

Provisioning Responsibilities: How Relationships Shape the
Work that Women Do

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Cette étude documente le travail d'approvisionnement que les femmes effectuent pour elles-mêmes et pour les autres, tout en enregistrant les contours de ce travail et en analysant les responsabilités qui y sont associées. Le concept d'approvisionnement a orienté les interviews réalisées auprès de 100 femmes. La diversité et l'étendue du travail des femmes se sont manifestées par le choix des femmes provenant de six groupes communautaires marginalisés par le revenu, la race ou l'âge dans

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deux provinces canadiennes. Les résultats résument les types d'activités et de stratégies d'approvisionnement que les femmes utilisent pour assumer leurs responsabilités. Parce que celles-ci font partie des avenues de leurs relations, négocier les limites de leurs responsabilités d'approvisionnement modèle le travail quotidien des femmes et leurs possibilités de s'engager dans la société civile.

This study documents the work women do to provision for themselves and others. It charts the contours of this work and examines associated responsibilities. The concept of provisioning informed interviews with 100 women. The diversity and range of women's work were surfaced by selecting women from six community groups, marginalized by income, race, and age, in two Canadian provinces. Findings summarize the types of provisioning activities and strategies women use to meet their responsibilities. Because the latter flow through pathways of relationships, negotiating the boundaries of their provisioning responsibilities shapes women's daily work and possibilities for engaging in civil society.

SINCE THE GROUND BREAKING WORK OF Marilyn Waring's *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth* (1988) was published, there has been a veritable explosion of research and theory about the various types of work that women do, where and how the work is done, its characteristics, and perhaps most contentiously, how it is valued (for a summary see Neysmith and Reitsma-Street 2005). There is little doubt about the importance of charting and accounting for all the work that women do. The debate is around approaches that best capture both its depth and complexity and then the relative merits of different strategies for imputing its value (Bourgeault and Khokher 2006; Craig 2007; Hoskyns and Rai 2007; Neysmith and Reitsma-Street 2000; Statistics Canada 2003, 2005:116). Although the different approaches that make up this literature have implications for research and theory, of particular concern is how the associated policy impacts affect the quality of life experienced by different groups of women. In this paper data are presented on provisioning, defined as the paid and unpaid relation-shaped work responsibilities carried by women who belonged to six different types of community groups in Ontario and British Columbia, Canada. These groups focused on the interests of women marginalized by income, race, and age. Our findings confirm the complex nature of the activities that make up women's work across spheres and social locations (Luxton 2001; Staeheli and Clarke 2003; Vosko 2006). The study also conceptualizes practical and transformative strategies women use to meet their provisioning responsibilities. Provisioning responsibilities flow through pathways of relationships (Adkins 2005; England and Folbre 2003; Misztal 2005; Nelson 2006; Neysmith 2000). We argue that centering the work-relationship connection is necessary if multiple types of work are to be inserted into theory and policy debates (Cooper 1994; Funk and Kobayashi 2009; Neysmith et al. 2009). Doing so is an important step toward changing a discourse that devalues the contributions that women make to civil society.

THE WORK OF PROVISIONING IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

Nation state regimes, such as those found in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, delineate through public policy the responsibilities and rights of those living within their borders. Policies are based on assumptions, an important one being understandings of public and private life. Boundaries set around these two spheres result in quite differing lived experiences for different groups. In this study the research sites were situated in two Canadian provinces, Ontario and British Columbia. Both provinces elected governments late in the twentieth century committed to rapid implementation of neoliberal policies that radically decreased social and health services. During this time, in both provinces, employment equity legislation was revoked, labor legislation was weakened, social assistance rates were deeply cut while eligibility criteria became very restricted, and education, health, and social services underwent massive restructuring (Creese and Strong-Borag 2005; Neysmith, Bezanson, and O'Connell 2005).

Neoliberalism is a term used since the early 1970s to refer to national and international policies that reflect a philosophy of liberal individualism. Programs that flow from such policies rest on the theory that the best approach to securing and protecting human well-being is through individual economic and social freedoms and that state interventions in market activities should be kept to a minimum (Harvey 2005 as quoted in Cohen and Pulkingham 2009:16). Some of the effects of neoliberal programs are quite visible and are documented (Cohen and Brodie 2007), especially the expectations placed on persons and communities to prioritize employment in the labor market, even if jobs are insecure and poorly paid. Less visible, and a challenge to document empirically, are the effects on women of the off-loading of responsibilities from public into private spaces. Costs to families and communities are hidden in rhetoric about strengthening the family unit and developing caring communities; those who cope with the consequences are primarily women in their front line positions as family caregivers, neighbors, service providers, and community actors. This social location means that many women experience the associated costs personally or are in direct contact with those affected by the loss of social provisions that characterize neoliberal policies. It is these policies that produce the circumstances in which women try to meet their provisioning responsibilities, responsibilities that are tied to relationships. Such relationships shape the content and the process, the what and the how, the activities and the strategies, that are available to women as they do the work of caring for children and other kin, providing income and goods, exchanging services and developing community capacity.

Feminist scholars, bureaucrats, and activists have offered different ways of valuing social reproduction (see, e.g., Bezanson 2006). However, we agree with Hoskyns and Rai (2007) when they conclude that the discourse has not fundamentally shifted like it did when the economic importance of the service sector to the gross national product became apparent. Our re-

search does not resolve this conundrum but it does problematize ways of valuing work by examining the forms it takes across spheres, disregarding traditional definitional borders. By focusing on provisioning in this project, all the work women do to provide for themselves and others—whether paid or unpaid in the market, home, or community spheres—is counted. Valuing different types of work across spheres, in the context of intersecting income, race, and age inequities, also means understanding how current accounts support privilege even as they oppress some women more than others (Barker 2005).

The use of the term provisioning denotes our interest in contributing to developing theory from a starting place that is not segmented by the classic conceptual dualisms of public/private, economic/caring, or productive/reproductive labor. We note that feminist scholars in general integrate notions of relatedness, “obligation,” and responsibility into explanations of economic behavior and conceptualizations of public policy. Feminist economists begin with the central concern of how humans interact with each other and with the environment in order to sustain human life (Beneria 1995; Donath 2000; Ferber and Nelson 2003; Nelson 1993, 2006; Power 2004). Taylor (2004:31), for instance, suggests that all activity which engages in provisioning is work and she directs our attention to the relational nature of this activity: work is embedded in and defined by the social relations within which it is located. Thus, provisioning can be defined as the daily work performed to acquire material and intangible resources for meeting responsibilities that ensure the survival and well-being of people. A neglected aspect, however, even in many writings by feminist economists, is the empirical investigation into how these activities, no matter their domain, are shaped by the character of relationships with others whether kin or nonkin, individuals, or communities.

The data presented in this paper emerges from a cross-site research project that explores what supports and constrains the provisioning responsibilities of women associated with groups and organizations formed to serve communities marginalized by income, race, and age. We were concerned about the magnitude since the mid-1990s of the gutting of services to women on low or insecure incomes, the destruction of local nonprofit women centered groups and organizations and the shrinking of spaces where women collected to talk and imagine other ways to survive and prosper. One way to challenge assumptions fueling these actions is to document and theorize how women, individually and collectively, talk about, create, and value the work they do every day.

The community groups and organizations in the project were of interest because they can be sites for developing nonfamilial relationships and alternative identities. This broad domain of civil society engagement, with its attendant responsibilities and work, is rendered invisible if analysts attempt to encompass these activities through expanding the boundaries of family and employment; likewise, they are devalued when they are put in residual categories of nonwork, leisure, or volunteer activities. One result of such classifications is that the substantial work of building and maintaining

networks that sustain, as well as make demands of, women disappears from public accounts, it is not documented; what is not written down need not be taken up. Recently this space has been referred to as civil society (Howell and Mulligan 2005; Jaggard 2005). This term was not part of the vocabulary of participants so instead we asked them to talk about the work they did in their communities. We recognize that the term community is vague, its meaning contested by many writers (McBride 2005). Nevertheless, it was a familiar term to participants, allowing us to explore with them a range of provisioning responsibilities without the conversation being stopped at conceptual border crossings that might, for example, differentiate established nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from neighborhood associations.

METHODOLOGY

We were particularly interested in examining how and where participants, rather than policymakers, defined their boundaries of responsibility. We expected that some of these would map onto traditional spheres of family and employment. Because there is less discussion of the parameters of women's lives outside of these two spheres, we also assumed that language and discourses would be less available for participants to draw on for their accounts. Therefore, interviewers probed participants to elaborate on the responsibilities they carried, and the work they did, inside and outside of family and employment. The concept of provisioning helped to create different starting points for asking about work, including work in the local and broader community. Rather, than asking participants to describe the work they do, we shaped questions around the responsibilities associated with those they provided for. The following questions guided the interviews:

1. *Who* are you responsible for?
2. What *activities* do you do to provide for the persons or groups you are responsible for?
3. *How* do you carry out this work? What *helps* you and what makes it *difficult*?
4. What *changes* do you foresee in these provisioning responsibilities in the next 3 to 5 years? What do you see *affecting* this work in the future?

The selection of sites and the sampling of 100 women interviewees was purposive to ensure diversity of participants and rich information about women's work, particularly their less recognized community work. We also decided to concentrate on how women in marginalized locations may be taking up their responsibilities differently, possibly creatively, with the help of community group spaces. Hence, we selected a range of groups explicitly geared to women's material and gender interests. These spaces, called sites in this article, were also selected based on feasibility and mutual interest, including geographical proximity and a history of relationships with at least

one researcher. The six sites, their characteristics, number of women interviewed, and selected demographic data, are summarized in Table 1.

Processes for sampling participants as well as collecting and interpreting data were informed by the advice of community advisory groups. At several points during the four-year study, additional persons participated in focus groups and key informant interviews to better understand the context of site activities and the constraints both the sites and individual women faced. Interviews and focus groups were taped and transcribed for analysis. Initial coding of interview data was done at the site level using NVivo software for

Table 1

Description of Sites and Background of Women Interviewed

Sites by pseudonym	Number and background of women interviewed
<i>Pont Place</i> is a small NGO that hosts employability and counseling programs for women who have left abusive relationships	$N = 13$. Ages 25–55; three aboriginal or metis; all low income; nine with children living at home; two living in transitions home
<i>Hands On Centre</i> is a large NGO community resource organization with free play, cultural, and educational activities for children and families in two poor multicultural neighborhoods	$N = 25$. Ages 25–45, and two over 55; three aboriginal and five francophone; all low income; only one with no children at home; 13 single parents
<i>Cascade Coop</i> is a medium size food cooperative, with its own executive responsible for advocacy, food security, fund raising, and mutual aid activities; housed in a large multiservice center for urban poor families	$N = 21$. Ages between 40 and 55, with three younger and three older; three recent immigrants; all low income; diverse household types; most responsible for children, including adult children at home or living close by; four without children
<i>Heracane</i> is a large group of older women in two cities committed to public debate and advocacy on issues of justice, stereotypes, and the representation of older women on policy committees	$N = 18$. Ages 55–80; three aboriginal and racial minority; none poor, but some with modest incomes; one-third living with partners; most regularly caring for grandchildren, siblings, older relatives
<i>Gen-Y</i> is an independent program geared to the employment, housing, and parental concerns of young women administered by a very large NGO committed to women's issues and needs	$N = 15$. Ages 16–24; all but one women of racial minority status; all low or no income; seven lone mothers; three live on own, five in shelter, others with mother or roommate
<i>Jane's House</i> is a very small, fledgling tenant's self-help and advocacy group in a large urban social housing complex	$N = 8$. Ages 25–55; five racial minority; all low income; diverse household types, including multigenerational; all with two or more children

qualitative data (for a methodological discussion of the costs and benefits to devolving research decisions to the local level see Thomson and Holland 2003). Researchers from the six sites met twice over the following two years to compare and debate the content and naming of codes until saturation was reached. This process produced 21 categories of provisioning work that were subsequently amalgamated into 12 and organized under two major divisions—activities and strategies.¹

FINDINGS

The form that specific activities and strategies took within categories, and their amount, varied by site and participants' social location, but the categories themselves held. Chart I describes some of the types of work associated with sets of provisioning activities. We found that these could be broadly grouped into those commonly recognized as work, and those still invisible to most as work activities. We have separated activities from the different types of strategies that women described they used to fulfill their provisioning responsibilities, summarized in Chart 2. Some strategies seemed to be survival and coping mechanisms to address needs that had to be met even if they were not in the long-term interests of participants. These might be thought of as the practical daily strategies referred to by Moser (1989) and Molyneux (2002). Other strategies seemed to have the potential for promoting women's interests beyond daily survival because they incorporated a consideration of structural changes. We categorize these as transformative as they aim to create identities and envision policies and practices that dismantle gender, race, and age inequities. Activities and strategies, and their related categories, are explicated through quotes and examples drawn from data collected at the research sites. We recognize that the subcategories, their organization, the particular names we have given them, could be challenged. However it was agreed among the six researchers that these titles did capture the content of the data. Thus, we offer them as a step in "naming" the work and contributions that women in these marginalized communities are contributing as actors in civil society.

The Complexity of the Work: Visible and Invisible Provisioning Activities

Although the labor market, domestic/home labor, and community engagement have quite separate literatures, they have a theoretical presence and

¹. All women who agreed to be interviewed signed consent forms that had been approved by research ethics committees. Each participant also received a \$30 honorarium to cover some of the costs associated with their participation. Interviews were transcribed, cleaned, coded using the NVivo software package, and the data were stored on a secure electronic site. Transcripts were subjected to bottom-up open coding by site researchers to generate concepts, two-cross site meetings were held to discuss similarities and differences in coding, finally top-down thematic cross-site coding was done by one individual. This process was intended to maximize within site depth while minimizing threats to cross-site comparability. Preliminary results were shared with each of the participating organizations in the study in an effort to enhance validity by promoting debate about the interpretation of findings.

Chart 1

Types of Provisioning Activities Done by Women

1. *Recognized provisioning activities*

i. *Engaging in formal and informal work in the labor market*—Activities generally associated with jobs or careers done under market norms; contingent, casual, part-time employment; unpaid work in family business; work placements, for example fulfilling community hours as student/welfare requirements; traditional education activities, such as going to school, upgrading skills, community training programs

ii. *Providing caring labor in the domestic sphere*—Activities centered on: running the household; domestic labor, caring for children and other relatives; nonmarket mental, emotional, and physical caring labor for nonkin

iii. *Undertaking commitments in the community sphere*—Formal and informal volunteer activities in community organizations (including places of worship); creating and maintaining networks, visiting, and organizing social gatherings

2. *Invisible provisioning activities*

i. *Sustaining health*—Activities associated with relationships women had with children and others who lived with disabilities, chronic conditions, or mental health issues, administrating medicines, preparing special diets; health management tasks like scheduling, coordinating, and going to medical appointments

ii. *Making claims*—Encompasses the work of advocating for oneself and others for services and money; putting in the time learning where to look for financial assistance and other resources; learning to present oneself, dress, talk, and act in different settings; learning to make arguments with evidence and asserting one's rights: convincing family, friends, landlords, bureaucrats, professionals, and volunteers in medical, education, social, and community services that one is worthy and/or that service claims are legitimate

iii. *Ensuring safety*—Activities undertaken to bolster the safety of self and children. Tasks included: finding safe housing and dealing with violence against themselves and others

thus language and concepts that define their existence. In documenting women's provisioning activities, however, we had to expand the boundaries of even these traditional categories in order to capture the gendered nature and structure of work at this particular historical moment. Among our participants, work in the labor market included nonvoluntary "volunteer" activities required by social assistance regulations for receiving benefits and/or curriculum volunteer hours requirements for graduating from high school. Under caring labor is found the work of older women who were provisioning for children, grandchildren, siblings, other relatives and friends, as well as aging spouses; women still in their teens who were provisioning for parents as well as boyfriends and their own infants; women on social assistance who had complex responsibilities for a range of kin, neighbors, ex-partners, as well as their own children.

The range of responsibilities reported by participants was broad and provisioning activities encompassed more than providing material re-

Chart 2

Types of Provisioning Strategies Used by Women

1. *Practical daily strategies*

i. *Creating and managing resources*—These are ways women deal with the exigencies of daily living. Included are approaches to managing and gathering resources needed to make ends meet, such as exchanges, saving, selling items, strategic budgeting, juggling bills and priorities, making sacrifices, going without luxuries, cutting back

ii. *Engaging in risky behaviors*—These are ways that women respond to and anticipate uncertain futures with the resources at hand. They often involve short-term/long-term trade-offs, or appear to be risky behaviors, such as going without food, getting behind in the rent in order to pay other bills, returning to violent relationships for economic reasons

2. *Transformative strategies*

i. *Recreating identity*—These are ways that women take time to care for themselves; to do activities that they find meaningful, such as doing exercises, pursuing spiritual, leisure, social, and nonformal learning opportunities

ii. *Resisting stereotypes and stigma*—These are ways that women reclaim status, redefine, and take up administrative and ideological categories imposed upon them. At times they strategically claim identities (e.g., client) to access resources; at other times they actively challenge stereotypes and assumptions that define them in ways that they do not identify with, for example as youth, being poor, et cetera

iii. *Negotiating boundaries of responsibilities*—These are ways women direct/take control of/strategically manipulate their relationships of responsibilities. They generally negotiate these boundaries by distributing their work across market, home/domestic, and community lives; developing new or setting limits on existing relationships with friends, families, acquaintances, and networks that challenge existing boundaries around their work

iv. *Envisioning a future*—These are efforts to define and envision how one might provision in the future. Activities range from making concrete timelines and outlining specific tasks, to more general articulations by participants of how they would like to experience their future lives. Included here are women's descriptions of what is imagined, limits to imaginings, and how futures are imagined

sources. Thus, in addition to expanding the foregoing boundaries, we had to add categories of labor in order to catch the content that arose as participants talked about their work and responsibilities. These included descriptions of the time and effort used to sustain the health of those around them, pursuing particularly social assistance and health officials in order to get the resources and follow-up appointments to which they were entitled; calculating the costs and benefits of risky behaviors that participants deemed necessary in order to meet their provisioning responsibilities. Later in the article we argue that these areas are analytically important for assessing the impacts of cut backs and other changes to social programs for women across different social locations. They reflect important forms of inequities that are occurring in the lives of different groups of women; forms

that arguably are associated with the spread of neoliberalism across policy arenas.

As Chart 1 outlines, women do paid, domestic, and community work but traditional notions of what these encompass reveal only the tip of the iceberg. For example, young women were engaged in service jobs, retail, telemarketing, babysitting, and such. In addition, almost all recognized the importance of formal education; wanting to get that “piece of paper” that would get a “good” job. At the same time they, along with women in other sites, enumerated “never ending” household duties, as well as caring for children. Chantel, a 19-year-old black lone mother, full-time student, and part-time telephone survey worker, conveys the multidimensional demands on her time and energy as she combines education and employment with domestic and caring labor—made possible by the uncounted contribution of work by her mother. The implications of this narrative lies in the fact that it exists within a dominant discourse wherein images of young women focus primarily on the emotional and physical challenges of developing careers and finding future life partners:

I have time when he's sleeping to get everything done, and while he's at my mom's house, I'd be working. From there, my mom would drop him home. Everything's basically done when he's sleeping. I make food the night before so the next day food would be prepared for him, 'cause I can't cook while he's around, 'cause my child likes to run into the kitchen and I don't have a gate to put there. He doesn't like to be in his playpen, he starts screaming. He likes a lot of attention, and nobody's there to watch him . . . I try to get work done. I do homework but sometimes I get in at midnight and I just want to go to sleep. Sometimes I do a little studying or I get up early in the morning to study. When I tell [people] I go to work, they think, how could you do that? You go to school, and you have a son to take care of, isn't it hard? It's hard but I have to do it for my son, not for me, for my son. [But then] it's not that hard, cause I have family to watch him, and I only work on weekends and his father is there to help me.

Formal community activities include such things as helping to organize the high school breakfast program, serving on the council of a community resource center, volunteering in exchange for provisions, such as food and diapers. Life circumstances and/or social location often influenced women's decisions about where to contribute their limited time and energy. Among our participants there was also considerable informal community managing work, such as acting as the “community babysitter” for children who were left unsupervised, informing native people in the community of resources and programs, and exchanging knowledge about where to get day-old bakery products or how to obtain a season pass for children to the community swimming pool. Resource collecting and managing were time consuming but essential activities for meeting provisioning responsibilities for women who lived on very low incomes. As a member of the food cooperative notes: “The extra clothing you get on the pick-ups, the food, the Christmas baskets, Easter stuff, all the little extra stuff, they help out. The extra food is important.”

In addition to the above visible work, participants talked about the range and types of work in areas that we are classifying as invisible forms of labor. Three major areas were: sustaining the health of those around them, making claims, and ensuring safety. Our findings about the work entailed in sustaining the health of those for whom women were responsible echoes research on kin care documenting how families have assumed increasing labor costs as health-care priorities and budgets have changed (Armstrong 2003; Aronson and Neysmith 2006; Dyck et al. 2005; Light 2001). Women could not always attend to such health-care needs (due to lack of resources or other obligations), however, for many the mental and emotional work of dealing with substantial health issues and health-related concerns frequently shaped their lives. For instance, Gina, who manages on a very low income, does health work for her ex-partner, as well as her current husband and one of his friends:

Re. husband: 'He doesn't like to, um, push the wheelchair by himself because he tipped over one time. So when he has a doctor's appointment or something like that, um, he usually takes, um, the taxi and I'll meet him at where he's going, and I push him to the appointment and then I put him back on the taxi.'

Re. ex-partner: 'I was doing a lot for him, filling out forms, following him to doctors because, um, he's also from Jamaica and he has, um, stuttering when he talks. He gets nervous and he can't talk, so usually I go to the doctor's with him.'

Gina also accompanies her husband's friend, who is illiterate.

For low income women, the time and energy consumed by having to make, and remake, claims were enormous. On the one hand, it could be argued that women have always had to establish, provide evidence, and fight for services. On the other hand, participants like Ina, mother of a five-year-old, from an employment readiness program for women who have been abused, were not alone in feeling that the amount of this work had escalated in recent years as welfare entitlements and programs were slashed:

It's changed. I'm afraid to be a single mom and scared to death that what they expect from me isn't what I'll be able to deliver and then I'm screwed. If I were to go out and get a job right now I really don't believe that I would hold it down. I think that I still have things that I need to work through and they don't care about that. They don't care if I fail. 'You have to do this and this' is what they say and it's your responsibility if you fail. I'm willing to take on that responsibility, but they won't support me in that. And because you're only allowed welfare 2 years, or is it 3 years, out of 5, I've used that up.

The third area of invisible labor, ensuring safety self and others, is often depicted in the media as a problem of rising crime rates or neighborhood youth violence. Suggested policy responses, whether "saying no to racism" campaigns or increasing community policing, miss the emotional and daily struggle to keep oneself safe, reduce potential abuse to children, and promotion of pride in one's age or culture. These public pro-

posals also seldom mention the increased work born by or the costs to women in local neighborhoods. It is they who monitor themselves and “walk on eggshells” in daily encounters with potential and real abuse from partners, strangers, and even professionals representing hurtful welfare or other rules (Mosher, Evans, and Little 2004). It is the hidden, invisible work of women that keep places safe, advocate for more safety, evaluate alternative strategies, and develop ways of containing if not eliminating the violence that surrounds their lives. Sonya provides a graphic illustration of this work:

I walk up and down my street. I'm picking syringes off the ground. My daughter was outside and she found three of them. She knows not to touch them. And she asked me, 'Mommy, can you call the cops to come get these?' So, for her concern, okay, you know. I phoned up the police and I asked—told them my daughter found three syringes outside. 'Is there any way you can have somebody come dispose of them?' And he told me: 'Oh, that's not my job.' I just simply lost it, you know: 'My daughter is asking for a police officer here, for a little bit of help to get rid of this dangerous stuff in our home and you're gonna tell her that's not your job!'

The Hidden Mountain of Strategizing Work: Practical and Transformative Strategies

Permeating the previous list of provisioning activities is the cognitive and emotional attention, conscious or not, that participants used to knit together, to defend, to balance, and to change burdens of responsibilities that women marginalized by race, income, and age encounter. At first we just named “strategizing” as a type of provisioning activity in the list of naming all the visible and invisible work that women do. However, the interviews revealed different types of strategizing work; a single category seemed to hide rather than explicate the dimensions of this work. This led to the decision to develop a separate strategies chart that more accurately captured the multidimensionality of the strategizing work that participants did. Hence, Chart 2 lays out some of the practical strategies used by women in their daily efforts to provide for themselves and others. It also organizes the less visible work associated with trying to take control of, trying to change, some of the conditions that shaped participants' lives. As the following quotes show, strategies were used intentionally. However, this strategizing, this negotiating work, itself was not negotiable—given the asymmetrical and involuntary conditions that marginalize women through racism, ageism, and poverty, especially in times of heightened insecurities and depletion of public resources. Nevertheless, even in the presence of these pressures, we see women trying to use agency in tight spaces to survive in the present, to plan for the future, to refuse some responsibilities and defend others, and to create community spaces that help.

The first set of strategies documents how women are dealing with the exigencies of today, using tactics that were available to them; strategies that reflect participants' histories of coping but which also shape and limit their futures. Such strategies had associated costs but varied in terms of how effective they were in enabling women to meet and sustain their provisioning responsibilities. Participants engaged in practical daily strategies of survival which involve acquiring but also managing scarce resources. These resonate with findings of other researchers who have focused on women living on low incomes (e.g., Edin and Lein 1996; Moser 1989). Our participants named activities, such as buying in bulk or doing one's own electrical repairs. Many engaged in casual exchanges of goods and services. Women had limited control over the amount and kinds of resources available to them for carrying out their responsibilities; the circumstances in which they found themselves limited possibilities for action. Thus, strategies for managing scarce resources all too frequently are associated with taking risks. One participant from *Cascade* said: "I pay whoever sends me a notice first; who will cut you off the fastest [is the question]?"

Hannah and Carrie, two women from *Hands On*, describe respectively how they assess the cost-benefit balance of risky behaviors:

I survive on 4 to 5 hours of sleep; lately I've been doing it. Is it a life threatening approach? I've eaten a meal a day for a long, long time just so that the kids would have enough to eat and I'll drink coffee instead of juice so that, you know, coffee is a lot cheaper than juice, so my health is affected by it.

I haven't done anything risky to get by but I've been tempted. You think about the drug business and I don't agree with drugs but you know the thought has crossed my mind—easy money. It's a tempting thought at times when you're down and out.

Transformative strategies are shaped by multiple and intersecting discourses about what it means to be female, elderly, young, poor, racialized, or homeless, but they also reflect some of the ways in which participants are redefining themselves and their relationships to others. The transformative strategies section of Chart 2 starts with recreating identity, which is a product of social interaction. A considerable body of research has examined the symbols and communication strategies people use in the construction of meaning and identity. These are conceptually diverse and include such activities as storytelling, cultural narratives, political ideologies, roles, identities, and body attributes, for example gender, race, age, et cetera. They exist as part of approaches deployed to accomplish social objectives (for a review of this literature see Callero 2003:123). One arm of this tradition concentrates on how cognitive processes work to align behavior, meaning, and identity, thus offering an explanation of how and why identities can change. The dynamic relationship between meaningful activity and identity is caught in a reflection by Clara, a long-time participant in the food cooperative, who lives with her teenage daughter—and who certainly could not

be accused of “bowling alone” (Putnam 2000)! Through provisioning in particular ways her identity is shaped to move beyond one of client or volunteer to coworker and friend.

The food bank [has helped me out]. It’s not so much the food as the emotional support. Since I’m a volunteer there, I’ve become like part of the family there, been ten years at this one place, made a lot of friends there. We do Christmases together. My Christmas party of the year is with the volunteers there. We have picnics in the summer. We have social events where we go out bowling together, so they’ve become friends and not just co-workers.

Participants frequently found themselves caught in negative definitions of differences that effectively stigmatized them for being poor, native, aging, or on social assistance. Echo, from the employment program for women leaving abuse, felt that stereotypes associated with “being on welfare” influenced how the legal system classified who were or were not members of her family and prescribed how she should look during a court appearance. Echo resisted being told how to dress for court; she also risked losing her welfare and place in the program when she refused to attack her son’s father, as she still felt he was part of the family, for whom she had relationships of responsibility. Her work of creating her own identity and resisting the labels of the court also included specific tasks, such as writing a letter, to name the provisioning work of her ex-husband. He, like many other men who are performing valuable, but invisible, work essential to the well-being of children, could not escape the gendered consequences of traditional female work:

They [social assistance officials] also told me what I should wear when I attend this court hearing and I’m like ‘No way! I’ve had enough you know. You’re attacking my son’s dad.’ I said: ‘That’s going to mess things up for my son.’ You know they’re interfering and I don’t like it. Well, they’re [welfare] are going to cut me off anyway ‘cause I’m not attending the court hearing that they’ve set up for taking him to court. So, I’m writing a letter to support him. Just because we’re not together, we’re still a family and that’s where my heart is.

Affecting all the strategies and activities was the key task of negotiating which participants would be responsible for and how. Sometimes these relationships were reluctantly assumed, or changed. However, if participants had resources and adequate personal health, the burdens could be assumed more freely. For instance, while participants took steps to engage in activities that helped to reenergize their minds and bodies, and break their isolation, these activities also enabled them (physically and mentally) to sustain the responsibilities they carried. Boundaries delimiting for whom they were responsible were repeatedly negotiated, as Bunny from the older women’s group explained:

It was, it was something that was brewing anyway but then I got sick and that really was the impetus to say, you know, I really do have to get serious about this cutting back bit. So, for example, this sister who has needed a lot of help,

she lives far away. I would go there a few times a year and I was talking to her every day and I was strategizing about all her problems. I finally had to say to her: 'I can't do this anymore. You're going to use the sources of professional help that you and I have talked about and I'll call you, we'll be sisters and that's it.' And she was happy about that so I mean it's worked out well. So this is a fairly serious attempt to take care of myself and let me do some more of those things that really interest me.

Throughout the data, we saw women speaking about how community sites helped them meet their provisioning responsibilities, and also support the work of envisioning another future and negotiating new boundaries of responsibilities and possibilities. Vivian and Melissa, two participants from *Hands On* verbalize this about the work they do at their family resource center:

Melissa: If you start drilling it into people—look, this is how we can live. This is what your housing, your community, whatever, can look like, can be like, people are going to start to keep it that way (Vivian: Exactly!) because one person can't do it all by themselves. (Vivian: No!). You need the help and you need money to do it; so you get somebody to back the money on it and everybody else is going to start helping and pitching in 'cause they're going to want it to stay that way. (emphasis in original)

Talking about their tenants' group in a racially mixed complex of 100 units, a participant from *Jane's House* observed how they needed space to develop relationships and envision other futures.

It gives people a chance to resolve their issues, and come together and kind of bond together more. I mean, not everybody is going to get along with everybody. You can't force them. But, at least, if you're providing a place where people can come together as a group and do their things . . . and we don't have to worry about the kids being on the street, maybe dealing some drugs or trying to act cool. They have a place where they can come . . . I think that that's important. They need that space.

Conversely, cuts to programs and shrinking of community programs sometimes provoked the redoubling of volunteering hours to save the groups, adding to the workload of women; other times, there was a reduction of responsibility for and contributions to neighborhoods and organizations. It is a cost to the women, their children, and society when community spaces disappear, as did this fledgling tenants' group by the end of our three year research study.

DISCUSSION

We have presented a schema, consistent with the work of feminist scholars, such as Edin and Lein (1996), Molyneux (1985, 2002), and Moser (1989), which tries to capture and name the multidimensionality of the work that women do. We used the concept of provisioning, as developed by feminist economists, such as Barker (2005), Nelson (2006), Power (2004), and Taylor

(2004), because it allowed us to explore work, and the forms it took, without being impeded by conceptual barriers of public and private spheres that interrupt and thus hide the extent of the work. Furthermore, the concept explicitly ties work to the relationship-based responsibilities that women carry. Several analytical themes emerge from these data that have implications for what a changed discourse on work needs to include if it is to reflect the lived realities of women, such as those who participated in this study.

First, our data resonate with research showing that provisioning responsibilities are rooted in relationships that do not fit neatly into public and private notions of space (Adkins 2005; Funk and Kobayashi 2009; Mizstal 2005). In addition, these data highlight the range of persons in different spaces for whom women provision: themselves, members of extended households and family who may live elsewhere, including ex-partners and persons in community groups. Furthermore, the boundaries of women's provisioning responsibilities shift, they are not static, and are seen by participants as changing over the years. The particular contours they take are shaped by the social context within which women take on, or withdraw from, relationships with their associated provisioning responsibilities. Women meet their responsibilities by employing a range of activities and strategies. The study expands earlier work in that it suggests that the range of activities and strategies holds across groups of women living in diverse social locations; it is not confined to young mothers on social assistance. While differences in income, geography, age, race, and access to nonmonetary resources influenced the particulars of provisioning, variation was in the specific form that these took, not their existence. Finally, relationships of responsibility are both voluntary and imposed; their existence is a constant in women's lives, and so are their consequences; neither relationship, responsibility, nor the associated work are transferable—at least not in the short term. When these dimensions are hidden in discourses, such as work-life balance, seemingly family friendly policies can oppress women by denying the work demands of relationships that affect the employment decisions that women make. The boomerang effect is that those who have financial and/or familial resources can use the labor of others to meet their provisioning responsibilities and thus have access to employment-related benefits not available to others. Thus, market work is privileged.

Second, at the time of the study, public policies were undermining women's efforts to provision adequately for themselves and others. This resulted in women bearing personally the costs of such responsibilities. When their efforts failed it was they, not the policies, who were deemed inadequate. This dynamic can be seen in the ways that social program assumptions about lifestyle, consumption, and choice are frequently linked to notions of persons who are deemed at risk (Elliott 2002:306). In particular, the hybridization of "risk" and "need" in assessments can have significant consequences (Hannah-Moffat 2002). Women who have back-

grounds characterized by abuse, mental health problems, and drug use often find that their “needs” are reconstructed as “risks” through these assessment procedures. This is most marked when an individual’s lifestyle is considered deviant (Douglas 1992). The respectable victim is expected to engage with services, not challenge them as some of the study participants did as a strategy to provision for those they cared for. Failure to cooperate is interpreted as a refusal to accept help, reinforcing a portrayal of deviance. The contradictory outcome is that women, such as those quoted in this paper, spend energy justifying the work they do in the community, household, and market, why they do it and for whom. Justifying how they conduct their provisioning responsibilities becomes another work demand. Justifying the value of their labor is seldom demanded of those who are employed—the exchange of work for money is deemed a sufficient signifier of worth.

Third, participants in this study drew wide boundaries around who they included in their circles of relationships, with their associated responsibilities. However, the resources women had at their disposal to meet the needs of those so included were limited. The relationships that participants had with others were often critical to the strategies developed for survival today and negotiating future possibilities. However, maintaining those relationships took resources and for most participants money was not available. Instead personal help, energy, and time were the coinage of exchange. These are resources that women who are poor can muster—at a cost. For example, participants spent lots of time walking because they could not afford transportation. They spent extra time volunteering as a way to gain access to food. Such resources are limited, however, and are not easily substituted or increased as is possible for those with financial assets. Using such options affected the quality of some participants’ lives. For instance, although data were not gathered systematically on participants’ health, the transcripts were riddled with comments attesting to how accumulated pressures and stresses took their toll on participants’ own health. The possibilities of meeting their provisioning responsibilities satisfactorily for themselves and others increased if women could negotiate resources and nonkin relationships with neighbors and friends but also with civil servants, health workers, social service providers, and volunteers in organizations.

The existence of nonkin- and nonemployment-based provisioning responsibilities were revealed because the sample was drawn from community groups. Exploring relationships with provisioning responsibilities outside of the two familiar spheres of household and market was not familiar turf for participants and may well have been impossible to do if the community group was not there for them to reference. Even so, we suspect that we only scratched the surface. Not revealing these connections allows programs to be cut because the costs to women remain invisible, or categorized as unfortunate side effects, the equivalent of collateral damage. Prominent in the lives of participants in this project were Ministries of

Housing and Social Welfare. As social assistance became more restrictive, the borders for inclusion were policed more closely for signs of possible fraud; regulations for access to food became more restrictive; and certain kinds of assistance available only in exchange for volunteer hours were strictly monitored. The harmful effects of program regulations interlock with a social policy discourse that denies the existence of many of the provisioning responsibilities that women carry; they do not shift as resources are withdrawn. Unlike the provisioning boundaries defined by participants, the policy borders that define work, social identity, and entitlements are regulated through institutional practices that make assumptions about valued and devalued work. Thus, benefits accrue to those who can capitalize on narrow definitions of what is valued work.

What we categorized as invisible provisioning activities for the most part are absent in social policy. When they do appear, they are hardly recognizable in their neoliberal discourse clothing of health-care costs (versus sustaining health); risk management (versus ensuring safety); and welfare fraud (versus making claims). In like manner, strategies for transforming social identities are individualized through discourses of lifestyle choices; the resistance and creative potential of envisioning alternatives while enmeshed in the exigencies of the present, are reframed as issues of time management or maintaining a work-life balance (see Odih 2003; Thompson and Bunderson 2001). This is the context within which the complex contours of women's provisioning responsibilities are negotiated. Understanding why so much of this work is rendered invisible, and devalued, is one of the tasks to be addressed. An aspect of this is trying to identify how privilege is maintained by dominant understandings of work. In this discussion we have attempted to link findings with narratives that hide the extent of work that women do; that ignore the fact that provisioning responsibilities are tied to relationships and thus affect decisions about how to access resources; that oppress women through supporting myths that paid work is the most valued contribution to society.

CONCLUSION

Neoliberal discourse with its emphasis on market models of work, individual responsibility, the contraction of government, and cuts in welfare state funding has been critiqued because many arenas of work are actively rendered invisible by policymakers, scholars, and individuals in their daily talk. Inequities are reproduced because those constructing ideology and policy practices sabotage efforts to articulate alternative understandings of the contributions that women make to society. If social and economic policies centered a concept like provisioning, with its broad understanding of work, anchored in the reality of responsibilities and relationships, it would lead to different discussions about citizenship, civil society, entitlements, and re-

wards (see Campbell 2005 for one exploration of the possibilities). A model where the market, state, and family are all visible has been advocated by a number of feminist policy scholars (Lister 1997; Skevik 2005; Staeheli and Clarke 2003; Thayer 2000; Vandenberg 2000; Yuval-Davis 1999). Most conclude that shrinking public services reflect a retreat by the state with a subsequent pressure for more provisioning to be taken up by family, NGOs, and the market. We would argue that theories of the state, market, family, and civil society may reflect different scholarly/disciplinary traditions but the common analytic challenge is to document how the power of economic and social institutions affect the quality of women's lives. Women move within and between these sectors, and their changing definitions, on pathways of relationships. Their provisioning responsibilities need to be specified, to be part of the models, so that the changing costs and benefits to women are seen as work gets shifted in the process.

The above analysis contributes to this agenda by broadening what is defined as work, by laying out a schema that shows the multidimensional aspects of women's work, revealing how some work is valued and thus associated with entitlements while other work remains invisible. Of particular concern is how the nature of the work that women do, and the types of responsibilities they carry, are represented in policy. If pension, health, education, and social assistance policy all make assumptions that privilege paid employment, nonmarket work does not get factored into benefit equations even though it contributes to the welfare of others. Thus, disproportionate benefits accrue to the former. The labor of women, and men, marginalized by poverty, race, and age is subsidizing benefits enjoyed by more privileged citizens in good jobs. As this conclusion is being written, the unstable foundations of neoliberalism as ideology and policy are becoming exposed. The policy question is whether the social and economic pillars will be redesigned or whether state provisions will simply shore up market cracks until the next economic earthquake again reveals fundamental structural faults. Conversely, theoretical and public understanding of how women define and value all the work they do, using the concept of provisioning as an entry point, promotes consideration of women, and by extension men, no matter what their social or economic status, as full members of civil society, deserving full consideration in the policy process.

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