Abstract
This article discusses risk and protective factors impacting resilience through exploring how and why some mothers were able to achieve positive outcomes (economically, socially, as parents) in spite of adversity. By employing a qualitative research method and participatory action research, data were collected from 20 in-depth individual interviews, 3 focus groups with 18 participants and case profiles from the larger data set. The analysis counters the dominant individualism ideologies, which make the person solely responsible for their situation, and instead, argues that social structures can play important roles in building resilience and capacity. Practices of feminist NGOs reported in this study confirm this. The analysis has implications for changing practices in welfare bureaucracies and supporting feminist and similar NGOs.

Keywords
Lone mothers, poverty, feminism, NGO’s resilience, social welfare

Setting the Context: Single Mothers, Work and Welfare
There is much current research attention on resilience and how it manifests in various population groups, especially those who are vulnerable or marginalised. More particularly, researchers, policymakers and social work practitioners seek to understand how resilience might be supported and sustained. The notion of ‘bouncing back’ often characterises resilient responses to hardship and trauma. How then is a failure to ‘bounce back’ understood? Contemporary public discourse shapes a view that such a recovery comes about because of the grit and determination, the sterling personal qualities of the person who seemingly

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rewards. These discursive elements, supported by the dominant individualism ideologies of the West, remind us continuously that our lives and our good or ill fortune are up to us, shaped by our choices and our willingness to pull ourselves up by our proverbial boot straps. This article seeks to counter these ideas through a discussion of the resilience manifested by single mothers in Canada. Importantly, resilience, as it is used here, is taken out of its usual individual, psychological context to understand from a broad structural, communal and familial frame the barriers to resilient outcomes and the protective factors that are significant in supporting it.

Using data from a large qualitative study on low-income single mothers, the research from which this article reports sought to understand the risk and protective factors impacting resilience through exploring how and why some mothers were able to achieve positive outcomes (economically, socially, as parents) in spite of adversity.

It contributes to the literature on feminist community work, resilience and on single mother-led households as it elaborates on several seemingly very critical protective factors not previously acknowledged in the resilience literature and their correspondence to each other.

Lone mother-led families comprise 20% of Canadian families with children, and women head over 80% of Canadian lone-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2015). This statistic masks a number of complex structural dynamics that continue to shape family breakup in Canada (and in most Western countries). These include women’s earnings, child custody and childcare and the stigma associated with being a single mother, each of which are discussed briefly.

Women continue to work, in significantly disproportionate numbers, in female-gendered occupations and correspondingly are less well paid than their male counterparts. Although women workers in Canada represent about half the workforce, their gains in labour market entry have not been matched by wage equality or their representation in non-female-dominated employment sectors (Catalyst, 2019). Notably, women continue to work in sectors associated with ‘caring’ labour—teaching, nursing, social work and child care—while those with fewer credentials occupy the even less rewarding service sector where labour market precarity in all its forms predominates. Approximately 60% of single mothers in Canada report work in the above labour market sectors, with an additional 25% in the sector identified as business and administration where one suspects that many women occupy the lower level positions in the sector. Single fathers are twice as highly represented in management than are single mothers (Statistics Canada, 2015). More than 50% of lone mother-led families have incomes less than half the national median income, compared to only 10% of other family types (Catalyst, 2019).

In Canada, the majority of single mothers are single by reason of family breakup. While the ‘single mother by choice’ phenomenon has some relevance, it accounts for a small proportion of single mothers in Canada and usually applies to a more economically privileged population. Bearing some similarity to the common tropes heard regularly in the United States, there are teen single moms; however, teenage pregnancy is much less common in Canada (for a variety of interesting reasons beyond the scope of this article) representing only
2.2% of Canadian births compared to about double that in the United States (Luong, 2014). Thus, the major issue shaping the large number of single mothers is the custody arrangements when families breakup. Of the approximately 20% of Canadian children living with a single parent, only 4% live with a single father. There are a variety of reasons for this—some speculative. Fathers’ rights groups argue that this occurs because of judicial bias against fathers while feminist analyses suggest that mothers continue to have stronger ties to their children and so either wish to have custody or are concerned that their children will fare less well in other custodial arrangements. In short, mothers appear to continue to assume their proscribed social roles in caring for their children. In less contested custody arenas, the higher earnings of fathers may make such custody arrangements simply more pragmatic (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Given the high rate of single mothers as sole custodial parents, income disparity then follows somewhat naturally, especially given the lack of affordable, accessible child care. In Canada, child care is a patchwork of public and private arrangements with grossly inadequate numbers of subsidised spaces. In many locales, the care that is available is within largely unregulated private homes. Although successive Canadian federal governments have promised action on a national child care programme, the lack of secure access remains a major impediment to the full employment of a single custodial mother. The very high cost of childcare when it is available negatively impacts accepting low-waged employment, especially if care is needed for more than one child.

American discourse on single mothers and welfare has permeated Canada such that discursive tropes such as ‘babies for welfare’ and single mothers as ‘welfare queens’ have created an environment wherein to be a single mother on low income or worse, reliant on social assistance is to be highly stigmatised. Added to this is the strong association between being racialised and being poor, given that 1 in 5 racialised families live in poverty compared to 1 in 20 non-racialised families (Canada Without Poverty, n.d.; Galabuzi, 2001). Thus, we see that many single mothers face a triple threat of stigmatising discourse: single motherhood, status as a visible minority and low income, perhaps welfare reliant.

Thus, we have set the contextual background for understanding the circumstances in which low-income Canadian single mothers must cope. Given this array of structural and discursive factors, an inquiry into what supports resilient outcomes for these mothers and their children is vital. We suggest that supporting lone mother resilience is policy relevant and economically and socially strategic. Before proceeding to discuss the methodology and findings of this study, we offer the theoretical framing utilised in analysing our data beginning with a discussion of theories of resilience.

**Theoretical Framing: Social Exclusion and Resilience**

Well beyond just being a psychological characteristic, resilience is a multifaceted response to adversity aided by protective factors occurring at individual, familial,
community and structural levels. This shift in understanding—from the psychological to a broader understanding of what can support resilience—has come slowly, largely over the past 20 years as more resilience research has been done (Caragata et al., 2018). Still, often in the public consciousness, the idea persists that it is the individual—rather than the environment in which they live—that shapes a resilient outcome. This of course invokes the narrative of the morally ‘bad’ or ‘weak’ person, explaining why some ‘good’ or ‘strong’ people cope and others seemingly fail to cope. Detailed and nuanced inquiry into the barriers and protective factors that hinder or support resilience is hence critical to challenging these popular narratives.

An additional common understanding of resilience has been the idea of ‘bouncing back’; hardship strikes, one falters and then after a time, one returns to a functional coping life. Our research favours seeing resilience as a spiral such that resilient outcomes may be seen as ‘changing the game’ rather than recovering to ‘what was’ or ‘bouncing back’. Furthermore, we suggest there are different types of resilience that may appear differently over time. And the barriers and protective factors that support resilience are individually specific; a protective factor for one person might be a barrier for someone else. What constitute barriers and protective factors can also vary over time. For example, neighbour relations might be very important for a single mother with very young children, but other neighbourhood issues and conditions may become barriers to resilience as her children become teenagers.

Both barriers and protective factors related to supporting resilience are relational. That is to say that if there is strong support in one area, it may matter less that there is a barrier in another area. Again, by way of example, if a single mother reliably receives child support from an ex-partner, it likely suggests that this relationship will be less of a barrier to her wellbeing even if the relationship itself is difficult. Although the relationship itself may or may not be a protective factor—the income is. Additionally, the regular receipt of this income may mean that welfare or whatever other income she receives—may also be less of a barrier to her resilience. To better situate this understanding in the lives of low-income single mothers, we build on Amartya Sen’s work on social exclusion suggesting that it is critical to see the relational nature of poverty and disadvantage and how these issues square with notions of social justice (Sen, 2000, 2009). Living in low income, being reliant on welfare shapes life experiences well beyond the experiences of material poverty. The resulting deprivation is cumulative and intersecting, affecting all life realms. This understanding has sparked an interest in how social networks and social capital may ameliorate social disadvantage and their lack, compound it. This of course intersects nicely with understanding resilience, as social capital might be seen as a key protective factor in supporting resilience and it is possible to see—as this article elucidates—how it manifests in all of the spheres of exclusion: economic, socio-political, spatial and subjective. We turn now to a brief detailing of the methodology of the research discussed here.
Methodology

This research is grounded in a belief in participatory action research (PAR) and engaging research participants as meaningful knowers in guiding research processes and outcomes. PAR aspires to develop the capacity of those involved in research (Ryan et al., 2011; Warr et al., 2011) through consciousness raising about the social context in which they live (Burns & Schubotz, 2009) and the issue that is the focus of the research (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010). A core element of PAR is the support of researcher participation and the democratisation of the research process. PAR does this by sharing ownership of research with those affected by the issue being studied (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010; Pollack & Caragata, 2010; Warr et al., 2011) and by doing research with rather than on individuals (Heron & Reason, 2006; Khan et al., 2013).

Related to the above identified goals and epistemological underpinnings of PAR, it is important to provide some detailing of how the broader research initiative honoured these important PAR criteria. We began by utilising focus groups of single mothers to initially shape our understandings of the issues and how these were likely to be seen by respondents; peer interviewers were actively involved in shaping the interview guides.

Data analysis was done by small teams that included groupings of academics, students and peer interviewers; these groups then met together as a form of data analysis triangulation. Finally, analysed data and our interpretations thereof were reviewed through a series of member checks. These processes added time and complexity but both sharpened and validated our findings and respected the PAR process.

Specific to this project, we conducted three key informant focus groups with 18 lone mothers to explore their understandings of resilience to guide our subsequent inquiry. Subsequent to the focus groups’ shaping of our processes, we utilised a large longitudinal qualitative data set of interviews with low-income single mothers across Canada to develop case ‘profiles’ of resilient and non-resilient lone mothers. We selected a subset of 18 lone mothers (on social assistance with at least one child living with her) from a data set of 104 lone mothers in 3 Canadian cities, Toronto, St John’s and Vancouver. Selection was based on what appeared to be resilient outcomes over the 5-year span of the research. We ensured diversity by age, location, education and inclusion of Indigenous, immigrant and visible minority women. Of the 18 women from the original study/data set, 15 agreed to be interviewed, 5 in each of St John’s, Vancouver and Toronto. Six ‘cases’ were also chosen from this same data set that showed a lack of resilience in order to triangulate our definitions and analyses. Throughout the above selection processes, we triangulated our selections by each of three research team members identifying sets of participants and then through an inter-coder reliability process, we identified a final set that reflected each team member’s perspectives. Life history profiles were subsequently developed.
Five lone mothers who were not on social assistance or part of the original data set were identified and interviewed to further triangulate our data as all of the original longitudinal data set participants were on social assistance and we wished to assess whether this receipt itself might be a significant barrier. The data reported here are from these 20 in-depth individual interviews and 3 focus groups with 18 participants as well as case profiles from the larger data set.

The methodological process included identifying initial descriptive codes that were then modified creating broader categories, which Saldaña (2016) describes as collections or groupings of codes. This process of coding and categorisation enabled the identification of themes and concepts by which we can understand the data and its implications. Inter-coder reliability was established again at this subsequent level though the processes described above. NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to code and thematically analyse the data. All data collection, management and retention processes were approved by the relevant ethics boards.

Findings
The data from this study confirm some findings common to research on resilience. These include the idea that resilience is manifested differentially over time, that what constitutes a barrier or protective factor is specifically related to an individual’s experience, and that resilience is a more complex and multifaceted phenomena than is implied by the simple idea of ‘bouncing back’ (Mackay, 2003; Masten, 2001, 2018). The theoretical value of work on resilience is supported by this current work as is the more recent understanding of resilience as an outcome that can be supported through community and institutional structures and resources.

A critical and unanticipated finding from this broader work was the importance of a small subsection of the social service system—community-based and women-centred NGOs. This represents a new contribution to the literature on resilience and it is these findings that are the focus of this article. The NGOs that are our focus here stood out in appearing to consistently provide important resources to these single mothers and to do so in ways that echoed the best of what perhaps previously typified community work. Their roles included being guides and mentors as well as offering essential instrumental supports and both bridging and bonding capital. Before proceeding to discuss findings, I briefly situate these organisations and reflect on their presence as key actors in the social service system in Canada as well as the impacts on them of neo-liberalist-driven welfare state retrenchment and encroaching new managerialism. Subsequent to this brief discussion, data are presented thematically under the heading of Women-centred NGOs and the themes discussed are Authentic relationships; Flexible and non-hierarchical roles; Building community among service users; and Acting as guides and mentors.

The Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) was established in 1966 as an important tool utilised by the federal government to support the development of a national welfare state in the context of Canadian provincial governments having jurisdiction over welfare. By effectively putting money on the table with certain conditions, provinces were enabled and encouraged to develop social welfare programmes.
Because these CAP dollars coincided with an early point in the women’s movement, feminist advocacy efforts supported the development of a wide variety of feminist and women-centred organisations. These included shelters for women experiencing abuse, networking and educational programmes, rape crisis and family planning centres and many other such organisations. These were the programmes that stood out as key protective factors supporting the resilience of the women in this study, even though it is these same organisations that have borne the brunt of significant cuts to social service spending (Allen, 1993; Bezanson, 2006; Gauthier, 2012). Such spending in Canada was dramatically targeted during the 1980s, and although it has begun a very slow climb back—the climb still takes such spending to a level well below the OECD average. Canada’s spending on social welfare at 17.3% of GDP is at the low end compared to most western European countries that spend in the neighbourhood of 25% or more of their GDP’s on social expenditures; the United States spends 18.7%. Palley (2018) eloquently describes what has occurred as neoliberalism’s war against the welfare state and these data suggest that this war has been waged more successfully in Canada than in many other Western nations. This has left the not-for-profit welfare state organisations, particularly those that operate at the grassroots, especially vulnerable with significantly reduced funding. It is noteworthy too that many of these types of organisations were established during the second wave of the women’s movement where there was both state capacity and public appetite for recognising the long-ignored needs and rights of women. This included at least a marginal acknowledgement of the prevalence and insidiousness of intimate partner violence and its predominantly women victims. To comment further on this idea of a ‘public appetite’ for these issues, the current ‘Me Too’ movement warrants acknowledgement. The movement, identifying and naming, corroborating and claiming the prevalence and magnitude of women’s experience of sexual harassment and assault has had momentum and hopefully begun to fully reawaken a broader public awareness and outrage. This movement and its precursors are highly relevant to the experiences of the single mothers participating in this study.

Furthermore, re-emphasising the diversity of the research participants engaging in this study, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the critical feminist scholarship of Roth (1999), Thompson (2002) and others who argue the overlooked importance of Black and other racialised women in contributing to feminist challenges relating to the interlocking oppressions of race, class and gender. These critiques and analyses are important in understanding the reported experiences of some participants who note particularly their support by not only women-centred organisations but also Black and racialised women in ways that made them feel seen and recognised.

**Women-Centred NGOs**

Women-centred NGOs appeared through every interaction as a protective factor that supported resilient outcomes. This contrasted markedly with the mothers’ variable experiences with the formal social service system—experienced by
some women, as a protective factor and by some—as an additional experience of adversity. Supportive NGOs were characterised as small, operating less formally and responsive in focused ways across a wide array of issues. The staff in these organisations, with a wide range of credentials, tended to work less hierarchically and frequently from an explicit feminist orientation. Such an orientation suggests operating at epistemological, ontological as well as praxis levels. The emancipation of women and other desired societal changes recognise and challenge the distribution of power between men and women. Objectives usually include engaging with women’s lived social realities with a view to supporting change. It is important to acknowledge that at play is both the organisational structure and ideological positioning of the NGOs that enabled these more flexible and responsive staff roles, as well as the way in which the staff took up these different styles of performing their work. In considering these organisations and their work, it seems clear that there is a necessary interplay between the organisational framework and the ways staff respond. This interplay is framed by an organisational structure that supports and recognises staff as skilled and committed workers. Staff hiring is often explicitly focused on values and a feminist orientation to the work. In this context then, staff take up their roles with a measure of freedom and autonomy as the guiding principle of their work with their women clients is, as mentioned above, engaging fully with the women’s lived social realities.

A thematic presentation of the data and findings follows beginning with the theme of authentic relationships.

**Authentic Relationships**

The feminist or women’s-centred organisations discussed here generally appear to have supported a loosening of traditional staff boundaries. Women did not describe staff as friends—but they felt that there was a real relationship—offering both bonding and bridging capital. Bonding social capital is generally seen as relationships between members of the same social, economic and lifeworld groupings, whereas bridging social capital is that which enables connections into other social strata. While both are important for social wellbeing, Robert Putman in his book *Bowling Alone* discussed bonding social capital is good for ‘getting by’ and bridging as crucial for ‘getting ahead’ (Putnam, 2000). The comments of Erika, Dion and Karen are reflective of the types of relationships that made women feel like staff were reliably in their lives in a genuine and appropriate way with respectful but non-professional or hierarchical boundaries.

[The staff] at the community center, they’re all great to me. When I got laid off, I went over there and I cried on Bonnie’s shoulder… and, like, I can go over there and talk whenever I want. You know, involvement in the community, I got so much, more now [that I’m connected there]. (Erika, Panel 1, St John’s)

But, you know, she actually really, you know, I mean, she talked to me [like a real person]. Dion too commented.
I know she’s not my friend exactly, but she doesn’t keep herself up here [holding her hand above her head], she tells me stuff about her life and similar things she’s faced so that I know she really understands and doesn’t judge. It makes a difference. (Karen, Panel 1, Vancouver)

Much as Dion states, we use the descriptor ‘authentic relationships’ to signify that although these women-centred staff did not represent themselves as friends, they were truly and fully themselves with their clients, attentive to not building false expectations but giving of relationality, warmth and companionability in ways that appeared to differ markedly from the usual relationships between workers and clients.

**Flexible and Non-hierarchical Roles**

The data support these staff and their agencies as being key connectors to a wide range of other protective factors—supporting access to education, jobs, family supports and child care. Women also appeared to reclaim their sense of agency through these interactions. We suggest that this may derive from attempts by these feminist-based NGOs to minimise hierarchy and the power relationships that are so central to most public social service delivery.

Beyond their mandate of a safe place to stay, shelter staff supported women applying for social assistance, subsidised housing, subsidised childcare and legal aid, in addition to providing in-house programmes and connections to courses. Lillian describes a shelter worker driving her to another city:

I came in one night just as they [women’s center] were about to close. I’d been staying with my kids at a friend’s. I’d thought we were ok there, then [abusive partner] showed up and started pounding on the door. We were all scared. My friend’s husband came home and told [abusive partner] to leave but then he also said we had to go, it wasn’t safe for his family. He drove me over and I went in desperate. I didn’t know where we could go. [The worker] got on the phone right away, made sure me and the kids were ok and then she just started hunting for a safe place for us. Took her a long time. Finally, she put down the phone and really smiled at me, a really nice reassuring smile. She said “let’s go get your kids”. We did and then she took us out for pizza and then to another city a few hours away where she’d arranged a place for us. It was nice and she stayed for a long time till we could get settled. I always felt bad about her having that long drive back late at night. She always kept in touch and checked up on us.

Another participant described to a women-centred staff her frustration with the courses that welfare offered as part of their employment supports, complaining that they were useless and repetitive.

Alice describes the worker’s reaction: She just said, who is your welfare worker, then she said I’m going to call her, I’ll talk to her and then you tell her what you just told me, you’re smart, you need a program that will build your skills and help you get a real job. That’s what happened. With her sitting right beside me, I had the courage to really speak out. It worked.
Alice’s experience speaks not only to effective advocacy for the women with other agencies and building connections to training and employment but also to supporting the feelings of agency which are so critical to overcoming hardship and managing in the social service system. Somewhat ironically it is this sense of agency that is so often stripped away by services that expect and require client ‘compliance’.

Building Community Among Service Users

These NGOs also served as a hub for developing relationships with other women with shared history and circumstances—facilitating the bonding capital that is sometimes absent for vulnerable people. Although the value of supporting linkages to other women in similar circumstances and the emotional support that might accrue from these connections might seem obvious and their minimal cost attractive as a service option, these initiatives appeared to be rare. In fact, some organisations reportedly actively resisted any attempts by clients to engage in networking activities. The author, who worked closely with a major welfare delivery body, proposed supporting such groups for single mothers on assistance, even volunteering the funding for a support staff. These requests were repeatedly denied for reasons ranging from organisational risk if the group ‘got up to something’, to ‘participants spreading misinformation’ and, of course, ‘such an activity is just not feasible at this time’.

In contrast, the women-focused NGOs reported on here frequently engaged in these types of initiatives, often driven by clients’ requests. Erika, Laura and Pamela’s comments all reflect these approaches to supporting social network building. In some cases, such as Erika’s, it was deliberate and focused, but as Pamela and Laura’s comments indicate, there was a recognition that relationship building will happen organically if it is supported and that these personal relationships will be essential to women being able to sustain themselves in their communities in a happy and healthy way.

They [agency] started a cocaine group. It was a closed group. You go in and talk about your life and what’s happening now and get feedback from other people [also trying to quit]. And that group was the best thing that could’ve happened to me, right? It was when I went into good recovery. (Erika, Panel 1, St John’s)

[Through the agency] I built this amazing network of women who knew exactly what I was going through, who had their own strategies for coping, had different experiences. It was someone to vent to who got it…That was really important. (Laura, Panel 1, St John’s)

One of the nice things about the [Women’s] Centre is it was okay for us to just drop in and sort of hang around. It was nice cuz there were other women there too. I made some friends there that have been really important for me. Sometimes the staff would come and just sort of hang out with us, it felt really nice, sort of like a family. (Pamela, Panel 1, Vancouver)
**Acting as Guides and Mentors**

The shelter workers in all three research sites adopted a coordinator/mentor-type role, ensuring that a woman was effectively linked with all necessary supports. It is important to emphasise that this was not what would be traditionally understood as assessment and referral but rather a highly personalised and caring process, quite unregimented and occurring over a time span dictated seemingly by the individual woman’s needs. It is here too that we see the conscious acknowledgement of race. Ella describes this:

As a black single mom, I was used to the service system and the way people looked at me. When I went into… [a feminist NGO centered in a largely racialized neighbourhood with primarily black staff] I could feel the difference right away, no judgment, they knew and they’d felt the crap I had to deal with….

Dion echoes this as she describes a worker going well beyond her work roles and feeling that the worker’s experience as a racialised immigrant was significant in her understanding of Dion’s position.

She’s been an immigrant too [the worker] she knew how much control that man had over me and how my culture didn’t think much of women who tried to leave. I think that’s why she tried so hard to help me.

Suzie describes her worker keeping in touch through her progress to getting her own apartment.

_She’d call me_, and not to threaten or tell me I was in some kind of trouble but just to see how I was doing, if I needed anything, to remind me to drop in, that she was there for me. Who ever heard of that?

Alice describes her complete lack of familiarity with the service system—citing a women’s centre as giving her back her voice and guiding her next steps to essential services.

I had no idea; I didn’t even know that what was happening was called abuse. I saw this sign in their window (women’s service center) and I’d stand there and read about what abuse looked like, day after day I’d go there. One day she comes out and says come in and have some tea, I almost ran but she seemed nice and she was Chinese too so I went. She helped in every way, saved us probably.

Laura’s comment that follows is perhaps the best reflection of the kind of mentoring that appeared to be a common element or style within these organisations. It is perhaps reflective of the hiring practices of many grassroots NGOs that recognise the value of staff with lived experience. We will return to this in our conclusion as it is of particular importance for thinking about the roles of social workers.
Doing the program, I, you know, I made important connections and I learned things about myself and, you know, I got kind of a new path and a new goal. It really helped that some of the leaders had been where I am and where I was, they were models for how you could change without any big talk about it. They just were…. (Laura, Panel 1, St John’s)

Discussion and Conclusion

These findings have important implications for many aspects of social policy and social service provision. They may be especially relevant in an international context wherein there may not exist large-scale state-run services. In these settings, the work described here by small feminist-based NGOs may be more the norm and thus warrant acknowledgement and support. Furthermore, issues of social service funding, the bureaucracy of the public social welfare system, issues of race and racism, a public discourse that vilifies lone mothers and those who are poor, and the pervasive unaddressed violence that women experience are all matters that the experiences of these participants bring to light. Importantly, resilience was supported by and in community, not through the most commonly found models of worker/client relations but through genuine relationship building.

The NGOs so central to these outcomes are among the most marginal and poorly funded players in the Canadian social service delivery system—most vulnerable to the cutbacks which have dominated the current neo-liberal period. Their critical importance relates at least in part to the type of service recipients receive in the broader public realm. Welfare offices that refuse to allow women in with their children, the often-unhelpful surveilling of the poor by child welfare systems, retrenchment of employment insurance so that job loss is less likely to be supported outside the welfare system are all illustrations of ways that the public social service system fails its users. The prevailing principle of least eligibility is an effective deterrent to use of public social services, but the implications, beyond the short-sighted cost saving, may create longer term human cost. Juxtaposed against this system, which should be fully adequate to building and supporting the social wellbeing of Canadians, we see small, under-funded NGOs that in almost all of the cases described here, begin their mandate with strong values statements. These ideological positions, their feminist roots, appear to direct them to service that is truly client-centred unlike the similar service language used by most social welfare organisations. Their client-centeredness, as we have seen here, involves seeing and acknowledging gender, race and class and seeing the life circumstances of the women whose voices are heard here against the social and structural backdrop that has shaped them.

The acknowledgement of these marginalised identities does more perhaps than provide the services and supports needed. It seems plausible that also on offer, provided, is a more ephemeral but profound acknowledgement of the epistemic violence these women feel in their everyday lives. As our previous research has shown (Caragata & Alcalde, 2014), lone mothers on social
assistance have too often been the victims of abuse including childhood sexual abuse and intimate partner violence. For many women, leaving an abusive partner triggered their initial application to social assistance. They know how hard they work; they know that in so much of their life experiences they have been victims of things beyond their control, and they feel, every day, the harsh social judgments visited on them and on their children. This is epistemic violence and its effects are pernicious; robing these families of self-respect and agency and in their stead creating an overwhelming capability deprivation such as Sen (2000, 2009) describes. This idea of a capability deprivation of course challenges traditional ideas of poverty as more simply economic deprivation. The experience, for the women described here, of being on social assistance as a single parent, amounts to so much more than a lack of money. Both work and the income derived from it are critical markers of social status, and when we add to the lack of these, the negative associations with being a single mother, avenues of opportunity are fast eroded.

With respect to considerations of resilience, we can readily see the resilient outcomes that can derive when these women received the supports that were essential to sustaining their basic wellbeing. As the most recent resilience literature makes clear, there are key factors that can support its emergence. One of these well acknowledged in the literature are guides or mentors; social relationships that are responsive to an individual’s particular needs at a particular time. This well describes the work of these feminist-based NGOs.

The practitioners discussed herein who were significant in building capacity and supporting the resilience of their clients were community workers whose boundaries were more flexible and whose professional identities were less status contingent. This raises important questions about community work and the extent it has been able to resist the formalisation and professionalisation that have become dominant in most practice modalities. Grassroots community work can be understood as oriented to social justice, challenging of traditional charity work perspectives as well as creative and collaborative. It has been characterised by relationships between workers and clients being less rule-bound, where the worker knew, or at very least tried to know, the real-life circumstances of the clients she worked with. The criticality of this very real epistemic understanding is at risk when organisations succumb to the pressures of new managerialism (Tsui & Cheung, 2004). The impact of this managerialist discourse and its accompanying credentialisation and bureaucratisation too frequently shape workers’ lives given their status as middle-class professionals with spatial and economic realities that are far from the harsh realities of their clients’ lives. As a consequence, social reform, or even a real grounded understanding of the structural circumstances shaping clients’ lives are often far from their (our) minds. Included in the broader contributions of this article is an acknowledgement of the efficacy of workers in feminist-based NGOs whose work roles challenge these encroaching norms.

While this is a small study from which we must be careful to not over-generalise, these data point to the positive impacts possible from protective factors that support resilience. These protective factors offer pragmatic supports and
importantly facilitate women reclaiming their agency. While an ideal would be a fully funded public sector that brought to the table this very real client-centred mission, in its absence, these feminist-based, grassroots NGOs need both funding and recognition.

It is imperative as well that community and social service workers reflect on their roles as too often, they occupy status positions in more mainstream services and are perhaps the targets of the advocacy efforts by these less professionally centred service providers. And for those workers who continue to do this very grassroots, empathic and committed service, we must ensure the respect of their work and the assurance of secure funding so that their transformational work may continue.

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