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**THE POLITICISATION OF MOTHERHOOD:  
SILENCING SOLE MOTHERS**

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**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements**

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## ABSTRACT

In most OECD countries adolescent child-bearing and child-rearing is regarded as the forerunner of social, economic, employment and educational disadvantage particularly for young sole mothers receiving State-provided benefits. The National-led government has argued that the cost of social welfare benefits, an estimated \$7.6 billion in 2008/2009, is no longer sustainable. Towards the end of 2012 following recommendations from a government-appointed Welfare Working Party, the social welfare system was restructured to 'encourage' recipients to search for paid employment by restricting their opportunities for support if they did not. This study explored how young sole mothers experienced mothering, and made sense of the processes and consequences of the National-led government's reforms, in a socio-political environment that overtly prioritises paid work. Using thematic analysis of narratives obtained from unstructured interviews with 10 adolescent sole mothers attending a teen parent education unit in the greater Wellington area, the study also sought to understand the ways in which sole mothers are silenced on political issues affecting their futures. The research is based on feminist principles of empowerment of women and social justice and is situated within Michel Foucault's postulations that Governments, their institutions and their representatives, structure actions and use language to discipline and silence individuals and groups to maintain normative power and control. Themes from participants' narratives included an unambiguous preference for hands-on/ full-time mothering with support as needed; intractable difficulties in coping with inadequate DPB benefits with social isolation as a consequence; an acceptance of the need to obtain paid work, but only when their child is settled and ready; a determination to obtain further qualifications in order to achieve a better life for their child and themselves coupled with a largely unrecognised resilience.

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