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SOCIUS
Special Collection: Gender & Politics

ASA
AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World
Volume 4: 1–13
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DOI: 10.1177/2378023117734729
srd.sagepub.com
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"Coming Out of My Shell": Motherleaders Contesting Fear, Vulnerability, and Despair through Family-focused Community Organizing

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Abstract

Women's political engagements often look different from those of men, and they are also undertheorized and understudied. The author examines how participation in family-focused community organizing shapes women's lives, self-perceptions, and relationships. Using 15 months of participant observations of organizing activities and 40 interviews with parent organizers the author calls *motherleaders*, the author demonstrates how family-focused community organizing shapes participants' lives in ways that help them leave "shells" of *fear*, *vulnerability*, and *despair* within their often marginalized lives as women of color, recent immigrants, and low-income mothers. The personal narratives of motherleaders demonstrate how their collective action transcends publicly stated formal organizational goals and powerfully affects them in life-altering ways. It is important that scholars seriously consider the intersecting identities of collective action participants, the meanings participants construct of and through "politics," and the power of collective action to transform the lives of marginalized groups.

Keywords

community organizing, women and collective action, family-focused community organizing, intersectionality, mothering

Imagine living in a shell where your thoughts, actions, and experiences were shielded, separating you from the light of the outside world. This is how mothers and grandmothers in my study described their lives before becoming involved in family-focused community organizing, a political model that recognizes the inseparability of private and public lives. Through their raw stories of personal and social transformation, community organizing participants reveal newfound socializing abilities and how they perceive family life to be an integral part of the process and outcome of their participation in collective action.

For marginalized groups, participation in collective action provides both tangible and intangible resources for survival. Although studies of low-income groups highlight the importance of community and social service organizations for support, survival, and social mobility (Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Stack 1974; Watkins-Hayes, Pittman-Gay, and Beaman 2012), literature on U.S. social movements overlooks community organizing and democratic participation as a means for social transformation and emotional survival. This oversight is likely a symptom of studying more privileged collective action participants, whose civic engagement does not aim to change a lifetime of oppressive confinement of democratic freedoms and human dignity.

Mainstream social movement scholarship considerably lacks attention to gender and race and is often derived from the lived experiences of more socially, economically, and racially privileged groups (Pardo 1998)—and predominantly through understandings of men in national social movements (Tilly 2004). Yet we know that women's activism and organizing takes different forms and meanings for women (Clemens 1993), particularly for women of color. As feminist scholars have shown, the labor of mothers of color inside and outside the household is inseparable from family, kin, community, and their lived experiences of intersecting oppressions (Brodkin Sacks 1993; Flores-González and Gomberg-Muñoz 2013; Naples 1998; Pardo 1998; Toro-Morn and Flores-González 2011). Still, we know noticeably less about the experiences of lower income women who participate in local collective action in the United States and

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how they encounter and experience active democratic engagement (Pardo 1998). Given that family and kin are essential in reproducing and or challenging unequal social hierarchies (Collins 1998), understanding how family life shapes, and *is shaped* by, community organizing offers a unique perspective for appreciating the power of collective action to create personal, social, and biographical change.

This article illuminates the community organizing experiences of mothers and grandmothers as organizing leaders, whom I refer to as *motherleaders*. Most of these motherleaders live in some of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Chicago, and all are affiliated with an organization called Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI). In this study I ask, How does engagement in grassroots family-focused community organizing shape participants' lives, self-perceptions, and relationships? The answer to this question is important because it shows how political organizing has implications for participants beyond formally stated political and institutional goals. It also shows how the raced and gendered experiences of women involved in community organizing are distinctive. The assumptions about the life worlds of the middle classes, whites, and men who have often been at the forefront of studies of national social movements cannot account for the experiences and forms of social transformation that women in my study experience as they come to be involved with community organizing that is centered on the specificity of the families and personal lives of low-income women of color.

Using participant observations and interviews with community organizing motherleaders, mainly from Chicago, I show how women attribute changes in their lives to their participation in grassroots family-focused collective action. Women-centered and family-focused community organizing does not differentiate between one's public and private lives (Stall and Stoecker 1998) but instead builds in family life within organizing activities. This is accomplished by providing free childcare and shared food and refreshments and by helping women change themselves, their families, and their communities via networks that support collective action *and* their daily struggles. Importantly, family-focused organizing sets organizing agendas with children and families at the forefront and builds partnership with community organizing targets instead of resorting to confrontational methods first (O'Donnell and Schumer 1996). This intentionally family-friendly model of community organizing reaches women with limited financial resources to fight for pertinent issues around early learning systems, ending the school to prison pipeline, predatory lending practices, and more. The narratives presented in this article highlight how family-focused community organizing offered motherleaders multiple axes of liberation from shields that kept them concealed from political participation and illuminate how these experiences translated into their personal, social, and family lives.

The Nontraditional Impacts of Collective Action

Scholars acknowledge that the social consequences of collective action span well beyond publicly stated goals and often have unanticipated impacts on participants (McAdam 1990; Swarts 2015; Warren, Mapp, and Kuttner 2015). As such, institutional goals and outcomes should not be the only measures of social movement successes, but rather we should pay attention to collective processes and experiences. A subset of social movement research analyzes the personal and biographical outcomes of social movements, examining how civic engagement shapes life-course trajectories and political identities. This research finds that participation in social movements creates notable and durable impacts on the personal and political lives of former activists (Fendrich 1993; Fendrich and Krauss 1978; Fendrich and Lovoy 1988; Guigni 2004; Jennings and Niemi 1981; McAdam 1990; Nagel 1995; Whalen and Flacks 1990). Like attending college, being a parent, or serving in the military, "intense and sustained activism" has the powerful potential to transform a person's biography (McAdam 1999:122; Tilly 1999).

A number of familiar studies uncover that even decades later, former activists remain civically active in social movements and other types of political activities (Fendrich and Lovoy 1988; Jennings and Niemi 1981; McAdam 1990). Taylor and Raeburn (1995), McAdam (1990), and Fendrich (1977) found that former activists often became teachers or sought professions around helping others. Nagel (1995) argued that Native American activists who participated in the Red Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s often reclaimed their Native American ancestry. However, much of this scholarship revisits social movement participants (largely men) years after their initial involvement in collective action and tends to describe individualized political and career transformations. Notably, this research overlooks the interrelated experiences of gender, race, family, kin, and community and often excludes the experiences of women of color. Also, as Mary Pardo (1998) argued, by centering on national social movements, local collective action is suppressed and "perpetuates a male bias that excludes a unified approach to gender, ethnicity, race, and class" (p. 247).

Select work has begun to attend to these issues, showing that gender and race are critical bases for understanding how people organize and what it means to them. Feminist scholars, including Black feminist theorists and Chicana feminists, provide models for studying the distinctive experiences of women, highlighting intersecting oppressions due to race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins 1998, 2000; Crenshaw 1993; Moraga and Anzaldua 2015). Scholars who study women of color importantly blur distinctions among community work, paid work, collective action, and immigration status (Brodkin Sacks 1993; Naples 1998; Pardo 1998; Ricourt 2002). Mary Pardo's (1998) research on Mexican American community organizers, for example, shows how women transform everyday problems into political goals and actions to improve their local churches, schools, and communities. Nancy Naples (1998) demonstrates the congruency between family-based labor, unpaid community labor, and paid work, arguing that these experiences are inseparable. Women of color in her study did "what needed to be done" to secure

economic and social justice for their communities (Naples 1998:129). Growing up with a "consciousness of discrimination and injustice" (Naples 1998:130), essentially a "theory in the flesh" (Moraga and Anzaldua 2015:19), which is undividable from multiple identities including skin color and nationality, women of color consistently fight for essential rights for themselves and their families, and these fights often go unrecognized by the larger public.

Scholars have keenly shown how women's race and social position have contoured their experiences in collective life and how the essentiality of their leadership has often been overlooked by the public and by academia (Barnett 1993; Chavez 2000; Clemens 1993; Robnett 1997). Although we have rich theory and empirical knowledge about why women of color are involved in collective action and the *material* achievements they gain for themselves and their families, we know less about how their civic engagement shapes other aspects of their lives. The present study expands on literature and other work that focuses on the collective struggles of women of color (Brodkin Sacks 1993; Luna 2009; Mizrahi 2007; Pardo 1998) by attending to participants' articulation and experiences of family and political life within a little known but powerful model of family-focused grassroots organizing. The mothers and grandmothers in my study highlight the profound importance of a model that remakes politics so that it fits within their own lives, not the other way around. The narrative stories of motherleaders uncover how gendered and raced emotions, feelings, and relationships not only bind people together for systemic formal change but also construct lasting impacts on participants' lives in and outside of the household.

Constructing Meanings through Narratives

I build on scholarship that uses participant narratives to demonstrate how participation in political contestation transforms people, particularly their self-perceptions (Hart 2001; Kurzman 2011; Polletta 1998; Shepard 2015). As Stephen Hart (2001:82, 86–87) argues, intensively involved social movement participants "interpret their lives in the light of organizing principles" and they often describe, in similar ways, how collective action changes them. These social narratives are not only data. They help develop identities, because when people tell stories they configure events, make sense of the past, the present, and a possible future. As Francesca Polletta (1998) put it, "In telling the story of our becomings—as an individual, a nation, as people—we establish who we are" (p. 141). Narrative stories are telling not only of what happened but also what it means to those participating (Polletta 1998). Charles Kurzman (2011) argues that social movements actively make meanings and challenge preestablished meanings. Thus, studying meaning-making through participant narratives provides a glimpse of actors' reflections, reevaluations, and the social outcomes derived from sustained activities of contestation.

Methods

Ethnographic and Interview Evidence

From April 2016 to July 2017, I carried out participant observations of grassroots organizing activities and 40 one-on-one interviews with volunteer women organizers (whom I call motherleaders) and staff affiliated with COFI, a Chicago based organization that has a statewide reach. COFI uses a family-focused organizing approach that aims to spark and sustain long-term community engagement of lower-income parents. COFI also sponsors parent leadership trainings led by other parent leaders and staff organizers. The three phases of trainings include: Self, Family & Team; Community Outreach & Action; and Policy & Systems Change. In these phases, participants (1) build relationships and set personal, family, and team goals; (2) connect with the broader community to refocus their community goals; and (3) work with other parents from across the city and state to change systems. Ellen Schumer, a cofounder of COFI, describes the model as branching off from other organizing traditions dominant in Chicago, including the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Gamaliel Foundation. Schumer reports that COFI was founded to build a more family-friendly organizing environment that took into account the voices of mothers from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Ellen Schumer, interview, April 2017).

COFI provides institutional support for parents to engage in democratic activities in their neighborhoods, communities, and across the state so that they can develop a stronger parent voice for local and statewide systemic change. Over the time of this study, five to eight full-time COFI staff organizers supported more than 300 active parents individually, and within community groups, to ensure barriers to community participation were minimized. Accommodations for parents included scheduling events around their complex lives, providing small stipends for travel, sharing food with participants and their families during meetings, and offering free childcare during organizing activities. COFI organizes across a variety of neighborhoods in and around Chicago.

Interview participants lived in 24 different neighborhoods in Chicago and nearby. Of the 33 motherleaders I interviewed, 16 were Latinas (Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Guatemalan), 14 were African American, and three were White. One woman also identified as Native American. I carried out seven interviews with COFI organizing staff members, some of whom were former parent leaders. I met interviewees at locations of their choice, which included participants' dining rooms, kitchens, and living rooms, local coffee shops, restaurants, and COFI meeting rooms. During interviews, I asked participants about how their families were involved in organizing activities and how their participation in organizing shaped their lives, particularly their family lives. I inquired about shifts in relationships with their intimate partners and children, asking for concrete examples of these changes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim; 27 interviews were held and transcribed in English and 13 in Spanish. Although I did not specifically ask about citizenship

status, a handful of Latina women alluded to or explicitly discussed being undocumented.

I attended and took field notes at more than 90 unique organizing events totaling more than 250 hours, including consecutive leadership trainings, legislative trainings, organizing and statewide meetings, parent-led community forums, trips to Springfield to speak to legislators, door-knocking to survey community members, and social events. The organizing events were typically bilingual (English and Spanish), with a staff or parent translator, and they were held primarily in Chicago and the surrounding area (including Evanston, Bloomington, and Aurora, IL). During participant observations, I documented interactions, paying close attention to how motherleaders incorporated and talked about their families within organizing activities. Through this method, I was able to see parents in action within organizing environments to understand how they contest their marginality for and through their families in intersectional ways.

Analysis

I used open coding techniques to analyze interviews and field notes. I placed conceptual labels on responses that described experiences, feelings, and events to uncover overlapping themes related but not limited to family relationships, gender, race relations, and power dynamics. I analyzed each interview to answer my interview question and to identify meta-themes. Finally, I reexamined all data for common emerging meta-themes. I remained focused on the intersection of community organizing, gender, and family lives, while considering how these interwoven experiences were affected by varied oppressions in participants' communities and everyday experiences.

Findings

The COFI Family-focused Way

Founded in 1995, COFI was in part the result of a successful pilot project, Women Leaders in Action in Chicago (1989–1993), which aimed to help develop the leadership capacities of women in areas that had little policy-making input from low-income families. Women Leaders in Action, and later COFI, from the start did not dichotomize the personal and the political and placed the economic and social advancement of women at the forefront of organizing (O'Donnell and Scheie 1999). Women-centered organizing uses nonantagonistic tactics and focuses on self-sufficiency through community ties, economic independence, and education, similar to the tradition of Jane Addams (Hamington 2010). COFI evolved into a family-friendly model instead of a women-only group, inviting fathers to participate in organizing. However, the majority of COFI parent organizers were women, predominantly women of color, although the organization collaborates with other groups of fathers and workers.

COFI's family-focused organizing approach uniquely reaches parents who might not otherwise be involved in collective action. Again, the model offers spaces for mutual support *within* organizing activities, does not draw a line between one's public and private lives, builds coalitions with social service agencies and other community organizing groups, sets agendas with children and families in mind first, and uses highly confrontational tactics only as a last resort to garner the attention of policy makers (O'Donnell and Schumer 1996). Like other models, COFI worked to build personal and community power and relationships through "one-on-one" conversations. However, unlike other models, building relationships was not solely a means to systemic change, but rather it was an end in itself. Several COFI staff organizers had work experience in other models of organizing, and although they acknowledged strengths with other methods, they also recognized their previous limits as organizers to support parent leaders. More "masculine" models of organizing, through experience, were less welcoming and even dismissive of the experiences and obligations of women, mothers, and caregivers (Law and Martens 2012; Stall and Stoecker 1999). In the next quotation, Esperanza,[1] a COFI staff organizer, describes her experience with an Alinsky model of organizing:

> One day my boss [in the Alinsky-based group] told me—some of the moms' husbands were being deported and they were going through a lot and—she told me "We're not social workers, you cannot form a support group for them. We don't do that. We need them to advocate, we need them to fight, we need them to come to these hearings to testify!" And I was like, but we gotta support them somehow? . . . So I really just value and appreciate that COFI has that support, that web of support, those tools to be able to take families through. . . . So we can be like ok now that we have these tools, what's next? You know? . . . Let's take a step back and see how they're doing. Like how are their personal goals, what's going on, they lost their job, so what's next?

As Esperanza emphasizes, COFI's family-focused approach takes into account the complex lives of parents, particularly lower income mothers, and aims to support and ensure parents who are usually absent from policy making participate in politics (O'Donnell and Scheie 1999; O'Donnell and Schumer 1996). As Nora, a COFI staff organizer said during a workshop, COFI reaches "parents who are not just low hanging fruit, meaning easy recruits into leadership positions, but people who don't see themselves as leaders and then grow to see themselves this way."

COFI staff members actively recruited parents and sponsored family-focused trainings through local neighborhood

[1]All names are pseudonyms.

public schools, Head Start and daycare programs, and social service agencies located in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Chicago. Some of these community areas included but were not limited to Austin, Auburn Gresham, Englewood, Hermosa, Back of the Yards, Lawndale, and Little Village (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning 2016). Motherleaders from across racial-ethnic communities and neighborhoods collaborated at committee meetings (which were held in English and Spanish) and organizing activities. Sharon, a Black motherleader, as well as many others in my study, highlighted how COFI helped them "speak to different people"[2] and "not be afraid to go to talk to different people that's got different cultures." African American, Latina, and white motherleaders went to immigration summits and rallies together, attended events focused on decriminalizing youth, and rode buses to Springfield in mixed-community groups to visit one another's representatives and senators.

Importantly, parents who participated in COFI's organizing trainings learned about institutions that have oppressed them—the education system, legal system, police, and media—and identified laws and practices that hindered progress for them and their families. "Who gains when we are divided?" asked Nora at a statewide COFI training. "The prison system! The one percent! Trump and his friends!" participants chimed in enthusiastically. Within formal trainings and informal conversations, leaders were often prompted to claim their power to hold legislators and public service members accountable to do their jobs as representatives of their communities. During my observations, COFI staff organizers and parent peer trainers routinely emphasized that legislators "work for the people," reminding participants that "as parents, you are your children's greatest advocate." COFI parents found networks of support within welcoming and hopeful settings of solidarity where they set and wrote down goals for themselves, their families, and their communities, and they held one another accountable to achieve those goals.

Parents connected personal troubles with public issues by developing a sense of their own importance and capacity to create change. In the following quote, Ms. J, a Black motherleader, described how despite her initial hesitation to participate in COFI's family-focused training, the workshops helped her to discover her own leadership abilities:

> I didn't want to take the training, but when I got through the Self, Family & Team, it was so motivating. . . . I tell people it's one of the most, um, eye opening trainings I've ever had, and I've done a lot of trainings before. For me, that just kinda jumpstarted me into my [organizing] career. So, I loved it after I got involved with it. And that's why I love doing it. Because I'm a witness to what it can do. You know, I went from being a normal mom to . . . a parent leader . . . and I didn't learn that until I went to the training and COFI opened the door for me.

[2]Quotations are respondents' exact words.

Once parents completed the first two phases of locally based parent leadership trainings, which on average took about 18 months, they began their Policy & Systems Change training and often joined a cross-community and cross-cultural parent-led membership group sponsored by COFI called POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win Educate and Renew Policy Action Council). POWER-PAC was founded in 2003 by trained leaders as a "next step" for citywide and more recently statewide community organizing. POWER-PAC focused on four city and statewide issues: (1) Elementary Justice, (2) Stepping Out of Poverty, (3) Healthy Food and Recess, and (4) Early Childhood Learning. Each campaign was co-chaired by parent leaders; intentionally, one African American and one Latina woman were voted into these leadership positions. Motherleaders explained that they wanted leadership to represent the larger group (which is also why although men were involved in meetings, co-chairs have always been women). All co-chairs were part of the POWER-PAC Leadership Council, which, among other tasks, planned for POWER-PAC quarterly meetings and participated in annual goal setting and budget review with COFI's Board of Trustees.

Each of the four campaigns held at least one meeting each month (25 people consistently attended), and POWER-PAC held one meeting every three months (60 people consistently attended). Toward the end of the research, POWER-PAC restructured its organization into city branches corresponding to areas in Chicago (Southside, Southwest, West, North/Northwest) and began to connect more formally with parents in other surrounding areas (including Evanston, Aurora, Elgin, and East St. Louis) that were actively organizing around similar issues. Similar to Zakiya Luna's (2009) conclusion that reproductive justice organizing around "human rights" emphasizes participants' "intersectional location in life" (p. 358), COFI's organization around "family" helped unite lower income mothers from diverse communities and racial-ethnic groups while providing support of their multifaceted identities. Often, parents said that what joined them and kept them together was their desire to create better communities for their families. However, interviews reveal that organizing meant much more than systemic change.

The Process of Leaving the "Shell" through Family-focused Community Organizing

Most of the motherleaders in my study were African American and recent immigrant Latina mothers and grandmothers who lived in some of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Chicago and the surrounding area. During interviews, motherleaders described their daily lives, sharing intimate stories of overlapping oppressions due to gender, race, class, and immigration status. Although I call my respondents motherleaders, highlighting the juncture of their motherwork (Moraga and Anzaldua 2015) and community leadership, this title is by no means exhaustive of their intersecting identities. Motherleaders faced many "axes of social

division and oppression" (Collins and Bilge 2016:2) ranging from discrimination in public, at home, and at work, to fearing for the lives of their children whose skin color and neighborhood put them at risk for criminalization and gun violence (Rios 2017). During an interview, Star, a Black motherleader, shared how she "hated" how her children were constantly exposed to shootings just outside of her home. She recalled how one day her two young sons were taking out the garbage and began "running and yelling they're shooting, get down!" Star hoped to help change "all of that so her children won't be raised around that, thinking it's a way of life."

Many motherleaders described their experiences as encompassing a great deal of *fear*, *vulnerability*, or *despair*—their marginal statuses as poor women of color, as immigrants, and/or as survivors of domestic violence often defined their daily interactions. Ingrained in their everyday struggles were direct and indirect messages telling them they were not important enough to be heard, and indeed for long, discouraged them from publicly articulating what mattered to them. Thus, many described remaining silent day after day. Yet mothers' descriptions of a past voiceless status, developed and reinforced throughout their lives, were in striking contrast to the ways they later saw themselves as community leaders, educators, and organizers. For these marginalized mothers, their work in the community through family-focused organizing provided one path toward dismantling discrimination in and outside of their households and freeing themselves from shields that often left them in the dark.

Through my observations in a peer-led COFI family-focused leadership training, I consistently witnessed how leaders were pushed to see themselves as agents of change in their communities. During a training session, parents were asked to first write down the names of people they considered to be leaders, and second to list the qualities of those leaders. Parents listed First Lady Michelle Obama, religious clergy, and school principals, among others. Referring to some of the suggested qualities of leaders, the cofacilitator Ms. J said, "Having the responsibility for other people, delegating, leading by example, and having wisdom are qualities that as parents we have, *especially* as moms." She continued:

> We are leaders in the household! To strengthen ourselves we might want to step out of the box. I'll use me for example. I used to be really shy, but to do these peer-trainings, I *had* to step out and become more outspoken.

Using themselves as examples, peer trainers described how they became stronger for their families by "stepping out of the box," or metaphorically breaking out of their shell.

At first, this group did not outright recognize their positions as leaders. They did not think of themselves first when asked to offer examples of leaders. But with a little nudge from the group facilitator, parents began talking about their daily acts of leadership—even if just within that safe space for the moment. Unlike findings from Brodkin Sacks's (1993) study of women hospital workers who made attempts to unionize and acceptingly agreed "women are organizers: men are leaders" (p. 117), COFI begins with the premise that women and mothers are leaders, and they have been all along. As Red, an African American motherleader said describing her daily experience as a mom: "I'm basically like the head ringleader over the entire family. . . . I'm the ground holder of all 'em. If the garden isn't put out and I don't pull up the carrots, won't nobody have soup for tonight."

The recognition of their leadership through community organizing often led motherleaders in my study to "come out of their shell" or "leave their bubble." In the following quotation, Abby, a Latina motherleader, explains her experience:

> I've always enjoyed talking and also meeting other parents [at COFI] and to hear about what they share because you know, I can relate . . . I have come out more of my shell this past year as well. So now I don't get—I get nervous, I get shy, but I just go with it. I go with the flow. So I feel like more comfortable talking to legislators, senators, and building relationships.

As motherleaders described poignant memories of change, they often talked about "getting out" of places of isolation and often into spaces outside of their comfort zones. This process was reportedly not easy, but they worked through their hesitations along other parents from diverse communities—undergoing similar discriminations, economic difficulties, and community struggles—parents they could relate to.

More than two thirds of interviewees said that organizing had changed the way they felt about themselves and/or the way they interacted with others. Motherleaders usually described their shell as something inhibiting their growth, holding them back, or shielding them. The metaphorical shell was both self-created or imposed on them by other people, usually people close to them. This shield sometimes acted as a mechanism of protection, while other times it weighed motherleaders down, and in many ways it ensured that their progress was achieved in stages. In the following sections, I continue to use the shell metaphor to help explain the transformative but ongoing process of organizing private lives and public issues as one, through family-focused community organizing. The difference between remaining trapped within a shell of *fear*, *vulnerability*, or *despair* rested largely on parents' ability to recognize that change was possible, both within their own lives and within social structures that often worked to stymie their progress.

Contesting Fear, Domesticity, and "Getting Out of the House"

> But, although I was ok [*bien*], I did not leave [the house]. I did not leave for anything because I did not know, although I was in this country legally, and I am legal, I did not know a lot of

> English and before I knew less than what I know now. My husband would say, if they take you, they'll take you to jail but later I'll come get you out." I would say no, no. He would tell me, "Why go out? You don't have anything to go out for? My father says the woman is for staying at home [*la mujer es para que este en la casa*]. (Alma)

I interviewed Alma, a Latina motherleader, in the colorfully decorated basement of her home after we both attended a community forum[3] hosted by COFI leaders, who called themselves "Padres Lideres en Accion" (Parent Leaders in Action). Alma shared her story of growing up in Mexico on a farm and making a quick decision to come to the United States at a young age after she discovered that her long-term boyfriend was having a child with another woman. She teared up as she described missing her country and her family: "Sometimes everything you have does not fill you because you are missing . . . your people, your brothers." She continued, "Even now I think why did I come? Why did I come? Just because I fought with a boyfriend?" Alma expressed her frustration with being thousands of miles away from her siblings, even more so now that both of her parents had passed away. She said she heard about COFI's leadership training when her now 20-year-old daughter was in kindergarten and said she had been involved in her community ever since. As Alma noted in the previous quote, the parent training helped her to "get out" (*salir*), to meet new people, and "to become stronger"—all of which arguably helped her cope with missing her family and having a husband with archaic notions of woman's role in the household. Alma explained further:

> I told my husband, [the organizer] is inviting me. I am going to feel [*sentir*], I am going to learn [*aprender*], I am going to leave my routine because routine is tiring [*la rutina cansa*]. . . . I think I was dumber [*mas mensa*] before than I am today or I don't know what I was thinking, but I always did what he said. But, I started learning to leave my routine and I started to learn by taking the trainings.

Alma and several other recent immigrant mothers described an emotional, physical, and social sense of being closed off or "shelled" in. Both documented, and undocumented immigrant respondents described the fear of being unable to communicate in English, the potential risk of being arrested or getting lost, and their apprehension with stepping outside of the gendered norms of what a "good mother" looks like.

For some mothers like Alma, their husbands took full advantage of this fear and distress and established a cycle of dependency for basic necessities, while claiming that they were the only possible source of salvation. Although there would be no reason for Alma to be arrested simply for being alone in public and not speaking English, her husband would casually tell her it *could* happen, and if it did happen, he could save her. This implied that when Alma left the house, it was outside of her role as a good mother and wife, and he had the power to either get her out of jail or leave her there—both troubling scenarios. Much of her husband's power rested on the fact that he was the primary breadwinner, while Alma's work at home went unvalued. Alma was not always a stay-at-home mom. She vividly described how before she was married, she worked full-time at a factory where she made razors and combs and was paid up to $14 an hour—a "nice" amount, she noted. However, after Alma had her first child, her husband complained she was paying too much for a babysitter and convinced her to leave work. Leaving her job led her to at one point not exit the house for nine months; her husband instead brought her "everything she needed." Once her daughter started kindergarten, dropping off and picking her up became one of Alma's few outings. One day, she ran across a COFI flyer in Spanish at her daughter's school.

She explained her first impressions of the training flyer: "On the school door, there was a flyer with women holding hands with colorful dresses. It said, 'We invite you to a training for parents, space is limited.' I thought 'it sounds nice.'" So, she took a chance with a training program she knew very little about. Trainings were in Spanish and English and were held during the time her daughter was in class. Alma saw this as an opportunity to break her routine. She left the phone off the hook when she went to her trainings, because her husband often called to check on her. She explained that he probably "assumed" she was talking to her sister on the phone. When her husband eventually found out about the trainings and her involvement with COFI, Alma said she learned to ignore his comments and those from her mother-in-law regarding her supposed neglect (*descuido*) of her home. At the time of the interview, Alma's husband still did not fully support her participation in the community or with COFI, but he stopped "giving her extra chores" like having her clean out the garage to prevent her from attending meetings or events.

The training pushed Alma to set a personal goal and to think of *herself first* for the first time in a long time (her personal goal was to lose weight). Alma started taking English classes, worked part-time as a community health ambassador, and made attempts to learn how to drive (all largely hidden from her husband). She credited the training with not only helping her learn about the different ways she could make her community better for her daughters, but also for offering her a space where she could "feel" (*sentir*), and be free at least for an hour or two from the confines of her home. With other mothers in the training, Alma also set family and group goals to improve their community (their first goal was to host a free event with food and games for kids). These types of activities were common, as the family-focused

[3]The aim of the forum was to share the results of a survey parents conducted with 103 residents of their community. During the forum, parents said that the survey showed that community members were most concerned with neighborhood violence, the lack of workshops for parents, and the absence of affordable programming for children.

model both touches on the immediate needs of families and the structural changes and goals for the communities they live in. Later, Alma and parents from different neighborhoods helped to end silent lunches, established restorative justice practices in Chicago Public Schools, and fought to stop the exploitation of workers through payroll paycards (debit cards used to pay employees) in Illinois, among many other city and statewide campaign wins.

Past research shows how mothers tend to volunteer more and do more community work than men, which is often an added burden (Pardo 1998; Ricourt 2002). Yet, we know less about the interpersonal and familial barriers of grassroots organizing and how participation in a family-focused model can help break down these and other barriers. Alma and others like her described cleaning, cooking, and washing late at night or early in the morning so that their husbands did not have any "excuse" for forbidding them to participate in organizing. These narratives corroborate Pardo's (1998) research, which shows how women who were active in their communities somehow almost always found time for all of their housework. However, Pardo argues that "household and domestic relations changed very little" for her respondents, despite their increased community involvement (p. 128). As such, her study does not show substantial conflicts or renegotiations at home as a result of grassroots organizing participation. In contrast, motherleaders in my study described resisting their husbands' insistence to "stop wasting their time" doing "free" work in the community. Instead, they stood up for their right to learn and get out of the house, and in some cases motherleaders asked their spouses to partake in cooking or cleaning so they could seamlessly add community organizing within their daily routines. As Estrella, a Latina motherleader said with regard to her relationship with her husband, "In COFI, they teach us how to go defend the rights of others. But, I'm learning my own rights. I'm going to defend my own rights. . . . Freedom of expression, of self-fulfillment. To be me. Those are my rights."

"Aprendí a No Dejarme (I Learned to Stick up for Myself)"

To be clear, only a handful of first-generation immigrant Latina mothers in my study openly discussed having partners who adhered to a pattern of "machismo" to the extent found in Alma's case. However, most did discuss ongoing struggles with partners, in-laws, and family members regarding their community organizing participation, and they described fear surrounding their inability to communicate in English. For example, Claudia's husband was supportive of her community organizing work, but as a Spanish-speaking woman, she described a sense of fear around speaking English and interacting with strangers. Claudia, a Latina motherleader, explained how even though she had worked at a supermarket for more than a decade, before the COFI trainings she was often scared to speak up when a customer or another staff member was rude to her. After being involved with COFI for two years, however, Claudia said that she pays attention to her needs and "takes care" of herself more. She said that she no longer tried to "please everyone," instead she did the best she could without stressing herself out. For instance, she said that if a customer interrupted her while she was speaking with another customer, she politely told them she would be right with them instead of trying to help two people at once or rushing to help them for fear of getting in trouble. She learned to "stick up" for herself and had recently done so when a coworker made a racist comment about Mexican women. Also, Claudia and three other mothers who participated in a COFI family-focused leadership training took the initiative to learn English. They organized a conversation exchange group composed of six to eight consistent participants with the purpose of being able to communicate better in English to stand up for themselves and for their rights. I attended these conversation exchange meetings as often as I could.

During the group, participants invited English-speaking students and community members to join, with the incentive of teaching them Spanish for part of the session. Any community member looking to learn English or practice their Spanish was welcome to join, as advertised in local parish bulletins. The group organizers said that the group was a way to practice English in a nonjudgmental environment with hopes of becoming more independent of English-speaking family members. Participants said they wanted to "speak for themselves" (*hablar por nosotros mismos*) at the doctor's office and at the grocery store, and they longed to connect with policy makers and their children's teachers in meaningful ways. In addition to becoming a space for learning English and discussing mutual grievances, motherleaders used the group as an opportunity to share information about health fairs and community forums and to recruit community members for collective projects to improve their communities.

I observed how within these empowering spaces of learning, participants often described daily experiences of feeling subjugated. Participants discussed common experiences of being shortchanged at stores, feeling talked down to, and being humiliated for not speaking English. In contrast, I witnessed one instance in which Claudia stood up for herself and did not let someone mistreat her (*no se dejó*) just before a conversation exchange group meeting.

As Claudia and I were walking into Casa Jose Ramiro,[4] a community center owned by a nearby parish, she hurriedly mentioned that the janitor had approached a new member of the group, Juan, the week before, asking him questions about who was in charge and what time everybody was supposed to be inside because the door needed to be locked for safety purposes, reasons he did not initially mention. When the janitor did not receive a straight answer from the new and

[4]Pseudonym.

startled member, he proceeded to enter the room where the group was meeting, raising his voice as he made demands for answers. Claudia and the other moms answered his questions, only to wonder for the rest of the day what they did wrong. Claudia said she thought maybe she had forgotten to flush the toilet in the restroom. Others thought that something might have been missing in the building and the janitor possibly thought they were responsible.

As Claudia predicted, the janitor approached us shortly after entering the building lobby. He was wearing glasses, jeans, and a white t-shirt. His frowning and wrinkled forehead suggested agitation. Without greeting us, he instructed us to use a door that had a posted "emergency only" sign and proceeded to lead the way up the stairs. The interchange is worth quoting at length, for it shows how Claudia stood up for herself:

> "Use this door" said the janitor with little explanation pointing to a door on the right.
>
> "Ok," said Claudia, "We were never told to use it before."
>
> "Well . . . that's because . . . people often leave it open . . . and we don't always check it . . . because we *assume* people listen," said the janitor speaking slowly as if he were talking to a toddler, then progressively started talking faster. "But that's what happens when you assume. See people are never really listening. They are talking to themselves in their heads when someone else is talking and they are not listening, it's like when I asked Juan a question last week, he didn't want to listen."
>
> "It's all in the way you ask things, and approach people" said Claudia, "last week, you came in and we were in shock because we didn't expect you to demand answers with no cause."
>
> "I was trying to prove a point to Juan, because I told him to just give me straight answers . . . I guess I should have asked if anyone had any questions," responded the janitor focusing on the fact he did not allow for questions instead of his actions in general.
>
> "I had my daughter with me and she got scared. Imagine if my husband were to find out, what would he say about where I am and what I'm doing?" said Claudia—before being interrupted.
>
> "See you are being very imaginative, you bring in your husband and all these stories. . . . You *create* these stories," said the janitor.
>
> "*No* . . . my daughter got scared, she said mommy why is this man mad? And as women, as Latina women we are submissive to *machista* men but we shouldn't be. We should be able to speak our mind. We are going to keep being *leaders*. We are all adults and we should be spoken to like adults," responded Claudia firmly.

The janitor proceeded to apologize for being so dry (*seco*) toward the group and asked Claudia to let the group know his sentiments.

I realized later that standing up to the janitor risked losing permission to use the space (something that actually happened to another motherleader for similar reasons at another site across the city). On the basis of an agreement with the pastor of the parish, the janitor opened the doors for the group during hours the center was not open to the public. Despite this fact, Claudia insisted on letting this man know that those in the group, largely women, were all adults and deserved respect. Even though the janitor's actions could have possibly angered her husband and *did* scare her daughter, the janitor was dismissive of Claudia's concerns, writing them off as products of her imagination. In her response, Claudia contested machismo, while also using it to get her point across. She alluded to what could happen if her husband found out she was putting herself in questionable situations, inferring that it might anger her husband or lead him to forbid her from attending. After the group meeting, Claudia called me as I made my way home and she told me she wanted me to know that her husband really wasn't a "*machista*," and in fact she had told him herself about the incident. She further explained "My husband doesn't even approach me like that, why should he [the janitor]?" Claudia said she wanted the janitor "to learn a lesson" about how his actions could have sparked trouble at home. Claudia contested rigid gender stereotypes of being submissive but simultaneously reinforced notions of expectations of domesticity within the Latino community. This excerpt from my field notes shows how women, particularly recent immigrant Latina women, are confronted by men in aggressive ways within their everyday lives and how COFI motherleaders like Claudia fight back using skills and language they learn from organizing trainings.

The story of Cindy, a Black motherleader, also shows how organizing led her to stand up for herself, her block, and her community. Like other motherleaders I interviewed, Cindy expressed her constant struggle for amenities in her neighborhood that were commonplace elsewhere, like green grass and safe playgrounds. After communicating with parents from other areas in Chicago through COFI, Cindy learned that she had to speak up for her community or nothing would change. Cindy said that through community organizing, she learned of her right to contact her local representatives when she had concerns. She told me about a time she called her alderman and asked him why there was no grass on her block like there was on other blocks. Her alderman replied, "No one had asked for grass before." Perplexed about why there was even a need to ask, Cindy said that within weeks, and much to her surprise, the dirt adjacent to the sidewalk on her block was replaced with fresh grass. Parents, like Cindy, were tired of being mistreated because of where they lived or the color of their skin. Importantly, they organized to create change because they realized that if they did not, then who would?

From Despair to Purpose

As is prevalent in low-income communities, many motherleaders described chronic, often debilitating health conditions that affected their daily lives. Butterfly, a White motherleader, said that she was able to cope with her constant physical pain through her community involvement. "I'm in excruciating pain most of the time that I'm here," she said. But instead of letting her health conditions, including depression, take over her life, she chose to actively participate in her community, which in return gave her a sense of utility and respite. Butterfly was trained by COFI to be a peacekeeper at a public elementary school. She mentored youth who had gotten in trouble at school and worked with them through restorative justice practices, which often prevented their suspension and or expulsion from school. Butterfly told me about a child in second grade she was currently meeting on a weekly basis:

> Last year he used to spit on girls because his mother spit on him [voice shakes]. And this year he has changed so much. I'm the only one—he has a little problem with anger sometimes. . . . And I'm the only one that can calm him down. I just you know, gently rub his back to make sure that he's ok and it calms him down.

Throughout our conversation, Butterfly kept saying she was involved in community organizing and in leadership positions, "for the babies," to ensure that they were taken care of. But her descriptions elucidate how she also did this work to escape from a state of desperation, depression, and isolation. Butterfly explained, like Abby, quoted earlier, how she often felt unsure about her abilities but continued to be involved in community organizing. In the next quotation, she describes how her community contributions served to blur her own worries:

> And I don't know a lot of times I just feel like I'm alone in a big ol' room full of people. I'm just there like trying to figure out what I'm doing. You know? And this takes me away from it . . . I'm worried about trying to help feed kids and trying to pass bills and worry about other people's problems you know. It's a lot easier to worry about other people's problems than your own. It really is. Somebody has always got it worse you know? I didn't believe that until I started being here [at COFI]. I didn't believe that somebody could have it worse than me. . . . And that's one of the reasons I started going to the meetings and threw myself into everything, to take my mind off everything else.

Even though food insecurity and neighborhood violence was prevalent in her life, and some of the issues she was advocating for were very much matters that she dealt with on a daily basis in her own family, Butterfly kept saying that other families "had it worse." The idea of organizing for "someone else's problems" is the opposite of what Nina Eliasoph (1998) found in her study, in which community volunteers insisted on working on problems "close to home" that affected them directly. Whereas working on concerns that were "close to home" was a strategy Eliasoph's respondents used to avoid becoming discouraged by larger systemic issues, for Butterfly, working on issues faced by "others" helped create distance from her current circumstances as she momentarily avoided worrying about her own predicaments. Butterfly's sense of the expansiveness of community speaks to the capacity of the COFI model to help motherleaders see their own struggles as connected to those of others while providing relief from daily stressors.

Perhaps even more pronounced was the transformative experiences of Factotum and Lulu. Factotum, a Black motherleader, said she was ready to stop taking her life-sustaining medication when she was "forced" to attend a COFI training by one of her social workers who at the time was helping her receive public assistance. "I didn't hear anything they had to say at first," she said as she retold the story of how she went from "shutting out the world" and everyone in it—a form of being inside a shell—to being one of the most vocal COFI proponents of systemic change in childhood education. Having endured abuse throughout her formative years, and as a recent widow, when doctors told Factotum that she had "cancer all over her body," she said she was ready to give up on life. The last thing she wanted was to go to a training to think about her personal hopes and dreams. But, eventually she started listening. Factotum described a workshop where she and others were given an 8 × 10 inch crisp piece of paper and told to crumble it up in a ball. Then, parents were instructed to bring the piece of paper back to its original state. "The crisp piece of paper is a child's self-esteem before it gets damaged by the wrinkles of insults and yelling at home," said a peer trainer. At that moment, Factotum said she broke down, realizing that her negativity was contributing to a harmful environment for her children. This exercise also signified that the abuse she endured as a child was not her fault. Perhaps she could have achieved this realization in group or individual therapy, but arguably, attending leadership trainings with the goal of organizing for systemic change carried far fewer taboos than seeking a mental health professional. Whereas medical models may offer individualized explanations for social problems that often blame the behavior of Black and Brown communities (Crawford 1977; Krieger and Bassett 1993), community organizing instead focuses on structural issues, the impediments to opportunity and access, and finds ways to collaboratively improve communities. Factotum stuck to her first goal of consistently taking her medication and eating in healthy ways during the parent training program. She lost 50 pounds and was fighting her cancer at the end of the training. Factotum said that achieving her first goal was her proudest moment. For Factotum, community organizing through COFI literally "saved her life" at a time when she felt disillusioned by every aspect of her existence. She explained,

> The impact is . . . my whole life changing. I went from deaf to advocating for, I believe thousands and millions of people at this

> point. And I'm still facing very horrible challenges in my life, I mean it didn't end with that . . . if there's a list of medical conditions, I probably could check off almost every box on there, and I'm not saying that in a winey mode, I'm not saying that in a complaining mode, I'm saying it in a victory mode.

Factotum went on to explain how organizing helped her grow on a personal level so she could do more for her family and countless other families and children.

Like Factotum, Lulu, a Latina motherleader, said that she participated in a COFI training as a last chance for life. As a survivor of severe domestic violence, which resulted in getting thrown out of a moving vehicle and losing her unborn baby, she said that she contemplated ending her life for weeks and at one point had a loaded gun to her temple. Lulu joined a COFI parent training she saw advertised through a flyer her daughter brought home from school. At the time of her interview, Lulu said that as a peer trainer, she now told other parents to say out loud, "Yes you can!" and urged them to look in the mirror every day and tell themselves they could do it, whatever their goal might be. She said parents came back years later and told her that this simple daily exercise changed their lives. Even though several of Lulu's family members negatively referred to her organizing work saying phrases like "that's not a job" or "you're wasting your time," she told me that if she could help just one other person "that's all the pay" she needed.

Motherleaders crafted relationships that helped them challenge and cope with simultaneous oppressions in and outside of their households and family life. In the next quotation, Spontaneous, an African American motherleader, poignantly summarizes the positive, communal, and expressive components of structural change through a family-focused model of organizing:

> Change is going to make you better it's not going to break you, it's not going to tear you down in your weakest spot, it will make you strong, it will make you understand, give you patience . . . sometimes parents feel like you're doing it by y'all self but if you come to certain things you'll find a lot of opportunities for y'all to get out there, to take that break while your kids are in school, and you need to vent . . . this [COFI] is a place where you can vent.

Learning from the Narratives of Motherleaders

Given the social experiences of intersecting oppressions, it is not surprising that my respondents, mainly Latina and African American mothers, initially felt voiceless within their own communities and families. As shown in this article, low-income motherleaders often endured worlds filled with multiple axes of oppression, even when making conscious efforts to make their communities better. When women constantly receive messages about their inferiority, it can easily lead to their limited participation in politics. But despite assumptions that low-income women of color are not involved in collective organizing and local movements, as one could assume on the basis of extant literature focused on Whites, men, and models of social change that do not account for the hurdles implicit in being a Black or Latina mother living in a disadvantaged neighborhood, the narratives of motherleaders tell a different story. Through their organizing work, motherleaders won many interpersonal and policy achievements. This article documents how, with the right support systems, motherleaders engaged in local politics, became involved in their children's schools, and gained skills to stand up for themselves and their families.

The participation narratives of motherleaders show how despite their daily struggles, mothers and grandmothers were vocal within their communities through their work tied to COFI's family-focused organizing approach. These stories were not meant to dramatize the lives of women in my study but rather to show that despite their personal doubts and ongoing battles, family-focused organizing encompassed more than collective work toward community change. For motherleaders, family-focused organizing and trainings became lifelines by which they could contest and outgrow their shells of domination toward a future of liberation—a lens through which they could make sense of politics that took into account their full identities.

Motherleaders in my study described themselves as undergoing a process of "leaving their shells" of fear, vulnerability, or despair while learning about structural issues and how they could collectively address them. Many motherleaders shared stories that signaled how organizing helped them to cope with and contest their marginal status. Participating in family-focused parent leadership trainings through COFI's model of community organizing highlighted and honed motherleaders' innate leadership qualities by pushing them to interact with parents from different neighborhoods and to speak up for themselves, their families, and communities. Organizing encouraged motherleaders to see themselves as leaders through an intentional model that started by highlighting how a mothers' everyday labor radiates leadership. Moreover, the COFI training process modeled relationships that promoted increased equity in and outside of their households.

Although other studies have shown that the private and public lives of women of color are inseparable (Brodkin Sacks 1993; Naples 1998; Pardo 1998), the present study illuminates how a family-focused model of organizing *supports* and makes room for the intersectional and multidimensional personal, familial, and political lives of women through community organizing (Crenshaw 1993; Moraga and Anzaldua 2015). Gender and race are critical for understanding how people organize and how marginalized groups come to see themselves as political actors. Moreover, organizing around "family issues" helps unite groups of parents, older and younger, from opposite ends of Chicago and Illinois, who speak different languages, and who would otherwise rarely interact. COFI's family-focused organizing

also highlights and praises participants' intersecting identities as women of color, leaders, mothers, caregivers, workers, and community members. Free childcare during organizing meetings, English-Spanish translators, and kid-friendly meetings were all essential for reaching groups of low-income and non-English-speaking mothers who might otherwise be discouraged from becoming involved in policy change efforts.

Motherleaders continued to struggle on a daily basis; their problems did not magically disappear. Many continued to fear losing their children to gun violence, and most were underemployed, living paycheck to paycheck. But instead of subsiding to the sidelines or giving up all together, their involvement in relationship building and collective action motivated them to keep striving one day at a time. Each goal motherleaders achieved individually, as a family, and as a group signaled their power to make change and gave them purpose beyond their own worlds. Sociological studies of collective contestation ought to refocus on how collective action can most affect groups that are often excluded from democratic participation. As scholars, we must seriously consider the whole lives of local community organizers and how they make sense of politics in ways that neither dichotomize the public nor the political, nor ignore the multiple identities brought with and shaped throughout collective experiences.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the Arthur J. Schmitt Foundation, the Midwest Sociological Society, The Center for Urban Research and Learning, and the "Page Liberators," in particular Dr. Kelly Moore, for their invaluable support. I also would like to thank COFI parent leaders and staff for always welcoming me.

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