

**The Experiences of Low Income Single Mother:  
The Impact of the CAS ‘Duty to report’ when using and accessing  
External Support Services**

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## **Abstract**

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The primary goal of this research project was to explore how the CAS ‘duty to report’ regulation impacts the decision of low income single mothers without prior CAS involvement to access and use support services external to CAS. Feminism was employed as the major theoretic principal and was used to gain an understanding of how such regulations can govern specific behaviours when single mothers access or use support services external to CAS. The need for this study derives from a lack of qualitative research that directly explores this phenomenon. Six individual, qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted for the purposes of this research project. The results emphasized the participants’ experiences and the findings spoke to the challenges of single motherhood in relationship to ‘duty to report’ and the perception of those who have an obligation to report.

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## Introduction

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Single mothers are among the poorest of the poor in Canada and this places them in a position of public and/or professional examination and investigation. A mother is expected to demonstrate domestic and child care competency. Those who cannot live up to these standards are categorized as failures and monitored. The power that is exercised by Child Protection Services (CAS) and the public through discourse and regulations can create a sense of suspicion of support systems for single mothers. This suspicion can produce a feeling of apprehension when accessing any social, educational, and medical services because all professionals and the public have a duty to report suspected child abuse and/or neglect (Tufford et al., 2010).

Many single mothers are faced with complex circumstances such as poverty, unsafe housing, violent ex-partners, mental health and/or addiction issues. In many cases, these issues are exacerbated or directly caused by system regulations/policies that are put into place by social services and may not be the fault of the mother. Regardless, the mother is blamed because she is not able to provide a stable environment for her child. Single mothers are not provided equal opportunities because dominant discourses place them in a risk category (Swift & Callahan, 2009). This category perpetuates the public and other professionals to deem these mothers as “unworthy”, thus giving them the ‘right’ to enact the ‘duty to report’ regulation.

Instead of placing these women and their families under the microscope, I believe that we should be looking at the systemic injustices that produce mother blaming values and critically examine the system failures that place many of these women and their families in precarious living circumstances. Social Workers and other professionals need to look beyond the mother blaming discourse and what are deemed to be ‘facts’. Instead, we need to look at the situation

through a critical lens and not blame single mothers for system flaws. If single mothers knew that they were not going to be blamed, they may not be hesitant when accessing/using support services or feel uneasy about disclosing complete details that could potentially provide more assistance. Social Workers need to understand that the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy can create a sense of trepidation for a single mother due to her knowledge that she is seen as “unworthy” in the eyes of the public. In accordance, this paper is going to explore how the child welfare ‘duty to report’ regulation impacts the decision of low-income single mother without prior CAS involvement to access and use support services external to CAS.

## Me as a Researcher

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I chose to explore how the child welfare ‘duty to report’ regulation impacts the decision of low-income single mother without prior CAS involvement to access and use support services external to CAS because I am a single mother of two boys and have endured the hardships of heading up a low-income family. In the past, I have tried to gain access to support services external to CAS and I did so with much apprehension and fear. In fact, I was denied access to all the services to which I applied and it was a humiliating experience. I have endured many instances in which service professionals have blamed me for my single mother status and have perceived my mothering choices as ‘wrong’, thus I fear the potential consequences of ‘duty to report’. Even though I have never had prior CAS involvement, I still fear this agency because being a single mother is deemed to be ‘deviant’ and we are not abiding by the ‘normal’ rules of a patriarchal society. This type of constant anxiety is extremely taxing and causes unwarranted stress. I feel that I am an excellent mother and being single does not affect the way in which I parent. I may not have access to a dual income and I am responsible for all aspects of daily living, but I am a good mother and service professionals need to understand that structural, societal and common discourses are not the fault of a single mother.

I wanted to explore if my fear and experiences are a common phenomenon for other single mothers and if so, what are the opinions of other single mothers and what do they believe are the contributing factors. I would like to jump start conversations that could potentially change the way that support service professional provide service and change common mother blaming discourses.

## Terms and Definitions Used Throughout This Research Study

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**A Low Income Single Mother:** For the purposes of this study, a low income mother is defined as a mother who is raising her child(ren) without or with minimal involvement from the father (access and/or financial support). Low income will be measured by the ‘Low Income Cut Off’ (LICO) that is defined by Statistics Canada. Under the LICO, a family is deemed to be low income when they have to use 63% of their after-tax income on necessities such as shelter, food and clothing. In comparison, an average family that is not deemed to be low income will use about 43% of those necessities, which is a 20 point (or 20%) difference (Statistics Canada, 2009).

**Without Child Protections Service Involvement:** For the purpose of this research, I will be interviewing single mothers who have not been provided services through Child Protection Services (CAS) in relationship to a maltreatment complaint regarding the mother. If the mother had a complaint made about her and the case was closed immediately (no services were provided) or the complaint was made against a previous male partner (child abuse, wife assault), then this will not be seen as CAS involvement in relationship to the mother.

**Support Services External to CAS:** For the purpose of this research, support services external to CAS will be defined as any services that are available to access that are not in direct affiliation with CAS. Some examples are, Ontario Works, the education system, doctors, mental health services, shelters, violence against women services and etc. All of these services have a ‘Duty to Report, but they are not managed by CAS.

**‘Duty to Report’:** Everyone is obligated to report suspected child maltreatment to Child Protection Services. (Appendix A)



## **Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework**

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Single mothers are among the poorest of the poor in Canada and this places them in a position of public and/or professional examination and investigation. A mother is expected to demonstrate domestic and child care competency. Those who cannot live up to these standards are categorized as failures and monitored. The power that is exercised by Children Aid Societies (CAS) and the public through existing discourse and regulations can create a sense of suspicion of support systems. This suspicion can produce a feeling of apprehension when accessing or using any social, educational, and medical service because all professionals and the public have a duty to report suspected child abuse and/or neglect (Tufford et al., 2010).

The current literature states that single mothers fear disclosing information, but does not provide an in-depth rationale, instead this is presented as a 'fact' that lacks the voice of the mothers themselves. The purpose of this research is to fill that void and gain information that will help guide and/or educate professionals when providing service to single mothers. If mothers do not provide full disclosure or access particular services due to the fear of 'duty to report', then mothers and their children may not receive optimal support. From a Feminist framework, my research will be exploring how the child welfare's 'duty to report' regulation impacts the decision of low-income single mother(s) without prior Children's Aid Society (CAS) involvement to access support services external to CAS. I will be looking at how this regulation and the current discourse governs single mothers and how these women respond to being governed. I will be examining my question through the lens of Foucault's theory of governmentality.

This literature review will define feminism and governmentality and will link these theories to the current research that is available regarding how low income single mothers access and use support services external to CAS in light of the ‘duty to report’. In accordance with the current literature, I will be exploring the following themes throughout this literature review: 1) the ‘ideal’ mother discourse; 2) mother blaming; 3) media and discourse; 4) a low income single mother household; 5) child protection services and ‘duty to report’ in Canada; 6) a risk society; 7) family structure: the risky nature of single motherhood; 8) governmental support services; 9) neglect and the connection to single motherhood.

**Feminism:** Patriarchy, a major theme within the feminist framework can be defined as a social system in which the male has been granted power and authority over institutional practices. It implies that men have social privileges that are not presented to women. This power is granted, not on personal ability, but on male status. Male status is not the same for all men and this is due to differences in race, socioeconomic status, mental health status and etc. These differences may result in systemic oppression that can position some men lower on the power hierarchy, but still above women (depending on their social position) (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). In accordance with the feminist theory, single mothers, being without a male partner are commonly placed in a ‘deviant’ category.

**Governmentality:** Governmentality is defined as an individual’s need and want to self-govern their behaviours due to reward, accomplishment and self-esteem. This theory comprises the practice of government and the affects that governing have on those who are being governed. A person self-governs their actions based on dominant discourses and in turn, the individual tries to behave as per the dominant discourse (Pease, 2002). Some persons are excluded from the same opportunities and cannot reach equal positions within society even if the individual is self-

governing their behaviors based on dominant discourse. If the virtues surrounding the dominant discourse cannot be reached (due to race, gender, class and etc), persons are seen as ‘faulty’, ‘lazy’ and/or ‘undeserving’, hence, the dominant discourse (the ‘deserving’) is reinforced (Jeffery, 2002). Many low income single mothers are governed by Social Work policies, government regulations and common public discourse. Due to being systemically governed, single mothers are placed in a situation in which they may regulate themselves in order to attempt to live up to ‘unrealistic’ expectations that have been placed upon them and are faced with forced compliancy (Gingrich, 2010).

**The ‘Ideal’ Mother Discourse:** Throughout history, discourses have been used to describe and determine who is an ideal mother and who is not. As per Foucault, discourse is a concept of dominant ideas/beliefs that are considered to be ‘truth’ and are conveyed and/or reproduced through verbal and text communication. He believed that discourse is a social construction of ideas that are shaped by, and shape the way individuals perceive the world through the complex interaction of their experience and location (Chambon, 1999). Discourses create and maintain binaries. This generates power inequalities such as “deserving” and “undeserving”. Discourses are not fixed and are subjected to change over time. They undergo transformations and reflect current knowledge and what is believed to be “truth” for that specific time period. In addition, certain undertones of previous knowledge from past times influence current discourse (discourse carried forth) (Chambon, 1999).

The “ideal mother” discourse was socially constructed during the Victoria era. During this period, mothers were seen as natural caregivers and the home was the central point of interest in a woman’s life (Swift, 1995). These ideas were created and governed by white, middle class, heterosexual and able-bodied persons (Strega, 2007). A separation of gendered labour was

introduced due to the belief that motherhood is an innate female characteristic, thus maintaining the idea that unpaid child care is a natural phenomenon. This concept also reinforces the idea that a nuclear family model is more effective because both male and female roles are required within the home. Men are seen as best suited for the financial provider role, while women are placed in the domestic and child rearing role. The concept of the “ideal” mother is still thriving in current western practices and continues to have a large impact on the duties of the mother (Wiegerts, 2002).

Historically and currently, mothers have been provided with total control over their children and domestic duties; until they do it wrong (Swift, 1995). Current literature suggests that the concept of the ‘ideal mother’ as self-less and with the innate ability to nurture creates and maintains unrealistic expectations for mothers. Most women cannot live up to these expectations; thus, they are seen as inadequate parents (Davies & Krane, 2008). These mothers are deemed as “at-risk” for child maltreatment and may require child welfare surveillance because they are deemed as different and unable to live up to the ‘ideal mother’ expectations (Swift, 1995). This discourse has created a common belief that governs the way in which mothers are supposed to behave and what is not acceptable. When women ‘do it wrong’, the Child and Family Services Act (government) is involved and the mother is monitored until she can prove that she is able to change her circumstances for the best interest of the children. According to Davies & Krane:

The depiction of mothers as idealized nurturers shapes normative and public expectations of all women as mothers. The results of their caring labour are open to public scrutiny and evaluation, especially through the child welfare system (2012, pp. 5-6).

**Mother blaming:** Mother blaming is a common theme that can be found in much of the feminist research that is related to ‘mothering’. For instance, current research suggests that the

work that mothers do is linked to outside institutions such as schools, human services, medical services, child welfare and the general public. Everyone is policing a mother's ability to function in an "appropriate" manner (Swift, 1995). The term 'mother-blaming' is used widely within the feminist perspective. Mother blaming is the action and/or idea that holds a mother responsible for the well-being, care and protection of her child(ren). The mother is held accountable even when her inability to provide the 'ideal' mothering skills is based on systemic issues, such as single motherhood and/or a lack of resources and being blamed for her own poverty (Strega, 2007). The child welfare sector is mandated to protect the well-being of the child and this may punish mothers, especially low income single mothers (Strega, 2007).

Many researchers use a gender-biased model of studying a mother's behavior in relationship to the harm she causes to her children that does not exist for men. Consequently, this ignores the similar impact that fathers may have on their children. Blame for any childhood pathology is usually placed on mothers and the father is discounted (Jackson & Mannix, 2004). A father is not judged on his (in)ability to provide child care or complete domestic tasks. Instead, any parenting duties that he may do are praised because child rearing is not deemed to be 'men's work' and he is viewed as helpful and exceptional (Swift, 1995). In addition, when a CAS file is created, they are opened in the mother's name, even if a man is the perpetrator of the child maltreatment. This type of policy reinforces the mother blaming discourse because the mother is named and the men remain absent (Swift, 2010). According to Caplan and Caplan;

Most mothers realize that if anything at all goes wrong with their children, they as mothers will be held almost entirely responsible. This places mothers under intolerable pressure. Mothers thus operate under intense strain, and this can make them anxious and fearful, so that the tasks of mothering become even more difficult than they have to be (1994, pp.71-72).

Literature says that many single mothers are aware of the stigma that is attached to their social location. One study found that women are less concerned about the poverty that they are faced with and more concerned about their inability to provide a ‘normal’ childhood for their child(ren) due to their poverty. These women internalized the dominant discourse and felt a sense of failure because they could not live up to the ‘ideal mother’ discourse. (Power, 2005). Dominant mother blaming discourses are powerful and can be expressed through personal internalization and external behaviours even though the (in)ability to parent may be due to systemic issues and may not be the consequence of actions or omissions of the mother’s behaviour (Jackson & Mannix, 2004).

**Media and Discourse:** Current literature suggests that the media provides a picture of the ‘ideal mother’ and reinforces gender roles and responsibilities. Mothers who are unable to adhere to the ‘rules’ (governing), are deemed as ‘unworthy’ and consequently, monitored. According to feminist thought, the idea of the mother portrayed by media often adheres to a patriarchal notion of what is considered feminine. Many media presentations portray ‘good mothers’ as those who opt-out of working, but this is not always possible for the single mother. Even if she is able to stay home, due to accessing a financial aid program, she lacks the financial means to provide ‘intense’ and ‘proper’ parenting (Kuperberg, 2008).

In many media accounts, a woman’s behaviours or omission of behaviours were often decontextualized and understood in terms of mental illness. A mother accused of child abuse can be viewed as a person with a mental illness because she is abandoning her natural role as a caregiver (Greaves et al., 2002). Any behaviour that goes against a woman’s “natural” mothering instincts (nurturing and selfless) is labelled as ‘abnormal’ (Greaves et al., 2002).

In addition to framing the ‘ideal mother’ discourse, the media also mainly publishes horrific stories about child abuse and neglect with the intention of providing the public with education and social recognition. Sensational news coverage grabs the attention of the general public, leaving them uninterested in the ‘typical’ child abuse case (Saint-Jacques et al., 2013). The most common child abuse cases are neglect and this is not reflected in the media (Hove & Paek, 2013).

Literature says that this type of media coverage has contributed to policy changes, the development/changes within institutions that guide the behaviours of individuals who report and those who are accused of the abuse (Saint-Jacques et al., 2013). Individuals feel more compelled (governed) to report child maltreatment because they see it as their duty. Child maltreatment media coverage has caused child protection service workers to be more careful because they do not want to be accountable when things do go wrong, so they have adopted a “better safe than sorry” attitude, thus they may categorize more families at a higher risk to reduce their liability (Saint-Jacques et al., 2013). Instead of reporting horror stories, it has been suggested that media should frame child abuse in terms exploring potential solutions, identifying the social risk factors and create a public understanding that abuse is a public health concern (Hove & Paek, 2013).

**A Low Income Single Mother Led Household:** Current research states that one out of every five children will live in a single parent household and 81% of those households are run by a single mother (Lipman et al., 2002). That translates into almost one million homes in Canada that have a single mother as a sole parent, which represents a large portion of the current Canadian population (Lipman et al., 2002). The poverty rate of single mothers is four times that of the general population and these women are overrepresented in child protection services (Strega et al., 2008). Working single parents are estimated to bring in approximately \$32,365 a

year in comparison with the average two-parent home being \$77, 226 a year (Cairney et al, 2004). Single parent led families who are living on a social allowance program in Canada will only bring home a revenue of about \$14, 936 a year depending on the number of dependants that reside in the home and other income such as part-time work, Child Tax Benefit, Child Support, geographic location and etc. (Appendix B). Working single mothers typically earn more money than those accessing Ontario Works, but working mothers incur costs such as day care, transportation to work, and clothing required for the position, which may make their actual take home pay lower than if they were on OW (McMullin, 2002).

**Child Protection Services and ‘Duty to Report’ in Canada:** The first child welfare worker program was introduced into Canada in the 1900’s in the form of a volunteer service named friendly visitors (Brown, 2006). The friendly visitors were comprised of white, middle class women who aspired to provide education, minimal services and to monitor the activities single mother households. The friendly visitor’s job was to examine the moral character of the mother, her current situation, her habits and her needs (Swift, 1995). Eventually, the friendly visitor service was deemed to be too subjective and this contributed to the birth to Social Work as a legitimate profession. The Social Work profession was deemed to be more objective since the workers were considered to be ‘experts’ (Swift & Callahan, 2009).

Today, there are 47 active Child Protection Service agencies (CAS) in Ontario (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2011). The current child welfare objective is to “work with service partners and the community to ensure the safety, well-being and stability of children and youth” (OACAS, 2010). This overall goal fails to mention the well-being of the family unit and struggles to concurrently support parents (Dumbrill, 2006).



The Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) originally came into effect in 1984. This Act contains the regulations that govern CAS and the public and/or professionals must comply with (govern). Over the years, there have been amendments to the Act and some of those changes have impacted current definitions and practices re: ‘duty to report’ (Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2010) (Appendix A).

Under the guidelines presented by the CFSA, anyone who suspects child maltreatment is required by law to report their suspicions of the abuse to CAS. When a report is made, CAS meets with the family to complete an intake (Brown, 2006). This can be very intrusive as the CAS worker will look into family issues such as past experiences, current behaviours, and childrearing skills and this can cause mothers to be apprehensive and fearful of CAS. This type of intrusion is done through the lens of a risk society (Brown, 2006).

**A Risk Society:** The term ‘risk society’ was coined by a German sociologist by the name of Ulrich Beck and a ‘risk society is defined as “a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk” (Giddens, 1999, p.3). A ‘risk society’ is based on predicting the future in order to prevent perceived undesirable consequences. A risk is calculated on probability, and our ‘risk society’ is concerned with how to avoid certain situations deemed ‘too risky’ (Gillingham, 2006).

Currently, CAS agencies use the Ontario Family Risk Assessment to determine risk (Appendix C). “The Ontario Family Risk Assessment is an actuarial (statistically driven) instrument that is designed to collect information and is organized along two indices: Abuse and Neglect. Using empirical probabilities, this Risk Assessment then identifies those families whose characteristics place them at a higher likelihood of future child maltreatment over other families. High risk families have significantly higher rates of subsequent referral and verification than low

risk families. “Correct use of the provided descriptors and scoring is essential to maintain the validity of the instrument” (Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2011).

Risk assessments are documents that target a specific population. Current literature suggests that their purpose is to classify families and target parents who are deemed to be a risk to their children and children who are in need of protection. This can be the case for single mothers because their children are often seen as in need of protection due to the widely understood notion that single mothers ‘risk’ to the well-being of their children (Swift, 2010). A ‘risk’ assessment is more likely to be respected by other professionals such as lawyers, police and etc. due to its ‘scientific nature’, thus it is widely used and accepted. The scientific basis of the assessments is considered to guarantee truth and creates discourse about target populations, such as the single mother (Swift & Callahan, 2009).

Literature says that many low income single mothers are under stress due to their financial status and are unable to provide normative resources and experiences for their children. Brown (2006) argues that risk assessments can redirect social service funding to creating more assessments and ‘risk’ training for CAS staff. Brown believes that funding should be directed towards preventive services for families and changing the situational circumstances of single mothers and not towards refining professional assessments.

Some research suggests that risk assessments also create a power imbalance between the mother and the CAS worker. The worker has dominance over the client and the client has to be subordinate. The CAS workers use the assessment to understand the mother’s deficits and create risk reduction plans that the mother has to follow in order to be compliant with CAS and the CFSA. The mothers are governed by CAS and society and must practice ‘good’ parenting, even when the resources are out of the financial scope (Swift, 2009).

**Family Structure: The Risky Nature of Single Motherhood:** A major theme that continually emerges in the current literature is how family structure (single motherhood and/or the absence of the father) negatively affects children and adolescence. Some research argues that single motherhood can cause harm to the child(ren) in the home, thus single motherhood can be regarded as a risk. One study suggests that low income single mothers are unable to provide optimal and supportive parenting due to the presented stress of poverty (Lipman et al., 2002). Other studies show that many single mothers endure financial hardships due to a lack of employment opportunities, thus limiting their social network of supports and consequently elevating their levels of psychological distress (Hope et al, 1999). Single mothers are twice as likely to have a major episode of depression in comparison to married women within a 12 month period and are more prone to other psychiatric and psychological distress. Studies show that this affects the overall well-being of the children in the home (Cairney et al., 2004).

Some research argues that children living in single parent homes have been found to exhibit more distress because these children are required to take on more adult responsibility (Hampden-Thompson, 2013). Parents who are married are seen as able to provide a strong parent-child bond through consistent discipline and positive role modeling. On the other hand, single mothers have to balance both the financial burden and the child rearing and have little time to build strong parent-child relationships (Musick & Meier, 2010).

Research also suggests that children raised in a single mother home present with more learning difficulties and are more likely to drop out of school than those who live in two parent homes. Low levels of education are linked to poverty and single motherhood because these women are unable to purchase education tools and resources to help their children advance. Due to the high cost, these women are usually unable to put their children in summer camps and other

extra-curricular activities that help children learn positive socialization (Hampden-Thompson, 2013). In addition, many of these children do not go on to post-secondary education because of the cost associated with higher learning (Musick & Meier, 2010).

Current literature suggests that due to living in poverty, many single mothers are forced to live in precarious living circumstances and it was found that single mother families frequently geographically relocate. This type of instability has been found to cause internalizing and externalizing behaviours and overall poor health in children. Children in poor families are four times more likely to have experienced five or more moves more than those children who are not living in poverty type situations (Murphey et al., 2012).

Many researchers have made recommendations that include increasing income and education because this would benefit these families. They also suggest that these women should obtain mental health services because better maternal mood is beneficial to both mother and child (Lipman et al, 2002). These services are believed to improve a woman's ability to parent and ensure the well-being of their children (Cairney et al., 2004). It must be noted, that these suggestions were made on the basis that these circumstances will improve the well-being of the mother and child(ren), but the researches did not provide any suggestion about how to accomplish these achievements.

**Governmental Support Services:** Many low income single mothers have ongoing and/or episodic complex concerns and can be involved in a multitude of social services at any given time. Some of the systems that are currently in place to support low income single mothers contain hidden realities that can create more complications and stress for the family.

In 1995, the federal government implemented a debt reduction strategy. Part of this strategy was to replace the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) with the Canadian Health and Social Transfer (CHST). CAP was a federal policy that produced equal provincial standards for programs based on need and the federal government matched the spending amount 50/50. CHST was introduced under the debt reduction strategy and is defined as a block funding for health, education and social welfare. The federal government reduced the amount of funding given to provinces and left provinces to allocate funds as they saw fit (Swift, 2010). In many cases, provinces reduced the flow of funds into the social service sector, directly affecting both income assistance programs and other social service programs. The reduction in family income reproduced and strengthened the idea that single mother led households who live in poverty are unable to provide for their children and maintain the mother blaming discourse. Families have less money to allocate to family needs and safe housing, leaving families in a more precarious position (Swift & Parada, 2004). The social service programs that were cut and/or eliminated affected families that live in poverty because many of them depend on these services to make ends meet. For instance, some of the affected agencies helped with transportation, child care or food and this is now limited. Without these services, families living in poverty become targets of child protection services because their situation will look more and more like neglect due to being forced to live without (Swift & Parada, 2004).

In 1997, the Ontario government introduced the Social Assistance Reform Act (SARA) with the goal to lessen the 'cycle of dependency'. Under this new legislation, the Ontario Works Act (OWA) was also introduced. The OWA reduced the monetary benefits that were provided to families by 21.6% and it emphasises self-reliance and provides inadequate financial assistance as an incentive to secure employment. In many cases, the fixed-expenses of a general household

exceeds the financial amount that the Ontario Works program currently provides families, leaving many families in debt (Gingrich, 2010). Providing less income than is needed to make ends meet will place low income single mothers in a situation in which they are unable to provide the basic needs for their children, thus governing the way a single mother is able to parent her children and then blaming her for not doing it 'right' through possible CAS surveillance (Swift, 2010).

The OW directly affected low income single mothers due the gendered nature of financial assistance programs. A large portion of Ontario Works participants are women and the Ontario Works amendments has forced mothers to work or to do unpaid community work. These mothers may have to struggle to find safe and affordable daycare and find flexible employment that will allow for ridged day care service schedules. In addition, many single mothers have low educational levels (due to the lack of time and/or cost of education); consequently; they will earn low pay if they are working. In many cases, single mothers who work are worse off than those on welfare due to the costs of work (clothes, daycare, transportation and etc) (McMullin et al., 2002). If single mothers do not comply with the standards of Ontario Works (going back to work), they are commonly labelled as 'lazy welfare mom's' (Cooke, 2009). Single mothers who are receiving Ontario Works are often seen as the 'unworthy' poor (McMullin et al., 2002).

Power (2005) conducted a qualitative study that examined the governing and surveillance that occurs when a single mother is living on OW. Most of the women who were interviewed felt humiliated because they had to follow strict guidelines and lacked a sense of freedom. Power argues that:

Participants lives were governed by arbitrarily applied rules, and by the possibility that they could be reported by anyone (and no one in particular, since the name of the initiator

of any such report remained confidential) for a real, suspected, imagined or fabricated transgression of the rules. Such arbitrariness would give rise to considerable anxiety even among those living irreproachable lives, and leave a lingering paranoia about whom one could trust (2005, p651).

**Neglect and the Connection to Single Motherhood:** Child neglect is a broad term that is often ambiguous. It can be hard to properly detect this type of child maltreatment due to its substantial definition and public misconceptions. Often, poverty or a lack of resources is mistaken or assumed to be child neglect (Swift, 1995). Child neglect is commonly defined as:

The omission, rather than a commission, of behaviour. That is, neglect occurs when there is a deficiency in appropriate parenting behaviour, rather than when an inappropriate parenting behaviour occurs. Generally, child neglect is defined as the failure by a parent or other guardian to provide necessary care to a child, resulting in harm or threat to the child (Schumacher et al., 2001, p. 232).

Research states that more than 80% of child neglect cases involve single mother led households who are living in poverty (Sykes, 2011). In most child neglect cases, the father of the child remains to be absent from case files and this provides an inaccurate portrait of family dynamics and continues to place blame on the mother (Dufour et al., 2007). This type of blame reinforces the idea of patriarchy and further illustrates that a woman is supposed to be the natural caregiver and gives the father the permission to ‘opt-out’ of a care giver role without consequence.

In 2000, the Ontario provincial government altered the way in which ‘neglect’ is applied under the Child and Families Services Act (CFSA). The act now uses the term ‘pattern of neglect’ to distinguish if a case is deemed to be neglect. This phrasing is problematic because it is hard to decipher between neglect and poverty. For example, if a single mother cannot afford weather appropriate clothes on a continuous basis, this could present as a ‘pattern of neglect’ (Swift & Parada, 2004). The language that surrounds the idea of neglect under the CFSA has

and will continue to reproduce the societal perception that low income single mothers are neglectful parents, hence creating and maintaining categories of people (Good/ Bad or Us/ Them). Creating categories gives society a specific population to blame for societal problems and will validate feelings toward policing and governing families (Swift, 1995).

Current literature says that once a mother is deemed to be ‘neglectful’ and a file is opened, the caseworker will create a service plan that must be followed by the mother. The adherence to service plans ensures that the mother is ‘reforming’ her neglectful ways. Many mothers found that completing service plans without financial resources is a challenging endeavour and sometimes impossible. Mothers who were unable to complete their plans are deemed as ‘unreformed’ and/or in need of CAS surveillance and/or governing (Sykes, 2011). The evidence that is collected by CAS workers focuses on the (in)ability to parent in a manner that is approved by society. Essentially, the study of child neglect is an examination of mothers who fail (Swift, 1995).

The literature that is available on the topic of low income single mothers is vast and covers topics such as what concept of the ‘ideal mother’, mother blaming, neglect, family structure issues, discourse creation and maintenance, government services and risk, but there is a significant research gap. Researchers have presented findings that suggest that low income single mothers are apprehensive about using support services and navigate through systems with trepidation, which in turn impacts how much information they disclose to service providers due to a professional’s duty to report suspected child maltreatment. Much research proposes this finding as a ‘fact’ or a symptom of their own research question, and in most cases, no rationale has been provided for the finding. The current research explores this topic through the lens of the professionals who work with these mothers and not by the mother’s themselves. My research will



explore how the mandatory reporting regulations affects the choices single mothers make in accessing and using support services that are independent of CAS. More research needs to be done in order to help Social Workers and other professionals who work with low income single mothers to correct the system flaws and discontinue the practice of public and professional mother blaming.

## Research Design and Methods

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**The Participants:** All of the participants that were interviewed for the purposes of this research project are between in the ages of 25-45. Two of the participants were never married, one participant was divorced, one participant was taking care of her mother's children and one participant listed 'other' as her status, as her partner is serving time in a federal penitentiary. The participants had identified as being a single mother between a range of 10 months to 6 years and all have child(ren) under the age of 16. The range of children that the participants are supporting is between 1- 3 child(ren), all between the ages of 10 months to 14 years of age. All 6 of the participants identified themselves as Canadian and 5 out of the 6 participants identified as 'white'. One participant identified as Canadian-Italian. Only one participant identified as having a CAS compliant made against her, but the case was not opened due to no evidence of child maltreatment. One participant received child support consistently, one participant said she sometimes receives her child support and four of the participants did not receive any child support. Three of the participants did not receive any family support, financial or otherwise. Three of the participants receive some family support, financial or otherwise. Three of the participants work full-time, one participant works part-time, one participant is on Employment Insurance and is in the process of applying for Ontario Works, and one participant is on Ontario Works. Three of the participants are living with family members, two participants are living in apartment's buildings and one participant is renting the top portion of a house.

### Research Design:

I chose to conduct a qualitative study because there is a lack of narrative research available on my topic. Qualitative research is defined as a research method that attempts to

explore and understand reasons, opinions, and motivations that are set out in a research question. Especially, this method, asks the 'why' and 'how' questions that are associated with research. Qualitative research is used to understand the problem and to uncover common themes by being part of the participant's natural environment through interviews, participation and/or observation (Silverman, 2010).

I believe that my research question would best explored through personal narratives because they help to bridge the gap between the interior world of the participants, single mothers, and the outside perception, the general public and support services professionals (Maynes et al., 2008). Narrative research allows the researcher to capture the life experiences and the detailed stories of each participant (Creswell, 2007). I wanted to ensure that single mothers were given an opportunity to share their personal stories, thus providing them with a forum to educate those providing services to them and to become agents of change.

Qualitative research allowed me to use a semi-structured interview approach when interviewing and this provided me with an opportunity to ask questions, but also to inquire further if I feel that more information would be helpful for my research. A semi-structure interview is an interview that has a set of pre-planned questions allowing other questions to emerge and be explored by the researcher as the narrative is being told by the participant. The semi-structured approach encourages the participant and the researcher to engage in a flowing dialogue instead of a controlled answer and response interview (Glesne, 2010). I felt that this style was best suited for my research project because the topic is sensitive in nature and this allowed me to have a more relaxed conversation with the participants. In addition, it may make the participants feel more involved in the research project, providing them with a sense of power

because of the examination and re-telling of their personal experience (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009)

I explored my research question through the lens of a Phenomenological research design. Phenomenology starts with a phenomena/experience and through narratives of the participants; this design allows me to explore common perceptions and their effects in regards to the phenomena/experience (Willis, 2007). “Phenomenology (is) focused on the subjectivity of reality, continually pointing out the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them” (Willis, 2007, p. 53). It is the study of describing what all the participants have in common and the purpose of this type of research is to try and reduce the experience (phenomenon) and to describe it as a universal phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

I believed that the Child Protection Service’s ‘duty to report’ regulation defined by the Child and Family Services Act will affect the decisions that single mothers make regarding accessing support services external to CAS. This belief is due to my own lived experience and those of my friends and family, but I wanted to explore if this is in fact a common experience. The current research suggests that single mothers are fearful of CAS, but I wanted to examine this ‘fact’ further by listening to the subjective stories from single mother’s (Power, 2005).

For the purpose of this research, I used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a non-random type of sampling in which the researcher chooses the participants and recruitment sites based on specific criteria. This is done to ensure the participants have an understanding of the phenomenon or research problem and can relate to the research question and/or idea (Creswell, 2007). This type of sampling is useful because I am able to create a pool of participants who have similar backgrounds, but I am seeking them out, thus other persons outside of this pool are not provided a choice to participate. In addition, I also used snow-ball sampling

because I was unable to recruit enough participants who fit my desired criteria through purposeful sampling. Snowball sampling is defined as recruiting new participants from the leads given to the researcher from the current participant. These leads could be friends or acquaintances of the current participant that fit the criteria that is outlined in this study (Crestwell, 2007). When using snow-ball sampling, confidentiality was maintained. All participants remained anonymous and I explained that if current participants contacted other potential participants on my behalf, they would not be permitted to know if their contacts participated in the research project.

All participants have received a \$15.00 Tim Horton's gift card as an honorarium for their participation in this study. I thought it was important to thank those who participated in my study, especially since they took time out their hectic schedules to complete an interview.

**Data Collection:** For the purpose of this study, I conducted 6 face-to-face interviews with participants that met my required inclusion criteria: (1) low income single mother, (2) living in an urban area, (3) no prior involvement with CAS, (4) between the ages of 25-50, (5) must have children under the age of 16, and (6) must be aware of 'duty to report' regulation.

For recruitment purposes, I created a flyer inviting single mothers who fit my inclusion criteria to participate in my research project (Appendix D). On the flyer, I included some basic information about the research project and my contact information. Mothers who were interested were encouraged to contact me to obtain more information about the project and to confirm participation. I posted the flyer on community boards located in apartment buildings, grocery stores and community centres within the Region of Peel. I received 4 telephone calls from mothers who wanted to participate in my research project. In addition, I asked those 4 women if

they knew others who may want to participate in my study. In total, I was contacted by 11 mothers and based on my research criteria, I chose to complete 6 interviews. In addition, 3 of the women who contacted me decided that the topic was too sensitive and/or risky and did not wish to participate after obtaining more information about the research project.

I encouraged each of the participants to choose the location of their interview with the understanding that it must be a public place. I interviewed two of the participants in their place of employment (on a lunch break). I interviewed three of the participants in local coffee shops and I interviewed one participant in the public library. I felt that it was important to allow the participant to choose the meeting place that they felt best suited their comfort. This may provide participants with a sense of power throughout the interview process and creates an emotionally safe environment that promotes overall ease (Glesne, 2010).

Before I began each individual interview I felt it was important to build a positive rapport with the participant. To do this, I asked general questions that are not related to the study, inquiring about the participant's overall well-being. Glense (2010) suggests that it is good practice for researchers to build trust before they ask demanding questions about the study topic. I felt that this helped the participants feel more at ease

I provided each participant with an invitation to participate in the study (Appendix E), a copy of the flyer. In addition, I reviewed the Informed Consent form before the interview officially began. I ensured that the participants understood their role in the research project and provided them time to ask questions (Appendix F). All of the participants were asked to complete a demographics form to help me to create context for the practice research paper. The demographics of each participant will also help to define and describe the findings based on the

information that was provided (Appendix G). In most cases, the participant asked me to fill in the form by asking them the questions.

I chose to use all open-ended questions during my interviews because they encourage participants to tell their stories in a narrative approach. Open-ended questions are questions that require an explanation and allow the researcher to listen to the stories and explore the common themes that are being told by each participant (Creswell, 2007). When a posing question did not elicit a great amount of context, I used the semi-structured interview approach and explored further. I asked questions that related to the content and this provoked more communication between the interview participant and myself.

**Data Analysis:** Each interview was recorded by using a digital recording device with the permission of the participant. Recording the interview allows the researcher to ensure that the details of the interview are accurate and the focus/attention of the researcher is directed toward the participant at all times (Glense, 2010). I explained that the participants have the right to access their recordings at any time during the duration of this research project and have the right to omit and/or change the information that they have provided. They also have the right to add information to their audiotapes during the duration of this research project.

I personally transcribed each interview and I found this helpful because it allowed me to become familiar with the material when coding and looking for themes. Transcribing is the first step to analysing any data because it reduces the conversations to text that can be categorized and assessed for narrative comparison. (Martin et al., 2000). I ensured that I captured the spoken words of the participants as closely as possible due to the importance of reflecting an accurate portrayal of each narrative and to enforce research rigor (Witcher, 2010). “Rigor is the

authoritative evaluation of good research and the unspoken standard by which all research is measured” (Davies & Dodd, 2002). Rigor is the rules that govern the reliability and validity of good research (Davies & Dodd). Due to the nature of qualitative research some critics believe that rigor is not enforced. On the other hand, “knowledge can never be impartial, disinterested, or value free, but that does not mean that science cannot provide more or less reliable accounts about the empirical world or that it is impossible to make judgements about the faithfulness of the research accounts” (Davies & Dobbs, 2002). From a critical standpoint, rigor can be used within qualitative research by staying as true to the participant’s narratives as possible.

When transcribing the interviews, I took note of the paralinguistic features of each conversation, such as pauses, tone of voice, voice pitch and etc. These features help researchers to understand not just the words being spoken, but also the emotions that are behind the words (Martin et al., 2000). This can also help to create themes that are evident in the emotional responses that are received in each interview. I made note of paralinguistic features with the understanding that it is difficult to capture emotion due to the limited nature of text communication. It must be noted that an analysis of transcription is the researcher’s representation of the words spoken and an interpretation of the emotions depicted (Witcher, 2010).

For the purpose of this research project, I used a grounded theory when coding. Coding is when a researcher examines the text that is provided in an interview and picks out the salient themes that emerge (Creswell, 2007). In the effort to categorize themes, I read and re-read the material while making comments about the text and emerging themes. Once I decided upon the themes, I coded the themes by colour making them more accessible for analysis. After colour coding, I created a matrix with the research objectives and goals as column headings and put



participant comments/narratives in the rows. A matrix gave my themes structure and ensured my thematic analysis was on par with my research question (Martin, 2000).

All participants were made aware that the audio tapes that were created will remain stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's private home office. All data notes, transcriptions, signed forms, and demographic information will be filed in the researcher's home office in a locked cabinet and/or stored on a password protected computer. All documents and audio tapes will be stored in this way for two consecutive years and will be destroyed thereafter. All participants have the right to contact the researcher at any time to gain access to any of their own personal information.

The names of the participants will remain anonymous. In accordance, I used pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality. The participants were made aware that they had the right to discontinue the interview at any time without any consequence and that they also had the right to later request to omit and/or change information that the participant disclosed during their interview.

I chose to use a narrative analysis to describe the stories that were told by each participant. This type of methodology is based on exploring the voices of the persons being interviewed and allowed me to decipher the common themes and how they are connected to the larger picture (Silverman, 2010). Within the context of narrative analysis, a narrator is defined as "the person through whose authorial voice and subject position a life story is told and whose life is at the same time the story's focus" (Maynes et al., 2008). For the purposes of this study, the narrator of each story is a low income single mother without prior CAS involvement who had agreed to participate in this research project and share their voice.

A narrative analysis will allow me to gain a better understanding of how these women see themselves in the world and how the 'duty to report' regulation affects their decision to access support services external to CAS. This research project explored how these women felt they are being governed and how they governed themselves in relationship to their social location and the discourse that surrounds single motherhood.

Due to being a single mother myself, I felt that I had privileged access to a particular kind of knowledge due to being an 'insider'. "Insiders are the members of specific groups and collectives, or occupants of specified social status. Outsiders are non-members" (Mercer, 2007). Some research suggests that being an insider provides an advantage because insiders have an understanding of the context, links between experiences and an overall familiarity (Mercer, 2007).

In order to help the mothers feel more at ease, I felt it was appropriate to disclose that I too am a single mother and that I decided to do this research project due to my personal connection to this social issue, although, I did not disclose any of my personal experiences, as I thought that this could affect the neutrality of the research. I wanted to ensure that the participants expressed their stories from their own perception. While doing the interviews, I had to remember that I was in fact an insider, but my social identity of an insider is permeable (Witcher, 2010). I am not occupying the same space as those being interviewed. We cannot categorize people and create homogenous ideas about specific populations. I am an insider, but the boundaries are not static.

My social location is different for many reasons. I am a white woman, I have an education and have the opportunity to pursue my education further, I live with a supportive

family, and I have full-time employment, as a Social Worker. In addition, I am the interviewer and they are the participants. I have power because of my position and I have power over how their stories will be used in the construction of this research. I am the data collector, a philosopher and the storyteller. As a researcher, I am granted the power to interpret and process knowledge based on my own personal experiences and social location. In addition, I choose the theories that are being used to frame my research (Karnieli-Miller, 2009).

In order to give power back to the participants and to acknowledge my own power, I provided opportunities for participants to follow up with me regarding the research process and the material that is being used. I also informed all participants that they may have a copy of the research project, as per their request. Allowing the participants to become part of the project may provide them with a sense of inclusion and power, but I must acknowledge that I, as a researcher, will still be in a position of power over the participants (Karnieli-Miller, 2009).

As a researcher, I must hold myself accountable for the data that I produce throughout this research project. I must use research rigor, while also understanding my social location. I have an obligation to provide the participants with a safe space to share their stories and to not cause them any harm during or after this research project. I have the responsibility to re-tell their stories in order to provide education for support service professionals and the general public about their experiences. I have a responsibility to provide insight about how I come to know what I know and where I am situated in the act of creating knowledge (Maynes et al. 2008)

I will be using my own autobiographical experiences as a backdrop for each of the themes that have been identified. I decided to research this particular question because of the personal experiences that I had faced. I wanted to share my story, along with others who have

endured challenges disclosing information and accessing and/or using support services external to CAS. Many of the participants shared limited information with me and many did not share personal examples throughout their responses, instead they shared their opinions about services, external perceptions and CAS. Therefore, I thought it was important to provide a personal story to create a connection to why single mothers may have certain opinions. I have also chosen to use the direct quotes from the participants in order to practice good research rigor and to ensure the integrity of the women and their stories.

**Ethical Issues:** Some of the single mothers that contacted me felt that my topic was too sensitive and many were fearful of the potential consequences. In some cases, some of the single mothers that did contact me decided not to participate after considering the sensitive topic. Many of these women are involved in multiple systems and have stated that they fear what could happen if their workers found out they spoke about their experiences. For the participants that decided to follow through with the interview, I had to assure them that I practice confidentiality and that they could decline to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable. I wanted to ensure that the participants felt that they were able to talk about their experiences without the fear of system consequences. In addition, as a researcher, I had to communicate that I have a ‘duty to report’ any suspected child maltreatment and this was done at the initial contact. I do not work for CAS and I have never been a Child Protection Worker, but participants may be suspicious of my intentions since I am studying Social Work and I am a practicing Social Worker. I will explain the intentions of this study and reinforce that their stories will remain anonymous.

Many of these women may have or are currently facing systematic trauma and/or stress and this type of interview can trigger some traumatic responses. I needed to maintain my subject position as a researcher, but I also provided social service resources, thus being supportive in my

role as researcher. Also, I completed a 'check-in' with each participant. I called each participant one week after the interview to ensure that the participant was not experiencing traumatic symptoms and if they were, encourage them to use the resources that were provided during the interview.

This research project was approved by an internal ethics review committee at York University, School of Social Work that follows the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

## Findings

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**Themes:** The following section of this research project will classify and explain the common themes that were identified within the interviews. It must be noted that the participants did not explicitly speak about the information they chose to disclose and how they navigate support services external to CAS in light of ‘duty to report’. Instead, the participants discussed their opinions in a more general context. This allowed me to create a holistic picture of the challenges that single mothers endure when accessing and using support services external to CAS.

The goal of this research project was to share the voices of single mothers in order to educate support service professionals and the general public. Single mothers experience many challenges that may govern the way in which they access and use support services external to CAS. Exposing these experiences is important because it may help to change policies, laws and mother blaming discourses. The major themes that were identified within the interviews are as follows: 1) disclosing information; 2) patriarchal discourse; 3) mother blaming and governing; 4) accessing and using support systems; 5) risk and the idea of neglect; and 6) the stressful nature of single motherhood.

**The Participants Understanding of ‘Duty to Report’:** One of the criteria that was required of all participants in order to be eligible to be interviewed was a knowledge of ‘duty to report’. Before getting to the interview questions, I wanted to gain a better understanding of how ‘duty to report’ is understood by the participants and gain an awareness of how single mothers govern their parenting due to their understanding of this regulation. For example, an inaccurate understanding of ‘duty to report’ may lead some women to not disclose information or be

selective to whom they are disclosing. Single mothers may be governing their parenting behaviours based on a lack of knowledge.

All the participants were asked to explain their understanding of ‘duty to report’ and their thoughts regarding the regulation. All of the women had a general idea of the regulation and most of the participants had common ideas regarding ‘duty to report’. Some of the participants gave more descriptive responses and appeared to know more about ‘duty to report’ than others. For example, four of the participants understood that everyone, not just professionals have a ‘duty to report’. In accordance, Sarah stated:

Duty to report is the responsibility of any individual to report to CAS if they feel that a child is being neglected or abused. It could be the teachers at the school, or any professionals, or even your neighbour.

Two of the participants did not know that everyone has a “duty to report”. Instead, they understood ‘duty to report’ as an obligation for professionals. They were not incorrect in their responses, but their understanding was not comprehensive. For example, Jessy stated:

I understand that ‘duty to report’ is a professional obligation to report any instances of child endangerment to CAS....any kind of endangerment.

When the participants were asked to explore their thoughts surrounding ‘duty to report’, the common response related to misunderstandings and people making assumptions without the facts. This promoted feelings of fear regarding ‘duty to report’ and the possible implications for a single mother. A general consensus was that general public and many service providers have an incorrect perception of child maltreatment and this can cause fear, especially regarding disclosing information and being protective of their family unit. Heidi expressed her fear by stating:

Sometimes I find that situations that aren't what they...people on the outside view them to be. They're blown out of proportion and it makes you scared about 'duty to report' because of that.

Most of the women also believed that the underlying concept of 'duty to report' is valid, but sometimes it is implemented when child maltreatment is not present, thus creating stress for the mother and the child(ren). Many of the participants also mentioned that children sometimes say 'the wrong thing' and this can also lead to CAS involvement, thus causing family stress. On the other hand, they believed that in some cases child maltreatment is overlooked due to a lack of evidence and this may lead to feelings of uncertainty and a lack of confidence in the system. Vella was very candid about her thoughts regarding 'duty to report' and appeared to be very passionate about her response.

There is definitely good and bad. In some situations, it gets reported and you get put through the ringer for no reason, as people are...they misunderstand the situation, or the child unfortunately sometimes does make up stories, which I have seen and in some situations when they do need to step in there isn't enough evidence and the child gets left in a situation that is not good.

Speaking as a single mother myself, I understand this fear. All that is required for reporting is a suspicion of child maltreatment and this leaves room for ambiguity. In my experience, I know that I am doing everything I can possibly do to promote the well-being of my children, but that does not take away the fear. Everyone has a perception of what an 'ideal mother' should look like, but being single and raising two boys is not considered to be the 'right way'. Because of this perception, single mothers are left vulnerable to prejudice, public uncertainty and misunderstandings.

**Disclosing Information:** Being a single mother is the hardest job that I have ever had to do and sometimes it becomes more difficult because I feel like I am constantly censoring what I do and/or say. This type of governing can become taxing because I feel like it adds stress to the



already high demand life of a single mother. For example, when I was going through my divorce, I contacted numerous lawyers to gain advice and I was told on many occasions what not to do, instead of what I should do. I was told not to access any types of counseling services, or contact medical professionals that will prescribe medication that will help with anxiety or depression. This was not in my plan, but I was shocked by this approach to counsel. I asked many of these ‘professionals’ why a single mother should not access support in their time of need and I was told that it could hurt their case and that it will prove them to be weak mothers. This was very eye-opening and I now fear disclosing information because I do not want other people to perceive me as weak and an inadequate mother. To this day, I choose to disclose minimal information and I believe this is a learned response due to the events that have occurred in my personal history.

I was not surprised when I learned that five out of the six participants stated that they only share information that is pertinent to the situation. Only one participant stated that she would share whatever information is necessary. In addition, when conducting each interview, I received limited information from all six of the participants, thus corroborating their sense of apprehension to disclose too much. For instance, when asked about information sharing with support services Sarah stated:

I share what they need to know and not much more....again, it goes back to not wanting to be judged and not wanting them to think of me, what I am not and not based on the information I provide....I feel like being a single mom, they will judge you no matter what, so I give them exactly what they need to know and anything extra I keep to myself.

Many of the participants expressed a sense of trepidation when asked about disclosing information. Many of them believed that they had to censor what they say due to the perception of others and ‘duty to report’. Many of the mothers were open to accessing support, especially

counseling, but were apprehensive to explore all the issues of single motherhood due to fear of things taken out of context. Therefore, these findings suggest that many single mothers may not be using services to their full potential and consequently, not receiving optimal support. Jessy added:

You want to go in there open to support but knowing that there are sticky situations that could result in other people getting involved. You then tailor what you say and how it's said so that you are trying to get to the point, but without going around the things that might cause, that might cause people to think of abuse or putting CAS involved.

Many of the participants stated that they would prefer to use informal support systems, such as their friends and family over formal supports. They felt that informal supports will not place the same judgement upon them because they understand their situations. On the other hand, Yolanda stated that she would prefer to use formal supports because she does not get along with her family and felt that her family would be more judgemental. Kelly stated that she would like to use both informal and formal supports, but trusted her informal supports more. It appears that if given the choice, the participants will use the support networks that make them more comfortable in relationship to 'duty to report' and their perception of who is safer is based on who they feel will judge them less. It appears that most of the participants felt that they could disclose more to persons they trust, which in most cases were close friends and family. For example, Heidi stated:

I think I would probably prefer to use informal supports if they're there. Just because with friends, they understand my history if they have been a long-time friend. And I find they're not, I don't feel like I have to hide things from them and the fact that I can be very open because they're not going to judge me on one little thing that I say and take it out of context.

It appears that most of the participants will only disclose what is deemed necessary for the circumstances and in most cases, they do not trust persons in authority and who hold positions of power within support services. Most of the mothers are aware of their social location

and the negative perception of single motherhood, thus it appears that they disclose limited information based on this understanding. They do not want their circumstances taken out of context and used against them in light of ‘duty to report’.

**Patriarchal Discourse:** All of the participants who were interviewed identified that patriarchy (the participants did not name the term ‘patriarchy’) exists within the systems that they use or within everyday discourse. I personally thought that this unanimity was significant because I too have experienced the effects of patriarchal discourse in relationship to single parenting and system usage. My experience has shaped how I navigate through systems and how I now perceive the intentions and beliefs of the some professionals who have been granted power in those systems. I don’t believe that all systems and professionals are the same, but it is hard to forget the specific events and the feelings that they elicit. For instance, when I was going through the court system to gain custody of my children, I was cross examined by a lawyer in order to prove that I would be an ‘ideal mother’. I was humiliated and I will never forget my fear. I wanted to be honest because I felt that I had nothing to hide, but I was also afraid that if I said the wrong thing, my children would be affected due to ‘duty to report’. In the end, I received sole custody, but not without being hurt by the system that was supposed to protect me. In my case, the father did not have the same experience and did not have to be cross examined to prove he was an ‘ideal father’. To me, this indicates that a father role is commended and praised especially when they take on a ‘nurturing’ role. A mother is expected to be ‘nurturing’ and is monitored or has to prove she can do it. I am saddened that patriarchy exists in western society, the land of ‘equal opportunity’ and disturbed that many women have these experiences.

To understand patriarchy as a single mother issue, I wanted to explore how other mothers felt about this specific discourse. All the participants were encouraged to explore and explain

how they view single fatherhood versus single motherhood in relationship to 'duty to report'. All participants believed that single fathers would be treated differently when using and/or accessing support services and within a general context. Five of the participants shared that they felt that men get away with more and are praised when they are the single parent that is the sole provider, being the opposite of what is seen as truth for a single mother. For instance, when asked how 'duty to report' would affect a single father opposed to a single mother, Sarah stated:

I think being a single mom, they think that you made the choice to have the baby and then do it on your own. Whereas a single father, you know is praised because, you know, they had a baby and then...and took on the responsibility and it's just brought into a whole different view. The public doesn't look at the two the same.

Participants believed that single fatherhood should be commended but that the same rigorous standards that exist for single mothers do not exist for single fathers. When a single father is parenting, he does it right, or to his best ability and when a single mother is parenting; she must do it right because everyone is watching. Yolanda became very emotional when she spoke about the differences between a single father and a single mother. She spoke about her ex-husband and how he does not help her financially or otherwise and that is viewed as acceptable in the eyes of the public, but a mother must do her duty as an 'ideal mother'. She stated:

A father, I think fathers, some....in my case....he gets away with a lot compared to what a mother..... I think it's on a mothers back. We have a lot of issues, you know, like financially, you know...feeding them, loving them, caring for them, schools, everything. Everything is on our backs. I find that a lot of men get away with it. I just fear sometimes that a lot of single moms...we financially can't do it, especially when your ex's don't help with the support, you're out there trying to find, and their giving you excuses that you know, they don't work and their entitled to a thousand of dollars of expenses and what are we supposed to do? Work five jobs?

Jessy had a different view on patriarchy and believed that the father may get more negative attention in light of 'duty to report' due to the assumption that he is not nurturing by

nature. She believed that fathers are not viewed as caring and that the implication for such patriarchal ideas would make him a target. She stated:

Even if you look at custody cases, there is more weight put on the mother being able to provide for their children and give them what they need. Whereas, the father isn't as nurturing, loving, caring component and I think, especially with a father, with things like sexual abuse, single fathers could be looked upon differently or taken more strict.

Many of the participants mentioned that support services and the general public classify a nuclear family as the norm. Many of the participants felt that without a father in the home, they are looked down upon and their families are not considered to be 'ideal'. There was a common belief that outsiders perceived single mothers in a negative manner due to their lifestyle and the choices that they make and this does not exist for father. For instance, Jessy stated:

So, without a man or a father figure in the picture, it's sort of deemed as something is missing. When you could be able to provide everything for your kids need, but because there is no father or second parent, it's seen as something's missing and there is an incomplete picture.

No matter the response, all the participants who were interviewed had an understanding of the patriarchal discourse that is evident in the systems that govern them, or the perception of the general public. These women did not label the phenomenon as 'patriarchy', but articulated that fatherhood is praised, while motherhood is an expected duty. None of the participants specially mentioned that patriarchy affects the way that they use and/or access support services external to CAS in relationship to 'duty to report', but they all agreed that if the tables were turned, a single father may not have the same experience. For example, Vella stated:

I think people wouldn't report as quickly because, well he's a dad after all and he is just doing what he can, as opposed to a mom, who should know it all.

**Mother Blaming and Governing:** Mother blaming is associated to patriarchal discourse due to the separation of gender roles within the home. In accordance with the feminist perspective, all the participants felt that women are believed to have an innate ability to be nurturing, while men are believed to be the ‘breadwinners’. They believed that when women do it ‘wrong’, they are blamed and viewed as failures within the mothering realm, but men are not typically blamed for their inability to provide for their family. As per the participants in this research project, outside negative perceptions of single motherhood govern the way in which they chose to parent their children, especially when speaking about the adversities that they encounter. Many of the participants felt the choice to ‘over parent’ in compensation to their social location was not a choice at all, but an obligation. Many of them felt the need to live up to the ‘ideal mother’ discourse or risk the consequences of ‘duty to report’.

I decided to separate the patriarchal discourse theme and the mother blaming theme because many of the participants spoke with conviction when discussing external mother blaming, especially when speaking about the hardships they face.

I believe that the outside perception of support services and the general public can affect the way in which a single mother decides to parent her children. For instance, not long ago, I was approached by a friend who suggested that I should put my son in hockey. I told the friend that I could not afford to pay for hockey or take time off from work to bring him to games. This friend then suggested that as a mother I should find a way to make this happen for my child and that sometimes mothers have to do things they don’t want to do. I was shocked by these remarks and very hurt. My family is very active and we do many activities together. They are signed up for sports, but these sports are chosen in accordance to cost and availability. After this incident, I signed my son up for another sport fully knowing that I was doing it because I felt like I was a

failure and the perception of this friend was governing my actions. I know I am not a failure, but it is hard to shake the comments that are made in relationship to your own family.

When listening to the stories of the other women, it turned out that I was not alone and in fact, mother blaming is more relevant this I first realized. Many of the participants spoke about situations that occur in relationship to mother blaming and they feel like they are being monitored, thus they govern their behaviour so they are not blamed. Yolanda spoke about having to move home with her parents after her divorce and she consistently receives a negative reaction from her family on her parenting ability. She felt that her family, the school system and others are watching her and she stated that she was overwhelmed by everything she had to do. She felt that she had to choose how she wanted to parent her children based on what her family wanted, thus not really having a choice at all.

You get some people that look at us like you know, you brought this on yourself, or you can do it or you can do that. They think we have everything handed to us. Again, we don't, you know when you go back home after being married and being on your own and having children, what your family thinks of and what you think of are two different things. So now you're dealing with your children, being a single parent, working, you know if they are ill, the kids need medical attention, support and other systems of curriculum, you're dealing with, you know, making your children happy and then you're trying to make, your family happy, you know, I find that very stressful and I am put in a battle between my son and my dad cause my dad's trying to cut in as a father figure, meanwhile your trying to say, you're not a father, you're a grandfather and it puts you in a very bad position.

Many of the mothers felt that the mother blaming discourse follows them everywhere they go, even when doing leisure activities. Some of the mothers felt that they needed to 'over parent' to ensure that they are perceived in a more positive light. As per many of the participants, this type of monitoring may affect how a single mother chooses and/or is obligated to parent her child(ren) due to being fearful of what other people may think and the repercussions of 'duty to report'. Heidi stated:

I think they....they don't have a good perception of them, especially have more than one kid and they look at you....again why are you having kids if you don't have support and why am I paying for you kids to grow up. That's a big perception that a lot of people have. Especially when you're out in the public, you might not necessarily want to maybe discipline your kids in a certain way or maybe you're a bit harder on your kids when you're out in the public eye because you're like....you don't want them to look at your kids and you and she's a bad parent because her kids are screaming that her kid's want a chocolate bar.

A common insight that was discussed by all of the participants was the lack of financial resources and how this can be perceived as not doing everything possible for your children. Many of the women stated that they wanted to do more, but were incapable due to having only one income and sometimes no child support at all. In addition, a lack of time was believed to add to the mother blaming discourse because single mother do not have the same amount of time to grant to their children due to being responsible for all activities of daily living within the home. The participants felt that a lack of money and time could make them look like 'bad mothers', especially when outside persons do not know the full circumstances. Sarah became very upset and tears came to her eyes when she spoke about the perception of others and her inability to pay for everything she wanted to provide for her children.

I feel that as a single mother, you have more people looking at you with more of a possibility of someone reporting you, even though they don't know the full circumstances. Being a single mother, people just don't feel that you do as well of a job as if you were a two parent household. I think we are looked down on as opposed to two parent households. They feel that we don't do enough for our children. It's harder to get them out and to do things and be financially stable when you're one person as opposed to two.

Many of the participants stated that navigating through day-to-day systems can be difficult due to commonly held notions of mother blaming. For instance, Kelly became angry when she spoke about trying to find a job that will support her and her son, but not getting the position because she is a single mother and she felt blamed for her choices. Kelly was trying to access employment at the time of her interview so that she did not have to use Ontario Works,



but she could not find a job that would help her to accommodate her daycare needs and her single mother status. Kelly, like many of the other participants, feared using systems due to 'duty to report' and the negative perception of single motherhood. Consequently, these perceptions took away choice in relationship to many areas in a single mother's life, like employment. She stated:

The only thing I didn't like was the other day I went to do an interview for a job and she loved me, she was going to hire me, she was going to say it and was like, what are you going to do in the summer when its nice outside and your Grandmother wants you to take your son out for ice cream. I was like, I don't go, I have to work. I do what I have to do. And she didn't call me back for the job and it was between me and another person and she didn't call me back because of that. So I think just, I think it was a quick judgement on her part.

It appears that all of the participants felt that a mother blaming discourse can affect how they choose to parent their children because they want to do it the 'right way'. In addition, mother blaming can take away choices, such as not getting a job to support children. Many of the participants became emotionally upset when they spoke about the hardships of single motherhood and felt that mother blaming can lead to distress. The participants felt overwhelmed by the day-to-day responsibilities, due to accomplishing everything on their own. An external mother blaming perception and choosing to 'over parent' in compensation may cause added stress and responsibilities, therefore governing how the participants practice single motherhood or have to parent due to a lack of choices available. The participants also felt that they always fell short of the 'ideal mother' standards and many of them internalized this blame.

**Accessing and Using Support Services:** Accessing and using support services as a single mother can be extremely stressful and a frightening endeavour. When I was 17 years old, I became a single mother. I did not have any information about the types of services that were available and I felt lost. While I was still in the hospital with my newborn baby, a Social Worker

came to my room and suggested that I access Ontario Works. She informed me that this type of financial assistance would provide me with an opportunity to finish high school and to raise my child concurrently and successfully. I followed the Social Worker's advice and I contacted Ontario Works. I was told that I did not qualify for the assistance because I lived at home with my parents and they were obligated to take care of my child and me. The worker told me to get a job and work just like everyone else. I governed my behaviours based on what the Ontario Works worker advised me to do. I obtained a part-time job, I went to high school full-time, and raised my son (with the help of my entire family). I did not receive any financial assistance and I feared accessing any other services because I believed that only 'bad' mothers need help. I now understand that this worker was in a place of power over me and I internalized her response. At the time, the worker led me to believe that 'welfare' was a bad thing and those who choose this path were weak.

All of the interview participants have tried to access support services external to CAS and have experienced similar challenges to my own when assessing and using these support services. For instance, Yolanda and Vella were both denied access to any support services (besides the school system and the medical system) and were told that they do not qualify for the services that they requested due to being employed. Kelly was in the process of trying to access Ontario Works, Second Career, child care and housing subsidies during the interview period, but was told that she did not qualify because she lived in a safe, rent free environment with her mother. Sarah, Jessy and Heidi are currently using support services, but all three of them stated that it was not easy to gain access to the services that they are using and to keep up with their demands. All of the participants felt that trying to access support services can be daunting because they felt that there was not enough available and that the complexity of the systems makes them difficult

to navigate. Many of the participants felt that the process to acquire assistance was a one-size fits all practice and this disqualified many legitimate cases. Many of the participants felt that making systems complex and standardized deterred people from using them in the first place. Thus, these systems have absolute power of the single mothers who require the services. For instance, Kelly stated:

I have tried to access Ontario Works and Second Career. You have to be like laid off for the last 4 years or work under a minimum of 20 hours. The woman at Ontario Works told me to go try Second Career, but none of the qualifications, I don't meet the qualifications of Second Career, to get into Second Career, even though she told me to do it. I looked into the daycare subsidy. I can't get daycare subsidy until I get a job, so but I can't get a job until I get daycare, so it's a circle. Housing subsidy is a list. You're on a list for like 8 years and daycare subsidy, even if I get it, I am on a list for 6 months. I don't know if there is any other subsidies. I have heard of other ones, but they are really hard to find. You can't really find them, written down anywhere. I have only heard of what other people tell me about them.

As per the participants, power is exercised within certain support systems to guide and deter specific behaviours. All of the participants agreed that single mothers are obligated to follow through with service plans, procedures and policies that are outlined when accessing and using services. Jessy, like many of the participants believed that they had to parent their children in accordance to what service providers felt was the 'right way'. They believed that if a single mother failed this task she would be reported to CAS, denied services and/or would be discharged from services. In accordance with the other participants, Jessy felt that support services monitor their clients and this creates a climate of suspicion and surveillance. She stated:

They are going to tell me the way I should be raising my kids and if you're trying to look good as a single mom in the services eyes, so they don't have to have anything to report, then you're going to do what they tell you to do.

All of the participants highlighted that in their experiences, support systems require clients to provide too much personal information. They felt that some of the information that is required was not relevant to the service provided and felt that service demands were too excessive. Many participants felt uncomfortable and humiliated when accessing or using support services, but provided the required information because it was a mandatory component of receiving services and they did not want their worker to report them to CAS for non-compliance. Sarah felt that the systems are too complex and based on the information clients provide, this will determine if you can access their service. This places single mothers in a place of uncertainty because there is no stability in what some services offer from month to month. They require clients to disclose information in exchange for services in which they may or may not qualify. Sarah laughed sarcastically when she spoke about using Ontario Works and the local foods banks. She also felt that the multiple responsibilities that single mothers are obligated to complete on a daily basis are not taken into consideration when using services. She stated:

OW requires that you do courses to upgrade your resume and look for work, yet they don't provide any financial help with daycare in order to do this, which is hard when you're on a fixed income. The food bank, they require you to be there at a certain time and they don't care whether or not you have a child in school and you have to pick them up. It makes it very difficult to use the services and do your normal life.... You call them and they give you a set time to go in and you bring all of your financial information, all of your personal information and they decide off of that, whether or not you qualify that month....They require every piece of information about me and my children that I have had in the last 5 years. They scrutinize over everything you've done in your life, your entire history and then they make you wait to decide if you're eligible for their services.

Many of the mothers emphasized that they would not use services if they could manage independently and many of them negatively internalized the mother blaming discourse associated with single mothers who use services. For example, Heidi accesses a single mothers

group. She believes that this group helps her to cope with parenting stress and is a great support network, but when asked if she would like to access any other services, she stated:

I would probably feel embarrassed for the fact that, I don't know, I'd feel that I'm trying to be a strong person and support myself and kid by myself and that something like Ontario Works, a lot of people look down on it, even though that's not what its intended for. Especially young moms, they just feel that you're just looking for a payday, you don't want to work, lazy and so I would be embarrassed having to use them though, you know, even if I really needed them.

From the experiences of the participants, it appears that the systems that are currently in place to assist single mothers are not working for them. Instead, the systems are governing behaviours and creating and maintaining mother blaming discourses. Many of the participants have had similar experiences and for those who could access services, they were monitored, governed and personal choice remained absent. For those who were not eligible for services, they still felt that they were being governed to parent the 'right way' and no choices were provided regarding service use. All the participants felt that they had lost their autonomy when trying to access and navigate services, leaving them feeling defeated.

**Risk and the Idea of Neglect:** The idea of risk and what risk looks like in relationship to single motherhood is ingrained in western culture. I see it in the media, within the social services agencies in which I am employed and I see it in some of the classrooms in which I learn. As Social Workers, we determine risk on a daily basis and sometimes I think that we are too busy filling out required documents to fully empathise with the situation or structural circumstances of each client. I think we do this because we have demanding caseloads, we are overworked and we live in a world of accountability. As a single mother and a Social Worker, I wear two hats. I have to be accountable for the decisions I make during my practice and this means following Ministry standards and completing risk assessments. On the other hand, if my

life is pathologized through a risk assessment, my family may be deemed as 'at risk' due to being a one parent household. For example, when my child was in grade 2, his older brother would walk him to school because I had to be at work before school started. During the winter months, I always made sure that my kids were dress appropriately for the cold weather and in fact, I would over dress them. One day, I received a phone call from the school stating that the school would not tolerate my son wearing shorts in the middle of the winter and felt that it was because I was not driving my child to school and did not know what he was wearing when he left the house. It turns out that my son was bringing a pair of shorts in his back pack and changing his pants on school property and had nothing to do with me being a single mother, but I was deemed to be a risk and blamed for incompetence because I was unable to drive my child to school due to being a single mother and having an obligation to work. I was humiliated and I demanded an apology from the school, especially because they stated that I was being neglectful. I am still waiting for that apology.

All of the participants recognized that single motherhood is deemed to be a risk to the child(ren) within a single mother household. They believed that external support services perceive single mothers as 'not good enough' or neglectful based on a lack of income and time available for their children. All participants believed that support service staff do not look at the circumstances of the situation and instead, they jump to conclusions based on risk assessments and preconceived perceptions of single motherhood. For example, Sarah was concerned about the financial aspect of what single motherhood looks like in relationship to neglect, she stated:

One of my fears is that nutritional food is more expensive than, you know the other stuff. I am afraid that the teachers, when I send my child to school and can't always have the best lunches are going to call CAS and tell them that I am neglecting him.

Many of the participants stated that they fear the repercussions of the perceptions of others because they felt that others don't always look at the entire situation before making judgments. It also must be noted that all of the participants do appreciate that there is a need for CAS, but would like service providers and external support service staff to use a more holistic lens when defining abuse and/or neglect. For example, Vella stated:

I don't know if it's possible, but somehow the facts being looked at before CAS is called cause if that mom or dad is innocent, it would be torture to deal with these people, but unfortunately the children that do need it, it's a good thing, so it's, I don't know, it's a tricky one.

Many of the participants felt that the idea of risk that surrounds single motherhood and the possibility to CAS involvement would deter them from accessing support services. They felt that accessing support services may be too risky and put their families in jeopardy. Jessy spoke about the need to protect oneself from external perceptions and CAS involvement. She felt that she would not use services that would deem her to be a risk to her children, especially since she does not feel that single motherhood is not a risk factor for her children. She stated:

If she's going to be thought of as a risk, and her children are at risk, we are not going to use the system. We are not going to go there. It's easier to say, I don't invite you into my life and into supporting me, then to try and protect yourself when you're in the system.

Five of the participants felt that single motherhood is not a risk factor in relationship to the well-being of their children. They felt that their children come first and everything else is secondary. There was a consensus that single motherhood is stressful and many of the mothers struggle financially, but they felt that this can only make their children stronger and more independent. For instance, Sarah stated, "I am there for my children 100% regardless if it's stressful, or broke or whatever, the kids are taken care of".

Yolanda had a different view regarding single motherhood in relationship to risk. She believed that single motherhood is a risk factor because she is unable to provide all of the extra material goods that her child wants. She was afraid that other children would make fun of her son because he didn't have certain things that other children have. She internalized the fact that she is unable to provide everything her son desired based on what western culture deems as 'normal' and this makes her feel like a 'bad mother'. She does not want to appear neglectful and wants to provide her child with everything possible, but she seems to be falling short of her own expectations that are guided by our culture. She stated:

You don't want them feeling like an outcast. There is so much bullying in the school nowadays. That you know, if you don't give them what they need, you feel like you're a bad mother or a bad person or you just put it on yourself.

External perceptions, risk assessments and internalization in relationship to risk and neglect govern the way all of the participants parent or use and/or access support services. It appears that many of the participants felt shame and guilt because they could not provide an abundance of material gains for their child(ren). On the other hand, many of the participants felt that single motherhood encourages independence. In addition, all of the participants stated that they do everything they can for their children, they are emotionally available for them and provide them with the basic necessities of life. Many of the participants felt that their children do not suffer and will benefit from growing up in a single mother household.

**The Stressful Nature of Single Motherhood:** Being a single mother is demanding, stressful and chaotic and I know this from my own personal experience. I work full time, I have a part time job, I go to school part time and I am raising two boys. In addition, I have to help the children with their homework, feed them, do their laundry, drive them to appointments and to their extracurricular activities and assist them with their other activities of daily living. By the



end of the night I am exhausted. I have little time for my friends or my own personal care, although I am fortunate to be surrounded by a supportive family. My family helps me in many of the tasks that I am responsible for completing and they also babysit so I can go to school in the evening. I am grateful for the assistance, but it does not compare to having a second parent in the household who is responsible to partake in family and financial obligations. External perceptions exacerbate my stress because I have experienced mother blaming discourses that describe single mothers as weak or at fault. We do not have the same amount of time to allocate to daily activities and we usually do not have financial means compared to a two parent household and these issues can be taken out of context and mistaken as neglect.

All the participants agreed that single motherhood is a stressful responsibility and sometimes they felt that their stress can affect their maternal mental health status. The participants felt that the common stressors associated with single motherhood are a lack free time, being responsible for too many daily activities and the financial hardships, leaving their children to sometimes do without nonessential items.

All of the participants felt that their lives revolved around their children and had little time for self-care, or none at all. Any extra monies that came into the household (which is rare) were allocated for their child(ren), leaving the mother without. All of the mothers agreed that they were doing the best that they could, but sometimes their efforts were not perceived as enough and this governed many of the participants to 'over parent' their children, which caused more stress and responsibilities. They felt that they had to prove that they were doing things 'the right way'. In Accordance, Heidi stated that:

I think just having to do everything by yourself, keep it together for your kids, you have no one to, you know, you can't vent to your kid about how your kid is acting and also

again, that look on society, you wanna, you almost feel you have to do a better job than a two parent household. Society already has a negative outlook on you, so you have to; you put more pressure on yourself to do better. It's a big stressor too.

Yolanda spoke about the stress that is placed upon her through her single motherhood status and stress related to the perception of her family. Within her interview, she stated that her family is more judgemental than external persons and this caused her stress, along with other responsibilities in accordance to single motherhood. She, like many of the other participants internalized the perception of others and this appears to be causing more distress. Yolanda suffers from depression and has attributed her mental health status on her living circumstance. She stated:

I feel a lot of pressure on myself because everything that I do I question myself. You know, you know, are they going to approve, are they going to disapprove. Or am I going to be in for a battle tonight. Or, it's not the same as being on your own with your children and having that unit. Now you're dealing with your kids, plus your parents and whoever else is around. So everyone's always got to put in their two cents....I think a lot of women in my shoes suffer from depression. I am one of them and I have been on a lot of medications just because of that. We put more on our backs than what is needed.

Jessy linked her stressors to similar day-to-day activities that were described by the other participants, but also connected her stressors to living in a patriarchal society. She spoke about having to play both roles in the household and this can place more pressure on the mother to step up her game. She stated:

Obviously things like finance, being able to give each of your children the attention they need when there's a missing link, no father figure, you sort of have to feel like you have to step in to be that father figure as well. And then time management, trying to be a single mom, working, raising kids, doing everything your kids need is tough.

As per the participants, possible CAS involvement would elicit feelings of fear and uncertainty, consequently adding to the stress that single mothers are faced with on a daily basis. A common belief was that they had to appear to be 'perfect' mothers if a CAS case was opened in order for the file to be closed. CAS appears to hold power over the participants even though

they have not had CAS involvement in the past. Many of the participants felt that they were good parents, but still felt that they needed to ensure optimal parenting. In accordance, Heidi stated:

It would be stressful. The, you know the feeling that you have to, I would feel that I would have to be perfect whenever they are coming over or not coming over because I would be scared even though I am not doing anything wrong.

Many of the participants stated that there are not enough services to assist the mothers with daily stressors and mental health concerns. Many of the participants felt that mental health services designed to improve maternal mental health would be beneficial because it is hard to parent and focus on your children, especially when they are living with mental health issues. Many of the participants have researched out to services, but have been turned away for various reasons causing additional stress and frustration. As mentioned before, many of the participants were faced with means-tested eligibility programs and were told that they did not qualify, thus creating and maintaining structural oppression. These types of programs determine who will get service for their mental health issues and how is going to be left out. Yolanda was angry at the system and felt that it failed her because she did reach out and she was turned away. She stated:

I am a single mom. I don't get child support whatsoever from my ex-husband, he is ill. I have tried to call, you know different support groups to see what help I can get and the response I get is that I am capable of doing it on my own and I don't think that's right. You know, he gets away with all of this and meanwhile I'm forced to work 3, 4 jobs and not spend time with my children and it's going to end up where, you know, as they get teenagers, they end up on the streets and become delinquents. And you know what, we're the ones who suffer because it's on our back.

As per the participants, the stress that is linked to single motherhood is profound. Many of the participants felt that they could never live up to the standards that are placed upon them by support services and the general public, thus leaving them susceptible to claims made under

‘duty to report’. Many of the participants feared that the perception of others in relationship to their parenting capacity. In addition, they felt that CAS involvement would exacerbate their stressors, consequently creating acute and long term mental health issues.

## Discussion

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The primary focus of this research was to explore how the Child Welfare ‘duty to report’ regulation impacts the decision of low-income single mothers without prior CAS involvement to access and use support services external to CAS. In addition to satisfying this particular question, I also thought it was important to explore the participants’ perceptions, experiences, and opinions regarding single motherhood in relationship to external perceptions, governing, and available support services. By completing a narrative analysis of the stories I was able to identify emerging themes that were common amongst most or all of the participants. The themes are presented in the last chapter will be discussed here in relation to the literature. These themes are: 1) disclosing information; 2) patriarchal discourse; 3) mother blaming and governing; 4) accessing and using support systems; 5) risk and the idea of neglect; 6) the stressful nature of single motherhood.

**Disclosing information:** Due to the fear of external perceptions and the repercussions of “duty to report”, many of the participants only shared information that was pertinent to the service in which they were accessing. Many of the women did not want to provide additional information owing to their mistrust of the system. This is in accordance to the minimal literature that is available regarding information disclosure. For instance, some research suggests that single mothers do not wish to disclose or even access support services due to stigmatization. Many single mothers feel that they are being watched and are looked down upon; consequently they restrict their exposure to services that may be beneficial. Many low income mothers share feelings of shame and/or guilt and try to cope on their own so that external services will not perceive them to be weak (Broussard et al., 2012).

Some research states that single mothers are trained to keep their heads down, answer questions when asked and to not volunteer any extra information. Single mothers know their place within the system hierarchy and govern their behaviours to fit the demands. The stigmatization of low income families and the idea of neglect is entrenched in the agencies in which families are screened and their deficiencies are labelled. Due to this, single mothers believe that their lives will be pathologized and they will be deemed as 'not good enough', thus they do not want to disclose (Callahan et al., 1995).

There is a significant gap in the literature regarding information disclosure. Researchers have presented findings that suggest that low income single mothers fear using support services and navigate through systems with trepidation, which in turn impacts how much information they disclose to service providers due to a professional's duty to report suspected child maltreatment. Much research proposes this finding as a 'fact' or a symptom of their own research question, and in most cases, no rationale has been provided for the finding.

**Patriarchal Discourse:** All of the participants indicated an awareness that motherhood is a socially constructed institution that is shaped through common patriarchal discourses. There is a great amount of literature available that describes 'the ideal mother', but there is a lack of literature that speaks to the 'ideal father'. The absence of this type of research may reflect the normalization of patriarchy and the acceptance of gender roles and blame. Most of the participants felt that when a single mother is the sole parent, she is monitored due to being female. She is supposed to have an innate ability to parent, while a father does not. Gender roles are defined within the child welfare sector and this perpetuates and maintains what is considered normal (Brown et al., 2008). Western culture has defined a father as the main breadwinner,

while a mother is responsible for domestic duties and childcare (Benoit, 2000). When she does it wrong, everyone is a witness, when he does wrong, he is doing his best and is praised.

The patriarchal principles that were described by the participants are common within the feminist and child welfare literature. For instance, a child welfare study suggested that CAS workers expect little from the fathers and they are usually constructed as irrelevant or rendered invisible. Fathers who do take on some responsibility for their children are regarded as heroic, which is not the case for a single mother. Instead, a single mother is expected to care for her children (Strega, 2008). Through my research, it appears that single mothers are aware of the patriarchal discourses that surround their social location and this affects how they parent. Many of the participants felt that they were governed by patriarchal discourses and felt guilty when they fell short of societal expectations. This type of internalization and feelings of disempowerment are in accordance with the current literature. For instance, some research suggests that low income mothers suffer from an internal conflict, struggling with their parenting behaviours and what is viewed as a 'good mother' (Middleton, 2006).

Many of the participants felt that the general public and support service professionals view their family unit as a risk due to the absence of a father. Most research that is available regarding fatherhood is based on the absence of the father within the context of a single mother home, thus the single mother is still the centre of the research question. For instance, one study stated that the absence of a father will negatively affect the children within a single mother household. It was found that the children in the home have more mental health issues and exhibit more negative externalizing behaviours in comparison to intact families (McIanahan, 2013). This type of research suggests that a nuclear family is superior and should be celebrated, while a single mother led household is understood to be deviant. When absent, the role of the father

remains ambiguous, while the mother is seen as responsible for the family. When the father remains absent, support services and CAS procedures appear to promote the uninvolved father, thus putting the single mother at the forefront for blame. This normalizes the absence, thus deeming the mother as the sole responsible parent (Brown et al., 2008).

**Mother Blaming and Governing:** All of the participants have experienced situations in which mother blaming was evident and many of them felt the need to live up to the expectations of this common discourse. Most of the participants felt that they needed to prove that they are good mothers and experienced internalized anxiety regarding their mothering skills. There is a great amount of literature surrounding the concept of mother blaming and much of the current literature is consistent with what the participants in my study have experienced. For instance, some research found that mothers who are working with support services feel like they have no control over their parenting and have to maintain a certain level of orderliness and perfection. Many of these women felt that they received constant negative messages about their parenting skills and this resulted in feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed (Tummala-Narra, 2009). In addition, much of the current literature also suggests that single mothers are aware of mother blaming and many of them are concurrently labelled as `poor`, `in need`, `abused` and etc. Many of these women feel like they are being regulated, judged and the expectations that are placed upon them are unrealistic, especially in light of being a single mother (Middleton, 2006).

In addition, many of the participants felt that they would not disclose certain pieces of information to service providers because it may be taken out of context. There is not a lot of direct literature on the mother blaming discourse in relationship to the amount of information that is disclosed to service providers, but there is literature stating that single mothers do fear being labelled and the consequences of not living up to unrealistic standards. For instance, some



research suggested that single mothers felt that mothering becomes a difficult task due to being under intolerable pressure and constantly fearing the consequences of not parenting up to par with the ideal mother standards (Davies et al., 2012). Some research suggests that it is easier to blame the mother for the problems in the home than it is to change service agency policies and many single mothers are aware of this trend (Jackson, 2004). Mothers are not going to provide support service professionals with full disclosure if they do not feel safe and/or if they believe that they are being blamed for issues that are structural in nature.

**Accessing and Using Support Services:** Many of the participants felt that accessing and using support services was a demoralizing experience and many of them highlighted that they would not use them if it was not absolutely necessary. These findings correspond with current literature that is available regarding single mothers and support services. For instance, many single mothers who rely on Ontario Works desired to live independently without financial assistance. They do not wish to be controlled by support services and they understand the negative perceptions of being a ‘welfare’ recipient (Gingrich, 2010).

Many of the interview participants felt that the support services that are available require single mothers to provide too much personal information and are too demanding and this is in accordance with the current literature. For instance, some research suggests that Ontario Works regulates persons who are considered to be low income through the micro-regulation of job search and personal behaviour. This type of administration and standardization pathologizes single mothers and acts as a service deterrent (Herd et al., 2005). Current literature found that many single mothers felt that employment standards and mandatory training programs that are required by Ontario Works did not help them to secure gainful employment and found them to be

a hindrance. In addition, many women had to attend mandatory parenting classes and they recognised this as a structural perception of 'bad mothering' (Gingrich, 2010).

Many of the participants felt that they had to parent the 'right way' to appease service providers and felt that their behaviours were being monitored. Some literature suggests that many people believe that poverty is self-made and those who require help are dysfunctional. Many people believe that poverty is based on an individual's deficiencies and not a structural and/or patriarchal problem. These beliefs create a negative social construction of single mothers who rely on financial assistance programs, thus condoning punitive measures to monitor behaviours and govern clients. Many single mothers feel the effects of this type of stigma and parent accordingly. In many cases, the complex needs and circumstances of a single mother family is not addressed, instead she is blamed for needing to use a service. (Luna, 2009).

Many of the participants highlighted that they were denied services based on not meeting specific criteria, thus removing personal choice. In addition, those using services felt that they lacked choices due to being mandated to complete certain tasks and behave in a specific manner. Either way, all of the participants felt that they lacked power due to being a low income single mother and these experiences are consistent with current research. For instance, the literature suggests that low income families have limited choices in many areas of their lives which include housing, clothing, social events, transportation and etc. The lack of choice disrupts a single mother's autonomy and leaves them feeling hopeless. Poverty also exacerbates the social perception that a single mother will relinquish her control to others willingly (McIntyre et al., 2003).

**Risk and the Idea of Neglect:** All of the participants suggested that single motherhood is perceived and categorized as a risk factor in relationship to the child(ren) in the home. The participants believed that this is common perception amongst service providers and the general public due to a single mother's financial hardships, a lack of time, stress, maternal mental health, patriarchy and mother blaming. Most of the participants did not want to access support services or CAS due to the negative perception of single motherhood in relation to risk and 'duty to report'.

These findings are reflective in the current literature that is available on risk within the child welfare sector. For instance, the child welfare workers conduct risk assessments on families and once a mother is deemed as a 'bad mother' due to a collection of risks, she is managed and profiled (Brown, 2006). Risk assessments leave a mother feeling humiliated, isolated and generate a mistrust of the system (Brown, 2006). Mothers fear CAS because they know that they are perceived to be a risk to their children and they do not want to be managed (Swift & Callahan, 2009). It has been founded that 70% of all cases that are reported under 'duty to report' are made by professionals (community health services, social services, schools and etc.) and not the general public. Clients involved with CAS feel a sense of hopelessness and a loss of power, so they may not access support services if they feel threatened (Pietrantonio et al., 2013). This may leave many single mothers without services that may assist them financially or otherwise.

Most of the participants themselves did not believe that single motherhood was a risk factor and all the participants stated that they conduct their lives around the needs of their children. These findings vary from the current data that is available on the topic of risk and neglect in relationship to single motherhood. Much of the current literature suggests that single

motherhood is a risk to the well-being of her children. Some research has found that children of single mothers typically have more behaviour issues, have lower educational attainments and many of these children suffer from mental health concerns. In addition, some research states that there is a link to child neglect and family poverty, thus a low income single mother would be considered a risk in relation to neglect (Schumacher et al., 2001). On the other hand, one study did find that economic hardship does not affect the parenting style, quality relations and the monitoring implemented by single mothers. Poverty does however exacerbate the difficult duty of parenting in general, a single mother is the sole person responsible to complete all family tasks (Bulanda, 2007).

Most of the participants in my study agreed that risk is related to structural circumstances and can be taken out of context because poverty can look like neglect. In relationship to single motherhood, much of the current data regarding risk and neglect does not account for structural and circumstantial situations. There is some literature available suggesting that support service professionals should account for the complex nature of single motherhood, but still holds to the understanding that single motherhood is a risk, especially those who are financially disadvantaged. For instance, one study suggested that single mothers who felt more competent in their role as a mother would parent in a way that promotes positive childhood opportunities and would minimize the risk to her children. This study did recognise that single mothers have complex circumstances and even in light of being financially disadvantaged, many of the single mothers reported that they were 'good enough' or 'very good' at parenting (Raver & Leadbeater, 1999). This study, like many others understands risk and neglect as a symptom of single motherhood and does not provide suggestions that will introduce structural change. In fact, this

study blamed mothers for feeling incompetent, but my research shows that these feelings can be attributed to mother blaming discourses and what an ‘ideal mother’ should look like.

**The Stressful Nature of Single Motherhood:** All of the single mothers interviewed collectively experienced the stressful nature of being a sole parent. They all agreed that that they lacked time, financial stability, emotional support networks and felt that their maternal mental health status can be affected by the compounded stressors that are associated with single motherhood. Current literature also suggests that single motherhood is a stressful endeavour due to their being the primary caregiver to their child(ren), and having full-time responsibilities outside and inside the home. They are responsible for all the family’s daily activities and the overall well-being of the unit (Hodgson et al., 2001).

In accordance with the interview participants, current literature also suggests that poverty creates additional stress. One study suggested that there is a correlation between poverty and depression amongst single mothers (Broussard et al., 2012). This correlation is concerning because further research suggests that poor material mental health affects the well-being of the child(ren) within the home (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2000). In addition, another study found that single mothers who rely on financial assistance programs have a higher distress level due to the stigma that is attached to this type of dependency and the precarious nature of the income (Pettersen et al., 2013). External perceptions that stigmatize single mothers generate more stress and add to the already stressful nature of single motherhood. Instead, current research suggests that encouraging and holistic support systems can improve maternal mental health and can be used as a positive parenting experience (David, Styron & Davidson, 2011).

All of the participants agreed that if CAS was involved in their lives, they would react with a stress response of anxiety or fear, coinciding with the current research findings. It must be noted that I was unable to locate any current literature in relationship to single mothers who had not had previous involvement with CAS, only those who had. Thus, current research does not look at the fear related to potential CAS involvement due to social location and risk.

Studies concur that single mothers who are confronted with CAS will respond with trepidation and this will damage the working relationships with support service professionals. In fact, single mothers would rank CAS the last place that they would turn to for assistance. Many mothers have a mistrust of CAS and support services due to 'duty to report' and the perception of others based on a mother blaming discourse (Brown, 2006). Many single mothers are under a great amount of pressure and supportive mental health services would benefit the mother and the children that she is supporting, as long as she feels safe to provide full disclosure without the risk of a worker taking her information out of context.

The participants in my study all agreed that they believed that they would benefit from mental health services because they understood the importance to practice self-care. On the other hand, they felt that they would not disclose everything to support services and this could impact their well-being and the overall effectiveness of the service. Due to these findings, there is a proven need for more support services that cater to maternal mental health issue, mother blaming discourse education and/or policy changes related to financial programs as Petterson et al. (2013) also argued.

## Final Comments

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**Limitations:** All research projects are faced with constraints, especially when research is conducted with human participants. Limitations of a study are the characteristics of design and/or methodology that impacts or influences the interpretation of the results or the actual application of the design (USC Libraries, 2014). My research project was time limited due to program requirements, thus I was faced with time constraints. Due to the time constraints, I was unable to collect data from a larger pool of participants and therefore I lacked a larger sample size. This resulted in excluding the ‘voices’ of single mothers who would have otherwise participated in this research project.

From my personal experience, I know that single motherhood is a busy endeavour and I tried to work with the participants to bridge that gap as much as possible. I agreed to meet with the participants at their convenience. Due to the participants having other required daily duties, the interviews were shorter than I expected, but all of the mothers shared their stories and provided me with thought provoking and inspiring feedback. I asked all of the participants what would have worked better for them due to their time restrictions. All participants shared a common response and stated that in the future, email, phone or questionnaires would work better for them.

This study lacked diversity because all of the participants who agreed to take part in this research project were all born in Canada and all but one participant identified as occupying a racially white social location. I think it would be interesting to look at my research question through the lens of culture and/or diverse social locations.

The subject of this research project is of a sensitive nature and this may have affected the ‘voices’ of the participants. For instance, when I began to receive responses from my research flyer and snowball sampling, I was contact by 11 women, but some of them decided that the topic was too risky and/or sensitive to talk about. One woman told me that if her worker found out that she was talking about ‘the system’, she could lose her support. I explained that the research would be anonymous, but some of the women appeared to be scared to talk to me. I believe that this fear may have also affected the ‘voices’ of the women I did speak with because in many instances, I received surface responses. In addition, I also had to tell participants that I have a ‘duty to report’ and this may have prompted the women to not disclose their entire story, as many mothers stated, that they fear the repercussions of what could happen if they were completely candid.

### **Implication for Future Social Work Practice**

I believe that support service professionals need to become more aware of the challenges that single mothers endure. Mothers are continuously blamed for what looks like neglect and system failure is never considered to be a related contribution (Swift, 1995). Systems need to be held accountable for their flaws and professionals need to become aware that system usage can be a frightening experience for many single mothers. To learn more about a single mother’s experience, professionals need to ask them about their history, what works for them, what does not work for them and to listen to their ‘voice’. In addition, Social Workers need to provide the media and other public outlets with context regarding the hardships that are associated with poverty, instead of pathologizing the individual. The general public needs to become aware that systems can create many challenges for a single mother and she is not always to be blamed.



Social Workers are at the forefront and can become strong advocates for single mothers and all they have to do is listen, absorb, create, change and spread the word.

In accordance with my research findings, the systems that single mothers use were found to be too demanding. Many of the participants felt that it was too hard to access services and were bounced from service to service. They also felt that the information about resources was not advertised and that the professionals that worked within the support services were unhelpful or unknowledgeable about other community resources. Cross-sector training is needed because sector mandates differ and sector disagreements create fragmented service delivery. In order to provide holistic service, professionals need to have a wider understanding of what is available in the community and service providers should be sensitive to different theoretical approaches that are used within specific sectors, such as feminism (Alaggia et al., 2007). For example, support services need to have an understanding that CAS can create a sense of trepidation for single mothers and CAS needs to be aware that their policies and procedures can create fear, thus they may inhibit single mothers to access other support systems. As Social Workers, we need to be accountable for the services that we provide and break down as many barriers as possible so clients can access services and feel safe.

Social Workers, especially Registered Social Workers (RSW), have to abide by the Code of Ethics set out by the Canadian Association of Social Workers. This code contains six values, one of which is the *Pursuit of Social Justice*. This value endorses the idea that Social Workers must oppose prejudice, break down barriers and to ensure fairness and equity (OCSWSSW, 2008). , but Child Protection Services seem to be exempt since they categorize families In addition, Ontario Works and other systems are based on strict eligibility criteria and sometimes single mothers cannot prove they are in need. Consequently, their family goes without. I believe

that as Social Workers, we are put into a precarious position because we are required to follow agency standards, but we are also obligated to follow the Code of Ethics and sometimes these two governing bodies differ. I believe that support service professionals need to become agents of change and advocate in order to amend current policies. Support services need to become inclusive to all clients that are accessing the system and understand that blame can create a sense of apprehension when using and accessing services. Current mother blaming and patriarchal discourses need to be changed and this work can begin within the agencies in which Social Workers are employed.

Most of the current Social Work literature that is available regarding CAS, external support services, single motherhood, mother blaming, risk, child maltreatment and patriarchy is explored through the lens of the professionals that work with these mothers and not by the mothers themselves. More qualitative research needs to be completed on these topics so that professionals can learn more about the experiences of a single mother and what works and does not work for them.

In addition, there is virally no research speaking to the anxiety that is provoked by potential CAS involvement among those single mothers who had never had CAS involvement in the past. My research suggests that many single mothers are concerned about how their social location affects the perception of others. Single mothers tend to 'over parent' to compensate due to their fear of 'duty to report'. Thus social work research should concentrate on the power that is generated by 'duty to report' and CAS. This will help professionals to understand that single mothers are not accessing and using support services to their full potential. Social Workers need to be aware of this structural issue and become 'agents of change'. Single mothers have a right

access and feel comfortable to fully disclose information without the fear of unwarranted CAS involvement.

### **Conclusion:**

In concluding this research, I have sought to gain a better understanding of how CAS's 'duty to report' regulation affects how single mothers who have never had CAS involvement access and/or use support services. Through my research, I have found that many single mothers, even when they did not have previous CAS involvement will, only disclose information that is pertinent for the service they are accessing. I found that many single mothers are suspicious of support services and only use them when they are absolutely necessary. In addition, it was also found that many single mothers encounter mother blaming discourses that are linked to patriarchy and risk, which in turn govern the way single mothers decide to parent their children or access and use support services. Through this research project, it was concluded that single motherhood is a stressful endeavour, but common societal discourses and the challenges that single mothers face when trying to access support services exacerbates single motherhood stress and are believed to lead to mental health concerns.

There is a lack of insightful research that pertains to this topic. Future research is required in order to capture the impact of CAS in relationship to single motherhood, even when they have not had prior CAS involvement. I was unable to find any research regarding single mothers who had not had prior CAS involvement and this excludes the 'voices' of a large population of mothers. It is important to understand why certain populations are not accessing or using services to their full potential because as Social Workers, we are accountable to make the service fit the client. Social Work should be client-centred and without a comprehensive understanding of client needs, we are not practicing critical Social Work. The client is the 'expert' of their own

lives and researchers need to use client ‘voices’ to document client-centred approaches that can be used by the professionals that work with single mothers and other vulnerable populations.

Every single mother has an individual experience to share and these ‘voices’ need to be explored. Particular attention needs to be considered when working with single mothers, and support service professionals need to understand the multiple stress related factors that are associated with single motherhood. Some parents do abuse and/or neglect their children and I am not concluding that all single mothers are exempt. Instead, I propose that support service professionals empathize with single mothers instead of automatically categorizing a single mother as a risk based on common societal discourses. Everyone has a history and each voice deserves to be heard.

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## Appendix A

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### Duty to Report child in need of protection

72. (1) Despite the provision of any other Act, if a person, including a person who performs professional or official duties with respect to children, has reasonable grounds to suspect one of the following, the person shall forthwith report the suspicion and the information on which it is based to a society:

1. The child has suffered physical harm, inflicted by the person having charge of the child or caused by or resulting from that person's
  - i. failure to adequately care for, provide for, supervise or protect the child, or
  - ii. pattern of neglect in caring for, providing for, supervising or protecting the child, or
2. There is a risk that the child is likely to suffer physical harm inflicted by the person having charge of the child or caused by or resulting from that person's,
  - i. Failure to adequately care for, provide for, supervise or protect the child, or
  - ii. Pattern of neglect in caring for, providing for, supervising or protecting the child.
3. The child has been sexually molested or sexually exploited, including by child pornography, by the person having charge of the child or by another person where the person having charge of the child knows or should know of the possibility of sexual molestation or sexual exploitation and fails to protect the child.
4. There is a risk that the child is likely to be sexually molested or sexually exploited as described in paragraph 3.
5. The child requires medical treatment to cure, prevent or alleviate physical harm or suffering and the child's parent or the person having charge of the child does not provide, or refuses or is unavailable or unable to consent to, the treatment
6. The child has suffered emotional harm, demonstrated by serious
  - i. anxiety,
  - ii. depression,
  - iii. withdrawal,
  - iv. self-destructive or aggressive behaviour, or
  - v. delayed development,

and there are reasonable grounds to believe that the emotional harm suffered by the child results from the actions, failure to act or pattern of neglect on the part of the child's parent or the person having charge of the child
7. The child has suffered emotional harm of the kind described in subparagraph i, ii, iii, iv or v of paragraph 6 and the child's parent or the person having charge of the child does

not provide, or refuses or is unavailable or unable to consent to, services or treatment to remedy or alleviate the harm.

8. There is a risk that the child is likely to suffer emotional harm of the kind described in subparagraph i, ii, iii, iv or v of paragraph 6 resulting from the actions, failure to act or pattern of neglect on the part of the child's parent or the person having charge of the child.
9. There is a risk that the child is likely to suffer emotional harm of the kind described in subparagraph i, ii, iii, iv or v of paragraph 6 and that the child's parent or the person having charge of the child does not provide, or refuses or is unavailable or unable to consent to, services or treatment to prevent the harm.
10. The child suffers from a mental, emotional or developmental condition that, if not remedied, could seriously impair the child's development and the child's parent or the person having charge of the child does not provide, or refuses or is unavailable or unable to consent to, treatment to remedy or alleviate the condition.
11. The child has been abandoned, the child's parent has died or is unavailable to exercise his or her custodial rights over the child and has not made adequate provision for the child's care and custody, or the child is in a residential placement and the parent refuses or is unable or unwilling to resume the child's care and custody.
12. The child is less than 12 years old and has killed or seriously injured another person or caused serious damage to another person's property. Services or treatment are necessary to prevent a recurrence and the child's parent or the person having charge of the child does not provide, or refuses or is unavailable or unable to consent to, those services or treatment.
13. The child is less than 12 years old and has on more than one occasion injured another person or caused loss or damage to another person's property, with the encouragement of the person having charge of the child or because of that person's failure or inability to supervise the child adequately.

(Service Canada, 2010)

## Appendix B

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# Ontario Works Monthly Allowances (Region of Peel)

### Basic Financial Assistance

The basic financial assistance Ontario Works issues each month includes an amount for Basic Needs and Shelter (if required), or an amount for Board and Lodging depending on your individual circumstances.

The tables that follow provide an **estimate** of the monthly basic financial assistance you may be eligible to receive, based on

- living arrangements (rent/own vs. board and lodge)
- number of dependents
- age of dependents, and
- marital or common law status
- dependent children who are living with their parents and have dependent children

In addition to these factors, the following factors may also affect the amount of assistance you receive or your eligibility for assistance:

- Accommodation costs
- Income sources
- Financial status (dependent vs. independent) if living with your parent(s)
- Assets (Note: Assets are anything of material value that an individual owns and can be converted into cash)

Basic Needs (*maximum allowances are indicated)		
Number of Dependents	Single Applicant	Applicant and Spouse
No Dependents	\$250	\$458
1 Dependent 0-17 years	\$344	\$458
1 Dependent 18 years or older	\$575	\$602
1 Dependent	\$575	\$602

0-17 years and 1 Dependent 18 years or older		
2 Dependents 0-17 years	\$344	\$458
2 Dependents 18 years or older	\$719	\$762
2 Dependents 0-17 years 1 dependent 18 years or older	\$575	\$602
2 Dependents 18 years or older 1 Dependent 0-17 years	\$719	\$762
3 Dependents 0-17 years	\$344	\$458
3 Dependents 18 years or older	\$880	\$923

(Region of Peel, 2013)

## Appendix C

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### Ontario Family Risk Assessment

Agency \_\_\_\_\_

Family Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Assessment: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Primary Parent/Caregiver \_\_\_\_\_

Secondary Parent/Caregiver \_\_\_\_\_

Worker Name: \_\_\_\_\_

	Neglect	Points Score		Abuse	Points Score
	Current Complaint is for Neglect		A1.	Current Complaint is for Abuse	
	a. No	0		a. No	0
	b. Yes	1		b. Yes	1
N2.	Number of Prior Child Protection Investigations (assign highest score that applies)		A2.	Number of Previous Child Abuse Investigations (number:_____)	
	a. None	0		a. None	0
	b. One or more, abuse only	1		b. One	1
	c. One or two for neglect	2		c. Two or more (Actual number ____)	2
	d. Three or more for neglect	3			
N3.	Family Has Previously Received CAS Ongoing Child Protection Services (voluntary/ courtordered)		A3.	Family has Previously Received CAS Ongoing Child Protection Services (voluntary/ court-ordered)	
	a. No	0		a. No	0
	b. Yes	1		b. Yes	1
N4.	Number of Children Involved in Current Child Abuse/Neglect Incident		A4.	Prior Injury to a Child Resulting from Child Abuse/Neglect	
	a. One, two or three	0		a. No	0

	b. Four or more	1		b. Yes	1	
N5.	Age of Youngest Child in the Family			A5. Primary Parent/Caregiver's Assessment of Incident (check applicable items, add for score) Max.score 3.		
	a. Two or older	0		a. ___Not applicable	0	
	b. Under two	1	_____	b. ___Blames child	1	_____
				c. ___Justifies maltreatment of a child	2	_____
N6.	Primary Parent/Caregiver Provides Physical Care Inconsistent with Child's Needs			A6. Partner/Adult Conflict in the Family in the Past Year		
	a. No	0		a. No	0	
	b. Yes	1	_____	b. Yes (Number of Incidents ___)	2	_____
N7.	Primary Parent/Caregiver has a Past or Current Mental Health Problem			A7. Primary Parent/Caregiver Characteristics (check applicable items, add for score) Maximum score 3.		
	a. No	0		a. ___ Not applicable	0	
	b. Yes	1		b. ___ Provides insufficient emotional/ psychological support	1	
			_____	c. ___ Employs excessive/ inappropriate discipline	1	_____
				d. ___ Employs overly controlling/abusive or overly restrictive behaviour.	1	
N8.	Primary Parent/Caregiver Has Historic or Current Alcohol, Drug or Substance Problem. (Check applicable items and add for score) Maximum score 2.			A8. Primary Parent/Caregiver has a History of Abuse or Neglect as a Child		
	a. ___Not applicable	0		a. No	0	
	b. ___Alcohol (current or historic)	1	_____	b. Yes	1	_____
	c. ___Drug (current or historic)	1				
N9.	Characteristics of Children in Family (Check applicable			A9. Secondary Parent/Caregiver Has Past		



items and add for score)				or Current Alcohol , Drug			
Maximum score 3				or Substance Problem			
a. ___Not applicable		0		a. No		0	
b. ___Medically fragile/ failure to thrive		1		b. Yes, alcohol and/or drug: ___Alcohol ___Drug		1	
c. ___Developmental or physical disability		1	_____				_____
d. ___Positive toxicology screen at birth		1					
N10 Housing (check applicable item). Maximum score 2.				A10 Characteristics of Children in the Family (check appropriate items & add for score) Maximum score 3.			
a. ___Not applicable		0		a. ___Not applicable		0	
b. ___Current housing is physically unsafe		1		b. ___Criminal or acting out behaviour		1	
c. ___Homeless at time of investigation		2	_____	c. ___Developmental disability		1	_____
				d. ___Mental health/ behavioural problem		1	
<b>Total Neglect Risk Score (Maximum 16)</b>			_____	<b>Total Abuse Score (Maximum score 18)</b>			_____

**Scored Risk Level.** Assign the family's scored risk level based on the highest score on either the neglect or abuse index, using the following chart:

Neglect Score	Abuse Score	Scored Risk Level
_____ 0 to 1	_____ 0 to 1	_____ Low
_____ 2 to 4	_____ 2 to 4	_____ Moderate
_____ 5 to 8	_____ 5 to 7	_____ High
_____ 9 +	_____ 8 +	_____ Very High

**Overriding Conditions.** Circle yes if a condition shown below is applicable in this case. If any condition is applicable, override final risk level to very high.

- Yes No 1. Sexual abuse case AND the perpetrator is likely to have access to the child victim.
- Yes No 2. Non-accidental injury to a child under age two.
- Yes No 3. Severe non-accidental injury.
- Yes No 4. Parent/caregiver action or inaction resulted in death of a child due to abuse or neglect (previous or current).

**Discretionary Considerations.** If a discretionary consideration is determined, circle yes. Circle the discretionary risk level, and indicate reason. Risk level may only be overridden one level higher.

Yes No If yes, circle override risk level: Low Moderate High **Very High**

Discretionary consideration reason:

Supervisor's Review/ Approval of Discretionary Consideration:

Date:

**Final Risk Level** (circle final level assigned):

**Low Moderate High Very High**

(Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007)

## Appendix D

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### SINGLE MOTHER PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study regarding

The Experiences of a Low Income Single Mother: The Impact of the CAS 'Duty to Report' Regulation in Relationship to using and accessing Support Services External to CAS.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to: answer open-ended questions that will allow you to provide your opinion in relation to being a low income single mother and the CAS 'Duty to Report'.

Your participation would involve *no more than one hour of your time, at your convenience.*

In appreciation for your time, you will receive  
*a \$15.00 gift card to Tim Horton's*

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,  
please contact:

***Lori Dunne***

***416-807-6551***

***lori.dunne@live.ca***

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the York University Research Ethics Committee.

## Appendix E

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

To: \_\_\_\_\_

I am a Masters of Social Work student at York University and part of the requirements of the program is to do a practice research paper. I would like to formally invite you to participate in my research study by sharing your personal experience for the purpose of this research. This project will be exploring how does the Child Welfare 'Duty to Report' regulation impacts the decision of low-income single mothers without prior CAS involvement to access and use support services external to CAS. The purpose of this project is to allow single mother's to have a 'voice' about how they feel that regulatory bodies such as CAS govern their decision to access support services and how they use those services.

All participants who choose to partake in this study will be asked to share their personal stories through an interview. The interview will be conducted by the researcher, Lori Dunne and will be audio-taped, unless the participant directs otherwise. The interview will be about 1 hour in length. Confidentiality of all participants is of utmost importance and no participant will be identified in the paper. Instead, the researcher will be assigning pseudonyms to conceal the participant's identity.

If you have any questions and/or would like to participate in this study contact me by email at [lori.dunne@live.ca](mailto:lori.dunne@live.ca).

Sincerely,

Lori Dunne

Master of Social Work Student

York University

## Appendix F

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<b>Informed Consent Form and Study Details</b>
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**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Study Name:** The Experiences of Low Income Single Mothers: The Impact of the CAS ‘Duty to Report’ when using and accessing external support services.

**Researchers:** I understand that the researcher for this study is Lori Dunne who is a Graduate Student from the School of Social Work at York University in Toronto, Ontario. The contact information for Lori Dunne is: [lori.dunne@live.ca](mailto:lori.dunne@live.ca).

**Purpose of Research:** I understand that the purpose of this research is to collect personal stories regarding the experiences of low income single mothers and the impact of the CAS ‘Duty to Report’ when using and assessing external support services.

**What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:** I understand that I have agreed to participate in a research study that will require me to provide information about my personal experiences. The interview will consist of open-ended questions that will allow me to provide my opinion in relation to being a low income single mother and the CAS ‘Duty to Report’. The interview should be about an hour in length and the interview will be digitally recorded, unless I do not want the interview to be recorded. If I do not want the interview to be recorded, the researcher will take hand written notes during the interview. I understand that I will also be asked to complete a personal demographics questionnaire that will also be used for the purpose of this study. The researcher has informed me that all of the information that I provide will be protected

and I will not be identified, instead the researcher will be using pseudonyms. I understand that I will be receiving a \$15.00 Tim Hortin's gift card as an honorarium for my participation in this study.

**Risks and Discomforts:** The potential risks and discomforts in relation to my participation in this study are anticipated to be minimal. I understand that it may be difficult to speak about distressing personal experiences and having to recall upsetting events, opinions, understandings could evoke a stress response. I do understand that if I want to stop the interview and/or end my participation in the study, I have the right to do so at any time and without consequence. I also have the right to ask the researcher to omit and/or change information that I provide at any time during the research period. In addition, I understand that the researcher has an obligation to report any suspected or disclosed child maltreatment. I do understand that the researcher will provide me with support service resources before the interview begins in case I feel that I may need to speak with a professional regarding any painful experiences that I would like to explore.

**Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:** I understand that I will not directly benefit from this study, but my participation in the research will contribute and enhance the current research that is available. My voice will help to create a better understanding for both professional and the general public in relation to how a low income single mother feels about the CAS "Duty to Report" when using and accessing external services. My voice will be part of a larger platform that may prompt support service professionals and the public to modify and/or change the current mother blaming discourse.

**Voluntary Participation:** I understand that participating in this research study is voluntary and I have the right to discontinue my participation at any time. I understand that I have the right to

refuse to answer any questions that are presented by the researcher if they make me feel uncomfortable.

**Confidentiality:** I understand that my identity will remain confidential and my name will not be used throughout this research project. Instead a pseudonym will be used to protect my identity at all times. The researcher, Lori Dunne will be the only person conducting interviews and the only person that will have access to my identity. I understand that all personal identifying information will be omitted from the researcher paper, or will be modified to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. I understand the audio tapes, notes taken during the interview, demographic information and transcriptions will only be identified by the pseudonym that will be assigned to the data I provide. I understand that I have the right to request a copy of the audio tape, transcripts and/or any notes taken during the interview. I have the right to request these items at any time during the research process. In addition, I understand that the audio tapes that will be created during the interview will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's private home office. All data notes, transcriptions, signed forms, and demographic information will be filed in the researcher's home office in a locked cabinet and/or stored on a password protected computer. All documents and audio tapes will be stored in this way for two consecutive years and will be destroyed thereafter. I understand that the anonymous data that I provide will be used for the researcher's practice research paper (PRP), which is a requirement for the Masters of Social Work Degree program at York University.

**Dissemination of Information:** I understand that the content of this research project may be shared with other Social Work York University students and/or staff, may be presented in a public forum for educational purposes or published in the future. I understand that all identifying

information will remain anonymous at all times. Participants may also request a copy of the research project.

**Questions about the Researcher:** I understand that if I have any questions or concerns during or after the interview, I have the right to contact the researcher, Lori Dunne at [lori.dunne@live.ca](mailto:lori.dunne@live.ca) or the supervisor, Barbara Heron at 416-736-2100 ext. 20521 or [bheron@yorku.ca](mailto:bheron@yorku.ca). I understand that this research will be reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914.

**Legal Rights and Signatures:**

I \_\_\_\_\_, consent to participate in The Experiences of Low Income Single Mothers: The Impact of the CAS 'Duty to Report' when using and accessing External Support Services conducted by Lori Dunne, Master of Social Work Student at York University. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_

Date



## Appendix G

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*Please leave a question blank if you feel uncomfortable disclosing information or are unsure.*

### **Individual Demographics Information**

1. Age of mother

2. 25-35          36-45          46-55

3. How long have you been a single mother?

---

4. Status

a. Single

b. Divorced

c. Separated

d. Other

5. Total number of children?

---

6. Total number of dependants 16 or younger

---

7. What are the ages of your child(ren)?

---

8. What ethnicity to you identity with most?

---

9. Have you ever had a CAS compliant made on you and/or your family?

---

10. Do you receive Child Support?

---

11. Do you have family support, financial or otherwise?

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12. What is your source of Income?

---

13. Do you feel that you spend 63% or more of your total income on necessities such as shelter, food and clothing?

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## 14.Housing

- a. Apartment building
- b. Basement apartment
- c. House
- d. Living with Family

*~Thank you ~*