That Deep Sense of Freedom: Transforming Community Organizing through Liberatory Feminist Practices of Leadership, Power and Time

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Abstract

This paper advocates for incorporating liberatory feminist approaches to community organizing practices in order to create healthy, just, and inclusive spaces for community members and leaders to challenge oppressive power dynamics and foster transformative, sustainable change. During the last five years, many organizing networks in the United States have just passed their 50 year mark while weathering social upheavals from a pandemic, ongoing race and gender oppression, and a rise of authoritarian populism and this has prompted some soul searching. Recently, there have been some helpful, challenging, and overdue deliberations on organizing practices at both the individual and organizational levels. These are inspiring efforts of what we see as a broader movement to bring the practice of community organizing more in line with its values. This paper continues the discussion, with a particular focus on both liberatory feminist approaches and structural-level transformations in the field of community organizing. We critique and reimagine the field of community organizing, particularly in the dimensions of leadership, power, and time. After considering these dimensions, we present recommendations on the level of narratives, organizational cultural norms, and resources.

Introduction[1]

This paper advocates for incorporating liberatory feminist approaches into community organizing practices in order to create healthy, just, and inclusive spaces for community members and leaders to challenge oppressive racist and patriarchal power dynamics and foster transformative and sustainable change. Many organizing networks in the United States have just passed their 50-year mark while weathering social upheavals from a pandemic, ongoing race and gender oppression, and a rise of authoritarian populism–and this has prompted some soul searching. Recently, there have been some helpful, challenging, and overdue deliberations about organizing practices at both the individual and organizational levels–many of which are referred to in this article (e.g., Bivens, 2023; brown, 2017; Hosang, 2021; Hogan, 2019; Piñeros Shields, 2021). These are inspiring efforts of what we see as a broader movement to bring the practice of community organizing more in line with its values. This paper continues the discussion, with a particular focus on liberatory feminist approaches that lead to structural-level transformations in the field. These structural factors fundamentally shape the organizational and communal landscapes within which we operate. Often overlooked or perceived as overly complex, such changes hold significant, long-term impact.

Dominant systems and structures are designed to perpetuate the status quo and its racial and gender hierarchies, and to dis-organize efforts at social transformation. They keep us working harder and achieving less. To encourage transformation and evolution in our field, we must critique and reimagine the field of community organizing, particularly in the dimensions of leadership, power, and time. We agree with Fung's (2020, p. 156) recommendation that movements should focus more on structural power, particularly the "designed structures" that can make long-lasting impacts (e.g., gerrymandering and home mortgage deductions). While power can be shifted in day-to-day interactions and at the policy level, attention given to changes at the structural or ethical levels can impact whole classes of people, the "playing field," and the norms and values that govern all levels of power. After considering these dimensions and how they impact our sense of leadership, power, and time, we present recommendations for the field including centering people power in our narratives, fostering liberatory organizational cultures and norms, and creating healthy and sustainable funding sources. We believe these recommendations will help our field continue to evolve to become more intentional, just, and inclusive.

For the sake of clarity, we offer definitions of what we mean by some of the terms used throughout the paper. We define "community organizing" as a bottom-up power building strategy that involves building relationships, developing leadership, and taking collective action to benefit our lives and our communities (Christens & Speer, 2015; Payne, 2007). We view community organizing as part of a broader power building ecosystem that involves power analysis, collective strategy, and the liberation of people. Thus, organizations involved in social movements, transformative economics, and similar fields can be considered "power building organizations". A "member" is an engaged constituent of a group and a "leader" is a person identified to take on an active role for the organization that aims to build community power. "Women-centered community organizing" places a particular emphasis on the process of building community with holistic leadership development as an important ingredient. As Piñeros Shields (2021) writes, the primary goal of women-centered

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[1]Shout outs to those we discussed drafts of the paper with including Greer Aeschbury, Constance Slider-Pierre, Emily Szerfy-Cox, Michael Anderson, and Nico Chin.

organizing is "personal and community transformation" rather than more limited, shorter-term demands. Women-centered organizing is motivated by a liberatory, intersectional feminism which sees the liberation of women, people of color, and queer people as interconnected to a broader liberation movement to dismantle all forms of exploitation and oppression. It challenges zero-sum conceptions of power by moving toward what Ai-Jenn Poo envisions as "systems and structures of abundance where power is built and shared" (Machado & Turner, 2020, para 16). It further works to build a new society where all people can control their bodies, labor, and identities (NDWA, 2024).

For both of us, civil rights organizer Ella Baker serves as a north star. We see her deep "spade work" of relational organizing, her patience in her organizing practice, and her seeing the power in everyday people as values that inspire us personally and that we hold for community organizing. We both started our careers in the social justice movement in Cincinnati, Ohio, US learning from and working with veteran neighborhood and civil rights movement organizers.

For more than 30 years, I (Katy) organized primarily on economic justice issues including childcare, health care, TANF, food stamps, and housing. While organizing with folks in neighborhoods, the city, and at the state and national levels, I learned (and still am learning) different organizing models from many organizers and leaders who are transforming lives and communities. The first half of my (Pat's) career was spent in leadership at a large, movement nonprofit providing low-barrier shelter for people experiencing homelessness as well as the local Homeless Coalition. For the last ten years, I have worked both in community and academic contexts fostering critical thinking and advocating for more just and inclusive organizations and community change efforts.

From our distinct but interconnected perspectives, we increasingly feel the urgency to align the practice of community organizing with its core values. We have heard from colleagues who lament the callousness and rush of the social change grind and long for inspiration through organizations that value them more holistically, and a pace that allows for deeper connections and space for long-term strategizing. This paper reflects our experiences, and aims to develop our analysis and generate recommendations for the field.

Leadership

Community organizers learn how to lead both explicitly and implicitly, experiencing how power operates within their organization, movement, and in the world at large. These leadership messages can often be ambiguous or in conflict. Too often, when it comes to power-sharing and leadership development in the midst of a campaign, many community members and organizers unfortunately cannot see a distinction between their organizations' "grassroots" leadership style and common dominant patriarchal leadership styles.

As an organizer in the Midwest United States, I (Katy) was immersed and received training in the "neo-Alinsky" organizing culture of the 1990s. I often felt uncomfortable with the aggressiveness of the training, particularly the agitation exercise originally developed by the Industrial Areas Foundation and continued through the Gamaliel Network where I experienced the training (Chambers, 2018; Gamaliel Network, n.d.). To me, it felt as if the trainer was acting superior in his intentional humiliation of people, and always agitating participants no matter how they answered questions. Explicitly, at that time, the training focused on agitating people on their "self-interest" and with a focus on the zero-sum power to act between losers and winners in a campaign. What I took away from the training is that you build power through macho-conflict, domination, and

humiliation–even with your own members. At that time, I organized with predominantly women of color who were on public assistance. This way of training and being in public spaces seemed to perpetuate the patriarchal and racist systems that we were trying to unravel in our organizing. At the time, I did not have the experience or exposure to different organizing approaches to articulate my unease.

I began my organizing journey after studying feminist theory and Liberation Theology in college. Both, together, resonated deeply and opened my eyes to how all people should be valued and have agency in their lives in community. However, at my organizing job, there was no curriculum or training from a woman-centered approach. My only exposure to women-centered models was through working with women community leaders and their organizing methods (Stall & Stoecker, 1998). The organization where I started and grew my organizing skills, the Contact Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, was started by Catholic nuns who were radicalized by visiting Christian based communities in Central America that practiced Liberation Theology. They brought back liberatory and participatory ideas to the Contact Center and changed the organization from a charity model to community organizing model. Those nuns were long gone by the time I arrived at a financially struggling small neighborhood organization. It was the Black women community leaders who held my hand, taught me the organization's history, and mentored me in my first organizing efforts.

I learned one of the main tenets of community organizing is leadership development based on small-d democratic values (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). Democracy in action brings community members to the table with decision-makers to demand and eventually negotiate the policy or practice of a jurisdiction or corporate entity. However, in practice, internally many organizations are not as consistent in the democratic processes that they are organizing externally to achieve.

The benefits of democratic processes in community organizations are many, including an increased sense of solidarity, innovations in tactics, and leadership development (Polletta, 2002). Baiocchi (2004) connects democracy and deliberation and emphasizes practices and repertoires that are inclusive, free and equal, and are grounded in shared reason. Community organizations, associations, and unions can provide avenues for becoming "schools of democracy" through various power sharing practices (Dodge & Ospina, 2016; Eikenberry, 2022; Sinyai, 2019). Many community organizers will say that they are building democracy within their organization, yet too many do not include their members in organizational decision-making, developing the long-term vision or the strategy to achieve it.

While community organizing is not perfect, ideally, it is about democratizing decision-making in our communities. Community organizing is also practiced in contexts of patriarchy and racialized capitalism, and, in the United States especially, it has evolved in the 20th century absorbing biases that lead to exclusionary views of who is "in" and "out" of the organizing world. Likewise, histories of organizing have traditionally focused on heroic (often male) leaders, erasing many community members, women, students, and youth in the process (Hogan, 2019; Hosang, 2021; Payne, 2007). Distinct separations between public and private spheres in organizing training and practices have further amplified gendered divides (Polletta, 2002; Stall & Stoecker, 1998). For example, Saul Alinsky did not think women could be organizers (Chambers, 2018):

> Community organizing was not a job for family types, a position he (Alinsky) reinforced by his own marital conflicts, by his demands on his trainees, and by his own poverty. In fact, if

anything, the main role of the private sphere was to support the organizer's public sphere work. (Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p. 733)

Today, the organizing field struggles together to make community organizing spaces more equitable in terms of race and gender (Arias, 2023; Tattersall, 2022). Still, many examples of leaders acting "powerfully" are of people acting with stereotypical patriarchal and heroic leadership steeped in individualism, aggression, and control. Drawing on the insights of Fletcher (2004), we see that traditional, heroic notions of power and leadership reinforce patriarchal norms in organizations, even those that might consider themselves democratic and "post-patriarchal."

Alternatively, women-centered organizing emphasizes the process of building community and, importantly, centering individual leadership development. In explaining the difference between Alinsky/masculine style and a women-centered approach, Piñeros Shields (2021) argues the primary goal of "women-centered" organizing is "personal and community transformation" rather than more discrete, shorter-term policy wins.

As a program evaluator who has worked with power building groups, I (Pat) recognize that these transformative impacts are seen as less essential when compared to the quantitative metrics or outcomes of many organizing campaigns. Typically, organizations respond to expectations of external funders concerned with producing heroic "wins" with their "mobilizations" as evidence of their "powerful organizations." Thinking of organizing from this lens has its roots in Alinsky-ism as Piñeros Shields (2021) points out: "(t)he focus is not to empower or develop individuals, but rather to create powerful community organisations that can win material gains for a given community (3)." This creates tension for many in the field between truly developing leaders and building an organization perceived to be powerful. The pressure to produce quantitative results are exacerbated by both the urgency of an issue and funding cycles that compromise the time needed to holistically develop individual leadership and community buy-in before running a campaign.

On paper, some organizations have an articulated leadership engagement process often depicted as a "leadership ladder" or set of concentric circles (e.g., Garcia, 2020; Roncaglione et al., 2023). The slow process of individual leadership development means there must be an investment in the capacity and time needed for people to realize their power and decide what they want to do with their power within their organization.

> *"Leadership development requires experience in making social change, it requires reflection on that experience, and it requires a supportive environment with other leaders working through common community issues. This process of leadership development has no shortcuts, and this principle about accountability emphasizes sensitivity to where people are—whether that is a trauma, or limits to experience, or a lack of supportive others in the developmental process" (Medellin et al., 2021: 3128).*

It also takes time to grow or change organizational structures into more democratic ones where leaders and members are in decision-making roles throughout the organization and its processes. For many in oppressed communities, it means shedding your internalized oppression first which can be both liberating and painful.

Piñeros Shields's (2021) "Midwife for Power" model is an intriguing metaphor for leadership development. In this model, an organizer works as a guide with individuals and communities through their "birthing" process to liberation. The organizer is helping them along the way to step

into their power, be the agents of change in their communities. Like a midwife helping a mother knows she is and will be able to birth a child, Piñeros Shields says that an organizer helps individuals and communities identify their strengths, holds their hands if they doubt their abilities, and is there for the entire time it takes to realize their vision.

In the last few years, power building organizations I (Katy) work with identified that many have not invested adequately in building their members or in leadership development practices. Instead, they are relying on a static core of leaders and mobilization tactics. For example, Community Change identified that organizations needed to go "back to basics" and recruit, train, and engage a larger base of leaders to build power to win material changes in people's lives (Fox et al., 2022). Recently People's Action released a white paper with similar analysis. (People's Action Institute, 2023) This approach to leadership development is core to organizing, however it takes time to build trust within a community and is not predictable nor linear, especially in building multi-racial and multi-generational spaces.

We see examples of long-term political strategy based on sustained strategies that build organization and collaboration through deeper leadership development can lead to historical transformations. Bargaining for the Public Good in Minnesota credits building relationships and trust across community, advocacy, and labor groups for more than a decade leading to "break through" wins in 2023 (Benton et al., 2024). Chicago's Community Organizing for Family Issues(COFI) is another example of women-centered organizing and leadership development that results in material wins in the lives of families. . Their model relies on supporting the individual needs of "motherleaders" and their families as important as the policy victories they seek (Cossyleon, 2018). The invitation to participate, care for needs, and invest deeply over the long-term in leaders empowers people like Idalia Rios from Santa Ana, California, to take action in multiple arenas–from hyper-local to statewide–as she explains her activism: "It's a domino effect, every time it gets bigger" (Shelterforce, 2021, timestamp). Similarly, Detroit Peoples' Platform organizer Kea Mathis engages her community for the long game, stating, "I'm no one-woman show at all. It is our community voices. It is their desires and their needs, you know, it's that community leadership. We're fighting to make things better for the longevity" (Shelterforce, 2023, timestamp).

Power

Organizers enter movements or organizing campaigns with various views of power. These views can be shaped by academic study, lived experience, or just common assumptions about how power operates. It is essential to take the time to invite our communities to analyze power together, align our views of power and various intersections, and push back against systems that seek to limit our awareness of oppressive power at work. A feminist, liberatory view of power moves us towards efforts that are transformational, relational, interdependent; and takes the time to ensure there is a broad understanding of power's hidden and implicit forms.

Without intentional and regular dialogue about the complexity of power, groups can suffer from confusion and a lack of clarity about strategy, or even unintentionally adopt limited views of power that replicate the status quo. These limits appear in organizing campaigns that consider power as a zero-sum proposition, seeking the "win" while often ignoring the growth of their own members. This "market logic" of power tends to legitimize hierarchies, disconnect our histories, and leave us unable to imagine more liberatory alternatives (Hosang, 2021). Seeing power as residing solely in the "public" sphere results in diminishing the power of the personal.

In our experience, many campaigns skip the power analysis phase or consider it only superficially, feeling it is either too obvious or too complex to complete and share broadly. As Jane McAlevey (2016) points out, too many organizational leaders, consciously or unconsciously, believe in an "elite theory" of power where power only resides in the "decision-makers" and not with ordinary people (McAlevey, 2016: 4-5). Furthermore, before power can be shifted, we must work to make it visible (Fung, 2020; Gaventa, 2019b) first to ourselves, then to our members and the larger public. This type of awareness is context specific and involves processes of learning systems of government and policy decision making, following the money with key stakeholders, and questioning common, often internalized, racist and sexist assumptions about "the way things work" and uncovering the power that exists within the organizational members. These deliberations provide groups with a basis of shared analysis from which intentional strategy can be developed (Minieri & Gestos, 2007).

In my (Pat's) class on strategic power building, students grapple with the complexity of power analysis as part of their coursework. For historical precedent, I point to Gaventa's (2019b) description of participatory efforts among Appalachian progressives in the 1970s to uncover shifting, international ownership of coal mines in Kentucky. Students then apply the concept with a real life power analysis of their own. For example, one recent student group struggled to uncover the hidden power behind a large slumlord managing multiple properties across the United States with no apparent pathway of accountability. Another group used a power analysis to reveal untapped sources of power of caregivers and essential laborers that could counter the intersectional exploitation of that community, often women and people of color (Geller et al., 2023).

Power analyses are most impactful when they are broadly participatory, taking the time to involve people with lived experience in deliberations around worldview, structural, and systemic power. Including a wide representation of leaders, members, and staff creates an opportunity for shared decision making, building understanding, buy-in, and trust. This type of "strategic transparency" works to "build strategic trust and sophistication" among power builders (McAlevey, 2016; Mitchell, 2023, para 74). Choice is crucial to empowerment. Involving community members helps us better choose how to focus our attention and energy in ways that will make the most difference. This women-centered view of power as communal upends zero-sum views of power and opens the door for more creativity in decision-making. Many examples of participatory power analysis tools and processes reflect this view of power including stakeholder analysis charts, power mapping guides, multi-dimensional tools (e.g., the Power Cube, the SCOPE LA power analysis process), and other frameworks with culturally specific or Indigenous roots. Participatory power analyses include connecting power with the personal experience of participants, intentionally addressing particular dimensions of power, and using shared visualization tools (Gaventa, 2019a).

Most U.S. based power building organizations operate within a nonprofit framework and the power of philanthropy on organizing cannot be overstated. A great deal of effort recently has focused on the system of philanthropy and its impact on our strategy, values, and practices. (e.g., Geller et al., 2023). Sulma Arias, executive director of People's Action, summarized this unfortunate reality well: "We have come to look more to philanthropy than towards each other" when making strategic decisions (S. Arias, personal communication, January 12, 2024). Despite some shifting rhetoric, philanthropy also tends to value what results communities can "produce" as evidenced through transactional, quantifiable metrics (Pastor, Ito & Rosner, 2011). In many ways, both explicitly and implicitly, these practices perpetuate a view of power that is purely transactional, competitive, and individualist. Based on recent critiques of racism and white privilege, some private foundations

have responded productively following efforts to elevate "trust-based" or "responsive" principles or using a racial justice lens in their approaches to philanthropic decisions (Trust Based Philanthropy Project, 2023; NCRP, 2023; PRE, 2023). Assisting sympathetic foundations with understanding power and developing a power analysis is one way that the field can further influence how philanthropy supports organizing (People's Action Institute, 2023). That being said, a wave of philanthropic concern with racial equity in 2020 has been followed by a significant backlash by politicians and business leaders seeking to roll back anti-racist practices. At best, the culture as it stands now leaves grassroots groups politely requesting moneyed groups to become more enlightened. We cannot forget that the history of the philanthropic system in the United States reveals an ongoing effort to retain generational wealth, evade taxes, and maintain social power (Justice Funders, 2023; People's Action Institute, 2023).

To move forward, power building organizations can reimagine ways to resource organizing and support structures that center anti-racist, feminist, and liberatory views of power. This necessitates considering new, popularly controlled methods of resourcing our efforts, with a focus on structural changes to public resources and the development of expanded solidarity economics practices. For example, the field can work to expand available public resources for power building by advocating for public funds that engage communities in decision making. this strategy could increase community control to directly allocate funds for initiatives such as those that support caregivers, community builders, and civic engagement (Baiocchi, 2005; Justice Funders, 2023). This approach builds on historical examples in the United States where Federal community development dollars resulted from movement pressure and were often controlled by community organizing groups before later succumbing to governmental and philanthropic pressure to professionalize (Stoecker, 1997). Another example we can look to are the practices of solidarity power between better resourced union and academic sectors and organizing efforts that result in more coordination and a more-just sharing of resources (Bhargava & Luce, 2023; Doussard & Fulton, 2020; NDWA, 2024). The shared funding model that kicked off the Bargaining for the Common Good effort in Minneapolis shows that even modest resources provided consistently by unions or academic institutions can make a large difference for grassroots power building (Benton et al., 2024).

Time

Speaking with organizers across the field, one consistent theme is the culture of urgency and crisis that hampers us as organizers to connect, plan, and act effectively. There are no shortcuts to produce the kind of sustainable power shift we desire. Building a sustained organizing effort needs a more time-intensive approach rooted in intersectional consciousness-raising and relationship-building work. Inspired by Rasheedah Phillips' (2023) work with "creating housing futures" and Barbara Love's (2007) "liberatory consciousness," we recognize that genuine transformation takes time and requires nurturing authentic connections, time to reflect and heal, make self-determined choices along a leadership trajectory, and develop shared understanding among community members. Unraveling dominant racist, patriarchal, and capitalist narratives we in the U.S. have been immersed in for centuries will take time. It also will take time to "birth" together the future we want to see for ourselves, our families, and our communities. Taking the time needed to organize "at the speed of trust" (brown, 2017) moves us toward a resilient organizing practice that understands our past and is forward thinking, taking future generations into account while striving for sustainable wins.

There is no place in organizing where the concept of time is more urgent than in electoral organizing with its hard, immovable deadlines of primaries, general elections, and fundraising reports. The bottom line is mobilizing enough people to vote for your issue or candidate by a set date. As an organizer in a politically-contested state, I (Katy) witnessed enormous amounts of money pumped in to mobilize people to the polls with hardly any resources dedicated to developing local leadership of people or the capacity of existing community groups beyond election day. Organizing that is exclusively focused on elections is almost always in conflict with women-centered organizing that is more concerned with building healthy communities, which means first engaging and developing healthy leaders. For example, many organizers, including electoral organizers based in power building organizations, continue to push the well-resourced funders and organizations (including unions) to understand that investing in the long-term ongoing organizing and power building will reap more benefits in the end: more local people engaged in both community organizing and electoral politics. (Guerra, 2020)

The urgent sense of time is not just created by election cycles, but by the broader culture in which they are held. Our electoral behaviors are a symptom of a more pervasive "neoliberal individualism" that invokes a constant sense of urgency alongside a social disconnection that makes it difficult to feel any sense of belonging or to develop trusting relationships (Bivens, 2023). Mainstream politics in the United States places us in a constant "present"–an endless summer, if you will–that leaves us without guidance, direction, and unable to rest and reflect (Ayni, 2024). To add to this disorganization, the environment fuels high levels of staff turnover to such an extent that we experience little sense of organizational or movement history (Bivens, 2022; Hogan, 2019).

Women-centered organizing operationalizes the old organizing adage to "meet people where they are at" and to accompany them on their organizing and liberatory journey. Organizational power to make structural change is grounded in the people who are organizing together. It takes time for people to feel and activate their own power together. Time is needed to invest in people's leadership and investing in leaders is not linear. As Phillips writes:

> *"While more and more organizations strive to involve community voices as they address urgent problems and respond to crises, we must also facilitate opportunities for communities to have space and time to think more creatively, expansively, and positively about the future of their neighborhoods and what a thriving community would look like to them. New solutions for tackling housing insecurity and creating equitable housing futures lie outside of the crisis response model and the sense of urgency that leaves little opportunity for communities and individuals to plan for their futures," (2022:14-15).*

Phillips talks explicitly about housing and neighborhood self-determination, and the same call for more space and time can be said for all community organizing within our capitalist, racist, and patriarchal systems under which marginalized communities of color have suffered for centuries. It will take time for community members to realize their power and act. As Piñeros Shields (2021) reminds us, those spaces and time allow for the most crucial part of our power building work:

> *"Strategies and tactics can be charted on Excel sheets, classified, interrogated and revised. But people's power cannot be so easily systemised. It is neither linear nor predictable. It is born of an organic process that is life-giving and life-creating. It is the labour of a community," (6).*

A leader from the Resident Action Project (RAP) in Washington State talks about her process of becoming a powerful leader taking time:

> *"Being able to learn how to see myself as someone who is valuable, and important, and who has strengths and gifts has been one of the most important things [that I have gotten from my engagement with RAP]. Because when we see that in ourselves, we empower others to see that in themselves. I battle every day with self-worth and self-value. RAP has given me a deep well to pull from, and it's just been very empowering to be a part of that work, and be told, 'Your story was so inspiring to me and now I'm ready to tell mine.' It's not only about me telling my story, which is important, but it's being a part of that shared strength and shared power, by giving somebody else the strength, courage, self-worth, and value," (RAP leader in Roncaglione et al., 2023: 4).*

Personal transformation is the beginning step within community organizing. Allowing people the time to be in a "dreamspace" (Hersey, 2022) together, imagining a future that they want for their families and communities, provides for creative and hopeful ideas to flourish. Similarly, the institutions doing power building need to allow time for organizational processes to evolve with spaciousness in order to meet the changing needs of our communities.

Discussion and Recommendations

Our exploration of leadership, power, and time has pointed to the need for a transformational shift in the field of organizing. We are not alone. Many authors have recently called for transformation inspired by feminist practices and goals of racial and gender liberation (Bivens, 2023; brown, 2017; Hosang, 2021; Hogan, 2019; Piñeros Shields, 2021). They call for new recipes, new "remixes" in our approaches. Recommendations tend to center around personal and interpersonal changes to attitudes, organizational practices, and the development of radical skills. We agree with all those efforts, but feel that *structural* changes need to be prioritized to allow those efforts to flourish and evolve. The recommendations that follow aim to support this movement to bring organizing practices in line with our values and visions for the world. To accomplish this, we propose changes to 1) our narratives, 2) our organizational cultures and norms, and 3) the creation of healthy and sustainable funding sources. Our internal narratives should be grounded in values of abundance, hope, and possibilities. Our organizations should live out the democratic and collaborative ways we want to see in the world. Precious resources should be shared, not hoarded, or used as power over communities. In short, as community organizers, we need to come to expect more from our field and demand changes that make organizing more supported, valued, and sustainable (see Table 1).

1. *People Power Narrative Change*

More and more, narrative change is seen as an indispensable strategy for social transformation. According to the Narrative Initiative (2023a), narratives are powerful "themes and ideas that are carried in collections of stories." "A narrative intervention can be any tactic or piece of content that allows you to challenge, reframe, advance, defend, or popularize a narrative." Concepts of narrative power and processes of creating narrative strategy, infrastructure, and research continue to evolve (e.g., Bhargava & Luce, 2023; Narrative Initiative, 2023b; Robinson, 2018). While efforts at training organizers on the basics of narrative are available (e.g., Ganz, 2009), they are still developing and often focus on how to apply narrative basics to the varieties of issue campaigns facing organizers.

Following a liberatory feminist approach, these narrative strategies can not only be used externally, but also to examine the stories we tell ourselves around leadership, power, and time.

Leadership stories that value our people:

We suggest examining the dominant gendered narratives around leadership that underpin our efforts and creating a narrative infrastructure from the grassroots bent on replacing destructive narratives with liberating ones. For example, narratives in organizing can tend to be productivist (i.e., "hard working heroes sacrificing themselves for the cause" or "weak and naive beginners who need to be disciplined into shape by stern authority figures"). These narratives replicate the oppressive, sexist, and racist narratives we are working to change. Instead, we need new narratives of organizational leadership that build on the example of Ella Baker– narratives that center cooperation, the use of gifts from all people, and valuing solidarity over productivity (Cossyleon, 2022). These alternative narratives should become normalized by being reinforced with an infrastructure that supports them such as training, content creation, media, events, and more.

Power stories of abundance and collaboration:

Earlier we mentioned the Alinsky-style Gamaliel Network organizing training whose training reinforces a zero-sum narrative of power and encourages participants to adapt a "real world" view of acting powerfully through an experience of domination and humiliation. This practice and its underlying narrative does not serve us well if we want to foster a sense of our interdependence and belonging. Consistent with liberatory feminism, power is personal and public. For this reason, organizing training needs to center different, more empowering narratives. We can use participatory practices like those included in the "Calling In & Up" curriculum–stories that emphasize the power in solidarity and cooperation across difference and connection to legacies of power building from below (Tschume & Bozzo, 2020). Taking the effort to create safe and brave places when discussing power can help us align our values with our practices.

Take time for storytelling:

Creating and sharing our own narratives of time – past, present, and future—provide new, transformative expectations for our work around gender and race, as well as connections to our ancestors and descendants. We organizers often miss chances to document or share efforts before moving on to the next campaign. Developing rituals and practices of organizational storytelling and intentional archiving can help us pass down knowledge to new members, reducing loss of knowledge and fostering relationships between new and long-time leaders and members (Bivens, 2023; Polletta, 2002). For example, the "RUN River '' practice documenting the history of both the organization and the individuals of the Residents United Network during their ten years of working to organize for housing justice in California (Figure 1).

2. *Foster liberatory organizational cultures and norms*

Our organizations can become so imbued in dominant cultural norms that it is almost cliche to point out that we rarely "practice what we preach." We need to expect more from our organizations and feel more confident in speaking out about workplace cultures that lack deliberative processes and transparency around strategy and decision making, and that leave little time for reflection and relationship building. We recommend liberatory feminist structures that

foster group-centered leadership internally, solidarity and collaboration across efforts, and new ways of approaching our lives in the movement.

Figure 1: Members adding their contributions to the history of RUN on the "Run River" chart in 2019.
Photo credit: Housing California.

Structures of group-centered leadership and participation:

There are many resources to help organizers cut issues, conduct power analyses, and develop strategy. Often, though, these tools are not used in ways that are broadly participatory. It is rarely said explicitly, but traditional organizing approaches seem to assume that "low level" members or new organizers lack the knowledge, insight, or cleverness of senior staff and veteran leaders and thus "difficult" tasks dealing with strategy must be done behind the scenes. The "troops" (often women, primarily) are for mobilization. In response, we must expect a much greater level of member participation in our organizations. In fact, the members and leaders of our organizations are the people to which organizers are accountable, not the reverse. Both McAlevey (2016) and Han et al (2021) find that it is not only important whether members are engaged episodically, but how they are involved. Quality and scale of participation matter. The job of organizers and their institutions is to entrust real responsibility and engage members in decision-making on complex structural issues. Various ladders of leadership and power that place organizations along the axis from "tokenism" to "shared power and control" can be helpful tools to measure progress toward more full participation (e.g., Garcia, 2020: 73; Roncaglione et al., 2023: 13). We recommend renewing that framework for our organizations and creating evaluative frameworks for organizations

on their way to increased popular control. Not only is it more just and fairer to bring in more voices and experiences from members, but it also will lead to more intentional, nuanced, and creative strategies and tactics. Examples of this type of time investment include There Ought to Be a Law (TOBAL) process at RUN (Figure 2). Another example is the Resident Organizing Network's Power Building Convenings, an annual multi- organizational training and planning session that brought together executive directors, organizers, and leaders from statewide housing justice power building organizations across the United States to learn with one another about aligned strategies and challenges (Roncaglione et al., 2023).

Figure 2: There Ought to Be A Law: Resident United Network (RUN) begins their annual summit each year with the finalization of a process that starts months before in their designated regions where members brainstorm policy changes that are needed in their communities. The summit is where each region sends representatives and follows a process designed to generate policy demands coming directly from the members.
Photo credit: Katy Heins

Powerful structures of solidarity and collaboration:

Practices that center solidarity are essential to building power for transformational organizing. To fully realize solidarity practices, we need to combat gendered expectations around unpaid labor, the siloing of organizing across various issues and scales, and the lack of trust among organizations, often fueled by competition for philanthropic dollars. Fostering and scaling practices of mutuality and economic solidarity have the potential to transform our organizations and our expectations for a more equitable society (Benner & Pastor, 2021). The Building Movement Project (2024) provides a variety of trainings and tools for organizations that seek to incorporate principles of solidarity.

Increased unionization is another approach to furthering solidarity–both formally established unions and new innovative forms. Some power building organizations in the U.S. have representation through various unions, providing organizing employees a voice and transparency in organizational decision making and clarity of roles and benefits. It provides a structural platform to prompt deliberations about factors that impact workplace culture. There are other practices, short of unionization, that provide benefits for organizers and members (Mitchell, 2023). The National Domestic Workers Alliance has developed a membership structure that provides tangible benefits like insurance and training as well as community connection and collective action (NDWA, 2023).

New structures of time and expectations around care:

Often strapped grassroots organizations feel they cannot afford the time to invest in member-inclusive planning, strategy deliberations, or group reflection–all practices that foster a sense of inclusion and belonging. To embody women-centered organizing, organizations need to be designed in ways that nurture a "life in the movement" for our members and leaders, rather than treating them as disposable and interchangeable. The sense of belonging one feels for our work should not be dependent on any particular job or role in a campaign. It should not be commodified like health insurance in the United States–disappearing when you change companies. One of the most important investments needed to make this expectation a reality is time.

Because of staff turnover and perceived issue urgency, organizers can feel that we are not able to take the time needed to fully onboard new members, engage them holistically as humans, and encourage their growth and learning. When organizers or members experience hardships, life transitions or even burnout from the hard labor of change work; their connections to the overall movement should be allowed to evolve without shame. Processes and behaviors of community care and resources and encouragement for self-care need to be embraced in our organizing practices. Bivens (2023) offers the concept of "micro-utopic practices" such as structured mentoring and co-mentoring agreements that challenge neoliberal individualism. Mitchell (2023) also encourages a focus on celebration and joy in our organizations, despite the challenges. However, we should also be sure to welcome peoples' full selves to the work, acknowledging a full spectrum of emotions, even legitimate feelings of hurt, betrayal, and skepticism.

3. *Creating healthy and sustainable funding sources*

New narratives and organizational norms will require new ways of resourcing efforts in order to become truly structural. To some, this may seem like the most daunting challenge of all since funding is often associated with wealthy, "good old boy" networks that leave our communities marginalized. Nevertheless, there are many inspiring examples of new collaborations, alternatives, and strategies of solidarity that hold the key to new expectations around resources.

Leading with a shared power analysis:

First, we must begin to look at the relationship between philanthropy and its connection to heroic, often gendered, narratives surrounding successful capitalists turned philanthropists as well as charismatic movement voices (Soskis, 2021). These efforts tend to look for recipients who are a complimentary part of the same dominant narrative, bold leaders delivering quick victories through their exceptional insight. The public has become increasingly skeptical of this top-down approach, turning to mutual aid and direct cash transfers during the pandemic and anti-racist movement strategies in 2020 (Soskis, 2021). It remains to be seen whether the narrative shift away from elite-

driven efforts and toward shared responsibility and liberation continues to take root. We agree with People's Action Institute (2023) and their *Antidote to Authoritarianism* white paper that includes working toward a common power analysis as a key step to help us develop a more realistic and contextualized rationale for granting or receiving funding. This practice can help funders disincentivize funding charisma and become more intentional in connecting their giving to part of a shared strategy grounded in community power building.

Solidarity power and resource sharing:

In liberatory feminism, power is expansive and grows through connection across differences. Instead of worrying about the costs of collaboration, we should instead be wondering if we can afford to really stand alone. This means focusing on solidarity power (Bhargava & Luce, 2023). An example of this approach is community-labor coalitions that gained prominence after the Great Recession in the US, some of which grew into robust, cross-sector alignments for power (Benton et al., 2024). There are many benefits to these partnerships such as increased resources, scope, and capacity; with downsides that can be mitigated through intentional alignment and trust building (Doussard & Fulton, 2020). Developing community-labor collaborations into durable alliances rooted in shared analysis and common goals of social transformation would allow trust to take root and long-term benefits to accrue (e.g., Bargaining for the Common Good in Minnesota).

Organizing efforts can also learn from the cooperative network model (e.g., Coop Cincy, Action Jackson, etc.) based on the ten Mondragon principles such as inter-cooperation, democratic organization, and social transformation shared by union cooperatives (Mondragon Corporation, 2024). Similar alliances could be built with academic partners. Academic partnerships can falter easily because they quickly become extractive or seek to replace local people's knowledge with their own expertise (e.g., Flint Rising vs. Virginia Tech in Pauli, 2019). Productive efforts go well beyond seeing power building efforts as research subjects and instead nurture trusting partnerships that share resources, relationships, and expertise. One example is the online history collaboration on domestic work and worker organizing between NDWA and Smith College (NDWA, 2024). These efforts need to resist transactional demands from institutions for external funding or unpaid labor in support of instructors. Finally, national community organizing networks should resist becoming gatekeepers for local funding and partnerships that can unintentionally foster competition and instead of collaboratively building trust and aligned approaches with affiliates (People's Action Institute, 2023). When organizing networks are given the opportunity to pass through or subgrant funding, they should use the opportunity to explore collective budgeting and increasing transparency to deepen trust. Organizers with Bargaining for the Common Good in Minnesota did just that with their initial pass-through funds from SEIU in 2011 "to avoid the establishment of transactional relationships where they assumed the role of patron and community organizations came to serve as clients." (Benton et. al, 2024: 13).

Taking time to develop next generation funding alternatives:

The community organizing field needs to spend the necessary time to develop truly liberated funding alternatives, particularly in areas of solidarity economics where trust between sectors is essential. Our field needs to find a pathway to decouple itself from funders that both place limits on our efforts and imaginations and reinforce a competitive, "grind" culture. Efforts are underway to help influence philanthropic practices and advocate for voluntary funder reforms. However, we feel that some funders, particularly those who have public missions, should receive continuous pressure

to do more, including spending down resources in a timelier manner and providing opportunities for citizen or community-led initiatives. Foundations that are resistant should become targets of campaigns to change both from organizers and their peers in philanthropy (Justice Funders, 2023). Another avenue for transforming the "designed structures" that drive philanthropy could be to organize nationally for Federal changes to tax law in the United States that would require funds be spent down more quickly and ensure transparency and participation in allocation. In that way, we can make transformations that pay forward to future generations of communities fighting for change.

Table 1: Recommendations for Incorporating Liberatory Feminist Approaches to Community Organizing Practices

	Leadership	Power	Time
Narrative changes for our field	Leadership stories that value our people: Baker's example of cooperation, sharing gifts, and solidarity over productivity	Power stories of abundance and collaboration: Calling in & up curriculum	Take time for storytelling: Rituals to share stories and connections to ancestors and descendants
Changes to organizational culture and norms	Structures of group-centered leadership and participation: TOBAL and power building convenings	Powerful structures of solidarity and collaboration: Solidarity principles, unionization, and support across silos	New structures of time and expectations around care: Nurture life in the movement, mentoring, bring whole self to the work
Creating healthy and sustainable funding sources	Leading with a shared power analysis: Look to each other, develop shared power analysis that guides funding	Economic solidarity power and resource sharing: Aligning partners, exploring successful models, collaboration in pass-through funding	Taking time to develop next generation funding alternatives: Pressure funders, academic partnerships, change tax law

Conclusion

In this paper we have advocated for incorporating liberatory feminist approaches and evolving organizing practices in order to create healthy, inclusive spaces for community members to challenge oppressive power dynamics and foster transformative and sustainable change. We hope that our critique and reimagining of the field of community organizing is useful, particularly in the dimensions of leadership, power, and time. We believe that our recommendations for the field in

terms of narratives, cultural norms, and resources will set the stage for reinvigorating the field in ways that are consistent with our values. These recommendations are not intended to be add-ons to existing efforts. Rather, we view them as necessary transformations if we are to address current challenges and underlying injustices, and transform our field to become more healthy, just, and inclusive.

> *In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed…It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.~ Ella Baker, 1969 (in Ransby, 2003)*

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