time, I don't find that's a problem. I'm very lucky. [My son] is a very polite little boy, he's a real little sweetheart

I found it interesting that her position differed considerably from those of other women I had interviewed; after further questioning, she revealed that her feelings on the matter were somewhat more contradictory than she had revealed at first:

Mind you, there are times when my fuse is very short as well. I mean, it has its ups, but it also has its downs, where after I put him to bed at night, and there's nothing to do, but laundry, or to clean or to sit and watch T.V. And I really wish there was somebody there to talk to. Or somebody to say "Oh, he did the cutest thing today!" Or even just to bitch about my day at the office. That's not there. And that's not necessarily something I want there all the time. Just when I want it.

Ellen also mentioned that she does not always find single-parent support groups helpful.

Her experiences as a lesbian isolate her from heterosexual single-parent women:

The trouble is that they tend to talk about men a lot, and I just don't -- I can't really identify. And yet, if I talk about women, it sounds to them like I'm trying to make a point or something. That happens at work a lot. I can't talk about it because people think that I'm, you know, being outrageous or something. Although I've come out at work, I still can't talk about it.

Several years ago, in the absence of appropriate personal supports, **Ellen** tried to become

more actively involved in creating support for lesbian parents. She experienced difficulties, however, in trying to start a lesbian parents support group (she laughed as she told me its prospective name -- "Dykes with Tykes"). Lack of energy and time were the main reasons organizing was difficult. Here she relates a conversation she had with a gay father who asked her about her success with the group:

He said, "How is it going?" I said, "Well, it isn't, because we're just so busy, we just don't have time or money or anything to get anything going. And he said, "That's incredible. It's just the opposite for us, because we never get our kids. So we have dinner parties with all these dads, and we're all saying, 'where are our kids?'. We can't have any time with our kids because we're gay." Yeah, so it's just the opposite. So they have lots of time, more money and no kids. But there is an organization starting up again, and I phoned, but all the kids are much younger than my son now, so it's not as good.

This experience highlights the effect sexual orientation has on caregiving responsibilities, and the differences between men and women in their child care responsibilities. It also show there are different support options available to women with children of different ages.

Although personal supports obviously are very important for single-parent women, they do not provide adequate or consistent support. **Rosa** explains the limitations of personal networks for her:

There are big differences in being a single parent. A lot of single parents here [in public housing], they are lucky that they have their moms, they have sisters. They have somebody to rely on and that's how they're able to go to work. So it's easier for them. For me, I'm stuck... because I don't have any family here. My ex-husband, who I should be able to rely on, he's not available either. So right now is just a transition period where I have to find out a good network. I have neighbours, but they have only one child. I have three [children], so we cannot exchange babysitting.

Diana finds her ability to participate in activities depends on the good will of others.

It would be 1 1/2 hours to take that bus ride on a Sunday [to church]. So we're

not going...I'd have to call up a whole pile of people and ask if we could please go with them...It's like I have to rely on other people to help me sometimes. Then when we're in the car, if my son acts up, I just find that it's really quite a problem.

Although personal networks cannot substitute for material supports, she explains that they can provide the emotional and spiritual supports she needs:

I'm involved in a lot of spiritual work, but not as associated with the church...[However] I find that I'm getting a lot of support from other people who are in periods of spiritual growth, such as I'm experiencing.

Women from African cultures may miss their extended family networks, and Canadian communities offer little support to replace these. **Nora** explains:

We have an extended family network in Somalia which is completely lost now. So most women would have had somebody to lean on back there, if they had lost their husbands. Here there's none. There's no network, there's no extended family. Everybody has their own load, as I said...the system's different...life's completely different from what it was.

Because she works in the community, **Rachèl** is well aware that not enough has been done at the community level to support single-parent women. She finds that her own network of real personal supports is very limited:

I find that really there isn't a lot of support, and that's where my work comes in. I do have help from my parents. It took quite a while to get that. I've only had that for maybe the last year and a half, and it took a lot of negotiating. But now they help out. They're not involved, but they're involved in providing some respite care and some things that maybe I don't have time, or maybe don't have money.

She sees communities as the most appropriate loci for developing more permanent support networks that assist families in caring work:

I think that we need to be more community oriented. That would certainly help out with a lot of issues. When you set up systems with your neighbours to help and watch out, I think that would make it a lot easier. Maybe they'll watch your children, but you can cook for them. I mean, not just [helping] with money.

As much as she sees the need for community cooperation, however, she does not mean to suggest that the bulk of community work, including child care, should be placed on the shoulders of single-parent women. She believes she also has a right to quality time, whether alone, with a friend, or with her child:

I don't really do that [babysit] anymore, because I'm with kids all day. When I have a weekend off (i.e., when my daughter is with her father), I don't want to see any kids. And when I don't have the weekend off, I want to spend it with [my daughter], because it's special time.

Where personal networks are not enough, some single-parent women turn the voluntary agencies within their communities for support.

B. Voluntary Sector

Surprisingly few of the women in my study had much to say about the support they receive (or do not receive) from the voluntary sector. As my interview with **Miriam** revealed, volunteer activities can provide important and reliable sources of respite care for single parents:

For the last year [my daughter] has had a Big Sister. That has been, I think, a real blessing. A real blessing for the both of us. [Her Big Sister] has been kind of like the extended family that I don't have here. Because I don't have any family here. So she's been able to build a relationship with [my daughter], and help [my daughter] to build trust with strangers, and to have somebody who she can feel comfortable talking to. And they go and they do all kinds of fun things. And it's a very consistent pattern, you know. They have a certain time slot each week when they see each other. For me it's wonderful, because I get 4 hours. And I know that's quality time that I don't have to worry about her. It's really a very healthy experience for [my daughter] and for me. Getting space.

Many community organizations such as Big Sisters have a great deal of experience in linking members of the community together in relationships that are flexible and responsive to each

other's needs.³⁷ Four hours per week, however, certainly isn't enough to reduce seriously the uneven burden borne by single-parent women, who are responsible both for caregiving and breadwinning. Furthermore, encouraging increased volunteer activity and community involvement is not an easy task for organizations; it requires money and time. Governments are reducing their already insufficient levels of funding to voluntary organizations, and the voluntary sector may look to the market for support as a result. The market has not proven to be an ally for poor women and their families. For example, to become economically efficient, the voluntary sector would have to tier its services, or reduce the scope of its programs. Economic inequalities would be increased.

The interviews revealed that single-parent women are just as likely to be volunteers as other parents. Both at home and within their communities, single-parent women often are expected to pick up the slack where fathers have neglected their responsibilities and governments have withdrawn their support. At the same time, community work was viewed by several of the women as an important source of empowerment. For example, as **Rachèl** explained her educational and employment goals to me, she expressed extreme frustration with the obstacles preventing her from pursuing them; however, a quick turn-about brought her back to her successes:

...those things are very frustrating, and I feel kind of powerless about that. On the other hand, I feel very empowered because I have made a lot of decisions. I am

³⁷I have been a Big Sister volunteer for more than three years. To my mind, spending time with one young woman (who lives in single-parent household) is, in its own way, a political statement. I view the time we spend together as being not only of value to Karla (my Little Sister), but also of broader societal value. The Big Sisters Organization has built and struggles to maintain the bridge that makes this possible.

working. I am involved in the community. I am trying to get the newsletter started, which is very kind of empowering, and is a very good way of meeting other people in the community, and reaching out for more support, and providing myself with the support I need to be empowered. I feel that, within myself, I have a lot of power.

It is clear that community work for most of these women is a two-way street; as **Miriam's** case demonstrates, women cannot expect to receive support from their communities without contributing to them in return:

I guess people could say I get suckered in real easy. Anyway, what they [daycare, board of directors] did was they got me volunteering and they paid for my babysitting. And it wasn't a normal thing to have done... But I decided I would take advantage of it, because, number one, it got me out... and [number two] I got to put back into the daycare what they had given me. But I only got to put a little back in comparison to what they gave me. But I got to play a role and I did that for two or three years. I was the secretary. It was a real pain in the butt, and there were some days I really hated it, but I felt it was worth it. It was really good. So that kind of got me into being a little bit more active.

Miriam has not only involved herself in the activities of her child's daycare centre, but also has integrated herself into other community activities that affect her daughter, such as church functions and Girl Guides. After describing her community activities in detail, she made a brief effort to explain her motivations and frustrations:

It's hard, it takes a lot of time. But, again, I don't see a lot of other parents doing it, and I don't see why not. But anyway, I do it. Because it's important. Sometimes, if I'm not there, or some of the other moms who are the consistent parents, the function wouldn't happen. So not only would my daughter be disappointed, a lot of others would.

Reflection on her community activities led her to think more broadly about society's failure to support single-parent families:

I am part of the growing society that is not going to get anywhere. And there doesn't seem to be a lot of hope for us in the near future, to get anywhere with it. It's becoming more and more obvious to me that I'd probably do a better job

hitching at the politicians than I do anything else. It really seems to be something that kind of triggered me over the last little while, that I'd really like to play a more major vocal role in that somehow. Like if I had more time, I'd really like to get involved. And as time goes on, I probably will get more active, and try to get things changed. Because it's not there for us.

Not all of the women felt that involvement in community activities reflected a political will. For example, **Natalie**, participates on fundraising and advisory committees at her daughter's daycare, and in many fundraisings activities at work such as United Way. Yet when asked if she was involved in anything which she considered "political", she responded that it was not something that was really possible, or even necessary:

In all honesty, depending on what the issue was, and how it directly affected me and [my daughter], yeah I could do it. But I can't see myself taking on an issue that would be a general issue and that I wouldn't be directly affected by. I don't have the energy or the time. Maybe later. But right now, I'm really focused on this window of time that I have now.

Resources such as energy, time and money are not the only factors determining community involvement. **Nadia** feels language and cultural stereotypes have been strong barriers against her family's full participation in the Ottawa community. Here she describes her son's experience at school:

I really felt sorry for [my son] at the beginning, and I sometimes feel sorry for him now. He tried to stress that he is Russian, and for him to be Russian is not bad. But for the other kids, especially at the beginning, when he was different and he spoke a different language... And they have a very homogenous society at his school -- no immigrants, maybe 5 or 6 immigrants. And this is the bad side too, because they don't have an E.S.L. [English as Second Language] teacher.

Because of her disappointment with the curriculum at her son's school, **Nadia** has placed her son

in enrichment classes co-ordinated by one of the local school boards.³⁸

Some of the women emphasized their involvement in voluntary activities beyond those of their own ethnic communities. Within her own neighbourhood, **Sarah** has observed that people from different backgrounds come together at the local community centre to help each other during special events, like holidays:

We are Muslim, and when we are making our celebration, they help us, our community. Yeah, they help us. We used to make our celebration at the community centre... It's free... And at Christmas time, we help them, our community.

Her comments reflect a clear distinction between the broader neighbourhood community, involved at the centre, and "our community", referring to the shared cultural background of the Somalian families living in Ottawa.

C. Changing "the System"

Some of the women had more understanding of how communities operate, and suggested how problems can be resolved at the community level in ways that the state is unable to address. **Rachèl** recognizes that there are serious structural problems which need to be fixed, and that a better understanding of the need for collective social responsibility for child care is required:

Things like working and daycare affect everybody. Things like the value of stay-at-home moms affects everybody. I think maybe a lot of women might choose to stay home if it was more financially feasible. And I think that most parents are

³⁸Somalian children in Ottawa have experienced similar obstacles in their efforts to integrate into the school system. See Donna Kakonge Jesmond Parke's video My Name Is...I'm From Somalia, HRP, School of Journalism, Carleton University, April 1994.

very isolated because we're not living in communities, we're living as individuals

Rachèl sees her work in the community as essential for filling gaps in the services the state provides:

My goals are to become more involved in creating some kind of information network or umbrella organization for single parents, and I'm working towards that. I mean, it's kind of idealistic and all, but I think that there's a lot of things that can be done, and I think that they're going to have to be done because of government cutbacks.

She continues to view the government as performing a role in service provision while insisting the "system" needs an overhaul:

I think that the first and most obvious thing to do is take some of these organizations and make them talk to each other, and make the services more accessible, and more [parents] know [about them]. Because they can't help the people that need help if people can't find them

Nora also talked about the expense of the current welfare system and the need to restructure it to better reflect the reality of the vulnerable groups who require services:

That huge amount of money gets lost in bureaucracy and paperwork. So we need maybe a rearrangement of the whole system, but it shouldn't be at the cost of the poor of the poorest. Living in a country where we always pride ourselves on being the best in the world, that we have the best social system, we have this and that. I mean so many children are living in poverty. It's not something to be proud about.... We need to restructure the whole system. That's a fact.

As **Nora** explained in her profile, although the problems faced by many Canadian single-parent women are severe, these problems are exacerbated for women experiencing cultural and language barriers. Yet government supports do not target anything except their most basic needs (i.e., housing and food) and, despite their sensitivity to women's needs, community supports are hit and miss at best given the very small number of outreach workers (*...there are no--as far as I know-- services available out there to help them... There's just outreach, which helps a little bit,*

but what can we do ").

Existing government programs are not designed to cope with the diversity of women's experiences. **Celia** addressed the issue of racism in the existing welfare system:

Yes there's racism in society. But I think it is much more systemic than perhaps people being racist themselves. There's a lot of things in the system that can be questioned. But again, those systems and administrations were designed way ahead of time, before Canada became multicultural. But I think this is the time for us to address it.

As a community development officer, **Celia** has discovered for herself the shortcomings of traditional views on community service work, and has chosen an alternative, community development model. Here she gives an example of how conventional, standardized approaches to community services are insensitive to the fast-changing needs of communities.

A lot of us are so book-oriented. You have to use a certain methodology, a certain formula. Community service is totally different, because people are different; they come from all walks of life and ... they're likely to change with the situation. If it's a racial issue, the way people are going to react will be totally different from if it was a murder in the community, or an illness. People are likely to be more sympathetic if it has something to do with an illness or murder. If it's a racial thing, believe it or not, that atmosphere will be so charged that you have to know that it's a totally different thing, and how you're going to present yourself. How you're going to address the two issues is going to be totally different. There's no formula to that.

Why does **Celia** prefer a community development approach?

I have to say that I really like it because it allows me room for creativity and for doing things the way I want and knowing that you can decide on an approach that may not work, but that's not the end of the world -- you try something else. So there's a lot of room for learning and experimenting with different ideas, and I really have to say that I enjoy my work.

Celia considers the impact of conventional community service philosophy on the situations of single-parent women:

There's going to be more families breaking up, and there's going to be less services for single parents. Now, given that reality, what do people do? I think that if there's any programs to be developed by social services, there should be more programs that will give single parents skills to survive. They need more sustainable skills, skills for women to survive better, or to cope better. Because when you continue to provide services, there's a tendency to become dependent to a lot of extent. I think people should be given skills to develop a sense of their own ways of doing things.

Rachél's job as a program coordinator does not involve all of the outreach activities that **Celia's** work as a community development officer does, but her critique of provincial job retraining initiatives echoes **Celia's** call for a new approach to program planning which better reflects an understanding of the different and changing needs of single-parent women. She argues:

Most people that I know who have gone through retraining don't get jobs. Or they get really shitty jobs. I mean, taking someone out of the home to go into a shitty job, with low pay, that doesn't have job satisfaction is useless. I mean, leave them at home and encourage them to educate their children; encourage them to join things like community kitchens; encourage them to do whatever they want to do, so that they can develop skills they might need; encourage them to make decisions, and help them with their self-esteem. Focus on all these things, because if you just retrain them for some stupid job, they're not going to be very happy, and they're not going to get very far.

Celia feels that the state has responsibilities to women beyond the parameters of social services.

The primary one is job creation:

My goal is to mobilize all the women who are on social assistance, and let them know that [they] have [their] rights as consumers. Welfare comes up with all these changes and then dumps them on women, and they can't question it, they can't say anything. I say, "You're consumers, you pay taxes, you have the right to refuse the kind of policies that are imposed on you simply because you are a recipient." So my goal is to mobilize them all (she laughs). Until the government comes up with the programs that put you in the workforce, you are entitled to that cheque, and you can really take it without feeling guilty.

Still, she is not optimistic that support will continue to come from the federal or provincial levels

of government. She believes the province's cutbacks in services to communities will force changes in community services philosophy:

I don't subscribe to the curative approach of social services, but the way to ease this "hurt" is going to go until such a time when there's no services or no resources. Then they can use the community development approach

Meeting basic needs (housing, employment and child care) is more difficult for low-income single-parent women, and for some, particularly recent immigrant women, it would be impossible to attain a reasonable standard of living without government and community support. Personal networks are important to most people, but the initial stages of single motherhood often mean a temporary break down in women's existing support systems, both personal and financial, and the need to rebuild their lives. Community work can also provide important sources of support for women, but not without reciprocal effort. The paucity of support for these women requires a re-evaluation of the possibilities of community practice.

Although community supports were important to all of the women to some degree, they were clearly more important for women who lacked outside financial support and/or who faced cultural and language barriers. Communities are dynamic, and the sources of support women receive change over time. In many ways, the community supports, where they exist, are more sensitive to the diversity of women's experiences than are state supports. Still, community supports are not well co-ordinated and there are many reasons why this is so. In the next chapter, I assess the benefits of community development and community practice to single-parent women.

CHAPTER FIVE

Assessing Community Development From a Feminist Perspective

In the previous chapter, I reported on the importance of community work and community supports to the women in my study. **Nora, Celia** and **Rachèl** demonstrated a sense of personal empowerment through their employment as community workers. These women, more than the others, expressed views regarding the structural barriers constraining the choices of single-parent women, and expressed their dissatisfaction with the current welfare system. **Celia** proposed a model of social services based on a community development approach. Most of the women seemed less concerned about state issues; several indicated that the day-to-day struggle of surviving as a single parent means that such issues are not a priority for them. All were able to relate to discussions about community needs, and several explicitly revealed their views on culture and community. Culture and community are constantly interacting and changing.¹ The immigrant women I interviewed do not expect that their lives will remain the same. Differences between women's equality in Canada and their home country, for example, will affect how these women perceive themselves as citizens.

In this chapter, I outline some of the key arguments recently made by proponents of community development. The first section includes perspectives on the political climate which has fostered a renewed interest in community development in Canada. I consider how community development has the potential to be either progressive or regressive depending on the

¹Sue Lees, "Sex, Race and Culture: Feminism and the Limits of Cultural Pluralism," Feminist Review, No. 22, 1986: 97.

assumptions underlying its practice. Building on the progressive potential of community development, in the second section, I consider how a feminist approach to community development differs from other approaches and argue that it provides the conceptual tools and methods required to facilitate grass-roots strategies that will assist and empower single-parent women.

5.1. Community Development -- A Progressive Force or Self-Help Capitalism?

In chapter one, I noted the convergence of left-wing and right-wing perspectives in terms of their tendency to critique the welfare state. Rekart (1993) argues that this convergence has increased support for welfare pluralism (a view which posits that the government, the voluntary sector, and the market should share responsibility for providing community supports). There are key differences between the two perspectives: The left wishes to reform the welfare state; the new right wants to abolish it, or at least roll it back. The new right, or neo-conservatives, support monetarist policies which they believe will curb inflation and will regenerate the economy. This is the approach currently being taken by the Progressive Conservatives in Ontario. In general they are anti-collectivists and unconcerned about issues of equality.² This perspective assumes that individuals will have no incentive to foster economic development unless forced to by the market, and that state activities in the realm of welfare impinge on the freedom of individuals.

²For a recent example of such a neo-conservative argument, including an attempt to justify/ deny the poverty of single-parent women, see Christopher Sarlo, *Poverty in Canada*. Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1992.

From a left perspective, the welfare state has improved the situation of the poor sectors of society, but it has not effectively reduced inequality among citizens. The contradictory role of the state undermines this social democratic goal. Rekart explains the source of this contradiction:

Government assists in capital accumulation through expenditure on both the economic infrastructure and the social services. A fiscal gap results because government bears the costs while profits are privately appropriated. It is exacerbated by pressure for more and more government services and resistance to increased taxation.³

In this sense, richer sectors of society receive "welfare" in the form of advantageous tax laws. Segments of both the new right and the left look to non-governmental sectors for solutions to the current welfare state.⁴

Although welfare pluralists believe that other sectors, such as the market and voluntary sectors, should expand their roles in welfare activities, their approach should not be confused with that of the New Right advocates, who also believe in reduced government involvement in social welfare provision. Rekart (1993) explains the former's views of the public sector's role in a pluralist system:

Welfare pluralists view the state or government as a necessary participant in a pluralist system. They point to the superior ability of the governmental sector to provide universal and integrated planning, to set and monitor standards, to achieve equity and social justice through resource allocation, and to preserve democratic control. They argue that the service delivery role is less suited to government, however, because the public sector tends to be costly, large-scale, bureaucratic, inflexible, and resistant to innovation. The over-centralized and bureaucratic

³Josephine Rekart, Public Funds, Private Provision: The Role of the Voluntary Sector, Vancouver, UBC Press, 1993, 18.

⁴Ibid., 16-18.

public sector is remote, impersonal, and insulated from popular control and public involvement. Although control and accountability are vested in elected representatives, the professionalism and paternalism inherent in the public sector deter public involvement and it remains impervious to the grievances and preferences of those who are served. Leaving service delivery in the hands of the public sector perpetuates the view of the public as client and government as the provider.⁵

The shifting approaches to state support in Canada and other western industrialized countries have generated a renewed interest in welfare pluralism, and the concept of community development more generally, in the 1990s. In 1992, for example, the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs (then NDP) sponsored the International Forum on Community Economic Development. The proceedings emphasized several findings which could revitalize community economic development (CED) in Ontario: building communities in a new way which does not rely on mega-solutions; broadening the focus from job creation to include aspects of social development; and defining CED as a process which involves consultation with and the participation of a number of groups. In this latter case, "the definition of community economic development will not be static for any community over time, and will evolve as the community defines and redefines its needs."⁶

Supporting people through community action and aid was an important part of our Canadian heritage before welfare responsibilities were transferred to the state. The Canadian state has retained an interest in community through CED projects. Since the 1960s, the federal

⁵*Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁶Ontario. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs Intergovernmental Committee on Urban and Regional Research. International Forum on Community Economic Development: Proceedings. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, (February) 1992, 5.

government has funded many CED initiatives, particularly to assist Aboriginal communities.

Boothroyd argues that the commitment of Aboriginal groups to community projects and politics has inspired a renewed interest in 'community' in Canada:

From well-publicized examples of self-government agreements and land claim settlements between Native communities and Canadian governments, non-Native communities can see the advantages of increasing the powers and scope of their own local governments in such areas as resource management, education, child welfare, economic development, and membership status. People in non-Native communities are also learning from Native examples that a strong community involves commitment to people and place, identity developed through time and reaffirmed through rituals, and cooperation in a broad range of activities -- in brief caring and sharing.⁷

Quebec also is quite advanced in its CED activities.⁸ Drawing on the Quebec experience, Shragge (1990) makes a distinction between community-based practice, which includes Alternative Service Organizations (ASOs) and CED initiatives, and economic development more generally. ASOs tend to be more radical, and aim to fill gaps in service provision. CED makes economic development a central concern, but in such a way that state funding and private sector involvement are at a minimum. The aim is to find alternative, or third sector sources of funding. These include non-profit co-operatives and community development corporations. At their most progressive, ASOs and CED initiatives provide the seeds of radical struggle at the grass-roots level. An essential component of successful CED planning involves a commitment to "bottom

⁷Peter Boothroyd, "Community Development: The Missing Link in Welfare Policy", Ideology, Development and Social Welfare: Canadian Perspectives, Bill Kirwin (ed.), Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 1991, 113.

⁸Eric Shragge, "Community Based Practice: Political Alternatives or New State Forms?" Bureaucracy and Community: Essays on the Politics of Social Work Practice, Linda Davies and Eric Shragge (eds.) Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990.

up" activity from the individuals within the community, in tandem with "top down" activity from the state. Aboriginal groups have made bottom-up decision making an essential condition for their participation in state CED programs directed at their communities. Shragge argues that most alternative organizations challenge existing social institutions at the same time that they work with state programs. In his assessment, Shragge found that it is very difficult for ASOs and CED projects to maintain autonomy. As they grow, they become increasingly bureaucratized and traditional in their approaches.

Community projects are often ad hoc, which is both a strength and a weakness. He comments:

Local groups become part of the shift from the State to a combination of the private sector, the community, and the family as playing a more central role in social provision. The concept of partnership...describes the situation in which the government is holding out a hand for groups such as ASOs to join in a redefinition of the social and health services. Similarly in CED, local organizations have become part of a process of local economic development, driven by the private sector. The consequences of the government actions are profound. They can integrate groups that have acted independently and represented community interests into either the network of the state social and health services or local economic development. At the same time, state action such as cutting back services and finding less expensive alternatives (often because of cheap labour in community-based organization), becomes increasingly legitimated because of the presence and participation of these community-based organizations.⁹

He argues that projects based on a progressive social vision and 'community empowerment' must form alliances: "Their ability to maintain clear vision, and their ability to build local community support and federate with similar organizations becomes the central factor in their ability to

⁹Ibid., 172.

protect their practice, and, orientation."¹⁰

Often the stated purpose of community development programs is to empower disadvantaged groups and communities. 'Empowerment' is one of several concepts used by CED practitioners which will prove problematic in their application if not deconstructed. Alan Barr, for example, questions the meaning of empowerment as the term is used increasingly by governments advocating a renewed interest in community development:

For the poor to be powerful is a contradiction -- they lack market power, they lack organisational or social status because they are victims of predominant power distribution. Why should they trust the overtures of the state as an agency of empowerment?¹¹

I agree with Barr that empowerment is an ambiguous term, which can be adapted to support different ideologies. Ontario's Conservative government, for example, argues that reduced welfare budgets will permit reduced taxes, which ultimately will empower consumers and the private sector. This despite the fact that responsibility for community care is devolving to the community at the same time that funding for community initiatives is drying up, because the market is seen as the driving force behind community and individual sustainability. But even when funding for development has been available, Canadian policies generally have reflected a liberal view of development which focuses on stimulating or maintaining business activity and/

¹⁰Ibid., 173.

¹¹Alan Barr, "Empowering Communities -- Beyond Fashionable Rhetoric? Some Reflections on Scottish Experience", Community Development Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1995: 128.

or employment, without the necessary social development activities.¹² CED approaches, which focus on individualistic empowerment within the market, are concerned "not with inequity but with the value for money and, since its benefits accrue more to those with greater economic power in the market, it may actually increase inequity."¹³

Some proponents of community development, argue that past CED policies in western industrialized countries often have been much less progressive, providing funding which is short-term and project-based, and which does not reflect a thorough understanding of the community base being targetted.¹⁴ Single-parent women, for example, risk being placed in an even more precarious situation if individualistic, market-oriented interpretations of "empowerment" continue to guide public policy. As Susan Heald (1992) reports, Canadian CED efforts have often further stigmatized single-parent women by categorizing them as "disadvantaged" and by not valuing the work they perform at home or in the job creation programs.¹⁵ Efforts to empower women without deconstructing the underlying assumptions of CED policies are doomed from the beginning.

As participants in a movement committed to equity, feminists have already grappled with

¹²Dal Brodhead, "Community Economic Development Practice in Canada", Community Economic Development: Perspectives on Research and Policy, Burt Galaway and Joe Hudson (eds.) Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., 1994: 2.

¹³Alan Barr, op cit.:122.

¹⁴Pete Alcock and Lars Christensen, "In and Against the State: Community-Based Organisations in Britain and Denmark in the 1990s", Community Development Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2, (April) 1995: 111.

¹⁵Susan Heald, "Gender, Region and Work in Canadian Job Creation Programs", Community Development Journal, Vol. 27, No. 1, (January) 1992.

many of the issues facing CED practitioners in their own politics. Within a patriarchal society, a shift in program delivery from the federal or provincial levels to municipal levels of government will mean little change for women. For example, although members of the same community often share the same value systems about many issues, including childrearing, these values may mirror the patriarchal structures that exist more broadly throughout Canadian society and within a capitalist economy. Facilitating grassroots interest in community care activities would require broad-based effort to redefine popular understandings of community participation in a way that values caregiving work and questions the gendered division of this work. I believe that only a feminist approach to community development provides the appropriate tools for accomplishing this.

5.2. Feminism and Community Development

Is there a difference between community-based development in general, and a feminist approach to community development? A feminist approach places women at the centre of community development.

On the basis of my research and discussions with the women I interviewed, I would argue that women's responsibility for community care makes their experiences of community activity much different from men's experiences. Community care refers to the activities women perform in the public sphere of the community which help them to fulfil their obligations within the private sphere of the home. From a woman-centred perspective, 'community' integrates the reproductive and caring work of women:

For women, the notion of community is not bound by territorial terrain. It encompasses those social relationships and networks constructed around the needs of those under our care and involves mediating and negotiating with private individuals, state agencies and commercial enterprises to fulfill the obligations that nurturing others imposes on us.¹⁶

As I have already argued, because caregiving work is not fully valued by the state or society, women are forced to mediate the gap between private and public sources of support. A welfare pluralist approach will not minimize this gap. Community development must make public sources of support for caregiving work a priority. As Lucy Alderson (1994) et al argue,

Women working in CED are...determined to acknowledge unpaid domestic work. Caring for children and elders, providing the nutritional and emotional support to enable family members to go to school and work, and carrying out household chores are key aspects of domestic production involving hours of daily work for most women.¹⁷

Jo Little (1994) argues that women's concerns must not simply be 'added on' in development planning.¹⁸ A feminist approach must place women at the centre of community planning. This requires moving beyond an interest in 'soft' areas traditionally associated with 'community care' into the 'hard' issues of economic development such as housing and employment. This view includes child care as an important aspect of the planning process. At the federal level, when Canadian feminists attempted to move beyond the status of women issues

¹⁶Lena Dominelli, "Women in the Community: Feminist Principles and Organising in Community Work", Community Development Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1995: 134.

¹⁷ Lucy Alderson et al, "Making Communities Work: Women and Community Economic Development", Community Economic Development: Perspectives on Research and Policy, 1994: 122.

¹⁸The author draws on experiences of women in Britain (where women's organizations mainly work at the local level). See Jo Little, Gender, Planning and the Policy Process, Oxford: Pergamon (Elsevier Science Ltd.), 1994.

into the 'hard' areas of economics (i.e., Free Trade Agreement) and politics (i.e., Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accord), they experienced resistance and backlash. In the end they were successful in making their views known, however, and in shaping the political discourse. There is no reason to believe that significant successes cannot be made at the community level which will contribute to the legitimacy of women's involvement in economic and political issues.

Feminists also offer a concrete methodological approach to community work. For example, Lena Dominelli (1995) argues that an ethic of community care must guide the activities of all community workers:

Working according to feminist principles, particularly those endorsing power-sharing, collective working and redefining professionalism, requires community workers to be more accountable to groups they work with, work more effectively collectively, share skills and develop more participatory mechanisms. Such approaches encourage the continued involvement of participants, refuel their commitment to the task at hand and boost their morale. They also facilitate their using their own skills and taking personal responsibility for the decisions each adopts as a member of the group. Community workers also need to promote consciousness-raising exercises enabling individuals to redefine their personal reality in social terms and acquire the freedom to express affective responses and emotions which connect external decision-making with their personal experiences.¹⁹

The term 'community care' refers to the move from institutional care, such as homes for children or the elderly, to non-institutional care, usually within the home of the service user.

While community care has advantages, such as allowing service users to lead more independent and fulfilling lives, it becomes problematic when adequate funding for community care services is not expanded, and the burden of caregiving falls on women.

While women throughout the world have historically been denied equal access to the

¹⁹Lena Dominelli, *op.cit.*:142.

public sphere, they have been instrumental in the survival and well-being of their communities.²⁰ Without the work that women do, particularly the unpaid labour of caring for families and other community members, society would come to a standstill. As responsibility for the vulnerable, including low-income single-parent families, devolves again to communities some feminists caution women to be wary of the rhetoric of 'community care'.²¹ Women's responsibilities as caregivers are in large part responsible for their poverty. The gendered nature of care-giving has both direct and indirect effects on women's opportunities in the labour market, not only because care-giving tasks are time-consuming, but also because the skills required are easily transferrable to the caring professions or low-level service sector jobs, which often pay less than traditional male occupations. In the absence of alternative supports, women are forced to become primary caregivers, reducing their ability to participate in the labour market, and jeopardizing their long-term financial security.²² It is useful first to deconstruct the meaning of 'community'. Walker, for example, asserts:

The notion of community, when presented in a neutral, objective, apolitical, ahistorical manner of ideology, obscures under the guise of individual and group

²⁰Marilyn Waring, If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.

²¹"'Community care' is often a code for women's unpaid or underpaid work, reducing the costs of social reproduction to the state, and both humanising and filling gaps in state provision." In Jan Pettman, Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia. North Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty. Ltd., 1992, 86.

²² See Patricia M. Evans in "The Sexual Division of Poverty: The Consequences of Gendered Caring," Women's Caring: Feminist Perspectives on Social Welfare. Carol Baines et al. (eds.) Toronto: Mclelland and Stewart, 1991. She discusses the powerlessness, isolation and stigma which accompany women's economic poverty, and how this poverty is linked to women's traditional responsibilities as caregivers in society.

interests the whole network of structuring of people's lives in terms of class, gender and racial features that are embedded in particular relations of production. It also depoliticizes issues, or excludes those which are unequivocally political in nature.¹¹

It is important to maintain a critical perspective, therefore, when considering the role of community in caregiving activities.

There are parallels between the U.K. shift from "care in the community" to "care by the community"¹² and the Ontario government's efforts to force through its welfare changes without sufficient planning or provision of alternative resources for communities. In assessing the impacts of privatization on community services in England, Mary Langan (1990) shows that local authority social service departments were expected to change from service providers to "enabling agencies", responsible for "assessing need, planning services and promoting consumer choice" among a range of public, private and voluntary organisations.¹³ A new administrative and funding structure would give local authorities more power, but with less money at a time when demands for social care are increasing because of demographic changes. She argues, further, that in its move toward privatization, the government has made

little concession to demands to make community care more accountable to users

¹¹Gillian Walker, "Reproducing Community: The Historical Development of Local and Extra-Local Relations," Community Organization and the Canadian State, Roxana Ng, Gillian Walker and Jacob Muller (eds.) Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990, 42.

¹²"Care in the community' means that state-funded programs are delivered at the community level. 'Care by the community' means informal networks such as family and friends assume more of the burden of caring, with fewer government supports. See Mary Langan, "Community Care in the 1990s: the Community Care White Paper: 'Caring for People'," Critical Social Policy, Vol. 10, No. 29, 1990-91: 61.

¹³Ibid.: 59.

and carers, and more open to popular participation. Black and ethnic minority organisations have identified a continuing failure to make the provision of community care more responsive to the particular needs of black and ethnic minority communities.²⁶

Also speaking in a critical vein, Harriet Cain and Nira Yuval-Davis (1990) found that there have been ideological and political shifts in the use of the term 'community' which have affected the 'race relations industry' in Britain.²⁷ They argue that even the more radical local authorities, which took the equal opportunities 'popular planning' approach, encountered problems in redefining 'community'. By including marginalized groups within a new definition of community, authorities assumed that all members of these groups would share common goals, or would belong to exclusively one group. They state:

The new uses of the term 'community' have succeeded in breaking with the old monopoly of a cultural essentialist category constructed around country of origin, but in the process has constructed new essentialist categories of difference (be it 'black', 'Asian', 'woman' 'gay' or 'disabled'), to the extent that individuals continue to be reduced to an all encompassing category both in terms of their treatment as well as their identity and empowerment.²⁸

Clearly, even well-intentioned programs can go awry. Unfortunately, Cain and Yuval-Davis are unable to offer any solutions, except to state the need to avoid 'tunnel vision resistance to racism' by "contextualizing race within ethnic process and considering how the racialisation of ethnic boundaries takes place and how these involve gender and class differences and exclusions."²⁹

²⁶Ibid.: 59.

²⁷Harriet Cain and Nira Yuval-Davis, "The 'Equal Opportunities Community' and the Anti-Racist Struggle," Critical Social Policy, Vol. 10, No. 2, (Autumn) 1990: 5.

²⁸Ibid.: 23.

²⁹Ibid.: 24.

They argue that gender and class difference can become subordinated to culture. They conclude:

A new definition and interpretation of the areas of culture and community is necessary... which would make them sites of positive resistance and redefinition. However, although this is necessary, the task is daunting and by no means yet clarified.³⁰

The dynamics of political struggle are complex, and it will be easy for divisions to occur in and between communities, especially as resources become increasingly scarce. The end result will be that concern for individual survival will supersede interest in collective agitation and organization. I agree with the assessment that organizations with progressive agendas will have to build coalitions to avoid undermining each other's goals, to provide sources of information to program planners, and to maintain a critical, central voice for community-based organizations.

Community development has been an important part of the experience of minority women in Canada. If we are to generate ideas about how to restructure our communities to empower the vulnerable groups within them, we must consider the experiences of these women, whose rich history in community development largely has been ignored or distorted. Their experiences demonstrate that traditional paradigms of community development will not deal adequately with the issues facing many women and their families today:

Community development cannot be learned solely through formal schooling or reading books. It is a process whereby people analyse and act in order to have more control over decisions that affect their lives. It is a process of learning by doing. Thus, when we talk of "community development", we are referring to those specific efforts in community work which are aimed at enabling immigrant women to bring about change in their lives, as women, as immigrants, as visible minorities and perhaps as members of the working class, not individually but as a

³⁰*Ibid.*, 22-3.

community.³¹

What approach(es) to community development and social support has the ability to empower vulnerable groups? Reflecting on the experiences of immigrant women in Ontario, Tania Das Gupta explains that any approach must be

antithetical to the conventional approach, which in "helping" individual immigrant women to overcome their immediate problems, does not necessarily empower the women to take control over their own lives. In fact, in the traditional social service structures, the unequal relationship of the "professional" and "client" is maintained. Merely delivering direct services to immigrant women as an end in itself is a band-aid solution in the absence of more comprehensive networking, support and advocacy.³²

Previous initiatives aimed at helping immigrant women have been undermined by lack of long-term funding and vision.

There has been an expanding interest in community service initiatives in Ontario that link the needs of vulnerable groups such as immigrants and single-parent women. I will focus on two recent examples which I feel demonstrate the importance of taking a clear feminist approach to community issues. A recent article in the Food Section of the Ottawa Citizen describes how collective kitchens function.³³ It claims that this "food and labour-sharing concept" originated in Montreal approximately six years ago, and that several similar initiatives have already been

³¹ Tania Das Gupta, Learning From Our History: Community Development By Immigrant Women In Ontario, 1958-1986. A Tool For Action, Toronto: Cross Cultural Communication Centre, 1986, 12.

³² Ibid., 12.

³³ Kathleen Walker, "Collective Kitchens: Immigrants and People with Low Incomes are Cooking Meals Together to Learn New Skills and Make Ends Meet", Ottawa Citizen, Wednesday, January 31, 1996: B10.

undertaken in Ottawa, with varying degrees of success, and some with little or no government support.³⁴ The article points out that new immigrants to Ottawa -- those of Arab, Cambodian and Somalian backgrounds are named -- are often unfamiliar with the foods that are available in Canada and can therefore benefit from this type of community program. The benefits available to single-parent women are also emphasized.

Unfortunately, what may begin as a good idea can quickly turn into a bad one: Within the rhetoric of collective support and knowledge-sharing is the message -- explicit in this case -- that poor women "can make it on their own with careful planning and budgeting."³⁵ While it is important to help these women achieve autonomy, it is also important to be careful of the language of neo-conservatism which suggests that solutions to their problems rest primarily within their individual sphere of influence rather than at broader, structural levels. Furthermore, the article reinforces the fact that women are the primary workers in these collective kitchens. At the same time, this service is essential to the well-being of these women and responds to their diverse needs. As Anne Bullock argues, 'community care' is a contradictory concept, while the state promotes it in the interest of reducing expenditures, caregivers in a community often also believe that 'community care' is essential. The structure of that care, however, is problematic because of the extraordinary burdens it places on women in a patriarchal society.³⁶

³⁴One such program, Welcome Nutrition, failed because of lack of government funding.

³⁵Walker, *op.cit.*

³⁶Anne Bullock, Community Care of Severely Handicapped Children at Home: A Moment in the Organization of Women's Work, M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, School of

My second example of 'community care' -- the Babies Best Start program recently initiated in Metro Toronto by the Children's Aid Society (CAS) -- made the national news page in the Globe and Mail.³⁷ The article addresses the isolation that new mothers experience, particularly as members of vulnerable (poor and marginalized) groups.³⁸ The article documents the success of the program in Scarborough, which is known for its high population of minority families, who often experience poverty, isolation and language barriers in dealing with social programs and their co-ordinators. As in the reports by the women in my study, the article reveals the sharp contrast between childrearing in societies where supervision is less required because of extended family networks and the impact of different norms regarding child-rearing which place a much heavier responsibility on mothers. The program has been successful in helping many of these families and in reducing the number of families on the CAS caseload. The benefits of this program are now being extended to other communities. Given the prominence the Globe and Mail gave the program, it may receive attention in other provinces and communities.

The home visitors, or 'community carers' in this program are mostly women, a situation which seems appropriate, at least in this case, because women are often primary caregivers for infants. Despite the emphasis on mothers, the education involves both parents when possible.

Social Work, 1986.

³⁷Jane Gadd, "Parents Guided by Experienced Hands," Globe and Mail, Friday, May 3, 1996: A6.

³⁸In Ottawa, a community information resource for women, Woman's Place, established with the involvement of minority women, has set up a smaller operation which attempts to link new mothers with more experienced ones. However, insufficient funding obviously limits their efforts. The involvement of the state via the police and CAS legitimates the efforts of the Babies Best Start program.

In the Babies Best Start program, however, a special effort is made to ensure that the community 'carers' have experienced similar situations in their own lives, and often come from the ethnic community they seek to help."⁹ (In my own research, both Nora and Celia demonstrated an ability to draw on their past experiences as recent immigrants in their community work.) The home visitors are screened and trained by police and CAS (regarding Canadian norms of childrearing, supposedly) and then begin their work. The home visitors interviewed for the article demonstrated a critical self-consciousness about their role, acknowledging the fine but distinct line between friendship and caregiving.

I feel that the above programs show some progress towards helping poor women and their families adjust to life in Canada at this time. Of course, the help and information offered is of little use if families do not have the money they need to acquire adequate food and shelter, as well as the benefits of good health care and education. Community service programs must be supported by job creation strategies which seek to guarantee sufficient wages for women, especially poor women, and to provide supports for families, such as adequate child care.

Progressive approaches to community development that make the feminist principle of social development central offer new opportunities to challenge assumptions about welfare and to give caregiving new value in our society. By making women's concerns integral to community planning, many of the difficulties experienced by some single-parent women could

⁹This is quite different, for example, from the services provided by the Victorian Order of Nurses, which no longer provides on-going maternal and child health services in Ontario (although they do help early discharged mothers and teach prenatal classes). While they try to meet the needs of their clients, there is no guarantee that they can provide services that are sensitive to cultural difference. (Personal communication, Ruth Miller, Communications Director, Victorian Order of Nurses, National Office, Ottawa, on May 24, 1996.)

be offset. I have examined two initiatives, collective kitchens and the Babies Best Start program which demonstrate some reactions to the changing needs of single-parent women within their communities. These can be important sources of support as long as they continue to challenge the structural constraints experienced by women and immigrants. As my interviews revealed, however, the meaning of community has different meanings for different groups, at different times. Building networks and institutions that respect diversity is not easy, and not possible unless the underlying structural issues also are addressed.

Feminism faces many challenges in Canada's changing political culture. In the next chapter, I explore some of these challenges, particularly those that have hindered the woman's movement in English Canada from fully supporting women in their roles as caregivers.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

I have argued that a feminist approach to community development offers possibilities for empowering single-parent women. My work has led me to ask two important questions, however. First, considering the urgency of the situation of single-parent women, why has the English-Canadian women's movement failed to represent the interests of single-parent women? Second, is focusing on social policy (at any level) the best way of creating alternatives for single-parent women?

Although the woman's movement has had some important victories which empower women as mothers, such as mother's allowances and maternity benefits, mothers generally have not been well-represented. There certainly is no comprehensive strategy for helping single-parent women. This 'absence' is explained in part by the existence of a broad ideological spectrum within feminism which has generated seemingly intractable divisions among women on central but problematic issues related to single motherhood. This schism is best exemplified by the debates within the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) over wages-for-housework.¹ Vickers et al. explain that

the wages-for-housework issue was the first to challenge the fairly comfortable agreement between liberal and leftist feminists about the way 'liberated' women

¹In Chapter Four, I noted that the debate over public versus private child care also has been divisive for women. Many wish to care for their own children at home, a position that contradicts the argument made by most feminists, who advocate a universal child care system.

ought to live. Liberals and leftists agreed that women's participation in the paid workforce was the key to their liberation and that the unpaid activities of child-rearing and housewifery for one's own family were not acceptable full-time occupations for liberated women. They had all kinds of good, substantive reasons for their views: stay-at-home women were unpaid, denied pensions, vulnerable because of economic dependency on their spouses, and generally demigrated by society....²

Class and race were important factors in this debate. First, many women who work at home full-time to care for their children are single-parent women, and are poor. A focus on paid work meant that "women on welfare or mothers' allowance were urged to 'get work' instead of being paid adequately for the work they were already doing in their homes."³ Second, throughout Canada's history, immigrant and/or minority women have been hired, for very low pay, to work in the houses of middle- and upper-class white women, cleaning and caring for their children. The question of whether all paid work is liberating, productive and enjoyable became central. In the end, NAC was accused of being unsympathetic to women in poverty. Although feminists acknowledge that the unpaid work that women do in the private sphere is undervalued by society, most have contributed to its devaluation by stressing that paid work is the only real solution for women.

Because the policymaking activities of the woman's movement mainly have reflected the frameworks offered by the state, we have been forced into the 'to work, or not to work' dilemma.

²In fact, opposition within NAC to Wages for Housework (WHH) groups was so strong that their applications for admission were denied. Although, since the 1970s, NAC has reconsidered and absorbed some aspects of the WHH analysis, the issue still is a major fault line in the English-Canadian woman's movement. See Jill Vickers et al., Politics as if Women Mattered: A Political Analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1993, 255-259.

³Ibid., 257.

As I have demonstrated, and as most feminists understand, the situation is not so straightforward. Women's attachments to the labour force depend on many factors, but because a 'position' must be formulated in our activities with the state, agents of the women's movement have focused on equality issues in which the greatest gains for the greatest number of women can be made.

In Chapter One, I presented the recommendations made by Susan Clark, regarding the changes needed to employment policy, such as valuing part-time work more highly and providing a pan-Canadian child care program, that would help all women, including those who parent alone. Such a position reflects a long-term commitment to all women, including poor women. Because many different kinds of families exist today, and because some are likely to be disadvantaged by reforms made in the interests of 'the family', feminists seek instead to ensure equality for women as individuals, not in their roles as mothers. Reform era feminists were able to gain reforms for mother-led families based on their roles as mothers and in the name of 'the family'.⁴ These reforms never effectively challenged the heterosexual, two-parent family norm in policy. As my study demonstrates, gender, race and class affect the experiences of single motherhood of the women I interviewed. Re-defining welfare structures may permit us to challenge the underlying assumptions that support a gendered division of labour in our society, as well as race and class divisions.

Employment and child care issues are key to addressing women's poverty, but immediate solutions are not on the horizon.⁵ In the end, the state has been unable to transcend the

⁴Caroline Andrew, "Women and the Welfare State," Canadian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 14, No.4, December 1984: 674.

underlying patriarchal and racist assumptions which prevent it from adapting to modern realities. Rather than challenging these assumptions, and restructuring itself accordingly, the state chooses instead to privatize its functions. It may be that such norms and values must first be changed through women's organizing and activism in the community.

As Dorothy Smith has pointed out, women's movements, like other movements or activities, are embedded in the relations of ruling and therefore the range of options available to us in our organizing are limited by the political, economic and social contexts of our struggles.⁶ It is important, therefore, to adopt an approach which permits us to adapt to the ever-changing contexts in which women act. Individual political women and feminist organizations have recognized historical moments of political opportunity and used them to increase women's equality through their interactions with the state. Since the establishment of the National Council of Women, women have been working at the federal level to increase state responsibility for many aspects of social welfare. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which provided the foundations for NAC, also provided an important and long-lasting relationship with the state. As Sue Findlay explains, however, the Canadian state has not always been supportive of policies put forth by members of the women's movement: "Responsiveness was limited to brief periods and was almost entirely due to converging political forces at a particular moment

⁶Brigitte Kitchen, "The Political Economy of Poor Mothers," Canadian Woman Studies, Vol. 12, No. 4, (Summer), 1992.

⁷Dorothy E. Smith, "Feminist Reflections on Political Economy," Studies in Political Economy, No. 30, 1989: 57.

rather than reflecting any rational commitment to women's equality."⁷

Caroline Andrew (1984) explains that, despite women's central role in creating the welfare state, they have not had huge successes as clients of and workers in the welfare state.

She comments:

Women play a very major role as workers in the welfare state but their power is limited. They provide many of the front-line direct services but they do not determine the form of these services. They care for the clients of the welfare state but they have little influence on the direction of the welfare state.⁸

My study clearly demonstrates that, given our society's value system, which stigmatizes social programs, many women feel a loss of autonomy as clients of the welfare state. The diverse population of those who need services means that the state's response is sometimes too broad.

Andrew states,

Although women make up the significant clientele groups of these programmes it can be argued that, in many respects, these programmes do not respond to the real needs and to the real situation of their clients."

So it is not suprising that several of the women I interviewed had contradictory ideas about the role of government in helping single-parents.

While the federal and provincial governments have been inclined to support policies for reform relating to status of women, they have been less supportive of initiatives aimed at transforming women's roles in society. Sandra Burt (1988) argues:

⁷Sue Findlay, "Facing the State: The Politics of the Women's Movement Reconsidered", Feminism and Political Economy: Women's Work, Women's Struggles, (eds.) Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton, Toronto: Methuen, 1987, 33.

⁸Andrew, op.cit.: 678.

⁹Ibid.: 679.

There is little reason to believe that, without a strong commitment from within government to breaking down traditional gender roles, the concept of separate spheres will cease to define future boundaries for action, or that creative new definitions of these roles will evolve and reflect more fully women's experiences and understanding.¹⁰

Burt argues that the government will not increase its commitment unless more women are involved in federal and provincial legislatures. I believe the representation women can provide at the provincial and federal levels will reflect the reality that power relations are shifting back to the community context. The transformation and restructuring of roles within the private and public spheres must allow women to play greater roles in community and government politics. Representation and accountability could have new meaning.

Because of these changes, many feminists view efforts to reform state activities as a waste of energy, money and time; they ask if the state, at least at the federal level, continues to be an appropriate focal point for women's organizing. Can we realistically expect that lobbying the federal state will achieve significant results for women's equality at this moment in Canadian history?¹¹ The possibility of influencing the state is diminished by its unwillingness to support (i.e., fund) feminist goals, as well as its declining ability with globalisation to control global economic forces that create women's poverty. In Chapter Three, I highlighted some of the international trends regarding single motherhood, and demonstrated that women throughout the

¹⁰Sandra Burt, "Legislators, Women, and Public Policy," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada, Sandra Burt et al., (eds.) McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988: 155.

¹¹Franco-Quebec feminists have argued that working with levels of government closest to women allows women to have more direct input. See Chantal Maillé, "The Women's Health Movement in Quebec Society," Conversations Among Friends -- Entre Amis: Proceedings of an Interdisciplinary Conference on Women and Constitutional Reform, David Schneiderman (ed.), Centre for Constitutional Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1993.

world are experiencing similar, and often more severe, poverty situations as those faced by Canadian women. The secondary status of women throughout most of the world because of the lack of value childrearing and other reproductive activities means that changes must occur at the international level. Jane Ursel comments that just when feminists are getting good at directing their political activities towards the state, it is possible that we may need to re-direct our theoretical and political work towards global and local relations instead.¹²

The state's historic relationship with women has been rife with contradictions, but it is not a relationship most Canadian feminists want to abandon. At the same time, resistance to decentralization and privatization of what are perceived by many to be government responsibilities in social welfare, such as health care, has been strong, and has required consistent effort on the part of feminists working at the federal level. Retaining an emphasis on national issues while adapting to the trend toward community responsibility for welfare poses a challenge to the English-Canadian women's movement. Its grassroots wing may be required to play an expanded role in community politics and decisionmaking.

In its struggle for social and political change, feminism in Canada has already begun the important work of building institutional links between all levels of women's social and political activities, from grass-roots to federal, and across a wide ideological spectrum. Vickers argues:

Feminism, whether suffrage-era or second-wave, has tended to support the enlargement of the realm labelled 'public.' If suffrage-era women lacked a strong tradition of looking to formal politics for a resolution of their dilemmas, they had developed instead a strong tradition of looking to *informal community* politics. This tradition of a public but sub-state focus, far from being displaced in recent

¹²Jane Ursel, Private Lives, Public Policy: 100 Years of State Intervention in the Family. Toronto: Women's Press, 1992.

decades, continues to run parallel to a tradition of increasing support for state-level intervention.¹³

Feminist organizations at the community level have experienced better success at helping single-parent women in their immediate support needs: women's shelters, women's resource centres and co-operative child care programs are a few. In the 1990s, reduced budgets means that the state is unable to provide welfare supports in the way it has during recent decades. This does not mean that we should no longer expect the state to provide funding for supports. In fact, significant state funding will be needed for many community-level services and development projects. It does mean women seeking the authority to shape and control community-level agencies as they did at the beginning of Canada's welfare state.

A new welfare state must be flexible to the changing needs of Canadians. I have shown that some women who parent alone find vital supports in their communities, especially recent immigrant women. Many of these women have started organizing to help each other adapt to motherhood in Canada. As the interviews revealed, community outreach work has been integral to the development of a system of supports for some minority women and their families. Their knowledge of community politics offers potential models for providing supports for single-parent women more generally, and their cultural understandings of childrearing can also challenge Canadian cultural norms about child care. I believe that feminists should continue to build on these understandings, and should use community-level solutions without fearing complicity with the New Right.

¹³Jill Vickers, "Feminist Approaches to Women in Politics," Beyond the Vote, Canadian Women and Politics, Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster (eds.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989, 22. (Italics in original.)

While increasing the community aspects of life is important for the well-being of single-parents and their children, and I agree that planning should occur with a "bottom-up" aspect, I feel that women must continue to focus on ensuring that the federal and provincial governments play a role in guaranteeing supports. Although Aboriginal peoples have reclaimed responsibility for their communities, they have not done so without government support. Other communities can work to be self-sufficient, and creative in their employment programs and other support strategies but cannot do so without continual support from larger governmental bodies. The federal government must continue to reduce regional economic disparities, and must work with the provinces to provide communities with the resources they need to ensure the long-term success of programs. New strategies will have to be developed at the community level, however, to ensure that these needs and goals are defined by all members of the community, including those who previously have been excluded from policy planning processes. I support a feminist vision of a different model of childrearing which involves all of the community more fully, including men. Working at the community level, we can move beyond simply adding women's interests into the existing policy process, to transforming that policy process so that issues of importance to women, such as child care, become central in determining the ever-changing structure and political culture of our society.

The progressive approaches to community development often reflect principles which seem compatible with feminism, but at the same time raise several concerns and questions. A recurring theme in the literature on community development, for example, is the need to build

long-term institutions at the local level.¹⁴ Issues of representation and accountability, coalition-building, organizational autonomy, networking and advocacy are important considerations in developing community infrastructures. Both in theory and in practice, Canadian feminists are experienced in handling the complexities of such issues. The survival of the National Action Committee (NAC), for example, despite the many external and internal conflicts it has faced, namely the challenge of creating broad-based support among women and facilitating coalitions between groups with divergent ideological positions and goals, attests to the political skill and commitment of feminists to building a long-term institutional structure committed to the democratic principle of equity.¹⁵ Such alternative institutions may play a greater role in facilitating inter- and intra-community relationships if the federal and provincial governments continue to abdicate their welfare responsibilities.

Andrew notes that women's political activities during the reform era emerged out of the extreme sense of isolation women experienced as a result of the separation of home from workplace.¹⁶ Although the women's movement succeeded in transferring responsibility for some welfare activities to the state, many women remain isolated, especially women living in poverty. The increasing constraints and pressures single-parent women face in Canada today continue to provide the impetus for social change. With the economic polarization of women in different

¹⁴Dal Brodhead, "Community Economic Development Practice in Canada," Community Economic Development: Perspectives on Research and Policy, Burt Galaway and Joe Hudson (eds.) Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1994: 3.

¹⁵Jill Vickers et al., op.cit., 22.

¹⁶Andrew, op.cit.: 673.

family forms, however, and the extreme diversity of experiences of motherhood. I believe that it is becoming increasingly difficult for women to recognize the commonalities we share. For this reason, it is important to move beyond abstract understandings of single motherhood towards exposing the concrete relations of single-parent women's experiences as they are affected by diversity. Through my research, I have attempted to reveal some aspects of this diversity and how it affects women's politics. Such diversity can create obstacles for organizing if not accepted, understood and bridged. Citing Audre Lorde, Sue Lees (1986) declares: "each woman must decide for herself whether it is the circumstances of her race, class or gender that most oppresses her and women must support each other in their struggles for liberation."¹

in the contemporary era, 'community' has acquired new meaning and political relevance which may once again change the meaning of single motherhood for many women. Communities already compensate in some ways for the deficiencies of the welfare state within a patriarchal society. If communities are to be a source of support for women, we must encourage women to move from their position of isolation in the private sphere of the home, into the public sphere of the community, where conditions for increased political activity by and for women may exist, and where a renewed vision of the state's responsibilities can be debated and fought for.

¹ Sue Lees, "Sex, Race and Culture: Feminism and the Limits of Cultural Pluralism" Feminist Review, No. 22, 1986: 101.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Introduction

- 1) How long have you been a single parent?
- 1b) How many children do you have at home? How old is your youngest child now?
- 1c) What circumstances led to your becoming a single parent?

Family background

- 2) What is your experience of "family", i.e., where were you raised; roles of family members?
- 2b) Has race made a difference in your experiences as a parent?

Education

- 3) What is your educational background?

Employment

- 4) Are you employed outside the home?

Childcare/Supports

- 5) Who helps you in raising or caring for your child ren (i.e., community, personal)?

Housing

- 6) What housing arrangements do you have?

Recreation

- 7) What kind of opportunities do you and/or your child/ren have for recreation/relaxation?

Activities (i.e., political)

8) Are you and/or your child/ren regularly involved in any events, activities or organizations?

Goals

9) What are some of the short- and/or long-term goals for you and your child ren?

Conclusion

10) Do you have any final comments?

Appendix B

Agreement to Participate

I understand the purposes of the research on the experiences of single mothers being conducted by Tammy in fulfillment of the requirements for her master's degree in the School of Canadian Studies. The interview process has been explained to me by Tammy and I have voluntarily agreed to participate. I am aware that there will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Check Back Procedures

I understand that the interviews I will be participating in will be taped. I agree that Tammy may quote me as long as I am not quoted by name and I cannot be identified. I will receive a copy of any section of the text in which I am quoted. I know I can ask for changes to any part of the text in which Tammy quotes me.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

END

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