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# The Challenges of "Moving at the Speed of Trust": How Women Navigate New Public Management Dynamics in Power-based Community Organizations

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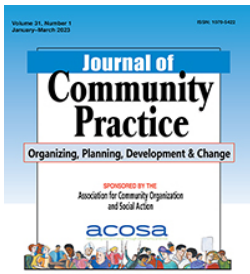
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# The challenges of "Moving at the Speed of Trust": how women navigate new public management dynamics in power-based community organizations

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**ABSTRACT**

The practice of professional community organizing aims to create a more equitable, inclusive society. However, power-based community organizing in the Alinsky tradition has historically been criticized for being unwelcoming to women, especially those who are caregivers at home. To better understand the paradox of working for social justice within an occupational context where one is not fully welcome, this exploratory interview-based study used an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to explore how women organizers understand, experience, and navigate gendered features of new public management within power-based community organizations in Chicago. Our findings indicate that women community organizers experience significant tensions due to professional demands and a culture of overwork that is incompatible with caregiving responsibilities. Nonetheless, practices of building authentic relationships, engaging in trauma-informed practices, and taking time for rest and reflection–practices that are not always consistent with neoliberal pressures to "produce" – brought them hope and meaning. Though organizing can be plagued by a sense of urgency, slowing down can be a political act of inclusion.

## Introduction

Community organizing is a vibrant and exciting profession for many who hope to build a more equitable world. By mobilizing and organizing local groups, community organizations have successfully campaigned for socially just policies relating to a range of issues, including quality education, affordable housing, accessible healthcare, equitable development, fair lending, environmental justice, and living-wage jobs (Fisher et al., 2007; Simmons, 2016; Staples, 2016; Swarts, 2008). Engaging in organizing has also been shown to provide mental health benefits to participants, as consciousness-raising and storytelling can have liberating and healing capacities (Ferguson et al., 2018; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020).

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Despite its attention to structural injustices and liberative possibilities, community organizing can be a challenging career path, particularly for women and caregivers. Although much organizing takes place with women and communities of color, limited attention has been paid to the ways in which women organizers experience and navigate gendered labor issues (for exceptions see, Gutiérrez & Lewis, 2012; C. Hyde, 1986; Mizrahi, 2007; Mizrahi & Greenawalt, 2017; Mizrahi & Lombe, 2006). Without taking into account the ways that women experience sexism within community organizations, social change organizations can perpetuate the objectification and exploitation of women, ultimately undermining their effectiveness (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 2012).

This interview-based phenomenological study examines the perspectives of women who work as full-time community organizers in Chicago. We extend existing research about women's experiences as organizers by drawing upon the neoliberal framework of *new public management*. The logic of new public management, with its emphasis on competition, performance and outcome measures, cost-effectiveness, and corporate management strategies, has been found to be pervasive in social service organizations (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2018; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). Workers are admonished to be "devoted" to their jobs while also expected to work harder and faster on demonstrable accomplishments with quantifiable metrics (McCallum, 2020; Pugh, 2015). Here, we focus on how women organizers navigate these dynamics and their gendered impacts.

Our findings demonstrate that women organizers struggle to keep up with the fast, unpredictable, competitive and outcomes-driven culture of neoliberal work regimes. These struggles constrain organizers' ability to authentically support volunteers and impacted community members. Further, they harm women organizers who struggle to balance their professional life with unpaid care work demands at home. Because their work cultures value overwork and interpret it as a reflection of one's drive and commitment, women organizers struggle to be valued or rewarded to the same degree as counterparts without gendered expectations. New public management's encroachment into social services–including social change organizations–challenges organizers' ability to do the slow but necessary work of building authentic relationships, engaging in trauma-informed practices, and allowing time for rest and reflection.

## Literature review

### *Power-Based community organizing*

Community organizing begins with the presumptions that (1) social injustices exist because of a lack of local power to bring about solutions, (2) the best way to build power is by organizing people and resources around a common vision, and (3) organizations that are composed of

local leadership are necessary to challenge unjust systems and policies (Obama, 1988). Smock (2004) proposed a typology of five community organizing approaches: power-based, community-building, civic, women-centered, and transformative models. While in practice community organizers can blend approaches, the approaches in this typology each have a unique theory and methodology to advance social change.

In this study, we interviewed women who work in the power-based model of organizing. We define power-based community organizing as a specific form of organizing in which trained professionals run campaigns by mobilizing impacted community members to collectively and strategically push for progressive change. Fisher (1994) identified five components within power-based organizing: the creation of an egalitarian, community organization; the trained community organizer as the stimulus for change; the objective to win power; the utilization of whatever tactics are necessary to win; and a pragmatic and value-free[1] nature of the created organization (Fisher, 1994; Wilkinson & D'Angelo, 2019). Professional power-based organizing is taught in intensive trainings for *community organizers* who are employees of social change organizations and *community leaders* who are volunteer representatives of the aggrieved community (Bobo et al., 2001; Chambers, 2018). Using a systematized and bureaucratized process that employs direct-action and conflictual tactics and pushes for concrete and pragmatic improvements, this approach is often associated with the legacy of Chicago-based organizer Saul Alinsky (Fisher, 1994; Wilkinson & D'Angelo, 2019).

In response to a changing socio-political context and critiques about the model's limited ability to address deeply-seeded issues related to so-called "identity concerns" including racism and sexism (Calpotura & Fellner, 1996; C. Hyde, 1986; Stall & Stoecker, 1998), contemporary power-based organizing has been influenced by social movements and community practitioners including the Black civil rights movement, the Highlander Folk School, as well as LGBTQ, feminist, and labor organizers (Brady & O'Connor, 2014; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 2012; C. Hyde, 1986; Payne, 1995). Some power-based community organizations have expanded their repertoires to include community building, popular education, imagining alternative social and political structures, and building coalitions across racial and ethnic groups (Bradshaw et al., 1994; Brady & O'Connor, 2014; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Markus, 2015; Rusch, 2010). Yet despite the integration of some collaborative and relational tactics, the overall logic and formalized methods of power-based organizing still apply. Thus, we wondered how women working in contemporary power-based organizations experience and navigate their work dynamics.

### New public management in social service organizations

The logic of neoliberalism, and the policies it gives rise to, began to take hold in the 1970s. Its tenets have had a profound impact on social welfare systems and social work due to the gutting and privatization of public services. To provide needed services, nonprofit organizations must compete for funding, and are thus incentivized to meet funders' visions for change (Smith, 2017).

Hasenfeld and Garrow (2012) describe how neoliberal professionalization pressures have become pervasive in social service organizations through a philosophy and management style known as new public management. *New public management* is characterized by a belief that market-based strategies can best address social problems (Roberts, 2014). Its metric-driven approach integrates corporate management strategies within the human services to emphasize competition, performance measures, and cutting costs (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2022).[2] These reforms can produce unresolvable contradictions among social service workers. For example, Spitzmueller (2016) found that the implementation of managerial reforms limited the ability of frontline workers to provide therapeutic care in a community mental health organization. As workers experienced resource constraints and pressures to speed up, they began to ration care, deny care to difficult clients, and reduce flexibility in service of formalized planning, scheduling, and structured intake. These reforms constrained the organization's ability to enact its mission of supporting people with severe mental illness.

A few studies have demonstrated that although neoliberal social policies and new public management may appear to be gender-neutral, both have gendered impacts. Neoliberal policies shift the purpose of social services from aiding people in need to transforming them into paid workers, regardless of their care obligations (Toft, 2020). Abramovitz (2012) demonstrated how negative impacts associated with neoliberalism disproportionately burden women, who make up the majority of public sector program workers, social welfare program participants, and union members.

Rooks (2003) found that labor organizers in the United States perceive that their performance is evaluated by demonstrating a willingness to relinquish free time to the job. Their organizational culture romanticizes the demanding nature of the job, characterizing organizers as martyrs dedicated to the cause. According to Rooks, this dynamic caused extreme disruptions to organizers' personal lives, particularly among women who had caregiving roles. Similarly, Kainer's 2015 study of labor organizers in Canada noted that "all of the women interviewed spoke to the unbounded obligations of their work and the explicit expectations by their labor employers to fully commit to organizing resulting in 'problems, hardship, and anxiety in their personal lives'" (Kainer, 2015, p. 110). Both of these studies demonstrate how the impacts of new public management – and especially its contributions to a culture of overwork–are gendered.

### Current study

As illustrated in the literature review, community organizing can advance social justice and can be a supportive and healing mechanism for participants. Yet it can also be challenging, particularly for women, and contemporary research has largely used a gender-neutral or gender-blind analytical approach that can result in the reproduction of gender oppression (C. A. Hyde, 2022; Mizrahi, 2007). Using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, this exploratory study examines how women who work in power-based community organizations in Chicago (1) experience features of new public management and (2) navigate these resulting dynamics.

## Methods

### Data and analysis

Data for this study include the transcripts of in-depth interviews with respondents (N = 10) that were collected as part of a larger dissertation project between March and November 2019 (Dungy, 2022) Sample criteria required respondents to self-identify as women and to have experience working as a power-based organizer for a minimum of two years in the Chicago region. The sample included women with the following racial and ethnic backgrounds: multiethnic African American/Black (2), East Asian (2), Latina (2), Southeast Asian (1), and White (3). Seven respondents were mothers. None reported having a social work degree. Notably, although they identified as women, some of the respondents used the terms "femme," femme-identifying," or "femme folk" to describe themselves.[3] The recommended sample size of an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is 10 to 12 (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The interview guide included semi-structured questions about respondents' perceptions of organizing experiences, motivations, priorities, and practices that work for women organizers. Mary (Author A) read each transcript four times while making exploratory notes by hand on content, language used, and theoretical connections (Smith & Nizza, 2022). From these notes, she wrote experiential statements on notecards and then clustered them into themes (Smith & Nizza, 2022; Smith & Osborn, 2003). These themes were then compared across the data to discover convergences and divergences, resulting in themes about overwork and organizers' methods of coping with the pace and demands of their jobs.

### Author positionality

Interpretive phenomenological methodology emphasizes researcher reflexivity. *Constitutionality* occurs wherein the divide between the subject and object

of research is softened. The participant and researcher co-create the essence of the phenomenon through a reciprocal and dialogical process (Garko, 1999).

Within phenomenological research, it is considered an asset when researchers select topics with which they have personal experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Mary and Amy (Authors A and B) are women who have worked as full-time community organizers. Mary practiced power-based community organizing as a professional and then as a volunteer for the past decade while balancing a doctoral program and the demands of raising two children. This positionality, as well as a preliminary study indicating that gender was an important factor in the experience of power-based organizing, inspired her to examine women's experiences. She drew upon her connections with other organizers who are women–a difficult to reach population–to recruit the sample. Amy was trained as a power-based organizer and worked for six years at an organization that blended collaborative and power-based approaches, and she is a new parent. Both have researched and taught community organizing, and are broadly motivated to understand how social change work can be nurturing to women's well-being and professional development.

## Findings

Using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, this study examines how women who work in power-based community organizations in Chicago experience features of new public management and navigate these dynamics. Here, we begin by exploring three themes associated with features of new public management and their impact on women organizers: (1) workplace devotion and competition, (2) caregiving, burnout and exhaustion, and (3) barriers to relationships, trust, and community building. Next, we explore how organizers navigate these issues, highlighting three themes: (1) building authentic relationships, (2) introducing trauma-informed practices, and (3) taking time for rest and reflection. When reporting our findings, we use pseudonyms to protect respondents' confidentiality When we provide a respondent's initial quote, we include their self-identified race or ethnicity, and if they are a mother.

### *Community organizing, gender, and new public management*

### *Workplace devotion and competition*
The pace of power-based organizing work, where participants are expected to give their all, has created barriers to participation especially for women (Kainer, 2015; Rooks, 2003). Many of the respondents characterized their work as time-intensive and unpredictable. Sharon, a Black organizer and mother, described the pace in her workplace thusly:

> It's breakneck . . . I mean, who is really creating these timelines? Are they real or are they imagined? . . . We should not be sidelined by every little thing that springs up . . . Press conferences every week, protests every week . . . And no celebration, no matter how much sweat, blood and tears goes into it. We say 'this went well, that didn't go well' and on to the next thing. And so how does that feed you? Where's the joy? Where's the living? . . . Cause it's doing something to us. It's doing something to our leaders. It's affecting all of us. Our leaders are exhausted because we are asking them to show up on Tuesday and then 'I need you again on Wednesday night and Thursday.

Sharon's description of how the breakneck pace of organizing requires both organizers and leaders to make sacrifices corroborates what Rooks (2003) and Kainer (2015) describe as the expectation that staff and volunteers must abandon themselves, including their personal lives and needs, to work. Sharon sarcastically claimed that her organization's culture believes, "If you don't live and die at the office, you must not really love your community!"

Sharon went on to say that it is not possible for everyone to participate to the same degree, and yet work can feel like a competition among workers to put in the most hours.

> There is definitely a culture still of 'who's working harder?' you know, 'who's working all the time?' Those are the people who are celebrated, you know. And those are gonna be white men. Like, what do you expect? It's so infuriating to see that re-exemplified in our space.

In a workplace that teaches organizers and leaders to interpret inequity through a structural lens while questioning the idea of "meritocracy," Sharon found it difficult to accept that workaholics were celebrated. In contrast, organizers with additional responsibilities outside of work, including caregiving responsibilities, were not celebrated in the same way.

### Caregiving, burnout, and exhaustion

Respondents critiqued the culture of overwork within organizing and described how it was incompatible with caregiving outside of work. They noted how demands from both result in burnout and exhaustion. For example, Jill, a Southeast Asian organizer who is balancing care for her parents and a child, described this dynamic by saying:

> I think women and femme-identifying people, like, there's so much we do for [every-one]- and it's hard to name. So sometimes you need to take heart and just process and be able to name it. Because, like, I crashed last Friday and was like, 'Why am I so tired? The elections were Tuesday, it's four days later, I shouldn't be this tired.

Workaholic culture can be dehumanizing and alienating to any worker, but it is particularly tough to sustain for people who do unpaid care work at home or in their community. For parents, particularly mothers who still take on most of the necessary care work in homes and communities, there is often a "second

shift" of labor that happens when they arrive home from work (Hochschild, 2012).

Balancing caregiving with an exceedingly demanding work schedule is challenging. Jessica, an East Asian organizer and mother, put it bluntly:

> [Community organizing] is just not family-friendly at all. Like for female-identified folks, even with a great partner, you just do the bulk of the domestic work. And being expected to do 70 or 80 hours of work per week and work on the weekends, it's just not doable. Even if you don't have kids.

Jill, the organizer who described her experience with burnout above, went on to say:

> After school [work] stuff is hard, Saturday [work] stuff is hard. I mean, it's just managing a schedule beyond my own which makes things really tricky. Like, I didn't pick up [child's] report card yesterday because I had a full day and I didn't manage his schedule and compare it with mine … I also have two elder parents. So having elder parents means I have also their schedules to manage, with doctor appointments, and my dad is on dialysis, so I have to make sure he gets picked up and dropped off on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Additionally, community organizers are often not paid sufficiently to hire poorer women to take on caregiving tasks for them, something that many busy professionals do when balancing busy careers with caregiving (Hochschild, 2012).

### Barriers to relationships, trust, and community building

Dynamics introduced by managerial approaches also impacted organizers' ability to build authentic relationships–a central tenet of community organizing (Mizrahi, 2007; Wilkinson & D'Angelo, 2019). Professional organizers reported concerns about how the fast, unpredictable work pace, and an emphasis on funder-driven, measurable outcomes negatively impacts their ability to build trust with and between leaders. Several respondents commented on this dynamic, noting that funders' emphasis on quantifiable deliverables can incentivize organizers to view human beings as "seat fillers." Jill, a Southeast Asian organizer and mother, noted how this instrumentalized view of people could undermine trust if the organizer is not slow and deliberate with relationship building: "We're too much of a culture of productivity and turnout and the dollars. But you have to invest the time – it's that whole go slow, move at the speed of trust thing."

Similarly, some respondents noted that there is an incentive to instrumentalize participants' stories. While sharing stories of alienation and trauma caused by oppressive systems can be an empowering part of the organizing process (Ortega-Williams et al., 2020), it can also be traumatizing if done in a transactional way. Erica, a Black organizer, states:

> We are skipping a whole lot of steps. We are just kind of pumping people into organizing with like no support, no skills, you know what I am saying? No accountability on our part . . . . We prop people up to tell really deep, difficult, traumatic stories, and we don't hold them. We don't stay with them through that . . . a lot of times we don't ask for consent in a real way. Or we ask folks who are like, not in a space to give consent . . . Let's be in deep relationship, but actually how do we do that in a way that honors our people and where they are, that's not just extractive?

Erica demonstrates how there can be a tension between pushing for "good stories" while building authentic, respectful relationships with participants. Building trusting relationships takes time. In contrast, an extractive model demands that people show up and share themselves whether they feel ready or supported to do so or not.

While the instrumentalization of relationships may be effective in "getting business done" in the short run, it does not build a trusting, lasting community that can do the long-term work of creating socially just policies and practices. Ashley, a Latina organizer and mother, described what is lost by moving too fast in community building as not weaving a "strong fabric" between people:

> There's nothing there, there is no fabric . . . You might know someone's story and what brings them to the work, but that isn't going to weave a home for people . . . I think a lot of what is missing from organizing spaces, both community and labor organizing, is an element of slowing down and building . . . and having a strong fabric between people. And that's devalued in our organizations, it's devalued in our culture. And it's something we femmes have to contend with all the time.

The notion of taking time to "weave a home for people" requires "slowing down and building."

Building a political home for people where trust is earned and participants' full humanity is honored proves especially important when working with vulnerable populations. Jill, who does youth organizing, described an interaction she had with a young person who was harassed by the police on the way to school:

> [She asked him] 'Oh did you tell your parents or when you got to school that morning did you tell your teachers that you got stopped by a cop?' They're like 'No' . . . They were scared to tell the adults in their lives . . . It takes trust to do that. They have to trust me to even file something anonymously. You know?

The cost of instrumentalized, rushed relating means that people like this young person may be left behind. Yet doing so would leave behind the people who most acutely experience the oppression these organizations are trying to upend. The philosophy and practices associated with new public management compromise organizers' ability to do the necessary work of building trusting, strategic relationships of solidarity with directly impacted community members and leaders.

### How women organizers experience and navigate managerial practices

Though respondents in this study had many critiques and concerns about the professional organizing world they were involved in, most remained committed to the field. Respondents identified practices used to cope with and manage challenges, and some respondents even found ways to address concerns about gendered exclusion. Erica, a Black organizer, described it thusly:

> There is a deep value and success in structural organizing. Like the basic concepts of being in deep relationship with folks, listening to the community and shaping our issues from the problems people are experiencing, investing in community resources and trusting the leadership of people who are on the ground.

These concepts–building deep relationships, listening to community members, investing in local resources and people–are considered fundamental to the practice of community organizing. However, as explored previously, many respondents struggled with organizational incentives to instrumentalize relationships with community leaders rather than build deep and authentic ones. Three ideas that had salience in the data were related to navigating these dynamics and required respondents to slow down and prioritize things that their workplaces did not do or only paid lip service to: (1) building authentic relationships; (2) engaging in trauma-informed organizing practices; and (3) prioritizing time for rest and reflection. Respondents reported that these practices were not only necessary but helped them cope with and stay engaged in the work of organizing.

### Building authentic relationships

Previously, we heard from a respondent who used the metaphor of weaving of a "strong fabric between people" to describe the necessary but sometimes challenging work of building a community. This requires building trust. Erica describes how trusting leaders is fundamental to her organizing: "What's working? . . . Honestly, when we trust our people." Erica went on to describe how she helped build a power-based organization that works to create policies and programs to support returning citizens. She had the authority within her organization to create a caucus specifically by and for Black women. This caucus develops campaign strategy and direction for the entire organization. The number one rule presented at every meeting is "Trust Black women, believe Black women." This rule centers the voices of people who are often drowned out by sexist and racist practices. The caucus is a mechanism to support the leadership of volunteer "leaders" rather than having paid organizers control campaign decisions or chase specific outcomes. This method appreciates community participants' full humanity and values them and all they bring to the work. It is a step away from instrumentalized relationships toward building authentic relationships.

In addition to letting community leaders lead, it is important to value their personal stories and understand that these may be painful to recount, especially if they are extracted and used by the organization in a transactional manner. Erica imagines what this can look like in the context of one-on-ones[4]: "What does it look like to do a one-to-one with someone that actually respects and is mindful of harm and trauma that folks have experienced?" Part of our shared humanity is that all people experience difficulty, at times profoundly. It can build solidarity to share stories with others about the pain and oppression one has faced (Ferguson et al., 2018; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020). It can also be very uncomfortable when these stories are solicited in an extractive or transactional manner. When done in the context of a supportive relationship built on trust, there is potential for story-sharing to be emancipatory for individuals and communities. Many organizers stated that treating painful stories with respect and care is central to their organizing philosophy.

### Trauma-informed organizing practices

Community organizing work can be emotionally taxing, with both organizers and leaders uncovering and discussing issues of injustice, deeply rooted inequities, and ultimately pain and trauma. Organizers and leaders likely experience vicarious trauma or their own retraumatization as they hear personal stories of oppression, and encounter and attempt to dismantle seemingly impregnable systems of injustice and violence. For these reasons, both individual and communal healing is needed. Organizers in this study recognized this, and four respondents explained the importance of creating spaces designated for healing. They gave examples of retreats for processing and healing and rooms for participants to decompress during training sessions and other events. Ashley, a Latina organizer and mother, described a healing retreat this way:

> [A healing retreat is about] respecting and knowing that the type of stuff that we do in [organizing] together a lot of the time is unpacking our trauma ... sometimes even recognizing that we have trauma. And that there needs to be space for people to heal ... or start healing or being taken care of ... whether it's taking care of themselves or having somebody take care for them with them.

Rather than assuming emotional support solely happens in private clinical spaces, these organizers recognized the importance of dedicated space for communal healing. Erica, a Black respondent, went into detail about what healing practices look like in her organization:

> I do think that the resources and spaces that we create and provide are super important. So like having healers when there are femme folks or non-femme folks who may have experiences with trauma ... being able to have folks in the space use different materials. We bring a lot of the elements in – so we use sound therapy, spend a lot of time in nature,

we do sitting practices and meditation, and we do physical activity, and kind of like bringing in all of our resources, and kind of like reaching back to ancestors.

Healing spaces honor the toll that organizing can take on people's emotions and the space needed to process and heal trauma caused by social inequities. True and deep solidarity can be formed when these experiences are given their due respect.

### *Time for rest and reflection*

One reason it is difficult to engage in the practices described above, such as forming authentic relationships and creating healing spaces, is the feeling that there is too little time. When work plans are packed with campaign tasks and organizers are under pressure to produce measurable outcomes, everything else can get pushed to the side including time for rest and reflection. Jill, a Southeast Asian mother, described the problem of finding time for regenerative practices at her organizing job saying:

> I think it's really hard. You just gotta keep going and there's no time for rest built in. It's like we don't even know how to rest … There have to be some more regenerative practices put in place so we don't die … too quickly. Because, like, it's a crush! … So regenerative practices that are sustaining, that give us life for as much emotional and intellectual stuff that we are pouring out.

A healing retreat, as described in the previous section, is a regenerative practice, but not necessarily a practice that organizers can take time off to do on a regular basis. Days off after big events, time to reflect and rest after a long campaign, and planning retreats are important but do not necessarily integrate rest and reflection into the daily routine of work or into the work culture. Though most respondents described evaluating events together as a staff, most did not have predictable intervals of time to process, rest and reflect. Sharon, a Black organizer and mother, described their perception that campaigns are more about claiming wins than learning and reflecting together:

> Reflection is supposed to be a huge part of our work. It's not. It should be. It should be. Because we're just moving on, you know. I think we are just moving through robotically, you know. And even if we were able to make an impact, it won't be lasting, because it's not as intended. It's not about us doing it together and moving forward together … It's like we got to get this thing done, and even if I never see you again, I can claim it.

When time is not protected to pause and reflect, it can be hard to generate insights that can improve organizing work, accommodate emerging needs, include everyone in the process or even enjoy a balanced, stable life and career.

Building deep relationships, allowing space for healing, and taking time for rest and reflection can be interpreted as distractions from outcomes-oriented tasks like building turnout numbers or racking up impressive policy wins. However, they provide benefits in the long term, especially preventing

exhaustion and burnout among organizers and leaders. In a culture that values independence, cultivating interdependence can be seen as a waste of time especially when not rewarded by funders.

## Discussion

Political scientist Wendy Brown describes individuals as beholden to a new form of existence under neoliberalism which allows "market-instrumental rationality to become the dominant rationality" in that it organizes and constrains the life of the neoliberal subject (Brown, 1995, p. 108). Theorist Michel Foucault (2004) describes the life of an individual under neoliberalism as "an enterprise for himself" devoted to developing personal capital by employing a cost/benefit analysis to daily life choices. Marketable skills, experiences, and talents are combined in the individual to form an "ability machine." In this context, life decisions are based on market rationality defined by competition and choice; the market is a lens through which all life can be understood, not merely the economic.

Anthropologist Ilana Gershon characterizes relationships under neoliberalism as "alliances that should be based on market rationality" (Gershon, 2011, p. 540). Within this logic, people are either business partners or competitors, each person working on cultivating their own "corporate individualism – a flexible bundle of skills [managed by] oneself as though the self was a business" (ibid, p. 546). Relationships governed in this way will, of course, become characterized not by care, solidarity or democracy but by transactional cost-benefit analysis. In this view, relationships with ourselves and others are impacted. Relationships are valued not for the meaning and connection they bring but for the growth of personal capital.

Previous research demonstrates that market-based logic associated with contemporary neoliberal capitalism impacts professions and professional organizations including social service organizations (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Spitzmueller, 2016) and labor unions (Kainer, 2015; Rooks, 2003) through the logic and practices of new public management. This study, to our knowledge, is the first of its kind to consider how these dynamics emerge in power-based community organizations and, importantly, how their impacts are gendered. Our findings demonstrate how women organizers must navigate new public management's emphasis on metrics, and how doing so pressures them to reduce people and relationships to numbers and their stories to soundbites. For the women interviewed in our study, professional organizing retains a culture of overwork and burnout. Organizing staff and volunteer leaders are pushed to their limit, and this is more acutely true for staff with significant caregiving responsibilities. This push creates mental health challenges, exhaustion and, ultimately, the potential loss of women organizers.

The women in this study feared that they were instrumentalizing volunteer leaders by treating them as "ability machines" who could produce social capital through participation in direct actions or by supplying an intangible form of capital: their story, their identity or their experience. At the same time, our respondents interpreted their own organizational roles as instrumentalized because they too were expected to create value for their job at the expense of their or their family's well-being. Workers in the field are expected to have such an intense devotion to their job that long hours, pressure to keep up an intense pace, and little pay do not hinder their passion. There is little capacity for the need for rest and reflection due to a sense of urgency brought on by pressing structural inequities and pressures to produce impressive quantifiable outcomes. This dynamic exacerbated gender and other inequities because those who are most able to thrive in careers that demand overwork have the most free time, resources, social support, physical abilities, along with the fewest caregiving responsibilities.

Our respondents also described how they find creative ways to navigate their challenging professional environment by prioritizing authentic relationships, integrating trauma-informed practices into their organizing work, and taking time for rest and reflection. Resisting the intense pace of work under neoliberalism can be seen as a political act. It represents a commitment to good organizing and, if done collectively, can be a strategy that challenges the accelerated time pressures and exclusions inherent in cultures of overwork. These practices reflect the simple understanding that there is power in mutual relationships, deep listening, and collective action against systems of oppression (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 2012; Krings et al., 2019; Mizrahi, 2007; Wilkinson & D'Angelo, 2019) – and these methods can sustain organizers.

## Implications for community practice

The practice of community organization has an important lineage in social work including Chicago-based Jane Addams and the settlement house movement that worked to transform communities through community development, labor union work, and peaceful protest (Brieland, 1990; Selmi, 2001). Additionally, the Code of Ethics and the Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) indicate that social justice, human rights, and democratic participation and inclusion are fundamental social work goals (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Despite social work's emphasis on social justice and student interest in training related to social action, few social workers participate in community practice, including organizing (Krings et al., 2020; Mattocks, 2018; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). The move away from macro community-based practice is due to several factors, including pressure to "professionalize" and an accompanying focus on individual diagnosis and

treatment rather than structural change (Carey & Foster, 2013; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Reisch & Andrews, 2001; Reisch & Wenocur, 1986). Further, given that power-based professional organizing continues to be unwelcoming to women, gender exclusion could act as a deterrent to reclaiming community organizing as a vital component of social work.

Our findings indicate that social workers have a significant opportunity to bring necessary skills to the field of community organizing. Social workers, including those trained in clinical practice, have practiced building rapport while being attuned to and genuinely caring about people's emotional state. Many are adept at integrating trauma-informed practices within their work in a way that transforms how people think about themselves and social issues. These supportive practices can contribute to the transformation of individuals and oppressive systems.

Our findings underscore how social service organizations broadly, and social change organizations specifically, are not immune to pressures associated with efficiency and production. These external pressures can impact critical questions like: who participates?, who decides?, and what issues are prioritized? Without an intentional strategy to center the interests of marginalized groups–including women, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and the intersections therein–organizers can be incentivized to focus on "easy-to-recruit" members, neglecting the interests and engagement of people who encounter additional barriers to civic participation–thus undermining their social justice mission (Krings & Copic, 2021).

Finally, our study demonstrates the importance of listening to and learning from the rich experiences of professional women who are community organizers. They act as protectors of relational practices within organizing, despite external pressures to instrumentalize people. Their experiences demonstrate the need for educators, practitioners, and funders to provide support and resources for women organizers.

## Limitations

Three limitations need to be noted in relation to the study. First, our analytical approach focused on convergences rather than divergences between respondents. Although our sample was racially and ethnically diverse, its low sample size did not allow us to make claims relating to differences in race, ethnicity, ability, or economic status.

Second, our research questions focused on women who work in power-based organizations. Future research might explore if or how perceptions among power-based organizers differ among men or nonbinary individuals or people who work in other forms of community practice such as consensus-based organizing, mutual aid, movement building, or feminist organizing models. A comparison between power-based models and other models could

highlight whether dynamics like overwork are an inherent experience of organizing work, resulting from the urgency of social justice, or if other models offer fewer barriers to women and other marginalized groups.

Finally, our data were collected in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lock-downs. Future research might explore how organizing practice has shifted as a result of COVID-19, focusing on if and how practices of building authentic relationships and incorporating time for rest and reflection shifted work priorities.

## Conclusion

Despite organizers' efforts to resist neoliberal forces such as the "meritocratic" rewarding of overwork, the push for measurability, and the encroachment of work into free time, power-based organizing is made of humans who are steeped in these dynamics and funded by the same. These pressures conflicted with their desire to build relationships and community with leaders. Women with caregiving responsibilities were particularly vulnerable due to difficulties with balancing work-intensive organizing careers with the demands of unpaid gendered care work at home. While organizing has historically been critiqued as being an unwelcoming space for women (C. Hyde, 1986; Stall & Stoecker, 1998), resultant changes to the model still seem not to have impacted the field meaningfully for these respondents.

The critiques of organizing being a "macho" boys club focused on winning campaigns at all costs, must be updated to take into consideration the demands of new public management on social service provision and social change work. The market-based model of organizations competing for funds based on auditable outcome measures pushes agencies and organizations to chase impressive metrics at the expense of other, more mission-driven but less measurable goals. The cost is a missed opportunity for authentic relationships with communities and leaders, the potential loss of staff who cannot or will not tolerate the work culture, and the silencing of essential voices in the field of community organizing.

With many workers demanding more time to care for family and friends, paid family leave, and the ability to work away from an office, perhaps new opportunities for rest, reflection, and genuine connection are growing. An appreciation for slowing down so that others–especially people from marginalized groups–can participate may help us all learn and grow much more holistically and significantly. When rushing to meet deadlines and benchmarks, organizations working for social justice are not immune from pressures to leave behind those who cannot keep up–neglecting the lessons they might teach and ultimately deprioritizing their interests. If community organizing is to succeed in its ends, it must use means that have space for all.

## Notes

1. The value-free, apolitical nature of organizations within this model has been more recently contested with some scholars documenting an increased embrace of progressive values (Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017).
2. Organizing has always been a numbers game, as groups rely on a large number of supporters who act collectively to secure resources from a powerful few. The difference with the encroachment of new public management is that outcomes are now determined by an outside body, not impacted groups deciding for themselves how they wish to measure success.
3. We understand gender to be socially constructed, and we acknowledge that there is diversity within the category of "women", including differences in race, ethnicity, class, sexual identity, ability, age, and more. Additionally, there are people who are gender non-conforming.
4. One-to-ones are meetings between an organizer and prospective participant. The organizer attempts to unearth the "self-interest" of the prospective participant and convince them to have a stake in collective organizing work.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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