Disruptions, Decisions and Discourses:
Mothering in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit North America in 2020 life has yet to return to “normal.” New realities included remote learning, physical distancing, lockdown measures, and mandatory masking. The pandemic has increased social isolation, stress and anxiety, employment loss, and financial instability. Even more, the domestic workload that mothers are usually responsible for in addition to their paid work, what Arlie Hochschild (2012) refers to as ‘the second shift,’ has been compounded and expanded, creating a 'third' and 'fourth' shift that involves homeschooling, increased carework, and 'worrywork' that burdens mothers during a crisis (O’Reilly & Green, 2021, p. 21). Mothers are the unrecognized ‘front-line workers’ of the pandemic – caring for sick family members, trying to balance working from home with childcare and homeschooling that has pushed mothers to their breaking points. This has left many mothers overworked, overstressed, overwhelmed, taking a substantial toll on their well-being. The purpose of this research is to examine the pressures, changes, and challenges around paid work, care, and family during the pandemic that mothers face— and the strategies they use to navigate these difficult situations. This study involves 11 qualitative interviews with Canadian mothers. The aim was to discover how women define and understand their own experiences of pandemic parenting, and how their experiences and choices were shaped by their constraining circumstances and contexts. This study examines the norms surrounding ‘who cares?’ and how disparities in carework underpin many of the gender inequalities women experience that blur the boundaries between their private and public lives.

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Introduction

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11th, 2020, and ever since, our world has been turned upside down: replacing 'ordinary life' with chaos, uncertainty, and fear. In Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Green's new book released in March of last year, Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic (2021), O'Reilly argues that while it's often touted that 'we are all in this together,' it is certainly not an "equal-opportunity pandemic" (p. 42). O'Reilly (2021) argues that the gender inequalities we are observing in the public sphere since the COVID-19 pandemic began are "attributable to and caused by preexisting gender inequalities in carework that the pandemic has now exacerbated" (p. 42). The widespread lockdown measures and closures of schools and daycares has created a "care conundrum" (Staab, 2020 April) where both formal and informal care arrangements have been upended and have left many families on their own to resolve this gap in care (Johnston, Mohammed & van der Linden, 2020, p. 4). However, as women have historically shouldered the heaviest weight of the childcare burden, mothers have been largely expected to fill this gap in carework (Dickson, 2020). These expectations are embedded in the cultural discourse surrounding 'good motherhood' – not only that childcare is understood to be a distinctly 'motherly' activity, but that there are certain ideals that mothers must uphold. Namely, they should be self-sacrificing and devote all their time, energy, and resources to caring for their children. When women deviate from these expectations, they are branded as 'bad moms' (O'Reilly, 2004, pp. 5-7).

O'Reilly (2021) argues that while we all are in the same storm, we are not necessarily in the same boat (p. 50). She suggests that it is "mothers who are in the most turbulent of waters and that the pandemic has caused a perfect storm for their carework, health, and employment. The confluence of gendered carework and COVID-19 has meant that the devastating effects of the pandemic have been most fully and keenly felt by mothers" (2021, p. 50). This astute claim underpins the urgency of this research and why bringing to light the stories and struggles of Canadian mothers as front-line workers during the pandemic matters. That media discourse downplays the burden for mothers demonstrates how little attention and social value is placed on not only carework but 'motherwork' – the vital labour (childcare, domestic labour, and eldercare) that underpins the functioning of society. This undervaluing becomes even more salient during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic that is heavily 'care focused' (Bryan, 2020, p. 331).

This research project explores different challenges and changes impacting mothers and how they navigate concerns related to paid labour, carework, and family life during the pandemic. I use a critical feminist lens to analyze the gendered norms that underpin the inequalities women face in both the private and public spheres, with an eye to mothering discourses and practices. Drawing on narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis I investigated how Canadian mothers understand and construct their experiences of pandemic parenting and their key choices/decisions in responses to the changes brought on by the pandemic, asking: how were their choices shaped or constrained by the 'good mothering' discourse?

The following discussion outlines the literature on the history of motherhood studies. I then discuss how the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and intensified existing gendered barriers and inequalities for mothers. Next, I present a detailed description of the research methods and procedures used from recruitment to data collection. Followed by data analysis, results and discussion.
Literature Review

Contextual Background on Motherhood and Mothering

Adrienne Rich (1976) was one of the first to extensively study motherhood with a feminist lens and has been recognized for "pioneering the field" of maternal scholarship (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 4). Rich (1976) made an important distinction between the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering and maternal identities, conceptualizations that remain important within maternal scholarship today. Rich defined mothering as "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to her children," whereas 'motherhood' was, in her view, "the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (Rich, 1976, p. 13). Rich (1976) argued that this definition of motherhood has been integrated into our social and political systems and that it is especially dangerous in its ability to withhold women's autonomy over their lives, and by "alienating women from our own bodies, by incarcerating us in them" (p. 13). Through the institution of motherhood, women have been deduced to the sole identity of 'mother' where "the female body has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out life" (Rich, 1976, p. 285). This meaning of motherhood implies that it is both natural and inevitable. That is, all women possess this 'motherhood gene' instilling in them the instinct and knowledge to mother and that all women should have an 'innate desire' and aptitude for care. However, extensive research by feminist historians contradicts this essentialist view of motherhood. As O'Reilly puts it, motherhood is "fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors" (2004, p. 4). As a socially constructed concept, the meaning of motherhood varies across time and place.

The institution of patriarchal motherhood created and reproduced the expectation that mothers be self-sacrificing, altruistic, and unconditionally loving (Ynestra King quoted in Ruddick, 1989, p. 39). Sharon Hays coined the term 'intensive mothering' (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 5) to describe the expectation that "mothering requires lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child" (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 5). Bound within this discourse is the assumption that the "mother is the central caregiver" and that her role as a mother is more important than her paid work (cited in O'Reilly, 2004, p. 5). This construction is particularly oppressive for a few reasons.

First, it suggests that the biological mother herself can only execute mothering tasks. Sara Ruddick (1989) proposed some fascinating ideas that challenge this belief. Ruddick (1989) argues that although most mothers have been women, "mothering is potentially work for men and women" (p. 40). Ruddick (1989) argues that there is no reason to presume that one sex is more suited to maternal work than the other: "A woman is no more, a man no less 'naturally' a mother, no more or less obligated to maternal work, than a man or woman is 'naturally' a scientist or firefighter or is obligated to become one" (p. 41). She argues that only a tiny fraction of maternal work is essentially female, which is restricted to giving birth and breastfeeding (Ruddick, 1989, p. 50). Although, there is a danger in placing birthing labour as essential to mothering, as Ruddick (1989) maintains that adoptive parents are no less qualified to being mothers, simply based on the fact
they have not given birth (p. 48). Nor is the act of giving birth "sufficient grounds for undertaking maternal work or doing it effectively" (Ruddick, 1989, p. 48). Therefore, Ruddick (1989) contends that the ongoing set of activities that mothering requires can be completed by either women or men (Ruddick, 1989, p. 49). Ruddick (1989) also draws a significant parallel to Simone De Beauvoir in the assertion that "neither a woman nor a man is born a mother; people become mothers in particular historical and social circumstances" (p. 51). Here, Ruddick (1989) argues that mothering can be learned through socialization and is not a biological fact.

Another reason 'intensive mothering' is oppressive is that it is a very "emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive" practice (Hays cited in O'Reilly, 2004, p. 5). These expectations of mothers discriminate based on class, income, employment, among other structural factors. Low-income women do not have means to stay home to take care of these 'extraordinary motherhood duties' and cannot afford to outsource this carework that middle and upper-middle-class families can. Single mothers or those who experience intersecting inequalities such as race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, or are marginalized based on 'otherness' and lie outside the hegemonic definition of family, face compounding pressures and social barriers to overcome to live up to this unattainable stereotype of motherhood (Hallstein, O'Reilly, & Vanderbeld Giles, 2020, p. 5).

Another way patriarchal motherhood harms women is outlined by both Rich (1976) and O'Reilly (2004) through the concept of "powerless responsibility." Underlying this idea is that mothers are policed by what Ruddick calls "the gaze of others," of doctors, neighbours, and friends (cited in O'Reilly, 2004, p. 6). Mothers are expected to conform to a specific set of values defined by their community in terms of the 'good' mothering practices, and in adopting other ways of mothering that lie outside of these norms, they risk being stigmatized as 'deviant' (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 7; Ruddick, 1989, p. 20). When children misbehave in any way, typically the mother is held responsible, and society’s perception of her is inextricably linked with her abilities as a mother. Powerless responsibility creates a paradox where women bear the 'responsibility' to raise the next generation, yet, have little influence over the practice of mothering, nor the social or economic circumstances in which they reside, or social policies or systemic disadvantages like poverty that directly impact women’s ability to mother (Ruddick, 1989, pp. 34-35). Mothers are "coerced to conform to an unnatural and unattainable idea of motherhood and chastised when they do not conform" to these set of standards. (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 7). The institution of motherhood acts as a form of social control that requires mothers to repress their sense of selfhood and strips them of their agency and autonomy over their own mothering experience (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 7). Deviantizing ‘bad mothers’ also serves as a method for society to control the dominant cultural scripts of gender and keep women oppressed in their solitary societal role as ‘mothers.’

Maternity scholars maintain a feminist alternative to the institution of motherhood, which is a woman-defined approach to mothering. O'Reilly (2004) and Rich (1976) refer to this as 'mothering as experience.' This alternative position focuses on the power of mothers and embraces their agency to define their own experiences within the practice of motherhood (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 10). O'Reilly (2004) focuses on how the role of mother is a "site of power and resistance in non-Western cultures" and seeks for ways to incorporate this form of empowerment of mothers in Western culture (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 10). Fiona Green interviewed self-proclaimed feminist mothers
asking them to describe how they incorporate feminist ideals into their practice of mothering (cited in O'Reilly, 2004, p. 14). Some mothers in her study reported actively resisting the patriarchal script of 'good motherhood.' Others employed non-sexist childrearing practices and raised their children to be "critically conscious of and challenge various forms of oppression" (cited in O'Reilly, 2004, p. 14).

**Contemporary Challenges of Mothering: Pushing Mothers to the Margins?**

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Freidan explored the "problem that has no name," the feeling of ennui by upper-middle-class women whose sole identity was that of 'mother' and 'housewife' which left them yearning for something more, to fulfill their full potential (cited in Bryan, 2020, p. 332). Second-wave feminists sought to increase women's participation in the paid workforce to address this problem. However, despite women gaining rights through the legalization of birth control, and becoming more integrated in the public sphere, the social construction of the patriarchal institution of motherhood persists in the 21st century. This led Hochschild (2012) a decade ago to refer to this as "a stalled revolution" (p. 12). Hochschild (2012) argues that significant changes in female labour force participation have not been met with dramatic changes in the system that would accommodate working parents (p. 12). In short, discourses and ideologies surrounding care persist; particularly, the assumption that women/mothers should be responsible for childcare and housework within the home. Studies show that women continue to contribute double the amount of time than their male counterparts to unpaid labour (Johnston, Mohammed, van der Linden, 2020, p. 2). Bryan (2020) argues that the presence of women in the workforce has done little to "redress the structural oppressions experienced by mothers, [and for mothers who are also "compounded by race and class," work has] reproduced their subordination rather than remedying it" (p. 333).

The myth that carework is a uniquely 'female activity' is deeply embedded within the cultural construction of motherhood. This myth has affected the types of jobs women are expected to do or are deemed most 'suitable' for, which has created a sex-segregated workforce where women disproportionately fill industries such as education, healthcare, childcare, and social work that are closely tied to carework (Hultin, 2003). Therefore, women are filling both the paid and unpaid care roles in society, reinforcing and maintaining the gendered scripts so prevalent today (Staab, April 2020). Socialist feminists describe these as 'socially reproductive roles,' which imply responsibility for not only the function of the household but of society as a whole (Bryan, 2020, p. 331). Bryan (2020) contends that this type of labour "underpins all other forms of labour and productivity. . . [and that] it is the foundation upon the capitalist mode of production is predicated" (p. 334). Yet, housework has largely remained unwaged and is regarded as 'unproductive.' This contradiction underpins the socialist feminist argument that mothers are being exploited for their free labour in the household and have consequently become capitalists' "two workers for the cost of one," as women fill both productive and reproductive roles in society (Bryan, 2020, p. 338). Some go so far as to argue that as children will be the next generation of workers and taxpayers; parents are "contributing to society by raising them," and that childrearing should then be viewed as a 'public good' instead of a 'private good,' since it is for the betterment of the collective society (Miller, April 2020).
Bryan (2020) argues that the "maternal conditions of motherhood" have been reshaped by the neoliberal ideology (p. 336). Over the last several decades, there has been a shift away from the welfare state that has "sought to mediate the relationship between labour and capital through compromise and redistribution" towards market-based policies. (Bryan, 2020, p. 336). This was intended to reduce individuals' dependency on the state as they linked eligibility of benefits to paid work (Bryan, 2020, p. 337). In effect, this further redirected responsibility of raising children from the state to the family. Childcare consequently is defined as an individual, familial problem. This can be linked to the powerless responsibility of mothers discussed above (Rich, 1976; O'Reilly, 2004). So, there is a complex situation where mothers are seeing a reduction of support from the state (Bryan, 2020), combined with an increase in participation in the workforce, similar or increased levels of unpaid household labour, and yet, their failure to maintain this impossible balance is still viewed as a negative reflection on their ability to mother.

Richardson (2020) argues that the lack of affordable and high-quality childcare in Canada acts as an "insurmountable barrier to progressively shifting gender roles beyond the traditional, mother-as-primary-caregiver model" (p. 354). In terms of meeting global standards for early childhood care, Canada is tied for last place out of 25 OECD countries, as it met only one out of the ten requirements (Horne & Breitkreuz, 2018, p. 127). Furthermore, Richardson (2020) estimated that only 20% of Canadian children under 12 have access to regulated childcare spaces (p. 353). Richardson (2020) argues the state must play a more significant role in assuring mothers' access to the necessary structural supports to ensure gender equity in the workforce, as past and current childcare policies have been insufficient and have had the reverse effect of reinforcing traditional gender norms (pp. 354-5).

It appears that what was once deemed a cure-all for minimizing gender inequality by neoliberals (Güney-Frahm, 2020) and socialist feminists (Bryan, 2020) – women in the workforce – has amplified the care burden for women to satisfy both the unreasonable demands that 'good mothering' requires with the standards of a productive employee within the neo-liberal discourse. Striving for work-family balance has led many working mothers to increasingly feel as if they "can be a mum or professional, but not both," and as if they are being forced to choose between a career and being a mother (Coombe et al., 2019, p. 314). Thus, mothers are being torn in two directions – on the one hand, not wanting to feel as if their performance is lagging at work, and on the other, not wanting their children to suffer from lack of attention (Ross, 2016, p. 37). Ross (2016) argues that this creates a "dissonance" between their conflicting roles as mother and worker (p. 38). A study by Coombe et al. (2019) revealed that even though mothers view the expectations of the 'idealized mother' as largely unattainable, it still feels impossible to disengage with the discourse (p. 305).

In Lean In (2013), Sheryl Sandberg appears to suggest that working women have only themselves to blame for not reaching the same success as their male counterparts (cited in Borda, 2020, p. 347). Sandberg argues that it is not because of government policies or sexual double standards but because women are unwilling to embrace the "masculine models of corporate success and to conform their personal lives to their professional ambitions" (cited in Borda, 2020, p. 347). However, Sandberg's individualized claims have been met with heavy criticism, as her ideals support the neoliberal concept of "trickle-down economics" that blames women instead of a system that fails to meet the needs of families (Borda, 2020, p. 347). Her solutions suggest that women
need to alter their behaviour instead of "remaking workplace culture to privilege working mothers' needs" (Borda, 2020, p. 347). Sandberg's suggestions do not fix the problems of gender discrimination and the corporate glass ceiling that women face.

Mason (September 2020) argues that the "system was never designed for working moms," it was instead made for working men who were "unencumbered by caretaking responsibilities or demands" by requiring 24/7 availability and devotion to their jobs. These expectations reinforce a traditional (patriarchal) gendered division of labour and consequently "underestimate[s] men as caretakers, and disregard[s] women" (Mason, 2020). Miller (April 2020) argues that the American workplace requires "undivided loyalty" from its employees and often rewards working long hours with promotions and pay increases. A demand that is not compatible with parenthood, moreover, motherhood. This dynamic pushes mothers to the margins, allowing men to get ahead while mothers fall further behind. Ross (2016) echoes this idea arguing there are existing barriers in achieving employment equity for women, specifically in male-dominated areas such as academia, law, and medicine that are based on a 24/7 work culture that leave few options for flexible or part-time that would help mitigate childcare burdens (p. 39).

Former foreign policy advisor to the White House, Anne-Marie Slaughter, notably responded with criticism to Sandberg's 'solutions' in her Atlantic article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" (2012). Slaughter (2012) admits her complicity in reinforcing these 'myths,' in telling women that they can "have it all" for years. However, after realizing the struggles she faced in managing a work-life balance within a rigid bureaucratic work schedule in DC, she realized that 'having it all' "depend[s] almost entirely on what type of job [you have]." and that in fact, it may not be possible for many types of jobs (Slaughter, 2012). Slaughter (2012) argues that 'having it all' has been falsely equated with personal determination (a neoliberal ideal). The 'supermom' discourse that she can 'do it all' places mothers in direct competition with each other, reinforcing individual over collective responsibility of childcare, and when they struggle, it is unspoken that it is based on their own "individual inadequacy rather than a structural impossibility" (Richardson, 2020, p. 357). Hochschild (2012) argues that the image of the 'supermom' creates an "ironic heroism," highlighting her personal strength and individual characteristics that mask the reality that she was forced to adapt to an over demanding, impossible situation (p. 23). Therefore, Slaughter (2012) argues that 'having it all' is simply impossible given how the current North American economy and society are structured. Slaughter (2012) argues several changes need to happen to achieve gender equality in leadership and create a society that fully embraces a genuine work-life balance for everyone.

First, Slaughter (2012) argues that we need to stop telling 'half-truths' about how women can 'have it all' including the misconception that they can achieve success only if committed enough by "keeping one foot on the gas pedal" (Borda, 2020, p. 347), if they marry the right person (who is willing to equally participate in housework and childcare), and plan out career paths and childbirth in a way that does not hinder success or hold one back (Slaughter, 2012). Slaughter (2012) argues that structural barriers exist within the system that inhibits this 'success' even if we follow these 'false' pieces of advice. Secondly, Slaughter (2012) maintains that society must reorient our workplace and shift from a culture that rewards workers for placing their careers before their families yet penalizes, overlooks, and accuses them of unprofessionalism for choosing their family over their career (Slaughter, 2012).
The demanding time constraints that many fields require that remain inflexible, such as the rigid bureaucratic environment that Slaughter (2012) experienced (or the fields of academia, medicine, or law that Ross (2016) investigated), leaves many working women to choose occupations that offer more options for flexible part-time work and have a family-oriented culture to fulfill the dominant time-consuming cultural scripts of intensive mothering (Ross, 2016, p. 39). The result is a higher percentage of women working in precarious, part-time positions that are usually lower-waged/low prestige. Some refer to this phenomenon of women dropping to part-time or abandoning their careers altogether as following the "mommy track" (Gershon, 2020) that has been echoed in media as the "opt-out revolution." Borda (2020) argues that the lens in which these stories are told, that women are "choosing" to "opt-out" because of a "natural desire to embrace domesticity," reaffirms gender stereotypes as well as essentialist feminist notions that have functioned in ways to discipline mothers, and perpetuates 'traditional' patriarchal assumptions of motherhood (p. 343). These opt-out stories do not recognize that the 'personal is political.' These so-called individual choices cannot be seen in insolation to cultural expectations surrounding 'intensive mothering,' the effect of gender discrimination in the workplace, or structural policy-level barriers such as the lack of family-friendly workplace cultures, comprehensive paid family leave, and access to affordable childcare (p. 347).

Another barrier that women face is the gender pay gap, in which women earn 80 cents on the dollar that their male counterparts make (Dickler, 2019). Connected is the glass ceiling hypothesis that argues the existence of an invisible barrier that blocks women's upward mobility and limits career advancement for women (Hultin, 2003). Dickler (2019) argues that this gap is far wider between mothers and fathers. Findings from the National Bureau of Economic Research show that women's income drops by 30% after giving birth to their first child, a gap that never fully recovers (Dickler, 2019). This gap is also referred to as the 'motherhood penalty,' in which women are treated differently in the workforce based on their status as a mother, evidence that has been replicated in other studies (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015; Miller, 2014; Aisenbrey, Evertsson & Grunow, 2009). For example, Dickler (2019) points out that following the birth of their first child, women start to fall behind in terms of earnings, rank, and the probability of being promoted. Results were corroborated by Richardson (2020, p. 359). While gender norms are starting to shift, Dickler (2019) points out that the idea that women are the primary caregivers persists. Therefore, mothers are more likely than fathers to experience career interruptions such as reduced hours, taking time off, quitting their job, or turning down a promotion, according to a 2013 survey from the Pew Research Center (Dickler, 2019). In contrast, fathers do not see the same penalty as mothers do. Instead, they are rewarded with a "bump up" in pay when they have children (Dickler, 2019), also referred to as the 'fatherhood premium' or 'daddy bonus' (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015; Hodges, J. & Budig, J., 2010; Fuller, Cooke, P., 2018; Miller, 2014). This could be as much as 20% more than men without children (Dickler, 2019). Therefore, there is a dichotomy within the experience of parenthood where mothers are penalized for having children, meanwhile, fathers are rewarded (Dickler, 2019).

Stanford sociology professor Shelley Correll (2007) conducted a study where she sent out fake resumes to employers for both female and male applicants that indicated they were members of a parent-teacher association. Correll's (2007) results showed that mothers were half as likely to be called back for an interview, whereas fathers were more likely than non-fathers (p. 1330).
exception to this, found in a study by Budig (2014), is that working mothers employed in the top 10% of earners did not see a loss of income, and those at the top 5% received bonuses at the same rate as their male counterparts. This was speculated to be because these women were perceived to operate on the same high-performance level as their male colleagues and could afford childcare to work the long hours necessary to 'get ahead' (Budig, 2014). Luhr's (2020) study of U.S service sector jobs found that women were more likely to conceal their parental status in employment negotiations. In contrast, fathers were more likely to discuss their families (p. 259). This indicates that women are worried that their status as a mother with infringe on their employment and promotion opportunities, whereas men have historically benefitted from their status as a parent, through the studies on fatherhood premiums (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015; Hodges, J. & Budig, J., 2010; Fuller, Cooke, P., 2018; Miller, 2014). This indicates robust cultural assumptions of fatherhood as the breadwinner model persists today where employers see fathers as more stable and committed to their jobs to 'support' their family financially (Correll, 2007, p. 1332). On the other side, women being viewed as the primary caregivers are seen as 'distracted' or less committed to their jobs by employers, which translates to their perception as less competent, as they have to balance it with motherhood (Correll, 2007, p. 1216).

The Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11th, 2020, and ever since, our world has been turned upside down: replacing "ordinary life" with chaos, uncertainty, and fear. Given the extensive interconnectivity of the world's nations in trade, commerce, and tourism, the virus quickly spread to almost every country, leaving more than three million dead in its path (WHO). The immediacy of the crisis forced governments to make the types of decisions akin to ones during wartime (Gans, 2020, p. 18). Centralized decision-making was used in place of market solutions to allocate scarce resources and implement necessary measures such as social distancing and stay-at-home orders to prevent further the spread of the virus (Gans, 2020, p. 42). The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (May 2020) estimated that nearly 80% of the global population had "come under stay-home orders, lockdowns, and quarantines" (p. 1).

The pandemic is more than a health crisis, it is a unique social phenomenon with severe ramifications in all spheres of life, especially the domestic sphere. It has created a new social condition where a state of uncertainty has become the new normal, encapsulated in Ulrich Beck's conceptualization of a "risk society," where we are no longer able to predict or control the threats in our society, leaving us helpless, confused and constantly needing to adapt to an ever-changing situation (cited in Matthewman and Huapatz, 2020, p. 2).

Surprisingly, the policies implemented to help mitigate the effects of the virus, in hopes of not overwhelming our health systems, have had the most profound effects on the lives of community members who do not succumb to illness. Malik (2020) points out that during times of crisis, it exposes the weaknesses in our systems and often exacerbates inequality. Many others echo this concern: Lewis (2020); Ribeiro (2020); Matthewman and Huapatz (2020); UNDESA (2020); O'Reilly and Green (2021). Malik (2020) argues that during a crisis, "issues that policy-
makers have long ignored suddenly become urgent. The pandemic has laid bare the insecurity of work, the cruelty of the welfare policy, the hypocrisy of a system in which every time a crisis hits, we are told that ‘we are all in this together,’” when in reality, the needs of the poor and vulnerable are most often ignored in society. Malik (2020) argues that the social distancing policies, and the economic burden they carry, fall disproportionately upon the “poorest and the lowest paid, many of whom cannot work from home and have few savings on which to fall back on.” Those who work in secure white-collar jobs have been, for the most part, rewarded with the ability to work from home, are better protected from the economic shocks of the pandemic with stable salaries and included health benefits, and have more spacious accommodation that makes self-isolation easier to manage (Lewis, 2020). Those who are not afforded the possibility of working safely from home and who work in precarious low-paid sectors that lack benefits such as sick leave are impacted substantially more in terms of layoffs, pay cuts, and risk of contracting the virus. The social and economic problems we are now observing in the wake of the crisis were not created by the pandemic itself, but it has simply “exacerbate[ed] a pre-existing problem” (Malik, 2020). The pandemic has “exposed the fragility of social life” and the existing inequalities within the system (Malik, 2020). What Malik (2020) does not address however, is how the pandemic does not simply impact the “poorest and lowest paid,” but weighs disproportionately on women and mothers because of gender inequalities that persist in both the public and private sphere.

In terms of the employment sector (public sphere), women have been hit the hardest in all areas. Women disproportionately occupy positions in front-line work battling COVID-19, making them more susceptible to contracting the virus and must balance low-pay, inadequate protective equipment with managing limited childcare arrangements since the closures of daycares. The WHO estimates that women make up 70% of the world’s healthcare and social work positions (Mathewman & Huppatz, 2020, p. 4). The World Economic Forum reports that women’s unemployment rates have risen by 2.9% more than male unemployment, which is a stark contrast to past recessions that have affected men more (Alon et al., September 2020). In their study Dias, Chance, and Buchanan (2020) found mothers were one-third more likely to be laid off than fathers, indicating that female-dominated industries were most affected by lockdown orders. However, the authors point to other likely factors that could have contributed to this. For instance, the pervasiveness of the male breadwinner model could contribute to the special treatment fathers receive from their employers, which may have reinforced the perceived need for fathers to support their families during challenging economic times such as these (Dias, Chance & Buchanan, 2020, p. 4). Also, past research on the motherhood penalty (Correll, 2007; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015) suggests the existence of gender and maternal discrimination women face and the women-as-primary caregiver model, which could have been a factor in layoffs (Dias, Chance & Buchanan, 2020, p. 4).

The widespread lockdown measures and closures of schools and daycares created a “care conundrum” (Staab, 2020) where both formal and informal care arrangements (neighbours, family, and grandparents) have been upended and has left most families on their own to resolve this gap in care (Johnston, Mohammed, & van der Linden, 2020, p. 4). It has been women, in most cases, who have stepped back from their careers to assume full-time care responsibilities during the pandemic (van der Linden, 2020). This is due to various trends touched on above, including their
gravitation towards more ‘flexible jobs’, and etc. (Dickson, 2020). Furthermore, a disaster such as a pandemic requires more carework all around. When children or parents fall ill, they require looking after. Suffering from social isolation and stress requires looking after (Lewis cited in O’Reilly & Green, 2021, p. 20). Thus, the ‘types’ of carework has also expanded and increased exponentially during the pandemic.

A study conducted by Johnston, Mohammed, and van der Linden (2020) reveals that at the beginning of the pandemic, women in Canada spent, on average, 95 hours a week on housework and childcare and that despite an increase in carework done by men, women were still doing more than half (p. 8). Comparatively, in an Australian context, the government reacted differently than in Canada in terms of social policy (Johnston, Mohammed, & van der Linden, 2020). Between April and July, the federal government subsidized childcare costs for pre-school-aged children (Johnston, Mohammed & van der Linden, 2020, p. 5). This had substantial effects on the well-being of mothers and resulted in a significantly lower amount of unpaid labour than Canadian women (15 hours less per week) (Johnston, Mohammed & van der Linden, 2020, p. 8). This indicates the necessity for ‘gender-targeted policy measures’ that can help reduce the stress of the childcare burden on women that has been amplified during the crisis (Johnston, Mohammed, & van der Linden, 2020, pp. 12-13; UN Women, 2020; Lewis, 2020).

This increased burden for Canadian women arguably created a ‘third shift’ where working mothers have to balance their own career (whether moved online or not) with increased unpaid domestic work, and the addition of homeschooling their now, home-bound children, which O’Reilly calls a ‘fourth shift’ (2021, pp. 46-47). While men argue that they do most of the homeschooling, according to a survey poll, only 3% of women agree with this (Miller, May 2020). Research has shown that men have consistently overestimated the time they spend on housework and childcare and have underestimated the contributions made by their partners, a trend that has been exacerbated during the crisis (Johnston, Mohammed, & van der Linden, 2020, pp. 12-13; UN Women, 2020; Lewis, 2020).

These circumstances have worsened an already ‘time poor’ group that have echoed worries among many that it will reverse the strides women have taken in minimizing the gender inequality gap (Dickson, July 2020), calling it a “shecession” (Alon et al., September 2020), or a “pink-collar recession” (Ribeiro, May 2020). The Atlantic even goes so far as to call the coronavirus a “disaster for feminism” (Lewis, March 2020). Donegan (2020) argues that “this pandemic threatens to undo what generations of feminists have fought for.” Donegan (2020) fears that this crisis will force women back into the domestic sphere, revoking their economic independence, which is especially problematic if they are in exploitive or abusive relationships. This could reinforce the discourse of ‘intensive mothering’ and reaffirm traditional gender roles. Due to the increased care responsibilities that have fallen on women, many academic journals have also reported a decrease in submissions from women by 50% in some areas. Yet, their male counterparts have had increases in submissions up to 50% (Matherman & Huppatz, 2020, p. 4). This is particularly worrisome because this decrease in women’s productivity could signal rhetoric that women are not as competitive in their fields and further feeds into the belief that women do not belong in academia or other male-dominated fields (Donegan, 2020).

The lockdown has also laid bare the reality that our personal and professional identities cannot be kept separate, as they have previously expected to be (Miller, April 2020). Mothers have long feared being penalized for letting their familial responsibilities interfere with their jobs (Correll, 2007). However, now it has become near impossible, as they have collided in the remote
workspace with children popping up in Zoom meetings, indicating the all-consuming job that parenting entails – one that the traditional workplace does not accommodate or even seek to be flexible to (Miller, April 2020). The neoliberal expectation of the ‘productive employee’ has become even more pronounced during the pandemic. This creates a situation where women run a risk of falling behind as they attempt to juggle the increased childcare burdens with their careers. The ramifications of the motherhood penalty can now be expected to be even more substantial.

The pressure from working a full-time job and running a household has come to a breaking point during the pandemic for many mothers. According to a study by the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, this near-impossible work-life balance has become too overwhelming and has caused women to leave the workforce at four times the rate as men in September 2020 (Schneider, Hsu, & Horsley, 2020). What this tells us is that under normal circumstances, the systems and policies were never in place to accommodate and support families, such as affordable childcare, sick leave, and flexible work policies, and that this pandemic has exacerbated these pre-existing problems that are causing fractures in the systems where there have already previously been cracks. The pandemic has caused a ‘pressure-cooker’ situation where inequalities in the system have been highlighted and intensified that cannot survive forever and will ultimately boil over. What COVID-19 has done is expose the issue of parenting that often intersects with disparities such as class, gender, and income that have been historically equated with ‘women’s issues’ and thus been “rendered marginalized in the discourse” (Dickson, 2020). What mothers are feeling can be paralleled with Peterson’s (September 2020) definition of burnout: “when the distance between the ideal and the possible lived reality becomes too much to bear.” The ‘idealized mother’ and the ‘perfect parent’ were near impossible to achieve under ordinary circumstances. However, given the drastic changes to everyday life, the economic shocks, and the constant worry of their family falling ill from the virus makes that ‘ideal reality’ too far out of reach.

Under normal circumstances, women report being often “over-tired, sick and ‘emotionally drained’” (Hochschild, 2012, p. 10). The added stressors of a pandemic, financial strain, employment instability, and exacerbated childcare and housework duties have taken a severe toll on women’s mental and physical well-being (Johnston, Mohammed & van der Linden, 2020; Calarco et al., 2020, p. 22). O’Reilly’s study of mothering during the pandemic is flooded by stories of women who are “simply surviving,” “treading water,” and feeling like they are “at the point of breaking,” and in the words of one mother: “How can I keep doing this?... I, like many parents, am worn out and tired, and I fear this unsustainable hamster wheel we’re on is giving rise to a silent, mental health pandemic” (2021, p. 48).

Women are also expected to bear the emotional burden of the impending crisis for the entire family, increasing the ‘worrywork’ of mothers (Donegan, 2020), which leaves us to question: if moms are busy worrying and caring about everyone else, who is caring for moms? The neoliberal ideal of ‘good mothering’ is upheld now more than ever, expecting mothers to manage this stressful ideal on their own with little help. If they struggle, women are socialized to internalize this as their failure to uphold the high standards of motherhood.

The pandemic has offered an opportunity to address the norms surrounding who is responsible for carework, why it is so undervalued in society, and why this labour often goes unnoticed and is rendered ‘invisible.’ This crisis reveals what families and stressed-out mothers have been trying to tell us for years – that something isn’t working and we need to address it, or
we risk sliding backward in our feminist efforts, and mothers will burnout altogether (Dickson, 2020; Donegan, 2020; Ribeiro, 2020). From now on, mothers' perspectives and experiences must be taken seriously in creating adequate policy. In the past, policymakers and researchers have often “overlook[ed], assume[d], or distort[ed] the experiences of mothers,” according to Horne and Breitkreuz (2018, p. 130). Ribeiro (2020) urges us “to think carefully about how we value what is known as women’s work – service work, care work. We undervalue it significantly, yet the whole economy relies on it,” and during a crisis, it becomes that much more apparent (Ribeiro, May 2020).

The extensive research on motherhood details the barriers women face daily to balance their careers with their familial responsibilities within a neoliberal framework that upholds the ‘good mothering’ discourse. Given these existing challenges that mothers already deal with and the recent data that has emerged, it suggests the difficulties that mothers face in adapting to the changes brought on by the pandemic and the policies measures that accompany it. However, there is a lack of research devoted to studying the impacts of the pandemic on families and most importantly, moms. This speaks to the importance of this study to uncover the lived experiences of Canadian mothers under the destabilizing social force of the pandemic and how they have navigated the new changes, challenges, and stressors. Through their experiences, in the context of their own words, can we come to understand what it has been like to parent under these unusual circumstances and the government support that would have been beneficial and can help mothers and families going forward.

**Research Problem and Methodologies**

The main research question of this project is: How do mothers navigate the changes and challenges around work, care, and family associated with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-topics/questions:

- In what ways does the COVID-19 pandemic impact the life experiences of mothers?
- What kinds of disruptions, changes, or challenges have mothers faced during the pandemic?
- What key choices do mothers make in response to changes in family life, paid labour, household organization, and/or child(ren)’s needs?
  - In what ways do their choices sustain or challenge the ‘good mothering’ discourse?

**Critical Feminist Framework**

This study operates within a feminist framework. This approach uses a critical lens to
observe gendered power imbalances embedded in the fabric of social life. These unequal social processes result in discrimination and oppression of women in both the public and private sphere, which is described in-depth in the literature above. There is a long tradition of excluding women’s perspectives and experiences from knowledge production in society (Reid, Greaves & Kirby, 2017, p. 25; Grenz, 2014, p. 2). Destabilizing this, the central focus of feminist research is to bring to light the voices of those marginalized from dominant discourses (De Vault & Gross, 2014, p. 14) and work toward transformative change.

Within feminist research there is no ‘single’ feminist methodology and feminist approaches are often referred to as ‘feminist methodologies’ as there are several ways to undertake feminist research. Motherhood scholars have used a variety of methods: some used surveys (Johnston, Mohammed & van der Linden, 2020; Coombe et al., 2019; Craig & Sawrikar, 2009), others used focus groups (Horne & Breitkreuz, 2018), or qualitative interviews (Luhr, 2020; Hochschild, 2012, Paterson et al., 2018; Cummins & Brannon, 2021). While quantitative methods are useful for specific areas of study, such as the gendered comparison of hours spent on domestic labour (Johnston, Mohammed & van der Linden, 2020), they cannot provide a thorough, nuanced account of the experiences and struggles of women involving care, family, and paid work during the pandemic – which is the central focus of this study. Quantitative analysis produces aggregate data, which cannot highlight the voices of women who have often been overlooked, minimized, and marginalized.

Qualitative interviewing has long been linked with feminist research as its central premise focuses on understanding the participants’ lived experiences (De Vault & Gross, 2014; Comack, 1996). As the nature of this study is exploratory with the aims of uncovering how mothers understand and construct their experiences of pandemic parenting, qualitative interviewing is an appropriate methodology. Qualitative interviewing involves the process of “telling about experience,” which asks the participants to tell us stories about their lives and the challenges they have encountered (De Vault & Gross, 2014, p. 5). I was interested in how mothers comprehend this macro-level phenomena and the ways they construct and make meaning of their experiences mothering in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Christensen (2012) maintains that “at its heart, research is storytelling” (cited in McAleese & Kilty, 2019, p. 823). McAleese and Kilty (2019) argue stories within academic research are significant because they can be seen as a microcosm for larger socio-political issues that contribute, constrain, and shape different narratives (McAleese & Kilty, 2019, pp. 827-8). This is reflected in the sociological tradition inspired by C. Wright Mills (1959), who claims that our “‘personal troubles’ are located in particular times and places, and individuals’ narratives about their troubles are works of history as much as they are about individuals, the social spaces they inhabit, and the societies they live in” (Riessman, 2014, p. 4).

Narrative Analysis

Narratives offer ways for people to make sense of their “disordered experience,” by recounting events temporally and spatially, with the use of linguistic devices such as actors and plots, they are concurrently constructing and making sense of themselves in these particular situ-
ations (Riessman, 2014, p. 6). Narratives act as a way of organizing our beliefs towards certain experiences or perspectives that combine both pragmatic and emotional forms of thinking to shape how we feel about something we present in a story (McAleese & Kilty, 2019, p. 824). In-depth qualitative interviews with open-ended questions make space for participants to share stories. Through personal narratives of the mothers’ experiences of the pandemic we can come to understand not only how they view the challenges they faced and the decisions they made to mitigate them but also link their personal biographies to the current historical moment. Narratives can be a site to analyze how individuals respond to change (such as the disruptive nature of the pandemic) by exercising their agency and also how their choices are impacted by the social structures and barriers in which they are situated (De Vault & Gross, 2014, pp. 17-18).

Narrative analysis is an approach based on the notion that an “individual’s experience results from an ongoing interaction with the personal, social and material environment” (Paterson et al., 2018, p. 406). Riessman (2014) used narrative analysis to examine how women’s lives were impacted by certain biographical disruptions such as infertility and divorce. Riessman (2014) draws on Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, arguing that we are always composing an impression of ourselves for others, and in times of difficulty, “social actors stage performances of a desirable self to preserve ‘face’” (Riessman, 2014, p. 9). This framing is important for this study, as mothers may be judged based on expectations within the ‘good/intensive mothering’ discourse and be subjected to and policed by the “gaze of others” (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 6). The way mothers narrate their story may indicate a ‘more acceptable’ version of themselves as feelings of ‘maternal guilt’ are common and widespread (Cummins & Brannon, 2021, p. 213).

**Discourse Analysis**

Feminist critical discourse analysis offers a tool for analyzing how ideological assumptions and discourses are embedded in and shape experiences of motherhood. In this way, gender (within a patriarchal framework) can be viewed as an ideological structure that reinforces and is reinforced by the construction of the ‘good mothering’/’intensive mothering’ discourse. As discussed in the literature on motherhood, these discourses have become hegemonic through the “internalization of gendered norms and acted out routinely in the texts and talk of everyday life” (Lazar, 2007, p. 148). Lazar (2007) describes the relationship between discourse and the social: “discourse constitutes (and is constituted by) social situations, institutions, and structures” (pp. 149-150). By ‘constitution,’ Lazar (2007) argues that acts of meaning-making (either written or spoken) “contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of the social order, and also in the sense of resisting and transforming that order” (p. 150). In this sense, the ‘good mothering’ discourse is reproduced and/or resisted through the social – through the way we talk about mothering. Lazar and Ke (2020) use this method to examine how motherhood is constructed on a popular Chinese reality show in terms of ‘intensive mothering’ and “other-centeredness,” which refers to the “prioritization of caring for children (and family) to the extent of self-sacrificing and self-effacing women’s own needs and wants” (p. 3).

Following these scholars, I used narrative analysis to examine how mothers construct their experiences of pandemic parenting and rely on critical discourse analysis to unpack the ways the
mothers sustain and/or constrain the dominant discourse of ‘good mothering.’ These analytical tools enabled me to understand the complex negotiation of maternal choice and how new challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of mothers’ lives.

**Sampling**

I employed a combined approach of convenience and snowball sampling. I posted a call for volunteers to participate in this study on a community Facebook group created by maternal feminist scholar Andrea O’Reilly called ‘Mothers and COVID-19’ where there are currently over 2000 members (See Appendix A). O’Reilly created the group as a platform for women to share their experiences of pandemic parenting. Some of these stories contributed to O’Reilly and Green’s book *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic* (2021). I also specified in the Facebook post that I encouraged the women to spread the news of the study to their friends, family members, and colleagues (otherwise known as “snowball sampling”). I anticipated that would expand recruitment and reach to mothers who may not have computer access or a Facebook account.

The inclusion/exclusion criteria were: participants must be Canadian females of at least 18-years-of-age who are mothers to at least one child under the age of 12 (in March 2020). I restricted my sample to only Canadian women because the pandemic's political, economic, and social circumstances are different in the United States than in Canada. I choose to restrict mothers with children under the age of 12 because while teenagers would demonstrate their own unique challenges for pandemic parenting, I argued that the scope of this study will not allow a thorough examination of mothering across age groups. Therefore, with a small sample size, data would be richer if restricted to a smaller age group and would allow for more cross-sectional analysis and comparison between subjects’ experiences. I choose 12 as the cut-off age because this is right before they reach the new developmental stage of adolescence, which is before youth typically gain more independence and require less hands-on care. This choice is supported in the literature. A study by Craig and Sawrikar (2009) indicates that the time spent on unpaid labour within the home diminishes for women as their children get older (p. 692). In addition, women reported feeling lower levels of time pressure when their children are high-school-aged (Craig & Sawrikar, 2009, p. 696). This shows studying mothers of school-aged children or younger would offer a sample of more time-stressed women during ordinary occasions and would be more likely to report feeling more overwhelmed during a pandemic such as a crisis. This allowed me to observe the population that is struggling the most with pandemic parenting. I also argued that parenting younger children during the pandemic would be more challenging as they would require more time and hands-on care when schools and daycares are closed and would require more guidance and assistance with homeschooling.

Since it was central to my research question to observe how mothers navigate the intersection of work, family, and care, I also included the following criteria: that they have some form of paid employment leading up to and/or during the start of the pandemic (since March 2020). This was important so I could explore how mothers balance the changes associated with increased carework with the volatility of the workplace (layoffs, work-from-home, etc.). I expected that wor-
king parents would be interesting to analyze during the pandemic since women also deal with added challenges in paid labour such as the gender wage gap, maternal discrimination, lack of family-friendly workplace policies, and lack of affordable childcare spaces. A group of mothers with the above characteristics would allow me to observe whether Hochschild’s (2012) concept of the ‘second shift’ was present, and/or whether it had been magnified with the addition of homeschooling, increase in carework and ‘worrywork’ to what O’Reilly refers to as a ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ shift (2021, pp. 46-7).

Using the above-mentioned sampling method, I set up 4 interviews with the mothers that responded to my Facebook post. After waiting a few weeks without any further responses, I reposted the recruitment poster to the ‘Mothers and COVID-19’ Facebook page so that it would be visible at the top of the page to increase views. However, this did not lead to my expected influx of responses. To address these challenges, the faculty advisor for this project, Dr. Joanne Minaker shared the recruitment poster on her personal Twitter account with a call for volunteers. This resulted in more than expected interest in the study! Following this, I set up interviews with 7 participants. The final sampling size was eleven mothers. Interviews were conducted from September until mid-November, 2021.

I originally planned for initial contact with participants to be solely over e-mail, which was the instructions listed on the recruitment poster. However, some participants initially responded to the post via comment. This is something that I did not anticipate. This also posed a risk for their confidentiality, as these comments were public. However, as soon as I responded to their comments and made contact, I ‘hid’ these comments from the public. This will be discussed further in the ethical considerations section below. I responded to their comments that I had sent them a direct message through Facebook Messenger. After confirming that they met the criteria, I asked for their e-mail address so that I could contact them directly via a more secure method. In this e-mail, I provided the participants with a more in-depth overview of the study and the expectations/requirements for them as a participant (see Appendix B). Once a date was set for the interview, a few days prior, I sent an e-mail outlining the procedures for joining the interview via Zoom and recommendations for the interview itself (ex: find a quiet space, etc.) (See Appendix C). I also attached a consent form for them to virtually sign and send back to me before the interview, with a brief overview of its contents (see Appendix D). Following the interview, I followed up with all participants within a week for a debrief, thanking them for their participation and opened up space for comments or concerns. I provided some mental health resources to the debrief e-mails of all participants so as not to single out one participant over the others or make them feel uncomfortable (See Appendix E). I indicated that the resources were there if they were needed. Finally, I contacted participants after sending an e-giftcard for Starbucks as a thank you for participating in the study (See Appendix F). Compensation was never part of the original plan, and was not indicated to the participants prior to their involvement in the study. Therefore, their participation was not swayed with a gift/monetary compensation. Instead, the gift was provided on behalf of the Department of Sociology at MacEwan, as a gesture of thanks for their time and sharing their stories.

Participants

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Within the (n=11) sample, the age of the participants ranged from 31-58 years old (See Table 1). Nine out of the eleven women were married, two of them indicated a recent separation with their partners prior to the pandemic. Four participants were from Ontario, six from Alberta, and one from elsewhere in Canada. The age of the participants’ children ranged from less than one, to fifteen years old. No participants disclosed having any major financial concerns prior to the pandemic. In addition, they mentioned having steady-paying jobs, which indicates that most shared middle-class socio-economic status. The participants ‘race’ or ethnicity was not part of my predetermined demographic questions; however, some offered that information on their own. One self-identified as a migrant woman from the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Another self-identified as Black. To the best of my knowledge, the remainder of the participants were Caucasian, however none confirmed on their own. In addition, four of the mothers revealed that their children have special needs or disabilities, which proved important to their individual narratives of pandemic parenting. All participants indicated some combination of working from home/remote working throughout the pandemic. Two mothers (Olivia and Penelope) took a leave of absence at the beginning of the pandemic (March 2020-September 2020) to take over full-time childcare. One participant (Amy) was laid off at the beginning of the pandemic, as her field of work was disrupted by the lockdown measures. In addition, two mothers (Olivia and Amy) quit their jobs in order to be primary care-givers for their children.

Table 1: Situating the Mothers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Province of Residence</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Age of Children (at time of interview)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>2 + 5 grandchildren (Parenting 1)</td>
<td>39 &amp; 35 Parenting grandson is 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>30-45</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12-year-old twins &amp; 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shireen</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 &amp; 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>N/A*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 &amp; &lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 &amp; 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12 &amp; 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9 &amp; 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11 &amp; 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Data was collected using qualitative interviews conducted virtually using the videoconferencing platform Zoom. The use of online research methods has become more established as a legitimate data collection method and has become increasingly popular over the last decade (O’Connor et al., 2011, p. 2-3). Archibald et al. (2019) argue that the use of online methods has the potential to be more attractive for both the researchers and the participants than in-person interviews due to certain “features including convenience, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and flexibility” (p. 2). The virtual interview is one of the best ways to recreate the face-to-face interview in real-time. However, the maintenance of rapport is a common concern among researchers. Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017) argue that the sense of distance created by the virtual meeting place and the “lack of shared environment [can] create feelings of disjuncture that reduces feelings of intimacy” (cited in Jenner & Myers, 2019, p. 167).

In contrast, Weller (2017) argues that this sense of distance can actually have the opposite effect of increasing rapport and may actually encourage the participants to disclose more than they would in an in-person interview (cited in Jenner & Myers, 2019, p. 4). In their study Archibald et al. (2019) found that a majority of respondents reported using videoconferencing to be effective in forming rapport with the researcher (especially in comparison to ‘nonvisual’ communication mediums such as telephone interviews) (p. 4). Both the researcher and the participants emphasized the ability to respond to nonverbal cues such as facial expressions as “important to facilitating engagement, building trust, and promoting natural, relaxed conversation” (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 4).

Another advantage of using virtual interview methods is its ability to connect individuals who are geographically dispersed. This is the case for this study as the call for volunteers was open to all Canadians, making online interviews the most conceivable option. I choose Zoom as my preferred videoconferencing platform for its cost-effectiveness, popularity, easy-to-use features, and convenience amongst the research participants (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 4). Zoom also allows for free recording of their sessions, which can be downloaded to the hard drive of the researcher. Given the nature of the pandemic and the added challenges of the lockdown and social distancing measures, it has become necessary to conduct these interviews online to eliminate the risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus for both the researcher and the participants. In fact, the pandemic offered a unique opportunity to expand on the limited available literature on the use of videoconferencing for academic research (Archibald et al., 2019; Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020).
The interviews were conducted one-on-one with the principal researcher. The interviews were on average, one hour in length, ranging from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes. Interviews followed an interview guide (See Appendix G) arranged in a semi-structured format. There were core questions, but the flexible format allowed for the opportunity for the participants to elaborate on their stories and experiences. This is central to a feminist approach that underlines the importance of highlighting women’s voices and giving them agency in the interview process (Grenz, 2014). Additionally, the researcher engaged in the process called ‘active listening,’ which De Vault and Gross (2012) highlight as central to feminist interviewing (p. 14). This requires the researchers to process the words and stories actively and allow it to affect them and take them on “unexpected detours” during the interview process (p. 14). This ensures that the research remains centered on the participants and their experiences. De Vault and Gross (2012) argue that by not participating in active listening, researchers are at risk of reinforcing dominant perspectives (p. 15). Unless they are actively engaging with the stories, they may only hear what they want to hear or what they expect to hear (p. 15). To challenge dominant ways of thinking in society, feminist researchers need to be aware and give space for experiences and perspectives that are unfamiliar, neglected, or misrepresented (p. 15).

The interview process was guided by the interview guide, but being flexible to the direction of the participants’ answers enabled the researcher to ask follow-up questions, to inquire the participants to expand further on certain topics or allow for clarification and at times drifted away from the questions to a more conversational style of interview. In addition, some questions were skipped entirely based on the discretion of the researcher. For example, if the participant had already discussed this topic earlier in the interview, or didn’t seem relevant to their story. Some participants required more ‘probing’/structured questions to discuss topics/stories further, which required more participation in the interview process on behalf of the researcher. This is in contrast to other participants that required very few questions or minimal probing as participants covered most desired topics on their own.

**Data Analysis**

The interview transcriptions were initially estimated to be carried out concurrently with the data collection in Fall 2021, to be completed by December 2021. However, that initial expectation overestimated the feasibility of transcribing in that time frame. The interview transcripts were completed by February 2022. In addition, it was initially planned to complete the transcriptions traditionally using slower speed audio, however a speech-to-text program instead facilitated this process and reduced the transcription time. The interviews were first transcribed using the Microsoft Word tool ‘Dictate.’ Following the first ‘listen’ through the program, the principal researcher listened to the video recordings over again to fix any mistakes that were made by the program and to add in punctuation. During the transcription process, special attention was made to respect the intention and integrity of the women’s stories (Comack, 1996, p. 162). This was accomplished by ensuring that the words of the participants were recorded exactly as said, verbatim, with minimal grammatical intervention (Comack, 1996, p. 162). For example, keeping word repetition, and common filler words such as ‘um’ or ‘hmm’ and placing ellipses for pauses
in speech. In addition, a conscious effort was made to retain the tone and emotion in the women’s speech by, for example, including any visible signs of emotions such as crying or laughing in brackets, (Comack, 1996, p. 162).

Data analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA program. A combined approach of deductive and inductive coding was applied (Delve, n.d.). While I did not begin with a codebook, I did know that I wanted to analyze the data through a feminist lens, specifically looking for discourses of neoliberalism and ‘good mothering.’ Throughout the coding process, I employed critical discourse analysis. Through the participants’ use of language, I analyzed the presence of dominant discourses on mothering, including ‘good mothering’/‘intensive mothering’ and the neoliberal ‘supermom’ discourse (Guney-Frahm, 2020; Hochschild, 2012). Through each level of coding, I coded certain words and sub-themes I found were present in the ‘good mothering’ discourse. For example, I coded for ‘motherhood sacrifice,’ ‘maternal guilt,’ ‘the individualization of care,’ and etc. when I encountered them in the coding process.

However, I did not limit myself to these specific themes or terms within feminist discourse, but also applied inductive coding. Since the nature of this study is exploratory, with the key aim of understanding the experiences of mothering during the pandemic from the women themselves, in their own words, I also made a conscious effort to use codes that emerged from the women’s stories. In the first round of coding, I concentrated on descriptive codes, structural codes, and value codes (Delve, n.d.). I used descriptive codes in order to begin to understand their experiences, and summarize the content of their narratives. I also broke down “big chunks of talk” into smaller codes to organize sub-topics. If I found that what a participant stated to be very salient, I coded their own words using in vivo coding. I used structural codes that pertained to specific interview questions such as: “pandemic parenting question,” or “role as a mother question” to group the answers together (See Appendix G). I used value coding to understand their feelings/emotions or beliefs about their situations. For example, I coded the word “awful” used by one participant 6 times in one interview to describe the pandemic, her situation, and how she felt about it.

During the second round of coding, I recoded the earlier transcripts using some of the codes that had emerged in later transcripts. I continued this process as the codes became more refined, and to the point of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where I found that no new data/codes were emerging. In this second round, I used thematic coding which aided the process of creating ‘categories’ that emerged through prevalent patterns and themes across interviews. I created ‘overarching codes’ and grouped together common codes that fit under its ‘umbrella.’ For instance, I created the code: changes/challenges/disruptions to job, and merged certain codes underneath it such as: ‘career change,’ ‘laid off,’ ‘job responsibilities escalated during the pandemic.’ Therefore, I merged together common codes into categories, creating subcodes within them. For example, under the category ‘mental health & well-being’ I grouped together sub-codes such as: ‘isolation/lonely’; ‘depleted’; ‘brain fog’; ‘burn out’ and etc. In addition, I also further developed codes that were high in frequency, and developed sub-codes through sub-categories. For example, for a code such as ‘stress,’ I created new sub-codes for what the stress pertained to further understand which instances were stressful, such as: ‘financial stress,’ ‘stress from uncertainty.’

Next, I analyzed each participant’s responses individually, looking for their most salient codes that describe their narratives/experiences of pandemic parenting. I also looked at the frequency of codes for each participant, which codes were present the most. At this step, I further
Zolondek investigated the meaning behind these codes, through the combination of codes/their intersections, and why each participant’s narratives contained some codes, while other codes were absent altogether. In these final steps of the data analysis, I employed a combination of narrative analysis and discourse analysis. Therefore, in certain instances, I borrowed from Paterson et al. (2018) method of ‘restorying’ to restructure certain key storylines in a woman’s account to better understand how they viewed a certain challenge they faced or decisions they made. For example, I used this method of restorying for Elizabeth’s narrative in terms of how she negotiates the ‘good mothering’ discourse and the tensions/contradictions in her speech. In certain narratives of the women’s speech that indicated tensions specifically according to agency/structure in their choices. Here, I operationalized the use of structural analysis of the narratives to identify linguistic features such as agents, repetition, social positionality, and verb tense (Delve, n.d.). This served to reveal how these women view their experiences of pandemic parenting, in terms of if they felt like things were happening ‘to them’ versus, actively making choices. An example of this is based on their social positionality in their stories, whether they are the ‘subject’ or the ‘object.’ The analysis was framed within the lens of critical discourse analysis, in terms of how much these women’s choices were constrained by the discourses of the good mother or neoliberal ideals.

Following that, I analyzed each major theme on their own, comparing each woman’s narratives to each other and looking for similar storylines, utilizing Hajer’s concept of ‘discursive affinity’ and ‘shared storyline’ to compare the narratives across participants (Paterson et al., 2018, p. 403). The goal is to identify the presence of commonalities between the women’s accounts of pandemic parenting. I also compared the responses to certain questions across participants, to see where there may be similarities/differences.

Research Findings/Results

Pandemic Parenting: Understanding the Mothers’ Narratives

While each mother has their own unique barriers and circumstances that influence their experience of the pandemic, what do their narratives have in common? The COVID-19 pandemic itself is a social phenomenon as well as a health crisis, with “wave” after wave of changes, leading people to adjust and readjust their lives accordingly to manage this uncertainty. What shared impacts affected mothers in particular? With the emergence of restrictions, lockdown orders, and closures of schools and daycares, parents, especially mothers’ work and home lives were transformed. This section outlines the most prominent disruptions that the pandemic had on the lives of these mothers and their families. In the following section, I will delve into their key decisions and negotiation of choices as they navigated and addressed these challenges. Special attention will be made to how discourses of the neo-liberal ‘good mother’ resurface in the women’s narratives and how these shaped or constrained mothers’ choices.
1. What kinds of disruptions, changes, or challenges have mothers faced during the pandemic?

A. disappearance of resources/support
B. shift in mothering expectations/roles
C. blurred lines of employee/mother boundary

1A: Disappearance of Resources/Support

One of the single most important themes that emerged from the data was support; both the disappearance of support and inadequate supports even before the pandemic. What was interesting and unexpected was how multifaceted support can be, and sometimes only when these support systems are removed do we realize how important they are. At the same time, we can see where there never was support, or an inadequate support in quality (type) or quantity (amount) and at times the inaccessibility of necessary resources. Some types of support the mothers in this study identified were: childcare systems, support through children’s activities, social network, supportive employer/workplace, formal support from government, and support for children with special needs.

Back in March 2020, when the pandemic first hit Canada, schools were temporarily closed. For most mothers in this study who had school-aged children (8/11), their children were expected to switch to online learning for the remainder of the 2020 school year. This was a major rescinding of support because schools not only take on the primary role of teaching children and socialization, but they also take on custodial care (i.e., free childcare support, and with some paying for after-school care services). Without kids’ time being taken up in school, it was shifted onto the home, where parents are now responsible for more of the kids’ time – to fill it, structure it, and supervise it. As Helen put it, “I think that you know, pandemic parenting, definitely put more, put more responsibility shifted onto the parent” in terms of replacing the school’s responsibility to both educate and offer childcare. Many mothers indicated the struggles they faced with online learning, with accessing technology, with the lack of support from teachers/school, and the overall added stress and worry of balancing online learning with their own work.

In addition, formal childcare systems temporarily closed at the beginning of the pandemic causing another burden for parents to maintain. Most childcare centers reopened a few weeks after setting in place COVID-19 protocols. However, for the moms with daycare-aged kids in this study, only 1/3 put their kids back in daycare, while the other two did not. For both Victoria and Eleanor, they explained how they did not feel safe for their kids to return to daycare. Therefore, both these moms with young kids under three took on the responsibility to provide full-time childcare while simultaneously working from home. Two other moms, Olivia and Rachel, could not find childcare/after-school care for their children. The consequences for Olivia were severe, since she was forced to take an unpaid leave of absence from March 2020-September 2020 to provide care for her kids. Further discussion of Olivia’s story will be provided later on. In addition, many of the informal caring arrangements such as family members or close friends that would have provided...
support before the pandemic were upended due to health risks associated with COVID-19 as well as the public health measures like restrictions/lockdowns.

A surprising finding was how the disruption of children’s activities/sports or playdates impacted families, in terms of the absence of childcare, and increased responsibility for children’s time, entertainment and care. In the words of Amy:

I just realized how much we we relied on like not so much babysitting, cause my kids are a little bit older, but just like terms of like hey, why don’t you just go to the park? Your friends are there too so you can play and they could play. . . So, I found like I was responsible like for so much of my kids’ time now. So not only was like this, they weren’t in school so I was doing their schooling. But just like their entire like social lives are now just OK. Let’s go play one on one basketball in the park again with just mom. [laughs] It’s something we would do, but like that wasn’t like their sole source of entertainment was now me. So, that. That was a big change for all of us.

As Amy mentions, she did not realize how much she relied on the support from her kids’ friends, or after-school activities to take up some of their time, and to give her a break. This feeling was echoed by a few other mothers in this study. Many mothers talk about how much of a burden it was trying to think up of activities to entertain her kids so that they could get work done. Sometimes bribing them with screen time, which added another layer of guilt for some mothers who indicated that, pre-pandemic they would never have let their kids use this much technology. Many mothers discussed how there was a lack of social support for kids through their schools, to connect with their peers, and overall activities to stay active or entertained. They wished there were more creative options to keep kids engaged with their school communities and how with this gap in support, families had to step in and provide that for their kids.

A question that I had not previously included in my interview guide, but I decided to add in later was how their kids’ lives were impacted in terms of disruption of activities/sports etc. I was expecting them to say something along the lines of how less activities outside the home would relieve some of the time stress of shuffling from one activity to another. While a few did mention this relief, many of them actually indicated how it increased the pressure. This concern Jane illustrated as follows:

So, that’s what comes to mind is less, going from one activity to the next and more just steady state parenting. Which is exhausting [internet lags for a moment], because you know when you are doing more than one thing to the next. Time is taken up in those transitions that you don't feel that time as much right? So, you know we're going to go to this birthday party for two hours. OK, well, the party is 2 hours, but that's our whole afternoon there, in the end. Whereas it’s like we’re gonna do this craft. Oh, that only took five minutes. OK what’s next?
This notion of “steady state parenting” described by Jane was echoed by many of the other participants. The idea of having ‘no beaks,’ no “breathing room” (Jane) was a result of this withdrawal of childcare support and always having to be ‘on’ parenting.

Another major area that the mothers highlighted as an important means of support was their social networks, or lack thereof. Take the story of Rachel, 42, mother of a 7-year-old son. She was recently separated from her partner before the pandemic and coincidentally moved out on her own the second week of March 2020, when the pandemic first hit. Rachel expressed that she was estranged from her mother, and that her family was not a particularly strong source of support for her. So, she describes the juxtaposition of her relationship ending at the start of the pandemic as “going from one kind of unhappy prison, to one of not my making.” Indicating her sense of loss of control and powerlessness in both situations. She expresses several times through the interview how she is “on her own,” that she has “no support,” “no family” and that “there’s no one, there’s no one checking in on me.” So, as Rachel described as feeling very isolated, lonely, and said “I was so broken. And the pandemic just threw gas on the broken part of me.” She approached her employer, because she needed to take a leave of absence. What she received as a response was another example of a lack of empathy and support that compounded her pandemic experience:

I remember talking to HR and saying like I think I need to take a leave of absence, feel like you need a break, can you take a vacation? And it’s like, and go where? Like I’m still stuck at home, by myself with my kid. Like how is that restful? And I remember her once just saying like, “well do you have any family you can, you can call?” And it was just so – um I know she was just trying to invalidate – or she was trying to be supportive but when you are already in that situation and you’re telling people, like I literally have no one to can come and help me. And as my employer, I need you to like help me find a solution to this, and for them to just say, oh well you know, “is there anyone you can call?” and that’s when I was kind of like okay, I’m really on my fucking own here.

Rachel indicated that the only way she would have been able to take a leave, was to use up all her vacation time:

But for me to pursue a leave of absence was also going to mean canceling all of those [vacations], using them up, and then asking for a leave of absence. Which really felt unfair in a lot of ways. Because it’s like, here I am as a single parent, yes as my employer that isn’t your responsibility, but you’re telling me that I have to sacrifice and lay on the line everything in order to get to the place where I can actually get the mental health support. Right? Like I – and so I really quite frankly resented.

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Well, I was like can’t I can’t use that time now to look after myself because I need it for the possibility of taking care of my son down the road. So, I just had to develop a little bit of a better attitude and that’s not even the right thing. Um I had to develop a better perspective.

People are burnt out and they are exhausted and if you don’t have any real meaningful solutions to support me as a parent as my employer, I can’t give you more. I don’t have it.

This reconstructed narrative using Paterson et al. (2018) method of restorying indicates how this story of lack of support from her employer was a pivotal point in her experience of pandemic parenting. Later on in the interview she indicates that her employer is ranked as one of the top-rated employers in her industry in Canada, and that she is lucky to have such a supportive employer which contradicts her previous narrative. This can indicate several things. Perhaps she is trying to reconstruct her experience to show her employers in a better light using Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, where she is trying to present a better image of her workplace (Riessman, 2014, p. 9)? Or, maybe this indicates how, while her company had some supportive practices in place, there were still gaps where single parents like Rachel fell through. She didn’t have other support networks she could turn to, which left Rachel on her own, as she put it, to “develop a better perspective,” to figure out how to manage her mental health by herself.

We can compare Rachel’s story to that of Elizabeth’s, since they both share a similar narrative of separating with their partners prior to the pandemic. Support is also central to both their stories, but they diverge in one key area. Elizabeth indicates that she had very supportive friends on whom she could rely. Out of all the mothers she mentioned having very supportive and understanding friends the most. Elizabeth indicates how without the support from her friends she would not have managed during the pandemic:

I had even when the pandemic was on and we were still only supposed to be in our own like our own families, that didn’t apply to me. I I just couldn’t function. I literally could not function with [Liam] with that. So, I have like four really great friends of mine. I’m so lucky that I have a good social social network of people have retired teachers that if I needed a break, you know they would just come and get [Liam].

Elizabeth also indicates how lucky she is to have them, and goes so far as to say “without them I would have sunk. I don’t know what I would have done.” This leads me to draw the conclusion of how pivotal a supportive, integrated social support system can be, and how the lack of support can have detrimental impacts on one’s mental health and well-being and their ability to cope under ordinary circumstances, even more so, during a global pandemic. It also indicates how
different Rachel’s story could have been, had she had the appropriate and necessary support. And how, it should not always be up to the individual, here, the single mother, to seek out and find these supports, but they should be readily and widely available, and presented to her.

One central narrative that was strongly shared by three mothers, Elizabeth, Helen and most prominently, Penelope, was the withdrawal of support for children with special needs. Penelope is a 51-year-old mother of two who both have severe disabilities. She indicates that even before the pandemic, the majority of her time was spent advocating for supports on behalf of her children, and simultaneously “end[ing] up dealing with the fallout from not having those supports in place.” This indicates the degree of involvement Penelope must have in her children’s lives. When asked about the most challenging aspects of parenting during the pandemic for her, she replied:

Um, I think probably losing all of the supports, so um. Maybe, I don’t know which would have been the bigger loss, but there’s the natural supports that we had, like the grandparents, and so that that. Um, I mean, there’s the practical aspect of not having them come in and do the things that they were doing, but also the, the connection, um as well. And but we also lost for my son, for the most part, his therapeutic supports so he no longer was really receiving speech therapy or occupational therapy.

Penelope describes before the pandemic how integral her mother and mother-in-law were in both providing childcare and instrumental support through household responsibilities and helping with homework. Having their help, Penelope says, was a “huge burden lifted” off of her. She explained that due to the nature of her children’s disabilities, she could not rely on after-school care nor a babysitter at all. So, when COVID first hit, she lost the support she had from the grandparents because health risks were too high. Because of the involvement that was necessary in her children’s learning, she had to take a paid leave of absence from March to September to become a ‘full-time teacher.’ In addition, her partner works in a hospital, and due to the increased stressors that came with the job that were heightened by the pandemic, Penelope indicated that “he just doesn’t have have anything left when he gets home.” The consequence of this, she revealed, was that she “kind of became like a single mom.”

These natural supports that were rescinded were combined with the removal of government funding for disabilities and the lack of support she received from her children’s schools for online learning. Penelope revealed that this was “very like emotionally trying for me, [laughs]” because what was being provided by the schools was not feasible for her son to do, which led her to: “kind of had to just come up with my own little curriculum for him . . . In order to just basically do some learning, because what was being provided was just completely, absolutely 100% inaccessible for him during that time.”

For Penelope, the most disheartening part was after all her hard work advocating for these supports for her son, only to see them have minimal impacts with their switch to ‘online delivery’. Further, Penelope says:
And for someone like my son like time is just slipping away, right? It’s like the earlier you do the intervention the better and so just kind of like watching, like all you can think of is, we’re like this is kind of a waste of money and time and opportunity and this might be it. Like this might be the last year we may not even have this available when things open up again. So, it was very disheartening to experience that.

For families like Penelope’s, access to these supports is always a struggle, and there is a constant risk that ‘this year will be the last’ and they will disappear soon. The stresses and worries for mothers in situations like Penelope’s further complicate the care dilemma for mothers. How clearly this withdrawal of support impacts these mothers can be exemplified in this quote from Amy:

I think with the pandemic did, it really showed how clear most of us, most of us, essentially my friends, my social group. Were, like in terms of like skiing that edge of like having so, like trying to do so much and then having, once our like our support system was pulled away just watching everything crumble. Like how close to like, we didn’t really have a lot of extra time or a lot of extra energy or a lot of. Because once those supports were gone, like there’s no, there’s nowhere to take that from.

Mothers were already a severely ‘time poor’ group to begin with, now they are more depleted than ever, scraping the bottom of the barrel, trying to muster up enough energy to continue on, without the supports they’ve had in the past to lean on (if any at all). Further, they are expected to ‘thrive’ in a neoliberal environment, specifically, they are encouraged to, as Jessica put it: “be resourceful in managing the worry and the unknown” on their own, without any outside help.

1B. Shift in Mothering Expectations

While research has explored the expectations mothers face, the responsibility for carework and unpaid labour in the home (Hochschild, 2012; Johnston, Mohammed, van der Linden, 2020, p. 2), less attention has been paid to the mental load that mothers carry on a daily basis and the emotional labour of mothering that often goes unnoticed, and unrewarded (Dean et al., 2022; O’Reilly & Green, 2021). According to Dean et al. (2022), mental load consists of both the “cognitive labor of family life – the thinking, planning, scheduling and organizing of family members – and the emotional labor associated with this work” which includes the responsibility
for the feelings and care of family members (p. 13). The data revealed how this mental load has
expanded, and how the expectations of mothers have shifted to encompass more things, more
worries, and more burdens to carry. Specifically, it is likely to infer that many of these new or
expanded expectations that arose with the pandemic emerged to fill the gaps left behind by a
withdrawal in support and resources. The quotations below from three mothers exemplifies this:

And I really feel that this pandemic has just, added another layer of the
expectations that were put on mothers, to do, to do more so in the house. So now
they’re doing their workload. Now they’re doing their home, the home jobs, and
now they’re trying to educate the kids or teach the kids as well. And I really feel
that, women are exhausted. Like mothers, they’re exhausted, and, um, the mental
illness is out there. And I just... I don’t know why, I don’t even know what the
word is that I want to say because it’s just been very frustrating and and I
commend all the mothers out there because boy has it, it’s not been easy. It’s not
easy anyway. I feel it’s never easy, but just this pandemic on top of it has just kind
of put, not the icing on it, not the icing on the cake for it, but it’s it’s, it just tipped
the scales even more. And I think you’re gonna see more and more women with
mental illness. And I think it’s just gonna just filter down to the kids, I honestly
do, so... (Elizabeth)

Yeah, and yeah she just, you never know what you’re doing with kids, right? Like
it doesn’t matter if there’s a pandemic or not. I’m sure every parent worries
constantly about everything because you do. You second guess everything you’re
doing anyway, so you just add more in or just add different things in, I think with
the pandemic. (Victoria)

And then with the pandemic, it’s just there’s so yeah, there’s so much more to
carry. (Jane)

The uncertainty associated with the pandemic brings with it a host of emotions, stress,
anxiety, exhaustion, among much more. Not only are these women feeling all of this themselves,
they are also carrying the burden of their children’s emotional well-being alongside it. Even more
so, it is expected within the expectations of being a ‘good mom’ within the institution of
motherhood, that the mother should be self-sacrificing, putting the needs of their kids above their
own (Ruddick, 1989, p. 39; Horne & Breitkreuz, 2016). An example of this is with Helen, mother
of a 14-year-old and 12-year-old twins:

The very early days, the first week or so I was very much like absorbing and taking
on and holding space for my kids. I have my, my son is autistic, so change is chal-
Challenging for him and uncertainty and not knowing what’s coming next was very challenging.

So that first week was really basically spent on the couch with one kid after another kind of rotating through cuddling, talking to me about what was going on. Just needing someone and by the end of that my husband was still working in the office at that point and by the end of the first week I was exhausted. Like when he got home Friday, I pretty much said you know what you’re not gonna see me all weekend and I like hid in my bedroom because I was so emotionally drained from being on all the time and just like absorbing all of this, this kid trauma and uncertainty.

Helen expresses how much the impact of “absorbing all of this kid trauma and uncertainty” had on her, so much so, she needed to isolate herself and recoup over the weekend. Later she expressed that she learned how much this impacted her: “I realized I had to adjust my self-care in all of this.” She started a routine of getting up before the kids and doing a morning meditation to have that quiet time for herself. The burden of worrying about your children’s mental health is heavy enough, when added in navigating/supporting your children with special needs, that burden gets even more heavy. Especially alongside the withdrawal of therapeutic supports indicated in the earlier section.

Hand in hand with worrying about their children’s mental health was their physical well-being. During a health crisis, this was central to the expansion of worries for most of the mothers. In the words of Eleanor, mother of 3-year-old son:

Um. To me, pandemic parenting is really just. Like risk management like risk assessment gone haywire because you’re not even just like thinking about your own risk like you have to think about, you know, you’re your child. And so, to me, I think that was like the main theme of our parenting decisions was you know what are the what are the risks versus rewards for, for doing this thing?

Every decision that parents make now, they have to, like Eleanor said, weigh the costs versus rewards, and for those who are immunocompromised, which many mothers from the study indicated they were, it makes those decisions even more prudent and even more stressful. When deciding whether to enroll their kids in daycare, or swimming lessons (when they restarted), the central concern is now “what is safe?” This question was something I’m sure was always in the back of the mind of parents, but in a pandemic, the worry and risks have now been heightened and amplified. Especially with the uncertain nature of COVID, and its unpredictable long-term health effects. Navigating an unsafe and uncertain world for your entire family is challenging and a huge burden to bear.

What also added to their mental load was taking on the role of teaching their kids how to
be safe in a pandemic, what I refer to as ‘COVID teachings’. This included things like learning to wear a mask, and wash your hands, and trying to get them to understand why they can’t see their friends. Even more heartbreaking is trying to get them to understand why they can’t see their parent that must isolate due to COVID. Eleanor describes the burden of caring for both her husband who was sick and isolating and trying to explain to her son what has happened:

Yeah, like I remember [Brandon] waking up in the middle of the night and just like crying and crying and crying ‘cause he missed his dad so much and he just like didn’t understand why his dad was suddenly just like not there but he could still talk to him and I think [Brandon] kind of caught on ‘cause he’s like, “Well, that’s like looks like the downstairs bedroom like, where are you daddy?” Um, and like [Brandon] would go play downstairs while I was like doing something upstairs and [Harry] would like look underneath the crack of the door to like watch him for me, which was like just so strange and sad. But like wonderful at the same time. So yeah, it was. It was really stressful.

What went alongside worrying about their children’s mental health, was also worrying about the impact COVID was having on them. Victoria was specifically worried about how these ‘covid-lessons’ will be expressed later on in life:

That’s probably been the biggest stress and so keeping them away from people. As a two-year-old, you also kind of, you hope that it’s not gonna give them a lasting effect [laughs] but like if it just this stays the way it is forever then who knows? ’Cause I remember in spring of 2020 or summer of 2020. I guess it would have been summer, she would be heading like towards the beach or something, she just like “people!” and like you U-turn, go the other way. [laughs] OK, so are you afraid of people or do you just know we stay away from people like how is this going to express be expressed later in life right now?

In addition, most mothers expressed concern about their kids missing out on things during the pandemic. A big one was their worry about them missing out on socializing, especially given how important it is at key developmental ages.

One of the most drastic changes in expectations for moms was now filling the role of ‘teacher.’ Based on the ages of their kids, they would need varying levels of help with their online schooling. For Olivia, she describes how ‘hands-on’ teaching her daughter was:

I kind of had like a burn out there because I’m having to teach my kids, especially
my daughter who was in kindergarten. Like it wasn’t like I would say, OK, yeah you do this and then walk away. Let me know when you’re done. It wasn’t like that. I actually had to sit down and be her teacher.

This was echoed by many other moms with younger kids in school, where they had to sit alongside them and guide them in their online schooling, which was a full-time job in itself, adding a “third shift” to their ever-expanding list of roles/duties as a mother during a pandemic (O’Reilly & Green, 2021, p. 21). Amy describes herself as having to fill the role of ‘TA’ for her children:

And so, it required more and they weren’t like high school kids where like OK like go to your room do and like with with all be like OK it’s cool like you need to to do it and they you know they didn’t so they needed like supervision and they also needed help in terms of I mean in the early days like where is the volume or how do I log into my Meet? and that things like that or just like hey where’s my pen? Like just things like this, just chaos, so they needed to be they needed me to as their TA basically. Uh, I found like when one was maybe in a meeting. I was like I had had them on the same floor because like if they were on opposite floors, they’d leave class so. [laughs] They’re just like, “oh I didn’t do it, ‘cause I couldn’t find my pencil” or something right? So, I found, I spent my day being like TA between the two rooms, basically. So, one was in the Meet, I was helping the other one up work through math or something and they’re in French immersion and I don’t speak French, so that was fun as well. So, it’s challenging for me ‘cause I spent my entire day being a TA.

For Elizabeth, who is an elementary school teacher herself, it could be expected that teaching her son [Liam] through his online schooling would not require much more work, as she is already teaching. However, for Elizabeth, this was identified as a major source of stress. She got to a point where her son, who has special needs, could not sit in front of a screen all day, and demanded too much one-on-one attention that she could not provide. So, there were many days where she emailed their teachers and was like ‘[Liam] can’t today’. As a consequence, Elizabeth indicates:

A parent I felt as a as a as a teacher and a parent, I felt so guilty. ’Cause here I was thinking, I am a dedicated teacher and I’m actually physically teaching my own students. Here I am not able to teach my grandson. He calls me Mommy anyway, right? So, I’m a Mommy to him. I physically couldn’t so I knew that his education was was lagging in some ways.
Elizabeth talks a lot about the guilt she has about feeling like a bad parent, and that her son’s education was going to suffer. She also uses a lot of language that indicates how powerless she was in this situation, to her circumstances. She repeats “I couldn’t”/ “I can’t” / “I had to”:

I had to let [Liam’s] learning slide because I had to physically sit here and teach all day. So, I’m sure that there’s other parents out there, that they’re at their own child’s education slid, because they had to work. It’s their job. It’s their income. It pays the bills, right? So, I had a lot of guilt. I mean, I don’t know how many days I sat here and I was on that computer and I pretended to have this happy face on for my students. And I loved my kids. I really loved my kids, but you know, I’d be looking at [Liam] you know him playing a game or something, and I’m thinking you know what, I should be sitting with you doing your lesson right now. And I can’t.

Alongside her worry about her son Liam and his well-being, his education, she was also carrying the worry about her students and how they were feeling and she felt a strong sense of responsibility for them as well that she indicated was a burden.

Mothering has always been a ‘jack of all trades’ job, to fulfill whatever need their children requires. During a pandemic it has added in more responsibility and more roles to an ever-expanding job: mom is now also their teacher, their therapist, their friend, and their health risk manager. In the next section I will discuss the ways in which mothering often collided with paid labour in the remote working space and the challenges that arose.

1C) Mother, Worker, & the Permeable Boundaries of ‘Motherwork’

Several of the mothers in this study discussed the challenges that remote working brought on. This was central to the narrative of Jane, 34-year-old mother of two, who’s work-related struggles were heightened with her employment in an Albertan university-setting amidst provincial budget cuts and structural reorganizing. Centrally, she speaks of the now very-permeable boundaries of work and home, now that there is nothing breaking up your day or creating that separation:

…the exhaustion of being able to go from meeting to meeting to meeting, with 30 seconds in between, is not OK…

That is, you know, you don’t realize how beneficial that, you know. Walking from one building to the other on campus for a meeting is. You get 5 minutes to be out-
side, or what even in a breezeway [laughs] in a pedway to think about the meeting you just had. And you know, what you’re gonna do with that information or whatever it may be. And now you don’t have that. You’re, click. Disconnect. Click. Into the next one. And it’s, yeah, and then I mean just to tie it into motherhood again. It’s like when you’ve got young kids, they it’s the same thing, right? I need this. I need this. I need this and there’s no breathing room anywhere in the day. And I mean those things are just, yeah, they’re similar. They definitely hurt each other for sure.

Interestingly, Jane compares the state of remote working, the idea of having ‘no breaks’ in her day, having “no breathing room” to the immediacy and all-encompassing, time-consuming job mothering entails. When both of these highly ‘needy’ aspects of mothers’ lives overlap, what are the consequences to these increased expectations alongside, the lack of breaks?

This theme of lack of boundaries was highlighted by several other mothers who found they actually missed their commutes because it was time that was their own, whether they listen to an audiobook, or a podcast, and it acted as a firm boundary between work and home. When you’re at work, you can put your full attention on that, and can focus of your career (mostly) without distractions from you family, or the laundry that needs to get done. Jane explains how the expectations for lunch breaks has even shifted with working from home:

…when I’m in the office and I get my hour for lunch. Great, I have to eat and go for a walk. That’s what I do with my hour. When I’m home and I get an hour. I have to eat, go for a walk, switch the laundry, wipe down the kitchen, throw something in for dinner blah blah. Like the list is just all this stuff that I should be doing with that hour, because I’m home. And then the house is a mess and I’m like the house shouldn’t be a mess, I’m home. But like in my mind I’m home all day. Why is the house a mess? ’Cause I’m working, but your mind doesn’t work that way.

What is interesting is how Jane uses the language “that I should be doing with that hour” which infers that now that she is working from home, the lines have completely blurred in terms of expectations and roles. When she’s home, Jane feels like she should be doing housework, because at home, she is a wife and a mom, who’s roles based within the societal expectations of mothers, extends to housework. Jane also talks about how she is the ‘default parent’ and when she is in another room, door closed, trying to get work done, and her husband or the grandparents are supposed to be looking after her kids, they’ll always come to her first. This is another example of the permeable boundaries of mom and employee in the work from home space. Additionally, it speaks to how the role of mother can never be truly disentangled.
In a similar vein, Jessica, mother of two discusses how these expectations of household responsibilities as a work-from-home mom shifted for her during the pandemic:

We used to share more equally, getting groceries, making meals and when I moved my office home, I think without like there he didn’t do it on purpose. He just assumed I was home, so I would, I would make it, supper. So, he would come home, go to the, we have a gym like a gym in the garage and so he would go workout. I’m still working. And then I would come downstairs and the kitchen is a disaster. And then and no one had planned anything for supper. So, everyone, and then I get mad at everyone. And then everybody is wondering why I’m mad all the time. [laughs] So, if there was some times of resentment where it’s like, come on, you get to work like, Oh my it must be nice that you got to do your workout, I sacrif- I did cardio this morning, but I’m sacrificing weight lifting weights because someone’s gotta make supper. And now we’re still not eating till 8:00 o’clock and I’ve slammed the cupboard doors. And hurt my 12-year-old feelings because. [laughs] And we just do this over and over and over again.

But I suspect and from my friends, they they have had a similar experience. There’s this perception of that your home. It’s like when you were home on maternity leave, and when you’re on maternity leave so you’re tired and you’re looking after a baby. But I still somehow managed to keep the house clean and house have food and prepare food. When you’re working full-time from 7 in the morning till 7 at night, barely having time to pee. Like I can see my bathroom just on the other side, but I would not have time to go there because I’m chairing meetings, Zoom, Zoom, Zoom. There, it isn’t just, I’ll throw a roast in the oven. I’ll peel some potatoes, but that’s not the reality.

Following this increase in housework burdens, many mothers including Jessica were forced to confront their partners, and start to have conversations about mental load, and how their partners needed to help out more. This also speaks to how when mothers are in the home, the expectation are that they will ‘take care of dinner’ or clean the kitchen while simultaneously working their normal hours (or even more hours than normal, as expressed by some mothers) at home. Many actually expressed how their workload, and work responsibilities increased during the pandemic, both because of the nature/field of their jobs, whether it be in long-term care like Jessica, or working for a non-profit providing essential services during the pandemic like Eleanor, but also how easily it was to bring work into the home hours as there isn’t the boundary of work and home anymore.

When asked about what comes to mind when she thinks about ‘work-life balance’, Shireen, mother of two and PhD candidate, responds:
…that just got thrown out the window, I think. Especially during a pandemic, because there’s no balance you like there’s no, it’s all blurred like you don’t know what work is, what life is. And how do you balance it? It’s like you kind of doing everything all at once I I thought it was it was all blurred.

A Shireen said, it has become almost impossible to distinguish home life and work life amid a global pandemic when most mothers are stuck working from home, while also simultaneously parenting their children. The permeability of these two roles, mother and employee is cited by almost all mothers in this study. With the blurred boundaries, comes with them additional challenges of maintaining the presence of ‘respectable employee’ and a degree of professionalism when these two aspects of their lives clash, sometimes comically as recounted through a story told by Victoria, mother of two under the age of 3:

[laughs] So, my favorite one sticking out. Thank goodness both our regional Dean and the campus manager in [name of city] are both mothers. I was on a meeting with the two of them and as I mentioned my almost 2-year-old decided she was potty training. [laughs] So, we had the potty in the living room kind of next to the bathroom. And I see her get up and she’s about to dump the whole thing on the floor. [laughs] And I remember throwing my feet down, screaming, ‘Shit, No!’ [laughs] And jumping like over the end of the coach [laughs] to stop her. And yeah, I may have forgotten to hit mute on that one. [laughs] So, thankfully, I managed to stop her in time, but there was a little bit of a mess to clean up. That was probably the most memorable experience and I’m sure they were just laughing on the other end. Like I said, thankfully they’re both mothers and completely understand, but that was a moment.

While Victoria sites having a very supportive workplace and employers, she does mention her concern about being judged by her coworkers for her children popping up in Zoom meetings, as she explains, some don’t have children and don’t have with it the same degree of understanding that parents might. Because of this, she explains how she often feels the need to try to present a more ‘perfect’ image of herself over Zoom:

…pandemic parenting is just, I guess it’s almost like this feeling being judged and like trying to keep your Instagram perfect life over Zoom, while actually getting parenting done which the impossible. Yeah, everybody has had my kid join a meeting or two. . . [laughs] The good thing about Zoom, as you see like, here up, [motions from the shoulders up] so like below I can be like breastfeeding and yet being on Zoom meetings. [laughs]
What is interesting about Victoria’s comment is how she uses the physical boundaries of her Zoom screen to reinforce the metaphorical boundaries of mother/employee. In this way, she can fulfill both the expectations of the mothering role while breastfeeding her son, while simultaneously maintaining a presentable ‘Instagram perfect life’ over Zoom in her ‘workplace.’

2) Decisions/Choices in the Face of Constraining Circumstances: A Story of Agency vs. Structure

How did mothers navigate the changing circumstances in their jobs, home lives, and caring responsibilities – and in what ways are their choices situated within dominant discourses of the good, neoliberal mother? How did they negotiate the tensions/pressures of upholding these often, very strong, convincing expectations? In addition, what are the stories of agency, choice and empowerment in the narratives of these eleven mothers? This next section speaks to all these questions, and to the extent that the mothers in this study understand their circumstances as happening to them, versus the choices they actively made in response to their situations.

While each of these mothers made decisions that may seem unique to their own circumstances, these ‘choices’ cannot be seen in isolation of the expectations of mothers. Furthermore, ‘the personal is political.’ Their individual troubles speak to the wider social circumstances in which they reside, connecting each of these mothers together based on their experiences of mothering, and the often, similar negotiations of choices/decisions within the ‘good mothering’ discourse.

Pandemic Parenting: Stories of Powerlessness

A central theme for all the mothers in this study was uncertainty, the constantly shifting restrictions, what you can and can’t do, not knowing what will be announced next. This was described by Ulrich Beck, as a “risk society” – where nothing was certain, and it makes it very difficult to navigate a world in which you don’t know what is coming next (cited in Matthewman and Huppatz, 2020, p. 2). For a lot of the women in this study, they expressed feelings of powerlessness, to the forces of the pandemic, to their constraining circumstances, to their lack of control of their situations. The language that these women use can be very indicative of how much control/power they feel in a situation. Take the quote taken from Elizabeth, the language is glaringly obvious of how she feels like she lacked agency, and things were just happening to her. As she puts it, “I’m on that rollercoaster, right?” She is being taken for a ride, where she is strapped in with limited control, unable to ‘do’ much to stop the COVID waves crashing on to her:

Elizabeth: For me, there was no work-life balance. It was a lot, it was, it was very stressful. It was very, um, ah... what’s the word? Unsure. It was
um, I don’t wanna say crazy ‘cause I don’t like that word, but it was just so, I really, the words are just really hard coming out because it’s just like, I really wanted to just say shitshow, that’s because I don’t know that’s not, but but really –

Christine: It’s what you’re feeling. That’s fine.

Elizabeth: – It didn’t, it didn’t. It didn’t matter what you felt or what you said. You were, you had no control. I felt like I had no control. Um, so there was no balance. There was no there was, so everything was so unsure. We didn’t know what was going to be the next step. You didn’t know if you were, you know, what was going to be the next thing that was going to be announced. You didn’t know what what, what restrictions.

A common thread among a couple of these participants is around the meaning of ‘resilience’. Some, such as Rachel takes the stance that: “I’m saying resilient and I think brave for doing my best to make the decisions I need to and um getting what I need done for my son.” Rachel see’s resilience as almost a ‘badge of honour’ for doing her best, and sees it in an overall positive light, claiming a sense of agency within her constraints. Others, like Helen and Shireen, had a different perspective. Helen sees less control within resilience, more of the result of navigating constraining circumstances:

I guess maybe resilience lines up more, you know when I had twins, people were like ‘Oh my goodness how do you do it? Three kids under three?’ and I’m like well you have to do it like you can’t send one back. So, I guess you know there’s that sense of resilience to like we’re in this I can’t control it I can’t change it. I just have to figure out how to work through it. So yeah, definitely that sense of OK, what am I gonna do to make make this work? You know these are the resources and the constraints right now, what’s the best we can kind of do in this situation? So, I think that was definitely an approach to the situation.

Shireen on the other hand, rejects the notion of ‘resilience’ altogether, when describing her experience of mothering during the pandemic mostly on her own, as her partner was away for long periods of time for work:

Shireen: This argument too right, I have no choice right, it’s not ‘cause I’m
resilient or, I can do this because I have no choice. I have to do this. Who else is gonna do it right if I don’t do it? So you kinda like force yourself to do all these things, not knowing you were capable of doing, right?

Christine: For sure. Yeah.

Shireen: You become naturally resilient.

Christine: Naturally resilient, yeah. What others see as resilient is like, necessary.

Shireen: It’s like, I have no choice that you have to be. [laughs]

Further on, Shireen connects this idea of ‘resilience’ with the neoliberal ideal of the ‘supermom’, claiming they are intertwined:

It’s not a supermom. We have no choice. We have to do this. Who else’s gonna do it? No one’s gonna do it. Otherwise, no one’s gonna, yeah. So, it’s basically a no choice kind of thing.

I think what Shireen is getting at, is that when we call others resilient, it may mistakenly disregard their lack of agency in the matter and rewards them for painstakingly trying to “do it all” while also disregarding the social constraints at play. Resilience is a neo-liberal ideal that rewards those that do not ask for help, that successfully manage to ‘do it on their own.’ This is in line with Hochschild (2012), who argues that the ‘supermom discourse’ emphasizes personal characteristics, meanwhile it discounts that “she has been forced to adapt to an overly demanding schedule” (p. 24). She argues that this obscures the problem at play, and when she fails, it’s because of her own lack of strength, not because the system is broken, and demands too much from her (Hochschild, 2012, p. 25).

Here, we can connect this sense of powerlessness to Rich (1976) and O’Reilly’s (2004) term ‘powerless responsibility’ – in which mothers have the power to mother but yet have no control over the circumstances in which they mother (external forces such as their socio-cultural/political circumstances, and social expectations of motherhood). In the same way, mothers are placed in this sense of loss of agency within the context of a pandemic that in many ways, strips them of their control, their power and forces them to make decisions to navigate these constraining circumstances.
At the start of the pandemic, Olivia took an unpaid leave of absence from her job in payroll to take on the central role of teacher and caregiver for her two children. A job she described as being very exhausting, yet also rewarding as she could see how her daughter learns. Olivia indicated she wanted to go back to work in the summer, however, she could not find childcare, therefore she was forced to extend her leave of absence till fall 2020. At this point she asked her employer if she could work from home in case her kids were sent home to isolate:

They told me that I wasn’t allowed to work from home. [clears throat] So, she couldn’t guarantee me an answer. And then she said that she would answer me after her vacation, but I said no. I’ve got, I finally got childcare lined up. I need to know like I I need to have an answer today because I will lose my spot and she didn’t get back to me in time. And so, right then and there I had to make a decision and that was either walk away from my job or be there for my kids and I choose my kids. So, it was a very painful decision to have to make. ‘Cause like I said it was a very good paying job. It was a place I wanted to, I finally found a job that wasn’t temporary and my plan was to retire with them move up the ladder kind of thing.

The language Olivia uses “I had to make a decision” indicates her lack of agency and control in this situation. Olivia was then forced to take a temporary position that was a significant pay cut from what she was previously earning. She indicated that the fallout from losing her job was substantial. First of all, she indicated that they were struggling to make ends meet financially and had to significantly reduce their monthly expenses. Secondly, she expressed that she had a burnout at the beginning of the pandemic when she was on her leave of absence because she was “doing it all” in terms of housework, teaching her kids, but also that she indicates “my job was my escape. My job let me be an adult. My job let me talk to other adults with no other kids around. Um. It was basically my escape from my real life, so to speak?” Olivia further indicates the anger and resentment she has for being forced to make the choice of her kids or her career:

Olivia: I was actually thinking about it and I’m like you know what? Whoa, like I’m still angry. I’m still angry that I am the one that was forced to make a choice between my family and my job. And a job that I loved. A job that paid me well, the job that gave him great benefits and it had a lot of perks and and so I’m quite angry
at the boss. Um, that made me that put me in that position. Instead of working with me. Yes, I would thankful she allowed me to take a leave of absence um an unpaid leave of absence. Um, but she’s like no. Nobody is allowed to work from home, only to find out that they’re still working from home. They all went back actually, they were all sent home. Or when the government said to, they were all sent home and then they all went back this Sept- not until this September. I think it was the 7th or 8th. They all got sent back home on the 10th of September. They’re still working from home. And they are vaccinated, but they’re still working from home. That makes me really angry. Because I feel like I’m lose, I’m the one that lost out. My family is the one that lost out and here we are struggling just to make ends meet.

Christine: It’s not fair that they were put in that position to have to choose. It’s not fair.

Olivia: It is definitely not fair and even even when parents were having to make the decision this September again, having to make that decision. I felt like I I’m very blessed right now to be able to work from home, but it’s, you know, I felt I felt so bad for parents that were put in that position again. ‘Cause I remembered how I felt and how you know, just looked at my husband like how we gonna do this like I don’t know how we’re gonna do it, but I’m sure it will all work out. So. And it did. [laughs]

Olivia does indicate that her new remote job was a “blessing in disguise that it has kept my mental health in check” by being so flexible, and allowed her to have alone time for herself. However, even over a year after what transpired with her boss, she still expresses deep resentment and anger towards her boss for putting her in that position. She expresses loss over potential career growth, over friendships she’s made with her coworkers, and self-fulfillment in a job she loved. All of this, she was forced to sacrifice for her kids. Highlighting a central theme/expectation within ‘intensive mothering:’ motherhood sacrifice (Hays, cited in O’Reilly, 2004). The situation that Olivia was put in; many mothers were forced to do so, even before the pandemic. The choice of your family or your career has been a very strong dichotomy within the good mothering discourse (Coombe et al., 2019). We can analyze Olivia’s choice, within these constraining circumstances, made by her boss but also within a wider lens of social expectations of a good mother and a good employee (which are often at odds with each other). It is clear that Olivia feels like her ‘choice’ was made for her, like she was removed of her agency in this constraining circumstance. The sac-
rifice she had to make in terms of her career remains to be seen whether they will have major ramifications in the future, in terms of the motherhood penalty, or if she will be better off with her job that benefitted her mental health?

Amy, had to make a similar choice during the pandemic to quit her job when her son was struggling with his mental health. However, the way these two mothers frame their choice is slightly different. While Olivia was very resentful of the decision she was forced to make, Amy expressed more agency in her choice:

So, we were doing therapy and I was like this is too much. I’m trying to like ‘cause he was learning from home. Plus, we’re doing therapy, plus for both both my husband I were trying to work full-time, plus we had, like just it was too much and so I made a decision like this is, something’s gotta give and it ended up being my work so. Um, which ended up being like like a good decision. It was a stressful one. ‘Cause I’m like, well financially, this is like the worst decision of my life, but in every other category it made so much more sense. So that was definitely a turning point. Things got. Um, things did get better and I I was fortunate enough that things. I was rehired by the city in June so I got lucky as well so.

Amy weighs the costs versus rewards of her decision, and while she expressed it was stressful to make, and was a burden financially, she says that it was a good decision. We can see the agency in her choice by the language employs: she says “I made a decision” not, “I had to make a decision” (language that Olivia used) reaffirming the control she had in this decision. Amy places herself as the active subject in her situation. Moreover, she indicated earlier in the interview that this position she had prior to quitting, was not a “good fit” for her anyways, which most likely aided her in the decision to quit. In addition, she indicates that she found another job in the Summer, one that was more closely aligned with her career goals. So, for Amy, she very felt like she was actively making this choice, versus Olivia who felt like these things were happening to her, decisions were made for her.

Another example within this career vs. mother dichotomy is the story of Jessica, is in a leadership role in long-term care. Her responsibilities escalated substantially at the beginning of the pandemic following a promotion. Central to her story were the choices she is constantly faced with deciding between her kids/family and her career, which she argues is heightened by her position in senior leadership. Jessica describes:

…one of the biggest challenges I think for me through the pandemic and as and was it the pandemic? Or was it the pandemic and a promotion into senior leadership? Or maybe both? Is how to be successful and feel satisfied and successful with the job I’m doing, as well as a leader and as an employee and not sacrificing the job I’m doing and my experience as a mom and. And I think that’s
something I think being aware of that, question even or that dynamic is half the battle. I think that’s a good start. It’s then its noticing when I might be sacrificing.

It is interesting how Jessica tries to understand what makes these decisions more difficult, whether it the pandemic, her promotion, or perhaps both? The dichotomy she is describing is basically a lose-lose scenario, where if she chooses one, (career or family) she is at the same time, making sacrifices in the other area and vice versa. Jessica precedes with an example scenario where she is faced with this challenging decision, and explains how she navigates it, how she weighs the pros and cons and comes to her final conclusion/decision:

So, my older daughter has a specialist appointment scheduled this Wednesday and another specialist appointment scheduled next Wednesday, and they’re not like she’s not critically ill or anything, but they’re, they’re important in her overall well-being. And I have an opportunity. I had an opportunity to do to be part of a fairly impressive speaking engagement. And so, I really struggled with. [laughs] I am not sure what to do. So, my husband wasn’t, he declared he wasn’t able to take the time off to take her to the appointment. And so, I felt I had it. I had to try to navigate, what’s more important? But they’re both important, I don’t know that one is less or more important than the other. And so, I was resourceful and managed to get the speaking engagement to another date so that I could do both things. But I did find it stressful and caused me anxiety to have to try to make that choice. And then It made me feel like if I was going to choose to do this work engagement that that makes me a bad mom. Um, because this work thing, in my mind was more important than my kids overall well-being. And that’s not true. That’s, that’s the inside, impostor, the inside voice, [laughs] setting us up for failure. So, I guess my lesson, the lesson in that was just trying to notice that that was happening internally, and to really think through, and talk through and use a little bit of cognitive behavioral therapy technique in. What is the right thing to do? Am I really minimizing? Is there going to be more speaking engagements? Of course there’s gonna be more speaking engagements and what kind of value or am I going to get? It’s really less about the appointment than it is the drive city appointment with just her and I in the car. Being there for her when she’s going to be a little bit nervous having this procedure, test, then the drive back. Probably stopping and getting whatever she wants, Starbucks or coffee, or you know, like Tim Hortons or something. That actually is more valuable than the speaking engagement. But it’s why I know this is a really long answer, Christine, but that there was real like I was really worried about that and I know people have other major things to worry about in our in the grand scheme of things. That’s a small thing, but I think that’s a challenge for women in senior leadership. Is this
feeling that you have to choose one or the other. You get to be a senior leader and an executive, and you sacrifice being a good mom. Or you be a good mom and you sacrifice your opportunities as a senior leader. And I am hoping that we can do both of those things. [laughs lightly]

Her language “I had to try to navigate” – places her as the object, in which the pressures /expectations are forced upon her. “I was resourceful and managed to get the speaking engagement to another date” – here, she is in an active position, using resourcefulness (a neo-liberal ideal) to be creative, and to manage to do both things – she didn’t have to make a choice one or the other in the end.

Jessica really breaks down this decision she has to make, with “which is more important?” “What value does it bring?” Jessica speaks of her ‘imposter inside voice’ that tells her she’s a bad mom for choosing her career, and that it means that her career is more important than her family. This imposter voice represents the very strong social and cultural beliefs that mothers face within the ‘good mothering discourse’ of what it means to be a good mom. That moms should always put their kids ahead of their career (Hays, cited in O’Reilly, 2004, p. 5). At the same time, neoliberalism places itself, equally constraining expectations of what a good employee looks like, one that goes to great lengths to be successful, no matter the costs.

Jessica also minimizes her worry and this position she was placed in as ‘less important’ than other people’s worries. This indicates how society has minimized these choices mothers must make on a daily basis. It speaks to wider questions of – why are women forced to make these decisions? And why does our society see them as ‘natural’? Why are male partners not faced with similar decisions? They are important, they may not be ‘life or death’ choices, but they are critical because these choices can be seen as mechanisms/agents for social change, in resisting dominant discourses. In addition, these choices place an undue amount of stress, anxiety, worry on these women – forcing them to make sacrifices to attain an unattainable standard of motherhood.

Highlighted within Helen’s narrative is a key decision and turning point of her experience of mothering during the pandemic. As a mother of three pre-teen aged kids, who have various learning disabilities, and as described by Helen, have very different online learning strategies from their respective schools, facilitating their schooling was a lot to manage, a lot to ‘administer’ and a lot of responsibility. In September when schools were supposed to be resuming regular classes, her family made the decision not to go back in person. However, Helen says that with her husband going back to the office, “that the responsibility would be put on me and I said, you know what? I still have a job.” So, in this moment, Helen decides not to sacrifice her own career, and her mental-health, that they would find an alternative option. Helen came together with three other families in the neighborhood, rented out a church basement and hired someone to facilitate their online learning. Helen points to this as a key decision for a few reasons: “So, they and I both really like shifting that responsibility to someone else. So, I did not have to also be the teacher and the mom at the same time.” So, it allowed her to maintain that separation of roles that was described as being very challenging by several moms to maintain as described in the section above “permeable boundaries.” Helen also accepts that she could not do it all on her own: “It wouldn’t have been
possible if I was doing that and my work. You know, I would not have managed that.” Helen admits that she needed help. In this moment she is resisting the neoliberal idea that dictates that we should be able to manage it all on our own, and that we are weak for asking for help. She does not, anywhere in the interview mention guilt or judgment from not being able to do it all.

Additionally, Helen claims how beneficial this choice was for her children’s education: “I think it was good for the kids in terms of their mental health and stability and consistency.” Although, the one downfall/fallout that Helen indicates from this decision is the financial burden. So, while she was successful in displacing this burden/responsibility of childcare/education onto someone else, it in effect, transferred it into a financial responsibility. It was a financial burden that she claims her family was able to withstand, however, I argue that it is not a choice that all families could have been able to make, given their variable incomes and socio-economic status. This means that Helen was in a privileged position financially which allowed to make this choice. This leaves me with the question, had they been worse off financially, what would have been the choice they made then? Would she have been forced to sacrifice her goals/career to manage the responsibility of teaching her kids?

Stories of Choice and Resistance: Negotiating the ‘Good Mother’ Discourse

In all the choices mothers make on a daily basis, they are constantly navigating the social expectations of how to be a ‘good mother.’ There are embedded expectations within the institution of motherhood, defined by Hays as ‘intensive mothering’ – that a mother should devote all her time and energy to her kids and that a mother should be self-sacrificing of her own needs for those of their children (cited in O’Reilly, 2004, p. 5). Within the neoliberal discourse, there is a similar, yet slightly altered version of the good mother – described as the ‘supermom discourse’ (Hochschild, 2012, p. 23). Embedded within this discourse is that mothers should both be a productive employee that capitalism requires, while also being a perfect mom. This ideal expects mothers to “do it all,” have both a family and a career, an ideal that is also unattainable and as Slaughter (2012) argues, a myth in her article “Why Women still can’t have it all.” I will exemplify how these mothers navigate the ‘good mothering’ ideal through the theme of ‘letting it slide’ that emerged from the data. Within this theme, we can observe how, because of the constraints of the pandemic, they had to let some things slide. Why they let things slide can seek to illustrate whether they see this as a moment of liberation, or a moment of guilt (or perhaps a combination of them both).

I will return again to the story of Elizabeth, as her story is centered along ‘letting things slide’ and how it coincides with her negotiation of the ‘good mother’. In her interview, Elizabeth displays a lot of contradictions when speaking of the good mother discourse. She says that she used to prescribe to them, when she mothered ‘the first time’ with her adult children, but now, she has let those ideals fall away. However, I found that Elizabeth’s narrative told a story that was central around ‘maternal guilt’. Which usually, in literature is displayed when a mother feels guilty for not living up to the standards of the good mother (Cummins & Brannon, 2021, p. 213; Constantinou, Veral & Buckby, 2021). In fact, there were more incidences of maternal guilt within
Elizabeth’s story than any other participant in this study. Below is an excerpt from the interview (restoryed to highlight her good mothering narrative) (Paterson et al., 2018), after I had asked her what comes to mind when she thinks of the term ‘good mother.’ She reveals that she knows Andrea O’Reilly personally (who’s work centers around the good mother), so while being familiar with the term this was her response:

Elizabeth: …and what a good mother is and I can tell you that I felt that that I was an awful mother. Ah, I felt I wasn’t. I wasn’t the mother that I should have been for my son when they had, you know, they were going through the pregnancy and the birth. I don’t feel that I was a good mother to [Liam] because I was stressed out all the time. We were stressed out all the time. Um. Whether, we were really lucky because, you know, we didn’t have to deal with finances. But, um, there were so many other aspects of what good mothering was, and no, I lost my patience many times when I shouldn’t have lost my patience. I was exhausted. I was tired. I was mentally broke–, mentally drained. Uh, and, you know, the patience level went down. My expectations went down, which is completely against what my own philosophy is. I always, you know, as a teacher and practitioner, I’ve always thought you know you want the kids to rise up. You want to set those standards that you know they’re attainable. You don’t want to just go down here, you want them to feel good when they’ve reached that you know, that goal or whatever. And I didn’t do that with [Liam] because I I didn’t have the mental capacity or the physical capacity to follow through with it. Because I was just so tired. You know? So, I interesting that good mothering term now. No, I wasn’t. No, I don’t. I don’t think I was. I don’t think most of us were, but I still are feel that were.

Christine: Or what or what society thinks is

Elizabeth: Ohhh

Christine: yeah– that society.

Elizabeth: Absolutely what what, yeah, what society thinks of a good mother. Yeah, that’s a really interesting topic because you know, I I struggled with that many, many years ago when I was in university myself. What does it look like to be a good wife? or a good mother? Or good daughter? you know? And I and I was truly, I was the poster child of thinking about that all the time. I have to do this because people might think I’m not a good mother. I have to do this because people might think I’m not a good wife.

Christine: Yeah.
Elizabeth: I play – I played that game. I really did play that game when I was in my 30s and I don’t play that game anymore because, you know, at my age I have enough wisdom that I really don’t care. But when you’re a young mother and and you know, newly married and whatever, I think a lot of women struggle with that really, really struggle with what that outside picture, that lens looking in what you should look like. And ah and that that that really crippled me, which really crippled me going through that whole good mother stage. Yeah yeah, that really did. But yeah.

What is very interesting, is how in her earlier response, she says that she feels like an awful mother for losing her patience with Liam, for not being there for her son and daughter-in-law through their pregnancy, however, right afterwards she says that she “doesn’t play that game anymore” of trying to live up to those mothering expectations, explicitly contradicting herself. When asked about any lessons learned from mothering, Elizabeth gives a very detailed response from what she has learned from her ‘first’ time mothering, how she prescribed to the ideals of the good mother:

Elizabeth: Well, it’s interesting when you say that because this good mothering thing, you know, uh, I didn’t, I didn’t, I didn’t sit back and smell the roses when I was a mother, a young mother. I really was in a position of always constantly judging myself about what does a good wife look like. What does a good mother look like? My kids can’t go to school with dirty clothes on. My kids have to have, like you know what I mean. And I put, I put that pressure on myself. Because I thought that that’s what society, says what a good mother is. Do you know what I mean?

Christine: Yeah.

Elizabeth: It’s really hard so I mean, mothering is rewarding and it’s loving, right? But it’s also, I put a lot of pressure on myself, as a mother. I wish sometimes I could go back and do it again. Because, I mean. . . I had this. . . I had this preconception in my head and I don’t know where it came from, but I had this preconception in my head, what I had to do. Even if even if I didn’t want to do it, or even if I really didn’t care about it. As a young mother, I would, like whatever I thought society wanted as a mother or viewed as a mother or as a good mother, I would put that expectation on myself. And even though that caused me a lot of undue stress, I did it because I thought that that was, that I would be, that that’s what I was doing to be a good mom. I was a good mum because I had my kids in sports. I was a good mom because even though I was dead dog tired, I
didn’t say no to them when they wanted to do this. I was a dead dog, tired mother because, you know, I’d stay up till midnight cleaning my house and just in case somebody popped over, my house had to be clean, right? So, it was what I had put the stress on myself as a good mother because what I thought society would look at me. Whether it was teachers or peers, or friends or family. I put that stress on myself. I’m happy that I’m a mom. I love my kids. I don’t see my daughter at all, but I still love her. I love my grandkids, you know, um… But I really wish, if I, if you said to me “You can still have your children and you can still have your grandkids. Hey, could you flip it back in time? Would you go back?” and I would say absolutely yes because I was so stressed out as a young mum. Ah. and I didn’t ask for support when I probably needed it as a young mom because that would have been viewed as weak, right? So, if you need to support or you can’t handle this or you can’t juggle everything like we do, then you’re a weak mom. And and I wasn’t gonna be a weak mom. So, I just did it, right? So, I had a full-time job. I was going to university. I had two children. They were in elite sports. I had a big home. I had it all. So, somebody looking in at me would think. “Wow,” you know, “look at that family” but inside I was like dying, right? And going to counseling for it because I was thinking I can’t do this. I don’t know I I, you know, what am I doing wrong? Because I- I here I am trying to do everything right that society is telling me I’m supposed to be as a good mom, right? And, I’m not happy, right? I’m exhausted. I tired, right? And I don’t want to do this anymore. So yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth’s narrative is centered around these social expectations of the ‘good mother,’ navigating them, trying to decide what exactly ‘matters the most’ to her, all the while, letting go of some expectations, but holding onto others. When she was a mother back in 30’s she speaks of how much these mothering expectations crippled her, and guided all her decisions. We can observe a lot of contradictions in her narrative, but if we look closely, we can distinguish why these contradictions exist. For example, Elizabeth speaks a lot of the maternal guilt, and at the end in the interview, she says that her mothering experience during the pandemic was centered around ‘guilt.’ However, upon closer inspection, the things that she ‘let slide’ did not all elicit guilt in the same way. We can divide her themes of ‘letting it slide’ into two sub-categories:

1) Intersections of ‘let it slide’ & ‘maternal guilt’

2) Intersections of ‘let it slide’ & ‘resisting the good mother’
1) When ‘letting it slide’ intersects with ‘maternal guilt’. These are the times when she talks about feeling like an “awful mom”, that she wasn’t a “good mom” – therefore failing to conform to standards of the ‘good mother’. The examples of these include: when she discusses losing her patience with her Liam, being stressed out, not being there for her son and daughter-in-law when they had their baby, and most importantly, where she feels like she had the most guilt, was around letting Liam’s education slide. We can see how much this weighs on Elizabeth, and how much she felt like she had no control in this situation with the language she uses:

I had to let [Liam’s] learning slide because I had to physically sit here and teach all day. So, I’m sure that there’s other parents out there, that they had to let their own child’s education slid, because they had to work. It’s their job. It’s their income. It pays the bills, right? So I had a lot of guilt.

Elizabeth repeatedly says “I had to let [Liam’s] learning slide,” representing her lack of agency within her constraining circumstances. Elizabeth was limited in her choices because of her responsibilities as a teacher, which were heightened and amplified in the home working space. When trying to uphold both the ideals of ‘good mother’ and ‘good employee,’ she could not balance both the same way, and felt like in these moments, she had chosen ‘good employee’ over a good mother. Elizabeth repeatedly explains how exhausted, depleted and mentally drained she is trying to maintain this level of stress, and something had to give. The outcome of this was her son’s education which she holds a lot of guilt because of it. We can observe that she did not want to let it slide, but given the constraining circumstances that the pandemic had created, in combination with the neoliberal good mother discourse, she felt like she had no choice. As explained in the earlier section powerlessness, Elizabeth repeatedly speaks of how she “has no control,” representing her limited agency.

2) However, the theme ‘letting it slide’ also coincided a lot with the theme ‘resisting the good mother.’ This is where we can see Elizabeth push back against the ideals of the good mother and observe her resistance, in slight things that she let slide. Following her discussion about how much the good mothering discourse crippled her decisions of parenting the first round when she was in her 30’s I asked if she felt like parenting her grandson now, if she has let go of some of these expectations the second time around, to which she responded:

Elizabeth: Absolutely. You know, absolutely. You know, I, you know, this is one stupid story, but it was like, you know, if my kids, when they were younger when I was folding the laundry and I had it all folded in the laundry basket, right? And they kind of touched the laundry basket started throwing, you
know, doing stuff around. I would have gone nuts, right? ‘cause I just got my laundry and I had it. “No, you’re ruining. Go away.” When [Liam] was like 2 ½ I had folded all the laundry it was in the basket. You know, he sat on the floor and he just pulled it all out and I’m like yeah, OK, whatever, I can refold it after. So, that whole philosophy, um, I think I have a lot more wisdom now and and I think I I, um... what’s the word I wanna say? I I just really don’t care. I know I’m a good person, I know I’m a good mom, I know I’m a good teacher because I care, and you know, it comes from the heart, right? But I don’t care if somebody comes. I still have not packed. I moved in April 15th. I still have not packed like I’m looking in the corner of my living room right now, there’s three boxes that it’s been driving me nuts for about two months because I haven’t unpacked them. I don’t care if people come into my house and see those three unpacked boxes. If I was in my 30 somethings with my kids, I mean I would have, you know it would, it would I would have stayed up till three in the morning to unpack those boxes. So, things change as you get older. Your wisdom, you’re your, your, the things that really matter to you, change. Your your expectations change, the things that really matter. Sometimes it means, some things still stay the same, but generally speaking like I’m not out to prove to anybody anymore who I am. I am me, right? And I and and I and I don’t prove it. I don’t need to do that proving anymore. It’s OK for my house to be dirty. You know, it’s OK that [Liam] has, if he wants Kraft dinner and hot dogs for dinner. I mean my kids growing up, oh my God, we didn’t even have Kraft dinner in the house, but you know what I mean? Like the all those things like it, it just doesn’t matter anymore ‘cause they’re not important. They’re not what’s really important for the soul. And certainly for this pandemic thing. It’s just it’s not worth it.

Christine: Yeah, like you said before you like, pick your battles, like it’s not worth fighting, right? Not stressing over.

Elizabeth: We’ve done enough stress and enough fighting over the year and a half. Um, it’s time that we just try to just be happy and just be quiet and just enjoy, really. Happy and quiet. And I don’t even worry about [Liam’s] marks at school or anything like you know, it will be what it will be for this year. And in the grand scheme of things he just want I just want him to know that he’s loved and I’m there for him and we will get through this. …But, for the most part it’s it’s really good, and so we just, you know, we just have to ride this wave, right? Through this wave.

In this story Elizabeth tells about the laundry, we can see how she has let go of some of
those expectations of ‘perfection’ that goes along with the ‘good mothering’ discourse. This is a story from before the pandemic started, so we cannot deduce that this resistance of the good mother was only indicative of the pressures that the pandemic brought on, but it might have aided in some ways. In this quote above, Elizabeth uses a lot of active language, in which she is taking control of her decisions, and her situation, such as: “I don’t need to do that proving anymore” that she is a good mom, “it’s OK for my house to be dirty.” She follows up to say that, especially in a pandemic, she can see what is truly important, and what expectations that we can let go of are “not worth it.” Earlier in the interview, she indicates that she has ‘let some things slide’ as a way of alleviating her stressors that have been brought on by the pandemic: “Um, some of my other other things I’m trying to alleviate is. Like really picking my battles like OK, you wanted to wear shorts the other day. Or you know, like, OK, well, you know, kind of natural consequences if you get cold then I guess you won’t wear your shorts tomorrow, right like?”

But you can definitely see that she is still in the process of negotiating these expectations and pressures, because she is trying to convince herself that “I know I am a good mom and a good teacher because I care” / “I don’t even worry about Liam’s marks in school or anything like you know.” This seems like an attempt to renegotiate the negative feelings of guilt she has to transform them in a better light, but she is also reaffirming what she knows to be true is that she is a good mom, and she is actively trying to resist these feelings of failure/self-judgment about Liam’s education. She is trying to reframe them in her mind.

There is a similar trend with other mothers that use the theme of ‘letting it slide’ as a means of alleviating stressors, and in the process actively resisting the good mother, as they let expectations of perfection slide. Whether the mothers see letting it slide as a positive thing or a bad thing, is with the language they use, whether they are using an active voice, or a passive voice. For example, letting their kids watch more TV was sometimes a site for change, and sometimes a site for guilt. Victoria talks about the increase in screen time using an active voice: “When I had my first, I definitely did not think that I would ever give her this much screen time. [laughs] But I think right away I kind adopted this whole Well, we’re gonna do what we’re gonna do to actually get what we need to done. [laughs]” Here, we can see she actively chooses to ‘let the expectations slide’ of having lower screen times, just to get through the day. In this scenario, it was trying to keep her kids busy so that she could get work done.

We can compare this with Penelope’s reaction to letting her kids have more screen time. She says that prior to COVID, she didn’t let her kids have any access to the internet, but since her kids had no contact with their friends, online communication was the only way for them to keep in touch. Penelope indicates: “that was something that we had to kind of compromise on.” The use of ‘had to compromise’ indicates her reluctance, and minimal agency in this decision. Penelope talks about this reluctance later on that because of her daughter's ADHD profile, weaning her off of online will be more challenging.

Another thread of ‘letting things slide’ involved letting their kids eat snacks that were unhealthier, as indicated by Elizabeth with letting her grandson eat Kraft Dinner. There was also the acceptance that their house doesn’t always have to be clean. This is something that some mothers are actively trying to resist and convince themselves that it doesn’t matter. Below, Eleanor depicts this negotiation she has with herself, and the tensions that still exist:
But I also, I feel like I’ve let other things slide, and it’s I mean whether or not that’s fine is, you know. Some things I struggle with, I’m like my bathroom should be cleaner like we’re home all the time and I’m like, of course they’re disgusting. We are home all the time. Like you know, I think about how little time we actually used to spend in the house as to now. And I’m like, yeah, no wonder it’s gross like we are here 24/7. Whereas before it was like mornings and evenings and weekends and it would stay clean if I cleaned on Sunday for a whole week.

Later in the interview, Eleanor, speaks of her ‘lessons learned’ of mothering:

Uhm? I think it would be that it’s OK to drop the ball. And to just know, like. Which ones are gonna break if you do drop them and so like. Being mindful about where you can slack off and where you need to put in your attention. Um. I think that’s been the number one lesson for me is that I can’t do it all, it’s so its probably fine if the bathroom goes three weeks without cleaning, but like. It’s, you know it’s not fine for me to like, be yelling at my kid for you know, splashing in the tub or or whatever, right? Like it’s. It’s really just about what things actually matter at the end of the day. Like will I ever really look back and be like ah yeah, my house was so tidy or like? Oh yeah, like I was you know, [Brandon]s outfit was well so well put together that day. Or will I look back and be like [Brandon] had a kind of blast like building all of his Duplo or like [Brandon] had so much fun, you know, covered in paint or whatever? Just kind of really focusing on the things that are are meaningful and the connections that I have made with other people through the pandemic.

The existence of these tensions, contradictions and negotiations that these mothers display, indicate how strong the expectations of the good mother actually are. We can see how Eleanor is trying to convince herself that things like having a clean bathroom doesn’t matter. These tensions do not get resolved overnight, maybe ever (as we can see with Elizabeth, who decades later, is still caught in the web of the good mothering structures, however she has let some expectations go, but still adheres to others). However, within Eleanor’s narrative, we can see that she is starting to let go of some of these expectations as she admits she “can’t do it all,” so something has to go, or as she explains it, ‘one ball has to drop.’ She does a very good job at describing how she ‘tries’ to decide/conceptualize which balls are okay to drop, which things actually matter at the end of the day. This is similar to what Elizabeth does at the end of her interview in the lessons learned section.
In addition, many may not understand that this discourse exist at all, but it does not downplay the realness of them. Even if we are aware of these very strong pressures, it does not always mean that it is so easy to resist them. Helen talks about how she did her PhD on the mental load, and was immersed in this good mothering discourse, however she indicates that “even though I’m aware of those those structures that you know limit women’s opportunities and have actively like studied and researched and acknowledge them, I still find myself caught in many of them. So, I think that you know even awareness isn’t enough to change those patterns right away”

Further, Amy expresses how unattainable the ‘good mother’ was during the pandemic:

So, in terms of a good mother like that stereotype mother [makes air quotes] like, doing it all, right? . . . That went to the wayside and any attempts at trying. Like I was never like so sold on the on the on the on that ideal. But like, really, like? Yeah, nope. Not happening, really. During the pandemic, it was just very obvious like that’s not. That’s not the the goal we’re achieving here. [laughs lightly]

Discussion

The main aim of this project was to investigate how mothers have been impacted by the pandemic and what sorts of challenges they faced in response to the drastic changes in their normal routines. What these women’s stories indicate is the layers to their experiences, how they stack one on another, compounding, expanding, and placing strain and stress on their well-being. Mothers had to navigate shifting to the remote work space, supporting their kids through online school, bearing the burden of increased carework, worrying and managing uncertainty for the whole family and as Helen indicated “absorbing all this kid trauma.” All the while, many of these changes that mothers had to navigate were in response to a withdrawal of care or support, formal and informal. Therefore, they are doing more, with less. As explored in the results section above, support was a central theme in all of the women’s accounts. Some of them spoke about how they had support prior to the pandemic, and it was rescinded following restrictions and lockdowns. While others indicated that they had limited or inadequate support before the pandemic to begin with. It is evident that those who were dealing with challenges prior to the pandemic, their experiences were amplified and intensified. Those who were single parents or who’s partners were not as available due to their nature of their work were bearing the brunt of an absence of formal support, all on their own. These mothers highlighted concerns over their mental health, resulting in burnout more than the other women in the study. This points to a major area of concern about the conditions under which mothers were expected to withstand even before the pandemic started. It points to cracks in our system that were therefore intensified and magnified when a major social disruption occurred such as a pandemic. If the foundation of support were in place prior to this seismic shift, would many of these families and mothers perhaps have been able to weather the storm better?
The “care conundrum” described by Staab (2020) was evident in the stories of mothers from this study. When caring arrangements and support systems were withdrawn, all of this increased ‘responsibility’ fell on the home as described by Helen. With previous avenues of support disrupted, mothers were left with no choice but to bear this burden (mostly alone). This expanded their already overwhelming list of things they had to ‘manage,’ it compounded and added to their worrywork and emotional labour resulting in ‘third’ and ‘fourth shift’ additional to their paid labour and regular mothering tasks as predicted by O’Reilly and Green (2021, p. 21). What underpins this theme of support, is how it is connected to the neoliberal ideal of ‘individualization of care.’ In the last few decades there has been a trend of rescinding of formal government support towards privatization of public services, and an overall increase in individualism and meritocracy (Bryan, 2020, p. 336). Embedded in this discourse is the idea that we should be able to manage on our own and if we were to reach out and ask for help, that we were weak, and a failure (Richardson, 2020, p. 357). This connects to this discourse of the good mother. Where if mothers indicate in any way that they can’t handle it, and reach out for help, it is viewed as they are bad mothers. This idea was heightened in a pandemic where care has been literally withdrawn overnight, however, mothers are expected to weather this storm alone, are expected to manage the increase in carework, alongside their shifts and challenges in their own careers. In addition, they are still expected to remain ‘productive’ employees (Gune-Frahm, 2020). This can be highlighted by Eleanor, at the start of the pandemic when her partner had to isolate: “And, for some reason I continued to work for those 10 days. I don’t know why no one said to me like. [Eleanor], you don’t have to work through all this because like, I was, I was doing everything.” What she is explaining, is this idea that even through a global crisis, there is this expectation that we shouldn’t take any breaks, that we can do it all, she said herself, that “But at that point in the pandemic, I was just like, I’m superwoman. I can do it all.”

This can be connected to Slaughter’s (2012) article “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All.” Society dishes out these myths that a woman can perfectly fulfill the unreasonable expectations of both a productive employee and a perfect mom. However, Slaughter (2012) maintains that this may only be possible in some types of jobs, or may even not be possible at all. We can see through the mothers’ narratives how important it is to have a supportive workplace in order to manage their mothering expectations even prior to the pandemic. The stories of both Olivia and Rachel centered on how unsupportive their employers were. For Olivia, it had serious life-altering consequences, because she was forced to choose between a job she loved and supporting her kids. Forcing her to take a step back from her career, in a critical moment where all she needed was support and understanding for her boss. Olivia’s story fits in with the trend of mothers taking a step back from their careers, referred to as the “opt-out revolution” in the media (Borda, 2020). Specifically, Borda (2020) highlights how it is “always women, not men, who are required to choose between family, harmony and ‘sanity’ versus personal ambition and achievement” (p. 351). An optimistic outcome though this experience, is the hope that companies and employers have been forced to listen to their employees, their needs and have started to shift the way they work – and recognize ways that they can support their employees better. Jessica, as a leader in her role, she did just that. She indicates how lucky she was that her children were older, and didn’t need as much hands-on care, in addition to the flexibility she had to move around her schedule to manage her mothering expec-
tations. Jessica indicates how the pandemic opened up her eyes to the challenges other mothers and families have faced, and what her company can do moving forward to better support their employees.

In line with the ‘individualization of care,’ what was often emphasized is the importance of ‘self-care.’ There is no contesting the value of caring for our mental health and well-being, but what can be damaging is the expectation that mothers should care for themselves, and the expectation that seeking outside support to do so is viewed as ‘less than.’ Even when mothers resist this outward judgment of seeking out help, during the pandemic, many support outlets or coping mechanisms were removed. This reaffirms the responsibility of care for oneself, as an additional burden for a mother to carry, especially given the added work to seek out support. When she fails to ‘look after herself,’ or her mental health is suffering, it can result in judgment from others that it is due to her own lack of ‘resourcefulness’ to seek out the help, or to help herself. This speaks to an important lesson moving forward, that there needs to be support systems in place to care for mothers – as they are exhausted, overworked, overwhelmed, and depleted, with, as Eleanor has put it, nothing left in their tank:

Like in the beginning you’re running on adrenaline and all this stuff, but like I just haven’t been topping up the tank, right? It’s like if you were driving a car and you’re just like constantly getting like that gas warning light and then you’re only putting in like 5 or 10 bucks worth of gas and it’s like K, yeah like you’ve put in gas. But like you’re not topping up the tank and checking the oil and changing your tires like you’re just doing the bare minimum. And so that’s kind of how I’m feeling now is like this has just been such an extended, long-term stress experience that I think it’s gonna take a lot to like top my tank up.

Through the narratives, and stories of these women, the hope is what will continue, is a conversation about carework, the mental load women carry, and how we can shift the norms over whose role it is to care – specifically away from the notion that care is an individual problem, instead of a societal one.

_Finding a “Clear Path Forward”_

I think a good first step toward making meaningful change is recognizing the value in women’s mothering experiences. Women’s voices have often been overlooked and dismissed, and they have not been taken seriously as valid knowledge. When looking to make changes within policy, it is vital that knowledge should come directly from women’s experiences themselves (Grenz, 2014, p. 2; Horne & Bretkreuz, 2018, p. 130; Ross, 2016, p. 46). When I asked one of the participants, Jane, if she had any lessons learned from her mothering experiences, she responded
with: “I’m like, I shouldn’t be telling, giving people advice.” The fact that she doesn’t view her own knowledge as important is part of the problem, the confluence of the dismissiveness of both women’s voices and of carework in general.

**Social & Community Care**

Most of the mothers in this study speak to the importance of social connection and emphasize the need for more dense and widespread social networks. What is largely absent in Western culture is the concept of ‘community care.’ That is, the notion that caring is social, and the responsibility of care, such as childcare is not solely felt/burden on the family, moreover, mothers, but spread out over a dense community of neighbors, extended family, community centers, government support systems and more. In the words of Amy:

Oh yeah, um honestly just realizing how, um, I don’t know, I think Western society. It’s kind of like. I don’t know, by it by emphasizing with individual like resilience and like you know, all that it. It really lessens the, the impact. Or like the importance of like social connection and that whole like oh, it takes a village. Not like really, it takes a village. And I know in other cultures it's like no really like the like multi-generational housing. Or just like aunties everywhere. We don’t necessarily, Western cultures don’t really value that so much, and I’m realizing how much how much that would help [laughs] me. If I had a big a bigger support network. How much that would be would have, would have made motherhood in general, a lot easier.

Rachel, who recognized where she lacked having support and guidance after the birth of her son, went on to create mothering circles:

I realized that so somewhere between our mothers depending on your age, somewhere between our mothers and our great grandmothers, we lost a sense of community. Something shifted in society. Women were told that they could have it all. But we were never actually given the social support and the path a clear path forward to do that, and that we still wore all these hats. I think we still wear all these hats, and I think that it’s vitally important for women to reconnect and to build our own mothering networks.
I argue that what Rachel is describing as a loss of community in the last several decades can be aligned with the rise in neoliberalism and individualism. Women are encouraged to do more, with less, and they are expected to know how to do it without any guidance or, as Rachel says “a clear path forward.” Therefore, in finding a “clear path forward” it is vital to investigate other, better, more collective ways of conceptualizing care. O’Reilly (2004) looks outside Western society, to other cultures that view mothering and care in unique ways, such as “other mothering,” or “community mothering” (p. 11). Both of these strategies extend the responsibility of mothering/childcare to everyone in the community, this allows for empowerment to be possible, describes O’Reilly (2004, p. 11).

Even more than having these widespread support networks in place, in terms of formal caring arrangements, another aspect of care and social connection that was highlighted by some of the women was the value in having supportive and understanding women surrounding them. A big challenge for women to overcome that is emphasized in the good mothering discourse is the “gaze of others” – the judgment they receive from others on how they’re mothering, which in itself reinforces the discourse of good mothering (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 6). Shireen often clashes with her mother and mother-in-law who uphold a very traditional concept of motherhood, that Shireen describes as very much rooted in their culture. They expect her to put all of her time and energy into her kids, and when Shireen decided to put her career and herself first, she was judged by them for being a bad mom. What was interesting that came up in my conversation with Shireen, was how often this judgment about their parenting comes not from men, but from other women, furthermore, mothers who are aware of how strong these expectations are and how difficult it is to uphold them. This demonstrates how internalized the good mothering discourse is, that women who suffer from within this discourse, yet are most often the ones who are reinforcing it by placing blame and judgment on other mothers. So, how can we change this?

I think one important way to challenge these internalized expectations, is to look towards those who lead by example. Those who actively resist falling into these ‘traps’ of reinforcing the good mothering discourse. Some of the stories highlighted in the section on agency and choice through resistance of the good mother, serve as sites for empowerment and change as we move forward to create these communities of care and support. Jane’s narrative highlights her active role in, as she puts it: “surround[ing] myself with very supportive whatever works for you type of people.” She indicates that she has actively created this world for herself, where her friends support one another, without judgment, and reiterate how well of a job they’re doing. Below is an example of how she actively resists implying judgment, and reinforcing restricting mothering expectations:

Jane: I’m very defensive of people who are even a little bit judgy. Like even because I’m surrounded by young moms all the time and we’re all kind of in the same boat. But then, like my mom and another generation, will make some kind of comment about some other mom and I’m like, hey, you don’t know, even if it’s somebody who I’m not friends with or maybe who I disagree with, you know their parenting style is different. You know, she’d
be like, Oh yeah, you know she’ll almost, she’ll say. If if she knows somebody is doing something different than me, she says it to me in like, uh, “oh, did you know so and so doesn’t do that?” And I’m like so? Right? [laughs] Like you could tell she’s saying it to me, thinking I’ll be like “Oh really?” But I’m like, so?

Christine: Yeah.

Jane: She’s tired. That’s what works for her, who cares, like? [laughs] Leave her alone. [laughs] So, yeah. I think it’s. It might be different for other generations looking in, right?

What we can learn from Jane and the mothers in this study is how to apply this framework of social care to policy making, so when the dust has settled on the storm that has disrupted the existing structures, we can make sure that the necessary support systems are in place. Not only the structures that were there previously, but how we can move forward, and be better, and better care for mothers, for families, and reconceptualize, and degender the norms surrounding care and motherwork. We should see this global crisis as an opportunity to disrupt previous assumptions of how our society should function. We must reevaluate the ways that policies actively discriminate against women and mothers, such as that don’t recognize unpaid caring labour in the home as ‘work,’ that assumes caring is work done only by women – the ways that these structures perpetuate gender inequities in both the public and private spheres. As one example, we need better formal reinforcement and encouragement for men to take paternity leave, to share in the caring labour that falls disproportionately on women, limiting their participation in the workforce and their career aspirations. Moving forward we must come together to create meaningful solutions, by having conversations that include mothers and families within the community, to inform better policy, create collective action and reorganize caring structures that empower women, instead of oppressing them.

What is important to note is that this study is mostly comprised of women who are in privileged positions, in terms of career and socio-economic status. Given the challenges that these women experienced, and continue to experience on a daily basis, how have women and families with even more extenuating circumstances, battling poverty, unemployment, and more have been weathering the storm? This provides an opportunity for future research in this area, to highlight the most marginalized voices and include them in the discussion of policy-making moving forward. Further, it is expected that those with less financial means, and even less resources at their disposal would have been forced to make different decisions and choices while navigating the good mothering discourses during the pandemic than the women in this study. How would their constraining circumstances have informed their choices and altered their understanding of their mothering experiences?
Study Limitations

One of the major limitations of this study was the time restriction of an Honours Thesis. Therefore, I was limited to conducting only one interview per participant. If I had more time, I could have extended this project to do more in-depth interviews or follow-up interviews which could have been conducted a year later, for example. This could have allowed me to see how things are like for them now, how things have changed, etc. With more flexibility in time, it would have allowed me to gain a deeper understanding into the histories of these women and their individual biographies. In addition, there were several ways to analyze the data, and there was a lot of valuable information that cannot be fully examined within the confines of an Honours Thesis. I could have conducted a deeper analysis into all the decisions the mothers made, and their negotiations/contradictions that exist within the discourses. I was limited to choosing only a select few choices/decisions that I found were most salient.

One limitation for this study could be my social positionality of not being a mother. This could have influenced the interviews, how comfortable the participants felt disclosing information to me given, I do not share the same experiences as them. While I never disclosed whether I had kids or not, they could have inferred such based on my body language, responses, or perhaps my appearance. Not being a mother myself, may have impacted the way I analyzed the data, how I understood their responses/stories and could have caused limitations throughout other aspects of the research study.

When I first proposed this research project shortly after the start of the pandemic in March 2020, I never could have anticipated that the pandemic would have still been going on, even at the time of writing up the final research report in spring 2022. I initially anticipated that one limitation I would have encountered was that, at the time of conducting the interviews, the pandemic was ‘so long ago’ that the memories were not very easy to recall and would impact the viability of the data/their responses. While this is still one small limitation that I asked them questions that were over a year prior, their memories of the events may not be exactly as they happened. Over time, our memories can change/alter from what they originally were. If I didn’t have to go through the processes of submitting a proposal, and all the required steps in an Honours Thesis, I could have set up interviews within the first 3-6 months of the pandemic and their responses might have been slightly different from what I got 17 months after the start of the pandemic. While these answers might have been different, I was able to see how over the past year and a half, things have changed/gotten easier/harder in terms of parenting, which in itself is very valuable.

Ethical Considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic is a traumatic event that we all experience differently, with the potential of impacting individuals’ well-being and causing financial or familial stressors. I note that while this study had minimal risk to participants (as it pertains to their physical risk of harm), there was the chance of uncovering any psychological or emotional distress while speaking of the events that have occurred since the pandemic began. I made it known to the participants that if they start to feel too uncomfortable (or for any other reason), they were free to withdraw from the
study at any time. I also ensured that they have the option not to respond to a question if a topic makes them uncomfortable. At the end of the interview, I indicated that as needed, I will offer them referrals to professional counselor services (See Appendix G). However, following some of the responses by the participants, where they appeared a bit defensive, and immediately replied “Oh, I’m fine,” when I talked if they required counsellor services, I changed my approach in the follow-up email. I was originally going to provide services, if they needed them. But I didn’t want them to feel uncomfortable or like I was singling them out, if they were, for example, emotional during the interview. Instead, I opted to include the services in the follow-up e-mail of every single participant. This way they were not put in a position of having to ask for support, or feeling guilty about it, or awkward at all. This was to assure the least amount of distress or anxiety for the participants as possible. In the debrief e-mail, I also provided a space for them, if they had any additional questions or concerns about the study or anything else that came up during our discussion (Appendix E).

Another important ethical consideration was to be aware of both the participant and the interviewer's social positionality and how it could influence the power dynamics of the research relationship. While most academic research emphasizes the importance of objectivity in the interview process (Reid, Greaves & Kirby, 2017, p. 48), academics operating within the feminist approach advocate that subjectivity of the researcher is inevitable (Letherby, 2014, p. 6). This is because in an analysis of our participants' stories, whether done consciously or not, we are filtering them through our own experiences and understandings of the world (p. 5). Grenz (2014) argues that the researcher-participant relationship will always be asymmetrical because the participant will always give more than the researcher does (Grenz, 2014, p. 4). In addition, the researcher always has more power because they are in the position of writing about their participants (p. 10). Instead, ‘intersubjectivity’ is argued to take precedence. It is described as: “creating and maintaining an authentic dialogue between participants in the research process whereby all are respected as equally knowing subjects” (Reid, Greves, & Kirby, 2017, p. 47).

As it pertains to this study, all participants are mothers of at least one child, a social position that the interviewer does not share. This points to the importance of reflexivity on behalf of the interviewer. This means that the researcher always had to be aware of how their inexperience of not being a mother may alter the data and had to be deliberate about understanding the participants’ point of view (Letherby, 2014, p. 6). To ensure respect for the participants’ words, experiences, and unique positionality, the researcher kept a reflexivity journal throughout the research process and continually reflected on their privilege as a researcher in this dynamic (Letherby, 2014, p 6) (See Appendix H). This assures transparency and accountability on behalf of the researcher (Letherby, 2014, p. 6). Through this practice of reflexivity, the researcher undertook an open-minded non-judgmental position, to the best of their abilities, through each stage of the research process.

As this project uses a feminist research methodology, additional special ethical considerations had to be made. The most important tenet of feminist research is to highlight the voices of those who have been marginalized from dominant discourses and include them in knowledge production in society (Grenz, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, the researcher had a crucial role in respecting the participants' voices and giving them space to tell their stories. This was done on
behalf of the researcher by assuring that their voice did not take privilege or overshadow that of their participants (Letherby, 2014, p. 8). Within feminist research, the researcher has a responsibility to respect the women's voices in their study. Further, feminist research retains within itself an important consideration of doing research “for women, not just on women,” and thus, feminist research should incorporate raising awareness of oppression (Grenz, 2014, p. 3).

To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used in place of their real names. In addition, pseudonyms were given to the participants’ partners, children or other people they spoke of during the interview. In line with the feminist approach, I gave the participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym as a way of respecting their agency in the research process (See Appendix D). In addition, once the interviews were transcribed, all research data was kept under password protection to ensure the security and welfare of participants' data. When the final project is complete, the video recordings will be deleted. Also, special attention was made to remove any identifying characteristics from the transcripts to ensure that the participants' identities remain confidential. Since these interviews were done virtually through videoconferencing, there were also additional privacy concerns to address. The platform of Zoom offers the advantage of securely recording the video interviews that can be stored to the local hard drive of the interviewer (that is kept under password protection) (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 2). In addition, Zoom offers virtual backgrounds to protect the security of the participants (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020, p. 5). There is also a helpful feature with Zoom, referred to as the ‘waiting room,’ that gave the researcher solitary control over who joins the meeting to reduce the likelihood of additional people joining, further protecting the confidentiality of the participant (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020, p. 5).

There were a few ethical concerns that I did not predict prior to the start of the project. First of all, as discussed in the sampling section, it was anticipated that the participants would have emailed me directly to indicate their willingness to participate. However, most of them commented on the Facebook post of the recruitment poster. This does pose a risk for the confidentiality of the participants. However, this was something that was out of the control of the researcher, and the participants commented knowing fully that their comments were public. However, it is important to note that this Facebook post was on the feed of a private Facebook Group, created by maternal scholar Andrea O’Reilly, specifically as a safe space for mothers across Canada and the United States to talk about their experiences. Therefore, it is unlikely that the participants knew other group members personally, or felt unsafe for disclosing their interest in participation in this study. In addition, in order to mitigate the situation, and preserve the confidentiality of the participants as best I could, once contact was made by email with the prospective participants, I ‘hid’ the comments on the post so that no one could see them besides me.

A second ethical concern that arose was due to a malfunction of the MAXQDA data analysis program. While using the program, an error occurred that indicated that the data (coded interview transcripts) had been corrupted and that the file was broken. After consulting with the MacEwan Research Ethics Office, they indicated that because the transcripts were removed of the original names of the participants, and there were only pseudonyms, that it didn’t breach a code of ethics by sending MAXQDA the file to repair. The MAXQDA support team provided me with their privacy policy in terms of how they handle customer’s data. They indicated that following
the file repair, that their servers would be scrubbed to remove all evidence of my interview data. In the end, the file was successfully repaired and the data was deleted off the MAXQDA server.

The Research Ethics Board application was submitted by May 25th, 2021 to be reviewed at the MacEwan REB meeting date of June 2nd, 2021. Approval was given June 3, 2021 (See Appendix I). A written consent form was sent to the participants a few days prior to their scheduled interviews (See Appendix D). Participants were asked to read the consent form in its entirety and sign if they wish to continue with the participation in the study. Participants were then asked to e-mail their consent forms back to the researcher prior to their interview. Before the formal interview began, the researcher went over briefly the ethical considerations for the study, and they ensured that the participants understood all aspects of the consent form. The researcher then received oral consent from the participants before conducting the interview process and starting the recording. In the debrief e-mail, a copy of their signed consent form was attached, for their participants’ records.

Conclusion

The importance of this study at this particular moment cannot be understated. There has been a long tradition of women’s voices and perspectives being ignored from research, policy formation, and overall, knowledge-production of society (Grenz, 2014, p. 2; Horne & Bretkreuz, 2018, p. 130; Ross, 2016, p. 46). Research highlighting marginalized voices is even more essential during the COVID-19 pandemic – to document how the lockdown measures and policies have disproportionately impacted mothers. This will become crucial in the recovery phase in the wake of the pandemic. While many academics emphasize the need for gender-based analysis of COVID-19 policies (Johnston, Mohammed, & van der Linden, 2020, pp. 12-13; UN Women, 2020; Lewis, 2020) (which is also essential), there is an additional need for what O’Reilly (2021) refers to as a “matricentric” approach (p. 50). This is based on acknowledging that the “category of mother is distinct from the category of woman” as the problems suffered under the patriarchy are far more extensive associated with the identity of ‘mother’ (O’Reilly, 2021, p. 50). O’Reilly (2021) calls for a matricentric approach to feminism because mothers are arguably more disempowered than women in general (p. 50). This is necessary to understand the various ways the existing systems, social structures, and policies perpetuate and sustain traditional gender norms and oppressive discourses such as ‘intensive mothering’ and the ‘good’ neoliberal mother.

The women’s narratives in this study highlight stories of maternal sacrifice, ‘resilience,’ and agency in negotiating and navigating these oppressive and restricting good mothering discourses within the context of a debilitating crisis of care and support. What can be learned from these women’s stories is how society, even before the pandemic, did not sufficiently support and care for mothers, and families in general. Care has been defined as an ‘individual problem.’ The idea that care should and can only be a job for mothers is not realistic and is not conducive to women being able to sufficiently be both a ‘good mother’ and a ‘good employee.’ Nor is it conducive to anyone trying to reach their fullest potential. As indicated by the participants in this study, what is instead needed, is dense community support networks that embrace the idea of social care - that extends the responsibility of care across people, groups and institutions. Many of the
mothers highlighted key lessons learned from their experiences of mothering during the pandemic that they can’t do it all on their own, and they ‘let some things go’ in terms of upholding the standards of the ‘perfect mother.’ The stories of agency and resistance in the women’s narratives point to the possibilities of transformative change and shifting of norms around care and mothering. A good first step is the $10/day childcare program introduced by the Federal government. This is one critical way of alleviating the childcare burden that has restricted mothers and families by bearing the financial costs associated with childcare, alongside career sacrifices mothers have been forced to make. Moving forward we need to lead with empathy in a reorganization in caring networks that supports and empowers women and disrupts the existing structures and assumptions that underpin gender inequity in both the public and private spheres. Challenging these assumptions also goes hand in hand with challenging individualism, that we should only look out for ourselves above anything else. Instead, we need reconfigure society towards an ethos of “interdependence, relationality, reciprocity, and mutual support” (Klostermann et al., 2022, p. 2). As Jane states below, being a mother means caring more about everything. So, how might society, and communities looks different if we were to do just that, care ‘more’?

It’s being a mom, is like going all in on society. [laughs] Like you have to care now because, it’s not just you know. I’m not like a you know that doesn’t affect me, but I never. Everything affects me now, right? It’s totally it’s going all in because now you brought these little humans into the game and you have to make sure things are good for them and I don’t know for me. Yeah, I just care more about everything, because of them for better or for worse. [laughs]

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Appendix A:
Recruitment Poster

OVERVIEW:
STUDENT UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES OF PANDEMIC PARENTING. PARTICIPATION INVOLVES 60-MINUTE ZOOM INTERVIEW

ARE YOU?
• CANADIAN RESIDENT
• 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER
• MOTHER OF AT LEAST ONE CHILD UNDER THE AGE OF 12 (AT THE START OF THE PANDEMIC, MARCH 2020)
• HAVE SOME FORM OF PAID EMPLOYMENT LEADING UP TO AND/OR DURING THE START OF THE PANDEMIC (MARCH 2020)

DOES THIS SOUND LIKE YOU?
CONTACT CHRISTINE IF INTERESTED:
zolondekc@mymacewan.ca

MacEwan UNIVERSITY
Appendix B

Initial Contact E-mail Template:

Hi [insert name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study ‘Mothering in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.’

I want to take this time to introduce myself. My name is Christine, and I am a senior Honours Sociology student at MacEwan University in Edmonton Alberta. This study is conducted as part of my undergraduate Honours thesis.

I will start off by providing a more in-depth description of the study and what your participation would entail. The purpose of this research study is to hear the stories of pandemic parenting and how mothers have navigated and continue to navigate the new and complex challenges related to the COVID-19 public health crisis. Through this research, the intention is to uncover the burden that mothers face in “balancing” carework, paid labour, and other family obligations, even before the pandemic.

Your participation would require one interview with the lead researcher, which would last approximately one hour in length. Interviews will be held virtually using the videoconferencing platform Zoom.

Your responses will be kept completely confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in place of your real name and any identifying characteristics will be removed to ensure the confidentiality of your identity.

The next step would be finding a suitable time for our virtual interview. Please provide the best three 1.5-hour time slots that would work for you in the next two weeks. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,
Christine
Appendix C

Pre-interview E-mail Template

Hi _______.

I hope you are doing well. With the interview coming up shortly, I thought I’d touch base with you. Our meeting is currently scheduled for ___ at ___. We will be using the videoconferencing platform Zoom. Attached below the email is a link that you will use at the time of the interview to join the virtual meeting. If you are not familiar with Zoom, here is a brief tutorial on how to join a Zoom call: [https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362193-Joining-a-Zoom-video-call](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362193-Joining-a-Zoom-video-call)

Below are a few recommendations in preparation for the Zoom interview:

- Find a quiet room with privacy away from others
- Minimize distractions around you, i.e., silence your cell phone
- Use headphones with a built-in microphone to optimize sound and minimize background noise
- Maximize internet connection by shutting down other applications on your computer besides Zoom
- For additional privacy, there are also virtual backgrounds available through Zoom that you can use during the interview

Prior to the interview I ask that you read through the consent form that I have attached in the e-mail. The purpose of the consent form is to assure informed consent before the interview: to make sure that you are aware of the interview procedures, and your rights as a participant. After reading through the consent form, and you do not have any further questions for me and you still wish to continue with the interview as planned, I ask that you fill out and sign the form and return it to me before the interview. You can either scan OR take a picture of the signed form and return to me via e-mail.

Something to pay attention to when filling out the form is to check off the boxes: “I grant permission to be audiotaped and videotaped.” There is also an option under ‘Confidentiality’ for you to choose your own pseudonym, if you wish.

Thank you again for taking the time out of your busy schedule to tell me your story. If you have any further questions, I am always available via email.

See you on _____,

Christine
Appendix D

Mothering in the Context of COVID-19
Participant Consent Form

Lead Researcher: Christine Zolondek
zolondkec@mymacewan.ca
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Joanne Minaker:
MinakerJ@macewan.ca

Purpose of the Study:
To hear the stories of pandemic parenting and how mothers have navigated and continue to navigate the new and complex challenges related to the COVID-19 public health crisis. Through this research, the intention is to uncover the burden that mothers face in “balancing” carework, paid labour, and other family obligations, even before the pandemic. This study is conducted as part of an undergraduate Honours thesis.

Study Procedures:
Interviews will be held virtually using the videoconferencing platform Zoom. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will be recorded for analysis purposes. It is estimated that there will be 5-8 participants. Please feel free to ask any questions about the procedures and goals of the study and your role as a participant.

Potential Risks:
There are no anticipated physical risks for participation in this study. However, given the traumatic nature of the pandemic itself, there is a potential minimal risk of uncovering any psychological or emotional distress while speaking of the events that have occurred since the pandemic began. This may include anxiety, stress, discomfort, etc. In the event of discomfort or anxiety, referrals for counseling services will be available. In addition, as a participant, you have the right to refuse to discuss a topic that you do not feel comfortable talking about.

Potential Benefits:
This study aims to shed light on the experiences and stories of mothers as front-line workers during the COVID-19 public health crisis, in addition to the burden mothers carry on a day-to-day basis. The hope is that in hearing from mothers themselves, we will be able to move forward in effecting positive social change by shifting policy to best accommodate mothers and parents in today’s society.
Confidentiality:

To maintain confidentiality, a pseudonym will be used in place of your real name. Also, we will remove any identifying characteristics from the interview transcript to make sure your identity remains confidential. Moreover, the Consent forms will be stored separately from the data, so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses.

The interview data and video recordings will be stored on the researcher’s computer under password protection. The video recordings will only be used for research purposes and will not be disseminated with the results or shown to anyone outside the researcher team (lead researcher and faculty advisor). When the research study is completed, the video recordings will be destroyed (April 2022).

After your interview and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview and review any quotations that will appear in the final report and add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.

I grant permission to be audiotaped: ☐ Yes ☐ No

I grant permission to be videotaped: ☐ Yes ☐ No

The pseudonym I choose for myself is:

First choice: ____________________ Second choice: ____________________

Right to Withdraw

Your participation is completely voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You have the right and may request that the recording (or use of video) be turned off at any time. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. Should you wish to withdraw, contact the researcher by the e-mail provided on page 1 and they will delete your data. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until April 1st 2022.

Follow-up

If you wish to obtain the results from the study, please contact the researcher by the e-mail provided on page 1 and they can direct you to where the results will be available following the completion of the research study in April 2022.

Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1.
Questions or Concerns about Ethical Conduct

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board on [pending date]. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Board at 780-497-4280 or REB@macewan.ca.

Documenting Consent

My signature below indicates that I have read and understand the description provided. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant ___________________________ Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix E

Debriefing E-mail Template:

Hi again,

It’s Christine from MacEwan. I hope this note finds you safe and well. I’m reaching out to say thanks again for participating in my research project. I profoundly appreciate you sharing the precious resource of your time with me. I hope that through my research we can shed light on the burden that mothers carry on a day-to-day basis, and that could not be possible without your help. So, I thank you again.

It’s been a few weeks since our conversation and I wanted to provide space, should you desire to address any questions or hear any comments you may have.

In the event that our conversation caused you emotional distress or anxiety in any way, I have provided a few counselling and mental health resources below:

✔ Wellness Canada offers free, live counselling over the phone or by text:
  https://wellnesstogther.ca/en-CA

✔ Crisis Services Canada for a list of local resources and support by location:
  https://www.crisisservicescanada.ca/en/looking-for-local-resources-support/

I have also attached a signed copy of your consent form for your records.

Thank you again for your participation.

Kind Regards,

Christine
Appendix F

Giftcard note:

Hi ______,

On behalf of MacEwan, please accept this gift as a thanks for your participation in the ‘Mothering in COVID-19’ study.

Take Care, Christine

Follow-up e-mail:

Hi ______,

I hope you're doing well. I have sent along an e-gift card for Starbucks as a thank you for participating in the ‘Mothering during COVID-19’ study, on behalf of the Sociology Department at MacEwan University. I just wanted to make sure that you've received it, and that it hasn't ended up in your spam folder.

Take care and thank you again,

Christine Zolondek
Appendix G

Interview Guide

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Christine, and I am a senior student in Honours Sociology at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta. I would like to take this moment to thank you for participating in my study. I greatly appreciate you sharing the precious resource of your time with me, and I look forward to learning from you and hearing your experiences.

To start, I’d like to give you a brief overview of my research and the purpose of the study. I am interested in hearing the stories of pandemic parenting, and I hope that through this research, I will uncover the burdens that mothers face in “balancing” caring, paid labour, and other family obligations, even before the pandemic. Our conversation will be about the impact of COVID-19 on your experiences of mothering as well as your ideas on what supports, or changes would be meaningful.

I want to make sure I have your informed consent. I want to reiterate that your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may end the interview at any time if you no longer wish to continue. You are free to decline answering any questions/topics you do not want to discuss. Your responses will remain completely confidential and a pseudonym will be used in place of your real name. I’ll be using the one you provided on the consent form.

The interview will last approximately 1 hour. We will begin with some general questions about you to get to know you a bit better. Then we will delve deeper into your parenting experience before the pandemic and thereafter, since the pandemic first began.

Before we start, do you have any questions for me?

Okay, if you are ready, let’s get started. Is it okay that I begin recording?

[recording starts]

Warm-up/background Questions:

1. So, to start off, please tell me about yourself.
   a. **Probe**: Can you elaborate a little on that? [or about specific detail they mention]
   b. Could you give me a sense of your background or demographics? [follow-up with categories/suggestions if they ask what I am specifically looking for, and/or afterwards, if they didn’t mention any of these, ask: there are a few additional demographics I am looking for specifically, I will go over them now.]
      i. **Age** – if you don’t mind me asking, what age category would you fall within?
      ii. **Marital/domestic status** – what is your marital status?
iii. Living situation – what is your living situation?
iv. Geographic area – province – to get a better understanding of the covid restrictions/policies in your area
v. # of children and their ages – how many children do you have and what are their ages?
vi. Job – “are you currently employed or doing any paid work?” – [yes/no]
  - If yes: ask for elaboration “can you tell me a bit more about your position/role, the job?”
  - If no: then ask about what happened in their employment in ‘feeling questions,’ follow-up on it later.

Main “feel” questions
Now we’ll discuss a bit about life before the pandemic, then move into how things may have shifted and what changed after the start of the pandemic in March 2020.

2. Would you paint a picture of what a typical pre-pandemic day looked like?
   a. Can you tell me a bit more about what your day-to-day routine involves – such as taking care of kids, care-work, and how you negotiate work with home responsibilities?

3. Can you give me a sense of how care tasks and household responsibilities get done in any given day?
   a. Are you the primary caregiver?
      i. Do you have others who support you in care-work?
   b. Can you elaborate on how much time you think you spend on household chores and looking after your child(ren)?

4. How would you say the division of labour in terms of caring and household responsibilities compares from before the pandemic started, prior to March 2020, to afterwards?
   a. Can you point to specific examples of how things changed?
   b. How would you compare pre-pandemic life to during COVID?

5. Reflecting on mothering during the pandemic, what are some of the most memorable moments for you?
   a. How about, the most challenging aspects of parenting?
   b. Have they changed over the months?
      i. Example: gotten easier, harder, remained the same?
   c. What made it so challenging?
      i. Probe: tell me a little bit more about that.
   d. How did you handle that? How did you tackle this situation/issue?

6. So, we are now going to shift the conversation a bit towards paid employment.
A. (those with paid work): How did you manage your job and work responsibilities on the one hand with the realities of the pandemic on the other?
   a. Can you give me a sense of what things were like for you? Can you pinpoint to specific challenges or problems you have experienced?
   b. Were there any conflicts between your work and family/care life?
      i. How did you deal with these?
B. (those not working for wages) So, you mentioned earlier that you are not currently employed. Would you elaborate a bit more on that?

7. Looking back, can you tell me about any turning points or key decisions that had a significant impact on you, your home, work, or family life? (Over the past year since the pandemic began in March 2020)
   a. Probe: can you tell me more about that?
8. What comes to mind when you hear the words: pandemic parenting, work-life balance, or good mother?
   a. Can you elaborate on that? Tell me about more about what they make you think of? (i.e., story or specific experience)
9. Do any of the following terms resonate with your experience?
   i. Exhausted
   ii. Depleted
   iii. Uncertain
   iv. Brave
   v. Resilient
   vi. Optimistic
   vii. Supported
   b. Can you elaborate on that? [tell me a story when these feelings arose for you/remind you of?]
10. Did you experience any significant life events during the pandemic?
    a. For example, major life changes to your job, relationships, or family?
       i. [illness, health changes, job loss, relationship breakdown, loss of friend/family member]
11. What sort of worries or stressors did you experience during the pandemic?
    a. What supports or resources did you turn to deal with what you had going on?
    b. Did you access any COVID-19 governmental benefits or other available resources?
12. Did you have an informal network of support?
    a. Did you have any friends, family members, or neighbors that you could turn to?
   I’m going to shift the conversation a bit towards formal supports and changes you would find meaningful.
13. From your point of view, how did the government (or others) respond or act in the face of the pandemic? Could they have done anything differently that would have helped you navigate the challenges of parenting during covid?
   a. What would have helped most/more?

14. What would you like to see done in the future (in terms of lessons learned)?
   a. Suggestions of policies/government help or resources?

**Closing/‘cool-down’ Questions:**

Alright, so, I just have a few final questions before we close out the interview.

15. **What does being a ‘mother’ mean to you?**
   a. [how they understand their role as mother, meaning of ‘motherhood’]

16. **Reflecting on your mothering experiences or identity as a mother, are there any lessons you learned that you could share with me? (or would like to share)**

17. Is there anything else that came up for you during our discussion today that you would like to clarify or expand on?

18. Finally, is there anything else you would like to say?

**Conclusion:**

Thank you for being a part of my study. Before we go, was there you’d like to ask me? [For example: regarding the study, consent, dissemination of results, confidentiality].

I want to emphasize how much I appreciate you taking the time out of your busy life to talk to me and give your input and perspective. I appreciate you trusting me with your experiences that I hope will help shed light on the burden mothers carry on a day-to-day basis, and how they are essential ‘front-line workers’ in the pandemic.

I want to remind you again that all your responses will be kept confidential. Also, don’t hesitate to contact me via e-mail with any questions or concerns.

I would also like to take the time to let you know that if any topics discussed today caused any distress or unease, I am able to refer you to counselling services if needed. I will also be sending you a follow-up email in the coming weeks to see how you are doing.

[Stop recording]
Appendix H

Reflexivity journal

Social Position:

- White
- Female
- 26 years-old
- Canadian (Albertan)
- Grew up in middle-class family
- University student
- Works in food & beverage industry
- In relationship, without kids
- Social democrat
- Feminist

October 1st, 2020

It is important to note that I am writing this as a Canadian who has experienced (and still am) the pandemic. Phases/lock-downs/waves affected countries and geographical areas differently. I am biased to my experience of the pandemic. While everyone experienced it in the world, not everyone’s experiences are the same. It can be different depending on their location, gender, SES, employment status, age, marital status and whether or not they have children (and/or care for grandparents).

I am middle-class and while I am financially independent, I have my parents who are willing to help me financially if needed. I have economic safety that many others do not.

I do not have children, and am not a mother. I will be conducting my research while never have experienced the pressures of being a mother/parent. I can only use motherhood/feminist scholarship to help me understand. Therefore, I may not be able to completely understand the experiences of mothers in the pandemic. I have an ‘outsider’ view on their experiences. This might be useful as it provides an objective perspective, but may limit how comfortable the participants feel talking to me (without that shared experience).

I am 25 and will (most likely) be younger than the participants I interview. This may also affect how comfortable they are talking to me and will affect my ability to empathize with the responsibilities experience that come with their age.

Interview 1:

I can see how my not being a mother can sometimes hinder my understanding of the women’s stories. For example, in the first interview I asked if the participants 7-year-old son was going to daycare (he is at kindergarten at that age).

When the participant told me that she was having trouble finding a sitter for her son, I kind of put my own biases and assumptions into the research process a bit when I responded with “I know it can be very expensive too” because the participant responded almost defensively saying she is financially stable and can ‘pay a living wage’ – like I was accusing her of trying to cheap out?
But I could see that she was just very passionate about paying women and girls a good wage for ‘women’s work’/care related activities – and maybe I was the one getting defensive because she misunderstood what I was trying to say? I just know a lot of research shows that childcare/daycare etc. is very expensive and I don’t mean that I think childcare workers should be paid less but that the government should step in to provide subsidies so that the families don’t bear this financial burden. However, in an interview setting I could not respond with how I was feeling at that moment.

Expressions of emotion/ crying tend to make me a bit uncomfortable. I think two of the women that I can remember did start to choke up/tear up and I wasn’t quite sure how to handle it. If I should, in this interview setting, comfort them. In one instance I quickly changed the subject but asking a different question, and I think I should have maybe not done that. Maybe should have given her a moment with her thoughts/feelings. I also did not want to draw too much attention to their display of emotions to make them feel uncomfortable.

October 30th 2021

The participant kept getting off track to talk about her job – interview lasted almost 2 hours and I’m not sure how. Maybe the fact that she spent most of the interview talking about her job indicated how important her job was to her?

I was a little bit tired this morning and didn’t get enough sleep as I should have and had a bit of trouble staying focused on the interview and her words.

November 1st 2021

One participant got a bit heated talking about how angry she is at Kenney – and though I agreed with everything she said, I tried to not show too much approval in what she was saying, but I might have failed. I will have to rewatch the video if my facial expressions changed too much or if I said anything to confirm these beliefs.

I think it’s important to note in my reflexivity journal that I am pro-mask and pro-vaccine and over the last few months can get somewhat passionate/ argumentative when talking to anti-maskers. The women I have talked to thus far have had a similar stance than me. I have not encountered anyone who was firmly against mask/vaccine mandates as far as I can remember. If I do encounter someone else that holds very ant-covid beliefs I would have to be careful to keep my composure and remaining neutral.

Had my interview with [Jessica] today. There was a little bit of feedback/ noise coming from her end that made it difficult to hear her. She was using a pair of apple headphones with a speaker. I was a bit distracting by the noise trying to concentrate on what she was saying – and active listening, thinking about follow up questions.
When transcribing the interviews, I realized a couple times when I accidently cut off the women’s words, and didn’t allow them to finish their thought.

I was intentional about trying to actively listen to their words, but at times I found it difficult to stay fully engaged, while also trying to remember questions that I wanted to ask as a follow-up/keep them in my mind as not to forget them. I feel like a few times, instead of probing the participant to continue on the story they were just talking about, I asked the follow-up question about something they had discussed earlier in the conversation – so as to not forget my question.
Appendix I

REB Approval

June 03, 2021
Dr. Joanne Minaker
A&S Dean’s Office
MacEwan University

File No: 161915
Approval Date: June 03, 2021
Expiry Date: June 02, 2022

Dear Dr. Joanne Minaker,

The Research Ethics Board has reviewed your application titled ‘Mothering in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic’. Your application has been approved. This REB approval expires on June 2, 2022. To continue your research past this date, you must submit a Renewal Form. When your research is complete, please submit a Closure Form to close out REB approval monitoring efforts.

Note that any research activity occurring face-to-face during COVID restrictions is not covered under this approval. In order to conduct face-to-face research activities, you must refer to the relevant ‘Research Resumption Request Form’ and ‘Guidance for Conducting Research and Scholarly Activity with Human Participants under COVID-19 Restrictions’ guidelines available on the Office of Research Services website, and ensure all appropriate approvals are in place. Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to MacEwan’s REB for approval prior to implementation, and you are reminded of your obligation to advise the REB of any unanticipated issues or events that occur during the approval period, per University policy. Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to MacEwan’s REB for approval prior to implementation, and you are reminded of your obligation to advise the REB of any unanticipated issues or events that occur during the approval period (as per C5052: 4.6.1).

If your project activities involve acquiring information through an institution, organization or other group, you should be aware that these bodies may have their own ethics or operational requirements, beyond REB review, for allowing access to their sites and to the use of their resources. It is your responsibility to formally collaborate with the relevant body to seek permission to proceed with the project.

If you have any questions about the REB review & approval process, please contact the REB at (780) 497-4280 or REB@macewan.ca. Do not reply to this message.

Sincerely,

Dr. Christopher Striewer
Chair, Research Ethics Board
Appendix J
Honours Research Timeline:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Expected Timeline</th>
<th>Actual Timeline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Ethics Board Application</td>
<td>Submitted by May 25th, 2021, to be reviewed at REB meeting June 2nd, 2021.</td>
<td>Research Ethics was approved June 3rd, 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recruitment of Research participants</td>
<td>July 2021-September, 2021</td>
<td>September 2021 -November 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Interviews between September 2021 – mid-November, 2021</td>
<td>September 2021- November 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcription</td>
<td>Will occur concurrently with data collection process (September 2021-December 2021)</td>
<td>December 2021-February 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>January 2022-April 2022</td>
<td>February 2022- April 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Report – Honours Thesis</td>
<td>Submitted by the end of April 2022</td>
<td>Submitted end of April 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissemination of Results:</td>
<td>End of April 2022</td>
<td>Student Research Day Presentation: April 21st, 2022</td>
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<td>Student Research Day Oral Presentation</td>
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Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Christine Zolondek

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of issue: 20 January, 2020