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Making Sharing Work: Migrant Community Groups and Informal/Formal Work

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Abstract

Migrant and refugee communities are at the forefront of highly feminised and precarious community sector work. Facing insecure labour contracts and contingent, competitive funding for activities, these communities routinely move between paid and unpaid work. Drawing on multi-sited and participatory ethnographic research and 30 semi-structured interviews with women of different African backgrounds living and working in western Sydney, this article explores the relationship between collective sharing practices and life as precarious workers. The sharing of material resources, information and support takes place beyond designated ‘workplaces’ and on a continuum of activity that moves between the formal and informal, public and private, productive and socially reproductive. This article uses a practice-based approach to foreground the social world of working migrant women. In doing so, it sheds light on the hidden, precarious work of an increasingly marketised community sector and the everyday and emergent ways that marginalised communities respond to precarious work under neoliberalism.

Keywords

Ethnography, gender, migration, neoliberalism, precarious work, sharing, sociology

Introduction

Between 2001 and 2011 the western Sydney suburb of Blacktown saw a 232% increase in arrivals from Sudan (profile.id, 2019). Nadia, a migrant from Northern Sudan, remembers the work involved with organising welcome baskets of food and assisting new arrivals to apply for housing, health care and social services. Nadia’s house doubled as the premises of a small organisation she founded to provide settlement support. To supplement the work of volunteers she tried to rent the spare room in her house to students in the area, but the money came at the expense of having a spare bedroom for women who faced violence at home. In 2015, as part of the government’s

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competitive tendering process, Nadia lost funding for her part-time wage. She continued her work, garnering resources through friends and colleagues, applying for grants and through the occasional formalised contract with the social service providers working with refugees and migrants in the highly diverse western Sydney region.

Nadia's movement between formal, paid work and informal, volunteer work is a common story amongst community organisers who move in and outside paid community sector work. With short-term contracts the norm, a lack of employment security and protection makes community work precarious work (Cunningham et al., 2014). However, as Nadia's story attests, it is also work that goes beyond the individual employment contract and complicates definitions of paid work and workplaces. This article presents a localised case study of the movements of a group of *precarious workers* (Campbell and Price, 2016) whose precarious employment is embedded in the social practices of their communities and mediated by their race and gender (Kalleberg, 2009).

Drawing on ethnographic and interview research conducted between 2012 and 2016 with women from different African backgrounds living in western Sydney, Australia, this article draws on practice-based approaches to work (Gherardi, 2012) with attention to the practice of sharing. The sharing of information, care, material resources and social spaces is a gendered practice that helps mobilise intangible and tangible resources and mitigates the social and economic impacts of precarity.

Across disciplines as varied as digital studies, business and hospitality and political economy there has been a growth of interest in sharing (Belk, 2010; Connelly et al., 2014; Kennedy, 2016) and sharing economies (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017). However, approaches to sharing that are sociological, grounded in the everyday and analysed in relation to gendered forms of work and exchange are noticeably absent. The relationship between sharing and work is important to understand given a global feminisation of migration (Tittensor and Mansouri, 2017), a corresponding feminisation of care work (Bauer and Österle, 2013; Boccagni, 2014) and a marketisation of social service delivery (Martin, 2014; Trudeau, 2012). In this context, a highly diverse, feminised and contingent workforce, is disrupting the binary of informal and formal, unpaid and paid work. Sharing provides a lens to view this disruption, helping to rearticulate the informal/formal, paid/unpaid not as two ends of an employment spectrum but as a continuum of work (Visser, 2011, 2017). This article draws attention to the precarity of life on this continuum. It suggests that for a culturally diverse and newly arrived migrant group, precarious work, and in particular the struggle for renumeration and upward mobility, intersects with marginalisation based on collective identity as a gendered and racialised minority.

The article begins by outlining the context for a changing provision of social services and suggests it is in localised settings where community groups do much of the integrative work of social services. Interweaving feminist methodology with a practice-oriented approach to sharing, the next section highlights the way work emerged as a key theme. After detailing the reciprocal research methods used, empirical findings are presented in four sections. The first section focuses on the micro intangible and tangible acts of sharing. In the context of a decline in funding for ethno-specific organisations, the second section looks at the processes through which informal groups become formalised. Drawing on the story of one community organiser, the third section details the individual, emotional impact of being unpaid as it intersects with marginalisation based on gender, race and ethnicity. The last section suggests that sharing remains a key collective response to precarity. The article concludes that an ethnographic focus on sharing sheds light on a specific manifestation of precarious work that culturally diverse groups face and sensitises us to the often overlooked collective impacts of precarity.

The Hidden Work of Community

Policy-oriented approaches to the work–migration–care nexus involve some significant ambivalences regarding how social, spatial and material inequities shape women's access to support and their movement through work considered more or less formal. In their everyday activities as professionals and practitioners, women are central in the reconfiguration of state-provided social assistance (Schild, 2000). In particular, women provide much of the emotional labour necessary to support new migrant communities: building and sustaining relationships of support and brokering between institutional and non-institutional settings (Neufeld et al., 2002). In practice, this brokerage has been accelerated under the system of short-term contracts and competitive funding arrangements that are characteristic of market-oriented approaches to social service delivery and wrought by neoliberalism.

In the context of a crisis in the post-World War II capitalist order and advent of neoliberalism, it has been argued that the state has 'abandoned, reduced, or reconfigured many of its prior responsibilities for social reproduction . . .' (Mitchell et al., 2004, p. 16). In Australia, the 1980s saw a financial deregulation and a limit to public sector involvement in the economy (Cahill, 2007). Following trends from neoliberal Thatcherism in the UK and Reagan's conservatism in the USA, restructuring presented challenges to the state's traditionally redistributory role (Pusey, 2003) and had implications for social service delivery.

As part of this restructure, governments have expanded publicly funded social provision, without expanding the public sector, by directly subsidising the private provision of contracted services (Meagher and Goodwin, 2015). Volunteers often fill the gaps in an under-resourced community sector and have organised at local, state and national levels to provide services (Brown and Keast, 2005; Darcy et al., 2009). This is particularly the case in regard to migrant volunteer organisations which have historically mediated in various ways between migrants, their families and society and in relation to the changing 'ethnic' identity that defines them (Moya, 2005).

Yet culturally diverse women continue to be seen as receivers of welfare and not as providers. This is despite challenges being made to universalist assumption of public service delivery, notions of professionalism and discriminatory practices (Williams and Johnson, 2010: 18). The introduction of contracted out and competitive funding has a new set of implications for the inclusion of culturally diverse communities. Strenuous accountability requirements place extra work on an already over worked group. They have been interpreted as a way of silencing community organisations under the guise of market values of competition and choice (Darcy et al., 2009; Ryan, 2005), while also denying them the long-term, recurrent funding that would help develop the skills necessary to engage successfully in a competitive system of funding (Brown and Keast, 2005: 514).

The extension of state contracts, and transfer of responsibility to local community organisations, raise questions of what constitutes the *public* and *formal* and *paid* provision of services? The socially reproductive practices that sustain people on a daily and generational basis can often constitute the invisible work of the productive sphere of paid service delivery (Katz, 2001; Martin, 2014). The imparting of cultural practices, identities and social values is a form of embodied community work – work that is highly gendered, often the domain of women and often not considered 'work' (Kershaw, 2010; Moya, 2005; Singh, 2016). Embodied work is often intangible and cannot be easily accounted for in terms of inputs and outputs. It is work that is particularly difficult to fit into accountability frameworks. For this reason, Martin (2014) has argued that migrant communities do the 'hidden work' of service provision and are increasingly responsible for providing social services to newly arrived communities.

The lived experience of this hidden work – what meaning women bring to it and what impact it has on their sense of community and belonging – is less explored. A renewed theoretical interest in

'community' as a key source of social support, inclusion and action separate from the state (Arneil, 2006) presents an opportune time to account for the localised and lived impacts of moving between informal and formal work. The everyday and localised settings in which 'patterns of social interaction and social group formation are realised' (Agnew, 1996: 133) are also the settings where partnership, collaboration and more or less formalised work takes place. Moving beyond a dualist conception of informal/formal allows us to capture the feminised work practices that an increasingly marketised welfare sector relies upon. Conceptually, Taylor (2004) offers a framework to understand work as a borderless continuum of labour practices, and more recently, Visser (2017) theorises work as existing on a 'continuum of informality'. In combination with a practice approach to work, these conceptual frameworks help shed light on a localised continuum of precarious work as it manifests in the social lives of women from African backgrounds living in western Sydney.

Why Sharing? Elements and Ethics of a Feminist Research Methodology

Macro-sociological approaches to precarious work can benefit from micro-ethnographic insights into the lives of precarious workers. These workers are often underrepresented in the formal labour market and doing 'work' outside the 'workplace'. From initial attendance at community events, it was apparent that sharing was a widely spread, informal mechanism to mitigate the impacts of precarity. Sharing food, money, information about life in Australia and histories of migration was an observable practice of pooling and redistributing social, emotional and material resources. However, unlike paid work with a formal employment contract or forms of reciprocal gift giving, acts of sharing were difficult to capture when it was stories, support and social space that were being offered and received. At times, it was difficult to discern who was sharing, when, and the appropriate social distances to share with strangers or friends. Yet as we know, sharing intensifies social relationships (Belk, 2010; Kennedy, 2016; Price, 1975). Who shares and with whom is a product of power, control and access to resources. The questions and tensions generated by sharing are also central to intangible and tangible practices of care. Care forms the basis of much community work (Collins et al., 2009) and can be neglected in accounts of precarious work (Bauer and Österle, 2013).

Ethnographic attention to sharing can help fill that gap. How we share, whom we share with, what and where we share, provide a general sense of reference for our access to social and material resources and how we imagine ourselves in relation to a collective. This starting point is closely related to a feminist vision of research that emphasises the affective dimension of the research act and the 'everyday' as a productive site for research (Sprague, 2005). On an everyday level, feminist qualitative research is also a practice that is crafted through acts of sharing between participant and researcher. Sharing is critical to building the trust, familiarity and openness that is required to share the intricacies of daily life and personal history. Feminist research principles encourage researchers to listen to the accounts of women and regard them as primary and constitutive of their everyday world (Young and Miranne, 2000). Knowledge is therefore partly autobiographical and gained by talking and by listening; it is every day, but it is deeply political. Consequently, sharing provides a way to glimpse a politic that is found between groups and institutional settings, whether formal or informal, and that cuts across public and private life (Lister, 1998).

Sharing was initially used as a sensitising concept to give 'a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances' (Blumer, 1954: 7). At the level of empirical data collection, sharing quickly exposed a situated set of practices. Women who had ownership over a particular resource made that resource available to others and, in doing so, initiated an informal economy of sharing. This economy differed from the popular and academic notion of the *sharing economy*, which is commonly understood to be a 'socio-technical system for the exchange of

goods and services' (Kennedy, 2016: 466). More often than not, the sharing economy involves the transferral of ownership or monetary compensation for goods or services (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017). However, sharing by definition is geared towards the extension of ownership rather than transferral or compensation (Kennedy, 2016) and shows a dependency on the collective rather than the individual. The exercise and performance of sharing something that was formally yours, and extending ownership to another, is informed by cultural scripts and norms of behaviour and action (Swidler, 2001). Consequently, taking a practice approach to sharing captures informal cultures of sharing and provides an opportunity to assess how these cultures are impacted by the increasing commodification of social support and care services. Together with insights from institutional ethnography (Smith, 2006), sharing helps get closer to, and question, the relationship between sharing and commodity exchange in contemporary work and workplaces.

Methods

This article draws on data collected between 2012-2016 as part of a larger research study on solidarity amongst African diasporas in western Sydney. As part of this study, ethnographic participatory research was conducted as a participant and volunteer at an African women's cooperative shop in Parramatta for 1–2 days a week for an 8-month period, and participatory observation was also conducted at an Intercultural Exchange in the Hunter Valley, an informal rotating credit scheme, and at selected times, at the African Worker's Network meetings which were held in either Blacktown, Parramatta or Granville. These sites were chosen because they were imagined as projects that would be inclusive of a range of African migrant and refugee communities, had a strong welfare ethos and aimed to mitigate the risks associated with being outside the formal labour market.

The ethnographic study was complemented by semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 30 women, with 27 of the interviews being recorded and transcribed and three interviewees preferring not to be recorded. Participants lived in Sydney and came from Zimbabwe, Ghana, North and South Sudan, Rwanda, South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Congo, Somalia and Sierra Leon, and included five non-African service providers working with African communities in Sydney and who had long-standing relationships with many participants and worked in the larger, established service providers. Participants' ages ranged widely, and the majority had been in Australia for 5 or more years. Pseudonyms have been used unless otherwise indicated by participants.

Such a diversity of participants was reflective of the community spaces and purposely explored. Important experiential differences exist between groups of African migrants and refugees. However, commonplace assumptions about identity markers such as country of origin, nationality, ethnicity and language fail to capture the intricacies of lived experience across African communities in Australia. Working with such a large sample had implications for the reach of the study. While English was common as a 'lingua franca' at many of the larger African events, a lack of funding for interpreters impacted on access to the newly arrived or more isolated women who predominantly spoke languages other than English. As a result, ethnographic participatory observation became a crucial way to capture the practices and performances of work that took place outside verbal dialogue. Participatory ethnographic methods also became key to enacting a critical feminist research.

In this sense, sharing emerged as a practice and methodological framework. The sharing of stories, friendship and information between myself as 'researcher', and participants as 'researched' helped move beyond an ethnography that reports from the 'outside', as an 'outsider', on the 'cultural Other' (Alexander, 2003: 108). The work of sharing is the work of recognition. As one participant said:

> I have to find a way of breaking barriers of discrimination, of lack of trust because I have to . . . know them and know me. When you know someone, and they know you, you feel like a part of them. Now I can see you as Claire, you see me as Hope, the problem is not the colour between me and you.

However, critically engaged feminist research has an ethical responsibility to move beyond recognition and to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a lived domain (Madison, 2012). Sharing in this study was underpinned by a commitment to volunteer at events, engaging in everyday acts of reciprocity (such as helping women with homework or interpreting forms) and the collaborative drafting of a good practice guide for service providers working with African communities in Sydney.

It is through reciprocal research that the focus of the work became multi-sited and multi-scalar in the sense that it followed 'people, connections, associations and relationships across space' (Falzon, 2009: 1–2). A grounded theory approach was adopted to the analysis of ethnography, interviews and reciprocal research. It was through this process that informal and formal work emerged as a key theme. The community leaders, in particular, the stories of four women, Nadia, Assiya, Vanne and Hope are the focus of this article.

The Intangible and Tangible Work of Community

Community work is labour intensive and difficult to quantify (Collins et al., 2009). It takes place outside designated workplaces or work times and is often difficult to capture without permission to enter informal community spaces. I entered my first interview with Nadia, whose story began this article, with uncertainty as to whether we were meeting at her house or on the premises of the organisation that she helped found, Services of Mercy (SOM). I was led into the kitchen where Randa, one of Nadia's friends, who volunteered for SOM, was sitting at a sizeable dinner table, surrounded by piles of financial reports. I looked out through the kitchen window onto a large paved area where plastic tables and chairs lined a backyard fence. The fence was decorated with colourful painted images of groups of congregating men, women and children.

As Nadia later explained, it was a multi-purpose space reserved for an array of community events. On the weekend that had just passed, she had catered for 25 women from different African groups. She and another five women had prepared a barbeque while the rest listened to music, occasionally danced and then began work. The work involved the group sharing their experiences of trying to find employment in Australia. Experiences of refusal, dismissal and a lack of qualifications helped start a conversation about strategies to cope and succeed. Nadia was not alone in her understanding that the informal approach to sharing space, stories and food was key to connecting with newly arrived communities:

> I always call SOM a bridge between people and the other services. Sometimes governments think that people can go straight to the Migrant Resource Centres. No way in the world without existing services like our service where we go and get people from their own shells and introduce them to the services, because it will be extremely scary experience for them.

The metaphor of a bridge resonated with many accounts of initial arrival, where access to the larger state-funded centres happened through informal community work. The compounding factors of language, traumatic migration histories and a lack of knowledge of new systems made newly arrived women vulnerable to isolation and wary of larger services (Broadbent et al., 2007). Hope, a South Sudanese woman, remembered arriving at a house in disrepair. The school her children were enrolled in was asking for fees that she did not know she had to pay, and she had a minimal grasp of English. She was told to get legal help but got so lost on her way to the office that she never made it and never claimed back lost rent. It was only upon finding two other

Sudanese mothers in the area that she was introduced to the services of the local not-for-profit organisation, Anglicare.

Increasingly, resettlement countries foster integration and economic participation through the contracting of services to organisations such as Anglicare (Swing, 2017; Vromans et al., 2018). Top-down, short-term and competitive project funding limit the extent of their engagement. The work of engaging newly arrived women, and on their own terms, often defies the temporality of marketised service delivery and takes place at the level of community:

> We go to people at their level. We initiate things that they will understand. We create activities at their level of understanding and then we take them to the upper levels – if it is training or education we take it from there *after* we build the trust and friendship.

The opportunity to build trust is created through sharing space, support and hospitality. Sharing allows for new relationships to form – embedded within less formalised and instrumental processes of exchange. Despite the occasional protests from husbands, and while children were at school, home-spaces figured as sites of sharing. For example, rotating credit schemes would take place where women would share $50 every fortnight, pool the money and give it to one person to go back home, help fund a wedding or cover the costs of larger payments. The food, music and stories that were provided in these afternoons were not merely decorative flourishes, but affective, embodied and intangible work that allowed for resources to be circulated.

The interplay between intangible and tangible aspects of sharing gives rise to informal economies of support: the sharing of childcare for friends, haircuts and beauty regimes, the lending of money and the co-operatively organised importation and distribution of goods. These initiatives were supported by women like Nadia and required constant immersion in community. Nadia would check on newly arrived families, women facing violence at home and those who were socially isolated. Her community work was unpaid, involved night-time visits and blurred the boundaries between work and home life.

Nadia carefully detailed how much work was involved in making it all work:

> We are always on the run, night and day. For example, the leader's meetings, they want to meet after 6pm when they finish work. You cannot say to them, 'In the morning', you will not get the Sudanese leaders for example, so we meet Friday night, okay. The Anglican Church women leaders we meet on Saturday morning and the SOM management is coming Sunday at 4pm.

The unpaid work that Nadia recounts doing is complemented by the small amounts of project-based funding given to SOM. Nadia's account attests to the amount of unpaid work that is required to fill the gaps of this funding. In an environment where employment is difficult to obtain for migrant women (Abdelkerim and Grace, 2012), the routine, group-oriented activities that emerged functioned as an informal community of practice were women shared a concern with work and a passion about community, and tried to deepen their knowledge about life in Australia (Wenger, 2011). While a number of small Sudanese women's groups remained informal and irregular, a larger Kenyan-dominated group formalised, regularised and aimed to receive funding. Different levels of informal/formal processes across diverse communities resulted in differential access to public funds and public spaces. These differences had social and economic implications. Along the spectrum of informal/formal, these women's groups were performing much of the integrative functions of the state (Cooper, 2013; Singh, 2016).

The Work Involved in Being Paid

After I got up to leave and we all said a warm goodbye, Nadia and her friend Randa suggested that I come and visit again: 'We should also have you in our management committee, a new victim!' they shrieked, slapping their hands down laughing. 'Who talked about mercy? Services of Mercy? We have no mercy! Abuse 24/7!'

The abuse they laughed about was the sheer amount of work involved with trying to get paid for their labour. For many community leaders this payment did not come in the form of an individual employment contract but in project-based funding. During our interview Nadia said that she did her funding submissions around four o'clock in the morning, 'with 20 pages to fill here and 100 words here'; she was struggling to get funding for organisational costs and to fund her own position. She sighed:

> This is where it is a big challenge for us. So really, we don't know what the future is holding for us. As I said it is sad because the projects are getting bigger and then the people are there who need the services, but then the money allocations are not there. So how can we solve this quiz?

For these community organisers the quiz was how to stay accountable to the needs of communities while getting the time and space to apply for funding, grants or an ongoing employment contract. In order to receive funds for this work, informal groups must adopt particular organisational formations, each involving 'different levels of regulation associated with the contractual arrangements and how actors engage in negotiations' (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013: 5). Sharing is turned into work through an attempt to institutionalise the informal and quantify the intangible.

In the state of New South Wales, in which Sydney is located, informal community groups typically take one of two forms in order to receive funding. On the one hand, groups can enter an auspice agreement with a larger not-for-profit organisation who supports the group to apply for small scale grants of $10,000 or less, provides them with insurance protection and gives the group the benefit of expanded skills and infrastructure (Parramatta City Council, 2012). On the other hand, groups can register themselves as an incorporated organisation, apply for funding in their own right and raise funds through tax or charity endorsements. These processes of formalisation are attached to new forms of accountability and new individual expectations of employment and upward mobility.

However, from within the social worlds of women, the point at which informal, unpaid work becomes formal and potentially paid work is also unclear. Training sessions are run by local councils and large service providers, but the processes through which collectives can volunteer or receive grants to cover the costs of the event or gaining a short-term employment contract is confusing. For example, Assiya, a Somali migrant, organised a group where Somali women partner each other through pregnancy. In her interview she recalled that the group had suddenly changed when the local service provider became involved:

> It was only four women in the beginning but then twenty . . . as you go we were meeting loosely and doing our own thing and supporting each other on a voluntary basis and then we couldn't meet suddenly? I don't know whether it was the government or what changed? Suddenly they wanted you to have public insurance and you should be registered as a group to meet.

For Assiya the change in how small groups could meet in the spaces of local resettlement services was sudden, providing a unique insight into what Smith (2006: 31) termed the messy 'actualities' of institutional processes. While the relationship between informal, volunteer work and formal, paid work is taken as an actuality of work in the community sector, in practice, volunteer work is

often formalised without becoming paid work. Assiya's experience of having to formalise her volunteer work was understood through her prior experiences of community work in Kenya, where:

> You do what you want, you don't have to have this corporate body that has laws that you have got to have a public officer, that you got to fill in reports and all this. It is real hard work especially if you are doing it on a voluntary basis. It still is, but you got to do it, you can't survive. Everybody asks you 'Oh are you a registered organization?' And 'Are you a not-for profit?' 'Are you this?' For any five dollars that we ask for.

What this excerpt points to is that organisers not only have to provide an account of their organisational and work identities, they also have to learn to account for their practices in increasingly nuanced ways. Assiya comments on the increasing amount of work required to learn how to account for her community work:

> Oh my god, there is all of this . . . it is just the system that *does you in*. Which is too many forms, too many bureaucracy, too many. So we had to change our constitution for that and the reason being, okay you either had to be a welfare *or* a cultural organisation. Because we are both, which one of two do you want to be? Somali welfare and culture? Which one? Which one do you strongly? But we do both strongly. We want the culture to be there and we do a lot of welfare.

For Assiya the distinction between welfare and culture and work and non-work is an arbitrary one. Sharing time, space and information with one another is a culturally inflected practice of support. However, new rules regarding what types of community events can be funded require women to account for their activities in increasingly nuanced ways. In contrast to the informal care that the groups used to provide, formalised rules also have the effect of regulating who can share, what they are able to share, in what spaces and in what organisational forms. As Assiya reflects, learning how to translate the informal into formal takes work and overtime makes it easier to work with those 'who know the system'.

Instituting new processes of formalisation contributes to regularisation and habituation of new social practices and new expectations. Those who learn the language and norms of the system learn how to translate the intangible aspect of care and support into a language of inputs and outputs. Only some women have the language and prior experience to frame the informality of community events as 'work', and consequently, a critical role is played by the women who 'broker' between the formal and informal. They forge new communicative links and exchange different forms of valuation in order to mobilise resources. The next two sections will turn to look at the impact that brokering between more or less formalised forms of work has on an individual level and on the level of collective practices.

'Okay enough, I am empowered': The Impact of Unpaid Work

The account of Vanne, a Congolese refugee who had experience of running a Swahili women's group and in applying for funding for a specific mental health programme, highlights the discordant relationship between formalisation and paid work. Vanne worked closely with a large religious service provider in her local area to convey the specific needs of her Swahili women's group and get help in creating a mental health programme that would aim to address trauma. Vanne reflected that the funding submission was written in consultation with her, but when the larger service provider received the competitively tendered funds to oversee the programme, she was not given the opportunity to oversee the work or get paid. Vanne's reaction to remaining unpaid was that the services were getting 'profit from us' and stealing her idea. Voicing her frustration with the system, she stated 'OK, enough! I am empowered!', and then elaborated as follows:

> I have 20 or 30 certificates at home. Now I am tired to be a volunteer for 7 years. Now I can smell money. I studied, I get my degree, I get my certificates. I am already empowered, so I empower some people. Okay, I can be paid now. 'Cause I give a lot, so I want to receive now.

The discourses of empowerment that Vanne was exposed to in Australia meant little for her in practice. Despite being part of lengthy formalising processes, Vanne remained unrecognised in the form of paid work and unable to shape her professional life. Vanne became a reluctant volunteer. Her words convey the frustration of remaining unpaid despite being responsible for building the relationships that helped women disclose their trauma and initiate a community response. Without institutional recognition in the form of paid employment, Vanne was denied the right to construct a work identity. The emotional impact of this denial compounds the gendered and racialised barriers that she faced as a Congolese woman in Australia and within her Swahili women's group.

As a woman of Rwandan and Congolese heritage, Vanne faced significant stigma for being 'half-blood' and difficulty fostering trust because of the widely held belief that a man should be in her position, a struggle faced by many women (Muchoki, 2013). In the wider Australian public she experienced a lack of recognition, and she recalled going to local and state government meetings where politicians would be shocked to hear that a Congolese community existed in New South Wales. Despite these barriers, she also felt she had inherited the responsibility to share with others in her new home.

As Vanne's story attests, the movement between informal and formal is gendered. However, this movement is also mediated by interpersonal and institutional forms of discrimination that are based on her race, ethnicity and educational status. Community organisers without Australian qualifications or 'local' work experience face particular difficulties getting work (Abdelkerim and Grace, 2012). The impact of this institutional marginalisation is that organisers like Vanne experience cycles of disadvantage. However, reflections from community organisers, and service providers working in collaboration with them, also point to the ways that social and material resources continue to be mobilised despite moving on a continuum of informality.

Sharing: Making the Informal/Formal Work

In the last substantive section, I want to return to the introductory paragraph about Nadia, her house and the spare room that existed as an emergency shelter for women facing violence. The initial existence of the room, as well as Nadia's eventual decision to pause community access and rent it out for money, is an example of one of the many decisions that women make in their movement between informal and formal. The decision also tells us that the costs formally associated with 'public' service provision are being absorbed by communities and often at the cost of the most marginalised. For this reason, these decisions need to be situated in relation to a marketised funding structure that excludes small ethno-specific organisations or community groups from being paid for the work they do.

In concert with a push to rationalise and mainstream social service delivery, the infrastructure of support for migrant women increasingly relies on the existence of bedrooms such as Manar's – bedrooms that have always existed, but are increasingly left to provide a home for women in otherwise 'unhomely homes' (Gedalof, 2003: 107). Home spaces figure as sites of emotional and material labour – labour that is exacerbated by the entrance of risk, accountability and finance. Yet sharing remains a practice that helps collectivise risk and remain accountable to community needs. In this respect, home spaces also speak to the intangible, private and seemingly invisible ways in which communities continue to mobilise to mitigate the impact of precarious work environments.

It is with a tone of sceptical pragmatism that Nadia hinted at her faith in community as a site of action, resources and care. She reflected on the house: ‘it is just something I gave to SOM, it is my personal house’. Similarly, when I enquired about the language she needed to use to apply for grants she replied,

> To be honest with you Claire, I don’t really bother on these things. We have our own world. You know? Really . . . ’cause if we waited until they changed the jargon and the names . . . I say, I will be stupid if I have the clientele and I have the volunteers and I don’t use those resources. So we are not using funding as a restriction to our activities, although it is. But I rather spend on it personally and really use the resource of the volunteers and of the existing cliental, because today they are here and you don’t know where they are tomorrow.

This faith in community as a site of resources was echoed in everyday practices of sharing. To regularise the impact of irregular employment, the social and material costs of organising events were shared across a number of women in different houses. The location of events changed routinely so that the work could be shared and the use of home-spaces was a way to overcome the uncertainty of formal rules around meeting as a group. This allowed women to avoid the time and space pressures of competitive, project-based service delivery (Bailey and Madden, 2017) and work at a pace that, as one Kenyan organiser suggested, was ‘just like the village’. Comfort and trust accrued through sheltering these spaces from competing institutional pressures. Nevertheless, there were also many instances where organisers helped one another strategically align with institutional rules and regulations.

For larger events, those in paid roles with larger service providers used the information regarding insurance and photo consent forms to ensure proper procedure was followed. Despite the pressure of competing for grants, there were many instances where sharing as a collective ethic prevailed across ethnic, linguistic and religious lines. For example, one community development worker noted how communities shared information about the process of incorporating an organisation:

> The Tamil community will invite the Somali to come, it might not be the whole community but it would be like four or five people coming along to their event, they are learning more, they are making friendships and seeing how they support their communities and say ‘Oh maybe we should try that as well’.

Similarly, another council development worker noted that the cost associated with gaining a space to work is ‘ridiculous if you are a volunteer or community group’ but that often groups will work with each other to ensure that everyone has some access: ‘You are not incorporated? . . . okay . . . we will book it for you and our members will come anyway and share that.’

Attention to the practices of those women working within and through settlement services reveals how staff and volunteers help one another move between informal and formalised roles, responsibilities and practices by sharing tangible and intangible resources. These acts of sharing help women to collectively negotiate access to more or less institutionally embedded resources. At times, local churches were called on to help with packages for newly arrived communities, and as local businesses became more familiar they were called on to give donations or sponsorship. Consequently, sharing acts as what Martin (2012) suggests is a collective institutional buffer that shields these women from the sharp edges of formalisation and monetarisation. From informal to formal and back again, sharing is indicative of an ‘institutional bricolage’ of resources, where communities use ‘whatever is at hand’ to continue to provide social services despite insecure work (Cornwall, 2004: 2).

Conclusion: What Can We Learn From the Lived Experience of Precarity?

What is presented in this article is a necessarily fragmented insight into the lives of four community organisers struggling to provide support for their communities while trying to earn a living. 'Sharing', like 'community', is a term that is always shorthand for far more complex, multidimensional and potentially antagonistic relationships. In relation to work, who, where and how communities share sheds light on the lived impact of precarious work on a marginalised community of workers and their corresponding efforts to mitigate the risks associated with this work. With a lack of opportunity for upward mobility and restricted access to paid work, these organisers move through more or less formalised spaces in a way that cannot be captured if we focus solely on the individual employment contract. This horizontal mobility goes hand in hand with the invisibilising of the tangible and intangible work that is done beyond the purview of the traditional workplace. There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from attention to the lived experience of gendered precarity.

First, we need to account for the intangible. It is the intangible acts of sharing of information, support and space between women that constitutes the everyday and often unrecognised community sector work. The forced movement between formal and informal, paid and unpaid compounds the affective labour that this work involves. To view work on a continuum of informality helps draw out the labour involved in community work but also the productive points of ambiguity. We can conceptualise this ambiguity as a result of community work's position between the 'sphere of market-based capital accumulation (the commodity economy)' and 'that of non-market based social reproduction (the unpaid care economy)' (Razavi, 2007: 8). In their everyday lives, workers broker between both economies, observing new language, norms and practices to share with their communities. It is within these micro practices that the tensions of gendered work can be observed.

Second, the stories of Nadia, Vanne, Assiya and Hope suggest that those who broker between community accountability and institutional norms of accountability shoulder much of the integrative work of the welfare state. Their subjective experiences of precarity need to be situated in relation to the objective face of neoliberal welfare provision, in particular, a funding structure that relies on the work that migrant women do to engage newly arrived communities while excluding them from recurrent, paid employment. This exclusion has the effect of marginalising an already marginalised community of women and exoses an exploitative relationship between state, nonprofit and private organisations and community groups.

Third, on a methodological level, an ethnographic approach to work helps expose how institutions of work are not given but instituted over time (Ahmed, 2012). Formalised institutional pressures map onto individual and collective relationships in ways that are often ambiguous and contradictory. Mapping this ambiguity has implications for how we understand mobilisation and resistance. The collective pooling of resources draws attention to the fact that the codification of new institutional rules and responsibilities of formal work is not deterministic and, as Hay (2016) suggests, there is always space for contingency, ambiguity, contestation and antagonism in the production of norms and conventions.

While individuals struggle for the individual recognition that comes with paid work, it is also through collective brokerage with these institutions that they are able to reinscribe a faith in community as a site of social action, resources and change. The continued emphasis on sharing with one another has implications for solidarity across communities. Sharing helps to mitigate the impact of insecure work and ensures that informal community spaces remain productive sites of comfort, connection and engagement. In these spaces, communities of practice form that are not necessarily prefigured or inherited through shared ethnic or national backgrounds, but are *produced* through everyday social practices that help mitigate the risks of labour market marginalisation.

Finally, a practice approach to precarious work within migrant communities sheds light on the importance of work as a site of belonging and recognition. In an environment where precarity and informality are the norm, unpacking the dichotomy of informal/formal places into question the assumed neutrality of public spaces, public services and processes of public accountability and draws attention to the exclusionary effect of public institutions of work and social service provision. Understanding the lived experience of existing on the continuum between informal and formal can contribute to further theorisation of the communities of practice that are produced in and though work. To understand the contemporary manifestations of exploitation and corresponding spaces of mobilisation amongst migrant workers, scholars must also move beyond the traditional workplace and traditional forms of organisation to the everyday and emergent ways in which marginalised communities struggle in the face of precarity.

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