

“Moving beyond AntiViolence to ProVisioning: Supporting the work of women's organizations in the 21st century economy”

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Summary

Twenty-five years ago people laughed about the issue of wife abuse in Parliament. Today, after years of work by women's groups and other organizations, parliament and the public understand that all women have the right to be safe from violence. However violence has not yet been abolished and women's groups continue to search for policies and practices that will ensure security and safety for all women.

This speech draws upon findings from over 120 interviews and 20 focus groups in a national study of six new types of women's groups that support women in their pursuit of security and safety in our changing economic and social times. The groups include a food cooperative, a community centre, an older women's network, a tenants' association, and an employability centre for women leaving abusive relationships and another for young minority women. The work of these women's groups is not only, or even primarily an "anti" or against focus, even if that is their origin. Their work is "pro" something, a desire for another vision—to provision, to create positive visions of well-being for their members and others. Who groups provision for, and how, are the fundamental relationships of responsibilities that every woman's group and organization negotiates, sometimes freely, other times with reluctance. Hence, the word "ProVisioning" is a term used to capture the concept of another vision—a vision that addresses the work of providing for the well-being and fulfillment, and sometimes even survival of those for whom organizations have relationships of responsibilities.

¹ Dr. Reitsma-Street is Professor in Studies in Policy and Practice at the University of Victoria and Principal Investigator of the Wedge Provisioning Research Project, a three year national study funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Thanks to Corrine Lowen, Crystal Gartside, Viki Prescott, Silvia Vilches, Arlene Wells, and particularly Catherine van Mossel who worked on earlier drafts of the analysis, and to my colleagues Stephanie Baker Collins, Judy Cerny, Sheila Neysmith, Elaine Porter, and Sandra Tam of the Wedge Project for conceptual contributions to this paper.

My focus today is on various types of what we call provisioning work that women do together--whether in small informal groups or large formal organizations.

In the research study on women's organizations we identified five types of provisioning work:

- Provide resources
- Create supportive culture
- Inspire and teach
- Resist unjust practices and counter dominant ideas, and language, that says violence, for example, is acceptable or older women are unproductive
- Strive to survive amid narrowing spaces

To support these types of provisioning work, women's groups and organizations need the following:

- To provide resources, time and money are needed
- To create supportive culture, a commitment to collective organization is necessary
- To inspire and teach, groups need autonomy to negotiate their mission
- To resist injustice and counter dominant ideas, groups welcome difference, participate in diverse coalitions and partnerships, and model for each other and the community what is acceptable and what is unacceptable language, behavior, and policies
- To survive amid narrowing spaces, mission-oriented evaluation and accounting are important.

Full text of this paper will be available on www.uvic.ca/spp under publications. Also contact Donna Barker, Research Secretary, 250-472-5072 dbarker@uvic.ca, or Crystal Gartside, crystalg@uvic.ca or Marge Reitsma-Street, mreitsma@uvic.ca for a copy. The paper should be uploaded to Bridges for Women Society website, under publications.

Introduction

Thank you for the warm introduction and invitation to speak. It is a pleasure and a privilege to be here this evening, to share some thoughts on what women's organizations such as yours do, and what supports this work.

Bridges for Women Society began its work in 1988, just a few years after several members in Canadian Parliament laughed at a speaker who spoke of the realities of violence against women. Since then—through thick and thin times, mostly thin times I think, Bridges has engaged in bold, difficult work “to provide education and support for women survivors of any form of abuse” and to “share information with others on the needs of women who have a history of abuse”—to quote from the purposes as stated in the Constitution of Bridges. Bridges has won awards for its work. Its mission has been taken up by 20 Bridging Programs throughout B.C.—until their recent demise in the recent funding cuts. More recently, the work of Bridges has been taken up in new ways in online Internet training programs available to women across the country. An evaluation completed early in 2000 demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of the longer, flexible supportive training program offered by Bridges before 2003. (One module of 15 weeks of training less than one-half the annual cost of training and other services for women seeking employment who live in supportive housing, and one-quarter of annual costs for those without supportive housing—when you factor in the health, social, criminal funding required (Eberle, 2001; Duivenvoorden, 2002).

Bridges says “no” to violence. One graduate summed this courageous message in her ironic way.

“It’s not new age, not drool about abuse. There is clear communication, and caring people who are together themselves. Really amazing, positive, healthy role models. They don’t teach it’s your karma to live with abuse, go back to him or learn from abuse as some people say, and as I used to think.”

Thomas Mathieson (1974, 2000), a leading abolitionist theorist and Scandinavian correctional policy maker argues the construction of alternatives should *not* accompany or anticipate abolitionist work. Rejecting violence and creating alternatives are independent stories, each with their own heroes and villains, conflicts and resolutions. Both are essential and both need attention. Sometimes the two approaches are enacted concurrently—but not necessarily. The same people and groups may direct both—but again, not necessarily. Mathieson states it is important not to wait for an alternative before engaging in abolitionist work, and Bridges has been doing that since it opened its doors—saying no to violence and sharing information with the public, politicians about the needs of women leaving violent relationships. One does not wait for creation of an alternative labour market before abolishing slavery and sweat shops, nor ignore violence against women while creating peaceful relationships. It is expected that politicians and the public abolish a specific injustice – whether violence, poverty, a snitch line, or time limits on welfare – even if a just alternative is not yet imagined or possible to implement.

But, the challenging work of creating alternatives and new visions of how to live together is required to transform injustices into just, caring realities. Bridges For Women Society is one of the many women’s organizations and groups that are taking up two very different and independent challenges: abolishing violence and its destructive ways of talking, acting, and organizing; and providing peaceful, healthy ways of speaking and acting so women can learn together and make their own choices about their lives, employment, and the future. As its name, Bridges implies, it is a bridge to move women away from places of violent acts and talk, where the “world is seen as a horrible place and everyone is out to get them” –in words of a student—to a safe space, another type of world, populated not of superwomen, but ordinary women who know themselves and each other, and of accomplish what they can. As another Bridges student concluded:

“So it took me awhile to get working again with people. I needed that space and time and I needed new women. I needed to meet strangers in a safe environment. That’s what I thought was the most important thing that Bridges gave me in order to start transforming and coming back into community and starting to work and to function.”

The focus of this talk moves away from the abolishing types of “AntiViolence” work, to the “ProVisioning” work pointed to in the title. I am addressing how large and small groups of women create alternatives to violence and the visions they create to provision for the survival, well-being and fulfillment for all women—and men, not just a few. I will briefly speak about the national study on what women’s groups actually do—not just what they value, nor a review of their mission statements. Rather, I examine empirically, what is the work women’s organizations do. I present five ways they do their work of providing, followed by thoughts on policies, practices, and approaches that support the work of women’s organizations.

A National Study on Women's Organizations

We—the researchers in the Wedge Provisioning Research Project Team featured in their summer colours in the overhead—are looking in a new way at the work women do. We are particularly interested in women marginalized by poverty, age, or race, and on the edge of the new economy—hence the name “Wedge” for our team—Women on the Edge. The two objectives for the project are: (1) To find new ways to understand the endless amount of work that women do to maintain the lives of those they feel responsible for, especially the work they do in the community. (2) To develop better practices, programs and policies that make it easier for women to provide for others without sacrificing their own well-being.

Overhead: The Wedge Research Project Team Summer 2006

From Top Left: Sheila Neysmith, Elaine Porter, Sandra Tam
Middle Left: Marge Reitsma-Street with Mario Liegghio middle right
From Kneeling Left: Catherine van Mossel, Crystal Gartside, Stephanie Baker Collins, Judy Cerny on bottom right and Oxana Mian in front Photo by Michael Milner



We believe that women's work cannot be neatly divided into categories of paid and unpaid work. They work in the arenas of family, employment and the community in complex and overlapping ways. We are trying out the concept of **provisioning** to describe the work that women do. By provisioning we mean all the activities that women do to provide the necessities of life for those they are responsible for inside and outside the home. This research project examines the patterns of provisioning relationships and activities that women do in their households, communities and jobs.

We are especially interested in the work that women do in the **community**. We know less about this area of women's work than we do about their work in the family and paid employment. We are interviewing women who are part of groups that define themselves as low income, immigrant, ethno-racial, youth or older. Such women are often at the mercy of government programs and policies, social service providers, employers, and businesses that have restrictions and regulations about how to access them, when and how often. Government, business and social programs, while helping, can add work to women's lives or give help that is not useful. In looking at women's community work, we want to find out how economic, political and social policies and programs and the organizations that affect women's lives can be changed to better support the provisioning work that women do.

Women and Community

Women work together in informal, often unpaid activities of self help, collective action, and advocacy political campaigns as well as in neighbourly networks and identity associations that respond to the demands of life using what Stall and Stoecker (1998) call the "crafts of empowerment." Women, as paid workers or volunteers, also perform collective work in institutionalized settings to deliver services, build community, protest injustice, and foster social change through feminist services, community care work, the voluntary sector, social justice coalitions, and non government organizations. The innovative and progressive contributions of women working together in the past have included the creation of peaceful, democratic spaces in the settlement homes and anti-slavery societies while in the 1970s groups of women conducted campaigns against violence and racism, created women's centres and transition homes, while expanding daycare, legal rights, and adult education.

By the late 20th century, new types of women's organizations were created to respond to global food insecurity, rising inequality, and negative impacts of political and economic restructuring programs, including community kitchens, food cooperatives, lending circles, international consumer boycotts and living wage campaigns of the 21st century (Ricutelli et al, 2004). Poor women's groups, organizations and movements mobilize to struggle against shared oppressions, whether street violence, hunger, inadequate shelter, and the loss of children to drugs, ill health, violence, or overwork (Noonan 2002).

They aim also for an end to economic injustices and political oppression: thousands of community kitchens in Peru, for example, staffed by volunteer women organized into federations attempt to serve as "an important political base for members to debate community and national issues", including the need to share the costs of caring for children, elders, and community (Lind, 1997, p. 1210). Paradoxically, the women's groups, organizations, and coalitions that emerged in Canada and the Majority World to absorb the shocks of what Molyneux (2002, p. 172) calls the "market fundamentalism" of the late 20th century are expected to do even more, just when access to state funding and public entitlement have decreased (Fabricant & Fisher 2002; Miles, 2004-05; Mohanty, 2003).

What is common to the work of women coming together is they speak and act not only on their own, but in some collective manner to create room for their needs, fears, and desires (Jaggar, 1998; Staehil, 2003). Women acting in groups work in spaces and ways that may be motivated by the interests of the household, market, or state, but also go beyond. Milroy Moore and Wismer (1996) posit the need to theorize another sphere of living and work in addition to the household and market, that they call community, to see more clearly other spaces for living and intentional social change. They argue that the persistence of the public/private opposition magnifies the interests of individuals, families, or businesses while minimizing the concerns of community, devaluing collective trust, cooperation and reciprocity. In the separation of household and market, or home and work, groups and communities are considered primarily as extensions of the household or support centres for the market. In a competing public/private oppositional discourse, political science scholars posit the public as the state and its activities with the private as the affairs of the market. The places beyond these two—configured as the community, the commons, civil society, or society--

serve as ancillary spaces or the background to both the market and state: necessary, but less important.

There are serious theoretical and policy attempts to bridge the divides between public and private. Feminists pursue equality in the public worlds of employment and state alongside demanding heightened attention to the caring labour required to ensure survival of the species. They propose for example, the universal caregiver model (Fraser, 1977), the earner/carer citizen (Lister 2002), and the women-friendly state (Hernes 2006) as a basis for policy and practice to ensure a fair distribution of resources, responsibilities and opportunities for all to enjoy the rights of citizenship, employment, and care work. Central to contesting boundaries between the public and private domains, however they are conceived, are “ideas about where a polity’s obligation to its citizenry begins and where private responsibility ends” (Staeheli, 2003, p. 818).

But, to concentrate on contesting equitable distribution of responsibilities and resources in the domains of public and private, whether household and market, or the state and market, misses other ways by which women (and men) provide for themselves and others. We assume there is a need to complicate further the boundaries between public and private domains. One way to do so is to examine the multiple spaces and arenas of activity that women use to provide for the well-being of themselves and the world around them. Hence, our interest in the practice of women working in formal and informal groups. A more fulsome portrait of what goes on in the community and collective arenas of work may spur debate on other ways to understand what are the responsibilities and resources of individuals and groups, and how they can be produced more justly.

The Study Sites and Data

Overhead: Study Sites and Data

Six Sites:

- members of a food coop in a small city in southern Ontario
- members of a community resource centre working-class multilingual neighbourhood in northern Ontario
- members of an employment preparation program for abused women in a western Canadian city
- young minority women in programs for education, employment and housing in a large Ontario city
- members of an emerging tenants' association in large multicultural public housing complex
- members of an older women's network centered in a large Ontario city

Data:

- Over 120 Interviews with individual women
- Over 20 focus groups with staff, board, members of each site
- Policy documents and field observations in each site

Turning now to the research on six women's urban organizations. We thought about many types of organizations and women's groups, and chose those that met four criteria. (We know that we have missed women living with disabilities, although many of the women in the sites report multiple health challenges. Also, rural groups are not included.) First, the group or organization is searching for creative, innovative ways to meet individual and community concerns, especially to women marginalized by poverty, racism, and ageism. Second, the group seeks to determine their concerns using dialogue and democratic governance. Third, the groups declare it is feasible for them to engage in theorizing type of research with the authors, or their doctoral students, who are academic researchers committed to feminist and community-based research geared to social change. Each of the researchers either had, or are developing long term relationships with the group or organization, to visit and read organizational documents, to make research observations, and to participate in the life of the group and its members, such as at speaking annual meetings, helping out with clothing drives or political actions, attending graduation ceremonies, and contributing in some helpful, reciprocal way to the well-being and survival of the group. Finally, the groups had to be quite different from one another, in order to add to a theoretical search for diversity of findings.

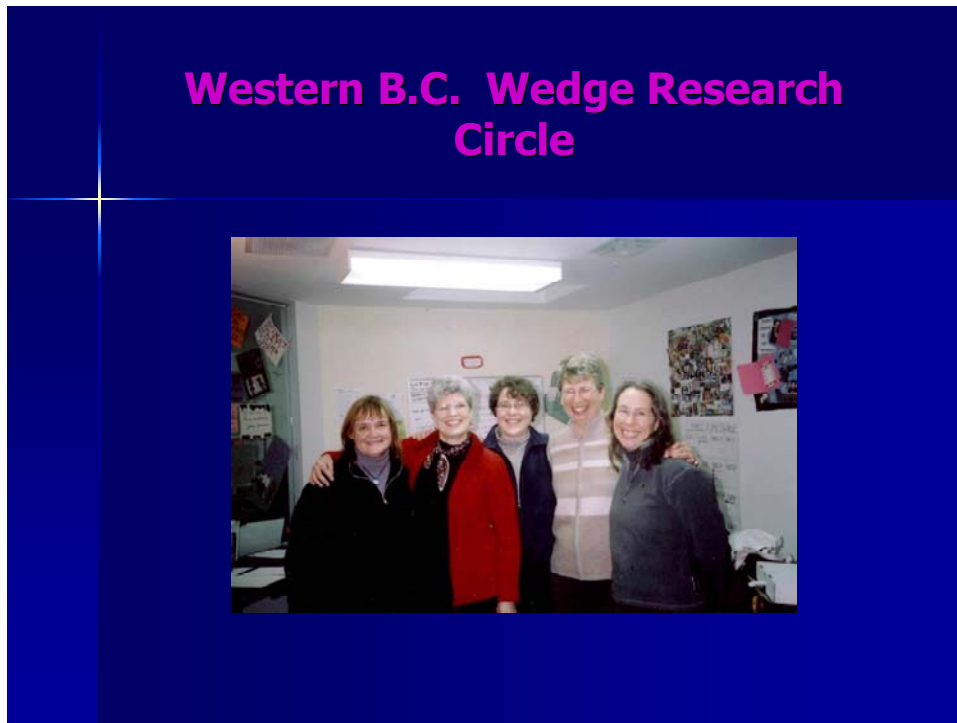
Not all of the groups are explicitly feminist but the majority of those who performed the paid and unpaid work in the groups were women. The groups varied from as few as ten to 300 members. They differed in organizational structure, including a large network of older women, a small emerging group of tenants who do not have core funding and dedicated meeting places, to small and large organizations incorporated as not-for profit organizations. The activities performed by the groups include mentoring, discussion, advocacy, and street theatre, delivery of childcare programs, employment training, food pick-ups, and creating of affordable housing. Services are available to members who are eligible by virtue of being on income assistance, resident in a particular neighbourhood or housing complex, or agreement to the group's purpose.

The analysis that follows draws from semi-structured interviews with over 120 women and 20 focus groups about the provisioning responsibilities, activities and strategies in six women's groups and organizations. The groups are situated in one large urban and three medium sized cities with populations over 250,000 in two Canadian

provinces, Ontario and British Columbia, who elected governments in 1995 and 2001 respectively, to implement policies that radically cut welfare, social and other services to women and communities (Neymsith et al, 2005; Klein & Long 2003).

The selection of respondents and research data collection activities varied by site. The research activities were reviewed by community advisory groups who agreed to work alongside the researchers for the study. The next overhead shows an example of one of the community advisory groups in Western Canada.

Overhead: Western B.C. Wedge Research Circle



Common qualitative questions were used to guide the 90 minute interviews and focus groups in the sites that focused on: relationships of responsibility within the household and the group; types and purpose of provisioning activities; external and internal changes in policies, values and activities; various approaches to negotiating and deciding boundaries of responsibilities; costs and consequences of provisioning choices; and supports and limits to provision work.

The authors conducted the focus groups themselves, and interviewed some of the individual women, while experienced research associates or women from the community interviewed the others. The taped interviews and focus groups were transcribed, with names and identifying information of individuals and organizations removed.

Data were subjected to theoretical top down and bottom up analysis within and across the sites. The author and their research assistants agreed to some common codes and a collective process of logging reflections and reactions to the data, after completing preliminary analysis of several interviews and discussions of descriptive findings with advisory groups and site members (e.g. Reitsma-Street, 2004). These cross-site common set of codes about provisioning relationships, activities, constraints, supports, and paradoxes, were then used to code interview and focus group transcripts using an NVIVO software program (add reference).

The analysis of data for this paper concentrates on understanding the provisioning obligations, activities, and decisions of groups and organizations of women.

Five Ways that Women's Organisations Provide

The major finding of the study is women's groups and organizations perform an amazing amount and variety of complex work—much of it invisible, unfunded, and produced through the energy and volunteer time of staff, boards, members and allies. They do this work to meet the relations of responsibilities they have taken and accepted, sometimes reluctantly. This finding may seem pretty obvious to many of you, and not new, especially those who feel burdened or overwhelmed by all that has to be done. But, it is worth looking carefully and specifically at all this work that you and others do, and what supports this provisioning work.

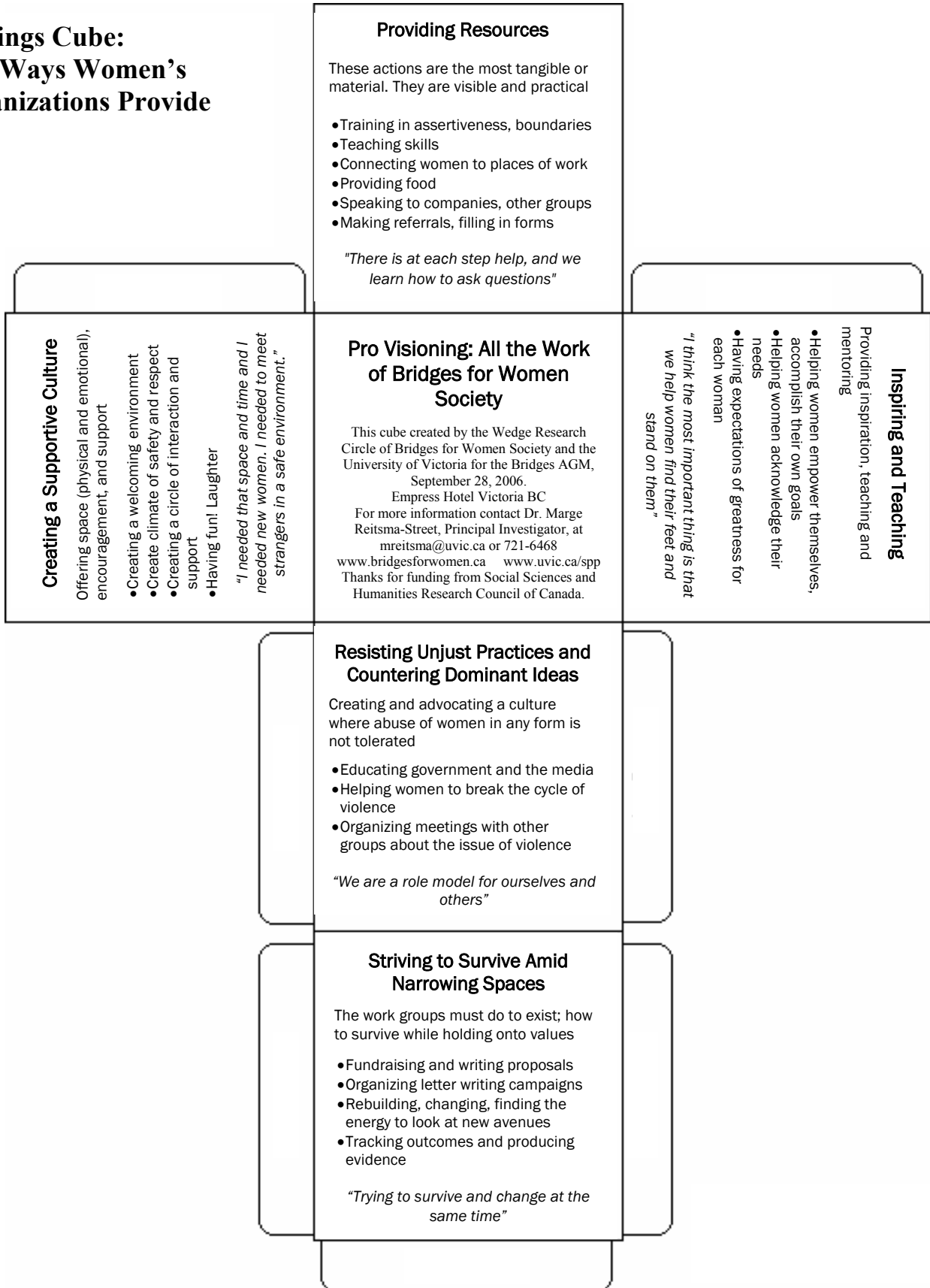
In our preliminary analysis of each site and across the six sites², we identified five types of provisioning activities:

1. Provide resources;
2. Create supportive cultures;
3. Inspire and teach;
4. Counter dominant ideas and injustice; and
5. Survive amid narrowing spaces.

There is a "Findings Cube" on your seats, and reproduced this text. The cube is an inspirational creation by Crystal Gartside and the Wedge Research Circle, to summarize the five ways women's organizations provide. The cube of findings is a tangible resource for you to take home, and think more on.

² See Site Reports listed at end of paper. Initial draft of the cross-site analysis in paper Marge Reitsma-Street, Elaine Porter, Sheila Neysmith and Stephanie Baker-Collins. (2006) "The Provisioning of Women's Groups in Neo-Liberal Regimes". Fourth Draft Presented at the *Wedge Provisioning Research Symposium*. University of Toronto. August 1.

Findings Cube: Five Ways Women's Organizations Provide



Provide Resources

These actions are the most tangible, practical, and visible of all the provisioning activities. They are valued highly by the members of the groups, including the provision—at no or minimal financial cost—of food, housing, space to meet, information, events, free programs, training, advocacy, and opportunities to exchange goods and services. Many, but not all, of these concrete material resources are spoken about clearly, counted, and used to construct the groups' public identity and case for funding, such as the number of children fed, housing units built, educational or volunteer placements, and workshops provided.

Immigrant and minority women in the new tenants' association in the 100 unit public housing complex in a large urban centre spoke of how important the provision of a physical space to get together was to them.

“It brings everyone together, and it gives people a chance to resolve their issues, and come together and kind of bond together more. I mean, not everybody is going to get along with everybody. You can't force them. But, at least, if you're providing a place where people can come together as a group and do their things. “

Create Supportive Cultures

The groups offer the physical space and emotional encouragement to support women and those they care for. The provisioning of support, and intent to create a culture of support, permeated all the respondents' conversations even when they complained, because they wanted more attention from staff, worried about unfriendliness of members, and the reduced time for visiting.

In the community centre, respondents frequently said “it's a place to belong to” or “it belongs to the community. They valued highly the “unconditional love” for the children in the before and after school, and summer programs, while parents had a safe place to “stitch and bitch” and be listened to. Those working, volunteering and studying in employment training group spoke of its safe, peaceful atmosphere. This safe environment was so different from abusive, insecure ones that they fled from. This safe environment is essential to helping women overcome the barriers of their history and obtain the necessary grounding to move

forward. The food cooperative is described as a “treasure box” where there is “friendship on a porch” by respondents, while they lamented and missed this welcoming friendliness after a move to new building accompanied by new personnel and more regulations and surveillance. In the older women’s network the respondents were drawn to the older women’s network as it was explicitly for older women and feminist, a space in which “I felt welcome and comfortable with people who were very much in line with what I guess my position was.”

Inspire and Teach

The groups perform considerable work to “help women find their feet and stand on them”, inspiring them to dream. To do this they provide space for healing, teaching, learning, and fun. Many of these provisioning activities are intangible, yet affirm the strength and spirit of women, and the possibility of what could be. There is enormous effort, primarily unfunded, required to create democratic, respectful processes, maintain good practices that do not stereotype or judge people, and teach new skills and ways to imagine. The following quote from the organization we call the “Hands on Community Centre, captures how these activities are relational and reverberate over time and space.

The Centre was able to take a small group of people from the community to develop and to teach the rest of the community, skills and opportunities with the training and the workshops, and all the different people that we met... I think that was the biggest thrill of my life from the Hands-on Community Centre. Just being able to give now what I receive every time I do have a workshop...and knowing that I can go out there and give it to someone else...Learning how to work as a team was something that was very different, having the opportunity of having a voice and that, working with consensus that nobody could pass something through that you had, you know, some feelings that it shouldn't go through.”

Resist Unjust Practices and Counter Dominant Ideas

Members of the older women’s network, the food coop, the employability program for women leaving abuse, the tenants’ group, the young women’s employment unit, and the community centre attempt to become conscious of the ideas, messages, and words that create the realities in which women live. In each group, time and resources are used to counter negative stereotypes of unproductive older women and welfare young brown mothers, to resist the notion that abuse of women

can be tolerated, and to create new ideas—such as women are entitled to safety and encouraged to have high expectations. The following quote is of a young woman in an employment program who is using the program to finish high school while taking care of her daughter. Keesha is trying to establish her own standards of what is good; at the same time she is resisting the standards of others and how others don't see her for who she is.

“Anyone who has high risk is not allowed to be around me because I have a daughter and I have to set the proper [standard]...you know like, whatever people see you, whatever friends they see you carry with you is the type of person that people assume that you are. If I realize my friend is taking drugs, or doing drugs, or something like that I don't allow them to be around me because I don't want anyone to point fingers and blame me, for providing something I don't do. Like I try to live my life properly so that later on in life when my daughter grows up no one could ever have, that power over her to say that your mom was this or you mom was that. That's another reason why I wouldn't go on welfare. It's not really that I watch what anyone else thinks or cares about me but I have a standard within myself.”

Countering silencing discourses promotes participation and agency of individuals and groups of women. The groups oppose the discourse that individuals can do it on their own; instead, groups, collectivities and communities are required, not as background or optional, but required for survival and change. Says a member of the older women's network:

“I saw a lot of inequities, a lot of social injustice and I wanted to belong to an organization that was addressing these inequalities for women that I couldn't do very well in my work”

Collective spaces are required to promote the strategic—the creation of new ideas and futures—even while struggling to survive despite loss of resources. The respondents in each study group echoed the following sentiment that it is important to keep “women's voices in the forefront and keeping the issues of anti-violence out there”, and other issues of poverty, age discrimination, and food insecurity.

It is not only the voices of women and the issues that counter dominant messages, but even more, it is the communities of women of “like minds” who need to survive to resist injustice and create new ideas, policies and practices. Each group struggled to maintain their collective space, place, and identity, with one group grieving the shrinking and disintegrating of how they wish to be and act, while another was searching for new priorities and possibilities. The need to survive and difficulty thereof is captured in the following quote. It is about the need to support an anti-violence community.

“An anti-violence community is where women deserve to live in safety and have their dreams fulfilled and have the right to respect. I think that it’s really important that our organization has existed for as long as it’s existed, for almost seventeen years. And that we have struggled really a lot to keep our doors open. We are currently under that struggle of not knowing how we’re going to pull it together but knowing inside that we will.”

Strive to Survive Amid Narrowing Spaces

As I said before, one of the main findings of the study so far, is women’s groups and organizations perform varied and complex provisioning work and much of that work is invisible and unfunded. I have mentioned now four types of work. There is still, however, one more type of work that the groups do—they need to provide for themselves, to manage themselves, to survive, and to change. The women’s groups in the study gave fulsome evidence of the effort it took to do this type of provisioning work, especially as they attempted to maintain the values they hold dear while changing to meet new realities, funding criteria, and connections with others. Sometimes the funding is not reduced, but tied closely to particular outcomes, so the group has less autonomy and control and “couldn’t move stuff around and you couldn’t change objectives or goals”. For those women’s groups that did survive in the two provinces, most faced significant budget cuts, and keeping a focus on the mission of the group and pride in its values became even more difficult. As one respondent from an employment organization concluded:

“Our funding does not support the success that we have in our work. We have had to be very careful to keep in line with what we do and keep our pride and keep our focus because it’s really not easy, not easy, but it sure is a drag to try and be very concrete and okay, how are we going to get these people into work, when really what we’re doing here is a group process for building self esteem, for doing all the fundamentals of personal work that needs to be done to overcome barriers to employment.”

The hard work that the staff, executives, volunteers, and members includes the horrendous time writing funding proposals, conducting fundraising, lobbying funders and authorities, as well as managing emotions of staff and members during the crisis. There is energy needed to provision for debilitating disagreements that erupt when resources are strained, and surveillance is increased. Respondents spoke of needing to respond to tensions between staff, laid off staff, and volunteers; between those with doctoral education and secure income and those without; between the francophone and Anglophone communities; and between new managerial staff at odds with the group’s history and vision. Or particular concern is the worrying, imagining, and strategizing how changes in policies and practices, and new opportunities, affect what each woman’s group believes are valuable about their provisioning responsibilities. This struggling to survive ethically amid narrowing spaces speaks to what the groups of women must consider as they decide how to provision for the group itself, and the others they provide for.

Supporting Women’s Organizations

One of the research questions in the national study is to understand the provisioning work of women and organizations. We are beginning to answer that question, and I have presented five major types of provisioning work that women’s organizations and groups do.

The second research question is to look at what supports and constraints the provisioning work of women and their organizations, and helps them to meet their relationships of responsibilities. We are finding in each site, and across the sites, a long and complicated array of constraints. Just this week for instance, we hear about the most recent cuts to the funding of the federal agency dedicated to women’s policy and community building—the \$4 million cut to the Status of Women.

But, rather than concentrate on the constraints, I have been asked to speak tonight about what supports women’s organizations. Drawing

upon some of the preliminary analysis, the literature on women's organizations, and my policy experience, I propose five supports, one for each of the five types of provisioning work identified in the research. In brief, these supports are:

- Time and money are needed to provide resources.
- A commitment to collective organization is necessary to create a supportive culture.
- Groups need autonomy to negotiate their mission so they can inspire and teach
- Debate within an organizations and with diverse coalitions and partnerships are required to resist injustice and counter dominant ideas
- Mission-oriented evaluation and accounting are important to survive amid narrowing spaces.

One. Time and money

A women's organization needs real time and funds to provide for its members and other responsibilities. The money can be from donors, allies, citizens and businesses, often channeled through government funding or agencies such as the United Way. The funds need to be stable and adequate—block, multi year funding. Short term, limited contracts—geared to particular programs or outcomes and won through competitions constructed for commercial businesses are unsuited to the complexity of human needs and organizations (Light, 2001). Moreover, short contracts that cover less than minimum costs are problematic, as are the modest bonuses available in exceptional circumstances, paid months later (Lowen & Reitsma-Street, 2006). These types of contractual practices can force small groups to shut down, exhaust meager reserves, or shut down.

The difficulties of inadequate, limited funding is starkly captured in the fact that one of the initial groups selected for our study on provisioning, a home care community agency with a long history of effective service and commitment to community building, was shut down just before our research began. It had to compete for funding in a new competitive tendering regime. A huge American for Profit Company won the competition, having submitted a lower bid, as it pays women workers less and provides less training (Aronson, Deont & Zeytinoglu 2004).

In a national study, called *Funding Matters*, that examines the changes in the amount and types of funding for not-for profit organizations in Canada, Kathryn Scott documents the increasing restrictions and decreasing amounts, making it especially difficult for those organizations with fewer than 10 staff—who make up the majority of non profits in Canada (2001 check date).

The other resource that supports women's organizations is time, particularly volunteer time of board, students, members and their families, staff, and families, and the allies of an organizations such as politicians, business people and bureaucrats. No women's organizations survive without hundreds of hours of volunteer work dedicated to many activities. Research demonstrates a clear relationship between funding and volunteering, and women's organizations need both. Neysmith and Reitmsa-Street (2000) for example calculated the economic contributions of volunteer time in five community-governed neighbourhood centres, collecting statistical data on volunteer hours over a three year period. They found that for every dollar of funded time committed to a centre, there were two to three hours of volunteer time donated. But, as the funding for paid hours decreased, so did the number of volunteer contributions, taking this valuable resource of the neighbourhood. In brief, both time and funds are required to support the first type of provisioning work of women's organizations.

Two. Commitment to collective organization

Every site in our study spoke so clearly about the value of coming together, and creating a welcoming environment, a place, a space for learning, safety, advocacy, and community. As one respondent concluded with pride: "I'm part of a history in this town." ...I helped to create a "context of support for women leaving abusive situations."

To create a supportive culture, the foundations of what theorists call social capital, community capacity building, and social cohesion, there needs to be a commitment to coming together, to building an organization, to maintaining a consistent, strong structure—that lives on beyond the fates of individuals. The focus cannot be primarily on the individuals, or identities or what theorists call subjectivities.

Karen Armstrong (2001) examines a worrisome trend in feminism, what she calls the 'retreat from organization' in her historical analysis of the past 30 years in the United States; she sees a significant decrease in

attention to how collective entities are created and maintained. Armstrong argues that without organizations, women (and men) cannot tackle the realities of substantial inequities in an era of global multinational capitalism. A narrow focus on individualism and independence she concludes undermines the organizations that are required to create the supportive cultures we need in our communities. Conversely, a strong commitment to collective work and building organizations increases our access to the supportive, welcome cultures each of us needs.

We in the Wedge Research Team have decided that most of our time so far has been focused on analyzing individual women. Like many other researchers, we have found it is easier to analyze and write about the provisioning of women as individuals and household members. It is harder for us theoretically to figure out how organizations provision, negotiate boundaries, and create a culture. Yet, so little is known about women's organizations. Even more, we worry that too many women's groups are disappearing, and we need to document, witness and share the knowledge of what women's collectivities do, and what is, or would be lost if they are destroyed.

Hence, we have made it our priority to focus in the new few years of writing on how "collectivities" provision—whether they be small groups or larger organizations. The importance of collective provisioning is illustrated in the following two quotes from respondents in focus groups.

"I had worked primarily in women's organizations and missed that once I retired. Then I became very politically active but when the elections were over I became bored again and I found out there was a women's organization, except that they were older. Let me talk about age. I'm not older, I'm old but still hopefully with life; at least as far as I know not dead yet! But this network got me involved and I think it helped me towards getting my energies directed again"

Another member said: "I feel to some degree responsible for the women who are involved with the network, individually but also for the organization as a whole. I would add that it's a responsibility that I take fairly seriously."

Three. Autonomy to negotiate their mission

Although I am proposing that a commitment to organization is supportive to the provisioning work of women's groups, that does not

mean I belittle their attention to the concerns, dreams, and needs of individuals or as the “Finding Cube” last bullet for this type of provisioning work states: “having great expectations for each woman.”

In some of the study sites, inspiring and teaching translates into counseling programs that teach women to create boundaries of self care, while in other sites this means educational units for individuals to finish high school, and advocacy workshops about how to obtain attention to their housing concerns.

What then supports the work of inspiring and teaching individuals and groups? I propose it is autonomy to negotiate an organization’s values and priorities. Autonomy means self-determination on the part of a board of directors or managing circle of an organization so they can establish what their purposes are, what they will spend energy on, and what they will seek resources for.

Dominique Masson (2000) reviews two decades of women’s organizing in Quebec. She argues persuasively that the transition homes, rape crisis shelters, women’s centres, and housing groups struggled to establish themselves autonomously to work on women’s issues that they had defined as important. They sought funding from various sources, including the government. However, they actively rejected proposals to be funded as state agencies, under the policy control of the Ministry who wished to change the admission language, from battered women to social misfits, and alter admissions policy so that women who had been battered or raped were sent to the same shelters. Through their provincial coalitions and organizations, and campaigns and lobbying, the Quebec women’s organizations successfully negotiated—until the late 1990s—funding that respected their autonomy to write their mission statements AND regulate their admissions, service standards, and progress.

Four. Debate and Diverse Coalitions and Partnerships

The fourth type of provisioning work of women’s organizations is resisting injustices and countering dominant ideas. To do so, organizations need to welcome debates on what is justice and injustice, and to analyze who has the power to declare what views take precedence. Supporting these debates, within the organizations and in dialogue with other groups, means creating policies, practices, and models of speaking and acting that promote respectful spaces for debate, dissent, argument, and change (Mehmoona-Mistha 2005). Support for debate assumes there is no common nor universal right way of seeing justice, or resisting injustice, or

speaking about dominant ideas. The notion of a universal truth, or a good type of woman, or a best way to create a non-violent alternative, or a correct approach to provision is a dominant idea that needs to be questioned. There is no one way, no universal human, no best organization. There are particular truths, many realities—and respect and space are needed to support the debate about differences.

Sometimes these debates will mean an organization changes its mission, its membership criteria, or sources of funding. Thus, for example, lesbian and minority women argued there was insufficient attention to their concerns in the white middle class women's organizations of the 1970s—both in Canada and elsewhere. They left and created new groups. Sometimes the separations happen in a respectful way, collaboration continues on issues of common interests. Sometimes organizations evolve, without splitting, by creating caucuses for different cultures and races, as did one of the sites in our study. In addition, new organizations have to be created, such as virtual, electronic communities, with zines and blogs, as youth and activists across the world find new ways to resist particular injustices and counter dominant ideas. And with new organizations, there is the need to build new coalitions and partnerships.

In the research by Masson, mentioned above, the success of the women's organizations in Quebec to resist threats to their autonomy and their ways of defining women's issues was due in part to the strength of their coalitions and provincial networks.

Allison Jaggar (1998) speaks of the ethics required to negotiate boundaries within and across organizations respectfully. These negotiations clarify the times when women need to restrict their focus on a particular difference or issue, and when they need to change and expand that focus. For example, women's organizations for many years excluded men from membership, as did Bridges for Women Society, to ensure that there was safe, strong space for women to become strong, find their voice, and create their own identities and dreams, welcoming men as allies. Those boundaries may be debated and changed —to make room for new realities and differences. Then new coalitions and partnerships are required to work with the differences, particularly when there is a need to build a strong campaign on a particular injustice. For instance, women's groups joined churches, regional governments, and social justice networks in a campaign to abolish the arbitrary two year limits on welfare here in B.C. since 2002 that threatened the livelihood of thousands of citizens April 2004 (Reitsma-Street & Wallace, 2004).

This respect for difference and the building of coalitions helped in the survival of one of our study sites—a community centre—when its survival was threatened several years back. The centre reached out to join with similar and different types of centres to campaign for continued funding, using evaluation research, including the value of volunteer time to build communities. As one result of that campaign, the community centre changed several priorities and membership criteria. Today they are admitting members to the centre that live outside neighbourhood, and debating now the implications of those changes in how they conduct their provisioning responsibilities.

Fifth. Mission-oriented evaluation and accounting

The six sites in our study did not originate in good times. They were created in the past 20 years to respond to particular concerns, such as violence, poverty, racism, and food insecurity, examples of injustices that I argue are created by deepening inequities, militarism, and undemocratic global capitalism.

Each of the sites in our study has been struggling to survive since they started. But times for women on the margins are not getting better—neither in B.C. nor elsewhere in Canada. There is thus a fifth type of provisioning work the women's groups in our study have to do these days: to survive amid narrowing spaces. As one respondent in our study said: "There's that chasing the dollar and in a, you know, world that doesn't have dollars for women is, you know, a real drain." Paraphrasing other comments, women in the focus groups spoke of being in "a pressure zone", where "everything is so compressed and condensed". One said "It's like [there are] competing demands. You want to do something on one hand and you're demanding to do something on the other. They clash with each other. You can't juggle them both."

One of the reasons for this pressure cooker is the new types of demands made by governments, businesses and the public for performance measures and quantifiable evaluation—in an era of what is called the New Public Management (Borins, 1995). It is not supportive, however, to the provisioning work of organizations, when these performance measures and evaluation are unrelated to the mission of an organization (Lowen & Reitsma-Street, 2006). If women are trying, for instance, to heal from years of abuse and have limited income to find decent housing, it is unrealistic and unhealthy to expect a woman to

complete a few months of training and get and keep employment. Performance measures that only count “the any old job will do” as one respondent stated, but do not take into account the housing situation, background, parental or health work of a person, is not supportive of provisioning work. Accounting and evaluation procedures that are negotiated by all those concerned, and not unilaterally imposed, and procedures that incorporate the priorities of an organization, such as well-being, the personal accomplishments, and the reduced exposure to violence, are supportive to provisioning work.

Critics of performance based accountability and evaluation, including bonuses for high quality service, argue that this approach distorts the activity, the provisioning types of work that an organization wishes and needs to provide, and gives undue weight to what is statistically quantifiable according to those in control of funding (Otley, 2003; Pentland, 2000). Moreover, the “thick” needs of real people are ignored or erased, so an organization looks better on particular outcome measures. Conversely, mission oriented evaluation and accountability practices, negotiated by those who have a stake in an organization—including funders, staff, members, and allies—are supportive to the difficult work of surviving and changing at the same time.

Concluding Comments

Thank you for your attention and interest. I spoke about moving from seeing the anti and abolitionist focus of women’s organizations, to exploring their attention to creating alternatives. I spoke of “provisioning”-new visions about providing for the survival and well-being of those for whom we have relationships of responsibilities.

I described five types of provisioning work in a study of six women’s organizations—providing resources, creating a supportive culture, inspiring and teaching, resisting injustice and countering dominant ideas, and striving to survive amid narrowing spaces. These provisioning types are inscribed on the “ProVisioning Findings Cube” for you to take home.

About 50 women from the older women’s site came to a presentation of the Wedge Research Team during the hot days of August in Ontario. After listening, the women in their late 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s—some with canes, hearing aides, and walkers--challenged us to look deeper and harder into the data. They asked us to imagine what

supportive policies and practices would look like, to help their own network, and other women's organizations. You have challenged me to do this as well, and I appreciate the challenge.

So tonight I propose various supports to help women's organizations carry out the five types of complex, varied, and often invisible provisioning work that we found in the rich data from many interviews and focus groups. I spoke of five supports: time and money; commitment to collective work; autonomy to negotiate priorities; openness to difference and diverse coalitions; and mission oriented evaluation and accountability.

Let's give the final word to an older women, who talked about being deliberate, needing to choose what to do and what not to do, what to support and what not to. Her words encourage us to be deliberate in choosing what work we wish to do, and how to support that work.

In fact, if I were to die now I would be pretty mad because I didn't finish all the things I want to finish. So I've got to look at things and some things have got to go.

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