

## 7.

# Motherwork in the Margins

## Homeless Single Mothers

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### MOTHERWORK AND HOMELESSNESS

MOTHERWORK IS COMPRISED of the often invisible duties and responsibilities performed mostly by women on a daily basis. It bears both physical and mental demands that may be exacerbated by the needs of the child; by the stress of paid employment or, conversely, the stress of needing but not finding employment; by familial and daycare arrangements; and, overall, by insufficient access to monetary resources. Race, class, and social location cannot be ignored here. Although motherwork does not privilege women overall, as it is typically devalued and unrecognized, women who are able to do it “well” may be celebrated and hailed as “good” mothers. Women who meet the expectations of good mothering seemingly perform motherwork as a natural, necessary, and universally accepted extension of their womanhood. Intensive mothering—mothers as the primary caretaker spending large amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child—proves to be more attainable for mothers who have a relationship with an income provider. Mothers on the margins—low-income, single, or homeless mothers—may still ascribe to the tenets of intensive mothering, but they cease to be in a position to meet its ideals. The reality of doing motherwork is obscured and undermined by the idealized notions of mothering, which, thereby, deny women’s agency and choice to mother in their own defined ways.

This chapter will explore the lived experiences of homeless single mothers. To accomplish this, I review the literature on the social construction of mothering, specifically focusing on race, single motherhood, and homelessness. I then present my research documenting the realities of motherwork and the idealized representations of motherhood showcased by thirteen transitional shelter residents.

### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERING

Although I refer to a multitude of works to situate the experiences of the homeless mothers in my study, I specifically draw on literature that centres the homelessness of single mothers in understanding their roles as primary caretakers of their children. In reviewing the literature, I focus on intensive mothering; mothering outside the norm of white, middle-class caregiving; and issues faced by homeless, single mothers. The literature reveals pertinent themes. First, discourses that label homelessness as a deviant identity necessitate the participation in strategies that

allow homeless mothers to overcome the negative identity label. Second, deviancy related to homelessness is more pronounced for single mothers simply due to the general negative attitudes towards single motherhood. Here, by ignoring structural obstacles to mothering, such as race and poverty, the dialogue around single motherhood focuses on “bad” personal choices. Hence, homeless single mothers must do more than cope with being homeless; they must also contend with how their identities are socially constructed as mothers in the context of being single, poor, and homeless.

### ***Intensive Mothering***

Marlee Kline describes the dominant ideology of motherhood as “the constellation of ideas and images in Western capitalist societies ... against which women’s lives are judged” (119). The expectations established by these ideals limit and shape the choices women make in their lives and construct the good-bad mother dichotomy. This powerful belief of motherhood includes what Sharon Hays calls “intensive mothering” (4). Intensive mothering involves the mother as being the primary caretaker; spending large amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child; and not comparing work activities to mothering activities (8). Intensive mothering functions in a heterosexual, nuclear family context with disregard for differences in race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age. Intensive mothering, as an influential practice, then serves to distinguish between “fit” and “unfit” mothers, where “expectations of good mothering are presented as natural, necessary, and universal,” thereby devaluing any other types of mothering experiences (Kline 121). “Unfit” mothers, in political and professional discourses, are often associated with being single, poor, and black (Fineman; Roberts, “Racism and Patriarchy”). Martha Fineman argues that single mothers in poverty are often associated with “degenerates”, the underserving poor who perpetuate their destitution through negligent personal choices (212). Families headed by single mothers, or mothers with precarious relationships with the fathers of their children, are seen as perpetuating deviance and, perhaps, even their own poverty through their lack of attachment to a male breadwinner.

The institution of marriage and government policies around marriage and family impart a two-parent ideal, which contributes to the conversation around the deviant single mother. Randy Albelda, Susan Himmelweit, and Jane Humphries argue, “The deck has long been stacked against lone mothers. Market-based societies have evolved a sexual division of labour that is built into the institutions of marriage and family” (1,8). The sexual division of labour relies on the expectation that mothers will be the primary caregivers of the family, presumably with a husband who works to support the family with his sole income. Yet both married mothers and single mothers are working outside the home. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the labour force participation rate for married mothers with children under the age of eighteen was 67.8 percent and for single mothers, 74.2 percent in 2013. However, intensive mothering does not include working for wages as part of its tenets. Paid work limits time mothers can spend with their children, yet, as good, intensive mothers, they know that they should be spending as much time with their children as possible. Thus, both working married and single mothers may experience the “mommy guilt” of not

being there for their children; but the expectation of intensive mothering is even more difficult to uphold for the single mother, since economically, she must provide for herself and her children.

For poor women and women of colour, the world of wage work has been one in which they have been historically engaged. Dorothy Roberts argues, “The conception of Black women as unfit for motherhood was reinforced by their working lives. The virtuous mother depended on her husband for support, while women who worked for wages were considered deviant and neglectful” (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 14). As Roberts (*Killing the Black Body*) and Patricia Hill Collins remark, the demands of work by women of colour who work as domestics in the homes of white people further undermine their roles as mothers, homemakers, and important contributors to the world of wage work. Thus, motherwork for many women involves time spent not only caring for their own children and managing households but also for other families in private or public daycare settings. Idealized notions of motherhood escape the poor, single minority mother as she works outside of the household to help economically support her family, and in some instances, doing motherwork for other women’s families. Homeless mothers who are single heads of households who economically support their families are similarly situated out of the intensive, good mothering discourse.

### ***Homeless Mothering***

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 84 percent of families experiencing homelessness are female headed. Whatever the reason for homelessness (e.g., domestic violence, mental health issues, or family separation), homeless mothers must often overcome the stressors contributing to their homelessness while maintaining their family lives. These “mothers in the margins” are not impervious to the ideologies surrounding “good” mothers, and to be without a home creates a significant challenge in meeting the tenets of intensive mothering.

Both Jean Calterone Williams and Julia Wardhaugh purport that the home is more than a physical space in which to reside; it often provides social meaning and identity, a space and source of comfort, stability, safety, and human development. (For individuals affected by domestic violence, “home” does not have the same meaning, and victims often feel they are “homeless” within their own home.) Gendered aspects of the definition of home and the home as a feminine construction present a challenge to homeless mothers. As the dominant ideology of motherhood relies on a white, middle-class, and heterosexual nuclear family, so too do the traditional concepts of home (Wardhaugh 95). Wardhaugh explains that “Home is widely, and often unproblematically associated with femaleness: both with the women who are expected to maintain the hearth and home, and with the presumed feminine principles of boundedness, physicality and nurturance” (97). Homeless women, in the study by Williams, emphasized that home is a place of origin, a fountainhead “necessary to create the next generation, to have a wholesome, healthy, or ‘normal’ beginning” (135). For homeless mothers, this beginning involves bringing up their children in a physical and ideal space in which they can practise actions tied to intensive mothering. Without this space, as Williams notes, “Their

disconnection from the domestic sphere means homeless women do not have access to one of the most important traditional markers of femininity” (138). Single mothers who are homeless are at once stripped of their abilities to be the “ideal” mother through white, middle-class constructions of motherhood and home.

Deborah Connolly explains that the homeless mothers in her study subscribed to idealized notions of motherhood and home, but faced challenges in how to navigate their lived experiences of motherhood in a temporary shelter. In describing the various experiences of homeless mothers, Connolly recognized that feelings of anger or frustration are “erased from idealized versions of motherhood” (48) because expectations of mothering are seen as natural (Kline 125). Contradictions, complaints, effort, or ambivalence regarding mothering are not acknowledged, as “patriarchal ideology defines [mothering] as a woman’s instinctive vocation” (Roberts, “Racism and Patriarchy” 225). The feminization of home and the social construction of intensive mothering affect the internalization of idealized versions of motherhood of homeless mothers.

The reviewed literature on intensive mothering provides a necessary backdrop for exploring the motherwork of homeless mothers. Too often, the day-to-day struggles of women in poverty are ignored. How do they find day-care when working a split shift or how many bus transfers does it takes to go to a job and get the kids to school? Indeed, there is a need to hear the voices of “mothers in the margins.” In this study, I observed and interviewed thirteen homeless transitional shelter residents in exploration of their own defined meaning of motherhood.

### EXPLORING THE MARGINS

The study of homeless mothers on which this analysis is based involved yearlong observation at a transitional shelter for women and their children in Phoenix, Arizona from August 2003 to 2004. A six-week Internet Art Workshop, which provided shelter residents an opportunity to learn computer and design skills and to tell their story through photographs and web pages, contributes a crucial and foundational piece to this research. Specifically, the data include a compilation of 1) documents from the shelter, including handouts given to residents regarding conduct and regulations, sample case plans provided by the case manager, and lesson plans for the Internet Art Workshop; 2) observational field notes taken at each instructional session for each of the thirteen participants of the Internet Art Workshop as well as at a tour of the shelter and during informal conversations with the residents; 3) interviews with each participant of the Internet Art Workshop and interviews with each of the staff members, including the case manager, the director, the career guidance specialist, and the therapist; and 4) the completed websites created at the Internet Art Workshop, which include the recorded voices of and photographs taken by the participants.

The overall creation of this study emerged and developed through naturalistic inquiry, a qualitative approach designed to investigate, through various and multiple methods, the lives and experiences of people in their social settings (Lincoln and Guba). The experiences of the residents in this study, therefore, reflect living under the institutional arrangement of a shelter that provided various programs and services assisting with drug or alcohol

rehabilitation, finding paid employment, and, ultimately, transitioning women into permanent housing. The shelter residents were without permanent housing and were the main caregiver and economic provider for their children. Thus, homeless, for the purposes of this study, means transitional shelter resident, and single mother means being the sole economic provider for self and family. The residents in this study ranged in age from twenty-one to forty six, had one to three children, and had diverse educational and racial-ethnic backgrounds. Length of time at the shelter varied from one month to a year and a half.

In this chapter, I draw primarily from interview data and the websites created by the homeless mothers. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews based on themes that emerged throughout the six-week Internet Art Workshop were conducted after the completion of the websites. These interviews lasting about one hour were each videotaped and transcribed verbatim. A website analysis protocol that I designed was used to interpret the thirteen different websites containing photographs, verbal scripts, fonts, and colours. Through the examination of this rich material, the construction of motherhood surfaced as a major theme, poignantly described through the residents' descriptions of motherwork and their adulation of motherhood.

### REALITIES OF MOTHERWORK

The women in my study articulate the struggles of being a single mother and confront them by speaking pragmatically about how to take care of themselves and their children. For example, Jenny<sup>1</sup> acknowledged that working full time precludes spending time with her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter. She said "I get to see her on the weekends and I try to make the most out of every weekend I can. But I'm going to be without her all day long because I'm a single mom." Jenny accepted being unable to spend time with her daughter because she works, and she works because she does not share the financial responsibility for raising a child with anyone else. Claire also explained how she is the sole provider and caretaker of her children. She expressed, "I'm going to be their mom. I'm going to be their dad. It's a struggle. I know they label single moms ... but I am a person, I have a job. I am taking care of my kids. I am doing what I need to do, just like any two-parent family out there. Don't label me. I'm a mom doing the best for my children." Like Jenny, Claire understood that being a single mother means making sacrifices in order to take care of children without a partner. Although Claire admitted to the strenuous endeavour of being a single parent, Kim described the day-to-day struggle in more detail. She explained:

*It's really tough. I pick [my children] up from day care and try to get them to calm down, but I understand it's the heat, and they're yelling, "I'm hungry!" I want to go home, and then we have to get on the bus, and it's hard getting them on the bus. And then by the time I get home with them, I'm out of energy and they reenergize somehow. Raising [more than one child] by myself is a tough job ... trying to get all of them to brush their teeth ... it's a really tough job. It's a big challenge to do it by yourself. Nobody better tell me what I'm doing*

*because I'm doing this all by myself. It's a big challenge.*

Kim identified something as routine as getting her children to brush their teeth as a daunting motherwork task, especially when she has to get them on and off the bus, to and from day care, and home to the shelter to settle down for the night. Like Claire, she reviled the notion that single mothers are deviant, and perpetrators of their own difficulties. In explaining their accounts of single motherhood, the women disputed the labels that define them as unfit to do the job. “Don’t label me” and “Nobody better tell me what I’m doing” are defiant statements asserting their capabilities to do single motherhood.

Single motherhood for the transitional shelter residents arguably created obstacles to fulfilling everyday motherwork tasks, but it was also a way for them to assert their independence and a sense of non-dependence on the fathers of their children. Claire, Jenny, Kim, and Mary do not mention marriage as a way out of their single motherhood situation. Mary specifically pronounced that “I’m more independent on myself than anybody else. My mom told me to never depend on a man. So, I’ve always depended on myself. I have things to do for my kids. I tell him [children’s father] that too. I can’t play games. I need to take care of my kids. I can’t be dependent on nobody.” The residents understood the realities of caring for children on their own without a male breadwinner for monetary or even emotional support; they, thus, accepted paid work as part of their single motherhood status. Despite this acceptance, they elaborated on problems related to working and parenting.

Balancing parenting and paid employment responsibilities is difficult for two-parent families and even more so for single-parent families. Donna Haig Friedman explains that the effects of low-income and contingent employment on a single mother confound issues related to transportation, finding quality childcare, and affording health insurance. In my study, Stephanie worked at a restaurant and was paid under the table. She said, “I had this job, and it only paid \$5.25 and [my boss] paid me under the table. I had to take [my child] with me because I didn’t have day care and so at the end of the week, I had enough to pay my rent and then I had like ten dollars left.” She compromised low pay and hard work with the trouble and expense of finding and taking her son to daycare before work. Stephanie subsisted on this arrangement because she did have money to cover rent, and daycare was not an expense. The cost and availability of childcare can significantly affect motherwork.

As much as finding quality and affordable childcare is an issue for all working parents, it can be extremely complicated for low-income mothers who work irregular hours or are several bus transfers from their work or home to daycare. In my study, Stephanie thought she would take classes toward being a medical assistant rather than a certified nursing assistant (CNA) because she worked on Sunday, and she could not find care for her son on that day. But once she found a twenty-four-hour day care and had access to a reliable car, she was able to take her son to daycare so that she could work on her CNA classes. She said, “There’s a twenty-four-hour daycare, and now that I have a car, I can take him because before on the weekends, we had to take the bus, and, oh my god, if you don’t get the bus [you have to wait forever for the next one].” Nancy who used to have a car but relied on the bus during the

time of this study remarked, “I take a bus now. It takes me about an hour and twenty minutes to take the kids to daycare and then forty-five minutes to get to school from their day care.” The bus system in Phoenix has a limited weekend schedule and due to the sheer size of Phoenix, travelling to an outlying suburb can mean several transfers and, as Nancy indicated, a very long time on the bus.

Large amounts of planning, craftiness, and self-assertion were exercised by the residents in my study in order to fulfill their motherwork. Although these women defended their single motherhood, the exhausting reality for them is not only engaging in the day-to-day tasks of caring for children but also balancing that care with being the sole financial provider. Low wages, finding flexible childcare, and transportation issues are significant hurdles affecting the balance of caretaking and working.

Although interviews and observations revealed the day-to-day experiences of looking for work, balancing work and childcare, the websites that the transitional residents created as participants in the Internet Art Workshop do not emphasize their struggles. Rather, the websites created by the mothers showcase a more idealized and normative portrait of motherhood.

## ADULATION OF MOTHERHOOD

### *Overcoming “Bad” Mothering*

Aware that their mothering was on display in the shelter, many homeless mothers who participated in the Internet Art Workshop felt that they could not discipline their children as they wanted or truthfully vent their frustrations about mothering to shelter staff and other shelter residents. The institutional rules of this particular social service agency monitored parenting behaviour and actions, thereby affecting the residents’ motherwork. Cultural discourses of the bad mother and the good mother are built into the controlling functions of the transitional shelter. Connolly notes that regulatory trends affect “women who are already marginalized—those who are already suspect because their poverty, their lack of education ... render them unable to act out the middle-class ideal. Homeless mothers ... risk being placed in the dependent category of the incompetent mother” (49).

For some residents, their “bad” mothering needed to be reconciled or overcome. Lori and Jeanese expressed guilt and regret for not living up to the cultural expectations of good mothering. They admitted to their past use of alcohol and how, in their minds, it jeopardized their ability to mother. Jeanese stated, “My past experience as a mother hasn’t met the expectations I’ve ever had of being a parent. This was due to my past involvement with alcohol and drugs. I am in recovery now, and my relationship with myself, friends, and family has since been restored. I am working on my ideal dream of becoming the parent I always wanted to be.” Jeanese expressed regrets regarding her ability to mother, whereas Lori felt she could make up for being a “bad” mother to her own children by being a good “mother” to her grandchildren, whom she is raising as her own.

Jenny conveyed that by having a child, she needed to stop her drug use. She said, “[My child] is my joy. She is the

reason I'm changing my life." Similarly, Betty indicated that her children were the reason she worked so hard to get her life together. She said, "I've come a long way. Those [children] are why. I know I have to be there for them because I know nobody else will be. So I have to keep myself going for them." Even quitting smoking was a way to become a better mother for Ashley. She said, "I quit smoking because I don't want [my children] to see that. I want to be healthy for them." "Changing my bad behavior so that my children will have a better life" is an expectation implicit in the discourse of good motherhood and one that these mothers embraced.

### ***Embracing "Good" Mothering***

Webpages created by the residents embraced the ideals of "good" mothering through an emphasis on home and photographs of children. Judith, Shannon, and Heather highlight their domestic affections through framed pictures of their children, and in Shannon's website, they appear to be hanging on a wall as they may be displayed in the family room of a home (see Figure One). Heather's website shows her son Chris at the park with friends, riding a scooter, fishing, and doing "kid stuff," whereas Violet and Lori both include photographs of their boys playing. Other residents present their children in similar ways (see Figure Two).

The photographs of children and other family members, in addition to the way that they are displayed, create an idealized version of home for the residents where children are portrayed as happy and adjusted. Julia Hirsch argues that editorial authority goes into the taking and displaying of family photographs, which discards any photographs that can be linked to failure or stress. Family photographs are selective, avoiding such occurrences as marital violence, family strife, or dislocation; they "do not show grades failed, jobs lost, opportunities missed. The family pictures we like best are poignant—and optimistic" (Hirsch 118). Having a well-adjusted family, one where children are participating in fun activities and are joyful and spirited, is important to portray when living under circumstances that may be cause for maladjustment.





Figure 1: Children in Picture Frames

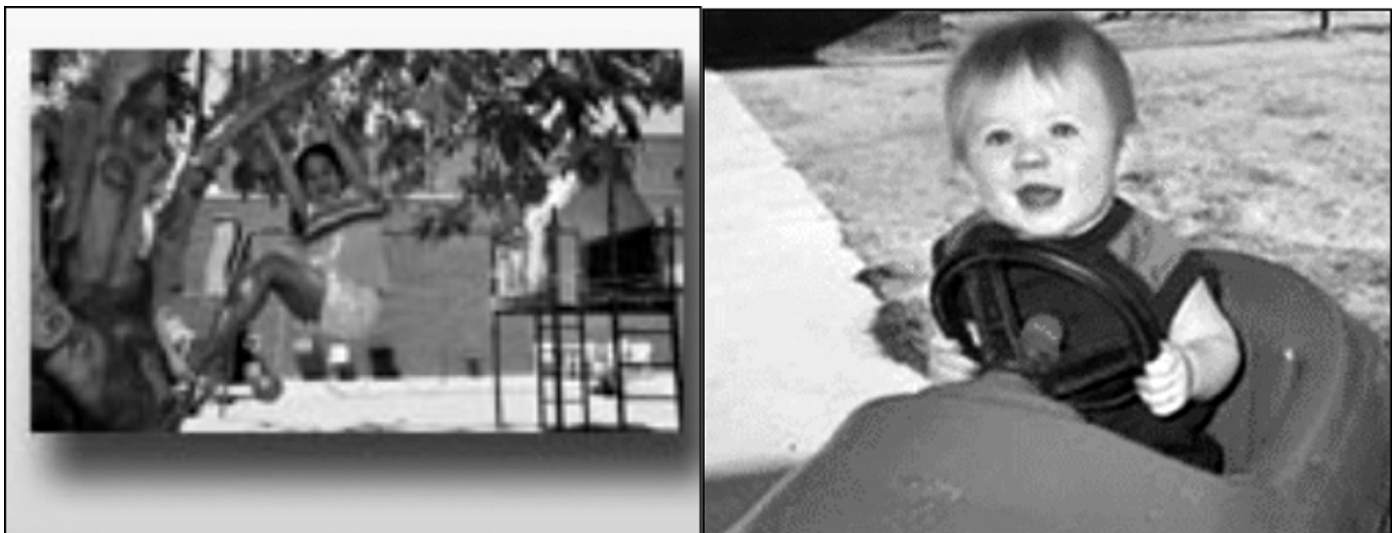


Figure 2: Children Playing

The mothers in my study purposefully chose to include photographs that did not portray homelessness as a struggle for their children. Homelessness, disharmony, domestic violence, or disunity is antithetical to being a “normal” family, in which the mother often has the primary responsibility for keeping the family happy and intact. Far from any dysfunction, the well-adjusted family should be seen as having fun, which may involve family member’s relations with material goods.

### ***The Consuming Family***

Photographs in magazines and images in commercials show happy, smiling, nuclear families participating in consumer culture. These families are seen in advertisements for new homes, cars, and vacations as well as buying

material gifts for each other particularly around the holidays. Although children in this study were not photographed with many toys or other material items because personal belongings at the shelter were limited, the mothers spoke of the desire to buy toys, or to provide gifts and parties for birthdays, or to take their children to the movies, as a way to represent themselves as a “normal” family. Heather’s son was photographed celebrating at his movie-themed birthday party with his friends, his dog, and his special birthday cake. Children were photographed at restaurants, a movie theatre, and a “play land” in the mall. Often the mothers in this study felt the need to justify items bought for their children or other entertainment purchases. For example, Violet stated that the check her brother gave her was specifically for a TV; it was his gift to her.

Although children were photographed with popular characters from movies and TV, the residents included photographs of themselves with cars, houses, and on a simulated vacation. Zakiyyah and Tricia, had luxury cars on their websites, while Jeanese photographed herself with a Ferrari and in front of a new model home. As the photograph of Camille and her son is transposed in front of a picture of Disneyland, it appears that they are participating in material “normalcy” by going on an annual family vacation (see Figure Three). Pictures of luxury cars, model homes, and a vacation to Disneyland represent a desire to participate in material culture.

Low-income families are acutely aware of the need to fit into material culture, but they also know the structural barriers that they face in doing so. Connolly poignantly explains the bind that affects poor mothers specifically,

On the one hand, in order to be viewed as moral and deserving of benefits, one must correspond with the norms of good motherhood and responsible expenditures. On the other hand, it is often necessary to break the norms of responsible expenditure in order to try to live up to the standard of allowing your children to partake in the paradigmatic practices of consumption and celebration in this culture. (168)

Mothers in poverty, specifically homeless mothers in this study, lived the tension between fiscal need and the obligation to provide more than basic resources to their children.

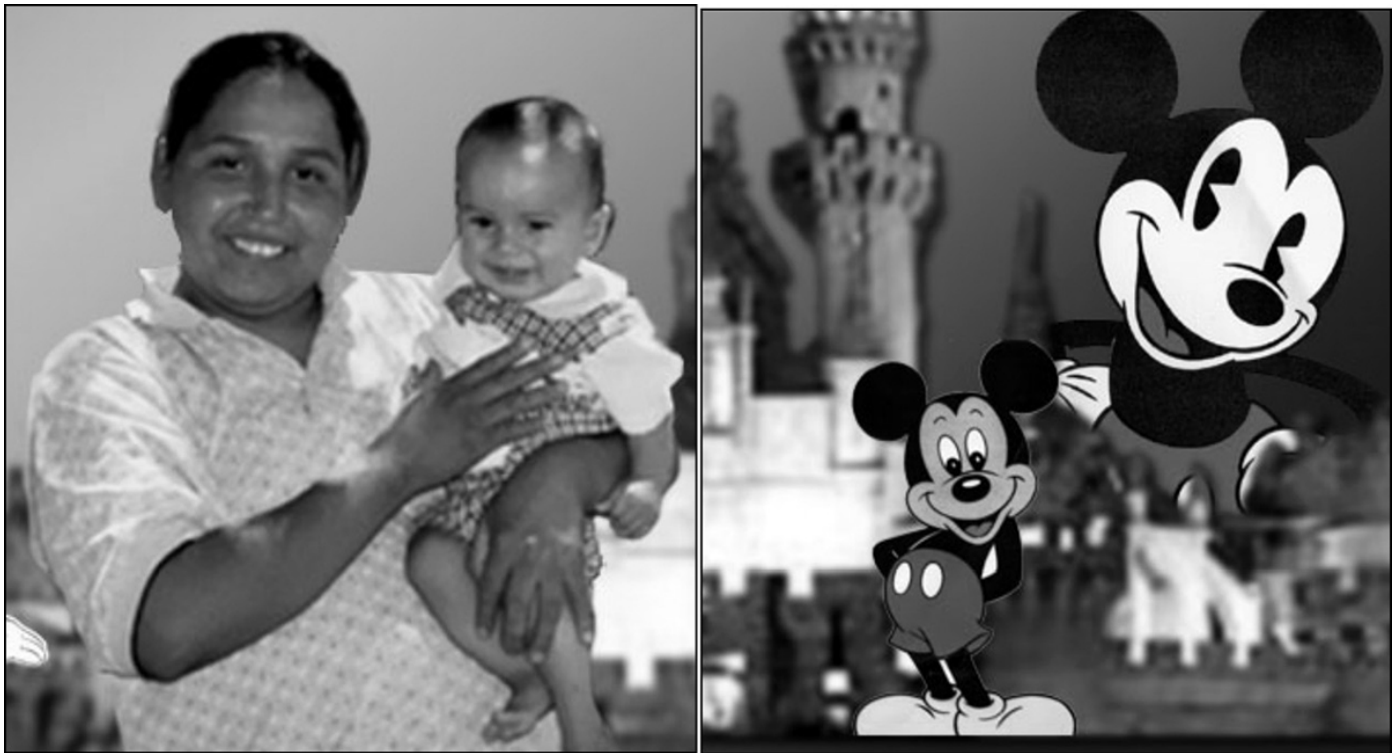


Figure 3: Camille and Disneyland

### MOTHERHOOD REDEFINED

The deviant labelling of homelessness and the single mother are constructions perpetuated by the disciplinary techniques and rules of the transitional shelter that controlled the residents' behaviours and actions. Problems that the residents faced were deemed to stem from poor individual choices and decisions, not structural barriers, such as poverty, race, gender, or disability. Reinforcing the good-bad mother dichotomy, the shelter's executed regulations sought to fix a bad mother's poor decisions by requiring her to take drug counselling or rehabilitation, to find work, or to attend parenting classes. Good mothers were seen as motivated, appreciative of help, and focused and calm when faced with distress.

The shelter residents were acutely aware of the praise or consequences received either by accepting or defying such regulatory arrangements. Furthermore, they both resisted and complied with powerful constructions of white, middle-class motherhood. Asserting independence from a male breadwinner, working hard to create a life of normalcy for themselves and their children, emotionally and financially supporting their children despite their homeless situation—all were ways the residents defied tenets of intensive mothering. Working for wages was not seen as antithetical to being a good mother. Yet the residents also participated in conforming to certain qualities of the good mother by altering bad behaviour, such as drug or alcohol use, by controlling anger, and by complying with the rules of the shelter. The residents also emphatically embraced feminine notions of home while pictorially showcasing their happy, normal, and adjusted family.

The transitional shelter as an institution revolves around one single program designed to fix the problem of the

single mother and her homelessness. But the lived experiences of the thirteen women in this study were intricately varied and suggest a complexity of factors that contributed to how they viewed themselves as a wage worker, domestic abuse survivor, recovering drug addict, homeless transitional shelter resident, and mother. Thus, despite being confined to institutional pressures, each woman had a unique story to define motherhood in her own way.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> All real names have been changed.

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