

CRSP/RCPS ISSUE 76 Fall 2016 Motherhood and Unemployment: Intersectional experiences from Canada

Motherhood and Unemployment: Intersectional Experiences from Canada

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Citation

Nichols, L.J. (2016). Motherhood and unemployment: Intersectional experiences from Canada. *Canadian Review of Social Policy/ Revue Canadienne de Politique Sociale*, 76, pp.1-24.

Abstract

Motherhood is central to women's lived experiences. It affects women's ability to integrate into the labour market, particularly the primary labour market, which has more secure and better-paying jobs. The Canadian government's employment and childcare policies assume that women can actively choose when to enter the labour market. But women do not have free choice regarding either social reproduction or wage work. The insufficient federal childcare program (Little, 2004; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010) along with work interruptions and job choices linked to childcare (Krahn, Lowe, & Huges, 2008) are barriers that push women toward precarious employment in the secondary labour market of low-paid, part-time, and temporary jobs. These policies leave few choices for women; only women in upper socioeconomic strata have adequate resources and choices related to their employment (Little, 2004). Employment challenges are compounded for women who have intersecting identities pertaining to factors like gender, motherhood, marital status, socioeconomic status, age, race, and immigrant status. This qualitative study uses an intersectional approach to explore the lived experiences of 26 unemployed women from diverse backgrounds in two Canadian cities and the challenges they face. The study found that neoliberal policies have resulted in a lack of support for unemployed women with respect to Employment Insurance, health care, childcare, job training, and the labour market, leading to employment precarity and consequently inferior living conditions and jeopardized health, with a greater impact on mothers and women with specific intersecting identities. This paper proposes policy modifications to improve the situation of unemployed mothers.

Keywords: motherhood; labour; unemployment

Résumé

La maternité joue un rôle important dans la vie de beaucoup de femmes. Elle peut avoir un impact important sur l'intégration du marché du travail, particulièrement le marché du travail principal, qui donne accès à des emplois mieux rémunérés et ayant une plus grande sécurité d'emploi. Les politiques de l'emploi et de la garde des enfants du gouvernement canadien présupposent que les femmes peuvent choisir quand elles intègrent le marché du travail. Cependant, le programme de garde des enfants fédéral inadéquat (Little, 2004; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010), ainsi que les interruptions de travail, et les choix d'emploi reliés à la garde des enfants (Krahn, Lowe, & Huges, 2008), demeurent des obstacles qui poussent les femmes vers des emplois précaires offerts dans le secteur secondaire d'emploi : emplois temporaires, à temps partiel et à faible rémunération. Ces politiques donnent donc moins de choix pour beaucoup de femmes; seules les femmes appartenant à la strate socioéconomique élevée se trouvent avoir des

ressources adéquates et des choix reliés à leur emploi (Little, 2004). Les enjeux reliés à l'emploi se trouvent être exacerbés pour les femmes qui, de plus, ont des identités multiples relatives au genre, à la maternité, à l'état civil, au statu socioéconomique, à l'âge, à la race, et au statu d'immigrante reçue. Cette étude qualitative utilise une approche intersectionnelle pour explorer les expériences vécues de 26 femmes de diverses origines et sans emploi, dans deux villes canadiennes, afin de mettre en évidence les obstacles auxquels elles font face. Nous concluons que les politiques néolibérales ont eues comme résultat un manque de support pour les femmes sans emploi en ce qui a trait à l'assurance emploi, à la santé, à la garde des enfants, à la formation professionnelle, et au marché de travail. Ceci a mené à la précarité d'emploi, et par conséquent, à des conditions de vies inférieures et une santé compromise pour ces femmes. Le plus grand impact se trouve être pour les femmes ayant des identités multiples. Cet article suggère et défend des modifications aux politiques existantes afin d'améliorer la situation des mères sans emploi.

Mots-clefs : maternité; travail; chômage;

Introduction

When workers become unemployed in Canada, there is an expectation that they will be able to access unemployed workers' support because they have paid into the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program while employed. However, this is not the case for many workers since the policy change in 1996 from Unemployment Insurance (UI) to EI. This change included stricter rules and regulations, notably in relation to the number of hours worked during the previous 52 weeks that are required to obtain supports (MacDonald 2009a, 2009b). However, the policy change did not affect all workers in Canada to the same degree. Those most impacted by the changes are workers from lower socioeconomic levels—especially women, because of their traditional family role as mothers (McGregor 2004; Nichols, 2014a, 2014 b; Silver, Wilson, & Shields, 2004; Silver, Shields, Wilson, & Scholtz, 2005). The demands of motherhood make it more complicated for women to access and remain continuously in the labour market (Nichols 2014a, 2014b; Shields, Silver, & Wilson, 2006; Silver, Shields, Wilson, & Scholtz, 2005; Townson & Hayes, 2007).

The impacts of increasingly underfunded and deregulated childcare programs in Canada have yet to be fully assessed, but it is likely that they will deepen existing inequalities in the labour market (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). One potential effect is that women will become permanent losers in the workforce due to their traditional connection to child rearing. As Krahn et al. (2008) argue, a past employment record of marginal jobs can create barriers to accessing the primary labour market because of the common belief that the worker has unstable work habits. These barriers imply that to address the needs of their growing families, women will need to take on precarious employment with the potential threat of having to remain permanently in the secondary labour market.

Not everyone is impacted to the same degree by these challenges. Some workers experience more inequalities as a result of their varying intersecting identities related to gender, motherhood, marital status, socioeconomic status, age, race, and immigrant status. The interconnections among these identities must be considered in order to fully understand the barriers that women, especially mothers, face in the labour market. Based on interviews conducted with 26 unemployed women in two Canadian cities in 2013, this paper applies an intersectional analysis to explore these varying identities and their impacts on women's employment within existing social conditions and government policies. The data collected underline the failure of current government policies to support women's need for economic self-sufficiency and to rectify social and legal inequalities that marginalize women in the work force, pointing to a need for significant policy changes.

Women's Employment

Despite the relative lack of change in gender roles and the household division of labour, more women are working in Canada today than 35 years ago, although they often work in nonstandard part-time employment. In 2013, 58.3% of Canadian women and 67.6% of Canadian men who desired to work were employed (Statistics Canada 2014), compared to 41.9% of women and 72.7% of men in 1976 (Ferraro 2010). Despite this increase in women's employment, few women are able to obtain unemployment supports if they lose their employment (Townson & Hayes, 2007).

Dominant social-policy paradigms that suggest that men are the breadwinners and women are the child caregivers are reinforced in labour markets and influence the types of jobs women can hold (Peck, 1996). Women have historically only had access to jobs typically perceived as "female," such as teaching and care-related work (Gordon, Edwards, & Reich, 1982; Kershaw, 2004). Labour markets must therefore be seen as socially constructed and segmented in such a way that women are slotted into jobs in the secondary sector that are characterized by low wages and high insecurity (Krahn et al., 2008). Peck (1996) argues that women will remain in the insecure secondary labour market until both "real and perceived" assumptions about the division of labour within the family are overturned (p. 67). If the government can help change who is responsible for social reproduction during the workday—for example, by providing universal childcare—then the division of labour within the family may become more equitable, and this may in turn change the characteristics of the primary labour sector and accessibility to it, at least in theory.

Not every mother enters the labour market willingly. Some women are forced to work when a lack of resources prevents them from choosing to be stay-at-home mothers. Others, particularly those in the middle and upper classes, have abilities or resources that enable them to choose how they participate in the labour market (Little, 2004). To address this social inequity, it is paramount that mothers have access to adequate childcare so that if they choose to work, they will be on an equal footing with men in the labour market (Little, 2004).

The Lived Experience of Single Motherhood

Evans (2009) notes that in 1980, Canadian single mothers received \$43 in government assistance for every \$100 received by a dual-earner family and that by 2005, this amount had only increased to \$44 per \$100. Furthermore, in 2000, single mothers made up one quarter of all low-wage workers, and progression to a better job was more complex for them than for married or coupled mothers (Evans, 2009; Morissette & Picot, 2005; Saunders, 2006). In addition, improving a single working mother's financial situation required an investment of \$6,300 by the state—up from \$5,500 in 2000 (Evans,

2009). A significant reason for financial insecurity in single-mother families is that most of the fathers do not pay child support, either in the required amount or at all (Tyyskä, 2014). The child-support default rate in the 1990s was estimated to be 50% to 75% (Nelson & Robinson, 1999; Richardson, 1996), and as of March 2012, 45% of all payers of child support were in arrears for at least twice the monthly child-support payment (Kelly, 2013).

Changes from UI to EI

UI was introduced in the early 1940s to address the large-scale unemployment that resulted from the Great Depression. The program was designed to provide financial assistance to unemployed workers (Lin, 1998). Initial eligibility was based on the number of weeks worked during the previous 52 weeks, with a minimum requirement of 12 to 20 weeks depending on the region the claimant lived in, and minimum of 15 hours per week. The amount of benefits was based on the total work hours and the total earnings during the previous year (Townson & Hayes, 2007).

In 1996, when unemployed worker support changed from UI to EI due to Bill C-12, the most significant changes to the policy were an increase in the total number of hours that a claimant had to work and a decrease in the EI benefit payouts. For EI, an unemployed worker now needs to document 180 days of paid labour during the previous two years with at least a 35-hour week (Townson & Hayes, 2007). Thus, workers must now prove that they have double the previously required hours to claim EI benefits. The average UI claimant received \$595 per week in 1995, and when inflation is taken into account, the same claimant would receive \$537 in 2016 (Battle, 2009; Government of Canada, 2016). These changes have had a significant impact on unemployed workers. For example, only 39% of unemployed workers were approved for benefits in 2009, compared to 83% in 1990 (Mendelson, Battle, & Torjman, 2010).

Women in the Transition from UI to EI

EI policy does not take into account the range of reasons why someone is not employed (Cooke & Gazo, 2009). The same rules regarding accumulated past work hours for EI eligibility apply whether one is fired, laid off, or leaves a job to take on the important work of raising children. Women are significantly impacted by EI rules when they temporarily leave the labour market to raise children and later attempt to return to work (Cooke & Gazo, 2009; Townson & Hayes, 2007). Along with other Canadian workers, mothers are viewed as reentrants or new entrants when they have temporarily left the labour market. They are not credited with any previous work and must satisfy the requirement of having worked 910 hours during the past 52 weeks in order to obtain benefits (Townson & Hayes, 2007). This requirement limits a worker's ability to obtain

EI benefits even if the benefits are needed to survive while looking for a new job (Bezanson & McMurray), their role in household labour and time commitment to it have not changed (Nichols 2014b). Thus, women's paid labour has increased, while men's unpaid labour has seen little increase (Blossfeld & Drobnic, 2001; Breen & Cooke, 2005; Gershuny, 2000; Nichols 2014b). Heterosexual households do indeed perform traditional gender roles "to legitimate social arrangements based on gender categories" (Breen & Cooke, 2005, p. 43; also see Coltrane, 2000; Ferree, 1990, 1991).

The Present Study: Mothers on EI

In 2013 I completed a year-long study of the lived experiences of unemployed women in Canada with a broad range of intersecting identities related to socioeconomic status, age, race, motherhood, marital status, and other factors. Participants included immigrants, mothers (including single mothers, mothers of multiple children, and caregivers to their own parents), and those who experienced precarious employment before the period of unemployment, lacked a partner's income, or had a precariously employed or unemployed partner. The central purpose of the study was to explore the effects of EI policy on unemployed women caring for children and other dependents. Using a qualitative analysis focusing on the women's experiences since they became unemployed, the study examined the different ways that women deal with unemployment, including the reasoning behind the decisions they make in managing their unemployment (Bryman & Teevan, 2005).

Here I focus on the 26 participants who were unemployed mothers to explore the socioeconomic and psychosocial impacts of having to live on Canadian unemployed workers' supports (see Appendices A and B). The participants were recruited through research advertisements at a variety of social service agencies in Toronto and Halifax. Those cities were chosen because Toronto is in a traditionally "have" province with high employment while Halifax is in a traditionally "have not" province (Porter, 2003). Given changes to manufacturing in Southern Ontario, the rate of unemployment was similar in both cities, at 9.2% in Toronto and 7.9% in Halifax in December 2013 during the investigation period of this study (Statistics Canada, 2014). Thus the participants were recruited through random sampling. The participants had to be female; between the ages of 25 and 40; caring for dependents such as children, parents, in-laws, or adult dependent siblings; and unemployed. The individual oral interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour and thirty minutes and took place at a convenient location for the participant, including local coffee shops, library study rooms, or my institutional office. These interviews were semi-structured, which allowed the participants to freely inform me of any detail connected to their unemployment experience that I did not directly ask about. The questions explored their unemployment experience, including the duration of their

unemployment, financial status, health status, access to Employment Insurance, and their overall suggestions for improving the program. Upon conclusion of the interview, each participant was given an honorarium of \$20. The interviews were analyzed via grounded theory. Grounded theory is designed to explore themes that emerge directly from the interviews conducted (Charmaz 2004).

Theoretical Approaches and Methodologies for Understanding Intersectionality

Feminists have critiqued social policies that are both rooted in and help to perpetuate unequal gender roles, gendered assumptions, and social relations in general. Among feminists, Black feminists (Crenshaw, 1989) and socialist feminists were among the first to analyze the many ways in which different forms of oppression interact and connect with one another, beginning with a focus on gender and social class (O'Connor 1996; O'Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999).

Beginning in the 1980s, third-wave feminists showed that gender is not the main cause of inequality and that there are instead many factors that are related to the creation of identities (Tyyskä, 2007). Tyyskä notes that “multiple feminisms associated with this most current wave attempt to address women’s local and specific experiences, with an emphasis on the interpretations of the women themselves” (p. 378). Although these research endeavors predated the term, the type of scholarship that Tyyskä describes is what is widely known today as *intersectional analysis* (Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012). This term was used previously by Black activists and Black feminists, including the Combahee River Collective (1977), but U.S. scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989 to analyze employment-related issues among Black American women. Crenshaw articulated that in critical race theory and traditional feminist theory, one’s identity is viewed as a privilege, meaning that power over certain identities “works to exclude or marginalize those who are different” (p. 1242). For example, Ludvig (2006) argued that gender can only be understood with respect to a specific time and place (see also Acker, 2012; Shields, 2008). Thus, intersectionality accepts the concept that everyone has many important parts to their identity, all of which are impacted by relations in the social world (Garry, 2011).

Those engaged in intersectional projects analyze the connections among various forms of identity such as race, class, and gender, taking all of these as “fundamental traits” (Hindman, 2011; Manuel, 2007). In this approach, a variety of social locations in which individuals experience oppression within society are explored, along with the structural systems of power that help to marginalize individuals through forms of exclusion and inclusion (Hankivsky, 2007). Thus, this approach allows us to comprehend a much broader range of different experiences within society (Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). The main theoretical argument of intersectional

analysis is “that identity is not additive, fixed, or multiple, but rather that the coming together of race, gender, sexuality, class, and other factors creates distinct wholes” (Boris, 2012, p. 1).

While intersectionality theory was first developed in feminist studies, it is thought of as a travelling term (Denis, 2008; Christensen & Jensen, 2013), that is, as moving across disciplines (Christensen & Jensen, 2013, p. 110). Thus, it is not surprising that intersectionality theory has been used in different ways and at various times inconsistently and ambiguously (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006) and has been referred to as a “delightfully novel but irritatingly ambitious” term (Davis, 2008, p. 79). The intersectionality approach has been taken up recently by a wide variety of scholars, resulting in many different methods and studies (Acker, 2012; Bilge & Denis, 2010; McCall, 2005), illustrating its interdisciplinary nature (Shields, 2008) and complexity (McCall, 2005). Feminists have begun to address the “limitations, implications or slipperiness of intersectionality or question its focus” (Garry, 2011, p. 826).

Intersectionality theory is explored through different methodologies (Acker, 2012). In the field of quantitative methods, it illuminates hidden issues that can in turn lead to further exploration (Covarrubias, 2011). Qualitative and quantitative research answer different questions. The quantitative approach can be criticized for its weak premises, depicting intersectionalities as a purely additive phenomenon. It is seen particularly by qualitative analysts as too simplistic to depict complex intersectionalities as a mathematical formula as it does not capture the subjectivities and agency of the individuals and categories that are central to the inquiry.

The focus on lived subjective experiences in the study presented here makes qualitative research the logical methodological choice. Qualitative analysis is a better methodology for this project due to the language and approach of intersectionality (Shields, 2008, p. 306). It begins very open ended and slowly moves to a narrower focus, while quantitative research starts off with a more rigid problem to explore (Bryman & Teevan, 2005, p.157; Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012). Therefore, qualitative methods, like intersectional analysis, attempt to achieve a different kind of knowledge. A qualitative approach provides contextual comprehension, focuses on the process, explores the micro level, illustrates deep and rich knowledge, and understands participants’ meanings and behaviours within their natural environment (Bryman & Teevan, 2005, p. 160). Thus, qualitative research is used to guide wider research questions (Bryman & Teevan, 2005), such as how everyone comprehends their identity differently and to varying degrees. Statistics and numbers do not necessarily attend to the issues of subjectivity. For example, identities can overlap into different categories. As well, quantitative research does not explain the causes of observed phenomena. Therefore, a qualitative approach is best suited to show differences in the lived experiences of unemployed working women.

Motherhood and unemployment

This project was designed to explore the different ways that women deal with their unemployment through qualitative analysis. Thus, this project will explore the micro level of unemployment while providing deep and rich knowledge of the women's own lived experiences. It also focuses on the natural environment of the women's daily lives since becoming unemployed. As well, since the study was conducted through qualitative methods, it was also designed to understand meanings behind the participants' actions in dealings with their unemployment (Bryman & Teevan, 2005, p. 160). In sum, the focus of this study was to see the general effects of Employment Insurance policy changes on different women's lived experiences.

This study is first and foremost a response to the lack of research in the area of women's lived experiences with EI. While there has been research into the numerous gendered effects of UI and EI (MacDonald, 1999; MacDonald 2009a; MacDonald 2009b; Porter, 2003; Pulkingham, 1998; Townson & Hayes, 2007; Battle, 2009; Mendelson et al., 2010; Silver et al., 2004), lived experiences have been neglected. One exception to this is a study by Silver et al. (2005a) that focuses on women who lost standard full-time employment; however, it neglects identity factors that would influence participants' experiences. The study by Silver and colleagues also misses those who are invisible in the labour market and are deemed undeserving by social policies—for instance, those who move in and out of the labour force and those in precarious employment. Also, further experiences of daily life need to be included, such as the impact of employment uncertainty, the impact of lack of income, leading to further reliance on social support systems such as food banks or social assistance, and the psychological and other impacts of unemployment on women and their families. In this study, such impacts are not assumed but are subjected to study, to ascertain the degree to which they encumber these women's lives.

I approached the interviews through intersectionality theory because it helps provide “a clearer picture of the way the intersections of identity impact individuals' access to social policies, and, indeed, to full social citizenship” (Nichols, 2013, pp. 234–235). Intersectionality theory allows a fuller understanding of the lives of individuals, including the choices they have and the decisions they make (Manual, 2007). The significance of intersectionality theory is that there is not one salient identity for an individual; instead, the effects of identities are fluid and context dependent.

Results of the Study

This study resulted in two main findings related to the experience of motherhood and unemployment. The first was that the neoliberal policy paradigm has eroded the state infrastructure. There is a paucity of supports for unemployed women workers, as these women not only face poor EI supports but also have inadequate supports related to health care, childcare, retraining, and the labour market. Accordingly, many unemployed

women face inadequate living conditions unless they have a domestic partner they can rely on. Second, women's health is negatively affected by this lack of supports, whether they are unemployed or precariously employed. They must cope with insecurity surrounding their inability to plan for the future, having to live on a limited income, and not having adequate health care benefits. Mothers, especially those with specific intersecting identities, are particularly at risk under neoliberal social policies.

EI Approval/Denial and the Lived Experiences of Unemployment

EI benefits guarantee a pay cheque to sustain a survival level of living with the goal of getting the worker to return to work as soon as possible. In 2014, the weekly benefit was 55% of the worker's previous average weekly wages, up to a maximum of \$514 a week (Government of Canada, 2014). This benefit is insufficient and only helps provide the unemployed worker with the bare minimal requirements as demonstrated in my study by Jessica,¹ a young racialized single mother who indicated, "I'm pretty much not making anything. Every two weeks I'm making \$212. It's like \$424 a month, which . . . honestly . . . doesn't cover rent. \$350 rent . . . \$345 insurance."

This study focused on women who were caring for a family, either for their children or for elder parents or in-laws. As noted earlier, EI policy ignores the many reasons that people leave the labour market (Cooke & Gazo, 2009; Townson & Hayes, 2007), including mothers who leave their jobs to take care of their children. Since the country needs an on-going supply of labour, raising the next generation of workers is essential, and yet the welfare state does not support the indispensable task of motherhood. Three interviewees who were denied EI benefits struggled with intersections that made it difficult to attain them. All three were mothers of children aged 7 and younger. In addition, three of the women who were denied EI benefits had given birth within the previous year and a half. Danielle, a married mother of three from Halifax, noted:

Yeah. I can money manage like the best of them—it's what I did for years. But when the income doesn't meet the output of what we need . . . it's impossible to manage a budget when there's not enough income to pay the bills.

The participants' fluid multiple identities made it complicated for them to access benefits. Danielle had recently had two children in quick succession. Sharon had one child, while Stella and Danielle each had three. Sharon was single, and Stella and Danielle were married. Each of these participants' identities had differing and fluid interacting effects. It is impossible to pull the identities apart to see which impacted the denial of EI benefits more; rather, they played a holistic role. Being single sets a woman up for being relegated to secondary employment based on employers' assumptions about a woman's availability

¹ Names of all participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

for work and the reality of social reproduction. The other identities then further complicate women's lives. Danielle's dire living situation was illuminated through her discussion of this:

[My income is] from my husband, who works two jobs. This is the first time he's ever worked two jobs and it's specifically because I couldn't get EI [that] he had to. The last few months, where we've maxed out every single credit source we have and considered selling our house, he's decided that he has to now work his full-time marketing job and then work construction jobs in the evenings and weekends.

Thus, the identity of being a mother was hard to separate from the identity of being a woman. Both of these played a role in how study participants experienced unemployment, particularly in relation to their approval or denial of EI benefits.

Dependency

As discussed above, present social-policy paradigms are rooted in the traditional male-breadwinner model. Indeed, relying on one's partner during a period of unemployment is a common means of dealing with the financial shortfall that comes with unemployment. Eighteen participants in Canada reported relying on their husband, common-law partner, or fiancé to pay bills, purchase groceries, and make rent or mortgage payments. Many stated that without their partners, they would be in debt. Participants noted the positive impact that their domestic partners had on their financial situation. Kate, a married mother of twins and a third child, said, "It's tough, but my husband's income really helps. Somehow we make it work."

Many mothers in this study were not so lucky, belying the general male-breadwinner model. Many stated that they were unable to rely on a domestic partner, for example, due to the partner's unemployment or precarious employment. Danielle was unable to work because of an unplanned pregnancy, which forced her husband to work two jobs to make ends meet. Lois, a mother of three in a common-law relationship, noted a similar experience: her husband became unemployed the day before she did. She asked me whether her husband could participate to collect the honorarium I was offering and was notably upset when I told her that her husband was ineligible to participate, given the focus of the study. Prior to their joint unemployment, they had worked in nonstandard employment. When they both lost their jobs, they lacked the resources to sustain themselves, a situation that a study by Khosla (2014) also uncovered.

Consequently, four mothers in this study stressed the significance of the social assistance programs on which they relied, including subsidized daycare and the baby bonus, a federal benefit granted to parents of newborn children. Sarah, a married

immigrant racialized mother of one, relied on subsidized daycare. She tried to obtain further social assistance but was informed that because of her husband's employment, she could not access welfare. Sarah explained, "I was told about emergency funds. [You] need to physically go with your husband for an appointment. My husband said, 'No way—sit there all day for a possible no and lose income for the day.'" Jessica's main goal was to obtain employment, and she therefore returned to work without subsidized daycare. She explained that there was a six-month waitlist for such daycares. Sarah was hopeful that her son would get into a daycare facility soon as he was on two waitlists. In this case, Sarah not only dealt with difficulties of being a mother but also experienced racialization of poverty and difficulties of settling in Canada from South Asia. Her situation was further complicated by her foreign credentials in accounting and Canadian work experience. Kathryn, a single mother of one with another child on the way, was similarly seeking further social assistance due to a pregnancy after she became unemployed. Kathryn reported, "Cause I'm pregnant, and they're trying to say that I should be able to take care of my child, but I'm having such a rough pregnancy, I need help right now." Still, the government maintained that she did not require further social assistance because her pregnancy meant that she would be at home to care for her daughter. This demonstrates the deficiencies in policies related specifically to women's family responsibilities and the hardships they cause, especially when there is no father/male breadwinner present.

The difficulties that mothers encounter also have long-term effects, as one way for these women to make ends meet is to rely on grey-sector employment, which doesn't add to their pensionable income. To meet their needs in the absence of personal supports or government assistance, many of the mothers in this study relied on undocumented work. Jessica expressed her desire to take on unreported work, although every time she tried, her need to care for her son prevented it:

I was looking into working under the table . . . but what happened was every time that I had to start a shift . . . [my son] got sick with a fever and a cold, so I stayed home. One [time] I found a babysitter, but then I found out that the babysitter doesn't start until after 7:30, but I had to be at work at 7:30, so it doesn't work. . . . Since school is out, my [14-year-old cousin] is willing to watch him. . . . I have been thinking about [finding a job], calling agencies, but I need to do more calling. Even if it's minimum wage, it's something, better than nothing.

Jessica's compounding identities of being a young, single, racialized mother of one led to her to have minimal options to attempt to reenter the labour market

The identities of being a mother, wife, or common-law partner as well as a woman are difficult to separate. In the context of being unemployed, these identities play

a significant role in participants' dependency. The compounding effects of these identities led to relying on a male domestic partner, if they had one, or relying on the state or working under the table.

Health Implications of Unemployment for Mothers

Many studies show that there are serious negative health outcomes associated with difficult employment situations because an individual's "basic life requirements" are acquired through income and benefits obtained from working (Linn, Sandifer, & Stein, 1985; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Unemployment often makes people "more anxious, depressed and concerned with bodily symptoms than those who [have] continued to work" (Linn et al., 1985, p. 504; Artazcoz, Benach, Borrell, & Cortès, 2004). Being unemployed can also lead to negative coping mechanisms, including drug use and excessive alcohol use (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010).

People who are precariously employed deal with multiple health consequences. Lewchuk, Clarke, and de Wolff (2008) found that negative health outcomes are an effect of the characteristics of employment relationships. Employment strain increases when workers are worried about precarious work terms and the strain of trying to maintain some form of employment (Lewchuk et al., 2008). A stable, full-time primary-sector job would therefore provide the most permanent and supportive safety net (Lewchuk et al., 2008).

In keeping with these earlier studies, 18 participants in the present study noted that their health was negatively affected by unemployment. They reported problems with planning for their future and living on a limited income with few health care benefits. Previous employment, including precarious employment, low socioeconomic status, and lone parenthood, can limit a person's ability to access health care services. Kathryn a young, single, pregnant mother with one toddler reported that despite the health care coverage she received from social assistance, she had difficulty meeting her health care costs. She had recently received a phone call from a debt-collection agency requesting that she "pay some \$200 dental bill, and I'm, like, I can't even give you a payment plan right now." The debt-collection agency still suggested a payment plan. Kathryn stressed that she would be unable to make any payment as she had no money. Likewise, Danielle, a mother of two, was unable to take care of her own physical and mental health needs:

I don't take care of myself because we can't afford childcare, so there's no way I can take three kids to a psychology session, or go talk to anyone in private or have a moment of peace to deal with anything physically or mentally. So it's just impossible.

Danielle's situation illustrates that mothers who are primary caregivers make personal sacrifices to care for their children before themselves in order to compensate for inadequate health care supports in Canada. But the consequences of inadequate social support also impact their children. Many mothers would like to ensure the health of their children through different means, including healthy preventative diets. Unfortunately, providing such diets is difficult for resource-poor unemployed women. Lois, a mother of three in a common-law relationship, explained her desire to purchase healthy foods, but lamented that her family's low socioeconomic position put this out of her reach:

We like to eat healthy, and we like to feed our kids healthy. But when we're unemployed or even just collecting EI, it's not enough money to be able to feed our kids healthy. So we end up buying what's cheap, and it's bad for us. It's bad for all of us. And in turn, [it] also makes us feel crummy, not only about ourselves, but just in health in general. You're dragged out; you're tired. I can see the difference between when my oldest has a healthy supper the night before as opposed to when she has a crummy supper the night before and gets up for school in the morning. I can see the difference. I can see how dragged out she is; I can see how gross she feels. And it makes me feel horrible because I can't currently afford to . . . be giving her the food that she needs. It's not like she has a lack of food. It's just not good food.

Jessica reported a similar situation:

I know it's not about going to the gym because there are other things that I can do, but vegetables and stuff are pretty expensive. When you go to the grocery store with not enough money, you can't [buy] special stuff like the fish and salmon, all the good things which is healthy for you. It's very pricey. Now I'm buying for two when I do have money, but it's not enough. I do have to think about my son first because he has to eat, so if it's about him getting his formula over me, then so be it. Because he's a baby. He wasn't asked to be born to this world to suffer. It's my responsibility to take care of him to make sure he's doing well.

Being unemployed or precariously employed left Jessica and Lois in a situation where it was difficult to prevent health issues. In addition, there are other costs associated with health care, including commuting to health care appointments, paying for childcare while the mother goes to medical appointments, and the cost of healthy food. For the Canadian population, and particularly mothers surviving on unemployment benefits, these associated costs are often out of reach.

Access to health care and health maintenance is complicated by the identities of being a woman, a mother, a wife or common-law partner, and a single mother. These identities further strain health maintenance and access to health care for those who are unemployed. They cannot be pulled apart but rather act in concert to compound the situation and impact women's health, particularly during unemployment.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience that mothers have in relation to unemployment in Canada. Twenty-six mothers participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews. The interview transcripts were analyzed through an intersectionality approach, which revealed that not everyone has been impacted by the change from UI to EI to the same degree. Compounding and intersecting identities related to gender, motherhood, marital status, socioeconomic status, age, race, and immigration status impact one's experience while unemployed.

The stark reality that emerged from this study is that being unemployed brings extra obstacles to the role of motherhood. The study participants were limited in their role as mothers due to their deficits in finances, health care, and social support, including childcare. The situations of the mothers in this study expose the deficiencies of social policies and their false premises, which are rooted in patriarchy and neoliberalism. The end result is that women with intersecting underprivileged identities, characterized by low income, immigration, and having children to care for, are left without the supports enjoyed by a select group of privileged women who are assumed to represent the entire feminine condition.

These findings point to the fact that government policies are not adequately supporting mothers in Canada and show the fallacy of the male-breadwinner model for unemployed Canadian mothers. Having a domestic partner clearly makes a difference. A domestic partner can help provide stability for a mother by bringing income into the household. The mothers in this study with male domestic partners had the best chance of attaining adequate employment and access to a variety of health care resources. Even though other participants also received benefits such as child support payments or social assistance, the benefits were not at the same level as those of the women who could rely on a male breadwinner. A male domestic partner provides daily, financial, and other support that can't be achieved through payments from social assistance or child support.

Thus it becomes clear that only the false generalized model of a self-sufficient woman fits the neoliberal paradigm. As Little (2004) observes, women in privileged positions have the greatest ability to purchase childcare, whether through a daycare facility or by hiring a nanny. Their resources allow them choices about whether to enter the labour market. They would not remain in a stressful employment relationship as they

have the means to wait for the jobs they most desire. They are able to address personal health concerns and they can pay for childcare while they go to medical appointments. But for the mothers who do not fit this model, the neoliberal policy paradigm impacts their decisions about fulfilling their role of motherhood. This study leads to the conclusion that government childcare supports should be modified to support all women on a sliding scale, supporting those with compounding identities more than those with more resources.

The task of being a mother is central to women's lived experiences. Motherwork affects women's ability to integrate into the labour market, particularly the primary labour market. When they become unemployed, their situation is more complicated than what EI benefits and supports are designed to address; therefore, other social policies and programs need to be implemented to help them reenter the labour market. Current policies inaccurately assume that women can freely choose when and under what conditions to enter the labour market. In fact women do not have free choice in either social reproduction or wage work, and government policies regarding employment insurance and other social supports need to change to reflect this reality. EI needs to be changed to accommodate both a shorter qualifying period and a longer period on unemployment for women who have family responsibilities, without penalizing them for the essential social role that they play in raising children, which is presumed by society to be a natural part of their lives. As well, we need to encourage the development of a universal childcare program in Canada that adequately takes into account mothers' varying roles and identities. Universal health care needs to be revisited to provide more supports for mothers, including dental and vision care, daycare for attending health care appointments, and support for healthy food options.

Feminist critiques need to address other forms of marginalization beyond access to the labour market, household division of labour, and the ability to have and maintain an autonomous household. We need to push further in order to analyze how different social categories and identities are impacted by social policies. Notably, the change to EI has further marginalized some segments of the Canadian population, such as people living in poverty, immigrants, and racialized individuals. More qualitative studies are needed to point the way to changes that are needed in order to level the playing field for women who are disadvantaged by multiple intersecting identities.

Appendix A: Characteristics of Halifax Participants

Characteristics	Halifax Participants												
	Amy	Claire	Danielle	Erica	Kathryn	Lois	Mary	Meghan	Sharon	Sophia	Stella	Stephanie	Susan
25 to 29 years old	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•	•		•
30 to 34 years old					•		•					•	
35 to 40 years old													•
Caucasian	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Racialized										•			
Income in 2012													
\$0–18,999									•	•	•		•
\$19,000–\$34,999			•	•	•	•	•	•				•	
\$35,000–\$44,999	•	•											•
\$45,000–\$59,999													
Number of children													
1	•	•						•	•	•			
2			•	•	•		•						•
3						•					•		
4													
Caring for 1 parent												•	
Caring for 2 parents													•
Precarious employment	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Married/common-law	•		•	•		•		•		•	•	•	•
Single/separated		•			•		•		•				
EI approval	•	•		•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•
EI denial			•						•		•		
Social assistance					•								
Unemployed partner						•							
Partner works in a precarious job						•							
Child support					•	•	•						
No child support								•					
No post-secondary education											•		•

Appendix B: Characteristics of Toronto Participants

Characteristics	Halifax Participants												
	Amy	Claire	Danielle	Erica	Kathryn	Lois	Mary	Meghan	Sharon	Sophia	Stella	Stephanie	Susan
25 to 29 years old	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•	•		•
30 to 34 years old					•		•					•	
35 to 40 years old													•
Caucasian	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Racialized										•			
Income in 2012													
\$0–18,999									•	•	•		•
\$19,000–\$34,999			•	•	•	•	•	•				•	
\$35,000–\$44,999	•	•											•
\$45,000–\$59,999													
Number of children													
1	•	•						•	•	•			
2			•	•	•		•						•
3						•					•		
4													
Caring for 1 parent												•	
Caring for 2 parents													•
Precarious employment	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Married/common-law	•		•	•		•		•		•	•	•	•
Single/separated		•			•		•		•				
EI approval	•	•		•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•
EI denial			•						•		•		
Social Assistance					•								
Partner is unemployed						•							
Partner works in a precarious job						•							
Child support					•	•	•						
No child support								•					
No post-secondary education											•		•

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