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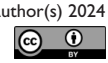

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Using Community Power to Tackle Gender-Based Violence: An Intersectional Theorisation

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Abstract

What is the role of the community in tackling gender-based violence (GBV)? Could communities succeed in ways that states have failed? What approaches could make this possible? This article presents a theoretical discussion of Community Power, a recently codified and influential paradigm in Britain that focuses on 'handing power' to communities to deal with local issues. We are particularly interested in its potential to tackle GBV, a persistent issue with many social determinants relevant to Community Power. Our refractive analysis works on two levels: (1) we explore the possibilities of Community Power in relation to GBV; and (2) we use GBV as a lens on Community Power to illuminate its broader strengths and weaknesses. In doing this, we call for a deeper engagement with the terms 'community' and 'power', which are under-theorised and flattened in the paradigm of Community Power. Applying intersectional theory to this task, we find that Community Power initiatives risk exacerbating the dynamics that underpin GBV. We make suggestions for creating a more GBV-sensitive approach to Community Power, which might also help to enhance this mode of practice in the round.

Keywords

Community Power, gender-based violence, intersectionality, methodology, participatory democracy

Introduction

What is the role of the community in tackling gender-based violence (GBV)? Could communities succeed in ways that states have failed? What approaches could make this possible? These are some of the questions that led us to undertake a theoretical analysis

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exploring the potential of Community Power, a recently codified and influential paradigm in Britain, to respond to – and more importantly, prevent – GBV. Community Power focuses on 'handing power' to communities to deal with local issues. We are particularly interested in its potential to tackle GBV, a persistent issue with many social determinants rooted in communities and thus relevant to Community Power.

GBV refers to acts committed against an individual because of their gender, which cause harm or suffering that can be physical, emotional, and/or sexual. GBV primarily affects cisgender women and gender nonconforming people: however, people of all genders can be victims. It is mostly perpetrated by cisgender men, although people of all genders can be perpetrators. The gendered perpetration and experience of GBV intersects with factors such as race, culture, class, disability, and sexual orientation. GBV includes acts such as stalking, harassment, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, family, and intimate partner violence (Renzetti and Bergen, 2004). It has been theorised as a violent continuum of power and control (Kelly, 1988), which makes Community Power initiatives, which focus on handing power (back) to those who may not have it, pertinent to this social problem.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, changes in the political, economic, and social landscape have led to a growing interest in the community and its transformative potential (Brennan and Israel, 2013). Community-led initiatives and services have a long history, but Community Power is a relatively recent paradigm which ostensibly aims to unify and define this work and facilitate power-sharing relationships between local government and community groups. Community Power sits (sometimes uneasily) alongside similar and older paradigms such as community organising, co-production and community accountability (Downes, 2017; Nabatchi et al., 2017), some of which have vexed (and the latter conflictual) relationships with the state. A significant amount of work exists on GBV within these longer-standing paradigms, especially that of community accountability (Downes, 2017), but there has been little connection yet between GBV and Community Power.

This article aims to explore some of the complexities of Community Power in relation to GBV, paying particular attention to the conceptual framings of the paradigm and how these might play out. Our analysis is refractive: we have not only explored Community Power and its potential to tackle GBV but have also used GBV as a lens on Community Power to illuminate some broader questions about the paradigm. Using this lens calls for a deeper theorisation of the terms 'community' and 'power'. We have applied feminist and intersectional understandings of both terms, to highlight some drawbacks of the Community Power paradigm and offer ways to make it more multidimensional and thus more effective (both in relation to GBV and more generally).

We begin by introducing Community Power and how it operates in theory and in practice. We then explore the potential of Community Power to prevent and respond to GBV, given its focus on issues in communities which are part of the ecology of violence. We situate Community Power within an intersectional theoretical framework and highlight the limitations this reveals. Finally, we discuss suggestions for creating a more GBV-sensitive approach to Community Power, which might also help to evolve the conceptual underpinnings of the Community Power paradigm in general as well as contributing to ecological theorisations of GBV.

Community Power in theory and practice

Think tank New Local set out the key principles of Community Power in its 2019 report *The Community Paradigm*, which drew on a history of ideas (including those of Elinor Ostrom and Ivan Illich) that have influenced progressive public service provision in the United Kingdom and overseas. As a concept, Community Power holds that citizens are capable of a certain level of self-governance without state involvement. As a practice, it consists of 'handing power and resources to communities' to solve their own problems (Lent and Studdert, 2021: 17). New Local (formerly the New Local Government Network) is at the forefront of this paradigm and is an independent think tank based in London that curates a network of more than 70 local councils and other organisations interested in Community Power. Its yearly conference Stronger Things, started in 2020, now hosts more than 1000 delegates from local government, healthcare, voluntary, and community sectors with speakers including National Health Service (NHS) executives, MPs, councillors, and NGO leaders.[1]

As a relatively mainstream, influential, and growing movement, Community Power is worthy of sociological analysis yet is under-researched. It is perhaps especially necessary to scrutinise the paradigm given the role and influence of think tanks in the withdrawal of the British welfare state: the assault on welfare provision by Thatcherite 'free market' think tanks (Slater, 2014), the role of centrist think tanks in New Labour's 'modernisation' of public services through social enterprise (Ball and Exley, 2010), and the 'Big Society' approach favoured by David Cameron's coalition government which gave a social justice gloss to the responsibilisation of individuals and grassroots groups (Slater, 2014).

Community Power situates itself in opposition to what is termed the current 'state-market paradigm' of public services, centring the idea of self-governance and community knowledge in identifying and responding to issues and challenges (Pollard et al., 2021: 7–8). New Local has distanced itself from 'Big Society'-type approaches and argued that it does not seek the withdrawal of the state but the creation of a 'new kind of state' giving people power over public services rather than leaving them to deliver these services themselves (Tiratelli, 2020). In a context of recession and austerity, however, Community Power intersects with contemporary political and governmental agendas around devolution and municipalism in Britain and overseas, which can operate as a means of delegating social provision to local communities (Blok et al., 2022: 15; Daly et al., 2023).

Action taken by local councils and communities can also paradoxically make it more difficult to address the root causes of issues or to develop strategic or preventive action at national levels (Benington, 2007: 14). For example, community initiatives to tackle poverty through food banks do not solve the cost-of-living crisis or address growing gaps in unemployment, housing, disability, and other benefits systems, for which responsibility lies with the state. Community Power, in other words, is a mixed proposition.

Community Power is implemented in Britain by New Local members and other groups through three main strategies: community decision-making, collaboration between communities and public services, and building community capacity and assets (Pollard et al., 2021: 9). There is also an ongoing campaign for a Community Power Act,

which would establish community rights to buy and shape public services and control investment, and create community decision-making covenants (Bell et al., 2022: 5–6). Community Power initiatives can operate in a range of areas including cooperative labour, communal resources, health and housing, neighbourhood security, communal spaces and recreation, and education. This is a largely pragmatic framework that creates space for local authorities and community organisations to work out targeted solutions, given that many of the most important interactions between citizens and governments happen at municipal level (Araujo and Tejedo-Romero, 2016: 886). However, the scope of community self-governance and the role of the state (especially the local state) within Community Power is debated within scholarship and practice (Christens, 2019; Pollard et al., 2021).

In the traditional literature, 'community' has often been used to refer to groups in specific geographical locations. However, emphasising communities of place can homogenise the experiences of diverse groups, and power differentials within locations can also create sub-groups with 'different perceptions, interests, resources and mounts of influence' (Crona and Bodin, 2006: 1–2). Community Power attempts to amalgamate communities of place with 'communities of interest' (Pollard et al., 2021), which is intended to help local authorities and organisations direct resources to subgroups situated at the intersections.

A range of initiatives are included within the paradigm of Community Power: some have been created recently with the input and support of New Local and other organisations, and others are longer-running and perhaps sat within paradigms such as community organising and co-production, before being drawn under the umbrella of Community Power. In this way, the paradigm can be seen as something of a tautology: it is unclear whether this is a new approach or merely a new way of describing work already being undertaken.[2]

In the area of health, social prescribing consists of healthcare professionals referring individuals to a range of non-clinical, local support services. An example of this is *Mind in Harrow*, a mental health charity which offers a range of services alongside talking therapies, such as art courses, dance, and yoga, and uses link workers who liaise with GPs. Similarly, practitioner collaboration refers to healthcare and/or welfare providers working with individuals outside their profession to provide additional support. For instance, the *Bromley by Bow Centre* in East London both provides healthcare and helps community members learn new skills, improve their well-being and gain employment. Support can also be provided in the community by peer-support networks, which are groups for people who share similar backgrounds or experiences to assist each other.

In terms of political and economic participation, citizen assemblies are collections of community members selected to create an action plan on a particular issue. For example, the *Camden Climate Assembly* was created to map out a long-term climate response by the Camden Borough Council in London. Participatory budgeting occurs when community members become involved in allocating public funds. An example of this is the 'Cost of the School Day' Project in Midlothian. This programme ran throughout 2018, with events held for primary school children, their families, parent council members, and school staff to assess projects to reduce the cost of schooling for poorer families. A total

of £72,999 was allocated to projects for marginalised families in the area. Community asset transfer is the process of transferring publicly owned buildings or land to community organisations, such as the 2012 Newcastle City Council transfer of Jesmond Library to 'Friends of Jesmond Library'. Run by volunteers, the library offers a free service and events and activities for the community.

The success of Community Power initiatives is measured in various ways. A key metric is well-being, which prioritises experience over rigid quantitative indicators (Pollard et al., 2021). Indices such as the Social Progress Index, the Public Health Outcomes Framework, the Happy City Index and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health Index measure wellbeing or 'quality of life' focused on broad indicators such as (in) equality, health, education and sustainability, more specific ones such as life expectancy, morbidity, population, teenage conception rates, workplace sickness absence, and crime, and others which are more difficult to measure such as loneliness and prosperity. These indexes usually use methods such as surveys and focus groups to collect quantitative and qualitative data, although data are often collected using sample sizes that may not always be representative, especially of more marginalised members of communities (Godward, 2020).

Community Power and the ecology of GBV

Very few Community Power initiatives specifically tackle GBV and those that do tend to take the shape of peer-support groups in which women experiencing GBV support one another. An example of this is *ReGroup* by Rise in Brighton and Hove, an 8-week intensive peer-education and consciousness-raising group for women who have left violent relationships. Such community support networks evoke 1970s models of 'women helping women' and can reach people who cannot access statutory services (Riley, 1990). Models such as this can also be applied to support perpetrators to change their behaviour (Douglas et al., 2008).

However, it is a mistake to think that GBV must only be tackled by specific and targeted initiatives: Community Power initiatives in general have potential to both prevent GBV and support survivors. GBV is framed most obviously by gender and intersecting inequalities, which tend to be the focus of targeted projects and services. Nonetheless, there are other social determinants of GBV which are relevant to Community Power in general such as poverty, homelessness, education, and immigration status. Moreover, intervening at the level of these social determinants is crucial, as very often, targeted initiatives will tackle GBV when the social conditions that cause it are already embedded.

Ecological theorisations of GBV (initially violence against women) conceptualise it as multifaceted and grounded in an interplay between individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors at micro, meso, macro, and exo-system levels (Heise, 1998; see also Michau et al., 2015). Such theorisations emerged out of a sense that the feminist community had been reluctant to consider factors other than patriarchy in conceptualising GBV (Heise, 1998: 263), although gendered social norms, or male dominance and entitlement taught through patriarchy, are still positioned as the main cause of GBV in the ecological model (Heise, 1998: 270–280; Michau et al., 2015; Taft and Small, 2014: 1672).

Ecological theorisations of GBV see community (and sometimes culture) as key, understanding it first and foremost as a site of social norm generation (see for example Michau et al., 2015: 1677). Ending violence against women, for Heise et al. (1999: 38), means changing community norms and cultural attitudes. The social norms approach is prominent in primary prevention of GBV led by organisations such as the World Health Organisation, United Nations Population Fund and other global health bodies.[3] These bodies take a public health approach, and programming tackles social norms alongside other interventions such as improving interpersonal skills and ending substance abuse (Brush and Miller, 2019: 1639; see also Heise, 1998; Michau et al., 2015; Storer, et al., 2016).

The ecological approach to ending GBV tends to position intervention at other levels of the social ecology as a way to change attitudes and social norms (see for example Michau et al., 2015: 1673). However, there are other social determinants of GBV which are not merely the source or result of gendered social norms, and which are tackled by Community Power initiatives. Indeed, Community Power initiatives could make a major contribution both practically and conceptually here, helping to ground ecological theorisations more solidly in material structures.

For instance, poverty is a major social determinant of GBV. Although violence occurs across all class groups, unemployment and low socioeconomic status is a predictor of domestic violence, whether this is linked to stress, relationship strain, lack of access to education, overcrowding, or poverty itself (Fahmy and Williamson, 2018; Heise, 1998: 273–274; Storer, 2016; Taft and Small, 2014). Scholarship also highlights the increased vulnerability of homeless women to GBV (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Social isolation and lack of community has also been shown to have a determining influence on the incidence of domestic violence as well as on the ability to access help and support (Heise, 1998: 275).

Although education tends to be seen in ecological theorisations only as it relates to the inculcation of social norms (see for example Michau et al., 2015), global statistics highlight a strong correlation between education level and both GBV perpetration and victimisation which is also linked to socioeconomic status (Costa et al., 2015; Erten and Keskin, 2018). This is not to say those with high levels of education do not perpetrate or experience GBV, but that lack of access to education can create additional vulnerabilities. Lack of access to education and low socioeconomic status also have the potential to exacerbate other social determinants of GBV such as alcohol and drug dependency (Erten and Keskin, 2018).

Insecure immigration status is both a major risk factor for GBV and an impediment to leaving violent situations and accessing support (Anitha, 2010; Voolma, 2018). If women are dependent on their partner's immigration status this can create opportunities for domestic violence and coercive control (Anitha, 2010: 463). Fear of deportation also makes contacting statutory services precarious, and in the UK people with insecure immigration status have no recourse to public funds, which makes them ineligible for many services and routes out-of-family violence (Voolma, 2018: 1832). Racism among service providers, including the assumption that domestic violence is part of particular cultures, can also be a deterrent to support-seeking (Anitha, 2010; Voolma, 2018: 1833). Insecure immigration status is also likely to result in low socioeconomic status and social isolation, which are additional factors contributing to GBV (Heise, 1998).

Considering all this, Community Power interventions focused on any or all these social determinants of GBV could assist GBV prevention and response. Furthermore, if Community Power initiatives in the areas of poverty, education, and/or migration were delivered with an awareness of GBV and linked to co-produced services, this might also enable and support the prevention planning of specialist GBV services that are often over-stretched and reduced to simply responding to crises. Community-led or co-produced projects and services also help build the community's own capacity to respond to problems (Mitlin and Bartlett, 2018: 365). This develops alternatives to calling the police, who can escalate violent situations (Nnawulezi et al., 2022: NP21967). It can also help nurture alternatives to statutory and publicly funded GBV services, which can be particularly helpful for those who find access difficult or impossible (such as women with insecure immigration status).[4]

In the political arena, deliberative democratic methods and citizens' assemblies can enable communities to think through complex local issues together, which might include both GBV and social determinants such as poverty, border legislation and access to education. Participatory political initiatives can also allow ethnic minority and migrant groups to have a voice. This is particularly relevant to more marginalised cultural communities who can be reluctant to engage with the mainstream for fear of being demonised and misunderstood and who have seldom been included in conversations on GBV interventions and primary prevention (Anitha, 2010). Participatory democratic forums, if run properly, could enable these issues to be discussed and create local ways of dealing with (often draconian) national legislation that can be a key tool used by perpetrators to both enable violence and prevent help-seeking (Anitha, 2010; Voolma, 2018).

A 2020 study of homeless women who had experienced GBV in Haringey, London, found that local authorities were detached from their lived experiences and the reality of life in shelters (AVA and Peer Researchers, 2020). This suggests a key role for community-based initiatives: both projects focused on support and community decision-making that involves homeless people. This might include participatory budgeting, which is an obvious way to tackle the causes of poverty and homelessness and could therefore help to intervene at a key level of the GBV ecology. Another appropriate practice would be asset transfer by transforming already-existing unused spaces into social housing, for both homeless women and women in disempowered financial situations who find it difficult to leave an abusive partner. Community ownership and wealth building is also helpful in terms of retaining social and economic capital in the community, supporting people into education and employment, and forming co-operatives and other interventions to reduce poverty (Prinos and Manley, 2023).

At present, Community Power initiatives focused on education, poverty, homelessness, migrants' rights, and other issues do not appear to engage explicitly with GBV prevention or support in terms of the potential impact of their work. A related exception exists around hate crime: the citizens' assembly held in the London borough of Waltham Forest, which focused on an increase in hate crimes in the area (Stevens and Ellis, 2020). Although Waltham Forest experiences moderate rates of poverty, homelessness, and inequality, within this assembly poverty and inequality were discussed in the context of hate crime and specific recommendations were made. However, this is

indeed an exception. We see this lack of engagement with GBV among Community Power initiatives as a missed opportunity, given their obvious potential for impact at various levels of the GBV ecology.

However, GBV is an issue that needs to be approached carefully or there is a risk of doing more harm than good. We will now turn our lens from a focus on how Community Power initiatives could help prevent GBV, to examining how what know about GBV can tell us about the potential limitations of Community Power. To be confident that Community Power initiatives could have a positive impact in relation to GBV, some significant drawbacks of the Community Power paradigm would need to be addressed. These are largely to do with its lack of conceptual depth and insufficient critical engagement with the ideas of both 'community' and 'power'.

Situating Community Power within an intersectional framework

Both 'community' and 'power' are under-theorised and flattened in the Community Power paradigm, which rests on the important but largely unelaborated principle that 'power' should be 'handed' to the 'community'. 'Community' tends to deliberately function as an abstract ideal, so the paradigm can be inclusive of as many different types of communities as possible. New Local defines a community as 'any network of individuals collaborating more or less formally to achieve a shared, socially beneficial goal' (Lent and Studdert, 2021: 38) and argues that defining the notion of 'community' too precisely 'would disempower many communities and make it harder for them to improve their lives' (Lent, 2022). This reduction of community to what Levine (2017) calls a 'floating signifier' with no stable meaning does mean that it can be taken up and deployed for a variety of purposes and projects, but also – paradoxically – homogenises the construct of 'community' as the term is somewhat empty of content.

The vagueness of the construct of 'community' makes it more difficult to understand power and to especially acknowledge power relations *within* communities. In contrast to the floating signifier of 'community', the idea of power in Community Power is a rigid and static conception of a thing that can be possessed and is usually possessed outside the community, by the state. While 'community' drifts, 'power' is fixed. Community Power demands that power is handed over by the state to the community, an action that tends to be situated as uncomplicatedly beneficial and which becomes a placeholder for a meaningful concept of power. 'A different understanding of power', for New Local, means that 'power needs to be shared with individuals and communities' (Lent and Studdert, 2021: 56). The definition of 'power' then becomes an account of where it is located, its transfer to the realms of 'the community' or a 'decisive shift in the balance of power' (Bell et al., 2022: 7), rather than a statement about what power *actually is*.

The problems with this 'empty container' of Community Power become especially apparent when examining it through the lens of GBV. GBV is both a consequence and cause of unequal power relations related to gender and intersecting inequalities, and these are often power relations *within* communities. This calls for a more intersectional understanding which sees power as multidimensional and mobile and communities as

both rooted and diverse. Intersectionality, the term popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) but with a much longer history in the tradition of Black feminism, is an account of economic, political, social, and cultural life that acknowledges differences within groups as well as between them. The concept of 'woman', for example, is fractured by categories such as race and class, so women may not all have the same experiences or interests. Intersectional theory encourages us to see communities as a 'tapestry of intersections of privilege and disadvantage' which are related to structural inequalities, social norms, and hegemonic ideas (Hill Collins, 2017: 25). Alongside the 'big three' of race, class, and gender, there are intersecting relations around factors such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, culture, and age (see for example Hill Collins and Bilge, 2020; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008).

Intersectional theory provides a nuanced and dynamic account of power. For Hill Collins (2017: 26), there are four domains of power: (1) the structural domain, constituted by public policy and social institutions; (2) the disciplinary domain, which refers to our actions that can either uphold dominant rules and norms or oppose them; (3) the cultural domain, meaning the hegemonic ideas that justify social inequalities and the counter-hegemonic ideas that challenge them; and (4) the interpersonal domain, which refers to the multiple experiences of individuals, shaped by intersecting oppressions. These sit within a 'matrix of domination', which refers to the large systems of heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism that shape the world. Importantly, these large systems combine in different ways in different places and times, as a 'structuring structure' for the different domains of power (Hill Collins, 2017: 22). This may seem abstract, but it is practically useful in terms of understanding power as a dynamic and context-specific process that happens at and between macro, meso, and micro levels.

An intersectional understanding of Community Power might acknowledge that communities are not cushioned from broader power relations and interests, which shape the power relations within them. They are where we encounter all four domains of power, which mediate and produce experiences of both domination and oppression at group and individual levels. The relationship between communities and the structural domain of power is acknowledged in the Community Power literature to the extent that the state is positioned as the structure which 'has' the power communities need. However, this only takes us some way towards an understanding of the interactions between communities and the structural domain and is especially problematic in its lack of engagement with the dynamics by which communities are responsibilised in the context of austerity and neoliberal governance, often through initiatives that look a lot like Community Power. Furthermore, the ways in which communities also interact with disciplinary and cultural domains of power (social norms and hegemonic ideas) are even less well theorised in Community Power (and this is where an amalgamation of Community Power with ecological theorisations of GBV could be extremely helpful).

Whether 'community' refers to people living in a neighbourhood, a common identity or way of life, a set of shared interests, a shared culture or religion, or a racialised, ethnic, or national group (Hill Collins, 2017: 28), intersectional theory also tells us that the people most likely to be able to *speak for* any community tend to be its most privileged members, even if the community itself is marginalised (Lugones and Spelman, 1983:

574; see also Carastathis, 2014). This is directly relevant to Community Power: local initiatives tend to be dependent on local leadership for successful implementation (Campbell, 2014: 49; Sullivan, 2007; Zanbar and Itzhaky, 2013), and the paradigm centres local leaders as change agents (New Local, 2022).

The campaign for a Community Power Act, for instance, represents self-defined 'local leaders' who are 'frustrated by their lack of power' to shape their communities (Young Foundation, 2023). However, 'handing power' to local leaders based on a notion of the community as homogeneous means that the idea of 'community' could be used to pursue the self-interest of dominant or advantaged groups, who may often be the most privileged men (Bradshaw, 2009; Mason, 2000; Shaw and Mayo, 2016), or to give power to officials or even corporations who invoke the ideal of 'the community' for their own ends (Levine, 2017: 1156). The construction of 'community', then, can be a strategy of power.

Power relations within communities, as well as between communities and states, also mean that the community has a key role in perpetrating, enabling, and concealing violence. The reasons for this can range from more benign to more insidious: for example, reluctance to acknowledge or deal with GBV can be a result of the over-policing of groups such as Black communities (Crenshaw, 1991: 1253, 1256–1257) in the structural domain of power, which relates to hegemonic ideas about Black men as violent. In this situation, GBV becomes a complex and sometimes tortuous issue due to fear of harsh punishments, family separations, or simply contributing to racist tropes. Addressing GBV can also be seen as divisive by communities. For example, within certain Christian communities, norms around marriage and sexuality relying on models of male headship and female submission (Nash, 2006) mean that challenging GBV can be deeply unsettling. Finally, and most insidiously, there is substantial evidence of communities linked to institutions, such as the military, schools, and the church, enabling and covering up violence (see for example Firmin, 2020; Gray, 2016; Terry, 2015). This is to do with entrenched power relations and inequalities within communities, especially when these are formalised as institutions.

When abuse is denied or covered up to protect those entrenched power relations (and the powerful individuals – often men – who embody them), the floating signifier of 'community' can be deployed to dismiss, undermine, and exclude survivors who speak out. For instance, Downes (2017) highlights how survivors within UK left activist communities can be ignored, silenced, or even attacked and treated with hostility, which can be more harmful than the initial abuse. She writes: 'To make sure nobody listens to survivors and their supporters and reunify the community around already established values and common goals, they must be made wrong' (Downes, 2017: 45). Similar dynamics have been reported in some religious communities, with concerns about how the disclosure will affect the community taking precedence over supporting survivors (Katzenstein and Fontes, 2017: 760). Likewise, Gray's (2016) research on the British military quotes a participant who said: 'They tell you that quite clearly . . . we're a family, we look after our own, but the head of the family happens to be . . . the serviceman. So that's who they're looking after' (p. 919). In these examples, the boundaries of 'community' are drawn to marginalise or exclude individuals seen as challenging, to maintain stability (which often means maintaining established hierarchies and hegemonic ideas).

If we fill the empty container of Community Power with more substantive conceptual content, it quickly becomes apparent that 'handing power' to the 'community' can often mean working through and reinforcing its existing power structures, which are shaped by gender and intersecting inequalities. Intersectional concepts of power understand it as something constantly in (re)production and circulation, both within communities and between communities, institutions, and authorities. Intersectionality also tells us that positions of privilege and disadvantage are produced through social interaction (Severs et al., 2015): therefore, initiatives involving local communities have the potential to both undermine *and underline* these unequal positionalities. As Hill Collins (2017) puts it, communities are 'important sites for *reproducing* intersecting power relations as well as contesting them' (p. 28) (our emphasis).

The Community Power literature acknowledges that initiatives may disproportionately improve the position of more privileged groups and individuals, understanding this in relation to complexities around participation and the various forms of capital and resources required (Ambrens et al., 2020; Bailey, 2014; Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). A GBV lens on this, however, takes these points a step further and suggests that if not undertaken mindfully, Community Power initiatives could *facilitate violence* by reifying internal power relations and concealing these through the construction of 'community' as homogeneous and benign. A GBV lens on Community Power, then, would centre power relations *within* the community and would produce a cautious and conscious approach to working through and with local leadership.

In contrast to the focus of Community Power on community leaders, intersectionality generates ideas around coalitions and complex solidarities. Hill Collins (2017) describes 'flexible solidarity' as a coalition between groups 'who have a shared commitment to a social ideal, e.g. freedom, social justice or democracy, or to a shared social problem, yet who take very different paths into coalition building' (p. 37). For Hill Collins (2017: 35), this can also become a definition of 'community': this is similar to, yet more dynamic than, concepts of community merely focused on 'interest', which tend to be homogenised through local leadership in much the same way as communities of place.

These coalitional ideas resonate with New Local's definition of community as a network of individuals collaborating towards a common goal, but there are important differences. Most crucially, intersectional ideas about solidarity are explicitly positioned within an understanding of intersecting oppressions and power relations and how these can shape the coalition-building process in negative ways. Such intersectional concepts of power and how it circulates within communities demand care in creating coalitions (Hill Collins, 2017: 37), and can also help to fill the 'empty container' of community while ensuring it remains as inclusive as possible.

The idea of coalition is also perhaps more helpful than the more commonly used term 'inclusion', 'which seems to presuppose the very same asymmetries of power that intersectionality contests' (Carastathis, 2014: 311). In contrast to inclusion, which is more consistent with existing approaches to Community Power in that it conceptualises power as something powerful groups have and 'hand over' to the less powerful, coalitional work sees it as something that circulates in relational configurations. Such work creates the possibility to reconfigure power relations in communities, and between communities and the state, due to the role of representation and social interaction in (re)shaping

positions of privilege and disadvantage (Severs et al., 2015: 347). This also helps to fill the 'empty container' of community, conceptualising it as a set of connections made on uneven, but constantly shifting, ground. An awareness of, and ability to work with, this concept of community might be the difference between whether Community Power reproduces inequalities (and associated violence) in communities or contests them (cf Hill Collins, 2017: 28).

Towards more intersectional and GBV-sensitive Community Power

Classic feminist theorisations of GBV (see for example Kelly, 1988) understand it as a crime of power and control, which connects strongly with the framework of Community Power. Community Power initiatives also have great potential to tackle the social determinants of, or multiple structural conditions which give rise to, GBV. The ecology of GBV centres gender inequality but also includes significant social problems and dynamics such as poverty, housing, education, border enforcement, the built environment, and other factors. These factors are tackled by many Community Power initiatives that do not necessarily focus on gender or GBV, but which as a result have significant GBV-prevention potential. Paradoxically, both the possibilities and limitations of Community Power in relation to GBV stem from the concepts of 'community' and 'power'. If we do not engage critically with these concepts, there is a risk that some Community Power initiatives might exacerbate the dynamics within communities that underpin GBV.

Critical engagement with the conceptual underpinnings of Community Power needs to be developed *with and by*, and not for, communities. Intersectional theory suggests that marginalised groups, with shared histories and shared locations in relations of power, are best placed to understand the systems and structures that oppress them (Hill Collins, 1997: 376). This is not to do with identity but with inequality and its relation to knowledge, and how 'shared angles of vision' (Hill Collins, 1997: 377) are created through struggle both between and within communities. All this suggests that power relations within the community and without should consistently be examined and challenged, through collective processes and space for reflection, as part of Community Power initiatives.

Communities are also where we formulate our responses to experiences of domination and oppression: as Hill Collins (2017) writes, 'people practice behaviors of submission and resistance to social hierarchy in communal settings of shared, patterned ideas and practices' (p. 27). This creates an important role for Community Power initiatives in consciousness-raising and supporting strategies of resistance. Intersectional concepts of power show that one is never just privileged or oppressed. There is space for agency here, which Community Power initiatives might exist in, contributing problem-solving and praxis.

Moving forward, it would be most useful for Community Power practitioners working on poverty, education, immigration, and other issues to spend some time understanding how these issues fit within the ecology of GBV, ensuring that this is included in conceptual frameworks and project designs. Doing this might also help to evolve

ecological theorisations of GBV which tend to see the community primarily as a site for social norm inculcation and engage other levels of the ecology – and issues such as poverty, migration, and education – only as they relate to the sphere of social norms. There is perhaps a space here for collaboration between Community Power practitioners and feminist researchers (which could also lead to collaborative work on developing GBV-specific Community Power initiatives), but this work must also be done in genuine partnership with communities.

Considering challenges around funding and community capacity in contexts of austerity, we can also draw on intersectional understandings of 'community' and 'power' to work out some general principles for ensuring that Community Power initiatives not focused on gender or GBV are GBV-sensitive, or at the very least do not exacerbate the conditions that produce GBV. Our suggestions are as follows. (1) Refuse to homogenise the community. In other words, take a critical and intersectional perspective on 'community' and the diversity that implies, with social positionalities such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age and disability at the forefront. (2) Engage with all four domains of power, not just that of national and local government, ensuring that cultural and ideological factors are centred and that power is examined at macro, meso and micro levels. (3) Focus especially on power relations within communities that may be related to gender and intersecting inequalities, exercising consciousness and caution when working with local leadership, especially if this leadership consists only of the most privileged men. (4) Allow this work to be developed with and by, not for, communities – with the most marginalised members relocated to the centre and fully resourced to participate (although we acknowledge that this may not be an easy task and that the most marginalised members of communities may not have time or energy for such activities). These principles, if followed, might also have the potential to enhance the Community Power paradigm in the round.

Furthermore, although these principles could be implemented to a certain extent in a simple ongoing reflective space and practice, they do raise deeper methodological questions. At present, Community Power initiatives tend to employ straightforward qualitative methods such as focus groups to evaluate their impact; an intersectional approach suggests a role for deeper, more participatory, and more ethnographic methods throughout the process. This would also necessitate a shift in the cultures and mindsets of some local authorities, and some creative thinking around the neoliberal 'input–output' models which tend to constrain their work and especially their funding programmes.

Future research is needed to explore all this further: the relationships between Community Power and ecological theorisations of GBV, the implementation of more GBV-sensitive approaches to Community Power, how to measure their effectiveness and the potential of more participatory and ethnographic methods in doing so. Given the huge potential of Community Power for preventing GBV, and the growing momentum and influence of the paradigm, the rewards of such research could be great.

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Notes

1. It should be noted here that there is very little information available about New Local which they have not produced themselves.
2. The examples listed below come from New Local reports which means they can be seen as indicative of broader practice.
3. 'An intervention is considered primary prevention if it is targeted before onset, secondary prevention once early indicators have emerged, and tertiary prevention is rehabilitation to prevent reoccurrence' (Storer et al., 2016: 251).
4. It should be noted here that some grassroots refuges and shelters are also increasingly reliant on public funding and/or intertwined with the criminal legal system and border regimes.

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