"Working with COW": Social Work Supporting Older Women Living in the Community

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ABSTRACT

Australia, like all developed Western countries, is experiencing a demographic shift resulting in an increasing proportion of the population being over the age of 65 years. Contrary to stereotypes, the vast majority of older people live independently in communities. This article explores the potential of social work practice informed by community development principles to enable socially disadvantaged older women to live in vibrant and supportive communities, in which they feel safe and are able to access the support services they need. It argues that participation in social action not only builds older women's well-being but also enables them to become (or continue to be) agents for social change in local communities. Adopting a community-based research methodology, this article draws on a decade of community development practice with the Concerned Older Women's (COW) Group. This data suggests that community development practice based on participation, empowerment, and social action founded on respectful relationships may accrue significant benefits to individuals and the broader community. This social work practice creates the social conditions to facilitate older women's capacity to work collectively to achieve social change, challenging ageist stereotypes.

Introduction

This article explores social work practice with older women in the community of Glebe, an inner suburb of Sydney, Australia. It argues that community development approaches have the potential not only to break down isolation and build connections but also to change the way in which older women are viewed in the community. The article draws on the experiences of the Glebe Community Development Project (hereafter Glebe CDP) in working with the Concerned Older Women's (COW) Group.

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Glebe CDP

The Glebe CDP commenced in 2004 as a community engagement or extension strategy of the School of Social Work at the University of Sydney. The project aims to improve the life opportunities of neighboring disadvantaged residents, particularly those living in public housing. The "Glebe Estate" is a public housing neighborhood of some 2,000 people, which borders the University to the north of its main campus. Public housing is government owned and managed housing for residents with low income and complex needs. Residents in public housing are generally among the most disadvantaged in Australia. The establishment of the Glebe CDP provided the School of Social Work with the opportunity to embed its commitment to social justice practice, teaching, and learning. The Project employs two part-time social work staff with community development experience and provides field placement for four to eight social work students annually. The Glebe CDP works in collaboration with other key institutions in the neighborhood, including Department of Housing, community groups, the City of Sydney, and local residents.

The community of Glebe is located 3 km west of the Sydney Central Business District, covers just over 2 square kilometers, and is on a peninsula, creating clear geographic boundaries (Solling, 2007). Within the community there is enormous diversity (or social polarization) in terms of wealth (most common household incomes either less than $200 pw or over $2,000 pw), cultural background, housing status, and age (Clancey & Russell, 2016). The Glebe Estate is home to approximately 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, making it the third largest indigenous community in Sydney (Glebe Youth Centre, 2016). A significant proportion of Glebe residents (38.2%) live in sole occupant households. Around 15.6% of the population of 13,834 are aged over 60 years, with nearly 1,200 of these being older women (City of Sydney, 2016).

Community development is marked by theoretical heterogeneity with numerous frameworks available to practitioners (Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011; Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2013; Westoby & Morris, 2011). Participation, collaboration, and empowerment based on *relationships* are the key practice principles of the Glebe CDP. Broadly, this means the work undertaken by the project is "bottom-up" whereby "local people become involved in a process of determining priorities and solving problems, and in the process, increase their knowledge and skill base in addition to achieving a sense of control over their environment" (Taylor, Wilkingson & Cheers, 2008, p. 99). Adopting a relational lens means acknowledging the value to individuals and the collective of being connected to others (Oliver & Pitt, 2013, p. 51). Relationships with others build a sense of belonging, which is of central importance to individual's emotional health and well-being (Oliver

& Pitt, 2013, p. 51). Facilitating collective action by helping people work together, supporting them to plan and take action, is a core component of community development (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2011; Oliver & Pitt, 2013). Collectivity or association has been found to facilitate co-operation, engender trust, and mutual aid (Oliver & Pitt, 2013). Putnam (2001) and others (Oliver & Pitt, 2013; Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2013) argue that associations have the potential to re-engage citizens in civil society and build social capital. Working collectively requires people to think "beyond [themselves] in more narrow terms to consider themselves part of a much wider community" (Dale, 2013, p. 428). It draws on collective efficacy (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2013) "a kind of latent energy, some kind of dormant potential in the human condition that only becomes manifest when social conditions develop in a manner that call it into being" (Dale, 2013, p. 428).

These theoretical frameworks inform the Glebe CDP's work in supporting the formation of social action groups, facilitating community participation in decision-making processes, resourcing community celebrations, undertaking action research projects, and providing individual support and advocacy as required. This work seeks to be anti-oppressive through the use of strategies that are inclusive of women affected by multiple oppressions including age, race, class, and ability (Baines, 2011). Practically this means being sensitive to cost, accessibility, time, dialogue, and creating space for cultural celebration.

The Concerned Older Women's Group

The COW Group was established in 2005 following community-based research into the experiences of older people (Concerned Older Women, 2014). For the following decade, the group met fortnightly at a local community café, with activities facilitated by Glebe CDP staff or students. Participants were drawn from very diverse backgrounds in terms of income, housing, cultural background, and age (with the oldest member being 92 years). A core group of eight women consistently participated in COW activities (about half of whom were public housing residents), with a further 15–20 involved in specific activities or actions. All activities were planned and led by COW members. The members described COW as an "activist" group rather than a "social group". Any costs associated with participation were kept to a minimum to ensure low-income women could participate (usually $1 or $2 gold coin donation). Free house-to-house transport was provided for those less mobile and to enable group participation in activities outside of Glebe. In 2014, the group produced a historical booklet reflecting their activities and achievements, *Concerned older women: A history. Glebe 2005 to 2014*. The book documents their involvement in a number of campaigns related to accessibility, mobility, safety, and health and dignity-related issues, as well as their involvement and participation in both local and

nationwide events and activities. Throughout the life course of the group, COW has worked with local councils, state-based services, and private organizations to improve the physical infrastructure of the suburb and simultaneously promote increased community engagement for older residents. In 2006, for example, the group lobbied state housing to introduce a "home handyman" service for older residents; introduced in 2007, the service provided older residents living in state housing assistance with small maintenance jobs such as changing light bulbs and loose handles on cupboard doors. Other campaigns related specifically to attempts at increasing the availability of larger clothing sizes in local shops, advocating to the public transport authority to change local bus routes to facilitate mobility-impaired residents access to the nearby tertiary public hospital, negotiating for the return of a breast-screening bus to the area, and scoping out potential to establish a women's health center in the Glebe community. The group's name reflected the women's wit (in Australia an "Old Cow" can be used derogatorily toward older women) and signaled their desire to challenge ageist stereotypes.

The following section briefly reviews the existing literature to provide a broader context to the article's exploration of social work practice with disadvantaged older women living in local neighborhoods.

Existing literature

Older people and well-being

The well-being or the quality of life of older people has been an important theme in research, policy, and practice in gerontology for some time (Smith, Sim, Scharf, & Phillipson, 2004). In Australia, as elsewhere, "successful aging" and "aging well" are major policy goals (Buys & Miller, 2006; Smith et al., 2004). Programs and interventions aimed at supporting older people "age well" in Australia seek to ensure older people participate in the "normal life" of the community. There is a particular focus on addressing social isolation and loneliness arising from living alone, away from families and other supports. Participation, particularly unpaid voluntary activities (such as bush regeneration or school-based activities), is championed as a key strategy to address social isolation and age well (Australian Government, 2015). Cattan, White, Bond, and Learmouch (2005) conducted a systematic review of studies about the effectiveness of the health-promoting interventions targeting social isolation and loneliness among older people. The review suggested that group activities with educational input were the most effective in alleviating social isolation and loneliness, increasing social contacts and enhancing self-esteem among older people (Cattan et al., 2005). Other studies have highlighted the positive relationship between volunteering and physical health (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Oman,

Thoresen, & McMahon, 1999; Parkinson Parkinson, Warburton, Sibbritt, & Byles, 2010); the mental health benefits of volunteering (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Musick & Wilson, 2003), and general quality of life (Briggs, Peterson, & Gregory, 2010; Taghian, D'Souza, & Polonsky, 2012). Utilizing data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, Parkinson and colleagues (2010) concluded that women who volunteer have a higher physical functioning, mental health, general quality of life, and social supports, than women who had never, or who stop volunteering (Parkinson et al., 2010, p. 922). Volunteering however tends to be more accessible to those with more social, economic, and health resources (Rawsthorne, 2010; Beckwith, 2015).

Research has identified several factors that contribute to well-being including socio-demographic attributes, social support, health, material resources, crime, neighborhood, and housing (Cohen-Mansfield, Hazan, Lerman, & Shalom, 2016; Smith et al., 2004). In this sense, well-being needs to be understood as a multidimensional construct shaped by a complex range of factors (Yeung & Breheny, 2016). It is clear that a person's social position and access to resources can significantly impact their health status (Gardiner, Mishra, & Dobson, 2016; Marmot, 2005; Read, Grundy, & Foverskov, 2016). Additionally, poor self-reported health has been found to be significantly associated with nonparticipation in cognitively stimulating activities or group social activities (Machon, Vergara, Dorronsoro, Vrotsou, & Larranaga, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the social and physical environment has also been found to have a considerable influence on individual's health outcomes (Chen et al., 2016). Stevens, Martina, and Westerhof (2006) argue that women are at a greater risk of isolation, anxiety, and depression in older age due to women being more likely to live alone due to being widowed and exhibiting less self-efficacy.

Community development, social work, and older women

Community development has struggled to gain legitimacy in Australian social work education and practice (Hugman, 2016). It has been even more marginal in practice with older people, with practice focusing primarily on individuals and their families (Hughes & Heycox, 2010, p. 27). Interestingly, older people are rarely named as "communities of interest" in the community development literature in Australia, which is much more likely to recognize Indigenous people, poor people, and rural people as forming "communities" (see for example Hugman, 2016; Ife, 2013; Taylor, 2016). This invisibility is a common cultural experience for older women in developed democracies (Hughes & Heycox, 2010, p. 98).

Whilst health and social work interventions to alleviate social isolation among older people are numerous, there is surprisingly little attention given to the effectiveness of community development as a method of intervention with older people. Beth Milton et al. (2011) conducted a systematic review of

the impact of community engagement on health and social outcomes (not specifically in relation to older people), reporting gains in relation to social capital, social cohesion, and fostering the capacity to work collaboratively (Milton et al., 2011, p. 330). Community engagement (defined as community involvement in design, governance, and delivery of services) facilitated empowerment for individuals and the broader community as well as capacity building in relation to practical skills (Milton et al., 2011). The "Making safer places" (MSP) is one example of a strategy that targeted women and employed a community development approach. It aimed to reduce the level of fear of crime and increase the sense of safety for women in regeneration areas of Manchester, Bristol, and London (Kapadia & Robertson, 2006). Women living or working in the areas were recognized as a valuable resource of information and were encouraged to contribute to develop a community safety agenda. Participating women developed presentation and lobbying skills as well as greater links with local governments, regeneration agencies, and local media to influence policy outcomes. This intervention is rare in facilitating higher levels of participation, power, and control through community empowerment strategies for social action (Milton et al., 2011, p. 317).

Despite not being widely used with older women, community development practice, reflecting principles of respectful relationships, empowerment, and social action, has been shown to strengthen community systems and enhance individual well-being (Ingamells, 2010; Taylor et al., 2008; Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2013). Respectful relationships commence with a willingness to listen and engage in dialogue that informs future action (Ingamells, 2010, p. 2). Empowerment is founded on a willingness to transfer power, to share skills, and support the development of autonomous local leadership (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2011, pp. 67–89). Empowerment is not simply something you give others; it is the result of deliberate, conscious strategies. The focus on action to achieve social change distinguishes community development approaches from many other practice approaches (Hugman, 2016, pp. 14–29), in keeping with the anti-oppressive practice theory (Baines, 2011). The adoption of community development principles in gerontological social work, with its "holistic-person-in-environment perspective", appears well placed to respond to the needs of older women living in the community (McDonough & Davitt, 2011; Park, 2015).

There is extensive research supporting the desirability of policy and programs that support people "age-well" for the individuals involved and the broader community. Less is known about the potential of community-development practice in facilitating this goal or the specific approaches that may be effective in supporting older women experiencing social disadvantage. This article explores the potential of social work practice informed by community development principles of participation, empowerment, and collective action with socially disadvantaged older women living in community settings.

Methodology

Community-based research, incorporating action learning, is engaged by the Glebe CDP to build knowledge with public housing residents, students, community development workers, and academics on the social justice impacts of social policies and programs (Caine & Mill, 2016). Community-based research is grounded in the day-to-day experiences of citizens and is inherently political (Caine & Mill, 2016, p. 14). The questions explored through community-based research arise from the community and reflect issues of importance to the community, seeking to "develop practical knowledge that is relevant to the community" (Caine & Mill, 2016, p. 19). Reflecting the methodological plurality of community-based research, a significant body of both qualitative and quantitative data has been collected in relation to older women living in Glebe over the past decade. A purposive sampling approach has been adopted with "the goal of yielding rich knowledge regarding the phenomenon of interest" (Krysik & Finn, 2013, p. 161). Additionally, snowball sampling was used to ensure inclusion of hard-to-access research participants, such as those with lower mobility living alone (Krysik & Finn, 2013, p. 163). The overarching question guiding this research has been:

> "How do we ensure older women participate in a vibrant and supportive community, in which they feel safe and are able to access the support services they need?"

Specific data drawn on in this article arises from the following.

- Community needs analysis via structured interviews with older people and service providers

In 2004 this research sought to gain insight into the perception of the strengths and issues facing older people in the community, defined for the purpose of this specific project as 55 years and over (Glebe CDP, 2004, p. 5). Student social workers conducted a literature review along with structured interviews with local older people (n = 24) and service providers (n = 13). Older participants were recruited from existing community and church groups. Service providers were recruited from relevant government and community agencies working in Glebe. The structured interview included questions on health, safety, social participation, service use, and general perceptions about the neighborhood. (Glebe CDP, 2004, p. 5)

- Research exploring the impact of participation in COW activities on members' health and well-being

In 2008, research was undertaken exploring the health and well-being benefits of participation for older women drawing on in-depth interviews with COW members (n = 8). All the key COW members at that time participated in the interviews,

which adopted a narrative or story-telling approach (Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011; Tan, 2008). The guiding questions were: "Why did you become involved in COW?", "What are the benefits for you of being a member of COW?", "Do you think you have a closer relationship with the community after joining COW?", and "What, do you think, are the benefits for other people in Glebe from COW's activities?" Each participant was also asked a series of closed (ranked Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) questions in relation to social contacts, safety, and community impact (Tan, 2008).

- Experiences of COW members in building better communities through informal community leadership

In 2011 and 2014, two founding COW members were interviewed as part of a larger longitudinal research project exploring the leadership role of older people in community life. These interviews were semi-structured and focused on: motivations for participation; factors that support participation; factors that act as a barrier to participation; and outcomes of participation. (Rawsthorne, 2012; Beckwith, 2015)

The collection of this data has been approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney.

Findings

The following section reports key findings from the Glebe CDP work with the COW group over the past decade, drawing on empirical data. We seek to explore the potential of community development practice focused on participation, empowerment, and collective action based on relationships to support older women in a vibrant and supportive community, in which they feel safe and able to access services.

Participation

Participation is a widely used but highly problematic term in community development. Very often it is employed instrumentally as a means to validate a predetermined outcome (Kenny, 2011; Taylor et al., 2008). In seeking to form relationships that enable genuine participation (marked by shared power and responsibility), the Glebe CDP *listened deeply* to the stories of older women in Glebe (Ingamells, 2010; Oliver & Pitt, 2013, p. 19). This commenced in 2004, when older residents in Glebe were surveyed, with the results published in a report entitled *Glebe: An Older Perspective*. Supporting previous research about the importance of the physical environment to aging well (Chen et al., 2016), most (21/24) participants described Glebe as a good place to grow old due to its proximity to shops, community amenities, and services and high frequency of public transport (GCDP, 2004, p.13). The majority (19/24) of participants lived alone (GCDP, 2004, p. 18). Just over

half of the participants (14/24) reported that their health limited their engagement in activities in some way (most commonly associated with having less energy and mobility issues). Less than half of the participants (9/24) were accessing some form of service support (including in-home personal care support, meals on wheels, and private cleaning services), with service access hindered by lack of knowledge regarding service eligibility and cost (GCDP, 2004, pp. 15–17). The women's ability to obtain help if needed from neighbors varied greatly (GCDP, 2004, pp. 14–15). Social inclusion, the physical environment, and access to resources and services (including those to support older women's independent housing) were identified as priorities for older people in the community through this research. This research and the dialogue that followed became a catalyst for the formation of the "Concerned Older Women" (COW) in 2005 (Concerned Older Women, 2014).

Early conversations concerning the purpose of COW focused on a desire to raise awareness of the rights and needs of older women in the community, particularly to address the "invisibility" of aging and to claim back respect and value through lobbying for neighborhood and structural improvements within Glebe (Tan, 2008). There was also a strong sense that collective action would be much more successful than individual advocacy.

> Because as a group we are able to get things done whereas people alone don't seem to get anywhere with authorities. The group is recognised in the Sydney LGA because of its proactive approach to being heard around their demographic needs and gaining visibility and consideration by local organisations. (COW member, Rawsthorne, 2012)

The Glebe CDP demonstrated its willingness to continue to listen to older women and engage in ongoing dialogue, through formal research and informal conversations (Rawsthorne, 2012; Beckwith, 2015; Tan, 2008). This research sought to transform policy and practice in relation to the inclusion of older women in Glebe, including those of the Glebe CDP. Through these forums, an ongoing dialogue between older women, services, and policy makers was established, enabling their participation in decisions that affected them as older residents in the community as well as the community more broadly (such as the need for improved parks or the maintenance of a local post office). The relational benefits for individuals were consistently identified by members with many commenting on increased connectivity (new friendships, feeling welcome, comradeship, being together).

> Camaraderie; the fact that once "shut-in" and/or lonely women are now meeting, mixing and talking to others with confidence. A mixture of types and nationalities, egalitarian in spite of different social mores and incomes. (COW member, Rawsthorne, 2012)

Drawing on the experiences of COW members, it would seem important for social work practice to engage in a sophisticated analysis of

"participation" and to distinguish between externally imposed participation and self-determined participation (Shier, 2001 cited in Oliver & Pitt, 2013, p. 19). COW provides an excellent example of the benefits of self-determined or freely chosen participation for older women who are positioned as active citizens (Brodie cited in Oliver & Pitt, 2013, p. 58).

Empowerment

Power is of central concern to community development practice (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, pp. 66–75). Transforming or shifting power relations is possible at the individual, group, or wider community level (Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011; Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). Empowerment, through shifting decision-making power, sharing skills, and supporting local leadership, has been a key strategy used by the Glebe CDP in supporting older women in Glebe (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2013). Empowerment is particularly relevant to older women whose life courses might have been shaped by limitations rather than potentials. Whilst the Glebe CDP assisted in resourcing the COW group, it continuously maintained its status as an autonomous community group (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2011). The Glebe CDP's interactions with the group are not dissimilar to the social work roles identified in the US "village model" of "community organiser, broker and coordinator, assessor and advocate" (McDonough & Davitt, 2011, pp. 535–536). Decision-making power sat with COW members, not the Glebe CDP; this resulted in advocacy targeted very clearly to the everyday lives of older women in the community. The group's members determined the agenda of each meeting, with needs and actions identified by the group such as seating, lighting, bus routes, access to specialist health checks, traffic management, and housing maintenance.

COW members identified a range of individual benefits of their active participation including a sense of empowerment through knowledge sharing and creation, the development of new skills, greater recognition, and achieving change (COW, 2014). The research found that the increased social contacts and social activity the group provided motivated members to go out to meet other people (Rawsthorne, 2012; COW, 2014; Tan, 2008). The benefits for individual member's emotional health and well-being were clearly identified by the founding members of COW, with repeated stories of significant shifts in mental health, increased confidence, and friendships (COW, 2014).

> I got depressed and I cried and I wanted to kill myself and I thought no, so I'm going to come round and talk to you and that's how the Cow Group started. We were all sitting down the old fire station whinging. Whinging, we need more street lighting, we're not safe at night, bits of us don't work properly anymore, we can't run if we're going to be attacked and blah, blah, blah. The seats are falling apart, you get splinters, they are not maintaining them. We need more seating. So we formed COW. (COW Member, Rawsthorne, 2012)

The women identified that being part of a group with a common cause and helping achieve positive initiatives in the community assisted in increasing their awareness of issues experienced by their community and had provided them with knowledge of the services available within Glebe. Members reported a sense of pride at being a member of COW but also a change in the way the broader community viewed older women.

> Prior to joining the group I had experienced a period of 18 months social isolation due to ill health. To have the opportunity of being picked up from home each week (by the bus the group organizes through City of Sydney council), has enabled me to continue attending the group and experience the positive mental health benefits it brings. Making friendships in older age can be difficult. The group provides the opportunity to develop new friendships in an environment that is non-judgemental and focused on achieving outcomes that are beneficial to everyone in Glebe. (COW member, COW 2014)

Collective action

Encouraging association and collective action has the potential to build trust, friendship, and mutual aid (Oliver & Pitts, 2013; Putnam, 2001). For other theorists, encouraging association is a political strategy available to community development practitioners that counters the increased individualization of neoliberalism (Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011; Ife & Tesoriero, 2006).

A key motivator for the establishment of COW was to achieve social change through collective action. This purpose informed the group's planning and activities. Advocacy became a core tool used by COW members to seek practical improvements to their daily lives. Their activities have been underpinned by values of respect (for themselves, each other, and COW), diversity, and support (Tan, 2008 p. 1). By coming together to lobby for change, COW indirectly sought to break down the social isolation of older women in the Glebe community (Tan, 2008, p. 1). Together, the members of COW lobbied government bodies and other agencies to create a positive change for older women in Glebe, "…to show that age is no deterrent to implementing change" (COW, 2014). Through their action, COW members formed relationships with influential people, including the Mayor of Sydney, local members of parliaments, senior staff of government departments, and the University of Sydney. Unsurprisingly many of the lobbying activities of COW focused on improving access, particularly for those less mobile in the community.

> This is the sort of stuff that we do. I mean quite big stuff and we do little stuff as well but make the point. Some of our people have disabilities or they're aged with walkers, some people have anxiety and find it hard to get on a bus and go places. (Cow member, Rawsthorne, 2012)

Although not always successful in their campaigning, COW's advocacy raised awareness of the rights and needs of older women in the community, particularly to address the "invisibility" of aging and to claim back respect and value through lobbying for neighborhood and structural improvements within Glebe (Tan, 2008). Participants also reported positively that they thought other people in Glebe had benefited from COW's activities, referencing the increases to public seating and street lighting improvements as examples of community benefit. Individual members also noted a change in their everyday lives.

> People are more courteous to you in the shops. [It is an] ongoing process. General people, specifically youth, are more aware that older people are useful, functional members of society. (COW member, Rawsthorne, 2012)

Gaynor (2009) highlights the risk for groups such as COW to become depoliticalized by substituting self-help for redistribution and self-reliance for state accountability. This appears to have been avoided in the COW group through a continual awareness of individual and structural power (Baines, 2011). COW was not simply about "helping out", but about seeking transformation that enabled participation and the "seeing" of older women as valuable members of the community.

Conclusion

A decade of social action by the COW Group highlights the potential of community development strategies to support older women, including disadvantaged women, living in local neighborhoods. Relational practice appears vital to the creation of the social conditions that shift participation and empowerment from the individual level to collective action. It is this shift to collective action that distinguishes the experiences of COW members from other group-based health-promoting social work interventions. "Bottom-up" processes ensured that group priorities reflected the everyday priorities of COW members and other older women in the community. Individual and collective empowerments were intertwined in COW members' reflections on the impact of their participation.

Lessons from COW and other such groups may assist in addressing the dearth of geronotological content in social work education internationally (Park, 2015, pp. 28–30). Negative stereotypes or attitudes toward older people are well understood as influencing the lack of aging-related content in social work curricula and student's motivation and willingness to work in the field (Park, 2015, pp. 29–30). The value of utilizing community development approaches as a means of transformative learning for social work students lies in developing these respectful relationships, which combat normative understandings of what it means to be older women or in the process of "ageing". COW members seem to have

understood their role as "educators" for students and students on placement acknowledged the impact of the relationships they formed with older women on their learning.

> We usually get a couple of social work students who come to the Glebe Development Project and they usually help with the COW Group, that's one of the things that they learn to do and it's really good for them because like you they get a different idea of older people. They get a different idea of poorer communities and what we can do and most of them have been pretty honest and said that they didn't expect to really relate to us and we've ended up being grandmother and mother figures to lots of them. (Member, COW, 2014)

> It has been such a pleasure working with such a dedicated group of women who are continually willing in their efforts in caring for the Glebe community. I have genuinely enjoyed working with you all. In my time at this placement, I have really admired your level of enthusiasm that you have continually delivered. (Social work student, COW, 2014)

Social work practice informed by community development principles has considerable potential as an effective approach for social work with older women living in the community, particularly those experiencing disadvantage. Community development principles of respectful relationships, empowerment, and action facilitate meaningful participation by older women in decisions that affect their lives. Bus routes, street furniture, and service access all have a direct impact on the capacity of older women to participate as full citizens in community life. Without the collective agency of COW, these issues are likely to have remained invisible to policy makers. Adopting a relational lens in our work with older women is vital to encouraging the formation of associations, supporting collaboration, and creating the social conditions that enable older women to act collectively.

Acknowledgments

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