Work Experiences of Women Survivors: Insights From the Capabilities Approach

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Abstract
The study presented in this article applied the capabilities approach to the experiences of low-income women survivors of gender-based violence, who worked in the formal and informal economies. Nine women were interviewed about their work histories, alternative resource-generating strategies, the advantages and disadvantages of different types of work, and the impact of gender-based violence on their work lives. The authors vetted these experiences through the lens of Nussbaum’s 10 human-functioning capabilities and found that 9 of the 10 capabilities were salient in the lives of these women. Implications for social welfare policy and practice with low-income women survivors are offered.

Keywords
capabilities, poverty, gender-based violence, women, work

The capabilities approach is a social justice framework that is based on the idea that all human beings are entitled to realize their full human functioning and potential to flourish. According to this approach, it is the government’s responsibility to create social conditions that allow people to develop these capabilities. These ideas were first advanced by Sen (1999) and further elaborated, particularly in the context of impoverished women’s lives, by Nussbaum (2001). In the social work literature, there has been some beginning theoretical discussion about the potential usefulness of the capabilities approach to address social problems (Morris, 2002; Pyles, 2008). However, no known empirical study has applied this approach to assess its merit for women survivors of violence. To fill in this gap, this article applies the capabilities approach to the experiences of low-income women survivors of gender-based violence, who have worked in both the formal and informal economies.

A group of nine women were interviewed about their formal work histories, their alternative resource-generating strategies, the advantages and shortcomings of different types of work, and the impact of gender-based violence on their work lives. The women were not asked about their capabilities, but after exploring their experiences with regard to the aforementioned topics, we applied, in a

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post hoc manner, the capabilities approach to understand what insights it may offer. In particular, we asked, What capabilities influenced the women’s life experiences, and how did these capabilities affect the women’s life and work experiences? This effort enabled us to develop preliminary implications for policy and programs for social workers that can improve the life chances of women like the ones studied here.

Background

The Capabilities Approach

The capabilities approach focuses on what people are able to do and to be. It can be contrasted to other social justice theories that are premised on utilitarian or Rawlsian approaches to economic and social welfare. The latter approaches view maximizing happiness for the majority, or getting fair access to a basket of primary goods, as a litmus test of human well-being. Although Rawls’s (2001) theory of justice is complex, one component of it requires all able-bodied adults to work in a free market economy to gain access to distributive justice. It is not always possible for low-income women to work and earn a living wage, however. Consequently, some women access welfare benefits to survive. To refer to such welfare recipients as “surfers” (Rawls, 2001) who need to fend for themselves and not to be eligible for welfare assistance is not an acceptable stance from Rawls, who is considered to be the most prominent social justice theorist of the 20th century (Banerjee, 2005). Both Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2001) criticized utilitarian and Rawlsian theories of justice and suggested that the capabilities approach is superior to these two approaches because it assesses social justice not through fuzzy notions of happiness or concrete indices of economic well-being, but through the actual lived experiences of people in terms of what they are capable of being and doing.

To be able to explore this issue in depth, first we need to discuss Nussbaum’s (2001) list of 10 central capabilities of human functioning as an alternative litmus test of human well-being. In this approach, humans are free to pursue or not to pursue these capabilities as functionings. The 10 central human-functioning capabilities are (a) life (to live life without dying prematurely); (b) bodily health (to have good health, nutrition, and shelter); (c) bodily integrity (to have freedom of movement and freedom from assault, including sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, and domestic violence); (d) senses, imagination, and thought (to have adequate education and the ability to express one’s imagination, to have the ability to search for the ultimate meaning of life in one’s own way, and to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid unnecessary pain); (e) emotions (to experience a full range of human emotions and to avoid one’s emotional development from being thwarted by fear and anxiety owing to abuse or trauma); (f) practical reason (to engage in critical reflection of one’s life and to be able to plan for a life that is based on meaningful choices); (g) affiliation (to engage in various forms of social interaction, including having relationships with other workers, and to be free from discrimination and humiliation); (h) other species (to live in relationship to the world of nature); (i) play (to play and enjoy recreation); and (j) control over one’s environment (to participate in political choices and have political rights, to have property rights, and to have the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others). If a person falls below a threshold or a minimal level of capability in any of these core areas, then, according to Nussbaum (2001, p. 74), society, “has not enabled [that person] to live in a truly human way.”

A review of Nussbaum’s list of capabilities shows that these capabilities are interrelated and “support one another and [that] an impediment to one impedes others” (2001, p. 290). Nussbaum identified two capabilities—practical reason and affiliation—as central because they pervade all other capabilities. For example, she noted that a woman’s ability to work and earn a living is affected by her ability to think critically and to choose work that is meaningful to her (practical reason) and...
her ability to relate to others at work in a mutually respectful manner (affiliation). Although Nussbaum recognized the importance of income in dignified living, she identified only “the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others” (2001, p. 80) as a subcategory of a core capability “control over one’s environment.” In other words, she did not identify the ability to work as a core capability. Like Sen (1999), Nussbaum contended that the freedom to develop a full range of capabilities is more important than focusing only on those capabilities that enhance economic well-being. This critique is further developed in the Discussion section.

Nussbaum (2001) noted that many people adapt their desires, goals, and behaviors because of their social situations and habits. This idea is known in economics as adaptive preferences. Thus, impoverished women may undervalue their basic human capabilities or prefer not to focus on or develop their capabilities because of social habituation and social pressure. Nussbaum argued that it is necessary to look beyond cultural norms because there is “something wrong with not seeing oneself in a certain way, as a bearer of rights and a citizen whose dignity and worth are equal to that of others” (p. 113).

Low-Income Women and Work

There is a large body of research on the types of employment, work barriers, and outcomes for low-income women who live in poverty and/or receive welfare. Some studies have noted that the outcomes of welfare programs reveal that women end up in poverty-level jobs without benefits or opportunities for advancement (Cancian & Meyer, 2000). However, little research has been conducted on the job satisfaction of low-income women. Scott (2006) studied 514 women who left welfare and found evidence that wages, work hours, professional status, having employer-sponsored health care, and being in good health had positive effects on the leavers’ job satisfaction.

Some women who have multiple barriers to formal employment may adapt their preferences by earning income in the informal economy. Edin and Lein (1997) studied 379 single mothers to determine how they survived poverty. They discovered a variety of ways in which women get by, identifying three basic strategies: work in the formal, informal, or underground economy; cash assistance from absent fathers, boyfriends, relatives, and friends; and cash assistance and help from agencies, community groups, or charities. Pyles’s (2006) study of low-income women revealed that engaging in some types of informal economic activity was associated with experiences of gender-based violence and resulted in reduced levels of economic well-being.

Work Experiences of Low-Income Women Survivors of Violence. Gender-based violence is emotional, physical, or sexual violence, which is perpetrated against women by intimates or strangers as a function of their vulnerable social status as women. Research has indicated that gender-based violence can be a barrier to work for low-income women. Pearson, Theonnes, and Griswold (1999) found that 44% of victims of domestic violence had abusive ex-partners who prevented them from working. Interference tactics may include sabotage, stalking, and on-the-job harassment, which can affect the women’s productivity, absenteeism, and/or job retention (Swanberg & Macke, 2006).

One key policy remedy for addressing violence against low-income women is the Family Violence Option (FVO) of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which allows for exemptions from work requirements if individuals experience domestic violence and consequently are unable to work. The focus is on helping individuals address the violence through safety measures and to move toward economic self-sufficiency. Some scholars have argued that low-income survivors of violence need a comprehensive package of services that address a range of needs that are much beyond their immediate safety needs (Purvin, 2007).

Nussbaum (2001) and Pyles (2008) have argued that the capabilities approach is useful for addressing violence against women as an economic justice issue. Although it is known that
gender-based violence affects work, not enough is known about the multiple dimensions of such women’s work, the complex ways in which work and violence affect these women’s lives, and the role of capabilities in this interplay. By applying the capabilities approach to these women’s experiences, we hoped to gain insights into the role of capabilities in their lives.

**Method**

The study presented here originated from a larger mixed-methods study with individuals in one U.S. state, which investigated women’s histories of surviving abuse and violence (Postmus & Severson, 2005). The research passed the university human subjects review. Nine women from the larger study were the sample for the study discussed in this article. After obtaining their informed consent, we used open-ended questions and probes to understand their experiences with work, gender-based violence, and resource-generating strategies in the formal and informal sectors. The interviews ranged from 45 min to 1 hr, 40 min, and were audiotaped and transcribed. The major research question of the initial qualitative study was, What is the relationship between gender-based violence and the formal and informal economies? In this iteration, we refined the inquiry to learn which capabilities influenced the women’s life and work experiences.

**Sample**

Recruitment for the quantitative portion of the mixed-methods study ($n = 423$) was targeted to women in the community ($n = 109$), at domestic violence/sexual assault programs ($n = 157$), and at a state prison ($n = 157$) through fliers and word of mouth. The women who participated in the study had completed the quantitative interview and were recruited on the basis of having reported some experience with violence and/or the informal economy. Because of the limited availability of resources, the first nine women who met this criterion were the sample for the study. Of the nine women, five were incarcerated at the time of the interviews and four were living in the community. The women were assigned pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality. Of the 9 women aged 19–60, 5 identified as white, 1 identified as black or African American, 1 identified as Latina, and 2 identified as biracial. Six women did not have a high-school diploma. The women’s work histories ranged from 3 to 45 years.

**Data Analysis**

The study drew on qualitative data analysis techniques discussed by Creswell (2003). The data were coded using the qualitative software, Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing (NUD*IST). These codes, or chunks of minimal units of meaning, were then condensed into manageable categories; inductive reasoning was used to determine the emergent themes. In addition, the first author consulted another researcher to achieve a degree of interrater reliability. This consultant reviewed the themes and found them to be sound, asking for clarification on only a few definitions of themes.

**The Women and Their Contexts**

Because this article focuses on the work experiences of women survivors of violence and their capabilities, we briefly summarize the larger context of these women’s lives as revealed in the interviews. We believe that this contextual background sheds light on the overall story of their lives. All the women were currently (or had been in the past) coping with a variety of situations that are often associated with women’s poverty and lack of capabilities. These situations included various combinations of gender-based violence, substance abuse, mental health conditions, health concerns,
homelessness, and criminal activity. The women discussed other experiences that affected their lives, such as untimely deaths in their families, childhood abuse that continued to affect them, conflict in their families of origin, and caretaking responsibilities of family members and children. They identified how having children at a young age sometimes interrupted their efforts to obtain an education.

Findings

Gender-Based Violence

Because women’s full human functioning is the central concern of the capabilities approach, we describe here the participants’ experiences with a central issue in their lives, which affected their functioning, namely, gender-based violence. All nine women had experienced some form of violence from intimate partners—husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends, and dates. None of the women reported being in an abusive relationship at the time of her interview. The women experienced multiple types of abuse and reported a range of strategies that their partners used to control them. They also used a variety of strategies to survive in their abusive relationships. Because economics and the work lives of women survivors of violence is the focus of this article, we report the ways in which their partners directly and indirectly tried to control them economically. These methods included general control, such as controlling the money in the relationship or making the women ask for an allowance; refusing to work, forcing the women to work in the formal or informal economy or to get resources, such as welfare, to support them; or directly or indirectly interfering with the women’s attempts to work and get an education and training.

A common theme among the women’s stories was that their partners would sabotage their work or educational efforts by harassing the women at their work sites, calling or showing up constantly. Sandy summarized her situation this way:

He would call my work to make sure I was there . . . I got fired at three different jobs because of him; . . . he would repeatedly call or he’d come to the store and be there for hours and hours on end. [He would be] loud and rude in front of customers. . . . And just on and on until it wasn’t good for the business. . . . So they would get rid of me.

The women believed that their working aroused their partners’ insecurities. Lorraine said, “He’d come out to my job and mark my tires to see if I had left.” Karen stated “He didn’t want me working much. . . . I think the main thing was that he was afraid I was going to find somebody else and leave him. . . . Any job I was at he’d usually harass me. Even after we were separated, he harassed me.”

Sandy noted that after she was fired from her jobs in the formal sector, her abusive partner tried to sabotage her efforts at informal economic activities as well. When asked if there were other ways, besides jobs in the formal sector, that she tried to get money or resources, she replied “No, he wouldn’t let me. I tried having a garage sale to try to get rid of things we’d collected over the years. . . . I didn’t have any extra money to do anything.”

The women discussed how their partners would sometimes stand in the way of their educational efforts. Sandy wanted to work on getting her General Education Diploma (GED), but her partner prevented her from doing so, partly because he controlled the only vehicle they owned. When she finally got to the point where she was ready to take the test, he reluctantly agreed to let her do it, but at the last minute, he took off in their only vehicle on the day of the test. Cheryl’s partner used to make her feel guilty for going to school, citing that it was too expensive or took time away from her familial responsibilities. She recalled, “I could be at home studying, and he’d [say], ‘Right now I need this’ or ‘why isn’t dinner cooked’? Or, ‘you need to watch the kids.’ . . . I had to eventually quit because it was just too much pressure.”
The Formal Economy

All the women had a significant amount of work experience in formal jobs. Because women’s economic lives were central to this study, we describe the range of formal work experiences that these women had, followed by an explanation of the benefits and disadvantages of the formal economy as the women identified them.

Types of jobs. All the women had worked in some sort of human service or helping job. In addition, they had worked in other fields, such as customer service, military, secretarial, bookkeeping, computer technical support, retail, factory work, and food service. It should be noted that many of the women stated that when they were younger, they wanted to get married and have children and wanted a career in a medical or other helping field. In addition, when asked about their future goals, several of them reported wanting to get into helping professions, such as nursing, teaching, and social work.

Benefits. There were many benefits that came with having a formal job. These benefits included a strong feeling of self-worth, appreciation of responsibilities and respect, satisfaction from caretaking activities, gratification with connections and friendships, enhanced technical knowledge and skills, and pay and benefits packages. Ruth enjoyed having her own desk, computer, and phone. She felt like she was, “actually becoming somebody.” Some of the women identified the importance of being given responsibilities in a job and getting respect from their coworkers. Mary said, “I saw that my coworkers respected me. . . . When I used to work, I felt good about myself. And I want to be responsible and self-sufficient again.”

Taking care of others is a value, and the satisfaction provided a critical benefit for many of the women. Ruth noted, “I took care of six ladies, and they are my heart and I miss them.” Sandy worked as a nurse’s assistant and remarked “It was fulfilling to see the patients being taken care of right and making sure my job was done correctly and then getting them up in the morning and seeing them smile.” Lorraine said that taking care of the children at her job “filled a void.”

The personal ties and friendships that the women developed in their jobs were of great benefit to them. Jenny, who was coping with depression and other mental health issues, identified getting a part-time job as beneficial because it “got me out of the house.” Ruth described working at a department store in a small town “It was a really small-knit family that worked in that store. . . . it reminded me of home where everybody is family.” Mary told a similar story “We had fun together, not only in the office, but outside. We did things together; we had picnics, we had boat rides. We had different parties for different occasions. . . . Yeah, I enjoyed it.”

Many of the women reported that they appreciated learning new skills in their jobs and gaining knowledge about technical aspects of their jobs. Mary said that her work at a cable company was “interesting; being on that radio, learning about different kinds of computers, I learned a lot about the boxes . . . the installation.” Sandy appreciated learning about accounting and a computer system and sharing that knowledge with others in the company.

A couple of the women reported that their jobs paid well and provided good benefits, which they found helpful to their lives. Mary said that at her job, “they had excellent benefits for us. . . . They had a 401(k) program; we had good health insurance, for our kids, our families. They took care of us very well.” Cheryl was working for a financial institution and started making “really, really good money. And, promoted into supervisory. . . . I was working a lot of overtime.”

Disadvantages. Most of the women identified some negative aspects of the formal economy, including problems with their own triggers and boundaries in helping professions, poor pay, and the lack of benefits. Lorraine’s experience was not uncommon:
The fact is that I brought it home. That was very hard on me. . . . My first day there I had an 11-year-old girl. She was on a suicide watch, and she was hanging from her curtain. That’ll affect me for the rest of my life. . . . I’ve seen children that have been severely molested. . . . That’s traumatized me. . . . And those kids are how I grew up. I grew up in an emotionally, verbally, and physically abusive home.

Several women stated that their formal jobs did not provide benefits or enough money to “make ends meet.” A couple of the women described their financial situations while working in the formal sector as a “struggle.” Some of the women did not identify low wages as a problem because their partners (some of whom were abusive) were making enough money at the time to support them. Others talked about having to get a second job, while still others turned to informal economic activities to supplement their incomes.

**The Informal Economy**

There are four categories of experiences in the informal economy: legal activities, illegal activities, benefits of the informal economy, and negative aspects of the informal economy. The most common type of legal informal activity in which the women engaged was selling things or providing a service. In addition, the women said that they received money from family members in addition to money from the men in their lives. Finally, two of the women started their own small businesses.

**Legal activities.** Stephanie and Jenny both reported selling plasma to get money. Stephanie also reported selling things at a pawnshop, such as “games, radios, clothes, whatever.” Cheryl and her husband sold cleaning products from their home. Her husband worked for a chemical company and could get the products at a reduced cost. They would sell industrial-size dishwashing liquid, for example, to people that would come by or phone their house. Jenny provided housecleaning services twice a week for a short time. Stephanie did housecleaning and child care for a woman she knew. Both Stephanie and Karen regularly asked their parents for money; Ruth relied on her grandparents, and Mary relied on her partners for money.

Cheryl started doing taxes seasonally for her family and friends. One of her clients turned out to be a man who had a construction business as a front for a major drug-dealing operation. She eventually stopped her legal business and worked for him exclusively; he also became her intimate partner. Twila had a small business for several years that provided in-home care to older adults, hiring 8–12 employees at a time to do this work.

**Illegal activities.** The women used several kinds of illegal resource-generating strategies, including stealing, selling drugs, selling sex, passing bad checks, and selling food stamps. Illegal informal economic activities were reported by all but two women. Ruth and Mary, both of whom self-identified as having addictions, stole things from people or stores. Mary described a practice called “boosting,” whereby she would take something from a store for a drug dealer and would get half its retail value from the dealer in drugs.

Ruth, Mary, Lorraine, and Cheryl all participated in selling drugs and sometimes did so while working a job in the formal sector and sometimes as a sole resource-generating strategy. Ruth sold drugs while working at another job “just to have extra. Because now I have a kid, and I want him to have everything I didn’t have.” Cheryl handled the money for her boyfriend, who was a drug dealer, while maintaining some of the legitimate accounts in her small business. She said, “I never saw any drugs, but I know he was bringing me suitcases of money.”

Jenny, Mary, and Twila reported having sold sex as a way to make money. Struggling with addiction and mental health issues, Twila found herself living on the street and in homeless shelters. Mary’s situation was similar to Twila’s in that she was dealing with addiction and homelessness.
Jenny was struggling financially and dealing with mental health issues that she attributed to a rape, but she was not dealing with substance abuse issues when she sold sex.

Several of the women talked about making money or getting drugs by writing bad checks through their own accounts, through checks that they stole, or through fraudulent accounts that they set up themselves. Ruth said that she gave her food stamp benefits to the “dope person” for crack. Mary described a scheme that she discovered to get extra money from social security. Other women described making money in other ways while collecting money from welfare and not reporting the income to welfare.

Benefits. The major benefit of the informal economy for all the women was the money that could be made. For some women, the money was useful for paying bills and paying for things that their children needed. A couple of women did not necessarily need the income, but it helped them to afford “extras.” For some women, particularly the ones engaging in illegal activities, the money that was made paid all the household bills and provided the women and their families with comfortable lifestyles. These women talked about having large sums of money and what it meant for their lifestyles. Cheryl said that getting “cash in hand” from doing taxes “always came at a time when we really needed the money. It was right after Christmas; we’d have Christmas bills to pay.”

Several of the women talked about the sense of dignity, accomplishment, and power that they felt from their informal work. Lorraine identified her feeling of power as a female drug dealer “I was on top of the world. . . . There were very few men in my town that could do what I could do because I was good at what I did.” Twila felt a sense of satisfaction in her small business, wanting to give her clients the best care possible. Sandy worked on the side doing data entry and accounting for a local company. She took pride in learning how to do a new computer system and saving the company money because of her new skills. She said it was “not really a control thing, but it was nice to be able to say, ‘Look, you can’t do this.’”

Disadvantages. Some women reported generally feeling bad about what they were doing. The women who were engaging in illegal activities worried about getting caught. Several reported that there was little money involved. Those who were making lots of money thought that the resource-generating strategy itself was “addictive.” Although Lorraine did not like the repetition of selling drugs because “it got old,” Stephanie did not like selling plasma because it was not something she liked to do “They’re poking me and taking stuff out. It’s a little scary.”

The boundaries between work and regular life were often blurred for these women. Cheryl said that selling cleaning supplies from her home “was a hassle. . . . People would call and say ‘Can you get me?’ and ‘Would you get me?’ . . . They were wanting extra or something for less. I didn’t like it at all. It was a hassle.” Similarly, regarding drug dealing, Ruth did not like “people knocking on the door at three in the morning.” The women who were doing informal work related to drugs believed that the work contributed to their drug problem. Mary said that she was “able to use as much as [she] wanted.” Ruth sold drugs for some time before she tried them. Once she tried them, she believed that selling them was an avenue to her full-fledged addiction.

Discussion

A qualitative study with a small sample that may not represent other women survivors of violence has limitations in terms of transferability. To address this problem, we have provided thick descriptions of these women’s lives to indicate to whom, where, and how the findings may apply. Our findings related to the life and work experiences of these women survivors of violence also resonate with those of other studies (Pearson et al., 1999; Swanberg & Macke, 2006). As such, they have created a space to explore how the capabilities approach may serve as a lens to understand the role of the
10 capabilities on Nussbaum’s list (2001) on these nine women’s life experiences with work and violence. Through this effort, this article contributes to the social work knowledge base about the role of capabilities in enhancing or impeding the lives of poor women who are survivors of violence.

A brief comparison of the participants’ work experiences in the formal and informal sectors shows that there are more similarities than differences. Irrespective of sector, the women engaged in low-skill and paraprofessional work that did not require much advanced education or experience, in keeping with their own backgrounds. Moreover, the benefits from work in both sectors were strikingly similar: a sense of dignity, self-worth, accomplishment, power, and income. The disadvantages of work in both sectors also appeared to be more similar than different: boundary issues and inadequate income. The differences were that in the informal sector, the women did not experience as much of a sense of friendship and connection with their coworkers and clients as they did in the formal sector. In addition, the women who engaged in illegal activities were afraid of getting caught and feeding their addictions, which did not occur in the formal sector. Last, regardless of sector, work was important to the women. Income from work, whether formal, informal, or blended, was critical for these women and their families to live and survive.

By applying the capabilities approach to these women’s life experiences, in general, and work experiences, in particular, we note that 9 of the 10 capabilities on Nussbaum’s list, with the exception of other species, affected the women in the study. Table 1 shows that three capabilities had a negative impact on the women’s lives—life, bodily health, and bodily integrity—whereas the other six capabilities had mixed effects. These women had suffered various degradations, such as hunger and homelessness (bodily health). As they recognized later, early pregnancy and abusive partners had affected their educational advancement, which, in turn, had limited their work skills and work-sector choices at various times in their lives (practical reason; bodily integrity; and senses, imagination, and thought). Experiences of untimely deaths in their families, as well as conflicts in their families of origin and abusive relationships, had affected their emotional well-being (life, affiliation, and emotions).

Gender-based violence—childhood abuse, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence—clearly influenced the women’s ability to work (bodily integrity and control over the material environment). Physical, emotional, and mental abuse at various stages in their lives had strongly affected the women’s experiences, sometimes leading to adaptive preferences, such as early pregnancy, substance abuse, and criminal activities to make a living (bodily integrity and bodily health). Such traumas had blighted their emotional health, as was observed in the women’s mental health and substance abuse problems (emotions). It can be argued that the women who abused drugs and alcohol found temporary relief from emotional pain by engaging in them and treating them as distorted recreational activities (play).

As Nussbaum (2001) discussed, we also noticed that practical reason and affiliation played a central role in the women’s work experiences. The women’s understanding of their past, present, and future choices determined their work sectors: sometimes formal, sometimes informal, and at other times a blurring of the two (practical reason and control over the material environment). Despite their many hardships and their lack of positive capabilities in various domains already identified, the women still retained their ability to connect with others at work (affiliation). They gained a lot of satisfaction by working for others and with others.

Simultaneously, a diminished capability of bodily integrity appears to have had a significant negative impact on the women’s emotional and work lives. The experiences of abuse and violence affected the women’s ability to work in the formal labor sector. Early experiences with childhood sexual abuse and current substance abuse also influenced their participation in the less stable informal economy. In addition, of course, the incarceration of five women during the time of data collection clearly impeded their freedom to work for a living (bodily integrity, practical reason, and control over the material environment).
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<td>9. Play</td>
<td>Substance abuse as unhealthy adaptive play</td>
<td>Fun at work and with coworkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Control over one’s environment</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Political</td>
<td>Do not own property, rent</td>
<td>Formal, informal, and blended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Material</td>
<td>Limited job skills</td>
<td>Unsteady jobs, income, and benefits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The women discussed issues with personal boundaries and their work lives (affiliation, control over the material environment, emotions, and practical reasoning). Many women had problems being able to separate their personal issues from the people they were working with in the helping professions. Experiences with childhood and adult violence, as well as substance abuse, influenced their ability to maintain boundaries. Essentially, the women’s emotional development had been blighted by traumatic events in their lives, thus affecting their ability to work in such professions. Although the empathic connection that the women felt with their clients is certainly a virtue in the helping professions, being able to maintain a professional distance is also necessary.

Affiliation was a significant capability among the women. The women gained important benefits from their work in both labor sectors, including empowerment, self-esteem, a sense of responsibility, and social connections. Work environments seemed to have had the potential to be places of positive social support for them. It seems probable that the women experienced a sense of respect and self-worth by working in the formal economy that they did not get at home or in their personal lives. Similarly, for the informal economy, some of the women reported a sense of personal power and felt that they were important to others.

Some of the women are able to actualize the capability of affiliation through their caretaking work, such as nursing and child care, affirming their compassion for others in need. At some level, this is a promising finding, and one may argue that the women were able to achieve a basic threshold regarding the capability of affiliation. The social basis for this capability appeared to be in place by virtue of the caretaking roles that women play generally in society. However, to be sure, these jobs do not provide women with adequate pay and benefits and thus do not offer a basic threshold for living (bodily health).

Given the finding that 9 of the 10 capabilities affected these low-income women’s ability to work and lead a dignified life, it is disappointing that Nussbaum (2001) assigned such a low priority to work and income. It appears that the mere “right to seek employment on an equal basis with others” (p. 80), when these women are unable to keep such work going because of experiences of gender-based violence or when such work does not pay a living wage in some cases is not adequate to help low-income women overcome the barriers to work that are posed by the various deprivations of capabilities that the women experience and to get out of violent relationships. Independent and adequate income from some source of work is critical for their survival and for freedom from experiencing personal violence. In addition, the women in our study clearly derived a sense of self-worth and dignity from working in either the formal or informal sector. Thus, this preliminary study suggests that the capability to work and to earn a living wage deserves a central focus on Nussbaum’s list of core capabilities. Future research with a larger sample and with women of various backgrounds could allow us to justify this claim.

Because of the pervasive influence of the capabilities on Nussbaum’s (2001) list, we agree that Nussbaum’s 10 core capabilities provide a litmus test by which to measure these women’s and others’ functioning in a just society. This study has shown that many of these women are not able to do and be who they choose to be: a helping professional, such as a nurse, social worker, or a teacher with a stable family. Instead, the women adapt their life choices to suit life circumstances with little assistance from society. If social workers were to adopt the capabilities framework, it would provide a useful tool for understanding the intricacies of the lives of women with the experience of gender-based violence, who are trying to make ends meet and would make planning for policies, programs, and practices more effective.

Social welfare policies and programs could address some of the problems that the women in the study faced by genuinely helping similar women to obtain stable, living-wage jobs in the formal or informal sector that are based on meaningful personal choices that simultaneously allow them to be safe. This outcome has not and cannot be achieved with current work-first or strict time-limit approaches mandated by TANF or with the limited remedies for survivors offered by the FVO. The efficacy of the FVO has been discussed by many researchers (Postmus, 2002; Raphael & Haennicke,
1999), but no one has critiqued it from a capabilities perspective. Although the FVO has been a promising policy, it does not provide an adequate grounding for the “social bases” of the capabilities of women survivors of violence. It not only is merely an “option” for states to adopt, but the degree to which states have implemented the policy is highly questionable. Many women who receive welfare have reported that they do not even know about the option (Postmus, 2002). Recent welfare policies as a result of the Deficit Reduction Act (2005) that require stricter work requirements may put women in further harm’s way. Other policy avenues, such as the Violence Against Women Act and the Victims of Crime Act, may provide critical outlets for addressing the capabilities of bodily integrity and bodily health. Bills introduced in the 2007 Congress, called the Survivors’ Empowerment and Economic Security Act (Senate) and the Security and Financial Empowerment Act (House), were promising proposals, but neither became law. Nonetheless, such policies offer provisions only for women who experienced the violence recently. This study suggests that women who experienced violence earlier in life need this option as well.

To address gaps in policies, we concur with Nussbaum (2001) that education is important to help women lead a dignified life. Only by obtaining more focused vocational or higher education could the pursuit of work in professions, particularly helping professions, actually pay off for women in terms of their economic well-being. Although one must be aware of the problems that are associated with perpetuating the roles of women as caretakers, it is important to heed the voices of the women when they articulated what kinds of work activities gave them satisfaction. It seems reasonable that caseworkers who connect women with employment need to consider that women’s choices related to jobs facilitate the actualization of the capabilities of affiliation and of senses, imagination, and thought.

In addition to education, women also need access to such services as child care, health care, safety planning, treatments for mental illness and substance abuse, and housing to ensure that capabilities such as bodily integrity and emotions can flourish. With regard to economic advancement, microenterprise programs could provide assistance with formalizing and increasing the profit margins of current or past informal economic activities of women. For microenterprises that provide home day care service, one policy implication is to authorize supported health insurance to ensure the capability of bodily health. New social welfare legislation could offer funding for such alternative economic development activities.

Has society provided the social bases that are necessary for these women to achieve full functioning capability? Clearly not. Selling plasma, sex, or drugs to survive in the utilitarian or Rawlsian market economy should not be an acceptable state of affairs. Women survivors of violence engage in these activities not because it is something that they “prefer” or value, but because they have no other choice. Such a situation is humiliating and is associated with various capability deprivations and adaptations that can lead to the loss of freedom, such as incarceration. It is incumbent on social workers and policy makers to remedy this situation by providing the social bases that are necessary to meet the threshold capabilities of women like the ones in this study. Just social work practice from a capabilities perspective would necessarily have to be comprehensive, as opposed to the fragmented ways in which social policy is often developed and programs are implemented. Such a policy, program, and practice approach would need to cut across the segmented sectors of education, employment, housing, welfare, and treatment related to health, mental health, substance abuse, gender-based violence, and criminal justice.

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