# "Motherwork" and communicative labor: A gendered analysis of hunger in marginalized US women

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**Introduction:** The feminization of hunger plays out in communities across the globe where poverty exists, including the United States, the world's wealthiest nation. The feminization of hunger and poverty can be traced to the "gender system"—deep seated gender inequities resulting in job segregation, discrimination in pay, unpaid caring work, and gender-based violence.

**Methods:**  Exploratory qualitative research study with two focus groups comprising low-income women ($n = 20$).

**Results:**  The analysis identified three key themes: toxic stress related to food work, welfare stigma and racism, and the invisible loads of care work and communicative labor.

**Discussion:**   The analysis shows how women's experience of hunger and food insecurity in the US is linked to forces of economic deprivation and symbolic violence. Consistent with Allen's (2007) theorization of "motherwork", for women and mothers the experience of food insecurity is distinct because of its gendered link to the care work, food work, and communicative labor necessary for the survival and wellbeing of children.

KEYWORDS

hunger, food insecurity, gender, mother, care work and caring labor, communicative labor

## Motherwork, care work, and communicative labor: A gendered analysis of hunger in the United States

Gender is inextricably bound with societal systems of difference and inequality and hunger is a prime example of those inequalities- this is as true in the United States as it is in the Global South. In the United States, one in three single mothers' struggles to feed herself and her children and female-headed households are more than twice as likely compared to all households to live in poverty and experience hunger and food insecurity (Bread for the World, 2019). Single-parent, female-headed households are significantly more likely to be food-insecure than single-parent, male-headed households (31.6–21.7%; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). This is not to say that men, single men with children, and men of color do not experience hunger and food insecurity, but rather their marginality is also gendered in unique ways linked to occupational hazards, unemployment entitlements, and the criminal justice system (Dickinson, 2020). For women of color, the hunger experience is tied to economic deprivation, but also the crushing burden of racism that impacts material and social opportunities (Hilmers et al., 2013; de Souza, 2019).

Food insecurity is a social determinant of health with short- and long-term negative health outcomes for women with children (e.g., Weinreb et al., 2002; Siefert et al., 2004; Martin and Lippert, 2012). While hunger in the Global North is a well-documented phenomenon (Riches and Silvasti, 2014) that can result in starvation, more often than not it is characterized by inconsistent access to food, disordered eating patterns, and consumption of lower quality foods resulting in poor physical and mental health outcomes. The stressful nature of food insecurity and its interactions with other poverty stressors means that trauma and stress are central to the hunger experience and can cause long-term physical and emotional harm (Knowles et al., 2016; Hecht et al., 2018). This is one reason why food insecurity is measured not only by the lack of

food but *worry* about the lack of food as seen in this key item on the USDA food insecurity scale: "*I/We) worried whether (my/our) food would run out before (I/we) got money to buy more.*" Indeed, one of the earliest studies conducted with women to operationalize the meaning of hunger identified household dimensions of hunger such as food anxiety, unsuitable food, and acquiring food in socially unacceptable ways (Radimer et al., 1990).

The feminization of poverty and hunger at global and local scales can be traced to deep seated gender inequities resulting in discrimination in pay, benefits and employment, job segregation, unpaid caring work, and gender-based violence (Van Esterik, 1999; Hendriks, 2002; Martin and Lippert, 2012). Women bear the brunt of poverty because their economic labor is exploited within labor markets and their "caring labor"—defined as "the multifaceted labor that produces the daily living conditions that make basic human health and wellbeing possible (Zimmerman et al., 2006, p. 3)— remains uncompensated within the private sphere. Caring labor may be thought of in terms of "social reproduction"—a process which involves "the creation of people as cultural and social, as well as physical beings" (Glenn, 1992, p. 4). Food is central to creating and producing human beings as social, cultural, and physical beings and given the gendered linkages between food and care, women tend to assume most of the food/nutritional responsibilities in the home (Counihan, 1999; Phillips, 2009; Sukovic et al., 2011; Carney, 2015). This "food work" involves massive amounts of labor including buying, strategizing, preparing, serving, and feeding of food (Beagan et al., 2008). Communication scholarship has also drawn attention to the notion of "communicative labor"—everyday discursive actions and articulations that place added mental, emotional, and physical strain on sick and marginalized bodies in their struggles to be heard (Frank, 2013; Harter, 2013). McKinney (2015) notes: "Indeed, the fact that people of color, women, the poor, the institutionalized, and the colonized must struggle to be understood, to be recognized, to be treated as subjects deserving of attention, empathy, care, concern and consideration by the dominant makes sense when we see that communication is a genuine form of labor" (p. 9).

Drawing on two focus groups with low-income women, this exploratory study attempts to understand ways in which care work and "motherwork" come together in the lives of women and mothers experiencing hunger and food insecurity in the United States. While the sample size ($n = 20$) is limited and not representative of all women who experience hunger and food insecurity in the US, the voices of these women offer us uniquely gendered and matricentric ways in which to think about hunger. Communication scholar Dutta (2016) asserts that it is the role of health communication scholars to examine how discourses are deployed by patriarchal structures to further marginalize women's health and how women negotiate structures, articulate agency, and enact resistance amid oppression. Taking up this call for health communication research, this study illuminates the voices of women in the margins of US society who experience hunger and food insecurity despite living in one of the most industrially advanced nations of the world. Care work and food work are stress-provoking at the best of times, but what does it mean for women and mothers experiencing deep structural vulnerabilities? My analysis is guided by Black feminist scholar Collins (2007) conceptualization of "motherwork," which shifts the center of analysis to refocus feminist theorizing on the experiences, standpoints, and voices of marginalized women. Collins (2007) argues that feminist

frameworks in the west have historically centered the experiences and standpoints of white, middle-class women and failed to account for the lives of poor and minoritized women. Drawing on Collins, a question I ask is how might our understanding of hunger and food insecurity change if marginalized US women and mothers were central to the analysis? What do we learn about hunger and food insecurity from the voices of mothers, who experience hunger, food insecurity, and other structural vulnerabilities? How do women and mothers articulate motherwork and food work in the hunger context?

## Women and food insecurity in the global north context

Women suffer disproportionately from higher financial and psychological costs associated with poverty and food insecurity (Hamelin et al., 2002; De Marco et al., 2009). Gender inequalities are reinforced in the food context because of the commodification of food and the fact that women still play the prominent role in caring for children (Phillips, 2009). Low-income and poor women struggle not only with a lack of access to food, but lack of access to housing, medical care, childcare, and health care. For example, Tarasuk (2001) investigated household food insecurity in a sample of 153 women seeking charitable food assistance in Toronto. Women identified chronically inadequate incomes and the need to meet additional and unusual expenditures as precipitating household food insecurity. To cope, women delayed the payments of bills, giving up services, selling or pawning possessions, or sending children elsewhere for a meal. Women were also more likely to report lower intakes of vegetables and fruit, longstanding health problems, and social isolation. In another study, researchers interviewed 69 families on the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) government food assistance program in southwest Michigan between 2007 and 2008 when retail gasoline prices rose nearly 75% along with food prices (Webber and Rojhani, 2010). Participants noted feeling concerned about their food budgets, shopping less, and purchasing poorer quality foods. Racial and residential segregation patterns mean that women also tend to reside in "food deserts" with no quality food stores, pharmacies, and home needs stores within walking distance (Vardeman-Winter, 2017).

Hunger and food insecurity occur amid other "structural vulnerabilities" defined as "a positionality that imposes physical/emotional suffering on specific population groups and individuals in patterned ways" (Quesada et al., 2011, p. 340). Researchers observe that structural vulnerability is the result of (a) class-based economic exploitation and cultural, gender/sexual, and racialized discrimination as well as (b) symbolic violence that legitimizes punitive neoliberal discourses of individual unworthiness (Quesada et al., 2011). Drawing on notion of symbolic violence, de Souza (2019) explored how "neoliberal stigma"—a particular kind of narrative that focuses on hard work, personal responsibility—is placed on the bodies of poor, low income, and racialized groups in charitable food pantry settings thereby reinforcing hunger gaps and the social and symbolic subordination of certain groups. In the food policy context, shame, suspicion, and surveillance function as communicative vehicles of "biopower" subjecting poor and racialized communities to neglect and containment within the food system (de Souza, 2022). The notion of voice, pivotal to the culture-centered approach (CCA) in communication, illuminates the marginalization

and agency of communities that carry the burden of poverty, hunger, and neoliberal systems of oppression (Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Dutta, 2008, 2015). For example, a CCA study with mothers on the WIC US food assistance program highlighted themes of loss of jobs, poverty, depression, inaccessibility to health care, and welfare stigma while also displaying agency and critical consciousness regarding their positionalities (Yehya and Dutta, 2015).

Food insecurity has a profound effect on the physical and mental health of women, particularly women with children, and has been identified as a stressor linked to clinical mental health outcomes (e.g., Siefert et al., 2001; Gundersen et al., 2008; Wiig and Smith, 2009; Cullen and Ivers, 2011; Martin and Lippert, 2012). Structural vulnerability produces "toxic stress" because women constantly must make trade-offs between food and other basic needs (Knowles et al., 2016; Hecht et al., 2018). While positive stress is a normal and essential part of healthy development, toxic stress occurs when an individual experiences strong, frequent and a prolonged activation of the stress response due to abuse, neglect, extreme poverty, violence, and/or food scarcity and the body has little chance to recover (Franke, 2014). A series of qualitative and mixed methods studies have found that food insecurity among women is related to toxic stress, gender-based violence, and structural vulnerability (Chilton and Booth, 2007; Cutts et al., 2011; Chilton et al., 2015; Knowles et al., 2016). Linking food insecurity to clinical mental health outcomes, studies have found that food insufficiency was significantly associated with poor or fair self-rated health and physical limitations with respondents meeting the criteria for recent major depressive episode or generalized anxiety (Siefert et al., 2001; Whitaker et al., 2006). Coping with food insecurity is also associated with complex familial-level processes that impact parent-child relationships; parents try to protect children and children try to protect parents from the physical and emotional effects of food insecurity—motivations that arise from deep seated beliefs about the gendered role of family members (Hamelin et al., 1999; Fram et al., 2011).

## Theorizing "motherwork"

Feminist research asserts that recognizing the "gender system" is critical to understanding the social, economic, and health marginalization of women (Harding and Hintikka, 1983; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999; Collins, 2000; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). Gender as a social system regulates the distribution of resources conferring advantages and opportunities to men and disadvantages and constraints to women. In this view, gender is not primarily an identity or role, but an institutionalized system of social practices that organizes social life and relationships. Like other multilevel systems of difference (e.g., race and class), gender is constituted at macro, meso, and micro levels and involves the distribution of material resources and opportunities, interpersonal, interactional, and organizational practices, as well as personal identity and meaning making at the individual level (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999).

The experience of women and mothers in the United States much like the rest of the developing world is profoundly shaped by the gender system and how it organizes labor and care work. However, despite hunger and food insecurity disproportionately affecting women and single women with kids, there are far too few studies that explore women's experiences of hunger from a feminist

standpoint. With a few exceptions (Chilton and Booth, 2007; Chilton and Rabinowich, 2012; Carney, 2015; Chilton et al., 2015), this analysis is rarely taken up in the hunger literature perhaps because so much feminist theorizing around motherhood has been rooted in the experiences of white, middle-class women (Collins, 2007).

Collins's (2007) provides a powerful critique of white middle class theorizations of motherhood, which focus on false bifurcations between home/work and private/public but fail to analyze the material conditions of women's lives. To this end, Collins (2007) offers the concept of "motherwork" for analyzing the voices of women at the bottom of the social hierarchy noting that motherhood occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender and cannot be analyzed in isolation from its context.

Unlike white middle class women, the class-based and racialized struggles of poor women shape how they mother and the purpose of mothering. The conflict is not necessarily with men or within the home but circumstances beyond. Collins (2007) writes:

> The locus of conflict lies outside the household, as women and their families engage in collective-effort to create and maintain family life in the face of forces that undermine family integrity. But this "reproductive labor" or "motherwork" goes beyond ensuring the survival of one's own biological children or those of one's family. This type of motherwork recognizes that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival empowerment, and identity (p. 312–313).

While the physical survival for white middle class children is taken-for-granted, for women who are "physically starving," the survival of their children is not to be assumed (Collins, 2007, p. 314). The work of mothers is not solely the relationship between a woman and her children, but also a political role (Story, 2014). "Motherwork" is the work that women do to ensure the survival of their children, families, and communities (Story, 2014). Collins (2007) points out three key care themes characterizing the experiences of Native American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian-American women: the importance of working for the physical survival of children and community, the dialectical nature of power and powerlessness in structuring mothering patterns, and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity (Collins, 2007, p. 314).

In engaging women's voices and in placing their personal experiences within context, this study seeks to call attention to the deeply situated experiences of low-income marginalized mothers in the US hunger context. The gender system is so far reaching in American culture such that it is hidden in plain sight, taken for granted, and rarely questioned. The purpose of this analysis is to draw attention to the intimate suffering experienced by mothers in a context of deep structural vulnerability, where their labors of care remain profoundly unrecognized, invisible, and burdensome. Dominant narratives of American wealth and exceptionalism tend to prevent an analysis of women—particularly white women- as disempowered and dispossessed. This study offers a nuanced understanding of how low-income women -white women and women of color in the United States experience hunger thereby generating context-specific knowledge and entry points for political action.

## Methods

This exploratory study reports on data garnered from two focus groups ($n = 20$) conducted with women at a community organization located in a small Midwestern city in the United States. The women were clients of a community organization aimed at eliminating poverty among low-income communities. The researcher had existing professional relationships with organizational leadership and staff and was therefore granted entry and access to clients. A brief informational session about the study was held at a monthly staff meeting and staff were encouraged to share information with clients. Flyers about the study were also posted onsite. Women who wanted to participate in the study were invited to sign up with a designated staff member. All women who signed up for the study and who showed up on the day of the focus groups were included in the focus group discussions. Two separate focus groups were conducted with 10 female-identified participants each ranging in age from 30 to 60. Except for three women who identified as Black and/or women of color, the rest identified as white. All women identified as "low income" and were either unemployed or underemployed. As seen subsequently in the findings, the women cycled in and out of the labor market depending on strategic calculations regarding employment and benefits.

Focus groups took place in the evening in a conference room located in the building. Childcare, transport, and dinner were provided to participants and their children. The focus groups were conducted by the author and another trained researcher. Before the start of the focus groups, women were guided through the informed consent process ensuring that they knew what they had signed up for and that they could leave or stop at any time. Focus group topics were designed to be open-ended and engaged three main topics: experiences of hunger and food insecurity, meanings of health and food, and stress and stress mitigation. Focus groups lasted 2 h with an additional 30 min allocated for the evening meal catered from a local restaurant. A research incentive of $15 was provided. All participants provided written informed consent to participate prior to enrollment in the study. All research protocols were approved by University of Minnesota Human Institutional Review Board (IRB Code Number: 1106S01082). The author was affiliated with this institution when the study was conceived and carried out.

Focus groups were digitally audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and loaded into *Nvivo*, a qualitative software used to code data. Charmaz's (2001) constructivist approach to grounded theory was used to analyze the data, which involved (a) open coding or a line-by-line reading of all transcripts coding for "what is happening" in the data, (b) selective or focused coding, which brought together several descriptive codes into more conceptual themes, and (c) synthesis/interpretation, which involved contextualizing and theorizing themes in light of the existing literature and theoretical framework. Some examples of open codes included: shopping for groceries, preparing meals, feeling lonely, fearing for children's future, running out of food, experiencing negative reactions to EBT/SNAP, and explaining household hunger to children. Selective coding involved grouping, categorizing, and collapsing codes into more conceptual themes. For example, fearing for children's future and explaining household hunger to children were brought into the conceptual theme of care work.

In the final stage, the conceptual themes were interpreted and theorized with respect to extant understandings of motherwork, caring labor, and food work. For instance, the theme of care work was articulated using the lens of communicative labor and mental/emotional loads.

Notably, the analytical process was grounded and iterative involving a constant looping back and forth between codes, themes, and interpretation. For example, the analysis did not begin with the notion of "motherwork," rather it was only after being immersed in the data that the need for a more nuanced and sensitive theoretical tool emerged that could bear witness to the voices of women in the margins. Consistent with the culture-centered approach (CCA) and the arguments offered by Collins (2007), while the focus groups only had three women who identified as Black or women of color, an intentional choice was made to highlight these women's voices in the analysis so as to call attention to the particularity of their experience and avoid conflating their experiencing with the larger group. All names and mentions of ages, specific health conditions, and places were altered in the manuscript to protect participant confidentiality.

## Findings

Three major themes emerged in the focus groups with respect to hunger and food insecurity: (a) toxic stress related to food work, (b) stigma and racism, and (c) invisible care work and communicative labor. These themes while interrelated represent gender-specific challenges relevant to motherwork and food insecurity. Toxic stress refers to the daily struggle of having to make ends meet in the kitchen and grocery store linked to economic exploitation in the work place and unremunerated care work at home; stigma and racism refer to the negative meanings, interactions, and discursive practices women encounter in their mundane efforts to procure food, and the theme of invisible care work and communicative labor refers to the hidden worry, doubt, and self-doubt women carried with respect to raising and producing physically, mentally, and emotionally stable and healthy children.

## Food work and toxic stress: "It's just food, and bills, and me. I don't even know who I am anymore"

Participants experienced deep anxieties, uncertainties, and prolonged stress related to economic job security and "food work" referring to the copious amounts of labor required to put food on the table such as shopping for food and strategizing about what to buy (Beagan et al., 2008). While positive stress is normal, "toxic stress" refers to the overwhelming stress associated with economic deprivation that remains active for prolonged periods of time eventually wearing out the body and mind (Franke, 2014). Women linked the stress of food work directly to low wage jobs and failures of the welfare and food assistance systems, which impacted their physical and mental wellbeing. Women were concerned not only with putting food on the table, but how to produce healthy and nutritious meals of their kids on extremely tight budgets.

The lack of livable wages meant that women struggled with paying for basic needs and were in a state of constant stress

having to decide whether to pay for housing, food, or transport. Women discussed being caught between an oppressive labor market and punitive state welfare benefits, where they were forced to choose between full time employment with inadequate pay or part-time employment with inadequate benefits. Here is how one mom explained it:

> Participant 5: My stressor is actually working a full-time job and not making enough money. My vehicle is breaking, so if my vehicle breaks, I cannot work. I am going to be having about $700 a month taken out between insurance and taxes. That's almost one whole check. My rent is about the other half. *How am I supposed to eat?* How am I supposed to put gas in my car? How am I supposed to have insurance?
>
> Participant 6: That's real. That's real life.
>
> Participant 5: I've decided that I might be quitting my full-time job to work part time so then I'm not stuck in this situation.

Another mom similarly noted that the high costs of medical care and pharmaceutical drugs put her in an untenable situation necessitating part-time employment.

> Participant 4: I cannot work more than part time because I have medical conditions. I cannot afford my medication. If I go up anymore, I have to pay… I cannot afford my medication, one of them was $1,000 a month just for 30 pills… Then I feel like, how am I ever going to get ahead? We want to move out of our apartment, I want to get a house for my kids at some point.
>
> Facilitator: So, you are balancing.
>
> Participant 4: Right. If my health goes down, I know I am in trouble, because then I cannot do anything.

In these instances, the gender system oppressed women on multiple fronts. The labor and welfare system colluded to push women into part time employment, and in so doing excluding them from rights and opportunities necessary to secure their health and livelihoods.

The interlocking structures of gender and class along with women's roles as key caregivers and food providers came to a head at the grocery store and in the kitchen. The structural conditions of women's lives meant that everyday tasks of cooking and grocery shopping provoked fear, anxiety, and stress. Mothers assumed a large responsibility for the diet and health of their children and therefore struggled with guilt about not feeding their children healthy food. Participants discussed the many calculations they made about purchasing, cooking, and managing household food resources to ensure that their children are fed. Parents with teenagers felt the strain of hunger because children "just eat so much." One participant talked about how she made big meals for her family that could be stretched—"big meals of rice and potatoes." Another talked about how it had become easier to cook for her adolescent son, but more anxiety-provoking because there were never any leftovers: "he just eats too much and the fridge is always empty." In these instances, although there is food available, the worry is about how long that food will last and the nutritional quality of foods.

Anxiety and stress at the grocery store were recurring themes in the discussion. One participant described the trauma of grocery shopping, which was accompanied by an intense physiological reaction.

> Participant 2: When I go grocery shopping I have so much anxiety. I'm not even halfway through the store, I feel like I am just going to have a meltdown, because I know already I've gone past my budget. Right now, it's just me and my son, but then I also have other people who eat with us. That's fine. When you're trying to incorporate a decent, healthy meal, a protein, lots of vegetables that's tough. We all know it works! We all know that from growing up. I grew up on a farm. By the time we're in the store, sweat is coming down like that. By the time I get to the cashier, I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to go over, these people are all behind me… It's a lot of stress. I know. It's just unbelievable. I don't like the grocery store. I've steered clear from it. I'll go to *QuikTrip* and grab some milk. Little of this, little of that, we'll throw it together. I have a tight budget.
>
> Participant 1: It's expensive to eat healthy.
>
> Participant 2: Yeah, so expensive.

In the above excerpt, this participant reveals her longstanding knowledge about the importance of eating fresh and whole foods, yet she prefers to shop at the *QuikTrip*—the gas station store to avoid trauma at the grocery store. There are currently important conversations happening about "food deserts" and "food apartheid," where gas stations are seen as inferior and more expensive places to procure food compared to full grocery stores (Washington and Penniman, 2019). While this is true in general, for this woman and mother who stopped receiving food benefits, her survival depends on the limited choices and reduced prices at the gas station. In the context of hunger and food insecurity, the gas station was her "best friend."

> Participant 2: Yeah. I no longer can get food assistance, so I've been paying with cash. It's hard. That's the only reason why I don't eat a lot. You know, *Quik Trip*. I go after four o'clock when the muffins are two for a dollar, sometimes $1.29. They're hard, but it's better than paying $1.39 for one when I can get two for a dollar or when eggs are like 69 cents. Milk's cheaper. The gas station has been my best friend.

Participants talked about how the lack of transportation and physical challenges with carrying heavy bags on the bus made grocery shopping a stressful experience.

> Speaker 2: I think about prices, I think about even if we have food, the money and support is going to run out. The whole thought of bagging it, unbagging it, and the transportation to get there… it's too much.

Some moms discussed how hard it was to go shopping with kids—that it typically resulted in the spending more money and buying more junk food. Another mom talked about how difficult it was to manage her son's dietary restrictions on a tight budget and the ensuing stress.

> My son has to eat healthy because he has a chronic dietary illness. We're on a tight budget. It's been really difficult to feed him. You go to the grocery store and to me it is a very big anxiety. It takes a lot of time and energy. Yeah, he's picky about how he eats and what he eats. Since he has this illness, he has to be. He doesn't eat right. We don't eat right because we don't have the money to.

Given that mothers' shoulder much of the responsibility for feeding and nutrition, the lack of food, particularly healthy food, produced daily anxiety and stress. Time and money were precious resources, so decisions about what food to purchase and cook were weighed against whether kids would eat the food. In the following example, a mother notes that while healthfulness was an important criterion, in the context of everyday vulnerability, it was not the most important criteria she used to prepare meals:

> Participant 5: I like convenience because I think for me, I can cook things, but if they don't turn out right, then I'm just like, "Yeah, we could do lots of cooking or we could actually eat instead of wasting." I mean like my kids do like vegetables and fresher things, but if my cooking doesn't turn out then it's a complete waste. Then I think, "Well, I just spent all this time cooking. Nobody's going to eat it, so great. There's money down the toilet," you know? Why don't we just have a pizza or "here have a bowl of cereal" or "here have a box of macaroni and cheese," you know, which isn't great."

In this situation, avoiding risky food endeavors or "dishes that kids may not enjoy" was necessary to manage food insecurity. Pizza and mac and cheese were not healthy, but ensured survival for this mother and her children showcasing the dialectical nature of power and powerlessness in shaping motherwork and mothering patterns.

Amid the everyday struggle of making ends meet, the women discussed the impact of the stress on their minds, bodies, and sense of selves. Even as their children got older, they still felt responsible for taking care of children alongside their other responsibilities.

> Speaker 2: I'm tired, and I'm achy, chronic pains. My son's taking so much of my energy. Not just him, the system. It has just been hell. I feel like the bottom has dropped out. The other day I was literally saying, I was just like, "The bottom's dropped out. He's a young adult now, and he's not feeling good, he's not going to school, he is my stressor. He doesn't go out of the apartment. He doesn't go to the grocery, so I'm in charge of everything. I just quit all of a sudden. It's just like I don't want to go to the store, I don't want to think about the list, I don't want to think about food, I don't want to think about anything systematic. I feel like it's just food, and bills, and me. I don't even know who I am anymore.

Another woman agreed saying: "Sometimes I feel I'm going to burst from the stress, and the solitude of my life. Just all of this pressing in. Less money for this, this comes up, and then something else comes up" (Speaker 4). The toxic stress of laboring inside the home and outside the home had a detrimental effect on women's physical and mental health. There was no end to their food work or labors of care; the fact that this labor occurred in an economic system that devalued and exploited women was not lost on them as seen in talk about systemic issues. In this context of economic exploitation, women were unable to take care of their own health and indeed looking after their own health was not a priority as seen here:

> Speaker 3: Anything that's got to do is women's health. I've never done a mammogram, never done any of that. People in poverty stay in crisis. When you're in crisis, you don't give a doggone about going to the doctor about a mammogram.

## Welfare stigma and racism: "It's all about survival"

Women experienced stigma and racial discrimination in their attempts to manage hunger and food insecurity and keep their children fed. The mothers discussed the social and symbolic marginalization they suffered outside the homes. Micro-interactions at the grocery store or the benefits office served as ready reminders of their devalued status in society.

The stigma of receiving food benefits *via* Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) formerly known as "food stamps" was a recurrent stressor and participants described being at the receiving end of degrading communicative practices:

> Facilitator: Do you feel there's still a stigma about using this type of benefits today?
> Participant 6: Absolutely. There's this guy in the store. He was new at the grocery store. It was the seventh and he was like, "Oh, it's national stamp day." I was like.
> Participant: Oh, really?
> Participant 6: Yeah. I said, "You shouldn't say that. If you've got the right person in your line they would snap on you."
> Participant 7: Yeah, that was rude.
> Participant 6: Yeah. He said it was national stamp day. I think that there's still a stigma behind it, but a lot more people have to use it now.

Another participant noted that the stigma was less today because of the Electronic Benefits Transfer or "EBT" card. The 2008 Farm Bill mandated renaming and rebranding the food stamp program to SNAP as a way to destigmatize the program. In the revamped program, instead of receiving stamps or coupons, the benefits are put on an electronic card that can be swiped at any eligible store. Referring to this program change, participants explained:

> Participant 1: It is way better than it used to be. I remember back in the day and you had little monopoly money. My mom would send me to the little corner store and then my friend came to the store and she'd be like, "How are you going to buy that food? That's fake money." That is part of the stigma, so now you're not running around with monopoly money or a coupon book.

Despite shifts in the official program, participants noted ongoing stigma as seen here:

> Participant 2: They've also made the cards more stylish too, so people don't judge…If you're swiping it, no one is going to realize its EBT unless someone says it. Somebody did that to my mom at the *Dollar General*. She went to use it and the cashier said, "So, it's a total of eight dollars, is that your food stamp card you're using there?" There was a bunch of people behind her, so now she doesn't go back to that store because of that one person, you know.

Another participant noted that she was always self-conscious about the EBT card, although she shouldn't be.

Speaker 1: I'm not looking down no more. Yeah, I've always had a complex about using the EBT card. Times are changing, man, I'm telling you. I'm telling you, you wouldn't believe the people that are on WIC [Women, Infant, and Children food assistance program] and food supports.

The stigma of choosing "bad food" or junk food also came up in the discussions. One participant talked about the "funny looks" she got at the grocery store when buying certain foods.

Facilitator: When you say you have anxieties, is that coming from within, or from somebody or something in the environment?
Speaker 1: Yeah, you could tell when they're acting funny and looking at you crazy because you're using an EBT card. I've just seen it in the grocery store too many times when people are in there buying junk food using their EBT cards. But that's not for other people to decide.

In the above excerpt, this mom evokes a long-standing political battle about the proper use of SNAP benefits. For the last four decades, Congress has considered restricting foods with limited nutritional value to SNAP participants citing the growing obesity epidemic as rationale- the underlying assumption being that SNAP recipients do not make good food choices (SNAP, 2013). While many of these paternalistic legislations have not passed, SNAP recipients are often at the receiving end of political or "neoliberal stigma," where they are blamed for poor food choices (de Souza, 2019). Another participant described a similar experience of being chastised at the grocery store for buying "bad food."

Participant 4: When I'm at the grocery store, they'll treat me... they kind of look at your food sometimes, like, "You're buying those donuts?" Yeah I am. I'm buying these donuts. You know what I mean? They think that you should only get fruits and vegetables if you're using the card, it's like, no!
Participant 5: You can get more with your card if you don't buy fruits and vegetables because the fatty foods are cheaper than the healthier foods.
Participant 3: Right, that's the thing.
Participant 2: The pizza is five for 10 dollars at *Super One* right now. Fruits, you can get two sets of bananas or a cantaloupe for 10 bucks. You know? It's ridiculous.

In these examples, we see that hunger is not only about the lack of food, but also about symbolic violence- the negative meanings mothers encounter in their attempts to feed their families. Even as food policy continues to reproduce systems that commodify food and exploit the economic and caring labors of women throughout their life course, women are blamed for feeding their kids unhealthy foods. The trope of the "welfare queen" or Black Welfare Queen offers an apt example of how stigmatizing ideologies continue to haunt anti-hunger policy today, where in order to access government food entitlements such as SNAP and WIC, women have to consistently prove that they are hardworking and "good mothers" (de Souza, 2019, 2022). In these focus groups however, women reject the paternalistic and stigmatizing narratives placed on them even as they worried about the healthfulness of foods. They recognized that they were making food choices based on economic rationality to

ensure the survival of their kids. The voices of women illuminate the resilience, agency, and deep consciousness surrounding their own social locations and positionalities.

The stigma of hunger and welfare was amplified for Black women and women of color in the groups, who experienced both welfare stigma and racism in their efforts to feed themselves and their families. One Black woman described how she was subjected to humiliating micro-interactions at the welfare office reinforcing her social and economic subordination. In this instance, racism acted as a barrier to receiving SNAP benefits—her rightful entitlement- and therefore interrupted her ability to secure food for herself.

Participant 3: Yeah, it is humiliating. For me, I know people are like, "Oh, it's to help you, this and that." The extreme things you have to go through just to get that [SNAP benefits]. It's ridiculous.
Facilitator: Even to sign up?
Participant 3: Yeah. Even to sign up! It's frustrating because that's your job to help people, so you shouldn't be giving me a hard time. To the point where you cannot even go to the office by yourself. You have to bring somebody with you because of how disrespectful they are. Just incompetent.

Validating her experiences of racism, a white mom offered an example of her own privilege.

Participant 1: I have to say, as a white woman, I have definitely seen that happen. Other people get treated differently than me. Clearly. I go up there and it's really easy, "Hi! How can I help you?"
Participant 3: Yeah.
Participant 1: It's like I'm there as a business professional. I'm like, "My card's not working," they're like, "Oh! I'll give you a number to call. It just seems like they are friendlier to me and treat me more like I'm not beneath them" (italics added).

This marginalized white woman captures the essence of racial stigma illuminating the relative racial advantage she faces compared to her Black female counterpart when securing food entitlements. This is an important pattern of racial advantage and disadvantage, wherein the state and its actors play an active role in entrenching hunger and marginalization and this reality is even palpable to poor white women.

Drawing on the work of Black legal scholar Crenshaw (1991), Collins (2009) argues that social injustice occurs at the intersection of identities *via* four domains of power: structural, cultural, disciplinary, and interpersonal (p. 53–54). While structural, cultural, and interpersonal experiences of marginalization were common to all racial groups, Black women identified the "disciplinary" domain of power as central to their oppression. In the following excerpt, one Black woman describes the ways in which she is surveilled based on age-old racist stereotypes.

Participant 7: Being a Black woman in America is really probably my number one stress... Being a Black woman in America is a stress because I was shopping the other day at *Younkers* and I was being watched. I was spending money, but I was being watched. It's stressful being a Black woman in America because I'm treated a certain way when I go to the gas station.

I'm a Black woman in America so I have to work harder to make sure my kids don't end up like whatever because they're Black kids growing up in America. That has to be my number one stress. I'm like that isn't right, it's not fair. That gets me going, my cortisol levels go up, I just learned about that. I was accused of stealing before I moved here, I was at a training for work and I was accused of stealing bath towels or something. They just accused me of some goofy stuff. I noticed that I found myself over-explaining myself. To my boss like "No, there's proof, I had a camera above my door, I did not take towels, you can check this, ask this person. They saw me leaving." I thought to myself, "If I weren't a Black woman in America, would I be trying to break down that situation?" That's stressful and it's not an okay stress. It's also stressful that I need plastic over my windows. It's stressful that there's a hole in my wall that the landlord won't fix. It's really not fair and my cortisol levels go up and I get mad and stressed and it's even unhealthy because I'm a Black woman in America. Drop the mic.

> Participant 2: Being an honest Black woman.
> Participant 7: I'm definitely going to keep it real.
> Participant 3: Yeah. I like that. Keep it real.
> Participant 7: I think if you're talking to me, low-income people, they're not thinking about whether they're going to be stressed out, you know what I mean. It's all about survival.
> Participant 2: Survival and existence.

Racist stereotypes mean that Black women and children are immediately suspicious because of their skin color and therefore subjected to disciplinary practices which can result in death at the hands of the state. de Souza (2022) observes that the joining up of shame, suspicion, and surveillance are key features of neoliberal stigma that represent the coming together of racial and carceral logics. So while white moms talked about their motherwork in the context of debilitating toxic stress, social marginalization, and symbolic violence, for Black women, motherwork was about their very physical survival and the survival of their kids. Collins (2007) writes: "Themes of survival, power, and identity form the bedrock and reveal how racial ethnic women in the United States encounter and fashion motherwork" (p. 314). The voices of Black women in the group standout for their motherwork that takes place inside and outside the home to secure the safety of the family in the face of white supremacist structures that produce Black people as subhuman. By referring to her rising cortisol levels, this woman and mother calls attention to racism as an embodied physiological experience that impacts her health in the short and long term.

## Invisible care work and communicative labor: "No, but I'm fine, I'm cleansing"

Beyond the grueling tasks of feeding children and overcoming stigma and racism, the discussions revealed a unique emotional and "mental load" carried by mothers that centered on social reproduction or producing children as cultural, social, and physical beings. Simply put, the women worried about whether they were raising kids who would be successful in life and able to withstand life's various pressures. The concept of mental load is defined as the cognitive and emotional labor performed in a household involving anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, making decisions, and monitoring progress (Daminger, 2019). Similar to caring labor, the mental load of raising kids and maintaining a household is often a gendered phenomenon with women performing more cognitive labor overall (Daminger, 2019). This was certainly the case for women in the focus group discussions.

Not only were women involved with the everyday stress of maintaining the household and keeping it running, but they were also engaged in communicative labor to protect kids from the stress of poverty. This was a silent, but heavy burden that mothers carried that remained invisible to the outside world. For mothers, communicative work involved framing/reframing the problem of poverty for family members, making sense of situations of scarcity and structural vulnerability for their kids, but more often than not communicative labor took the form of silence and subterfuge. Hunger placed a dual burden on women- not only did they skip meals so kids could eat, but they also tried to hide their hunger from kids by offering alternative verbal accounts for the shortage of food as seen here:

> Participant 1: I go to the grocery store, and I'm buying all this healthy stuff, but I'm not eating it. It's my kids and grandkids that I take care of that are eating it.
> Participant 2: If it comes down to it, there have been days where I've had a little bit to munch on, a few carrots, but I'll make sure my son is fed over me. Because that's just the way I am. There have been days where he's like, "Mom, did you eat anything?" I'm like, "No, but I'm fine. I'm cleansing."

In this instance, this mother attempts to buffer her kids from the emotional and mental consequences of hunger and poverty, but in so doing, confronts the stress of hunger and poverty alone. Another participant agrees:

> Participant 4: If you're with people who are struggling or who are dependents, you have to be strong. If you're alone, you have to be strong. There is a solitary piece to this whether you have family or not. You're not going to dump it on your family or if you have children or grandchildren, you don't expect them to grow up fast and understand that this is the way the world really is. There's not enough food and there are all these pressures. There is a piece of it that's solitary, whether you live with people or not.

Another participant reinforced her point saying:

> Speaker 4: You can't really talk about it. It's just like you don't say, "I'm hungry, I haven't eaten today" to somebody on the bus, or somebody out there. You don't start going on and on about these things. Yet, it's just weighing so heavily. It's like this huge cloud in my life personally. I don't feel comfortable in terms of food security. The piece that makes it very stressful is that it's a very private experience. You meet people, "Hi, how are you doing?" This isn't what you talk about. Yet, more and more and more people are marginalized with food and other issues. I'm just alone with this experience. It's a lot of pressure and solitude.

In these examples we see how the communicative agency of the women is compromised either because of the labors of care or social stigma surrounding hunger and poverty. We also see how while silence and subterfuge express care, these processes also work to individualize, invisibilize, and privatize the large scale structural

issue of hunger, and in so doing sensitize us to the socio-political dimensions of intimate communicative labor.

The women recognized the liberating aspects of communication, even though they may not have felt able to vocalize their experiences due to the burden of caregiving responsibilities. In the following example, one woman discusses the importance of "speaking" as a method to manage stress and make sense of it all.

> Speaker 5: I don't know about you guys, but like you say, you're trying to juggle all kinds of things. You're juggling family, you're juggling aging parents, you're juggling your own life, trying to fit everything in and whatnot. Oftentimes, you can mull something around in your head. You can't see a way out at all. When you're to the frustrated point enough where you speak to it, speak to somebody about it, or speak about it to someone. Not necessarily a professional, but somebody that can listen, to orally state the issue, I think your mind has to work different to put it into words. Oftentimes, when you say it out loud to somebody, then bam, magic, there's the answer! I think because our mind is having to work to put it into words so somebody can understand it, the parts start coming together that weren't together before, and sometimes the answer is there.

In this cogent analysis, this mom illuminates the power of communication and being able to tell you story. Her words resonate with the work of scholars who have studied the power of personal narratives for "sense-making" and processing events particularly in situations where people have lost their voice due to illness or in this case the forces of structural violence (Frank, 2013; Harter, 2013).

Mothers worried about the intergenerational effects of poverty and its impact on the moral and behavioral development of their children. In a neoliberal era, stigmatizing perceptions of the poor typically entail negative attributions, where poor people are seen as lazy, irresponsible, lacking in moral standards, and not willing to improve themselves or their circumstances (Quesada et al., 2011; de Souza, 2019). This could not have been further from the truth. These mothers thought deeply about their kids' futures. They worried constantly about how historical trauma and early life toxic stress including exposure to poverty, a lack of stable housing, and food insecurity might impact their kid's development:

> Participant 4: I worry about all this historical trauma, because I do a lot of training and stuff on adverse childhood effects and trauma. I'm constantly thinking about how I'm affecting my kids and their future by being poor. By not being able to give them this stability. You cannot eat good food, because mom cannot afford it. The healthy things that I want to put in your mouth, I cannot have. You cannot do all the things that other kids do because we cannot afford it. You don't have a yard because I cannot afford it. I'm worried about what is their future going to be like.
>
> Participant 6: Can I say something about that? Because my mom was a working mom and we hardly ever saw her. We didn't have a yard, we always lived in apartments. I suppose those same thoughts were running through her mind too. You've got to think, when they grow up, this is what they've got to strive for now- to have a yard. We used to move around constantly, but now I stay still. I'm in the same house to umpteen years. I got my yard.
>
> Participant 5: My daughter is grown up now and she's doing way better than I am. I raised her as a single mom. She's got

a full-time job, she's driving a real car and she's got her own apartment. She's trying to change it for herself. I had her at 16. She hasn't had a kid yet. She graduated on time and was the first college graduate.

> Participant 3: First generation.
>
> Participant 5: Things can be good in the future… I'm just letting you know.
>
> Participant 6: I get what you mean though.

In this excerpt, we see how mothers worry about what their kids are inheriting from them and their own maternal roles in facilitating kids' successes and failures. Their articulations reveal deep knowledge about the long term effects of structural violence as well as a tendency to internalize blame for its effects (e.g., "we didn't have a yard" and "we didn't have food").

The specific notion of "mother blame" emerged in the conversation with women displaying a variety of standpoints and experiences on the subject. The "bad mother" trope refers to the tendency to blame mothers for the failures of their children; a deeply ingrained patriarchal notion, where working women and Black women in particular, are blamed for transmitting lax morals, modeling subversive behavior, and thereby perpetuating poverty and delinquency (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998; Boero, 2010). In focus groups discussions, the "bad mother" trope showed up as part of the mental burden that women bear.

> Participant 4: I'm just going to say one more thing. I mean I think we also live in a culture that blames parents and mothers a lot… We feel we're never doing good enough.
>
> Participant 6: We personally blame our parents, you are right.
>
> Participant 4: A lot of parents blame their mothers, out there. It's funny though because my mom was the same way. My mom worked three jobs and put herself through college. You know what I mean. I feel good, I feel good about me. I feel good about how I turned out. You're right though, maybe it is just that mother gene where I'm so stressed out about what's going to happen to them.
>
> Participant 5: I was also going to say, I have a successful daughter, but my son is sitting in jail right now. blame myself, I feel like it's my fault I didn't raise him well, but I know he's a young adult now, he makes his own decisions. I blame myself for what has happened. Maybe if I had somebody in my life... You know what I mean?

While the women articulated a variety of feelings related to parenting, the mental burden of "bad" mothering practices was common to all. The women worried about their personal roles and responsibilities in raising kids, while also recognizing the oppressive and power-laden discourses operating in the larger culture that sought to blame them for the impacts of structural violence. The voices of women illuminate the ways in which structural vulnerability and agency shape dialectical patterns of mothering and motherwork.

## Discussion

In this exploratory study, I analyzed focus group discussions with low-income women using Collins's (2007) concept of "motherwork." The study shows how women's experience of food insecurity are

distinct because of the inseparable link to motherwork and the labors of care necessary for the social production of children. Toxic stress related to food work, welfare stigma and racism, and emotional and mental loads related to invisible care work and communicative labor were recurring themes articulated by mothers. Not only did women perform the daily caring labor necessarily to keep families running and put food on the table (e.g., looking after children, paying bills, signing up for benefits, grocery shopping, cooking, planning, and preparing meals), but they carried heavy mental and emotional loads linked to social reproduction. The lack of resources meant constant worry about how to make ends meet at the grocery store, how to cook efficiently, how to navigate part time vs. full time employment, and how to ensure that poverty did not adversely impact kids. Motherwork, food work, and care work extracted all manner of labor from women and came at a high cost, where stress, anxiety, burnout, and worsening health outcomes were all articulated by women as outcomes of living with poverty and food insecurity. Amid the daily struggle of making ends meet, motherwork centered on ensuring the physical, emotional, and social survival of children.

In listening to the voices of low income and racialized women, we learn that hunger is about both material and symbolic violence. The voices of women underscore the highly gendered physical, social and emotional facets of hunger that often remain invisible. Women's structural vulnerability is produced through systems of economic, gender and race-based exploitation linked to labor and welfare markets as well as symbolic violence linked to neoliberal narratives of deservedness and personal responsibility. Women's labor has little exchange value such that even working fulltime means that they cannot support themselves and their families. To make matters worse, women are marginalized by the paternalistic welfare system (Fraser, 1987), which undercompensates their labor. Food insecurity restrains access to food, but also opportunities for positive interactions. Women were distressed about "neoliberal stigma" or stigmatizing and racist encounters they experienced in the grocery store and other public spaces grounded in notions of good food and narratives of deservedness (de Souza, 2019). For Black women, racism restricted their access to food and other government services serving as a constant reminder of their devalued position in the racial hierarchy. Motherwork was not only about Black women's maternal roles in the home, but about defending their identities and families amid racist violence. In interrogating assumptions surrounding motherhood, the women revealed a heightened critical consciousness and agency— we should interpret these liberatory acts as important motherwork necessary for the survival of women and their families.

A recurrent thread connecting women's narratives was about how not being able to feed one's family was deeply painful impacting their identities as mothers. More than two decades ago anthropologist Van Esterik (1999) elaborated on how the ability to feed one's families was central to the identity of women, therefore losing access to food meant taking away a major source of women's power and identity. Van Esterik states:

> But for women who are normally responsible for providing food for their families, the experience of being unable to feed their children is tantamount to torture (and food deprivation is a form of torture"). Therefore, hunger and food insecurity must be considered part of the violence that women experience and must be explored as a violation of human rights… (p. 157–158).

Carney (2015) found similar themes in her work exploring hunger and migration in the lives of Mexican women; she found that food work was a fundamental modality through which migrant women negotiated and sustained family and community relationships. Migration was a hazardous endeavor filled with grief, conflict and economic exploitation that women undertook so that they could literally provide food for children and ensure their survival. However, arrival in the US did little to alleviate hunger and they continued to experience constraints in their ability to feed their families resulting in deep trauma and suffering. For women in this study, hunger was similarly a deeply painful physical and emotional experience that restricted their ability to care for children. Exposing their children to hunger and poverty was traumatizing as they worried about the long term consequences of adverse childhood experiences. Thus, while caregiving is fundamental to the human experience and can produce great joy, for women and mothers whose lives are constrained by structural vulnerability and state-sanctioned systems of violence, caregiving can have a detrimental effect on the health of women and exacerbate their precarity.

In addition to the typical kinds of relational communicative labor proffered by mothers to raise and "produce" children fit for society, for mothers living with hunger and food insecurity, *silence* was also a form of communicative labor. While silence is not typically conceptualized as such, it is a form of communicative labor because of the stamina it takes to remain silent in the face of deep mental and emotional strain both inside and outside the home. Poverty and hunger silenced women in their own homes, where they did not feel it was appropriate to burden kids and other family members with food anxieties. Poverty also silenced women outside the home through stigmatizing discourses including welfare stigma, racism, and mother-blame discourses that threatened the identities of women as caregivers and mothers. The silencing effect of hunger meant that hunger was a private, lonely, and isolating experience that disconnected women from their families and communities as one participant noted: "I'm just alone in this experience. It's a lot of pressure and solitude."

In this setting, where women labored to remain silent on hunger—a key concern that interrupted their lives and life chances, it is important to speculate on the political implications of silence. Quite simply, in what way does silence serve a political function? McKinney (2015) argues that the notion of "communication as labor" sheds light on subordinating forms of speech that play an important role in determining social status and political rights beyond the micro interaction. In other words, speech even in the most intimate and micro-interactional settings is imbricated with social and political power. In this setting, we might argue that silence produced through structural and symbolic violence plays a crucial role in sustaining hunger and propping up inadequate solutions to hunger. Neoliberal ideological formations devalue women and their labors of care positioning them as bad mothers and creating fertile grounds for shame, silence, and disconnection. At the cultural level, these discourses interpret hunger an individual problem caused by moral defect and bad decision making, rather than a structural problem. At the interactional level, these discourses sustain and reproduce neoliberal policies and practices as seen in grocery store and welfare office interactions. Overall, these discourses function to keep women quiet and maintain the invisibility of hunger—specifically

the ways in which hunger operates as a deeply gendered form of structural violence.

The study reminds us that the experience of food insecurity is deeply gendered and therefore there is an urgent need to adopt women-centered, feminist frameworks that prioritize the needs of low-income and marginalized women of color in the United States. While hunger in the Global South is frequently analyzed in relation to the marginalized role of women in society, the US hunger literature consistently fails to acknowledge the importance of gender with a few exceptions. When it comes to hunger, this makes "gender present as a kind of ghost in the background while other identities and activities are performed in the foreground of people's attention in the context" (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004, p. 522). Women face a unique set of challenges related to low-wage employment and the ways in which they are disproportionately burdened with the labor of social production including care work, food work, and communicative labor. Intersecting systems of patriarchy such as low-wage jobs, unpaid care work, and inadequate social safety nets combined with forces of symbolic violence contain women in cycles of marginalization producing poverty and hunger. In this situation, mothers are disproportionately charged with preparing healthy foods as well as coming up with the resources to do so in a market system that exploits and extracts their economic and caring labor, and in so doing producing profits, wellbeing, and health for other more dominant groups in society.

There is an urgent need for reparative food policy that dismantles patriarchal structures and prioritizes the needs of women, families, and households. For example, in the current political system, many adults lose SNAP benefits after 3 months if they are not working or participating in a work program (Gamblin et al., 2019). This welfare-workfare political scenario crafted more than three decades ago should be abolished paying full attention to the ways in which labor and employment systems devalue the work of women and mothers. Federal guidelines also prevent SNAP participants from using SNAP dollars to purchase prepared foods at restaurants, delis, and grocery stores. Given that women perform much of the food work in households, these restrictions disproportionately target women and mothers. Thus, amending SNAP rules to permit the purchase of prepared foods would alleviate time and resource constraints on women and families (Pine and de Souza, forthcoming). Discursive interventions are also necessary to dismantle stigma surrounding SNAP recipients. In the current system, SNAP benefits are often accompanied by stigmatizing marketing materials that "educate" SNAP users on how to eat "healthy" and "make SNAP dollars stretch" or on cautioning the public about SNAP fraud. This language demonizes SNAP participants and renders hunger into a problem of individual values and habits rather than a form of structural violence that disproportionately targets women and mothers. As the women in this study remind us at every turn, they know what it means to eat healthy, but lack the resources to do so.

Hunger is neither natural nor inevitable, but rather the product of social and political design as noted by economist Sen (1983). In the United States, like countries around the world women and particularly single women with children, are most likely to suffer from hunger and food insecurity, yet there is complete failure to account for the labors of care that go into producing children, homes, and communities. If the work that families—parents and mothers- do is so vital to producing children as human beings, citizens, and workers, then surely there must be more support and protections for these labors. A feminist reading of hunger and food insecurity would place women at the center of the frame and recognize the specific limitations mothers and women face in controlling their destinies in political economic environments that unendingly extract and exploit the labor of women in the home and the workplace. Finding a permanent solution to hunger requires not only increasing access to high quality food in adequate amounts but intervening in the social and political environment that produces hunger for women and their communities.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Minnesota Human Institutional Review Board (IRB Code Number: 1106S01082). The author was based at this institution when the study was conceived and carried out. All participants provided written informed consent to participate prior to enrollment in the study.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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