WEDGE (Women at the Edges of the New Economy) Project

Women, Provisioning and Community:
Thinking Holistically about Women's Work

A RESEARCH REPORT

March 2008

Women, Provisioning and Community: Thinking Holistically about Women's Work

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Introduction

Provisioning describes a broad range of work activities that women perform with other people, for other people as well as for themselves. Mostly, people think about work in terms of jobs. In reality, people also work in homes, schools and community settings. Provisioning includes paid and unpaid employment, care work, school work and volunteering done in these various settings. Provisioning allows us to examine work activities and patterns of work as well as the reasons why people do the work that they do, and the strategies they use to get their work done. This holistic notion of work is based on the belief that people have responsibilities to provide and care for others, whether those other people are family, friends or even members of a broader community or social group.

This research on women's provisioning emerged from a concern that economic and political restructuring in Canada in the late 1990s severely compromised women's capacity to support themselves, their families and their communities. Difficulties occur because spending cuts and reforms to social services affect women both as providers and users of social services and programs. As a result women's caring work has also increased. On the one hand, women face increased risks of unemployment and underemployment in their paid work. On the other hand, the caring, volunteer and community work they perform is often devalued and/or unpaid.

The Project

This summary of the study was written and produced by the research team. The analysis and conclusions are based on numerous discussions and meetings team members had to interpret the results.

The Research Purpose

This report documents research on women's provisioning activities and strategies in community settings. The study aimed to understand how social factors and processes supported or constrained women's abilities to provide for themselves and their families. (Men also provision; however, in this project, the research team was interested in highlighting women's specific experiences.) For the research, we sought the experiences of older and younger women who were members of low-income communities or members of racialized groups. The women were all members of community-based groups most affected by program and service cuts.

The research team was interested in this group of women because their provisioning extended outside of their own households to working with other women in community groups. In general, women have a history of organizing and developing collective responses to systemic inequities through social movements and community associations. However, recent policy and program funding changes have dramatically affected community-based organizations, especially those working with women and vulnerable populations. Our examination of women's collective provisioning attempted to assess what is happening and what are the implications of these shifts for marginalized women as well as for women's community organizations.

The Research Process

We selected six community sites that help women survive and strive in the global economy. The sites are groups and organizations that started from struggles for social justice by women. The sites vary in size, organizational structure and geographic location; they are located in large and medium size cities in Ontario and British Columbia. The selected groups were:

- a food cooperative
- an older women's group
- a community resource centre
- an employment program for women who experienced abuse
- young women's programs
- a public housing tenants' group

In total, we interviewed over 100 women who were participants in community programs. The study participants were diverse in terms of their age (15 to 85 years old), income level (although the majority lived on low and insecure incomes), household and living arrangements, ethno-racial, linguistic and Aboriginal status (including Franco-phones, First Nations, African, Asian, Indian and Latin American immigrants). We also spoke with 138 key informants including program alumni, staff and board members from the organizations. We asked study participants about their individual provisioning experiences, using these questions:

1. Who are you responsible for?
2. What do you do to provide for yourself and others?
3. How do you do this work?
4. What makes it easier or more difficult for you to meet your responsibilities?
5. What role does the community group/ organization play in your life?
6. How will your responsibilities change in the future?

When we spoke with key informants, we asked who their site provided for, how and why. We also asked what supported and hindered the work being done in the sites, and what changes did participants foresee in the next three to five years.

What About Women's Individual Provisioning?

Women's Relationships of Responsibilities Shape Their Provisioning

In the interviews, the women talked about being responsible for immediate, extended and step-family members, friends, neighbors and ex-spouses. Some of the women lived with or lived close by to the people they provided for, while others lived far away, in which case, schedules and transportation arrangements had to be coordinated. We made note of the relationships women had with others beyond the household because these relationships with community and organizations affected the provisioning activities participants did as well as the strategies they used to carry them out.

Women Carry Out a Wide Range of Work Activities

Chart 1 lists visible provisioning activities. Some of these activities are well-known; others are not typically understood as productive labour in a traditional sense. The category of recognized activities includes participation in traditional forms of employment and education, as well as new forms of work like part-time or contract jobs in the service sector. Community work includes formal volunteering (examples women gave included organizing a breakfast program at school, serving on a community centre council, volunteering at a food bank), as well as informal volunteering. One woman called herself the community baby-sitter, while another woman informed her Native friends about the programs available at the local community resource centre. Caring work includes child care, cooking, cleaning and shopping.

> I have time when he's sleeping to get everything done, and while he's at my mom's house, I'd be working. From there, my mom would drop him home. Everything's basically done when he's sleeping. I make food the night before so the next day food would be prepared for him. I can't cook while he's around, because my child likes to run into the kitchen and I don't have a gate to put there. He doesn't like to be in his playpen; he starts screaming. He likes a lot of attention, and nobody's there to watch him. I try to get work done—I do homework—but sometimes I get in at midnight and I just want to go to sleep. Sometimes I do a little studying or I get up early in the morning to study.

Chart 1: Women's Individual Provisioning Activities

Visible Provisioning Activities
- Engaging in formal and informal work in the labour market
- Undertaking commitments in the community sphere
- Providing caring labour in the domestic

Less Visible Activities
- Sustaining health
- Making claims
- Ensuring safety

Less visible activities in the new global economy include tasks that were of significance to many of the women across the different groups. In part, it became necessary

for women to perform these tasks given the cutbacks to social services and programs. We know from previous research that families take on more responsibilities when health care budgets change so it was not surprising that many women we interviewed took on unpaid health care activities. One young woman administered medicinal creams to her ailing father and insulin shots to her diabetic brother. A woman from the housing group took her husband and ex-husband to medical appointments on different occasions. Other women monitored their family members' special diets; some of the older women looked after friends and family who were ill or dying.

Making claims involve women in activities such as finding out about services, insisting on their rights, presenting themselves effectively to the proper authorities, dealing with issues around social assistance or housing for example. One woman ensured safety by picking up syringes in her neighbourhood to keep the environment safe for children. In other examples, an older woman talked about establishing a buddy system; homeless young women or women who escaped violent relationships were ensuring their own and their children's safety by seeking safe housing options.

Women Manage Provisioning Responsibilities Using a Variety of Strategies

Women used both the practical and transformative strategies listed in Chart 2 to manage their responsibilities on a daily basis. The daily tactics involve creative ways of acquiring resources and managing the resources at hand: they include buying in bulk or canning seasonal foods, doing their own electrical work, exchanging goods and services with friends or neighbours, starting small scale entrepreneurial activities, entering Internet contests and juggling bills. For example, one woman arranged to baby sit in exchange for getting a car ride, while another cleaned other people's houses for extra cash. Strategies also include risky behaviours that may have a negative pay-off. For instance, some women employed in low-wage youth jobs cut back on their personal spending to save money for their post-secondary education but they had no way of knowing whether they would ever be able to save enough with their low incomes.

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│  Chart 2: Women's Individual Provisioning Strategies │
│                                              │
│  Practical Daily Strategies                  │
│      •  Creating and managing resources      │
│      •  Engaging in risky behaviours         │
│      •  Making claims                        │
│                                              │
│  Transformative Strategies                   │
│      •  Recreating social identity           │
│      •  Negotiating boundaries of responsibilities │
│      •  Resisting stereotypes and stigma     │
│      •  Envisioning the future               │
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Transformative strategies involve ways that the women redefine themselves and their relationships to others so that they would be in a better position to provide resources. Low income women from the food bank used the strategy of recreating identity when they opted to become members of the food bank. As members, these women got food in exchange for their volunteer work without having to identify as a client or food bank user which is far more stigmatizing than membership.

> You don't have to feel like a low-down person, that you haven't been able to take care of your children… people [at the organization] are helping me to take care of H. properly…but I am not made to feel any less of a mother. And that means quite a bit.

Negotiating boundaries include the work that women did to manage their relationships. This occurred for some of the older women, for example, when they decided to scale down their family or volunteer responsibilities to focus on what was really important or to leave themselves free time.

The study participants frequently found themselves subject to negative stereotypes associated with being homeless, poor, young mothers, food bank users, welfare recipients or older women. In response, women spent time and mental energy resisting stereotypes and recasting themselves in a positive light. For example, even though the young women who were interviewed were considered "at risk" youth based on their participation in the community programs, they wanted to show others that they were responsible and striving to be independent and doing everything "right." This production of their social selves was actually tied to access to material goods and rewards. In another example, a woman who was

receiving social assistance was told by her social worker to wear suitable clothing for court so that the judge would not judge her harshly based on her appearance.

In terms of envisioning a future, some of the women planned and worried that they would not be able to support their loved ones in the future.

> I'm afraid to be a single mom and scared to death that what they expect from me isn't what I'll be able to deliver, and then I'm screwed. If I were to go out and get a job right now I really don't believe that I would hold it down. I think that I still have things that I need to work through, and they don't care about that. They don't care if I fail… it's your responsibility if you fail. I'm willing to take on that responsibility, but they won't support me... I mean if it was just me that would be different but it's not. There's a 5- year old little girl who deserves a better life than what I'm able to provide right now.

Women Manage Their Provisioning Responsibilities But Their Health Suffers

Women in the study were often juggling several tasks; the responsibilities in one area of their life impacted another, for example, their ability to find suitable child care influenced their options for paid work. It can be said that women in disadvantaged positions have always taken on various kinds of work to survive in difficult economic times. However, in the current context of economic and political restructuring, we found that women are pushed to be more creative at seeking out supports and resources, which result in increased pressures and workloads.

Research team members also observed from the women's provisioning experiences that their life circumstances and social location along dimensions of race, class, ability, and age, shape their activities and strategies. For example, if a woman could afford to hire private nursing care, she would not have to perform these health care tasks herself. The study participants generally did not have the means to arrange market-based alternatives. Furthermore, racialized, Aboriginal women, and women with disabilities are known to experience discrimination in a gender and racially stratified labour market, which poses specific challenges and difficulties for these groups of women in their provisioning efforts.

While all of the strategies that the women in the study used were effective to some degree, they also had associated costs. Most notably, many of the women we interviewed suffered from health problems. The accumulated pressures, stresses of daily living, and long-term results of engaging in risky behaviours in order to provision had them constantly compromising their own health. In some cases, women gave themselves permission not to take on so many responsibilities. For example, some older women decided to cut back their volunteer activities, but these were not easy decisions because the women felt a sense of responsibility to continue since others were depending on them.

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

Spending Cuts to Social Programs and Weak Labour Policies Make Women's Provisioning Difficult

Current social welfare and labour policies undermine women's efforts to provision adequately for themselves and others. For example, social assistance benefit rates are set below the poverty level but when women find jobs, they lose supplementary health coverage, or their benefits are cut back when they receive "gifts" from family and friends. There is little support for women who need to take care of their families, and go to school, and work. There are fewer programs now that help women deal with experiences of abuse, mental illness, or racial discrimination which means women have to deal with these issues in private or isolation.

We know that private and informal relationships support women's provisioning, but they can also be demanding and require a load of emotional energy and mental work to maintain, especially when there are fewer public supports. While women from the study were actively negotiating their provisioning activities and strategizing their relationships with family and community members, their autonomy, health, and economic independence was under strain.

Women Work Collectively to Meet Family and Community Concerns

Examining how and why women collectively provide for others in groups, organizations, and /or networks was a unique feature of the study. The women that research team members interviewed were leaders or participants (some were both) in community programs and settings. Chart 3 summarizes three approaches to women's collective provisioning.

Creating valued goods and services refers to how women worked collectively to provide resources, such as food and housing, and share knowledge through events, and free programs information at the sites. Program participants and key informants talked about getting help with training, doing advocacy, and taking opportunities to exchange goods and services. The work of providing resources, which may be small in amount but vital for survival, was important work that took time and effort, and helped women meet individual and familial needs. Without the goods and services, many women would have serious difficulty getting by. One woman in the food cooperative concluded: "The extra clothing you get on the pick-ups, the food, the Christmas baskets, Easter stuff, all the little extra stuff, they help out. The extra food is important."

> **Chart 3: Women's Collective Provisioning Strategies**
>
> Creating valued goods and services
> - Providing material resources
> - Creating cultures of support
> - Generating knowledge
> - Networking connections
>
> Constructing Alternative Possibilities
> - Exploring new spaces and identities
> - Resisting injustices
> - Countering dominant discourses
>
> Constituting the Collective
> - Mapping visions
> - Sustaining group places
> - Contesting boundaries

The willingness to work together on behalf of families, individuals, and communities, went beyond providing resources and services. Collective provisioning is also about creating positive environments or cultures of support where women maintained values of respect, caring, friendliness and belonging. Women in the study yearned to be trusted and listened to; they spoke of the importance of building supportive cultures and spaces. One member said of her organization: "[It] wasn't like an institution; it was like some place where they could come and feel that people cared….You empty your chest to talk to others." In another site, a member suggested that the presence of a supportive culture of women groups helped create other healthy spaces within households and the community.

> If I am not supported, I cannot give. If I have support and a safe place, I can give. In the past there was not support. At our organization, we learn this support…so the support and the dialogue moves into the community.

The knowledge generated at the sites is transformative in nature; it is learning that prioritizes safety, fun, change, and new possibilities. Women in the sites educated governments, funders and the public about women's interests and the need for collective action. Networking connection is provisioning done through relationship building which connects women to others and their communities.

> What I was really trying to do was to connect with women who would be part of the next phase of my life. Because I've always been fairly involved with women in work, and in my extra curricular life, so I think I was looking for a group [in] my life as an older woman.

Women Collectively Create a Better Future

Women in the sites provided for the survival needs of themselves and their communities. They also strategized how to make a better future. One strategy is to explore new ways of being in woman-friendly spaces that are safe, helpful, and challenging. One member of the public housing tenants' group concluded:

> [The centre] brings everyone together, and it gives people a chance to resolve their issues, and come together and bond. I mean, not everybody is going to get along with everybody… the kids, different age groups, can come and we don't have to worry about them being on the street, dealing drugs or trying to act cool. They have a place where they can come, chill with each other, do their thing…I think that that's important. They need that space.

Another woman confirmed:

> To bring together women is really, really important, to be in an atmosphere where you're able to start to trust others, and trust yourself, and begin the learning process. You know numerous people in this world have negative experiences with their past learning experiences, to have learning in a safe environment with other women, it made it easier, to be.

In these spaces, women could resist unjust practices and policies. The sites helped women by teaching assertiveness, engaging in advocacy for affordable housing, appealing the denial of social assistance benefits, or building a housing cooperative despite strong political oppositions. The sites were places where work went into countering dominant discourses. This is particularly subtle work since it involved women's questioning of what is assumed to be the natural order of things such as the stereotype of poor or older women do not work.

> We use Heracane [fictitious name of site] to hold forums, to bring in fellow feminists. We can co-partner, we can cross-network, we can cross-pollinate, we can do all of these wonderful things and at the same time keep our foot in the academic circles because we're not just frumpy grannies holding pink tea parties, you know. We're learning and working together. Our pamphlet says a voice for older women, older and mid-life women learning and working together.

Women Collectively Negotiate Their Values and Interests

The study sites are contemporary groups and organizations that started because of the concerns of women marginalized by poverty, race and class in Canada at turn of 21st century. The times are increasingly difficult for individuals and groups. To survive and change at the same time, members of the groups, networks and programs engaged collectively in complex negotiations about who the group provides for and how. A member of the community resource centre spoke about the importance of creating "an understanding of where we come from and what are our issues." This work establishes the group identity. It is often done out of public view. It involved discussions that helped determine how the group could meet their own mandates effectively while addressing the multiple needs, demands and pressures from stakeholders and the external environment. The following example demonstrates how one program manager talked about strategically positioning her site:

When the changes to Ontario Works [social assistance] came, we [the organization staff and board members] had major discussions. Some aspects, mandatory reporting [of clients who do not comply with the requirements to do mandatory volunteering], we didn't want to be part of that. The only part we thought we could be a part of was support services for women. We feel we haven't compromised our values; we're not turning women in, because that was not the way we want to work. We could've been part of all of it, we chose not. There was values we want to hold that are dear to us, we want to have programs that encourage and promote and give women options to take care of themselves, not to spy on them, absolutely not.

Besides the work of establishing and changing the vision of the groups, there is the daily labour of sustaining the group. This involves activities like hiring staff and recruiting board members, ensuring members are well informed, training, managing and appreciating volunteers, and writing funding proposals and accounting for services. Finally, the most difficult aspect of collective provisioning is debating, changing, and contesting the boundaries of the site's responsibilities. This involves the complex work of attending to conflicts and assessing what the group can and or will not do that threaten the "values we want to hold that are dear to us" as the woman above concluded. These negotiations are particularly tricky when funding is limited and obligations have increased.

These collective provisioning strategies, which are used by women in their local communities or groups, transcend national boundaries. The strategies are not necessarily new forms of work. What is new is looking closely at the wide range of collective work, the complexity of the labour, and the significant impact these activities have in the current time and place. Members of the sites and the researchers kept asking: what would happen if these organizations and groups closed down, or had no resources to create supportive cultures or faced restrictions on resisting injustices? We describe these examples of provisioning as a reminder of the importance of the collective work of women and how they need collective spaces to raise issues and awareness about women's needs and priorities. We argue that social policies need to acknowledge the many aspects of collective provisioning and women's important community contributions.

Social and Economic Policies Challenge Women's Collective Provisioning

Current social and economic policies impair women's abilities to meet their responsibilities. Some of women's collective provisioning in the form of community work is recognized while other forms, like establishing group identity, are not. Regardless of whether they were paid or whether the organization received funding for the program, women coordinated, administered and organized programs and events that they argued were necessary for their group to provide for the survival and future well-being of their members and communities. The women we spoke with participated in various types of internal strategic planning processes as well as external monitoring of social and economic trends. But many found it difficult for their site to "survive and change at the same time."

Fewer funding opportunities and more restrictive guidelines for programs and organizations have an impact on the extent and nature of the work that can be done to challenge injustice and promote equity. The social and economic policy context is such that, nowadays, there are fewer public spaces and women's programs where women can gather to dialogue with each other, raise consciousness about new forms of inequality, and work strategically towards gender equality and social justice in meaningful ways. When funding and resources are scarce, and as groups become concerned about provisioning to meet more immediate needs, they can be steered away from one or more of these main purposes.

In some cases, the research team found that groups were forced to make decisions to keep their programs alive, but those same decisions threatened the values of the group, or interests of members. For example, in one site, the employability program was changed by an imposed accountability framework that gradually steered its focus from a critical perspective on women's experience of abuse towards stringent, market-based definitions of employability. Ironically, then, the time and energy required to keep the community group provisioning for its members in accordance with original visions added to women's overall workload and provisioning responsibilities.

What Does This Analysis Mean for Women's Work?

What Is Unique About A Provisioning Perspective?

First, provisioning is about all the individual and collective work that women do, including the countless, daily details that make life possible in the present, and in the future. A provisioning perspective allows us to start with the position that there is all sorts of work that needs to be done by individuals and groups. It urges debates about who is responsible for all of this essential work, and how it can be done in the interests of those who do the labour, and for whom it is done. The spirit in which provisioning is used in this research aligns with Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Dr. Ursula Franklin's recommendation that we "keep the purpose of the work and responsibility for it clearly in everyone's mind"[1] in order to recognize that work should be organized for everyone's benefit.

Second, provisioning is a concept that challenges us to value work in a holistic way. It goes against the idea that work in the economic sphere is more important than work in community or household spheres. Provisioning does not view work as separate from the worker: work is performed in the context of relationships.
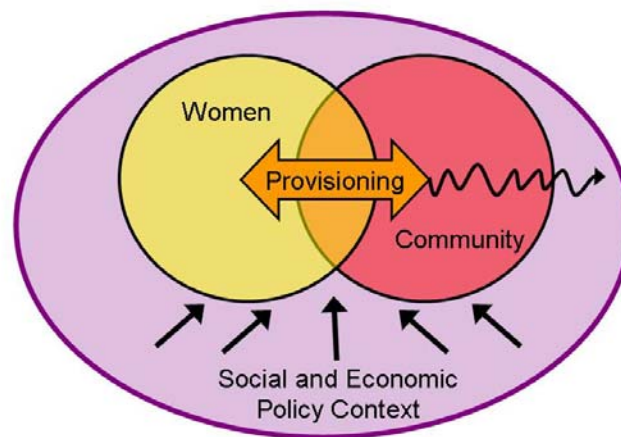
Third, provisioning reminds us that work cannot be adequately performed by individuals or households in isolation from each other. Collective provisioning is required for the survival and well-being of all. Small groups and large organizations do not only provide valued goods and services through their creative and strategic labour. This collective labour is also used to resist injustice, challenge stereotypes, and create new spaces and identities for everyone's well-being in the 21st century.

Lastly, through this study of provisioning, we can see what is truly required for survival and well-being. Provisioning allows us to understand how social policies shape women's lives and their individual and collective responsibilities. Figure 1 depicts how the social and economic policy context directly impacts women's individual and collective provisioning in community groups, organizations and programs (straight arrows). Understanding how provisioning can also affect communities and the broader social context

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[1] Franklin, Ursula. (2006) *The Ursula Franklin Reader: Pacifism as a Map.* Toronto: Between the Lines, p.254.

(squiggly arrow) can inform the analysis and development of policy alternatives for a gender equitable future.

Figure 1: Social and economic policies impact the relationship
between women's individual and collective provisioning

Provisioning as a Basis for Social and Economic Policy

In this project, the research team used provisioning as a holistic way of thinking about women's work to mean all of the work that women perform in homes, workplaces, schools and communities. We also used provisioning to question what has traditionally been named, valued and understood as work. Provisioning allowed us to understand the relationship between women's motivations and work activities and how these dynamics play out in the current social and economic context of women's lives.

The key to supporting women with few resources is for policy makers to develop social and economic policies and program funding guidelines that provide the conditions, spaces and real opportunities to facilitate women's provisioning. Minimally, we recommend that policy and program development entail an analysis of women's actual provisioning activities and strategies. Based on this research we argue that a complementary discussion of state responsibility for social provisions be re-inserted into policy debates. Such a move would be supportive of a holistic view of women's work, while promoting policies that make long-term investments towards creating healthy, caring, woman-friendly and gender equitable community programs and spaces.

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