

Bridging the Widening Gap: Research on the Impacts of the Liberal Cuts on Single Mothers Living in Victoria

**“If no support, we will be high, drunk and hiding.”
– Single Mother on Welfare**

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I. Introduction

This research report was completed as part of the School of Social Work research class at the University of Victoria. We (students/researchers) wanted to do a research project that would empower marginalized women and lead to positive change.

We had the opportunity to work through VIPIRG (Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group) to complete this research project with Bridges for Women Society. Susan Dempsey, coordinator from Bridges for Women, had contacted VIPIRG, as she was interested in researching the multiple ways the women at Bridges are oppressed but also empowered. This report is the product of these partnerships.

II. Selection of Topic

Conducting this research project was of political and personal interest. It was one way to begin addressing the different and multiple ways the recent social cutbacks by the Liberal government have affected single-mothers in the Bridges program. Conducting this research project also reflects the research group's commitment and passion for social change and justice.

Indeed, the research team was drawn to this particular focus in research, as it specifically looked at the multiple layers of oppression single-mothers on social assistance and in poverty face on a daily basis. Facilitating and taking part in this research was one way that we could better understand, document and analyze the overlapping multiple ways women's experiences and present situations are being oppressed by the Liberal government social cutbacks.

This topic interests us for a variety of reasons. First, Bridges is a program that operates an employability program for women with a history of abuse. Since 1988, Bridges has provided training and support for women to overcome the effects of abuse experienced throughout their lives. The agency has strived to help women re-enter the workforce, in order to achieve healthy and stable environments. We feel that the role of the Bridges program within the community is extremely important, as it provides an environment for women to work through their abusive lifestyles. Further, it is also a place for women to learn valuable skills to gain employment, in order to move their lives in a positive direction. We strongly feel that social programs such as Bridges are the foundation to a women's healing and, ultimately, her ability to lead a positive and productive life.

We are particularly interested in the lived experiences of women at Bridges because of the recent shifts and social cutbacks in various programs and agencies that assist women. We are dismayed at some of the social and economic reductions that the Provincial Government has made to social programs, particularly those affecting low-economic single mothers. We hope to gain knowledge and insight into specific cutbacks that have affected their lives, and acquire a better understanding of those programs that have been useful. We are interested in determining what sort of progress single mothers have made and what they perceive for their future, given the most recent cuts to such programs.

III. Explanation of the Context

Recently, the Liberal government has proposed to cut social spending between 20 to 50 per cent. These incisive cuts to social programs show the Liberal government's agenda of attacking women who are in the margins, and only to further the cutbacks to social programs that have been occurring for the past decade.

The Liberal Government of British Columbia is in the process of instituting massive cuts to welfare, including reducing support payments to single parent families, cutting transit, forcing people with disabilities to look for work, and threatening single parents of children over age three with further cuts if they are unable to find employment. Cuts to legal aid in BC will include drastically reducing family and poverty law services provided by the Legal Services Society, terminating direct assistance for landlord/tenant, EI, welfare, CPP disability, foreclosures, disability trusts and Supreme Court actions, and closing many Native and Community Law offices.

We, the research team, feel that simultaneously providing tax cuts, slashing jobs, slashing social programs and services, most heavily relied on by women and children, not only demonstrates a lack of effective fiscal leadership for BC but also illustrates this governments intentional disregard for basic human rights. A large part of this research was to pursue an understanding of the problems that cutbacks bring to low-economic single-mothers' lives. It is estimated that one-fourth of all women in BC and almost one-half of BC's single mothers earn less than the low-income cut-off ratio. With this in mind, the changes to welfare as of April 1, 2002 will and have had a tremendous effect on women.

- Single moms on welfare with children over the age of three are now required to search for paid work, enroll in a training program or return to work.
- Coupled with the cuts to universal childcare, this puts women in a double bind of finding work without access to affordable childcare.
- The support portion of welfare for single mothers with a child 3 years of age or older has been reduced by \$51.00. This support remains the same even if you have more than one child.
- Cuts to the childcare subsidy for low-income parents will put childcare out of reach for thousands of BC families. The subsidy cuts amount to \$26 million on a \$126 million budget. This is being accomplished by lowering the income threshold for the program by \$285, so that fewer women qualify.
- Eliminated the Family Maintenance exemption, which allows those receiving child support payments to keep \$100 per month.
- Eliminated the Earnings exemption, which allowed single welfare recipients to keep earned income of \$100 or those with a child or partner \$200 per month.
- Welfare eligibility is tougher; families can only possess a maximum of \$2,500 in assets, which is half the previous rate of \$5,000.
- Crisis grants now have monthly and annual caps. Individuals are limited to \$20 per month for food and \$100 per year for clothing. Families are limited to \$400 per year for clothing and only one month's shelter allowance per year. These caps defeat their purpose, which is to provide help to people who are suffering from unforeseen crisis situations.
- Changes to disability benefits have tightened the criteria required for disability status. There is no longer a permanent disability classification, so women are subject to reviews as the state sees fit.
- Applicants for BC employment and assistance must wait three weeks after making an appointment for an intake interview date in which they are expected to do a 'self-directed' job search and attend an orientation session. This is problematic as many women use assistance as a last resort and are unable to wait without experiencing severe hardship.
- All 'employable' welfare recipients will be required to seek work or participate in employment programs regardless of age.
- Reduced training wage to \$6.00 per hour, which will affect women who make up 64% of minimum wage earners.
- 0.5% increase in sales tax.
- Reduction in provincial government's contribution to the BC Family Bonus.

Doodlebug Grrl. Impact of B.C. Government Cuts on Women, July 9, 2002. B.C. Coalition of Women's Centres. October 11, 2002<http://www3.telus.net/bcwomen/archives/impact_of_cuts_on_women_jul_02.html>

IV. Bias & Conceptual Baggage

We are aware that the women in the Bridges program are economically and socially marginalized in society, where they suffer from inequality and injustice in their lives. We assume that there is not a high level of consciousness about the multiple impacts the social cuts have on the women in Bridges.

In forming this research project, we bring certain biases, which could affect our research process. Our biases are as follows:

- Regarding the recent government cuts that have been taking place in British Columbia, such costs are thought to have a greater impact on lower income single mothers
- Women are one of the main groups in society that suffer oppression and violence, and the recent social cutbacks have had a complex impact on their lives
- Incorporating a theoretical standpoint of feminist theory and practice.

Our conceptual baggage about our topic is important to review. The research team brings to the project multiple experiences, indicating a diversity of backgrounds. The research group was comprised of all women, 'researching' women, however there are many differences between us. As student researchers, we are entering into a space, asking questions, and attempting to find out more about the women at Bridges – their experiences with the program, impact of government cuts, and their personal stories. We bring to this research project our places of privilege (education, race, class, economic status), levels of social, cultural, political and economic consciousness. We bring knowledge, insight and a critical analysis on the intersections of oppression that implicate women, while recognizing that we come from a place of requirement and need. We acknowledge that this project is part of a requirement for a core course in our education, and that this is the main reason why we are conducting this research project.

V. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research project is to examine the social cut backs effecting single mothers in the Bridges. Our intention in completing this research was to give the women at Bridges a forum to voice their opinions and provide information about the ways the recent government cuts have affected their lives. From the information we obtain, we hope to gain a greater understanding of the types of social programs in the past and present that have been helpful for women. We further wish to explore how slashes to some of these programs have affected their lives. The information that we obtain will serve two purposes: it will be used by Bridges for Women staff and women participants, providing a picture based on the lived experiences of women in the Bridges program and it will be given to VIPIRG. A critical purpose in this research project is to understand the cultural, social and psychological impacts of the recent social cut backs on single mothers living in Victoria. It will also be valuable in highlighting the kinds of programs that have been beneficial to single mothers and expose

barriers that have blocked their journey toward a secure and stable lifestyle. This project fulfills a requirement of our Social Work research class (SOCW 301).

VI. Research Plan

This project consists of four parts:

- 1) research into the government programs that have been recently ‘cutback’ and its affects onto single mothers living in Victoria,
- 2) facilitation of two focus groups,
- 3) analysis of this information and the writing of a report, and
- 4) presentation of this research to a Social Work class, VIPIRG and Bridges for Women Society, in the hopes of adding another perspective to the Liberal government’s cuts on women implicated by the welfare system.

The research plan and design came out of ad hoc meetings that were held over the span of two weeks between the research group members, where decisions were reached by consensus. The methodology of focus groups was implemented for this project due to time limitations. We believed that focus groups would be a methodology to provide us with rich data. The focus group methodology was suggested to us by both Susan Dempsey and Bruce Wallace, who have had experience in using focus groups surrounding similar issues. We were advised that focus groups would help create a comfortable environment for the women to voice their opinions.

We drafted a letter that informed the research participants of our study’s purpose and intent. In this letter we asked for the women’s participation. This letter was given to them at a meeting before the first focus group, and also at the beginning of each focus group session.

Two focus groups took place at Bridges for Women Society on Pandora Street on November 14 and 21, 2002 from 3:15 – 4:30pm. This time was chosen by the Bridges coordinators for it was the most convenient time for the participants.

The focus group process consisted of the moderator posing questions, while the assistant moderator took notes on paper. Examples of the questions were asked were:

How did you get to Bridges?

Can you tell us how the recent government cuts have affected you?

How has Bridges for Women Society helped you?

Can you tell us what your hopes and fears are for the future?

This information was recorded with a small tape recorder that sat in the middle of the large square table. One of the researchers wrote participants comments on a flip chart. All this data was looked at by the research group, and broken down into categories: abuse, children, systemic oppression, Bridges for Women Society, and future hopes and fears. This information was added to the other sources of data and was analyzed and a research report was written.

In general, the research project fulfilled many of the objectives that were stated in the research proposal. However, given that this is a research project on social change, focusing on marginalized women, the research did bring new dimensions, which altered the research plan. Upon discussion with the research group, we discovered that the following modifications to the research plan were needed:

- Instead of three focus groups, we held two focus groups

- Rather than the proposed time of two hours for a focus group, both focus groups ran for 1.5 hours
- Each student researcher maintained consistent roles rather than having multiple roles
- We did not have research team debriefing sessions due to time constraints, rather each research member wrote up a personal reflective piece after each focus group session.

VII. Participants

The research project involved ten participants: four in the first focus group and six in the second focus group. All participants were single-mothers, over the age of nineteen, who are involved with the Bridges Pre-Employment Program. The participants were from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances. Some had been at Bridges for two years, others for just a few months. These women, although diverse, shared similar experiences of abuse, unemployment and being dependant on social assistance. The women interviewed also ranged in age, and ethnic and racial background.

The participants, although valuable in many ways to the research group, were not given a space to give feedback on our final research project before it would be handed in. Had there been more time allotted for conducting this project, we feel that a stronger relationship could have been established between the researchers and participants. This would have given more available avenues of participant research involvement at different stages of the research process.

Focus group participants became involved with the research project at a brief meeting at Bridges. Susan Dempsey helped ‘spread the word’ about the research, and accumulated a classroom full of women interested in participating and voicing their opinion about our research question. The women were asked to sign up for one of two focus groups that would take place over the next two weeks.

VIII. Ethical considerations

There were various ethical considerations that our research team carefully took into account before proceeding with our research. We felt we had to be careful that the participants were informed of the intent of the research and how the findings would be used. We also needed to be aware of issues surrounding confidentiality. In order to assure confidentiality we offered the women the choice of using code names. None of the women chose to use code names for they felt comfortable with us just leaving their last names out. Participants were assured that confidentiality would be upheld and their anonymity protected. Further, we kept aware of our own vested interest in the result of the project. In addition, we also were aware of our roles, our influence within the project and how this may have shaped the methodology, the application of the methods and the interpretation of the results.

In order to gather informed consent from the participants we created a consent form. This form was read out to participants at the beginning of the focus group and was available for participants to read. Each participant received a consent form to read, sign, and return to us. This was done for both focus groups.

The focus groups were held in a classroom. Participants were told that they could leave at anytime, and that they could change and/or withdraw their information at any time. No names or identifying details of the participants were used in the report and the tapes and written information from the focus group will be destroyed once the project is complete.

In this project we have been honest about our motives and goals with Bridges and with the participants, as we have been clear of our position as research students from the University of Victoria. There is no physical risk to the participants although participants may have taken a psychological risk by divulging details of their lived experiences and day-to-day lives. Potential risks to the participants may also have arisen out of the discussion content, questions posed, feelings experienced after focus group sessions, and those that may come upon reading the final research report.

IX. Power

Indeed, doing this research for a University Social Work research class project, having three researchers and working in partnership with VIPIRG and Bridges for Women Society all had an impact on power relations within this project.

Writing the final report as a requirement of a class, constrained our freedom to do this project in a different way. We had to meet the requirements of the assignment and as a result we have written this report in a prescribed way. This resulted in a tension between our desire to write a final report that could be better understood by the participants and writing a report that was academically sound, reflecting our knowledge that we gained in the research class, and using the language that is situated within the research field.

The differences between student researchers and research participants are also a place where power relations surface and this is important to consider. The research group felt a power difference in the beginning phase of the project, and continued to feel this relation up until the end. The power is situated within a social hierarchy relating to education, economics and class.

X. Research Project Question

What are the different impacts of recent government cutbacks on single-mothers in the Bridges Pre-Employment Program?

XI. Researcher Roles

Each research member wore a significant research “hat” that was kept consistent for both focus groups. Corrie was the facilitator, asking the group the questions that were constructed prior to the focus group. Michele was an assistant moderator who was responsible for keeping record of important information on note paper. Simrita an assistant moderator who took notes on a flip chart.

The research roles were chosen by the research group prior to the first focus group. The roles were consistent for both focus groups.

XII. The Research Survey Questions

Before we developed the research questions we met with Susan Dempsey of Bridges, and Bruce Wallace of VIPIRG, in order to get a better understanding of what we were going into. After speaking with them we then had a clear direction of where we wanted to take our research. We then used the internet as a resource to find the most recent information available about the cut backs that are currently being implemented in B.C. The combination of our meetings and the information that we gathered thus resulted in our questions.

We carefully designed the questions in order to explore how the social cut backs are affecting single mothers, specifically within the Bridges Program. The questions worked as a medium to gain knowledge and engage discussion surrounding our main research question.

XIII. Data Gathering Method

Our data was collected by the following:

- Facilitated discussion which was audio taped. These tapes worked as a resource for us to refer to when analyzing our results.
- Field notes were being taken by a member of the research team for the purpose of providing an extensive insight to what was happening as it was happening.
- Flip chart was used to document key points, statements, and phrases to provide a focal point for the group's discussion.

The specific data gathering plan was to record the focus groups by using audio tapes, as well we had one group member taking extensive field notes, and another group member writing up main points on a flip chart. These three methods of collecting data allowed for us to have a variety of baskets of data to revisit once it came time to analyze the data.

Our post-research discussions have led us to feel that the way we went about this research project was both appropriate and effective. No problems came to our attention that we could not resolve. We feel that the focus groups ran smoothly for we were successful in fulfilling our main objective for having had run a focus group. Also from the positive feedback the women gave us after the focus groups were done, we were lead to believe that we created a space for the woman at Bridges to voice their unspoken opinions in a way that may have empowered them.

We managed the data by appointing one member of the research team to be responsible for making sure that it was kept in a safe place. This same member of the team also went through the data and coded the data, in a way that would be useful for analysis.

XIV. Data

The following data analysis stems from our data collections from both focus groups:

- 1) focus group paper notes,
- 2) focus group flip chart notes, and
- 3) tape recorded audio tapes.

The data was not altered or tampered with in any way. Our analysis is rooted in a feminist anti-oppressive framework.

From our data collection, the research team collectively spent time coding and analyzing the data. From this process, we came to a consensus and decided to analyze the data in terms of themes regarding the questions that were posed at each focus group. The themes that have been constructed are as follows: abuse, children, systemic oppression, Bridges for Women Society, and future hopes and fears. These themes are analyzed under the broad categories of lived experiences and impact of recent Liberal government cut backs.

Lived Experiences

The most apparent issues that arose from the participants' stories circled around issues of abuse and the cycles of oppression women had endured in their lives. Several women from both focus groups passionately expressed their past experiences with a sense of hope that their lives will change. Although participants spoke with tones of hope, there was also frustration with their sense of disempowerment: "damned if you do, damned if you don't if you're a single parent here in Victoria."

Abuse

Many of the women spoke of the past abuses that they have suffered that has lead them to be in a program like Bridges. This abuse ranged from various kinds of domestic, alcohol and drug, childhood abuse and other violent situations, most often having come from a partner they once had in their life. One woman even shared with us that she is currently always living in fear due to her last abusive husband that continues to abuse her by sending her death threats. She says, "I live in fear when he is by the house...there is two weeks out the month that I cry." Three of the women also spoke about how they left abusive partners, but those men continue to try and stalk them, to the point where the women have had to re-locate for their safety and for their children's safety. A woman says, "I do know women that have tried to stay on the system, but I didn't choose this. I could be with my ex living the high life, but would have two black eyes every day and [that] would show a bad example for women."

Another pressing issue in their lives had to due with the lack of employment, skills for employment, and lack of confidence in getting a job. One woman says, "I'm at a loss right now. All I want is a job so I can get on with my life." One participant brought us to a realization that it was important for her to get a 'good' job rather than the kind of stereotypical jobs that surround women with a low-income. She stated: "why should they [women on welfare] have a brain? They [women] should be able to work."

Conversations around this comment displayed how the women felt about the idea that society does not support their need to educate and train for jobs that are "more than six bucks an hour," strongly asking: "where is the middle ground?".

Children

The women spoke a lot about their children, as they were integral to their lives and future. They expressed concerns about how they felt 'bad' for having put their children in the situation that they are in. The spoke about how they fear that their kids will go on to continue the cycle that they are currently situated within. They strongly made a point: they hoped that

their children, the next generation, would be able to break the cycle of the oppressions they are faced with and living under.

The women had children of various ages; some women had one child while others had three or four. There was this common theme amongst them of fear of their children finding out the reality of the lives they were living. For example one woman articulated to us a story about her daughter seeing a “poor” person and said to her mom: “mommy I’m glad we are not poor.” The mother was heartbroken for they are “poor” and she struggles to hide this from her daughter everyday. Many of the women spoke about how as their kids get older it is getting harder to hide their poverty and oppression as well as stresses. “I can’t do it. When I’m broke and I can’t do it, she [her daughter] will say, ‘Mommy, I’ll go get the money from my piggy bank.’” Other sentiments included how the children go to school and come home and lash out at their mom’s for being “welfare-moms” and yell at their mothers to get a job, to get help, and to stop having to live they way that they do.

The participants articulated their emotions through the stories they told us at the focus group. Indeed, the focus group was a space that many of the women felt comfortable in sharing.

The System

‘Frustration’ was a word that came up many times in both focus groups. Frustration about the system, about life, about being poor, and generally about everything. The women spoke of how the system offers support but when single mothers attempt to seek assistance and support, the process becomes more like an added barrier, difficult to overcome at the same time very impersonal. One woman mentioned that in the last year she has had four support workers and did not meet one of them yet. This left her feeling very angry as well as sad, for she not only just was looking for financial support, but was also hoping to get a sense of emotional support. The women also spoke of how social workers often belittle them and talk down to them. They do not feel respected by their workers, more so they feel victimized and burdensome. A powerful statement reads: “If no support, we will be high, drunk, and hiding.”

They also spoke about how the “systems” that are available to them are so hard to understand and are very confusing, in which case there are many loop holes to jump through before being able to get any kind of help. One woman says, “I’ve been in counseling since I was a wee little girl. There is support but no where to go back.” Another woman follows this sentiment with, “here is the info, now take it, and bye!”

More so, participants spoke to their feelings of fear and silence. A woman says, “I didn’t know I was taught to have that code of silence.” One woman spoke about her situations and how she felt that she needed to break the code of silence and isolation that she has been dealing with her entire life. On that note, the women began to talk about educating themselves. They felt that by knowing more about the ‘self’ and their journeys to and from the places they are at, they will be able to break the silence by being assertive, rather than disempowered and angry.

The women also spoke about how there are things available to them such as crisis grants but how hard they are to get. This was a very popular concern within both groups. They seemed to feel that the system “acts like they are so nice” by saying they offer such services but make it so hard to get, and after trying to get one, having gone through self-humiliation, the grant is often only \$15.00, better than nothing but still a slap in the face.

They all voiced their worries about how cheques are getting smaller yet childcare is getting higher and so are living costs. As a result, they have all had to learn how to live on a

small budget. This once again leads to the concern about children and the frustration of not being able to feed kids properly or to enter their children into extra curricular activities.

The women also voice their opinions about health, and how being on such a small budget does not allow them to live a healthy life. They can go to food banks to get food if they need but often this food is “macaroni and cheese”, and they feel that their kids need to eat more proteins such as meats, but this is the type of things that are expensive so they are stuck to having to eat cheap processed canned goods.

They also spoke of how they feel frustrated that employers will not give them a chance. Many of the women said that they have many job training programs “under their belts, but have no experience to go along with that” and therefore find it hard to get work. They feel no one gives them a chance. They also worry about how people perceive them and wonder if they will only ever see them as that single poor woman who is a recovering drug addict, or alcoholic.

They felt that the government needs to look at how the cuts they are making now will affect the future. It became apparent that cuts have taken a toll on the overall well being of single parent mothers in Victoria. The issues that were voiced on the subject of government cutbacks were dynamic and overlapping. It is obvious that there is no one solution, but rather there is a need for a shift in policy, follow-up, services, and resources, that are available to single mothers tied to the welfare system.

Bridges

The Bridges agency was referred to a place that helped the women “get out of their bubbles and to look at themselves in the mirror”, in order to critically see who they are, where they have been and where they want to go. Most of the participants came to Bridges to get job skills in hopes to get out of the cycle of oppressions that they have been living in. Bridges “taught them self-discipline, job skills, self empowerment and responsibility.” As an agency for women with abusive pasts, it also provided women with support, encouragement and empowerment. Many of the women spoke about how they have never learned to talk about their oppressions until they began conversations with one another, discovering that there were ‘other women like them’. One woman gave the example that she did not feel she had the language to even communicate how she felt and what she was going through. All she knew was sadness anger and frustration; Bridges has taught her how to realize her oppressions and the situations she has been in by offering her a way of understanding the world around her through the use of language and insights. Many of the women agreed about having a lack of language to communicate their feelings with, and how Bridges has really given them a way to do so.

Many of the women also spoke about how Bridges is the best program that they have been in so far, due to the fact of all the self empowerment and self reflection that goes on at Bridges, and the great job skills that they are obtaining. They also spoke about how at Bridges they offer a follow up period where the women are able to go back to touch base with the workers at Bridges in regards to how they are coping with life after finishing the Bridges program. One woman said: “you learn a lot of work skills and you don’t even realize you are learning them.”

The focus group discussions around Bridges provided the research group with insight into the places where the participants gained empowerment and support. This is important to include in the report, as it is a place of transition and social change and justice for women.

Hopes and Fears for the Future

When asked about hopes, the women were certain about breaking the cycle that they have been in and creating transitions in their lives. They also hope to get connected with a career, support, and better resources, all of which will aid them in providing a better lifestyle for them and their children. Another hope that came clear was shifting the way society views single mothers on social assistance. They hoped that people would come to see that their situation is not one of choice. Additionally women hoped to keep positive, self-aware, and continue to empower themselves and others.

In terms of fears, the women were afraid of the goals of the current B.C. Liberal government. Such fears surround cuts in necessary and valuable programs, facilitating their oppressed situation. Fears also were voiced around losing inspiration and the strength to “go on.”

Impact of recent government cut backs

When asked about the impact of government cuts, participants took a deep breath, sighed, and rolled their eyes before beginning to discuss this complex and oppressive issue that they all face at this critical time. The participants all have a relationship with the government, where the government holds a power over the women, and continues to be a strong manipulative force. The women repeatedly expressed their frustration with the ‘system.’ Indeed, from their stories, the system is an oppressive one.

The idea of ‘help’ and assistance is embedded within the structure, but accessibility to that assistance was being told to us as an apparent barrier to the participants. Many participants were angry at the lack of follow up, and lack of care they received from the ‘system.’ There was an overwhelming sense of belittlement and victimization that was being communicated which triggered the research team to critically reflect on our places of privilege and entitlement.

Many women expressed their concern for their children. Not only are the women being affected, but as single-mothers, their children are also caught in their cycle of oppression, as being intricately affected by the subtle and harsh ways the government cuts are taking a toll on their lives.

It is fair to state the two focus groups were largely discussions about the impact of the recent Liberal cuts. Indeed, this was a starting place to discuss other issues, which rail off the ways the government cuts are presently changing the participants’ lives. We as women felt very strongly about providing the space for the participants to relate to us the many ways the government affects their mental and physical health and well-being. The research group was adamantly angered with the ways subtle shifts in policy and procedure could have such a drastic life-changing effect.

XV. Process Analysis and Reflections in Hindsight

It was our goal in this research project to give a voice to the people most affected by the Liberal government cutbacks, and to facilitate positive change. We wanted to do participatory action research and involve the participants as much as possible. This proved to be difficult for a number of reasons.

We were under time constraints which strongly impacted on the amount of participant involvement. The only time we were able to engage with the women participants was when we met to conduct focus groups. As a result, most of the participants were not able to become involved to the extent we would have liked in a participatory study.

Also, the fact that we were outsiders of this community and our relative positions of privilege were barriers to conducting participatory research. In retrospect, it could have been to our advantage to either volunteer with Bridges or spend more time with the agency that the women participants actively talked about in the focus groups. This would have aided our understanding about the importance and relevance of Bridges, as well as providing us with a deeper knowledge of how Bridges impacts single mothers in Victoria. We could have also utilized the extra time to go and visit the resources that the participants referenced. In other words, spending a day in ‘their shoes.’

Lack of time also affected the amount of preparation we could do for the focus group. We had hoped to involve the participants in the creation of the research questions and process, but this proved to be difficult to do over a limited number of times we saw and talked with the participants. Much more relationship building time was needed to create an atmosphere where participants would be willing to spend time and energy on this project.

Additionally, it would have been beneficial to have allotted more time to this research project on the whole. The allowance of time would have given us the chance to have had more focus groups, as well as more time to become situated within the research as researchers. Time would have given us space to process, reflect, and analyze the data. We also feel that it would have been useful to have had given the women a way to evaluate the focus groups discussions, as a way for us to obtain feedback. Such feedback could have worked as another source of data, as well as have had provided a critique of our research project.

We also could have had a brainstorming session with the women in order to develop our research questions, instead of having had just met with their coordinator Susan Dempsey. We had hoped to involve Susan in the research project by recording her thoughts and views on the issues that the women presented us with. We thought her knowledge of, and level of comfort with, the participants would create a smoother process. We would have benefited from hearing more about Susan’s experiences (personal and political) with the participants, the ‘system’ and how she views the cycle of oppression the women are situated within.

Before this study, we assumed that the issues of poverty and accessibility would be very prevalent among the participants. Having these preconceived ideas caused us to create questions around them. These ideas may have also influenced our focus in our conversations with the participants and how we structured each focus group.

XVI. Relevance and Utility

Our goal in this research project was to give voice to the experiences that single mothers living in Victoria endure at this critical time of the Liberal government’s cut backs in different programs. The report is very relevant as it attempts to, through our perspective, speak to the lived experiences of ten single mothers in Victoria that are living under government oppression.

It was anticipated that the research project would provide three specific benefits. First, a closer examination of the different impacts government cuts have had on single-mothers, which would expand our understanding of poverty and its connection to women. We felt that by

examining the link between a single mother's lack of power and social cuts, the women at Bridges would be able to validate their experience. Second, the research project would give us first-hand experience in the fields of social work research and community development. It would give the agencies working with women with histories of violence, abuse, and poverty organized data another resource for improving the situations of low-income single-mothers in the region. Third, the research project would be handed in and graded. The participants will have the opportunity to read the finished project, and may benefit from the results due to seeing their lived experiences being reflected into a body of literature.

The final paper will be given to the Bridges program and VIPIRG in hope that it will be helpful for them to illustrate to the government how important their program is as well as how destructive (mentally, psychologically, physically) recent government cuts have been. We hope that our study will work to empower the women by having given them a place to voice their stories as well as a valid tool, that may help them. We also hope to empower ourselves and those who will read our research by the stories the women share with us. These stories have worked to show us the often untold lived experiences of women who suffer in our society due to social inequalities.

XVII. Reflection

Working as a group on a research project, we feel, has added many dimensions to the final research project. Our multiple voices have coloured the process of the research as well as the final project. All members of the research team are engaged in full time studies and work, and as a result, this has made it difficult and stressful to arrange a time for all aspects of the research process and the final research project.

However, the ways we have benefited in conducting this research project with the women from Bridges and VIPIRG is tremendous. As women student researchers, we consider the research project to be an unforgettable experience. None of the student researchers has been involved with a project that looks closely and critically at issues such as the government's cutbacks on single mothers. This was a new realm for all of us, which we entered with different places of privilege and entitlement. However, we all walk away with a greater sense of the intricate ways oppression intersects for single mothers living in Victoria on social assistance. The research group hopes that this form of learning never rests for us, but continues to build links and create relationships with those situated in the 'margins.' Indeed, the research project has invoked a new passion for us to build on what we have learned and participate with and for women, and pursue social change and justice. In solidarity.