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Responsibilization and Retraditionalization: How Neoliberal Logics Reproduce Gender Inequities Among Women Community Organizers in Chicago

Mary L. Dungy
Loyola University Chicago, lynmary@gmail.com

Amy Krings
The Ohio State University, krings.7@osu.edu

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Mary Dungy and Amy Krings

Author Biographies

Mary Dungy, LCSW, PhD is an adjunct instructor at Loyola University Chicago's School of Social Work. Dungy's research has focused on community organizing, gendered labor and neoliberalism.

Amy Krings, PhD, MSW is an associate professor at The Ohio State University's College of Social Work. Her work focuses on how marginalized groups collectively advance social and environmental justice, and how social workers and community organizations can support individuals' growth as social change agents.

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal capitalism creates a “crisis of care” in which *social reproduction*—though necessary for society—is undermined by stripping away support for caregivers, who are disproportionately women. “Social reproduction” refers to the reproduction and maintenance of the labor force via childbirth, child rearing, and caregiving for loved ones more generally. This interpretive phenomenological study examines how a crisis of care manifests for women in the workplace. Drawing upon in-depth, semistructured interviews with Chicago-based women who work as community organizers, our findings demonstrate that sexism in the workplace, coupled with the gendering of care work, creates unique difficulties for these women. By integrating the work of feminist critical theorists who argue that neoliberal logics produce gendered impacts, particularly due to processes they call *responsibilization* and *retraditionalization*, our findings help explain why and how gender subordination and gendered divisions of labor persist, even in organizations with a professed commitment to social justice.

Keywords:

crisis of care, neoliberal, responsibilization, retraditionalization, sexism, social reproduction

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Neoliberalism has been described as “an always mutating project of state-facilitated market rule, propelled not least by its own limitations, contradictions, and reactionary tendencies” (Peck & Theodore, 2019). Often associated with budget austerity, limited social services, and the weakening of labor power, neoliberalism is increasingly connected with resurgent misogynistic, xenophobic, authoritarian, and conspiratorial orientations (Brown, 2019; Peck & Theodore, 2019).

This article aims to extend existing research about how neoliberal capitalism causes a “crisis of care” for working women. Neoliberalism’s impact on social work practice and on the well-being of marginalized groups, including women, has been documented (Abramovitz, 2012; Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2015; Dungy & Krings, 2023; Baines, 2006; Brady et al., 2014; Zelnick & Kim, 2023). This manuscript extends that work by calling attention to the social reproduction functions of neoliberalism, features that are often overlooked in favor of the economic impact of neoliberal logics. Additionally, while extant scholarship tends to focus on how neoliberalism influences clinical or frontline social workers, here we consider its influence among community organizers.

Drawing from the work of critical feminist theorists, this article begins by explaining how neoliberal capitalism causes a “crisis of care” for working women. Specifically, we introduce two key concepts—responsibilization and retraditionalization—to explain how gender inequities are reproduced in workplaces, and in ways that burden women. We then present findings from our study of women’s experiences of work in power-based community organizations. Though the women in this study work within community organizations that center progressive politics, we uncover four mechanisms through which women experience subjugation in the workplace: “office housework,” gendered acknowledgment of expertise, the requirement to embody masculinity in order to lead, and down- playing the needs of mothers and caregivers. We conclude by theorizing about how the concepts of responsibilization and retraditionalization can help point a way forward for community organizers, social workers, and social change agents to push back against neoliberal social forces.

Neoliberalism and the Crisis of Care

Neoliberalism is partly a form of political economy organized around the primacy of free markets. Political theorist and radical geographer David Harvey (2005) describes neoliberalism as:

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (p. 2)

Neoliberalism is accompanied by a global “race to the bottom” in which profits are maximized at the expense of workers’ rights, the environment, and public goods and services.

Neoliberalism is not confined to the economy, however. Market rationality is also extended to noneconomic spheres such as education (Dixson, 2011), social work and social welfare provision (Zelnick & Kim, 2023), and personal relationships and identity (Foucault, 2004; Gershon, 2011; Han, 2017). Feminist scholars suggest that although neoliberalism may appear to be gender neutral, it disproportionately harms women, reinforcing gender inequities by cutting social services utilized by women and children while eliminating public sector jobs and unions of professions that often employ women (Abramovitz, 2012; Fraser, 2016). Neoliberal logics and practices also influence social change work, curtailing collective organizing possibilities and grassroots influence (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Krings, Kornberg, et al., 2019).

Feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser (2016, p. 99) points out that our neoliberal capitalist system causes a crisis of care. She notes that our capacities for “birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally”—tasks otherwise known as “social reproduction”—have been severely curtailed by disinvestment in social welfare and the ascendancy of the dual-income family.¹ She describes how contemporary neoliberal capitalism pushes women to work longer and more unpredictable hours away from the home, and yet—due to welfare revanchism—increasingly depends on them to continue capital expansion by producing the next generation of workers. Bezanson (2006) points out that social reproduction also includes navigating—and assisting dependents in navigating—systems of prejudice and racism, making the crisis of care particularly burdensome for racial and ethnic minorities.

Political theorist Wendy Brown (2015) points out that the crisis of care presents a false choice for women:

There are two possibilities for those positioned as women in the sexual division of labor that neoliberal orders continue to depend upon and reproduce. Either women align their own conduct with this [neoliberal] truth by [focusing on their own marketability and abandoning social reproduction completely], in which case the world becomes uninhabitable ... or women occupy their old place as unacknowledged props and supplements to masculinist liberal subjects ... as provisioners of care for others in households, neighborhoods, schools and workplaces. (p. 105)

According to this framework, women are to blame for the inequities they face—rather than the neo-liberal shift of risk from the collective to the individual via responsabilization and the regressive and binary conceptions of gender known as retraditionalization.

Responsibilization and Gendered Labor

Theorists such as Michel Foucault and Wendy Brown have argued that aside from its impact on economic structures and the state, neoliberalism shapes our subjectivity and our relationships with ourselves and others. Within a neoliberal logic, people are expected to become “responsible investors” in their own marketability. For example, Foucault (2004) describes subjectivity under neoliberalism as entrepreneurial efforts to increase one’s personal capital. Individuals are understood to be an enterprise for themselves, applying cost–benefit analyses to their daily life choices. Marketable skills, experiences, personality traits, and appearances are combined in the individual to form an “ability machine” that can be seen as a form of capital. Critical theorist Byung Chul Han (2017, p. 5) similarly states that “neoliberalism transforms workers into entrepreneurs. ... Today everyone is an auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise. People are now master and slave in one.”

One term to describe this individualized market rationality is responsibilization, or the shift of responsibility and risk from the collective to the individual, with self-investment becoming a kind of economic speculation (Brown, 2015). In reality, however, risk is more easily shouldered by some than by others, since structural factors constrain one’s ability to assume risk and make calculated anticipatory decisions based on market rationality (Adkins, 2003; Brown, 2015; Fraser, 2016). Responsibilization therefore magnifies already existing inequities, including gender inequity.

For the purposes of this article, we are interested in Catherine Rottenburg’s (2017) conceptualization of responsibilization, which describes how some women are labeled as more deserving (sufficiently responsibilized), based on the way they navigate their assumed participation in social reproduction. For example, according to this logic, upwardly mobile women, who are seen as making calculated decisions to further their personal enrichment, deserve balance between career and family because they have been responsibly planful. Rottenburg describes an increasing social consensus that women ought to invest heavily in their careers and “professional portfolios” before having children; women who fail to do so may be considered insufficiently responsibilized and therefore deserving of associated struggles to balance work and caregiving, with limited access to resources.²

Social welfare supports such as affordable and accessible child care, social insurance, and other social welfare programs are thus deemphasized in favor of personal responsibility. The legacy of blaming poor and minoritized women—particularly Black women and immigrants—for their plights can be seen in social policies that codify neoliberal beliefs about what it means to be a responsible mother (Toft, 2020). Welfare reform in the late twentieth century included policies that were designed to guide low-wage workers into a globalized economy hungry for inexpensive labor. Welfare policy “became more focused on practices designed to discipline the poor, placing a lower priority on the goals of redistributing income or helping [mothers] meet the basic needs of their families” (Schram et al., 2010, p. 740). This hit mothers who were already marginalized the hardest. For example, poor single mothers’ cash assistance was revoked in favor of pushing them to work in low-wage jobs away from their children—while public support for child care was simultaneously being defunded. Within this milieu of responsibilized motherhood, it is up to individual women to plan ahead, focusing first on a highly compensated

career and other lucrative activities while taking on caregiving responsibilities only after firmly establishing income streams and a sufficiently impressive resumé.

Some privileged women are able to deftly navigate the landscape of responsabilized motherhood, typically by having enough money to outsource much of the labor involved in caring for dependents. Frequently, that labor is provided by poorer women whom society sees as not adequately responsabilized. Hence, responsabilized women are able to appropriate the labor of women who are less fortunate in order to achieve a high-powered career and raise children without significantly affecting their own career trajectory or financial success (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Isaksen et al., 2008).

Appropriating the labor of less-resourced women is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Although entry into the waged labor market may have been new and liberating for some privileged women, many BIPOC and poor women have always had to work outside their homes as they were economically and racially precluded from the status of “housewife” made popular in White middle-class Fordism (Burden-Stelly, 2020; Davis, 1981). The legacy of racialized appropriated labor in the United States, including slavery and low-wage work, meant that the housewife who was seen as fragile, submissive, and trapped in her private home was most often a White middle- or upper-class woman. In contrast, Black women were forced to labor for free alongside men during slavery, and later to work for low wages as domestic workers. In the 1890s, for example, all but 9% of employed Black women were domestic workers, and according to the 1940 census, 59.5% of employed Black women were domestic workers (Davis, 1981, pp. 82–85). Responsibilization continues this legacy of appropriation of marginalized women’s labor to do the reproductive labor of more well-off households.

Retraditionalization

It may be assumed that in advanced capitalist nations like the United States women have realized many freedoms and liberties. However, neoliberalism and the individualization of risk have not liberated most women; rather, women continue to be pushed into traditional and binary gendered roles, both in professional settings and at home. Sociologist Lisa Adkins (2003) uses the concept of retraditionalization to describe how women continue to be subordinated in the reflexive individualized milieu that accompanies neoliberalism. Rather than modernity erasing traditional gender roles, Adkins (1999, p. 124) argues, tradition is “simultaneously produced or co-constructed with the modern.”

Although Adkins points out that long hours of intense work often require unpaid care from a supportive partner at home, she also shows that even when women do paid work alongside men, their labor may be assigned in gendered ways:

Thus, the operation of familial relations no longer depends on being “related” ... [I]t could be argued that workplace practices themselves may currently be implicated in the deployment and construction of new denaturalized yet retraditionalized forms of family and kin bonds. (p. 132)

Adkins points out that frequently work is assigned according to stereotyped gender norms as they occur in “traditional” family settings—despite the fact that most workers are not actually related. In work “families,” women’s roles and labor are often gendered. They may be relegated to the role of providing emotional support to a male colleague or superior, for instance, or they may be expected to complete menial work tasks, or “office housework” (Williams, 2014), on top of their normally assigned duties. A study by Banks and Milestone (2011) of women working in small new media firms illustrated retraditionalization in a professional setting: the expectation was that women would go above and beyond what was in their job description to do additional, gendered tasks. For example, women were expected to:

provide nurturing, emotional support to disgruntled and marginalized team members, exclusively young men ... not in any official capacity as, say, union representative or team manager—but, it transpired, as an unofficial “mother” figure to the “guys,” or when required, as the “soft” face of management diktat. (pp. 11–12)

Hence, the ambiguity of a team dynamic can result in women acting as a nurturing work mother or work wife to other team members. This represents a reassertion of traditional gender roles, in which the woman is a resource for men’s needs for affective bonds and support. Early in her career, activist scholar Angela Davis (1977) outlined the ways in which women are continually relegated to the roles of caregivers for working men in capitalism, functioning as a soft place to land that makes the ruth- less winner-take-all world of commodity production bearable:

In its “bourgeois-democratic” form, capitalism requires the family as a realm within which the natural and instinctive yearning for non-reified human relations may be expressed ... [T]he woman is presented in the utopian fringes of bourgeois ideology as an antithesis to the capitalist performance principle. (Davis, 1977, p. 161)

Although some scholars argue that self-reflexivity and individualization may help women override traditional gender roles through access to waged labor (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001), Brown’s recent book, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (2019), argues that neoliberal trends such as these actually reinstate tradition. For Brown, a part of the neoliberal project is the breakdown of democratic collectivity—the state, unions, public schools, and other forms of democratic collective society. The loss of these sites of collectivity necessitates a return to tradition as a means to govern society.

Brown draws from the writings of early neoliberal theorists, including Friedrich Hayek, to demonstrate why tradition is an important part of neoliberalization. “For Hayek,” she writes, “our freedom is founded neither in law nor in politics, but in the evolved, often inarticulate principles of conduct and opinion forming a cohesive people, principals that we ‘freely’ accept and abide” (p. 75). Milton Friedman (1962) echoes this: “To the free man, the country is the collection of individuals who compose it, not something over and above them. He is proud of a common heritage and loyal to common traditions” (p. 47).

Because neoliberalism was conceived by its founders as de-democratizing, tradition was understood to be the glue that would hold society together and govern conduct. Brown (2019) credits the 1975 Trilateral Commission with popularizing the neoliberal conception of the “excess of

democracy” (p. 73), which claimed that democracy was in crisis because of its unbounded reach. Brown suggests that “for Hayek, the great error of social democracy rests in its attempt to replace historically evolved spontaneous order, born by tradition, settled into custom, with rational master designs for society” (p. 107). The neoliberal undercutting of collective institutions was to be replaced with a spontaneous governance by tradition, privately accepted and engaged in by individuals and their families. Brown argues that what Hayek and the other founders of neoliberalism did not anticipate was that tradition would encroach on the public sphere rather than remaining at the level of private use by individuals and families. Brown notes, “As rights become a crucial vehicle for expanding conservative Christian morality into the public sphere, this morality is disembedded from tradition and therefore detached from both the organic roots and the spontaneous effects that Hayek ascribed to tradition” (p. 115).

Hayek saw tradition as a noncoercive way to govern society; he thought people would voluntarily choose to conform to these norms. Brown, in contrast, demonstrates that our current return to tradition would be abhorrent to Hayek, an encroachment of conservative Christian morality into the public arena meted out by the state and courts. Additionally, far from Hayek’s conception of collectively shared traditional values, the encroaching conservative Christian morality is connected to “the reactive energies of White male woundedness and displacements” and functions “as a retort to those it holds responsible for its wounds” (Brown, 2019, p. 121). In this sense, Brown notes, this contemporary return to tradition is more about revenge and resentment than about a return to traditional values; it lacks the secure mooring to a Judeo-Christian orientation, lost to the Enlightenment and science, of the premodern traditional values. These new “rootless” traditional values are easily appropriated, manipulated, used by market logic or as reactionary backlash to perceived threats to White heteropatriarchy in an already unstable and threatening climate of neoliberal capitalism.

Current Study

This study extends research about how neoliberal logics, particularly those of responsabilization and retraditionalization, shape women’s experiences at work. Using an interpretive phenomenological analysis, we investigate how women working within power-based community organizations experience gendered labor dynamics. These organizations used direct action campaigns to improve access to resources including affordable housing, healthcare, and good-paying jobs, typically situating their work within broader movements for racial and economic justice. Women working as community organizers—and professional power-based organizers in particular—are an interesting and underexamined sample. We find that, despite the field’s commitment to progressive social change, professional power-based organizing, like most professions, has absorbed logics of responsabilization and retraditionalization, contributing to a workplace crisis of care and an unwelcoming space for women and other marginalized groups (Craddock, 2019; Dungy & Krings, 2023; Hyde, 1986; Kennelly, 2014; Rooks, 2003; Stall & Stoeker, 1998).

Methodology

Data

This study used interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The data were collected as part of a dissertation project examining women's experiences as professional power-based organizers in 2019 (Dungy, 2022). In-depth interviews with respondents were conducted by Dungy and transcribed³. Each respondent was interviewed one time for approximately one to two hours. The interview guide consisted of semistructured questions about respondents' perceptions of organizing experiences, motivations, and practices. Questions of interest to this study included:

- Why do you organize?
- How would you describe your priorities in your organizing work?
- How do you feel about organizing today?
- What role does your gender play in your organizing work?

Inclusion criteria required that all study participants self-identify as women with experience working as a power-based organizer in the Chicago area for a minimum of two years. The total sample consisted of ten women with the following racial and ethnic backgrounds: African American/Black (two), East Asian (two), Latina (two), Southeast Asian (one), and White (three). In interpretive phenomenological analysis, small sample sizes are standard; 10 is typical (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Seven respondents were mothers, five with children younger than 10 years old, and three were single mothers.

Analysis

Utilizing the criteria for interpretive phenomenological analysis laid out in Smith and Nizza (2022), Dungy read each transcript four times while making exploratory notes. From these notes, she wrote experiential statements on note cards and then clustered these into themes, which were compared across the data to discover where they converged and diverged (Smith & Nizza, 2022; Smith & Osborn, 2003). A peer coder enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis by reviewing and coding two of the transcripts, and member checking was offered to the respondents. Hycner describes these as important methods to enhance rigor in phenomenological research (Hycner, 1985). Three respondents replied, all of whom were confirmatory and excited by the results. The data analysis resulted in a number of themes relating to women's experiences as community organizers, some of which are outlined elsewhere (Dungy & Krings, 2023). Finally, we harnessed a rich feminist critique to understand and interpret women's experiences related to gendered labor.

Author Positionality

Reflexive phenomenological research is a method that allows for insider research, meaning that researchers are encouraged to study phenomena with which they have personal experience (Moustakas, 1994; Preston & Redgrift, 2017; Smith & Nizza, 2022; van Manen, 1990). Both authors have professional experience as community organizers and were trained in schools of social work. Dungy has practiced community organizing as a professional and volunteer for the past decade while raising two children as a single parent. She drew upon her connections with other power-based organizers—a difficult-to-reach population—to recruit our sample. Krings worked for six years as an organizer and now is a parent who researches and teaches social work

students about community organizing and social change strategies. These personal experiences increased our ability to contextualize and interpret the data.

Limitations

Our study is necessarily limited in its generalizability due to the constraints of our purposive sample. Specifically, we opted to limit our sample to people who identify as women and community organizers working at power-based organizations in Chicago. While many of our respondents used an inter-sectional analysis in their interviews, we focused on how their experiences at work were influenced by gender and gendered dynamics, but we did not have an appropriate sample to extend that analysis to other social identities.

Future research might analyze how neoliberalization impacts community workers, particularly on the basis of their racial identity, immigration status, queer identity, class designation, and the inter-sections among these. Organizational contexts—such as their size, public or private status, mission, or approach to social change—could also be fruitful lines of exploration, as could the influence of respondents' educational background, such as if they were trained as a social worker. Future work ought to ask respondents to identify and describe their caregiving roles within and beyond extended families, including but not limited to parenting.

Findings: Gender Subordination in the Workplace

This study demonstrates that women who are community organizers interpreted their work as gendered in four ways: (1) they often were assigned menial “office housework,” (2) their workplaces acknowledged expertise in a way that gave preference to men and devalued women’s contributions, (3) leadership was associated with projecting masculinity, and (4) the needs of mothers and caregivers were downplayed within the workplace. These findings help to explain how the logic of responsabilization and retraditionalization manifests for women in the workplace, reproducing gender inequities and contributing to a crisis of care. In the quotations that follow, respondents are identified by pseudonyms. We include their self-identified race and ethnicity, as well as their self-reported status as a mother or parent. If they did not identify as a parent, they were described simply as “respondent.”

Office Housework

A common complaint among respondents was that menial tasks were foisted upon them or other women in the office. As defined by Williams (2014), office housework consists of gendered tasks such as note taking, scheduling, or other simple detail-oriented tasks. Erica, an East Asian respondent, described her frustration with office housework:

This is my pet peeve. It is not necessarily organizing specific, but note taking, for example, is one of those things I said I intentionally do not volunteer for ... or I only do it when there is a rotation in place. And in the context of large-scale events: logistics roles always, always—like sign-in or something that just requires a competent individual to be detail-oriented. But men never get asked to do that.

A White respondent, Lisa, echoed this, saying, “Still people ask women to take notes and will say, ‘You have the neatest handwriting,’ which is unacceptable.” Fulfilling office housework tasks can have broader implications relating to the distribution of work. If menial tasks are relegated to women on staff, is more meaningful work reserved for men? Erica went on to express additional concerns:

When it comes to like, I don’t know, bold visionary stuff, I feel like women don’t really get asked to do that kind of thinking. ... When a man proposes this big bold idea, it’s met with all this praise and validation, whereas the women just feel like “I can’t. I either won’t get the same response if I do that or I feel like I just can’t take the risk in this role.”

In this case, demonstrating visionary leadership is not simply ignored; instead, it is interpreted as a risk or even unsafe. In some way, Erica sensed that she would be seen as encroaching on male territory if she stepped beyond her designated role at work. Respondents noticed that women were stuck with menial tasks while men were encouraged to do more visionary work.

Giving Preference to Men’s Contributions

Although men were often encouraged in their ideas and expertise, some respondents noted that women’s contributions frequently went unnoticed at work. Lisa, a White respondent, described how men were seen as the experts:

I think one thing that is visible is recognition of who’s an expert. I feel in that way that sometimes the labor of female organizers is not seen because there are still certain people who are seen as the smartest, or who know what the best way is. ... I had an experience when [a male colleague] ... went in [to a coalition meeting] and wasn’t saying anything different from what [a woman colleague] had said but everyone was like “Oh yeah, good idea!” you know? Patriarchy, sexism, it’s still in the air.

Because the men in the coalition were listened to and praised for their contributions, regardless of their experience (the male colleague was described as having just started the job), the women in the room felt erased. Another participant, Latina mother Ashley, expanded on her feelings that her work was invisible and unacknowledged:

I think the biggest thing is the unacknowledged and unappreciated amount of emotional labor that goes into building out programs and bases and even dealing with male coworkers and superiors ... like all of this emotional labor, and also a whole bunch of labor that somebody else was taking credit for.

These quotes describe a tendency for people to support, encourage, and trust men to lead professional organizing work, while also ignoring, downplaying, or minimizing women’s contributions. Men’s ideas are met with praise and validation by others. Lauren, a White mother, described some discomfort about becoming the “woman behind the man” in her former organizing job and discussed her refusal to do so in her current position, with a male organizer who was her peer:

I have stood up for him a lot because he's been a really great friend and super supportive. And now that we're working on a project, he is just being a fucking drama queen, and I just feel like this is how men in organizing are. And [he has] an expectation that I am just not going to fulfill ... of me being his cheer-leader and saying his ideas are the greatest. And I just feel like that was pretty consistent in all the organizing I did, especially the higher up you get.

The expectation that women would “cheerlead” for their male colleagues suggests that men are entitled to support for their ideas and leadership. In this framework, maleness is a precursor to leadership potential. Men are seen as natural leaders or experts and their ideas are seen as more worthy of support and praise. Colleagues are expected to get behind and support the ideas of their male counterparts.

Embodying Masculinity in Order to Lead

Conversely, some women were encouraged to act more masculine in order to be seen as having leadership potential. Nicole, a Black respondent, reported that if a woman is in leadership, she is retrained to align with the cultural norms of masculinity:

The way that we are taught ... to be in leadership is very masculine, even though they try not to do respectability politics. But the way that you have to dress as a trainer in the training room, the way that you have to project your voice and have a loud, commanding ... like gestures, and just be unapologetically abrasive ...⁴

This respondent felt that she and other women were encouraged to adopt masculine traits to replace their feminine traits. Nicole described this process as “being organized out of” being feminine: “A lot of those things that are kind of attached to femininity or being femme ... You were in a lot of ways punished for and organized out of behaving that way.”

This seems contradictory to the prior themes about what appeared to be a workplace division of labor, with office housework and colleague support relegated to women and leadership and visionary tasks associated with masculinity. In this instance, women are encouraged to adopt masculine behavior when in leadership positions but to become a supportive caregiver and cheerleader when their leadership is not needed, a contradiction that is emblematic of neoliberal capitalism's relationship to gendered labor and care work in the crisis of care.

Sharon, a Black mother, described her resistance to her work culture's preference for what she described as “forcefulness,” which may be similar to Nicole's reference to masculine leadership and “unapologetically abrasive” behavior:

I hear [organizers] all day. They're ... so loud. I can't even think straight. It is like this forcefulness that is really well regarded. ... Like, that doesn't work for everybody. I'm not going to talk to people like that. That is not who I am, you know? ... And it's in the training style; it's how we talk to folks about accountability.

Although Sharon and Nicole are not from the same organization, both describe a forceful, loud, abrasive presence in the training room as a requirement if one wants to be seen as a good trainer. Within community organizations, training rooms are significant because, like classrooms, they are where concepts are taught and passed on to the next generation of learners, or in this case, to organizers and volunteer participants. Ideas about what it means to be a powerful community leader, and even the movement's vision, are conveyed in these rooms.

One participant felt that some of the problem comes from Chicago's community organizing heritage as a White- and male-dominated profession. Ashley opened her interview by stating, "In Chicago, we have a very, very rough history of organizing, particularly because of patriarchy and White dudes." This feeling that professional power-based community organizing reflects cultural tropes of Whiteness and masculinity was repeated in other interviews. Jessica, an East Asian mother, described her dismay at finding this to be true:

To me, a lot of times we are trying to follow a method that has been created by White men. That's, like, always the case, from school to here. I was so shocked and disappointed when I saw it in organizing, 'cause this is the place of liberation.

Although community organizing is about liberation from various forms of oppression, social change organizations are not immune to structural forces or material conditions larger than themselves.

Downplaying the Needs of Mothers and Caregivers in the Workplace

Professional community organizing can be a difficult field for caregivers. Its fast-paced work environment and its impact on caregivers—particularly women—has been documented (Dungy & Krings, 2023; Kainer, 2015; Rooks, 2003). Respondents felt that the needs of caregivers were often ignored. Lisa, a White respondent who did not yet have children, wondered how she might be affected later:

It's something I think about for myself. ... I don't want to stop organizing just because I am a mom or a parent or whatever. And I have seen a lot of people struggle with that because it's hard, and also because I don't think our organizations are providing the same amount of support ... And then I guess more generally, just being able to have balance, being able to be paid while being able to ... support ourselves, have lives outside of work.

Balancing a time-intensive job with caring for oneself or being able to "have lives outside of work," as Lisa put it, is hard enough. How much harder is it for those who have to care for a family member? Jessica, an East Asian mother, said:

What I do think is problematic still to this day, and has been—as I know you've experienced this too—is, like, I don't think organizing as a career or as a profession is welcoming to mothers, to families, single moms especially. Like it's just—it feels impossible. I consistently see, you know, moms especially who have children, have to leave organizing. In some type of way we will still do it with our volunteer time, but [we] have to leave it as a profession. It's literally a pattern.

The fast pace of organizing work can make balancing care work feel impossible. Sharon, a Black parent, reiterated this:

Making your child a priority has to be kept a secret in organizing ... You know, I cannot be living for the weekend, because that's when I am going to get to spend time with my kid. That is— No. They are growing up every day.

She pointed out that colleagues and supervisors exhibit ambivalence about her role as a caregiver; they see children as important but are dismissive of the time and energy required to raise them: “I can be not well regarded for the time I spend with my kid or whatever, but at the same time people are tripping over themselves to tell me how great my child is, you know?”

Sharon was frustrated by the expectation that organizers leave their personal lives, including their caregiving roles, at home when they come to work. She described how inequities have to be left at the door when she comes in to work:

There is like real other stuff that I am dealing with. And I am expected to pretty much show up the same every day and do the work. ... I am working with poverty issues in my own life, with incarceration issues in my own life. I am worried about my child when they walk out of the door. ... No, I do not think there is an understanding that we all have different capacity.

As discussed previously, as responsabilized neoliberal subjects, everyone is expected to confront the struggles they face on an individual basis rather than as tied to structural inequities. Differences in capacity based on systemic factors such as racism, gender, and poverty are decentered, as responsabilized subjectivity does not incorporate systems. Instead, it is up to each individual to ensure that they succeed. Neoliberalism can feel hegemonic; therefore, it becomes easy for people who do not fit the responsabilization mold to blame themselves. Ashley described how talking with like-minded women helped:

Until I had the language to say it, it always felt like I was like “Gosh, I am so exhausted.” ... Until I had other femmes pushing me to see that and validating that my experiences were real and not fake in my head ... I knew it was happening but I didn't have the words.

Ashley later pointed out that part of what is hard about balancing unpaid care work with a career is the lack of social programs and supports in the United States:

While I am driving back from dropping my son off at day care, to this office, I'm looking around and seeing ... the infrastructure and how gross it is and just thinking about me and my partner's life, and how if we had subsidies for our lives and we did not have to work as much, how much easier it would be on us and our kid. And then I was struck with such dread because I was just like, I don't know that this country will ever get there.

For Ashley, social supports like infrastructure or subsidies are public goods that are deprioritized and therefore missing from the lives of caregivers, leaving them to struggle to meet their needs in isolation.

Discussion

Critical feminist theorists argue that the crisis of care strips away social welfare infrastructure and necessary support for social reproduction while also demanding that women play the social role of reproductive laborer (Fraser, 2016). This leaves women in the bind of being responsabilized to find individual and private solutions for balancing care work with paid employment while also navigating regressive retraditionalized notions of femininity (Adkins, 1999).

We have extended this work by examining how the crisis of care manifests within the workplace—specifically, how it manifests among women who are power-based community organizers. In describing their struggles, our respondents noted that they were encouraged to act in gendered ways at work: by taking on office housework, having their contributions downplayed while also supporting their male colleagues, and adopting a masculine approach to leadership—all of which can be understood as examples of retraditionalization. Additionally, our respondents described their difficulties in balancing unpaid care work with their careers, challenges that were downplayed, ignored, or even viewed as a personal failing, exemplifying the dynamic of responsabilization within the workplace. In what follows, we discuss how the neoliberal concepts of responsabilization and retraditionalization contribute to gender subordination, emphasizing why and how these dynamics are especially important to the social work profession.

Retraditionalization Within and Beyond Power-Based Community Organizations

The concept of retraditionalization can help explain why gender subordination continues in workplaces, including social change organizations. In our study, some respondents reported that they were encouraged to take on menial tasks that lacked creativity, boldness, or vision—what has been described as “office housework” (Williams, 2014). Office housework is not rewarded by raises, recognition, or promotion, potentially contributing to gender inequities among leaders in the field. In addition, respondents described an unwritten set of expectations about how they ought to behave, which varied based on circumstances. Sometimes these women were expected to cheerlead their male colleagues’ leadership and ideas, whereas when they assumed leadership roles, they were encouraged to assume what were described as “masculine” and “forceful” characteristics. The respondents expressed frustration and surprise that they had to navigate these retraditionalized expectations even in a purportedly enlightened work environment.⁵

This continued deference to male leaders, coupled with a preference for a masculine leadership style, as described by our respondents, is consistent with literature describing women’s experiences in male-dominated professions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-Retamero, 2006). Feminist theorists like Adkins and Brown help to explain why traditional gender roles have not disappeared but have instead been reasserted and reformed with modernization. For Adkins, the flexibility of post-Fordist work environments makes way for tradition in lieu of formal structures or hierarchies to determine work roles and relationships. Brown explains further that tradition is foundational to neoliberalism as a method for guiding behavior outside of collective democracy. As exemplified in the study by Banks and Milestone (2011), traditional gender role reinstatement may occur within the ambiguity of horizontalized, team-based work environments. Though our

study is limited to the experiences of community organizers working in Chicago, our findings offer a cautionary tale to social workers broadly: the reinforcement of traditional gender roles continues to manifest in social change organizations, even those with a social change mission and structural analysis.

Retraditionalization can also help to explain how public policies and the legal system can embody sexism in a way that disproportionately harms women, especially women of color and the poor. This of course shapes social needs in ways that influence who social workers serve and how, and who is considered to be in need and why. For Brown, the enforcement of traditional gender roles takes on a more sinister hue when it jumps beyond personal decisions to symbolizing an activist White male backlash, codified within public policy and law. This retraditionalization, combined with the neoliberal force of responsabilization, leaves women vulnerable to political and personal violence while removing any modicum of state-funded support. Additionally, persistent gender inequities, combined with blows to reproductive rights and open misogyny from heads of state, have cast doubt on the assumption that women's entrance into the workforce—especially in male-dominated fields—has been commensurate with progress in women's liberation. Feminist theorists, including Adkins and Brown, suggest that rather than following a linear progression, gender roles and our assumptions about them can be regressive; we can move backwards from detraditionalized gender roles to retraditionalization.

Responsibilized Care Among Community Organizers

As feminist theorist Kathi Weeks (2021) describes:

The enormous amount of time, skill and energy devoted to childcare, eldercare, the care of the ill, the care of the disabled, self-care, and community care [social reproduction], without which the economic system would not exist, is provided mostly free of charge, disproportionately by women, in the moments left outside of income-generating work. (p. 9)

Despite the social necessity of this caregiving labor, austerity measures tend to target public support for social reproduction, and for the care of dependents in particular. Rather than collectively addressing this crisis of care by creating or investing in these supports, we responsabilize women to manage their reproductive choices with the goal of maximizing their personal market profitability. Fraser (2016, p. 113) characterized the problem as a “‘progressive’ neoliberalism, which celebrates ‘diversity,’ meritocracy, and ‘emancipation’ while dismantling social protections and re-externalizing social reproduction. The result is not only to abandon defenseless [or inadequately responsabilized] populations to capital’s predations but also to redefine emancipation in market terms.”

The caregivers in this study often found that their superiors and colleagues did not consider, or were resistant to considering, what caregiving responsibilities meant for their work life. The need for child care at evening and weekend meetings was often ignored, seen as outside of the organization's responsibility, or was at best an afterthought, and women who cared for aging parents were similarly on their own. The care of dependents was seen as a hindrance rather than

a social good for the benefit of their organization or the collective society. This was exemplified by a workaholic environment and the expectation that unpaid reproductive labor tasks would not interfere with career responsibilities.

Responsibilization assumes that we all start with around the same amount of access and privilege and that, when inequity does exist, it can be overcome by determination and hard work. Consequently, inequality is not understood to be problematic or a necessary target of public policy. Rather, by this logic, the individual is seen as atomized and thus wholly responsible for their own success or failings.

In this way, the dismissal of the needs of working mothers in this study—specifically their challenges in balancing caregiving with career responsibilities—is reflective of the responsibilized view of motherhood: care for dependents is a personal responsibility. It is as if society is saying to women, and particularly to those who are poor or working class, that they should not have children. According to Brown (2015, p. 107), “an impoverished single mother is framed to fail in the project of becoming a responsibilized neoliberal subject.” Brown describes women (or people) who become “responsibilized human capital” as “socially male” because of the way they relate to the market, society, and the division of labor between care work and professional work.

Despite neoliberal society’s refusal to provide or protect universal supports for caregivers, such as labor unions, affordable and accessible child care, social insurance, and other social welfare programs, it relies on reproductive labor, even in a solely instrumental sense, to replace an aging labor force and military. Thus, even though children are needed to someday replace today’s workers, there is a failure to invest in child rearing, creating a crisis of care (Fraser, 2016). Child rearing and caregiving are understood to be private issues rather than a shared obligation requiring public investment (Brown, 2015; Fraser, 2016). Responsibilization, then—like retraditionalization— influences social needs and social provision. It contributes to the feminization of poverty, reproduces gender inequities, and shapes the character of social welfare provision—which programs social workers provide (or do not), and what “care” should look like (boosting personal responsibility or addressing sexist social structures and cultural norms).

Implications for Social Work

As described by Abramovitz (2012), neoliberal and austerity measures can be understood as part of a three-pronged attack that should be of great concern to the social work profession and its workforce, due to its targeting of public sector groups: social service users and workers (all predominantly women), and labor unions. Our study builds upon this and other work that explores direct practitioners and frontline workers (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2015; Fenton, 2014), by examining how community organizers perceive and explain these dynamics. Community practice broadly, and community organizing specifically, are considered to be among the most effective strategies for social workers to realize their social justice mission (Fisher & DeFilippis, 2015; Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018; Wilkinson & D’Angelo, 2019). Yet our findings demonstrate that social injustice can play out within progressive community organizations, providing a cautionary tale for the social work profession. This is additionally noteworthy because previous research has found that critical reflection, a practice embedded within power-based community organizing,

can help social workers resist neoliberalism while bolstering practices that are aligned with human rights, equity, and other emancipatory goals (Fook, 2017; Morley & O'Bree, 2021).

While these realizations can be sobering, this study also provides social workers with a path forward. We note four mechanisms that can be challenged, resisted, and reformed to mitigate some of these harms. They include explicit attention to, if not organizational policy about, the delegation of office housework, how colleagues recognize one another's contributions, efforts to challenge biases relating to how leadership should be performed, and centering the needs of working women who are also caretakers. These necessary reforms can be part of a larger cultural shift wherein social workers reframe their roles as "helpers" or "experts" and instead act in solidarity with marginalized groups—recognizing shared burdens brought about by similar social, political, and economic systems.

Importantly, we do not intend to equate direct-action tactics—often employed in power-based community organizing—as intrinsically problematic or an ill-fit for social work. In fact, we agree with Frederick Douglass's (1857) famous quote: "This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand". Instead, we are suggesting that direct action and conflict can be strategically beneficial within struggles for social justice (Dennis & Bell, 2020; Krings, Fusaro, et al., 2019) and merit inclusion within social work education, yet no one should be expected to perform in a masculine way that does not feel authentic and an abrasive approach that does not center genuine relationships cannot advance social justice.

Conclusion

One might expect a field like community organizing to be immune to the forces of retraditionalization (for Adkins), reinstatement of gender hierarchies or nihilistic resentment disguised as tradition (for Brown), and the individualization of risk via responsabilization. However, community organizing's emphasis on critical consciousness building and liberatory values does not make it immune to forces larger than itself. While organizations certainly ought to prioritize mutual support for caregivers of all sorts, these organizations exist in a social milieu that materially and ideologically devalues and undermines caregiving. Additionally, social justice work is frequently underfunded, as it takes aim at systems of oppression that are powerful and entrenched. This paper's aim is less an indictment of particular organizations than it is of our society's unwillingness to support caregiving in particular and human need in general. The lack of mutualism, collectivism and support for the marginalized in organizations is merely a symptom of wider structural problems that impact organizations including those attempting to change those same structural problems.

To address the crisis of care within workplaces, then, it is helpful to understand how the social forces of responsabilization and retraditionalization manifest in the experiences of women. Until we recognize that we all collectively benefit from often invisibilized and undervalued reproductive labor, this crisis will continue.

Notes

1. Bezanson (2006) extends Fraser's characterization of social reproduction by noting its relationship with the functioning of the market: "The work of social reproduction—that is, the work that goes into maintaining and reproducing people and their physical and emotional capacities and needs on a daily and generational basis— mediates the tensions inherent in the labour market and social service provision while absorbing its insecurities ... internalizing the insecurity of putting together a living in a capitalist labour market" (p. 11, 26).
2. Companies can operationalize the logic of responsabilization through their organizational policies. As an example, Rottenburg (2017) highlights offers by companies like Facebook and Google to freeze the eggs of their women workers, encouraging them to wait to have children until they can be responsabilized mothers.
3. Respondents were not compensated.
4. In the model of power-based community organizing, a key aspect of the organizer's job is to train new leaders and organizers on the nuts and bolts, or "rules," of direct action campaigns, sometimes through intense multiple-day trainings. In this quote, the respondent is describing her perception of the expectations that her colleagues and supervisors had of organizers when they were leading such a training.
5. These respondents may have been expected to support colleagues who were not men, but respondents chose to discuss the experience of supporting male colleagues as expected and burdensome.

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