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Affilia published online 15 February 2012
DOI: 10.1177/0886109912437487

Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work
00(0) 1-11

DOI: 10.1177/0886109912437487
http://affilia.sagepub.com

Building Bridges to Safety and Justice: Stories of Survival and Resistance

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Abstract

The authors offer three narratives of women survivors who are engaged in organizing around issues of gender-based violence. Common themes include experiences of the cycle of violence, a wide range of control tactics used by abusers, the difficulties of breaking free, economic injustice, the complexities that children bring to leaving, and multiple barriers in community and public services, particularly for low-income and immigrant women. The narratives also demonstrate how the survivors found their voices and stand in solidarity with other survivors. The stories are analyzed from a policy perspective using a capabilities lens.

Keywords

capabilities approach, domestic violence, economic justice, gender-based violence, social justice

On June 1, 2009, a small group of courageous survivors of gender-based violence and their allies came together in Albany, NY, to create an association of women in the community who were committed to breaking the cycle of domestic violence. With the support from a local nonprofit domestic violence organization, as well as a local state university, Building Bridges was formed. Two primary goals of Building Bridges are to serve as a platform for survivors to articulate and organize around the issues of safety and justice for women and to provide an antidote to the provision of professionally driven social services as the primary response to gender-based violence. Building Bridges is a survivor-led group that works to alleviate domestic violence in the community through community education, the advocacy of policy, and other kinds of organizing. The group's statement of purpose is "We are women working to create a world of peace and harmony within our community while offering a bridge of support to empower women and the community through advocacy and education to bring an end to domestic abuse."

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Members of Building Bridges choose to use their personal experiences to teach the community about the realities of domestic violence. For example, members have spoken in various community locations, such as victim's rights rallies, universities, and youth groups. They want to empower women through education and their own personal truths with the hope that raising awareness and putting real faces to domestic violence can help those who are currently affected and prevent others from being in situations of abuse. Telling their stories of surviving a wide range of abuses inflicted by intimate partners is a key tactic of their organizing. This writing emerged as a part of the organizing and advocacy work of Building Bridges, with the explicit goal of connecting personal realities to academic and practitioner communities.

What follows are the extraordinary stories of survival and resistance of three women survivors of gender-based violence, members of Building Bridges. These stories were written and/or told by the women themselves with minor editing from other coauthors (the coauthors are an academic, the three survivors, and one professional advocate for survivors of domestic violence). The goal of this writing project is to give readers the opportunity to hear the nuances in women's narratives as opposed to cold statistics, or worse—victim-blaming discourses that present an inaccurate portrayal of gender-based violence. Here are the stories of three members of Building Bridges—Mariame, Katie, and Suzette—written in the first person. Mariame is an African woman from the Ivory Coast, who came to the United States in pursuit of higher education. Here, she met her future husband, who abusively sabotaged her educational pursuits. Katie is a white woman who was born and raised in the local community and worked as a nurse until a severe injury from her abuser prevented her from continuing her career. Suzette is a biracial woman who was raised in foster care and now, after getting free from her abuser, is facing economic hardship but continues to pursue her degree as a registered nurse.

The three women decided that they wanted to use their real first names, but not their last names. They also went through an informed consent process using the protocol of the university's Institutional Review Board. The first author conducted a preliminary analysis of the stories, hand coding them for common themes (Creswell, 2003). The other four authors cross-checked the analysis for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Common themes were considered from a capabilities lens, a policy framework that affirms that social policy should support what people are able to do and to be (Nussbaum, 2000). The capabilities approach has been used by some social work scholars to conceptualize women's poverty and work, address sustainable community development, and articulate an economic justice perspective on violence against women (Manteaw, 2008; Pyles, 2008; Pyles & Banerjee, 2010).

Mariame's Story

I was born and raised in the Ivory Coast, in West Africa. I was one of 15 kids in a family that valued education. I discovered books in the seventh grade; they told us that women are not good in math and science, so language is something I've preferred. I believe strongly in studying, reading, and I love it. I've discovered so many great things through books, some of it related to women and how they survive through everything. I have an idea about how to survive because of my readings. But education, that's why I came to this country.

I met my abuser in a mid-sized city in the Northeast after I had gotten admitted to a state university for a graduate program. I needed to meet some people to help me find an apartment because I had never lived in the city before. Somebody mentioned my future husband's name and said, "Oh, I know someone from your country; maybe he can help you find an apartment or something." So, that's how I met him. In the beginning, that's when it was good. He knew how to make me laugh; he really knew how to make me feel good. He also gave out advice on how to handle the school, how to handle life here, and you need somebody here like that in the first steps.

That's when I really started to be close with him, and he had spent more years here than I had. I thought, "maybe I should listen to him." You know, he came from the same country, almost the same region even, and when he talked to me, I thought I had to listen to him. In the beginning, I was interested in him for myself, and then we started to date, and I got pregnant.

I gave birth to my child in 1998, and that's when I started to notice that he was trying to control my life. But, I am a very independent person; from childhood, my father raised us to be independent, not to wait for somebody to help us. You start first, and along the way you can find someone to help, but don't wait for somebody. Coming from a big family, you have to compete. You start to learn to be strong and move for yourself; it's a kind of competition at home, but not in a bad way. Parents are guides, but you have to stand up and guide your own way, so I have a very open mind and am very independent. That's something he didn't like. Some people told me (but you know I didn't believe it) that my educational level scared him because I was already in graduate school.

The problem was that he wanted to have a wife, somebody who he could control, and I didn't want that. He knew that I was a foreign student, so he played that card a lot, knowing that I could not move around a lot myself, knowing that I needed the help for my son. He would leave the child with me and go out for the whole day, so if I had to go to school or do some shopping or talk to some friends, it was almost impossible. I started to get very mad when he said, "Why do you want to go to school anyway? Just sit at home with the baby; that's all I want from you." And he said, "You really think you can jump in this country without my help?" And I said, "What? You didn't bring me here; I did everything: I went and got my BA, and now I am here getting a Master's degree, so you didn't bring me here." He was trying to make me believe that he could kick me out of the United States. But, he couldn't and can't because I am legal here; he can't do anything. My school protected me; the international office always tells us, "Any problem you have, come to us first."

Once I had my child, he really tried to sabotage my studies. He would wait until the middle of the semester and try to distract me with his fighting. Like he would say, "Where are my keys?" and I would say, "I don't have your keys." And he would say "Well, we only have a little one here, so that means you have them; so give me my keys." And I would say, "I don't have them." And he would start talking, and he knew that I would challenge him all the time and start to be mad. So the schooling started to be shaky, and he knew that, so that's what he did the most.

He was verbally abusive; he really had what you would call "a bad mouth." He did that a lot, trying to make me feel bad. And he would do everything to make me stop school, and I know that's my strength. I couldn't leave it because my status was related to school. If I didn't go to school, then I would lose my immigration status. I was fighting more to keep myself in school and follow all the policies of the school, and he was fighting to pull me out, and I think that has taken a lot of my energy.

There are many things that helped me through this difficult period of my life. I went to my school's international office first to get help. They sent me to another woman at Catholic Charities, and eventually I received help from the local domestic violence program. They helped me a lot. I don't have to give up, and if I need help, I know many people there can help me. Being able to talk to someone was something cultural for me. African women are not supposed to talk about what's going on in our homes. We are raised like this; we just keep quiet. Even if I were to start to talk, they would blame me because I am responsible for anything bad going on in the house. So, at the domestic violence program, I was able to talk and express myself without being judged. That's something that I really appreciated.

I also found a lawyer related to my immigration status, and the first thing that he told me was to move out of the house, so my son and I went to a shelter. Over there, it's really well structured in a very positive way. They tried to make our life much easier, and living at the house there was supportive; together, with the other women, you could talk and cook and laugh, and that really helped me to overcome obstacles. In my case, they were taking care of me, with food, if I needed clothes, if

I needed counselors, they have helped me with that. After three months, I was able to move out of the shelter and into an apartment. They helped me with some of the furniture, some of the kitchenware. They came and checked up on me to see if I was doing well or if I needed help. It really helped me to know that some people cared and that I don't have to do it all by myself.

One of my challenges right now is basically economic. I don't have a good job—that's something I worry a little bit about, especially with the economic crisis, although you cannot blame yourself too much. I haven't finished my education yet, and I hope to finish. But I want people to know that even though I'm struggling, I will overcome; I am always positive, and I know I will do it. Yes, my future is bright. Yes, it is. You have to believe in yourself and be positive. Then if anything happens to you, you don't know why it has happened, but it shouldn't stop you from reaching your goal. I am going to reach mine.

Katie's Story

Imagine a house, this house looks like every other house in the neighborhood. The family who lives in this house seems to be like everyone else—they go to work each day, take care of their children, and mow the lawn just like everyone else. Now step inside that house with me. Inside that house everything is made of glass—the walls, the floors, everything. Living in this house is a couple and their two young children. Now picture that this is your house and these are your children. Imagine living in a glass house and having carefully to calculate your every move, your every noise, your every breath, so as not to crack the glass. The children who live in this house have to live in constant fear of hearing that glass crack. The children cannot have friends over for the same reason. Imagine not being able to have family or friends over for fear that they may cause a crack or even break the glass. You cannot leave this glass house for fear of stalking or the fear that your actions may be misinterpreted by your partner and that you will come home and your glass house has cracked and is falling to pieces. Imagine being afraid every moment of every day of cracking that glass because you know that if the glass cracks, you will get hurt. Some days it may be emotional, some days sexual, other days physical, but there is always a consequence. Some are worse than others, but it causes you to wake up each morning and wonder if this will be the last day that you are able to hold your children, your last chance to leave, and your last day to live.

I lived in this house for 12 years until the day that I broke the glass. I woke up, thankful to be alive as I did each day. Some days it would take me longer to hide my injuries than it would to get myself and both of my children bathed, dressed, and fed, but sadly it was part of my routine. Had my son not gotten there when he did on the night of September 21, 2007, I was told that I would not be here today.

I endured many dark years of abuse and fear—abuse at the hands of the man who once made me feel like he would protect me from all the hurt in the world. Domestic violence is so much more to me than a punch or harsh words. To me it was my abuser trying to strip me of my very being, my self-esteem, my strength, my smile, and ultimately my life. It got to the point where I truly felt like a shell of the happy, carefree person that I once was. It was a nightmare; every single day there was fear, anger, pain, and loneliness. I have been beaten in public places, and every single person turned and walked by. I have slept in the police station because my reports were minimized, and I had nowhere safe to go. I have cried out for help, but most people underestimated my abuse or simply did not want to get involved. I came to a point in my life where I felt like happiness and safety were no longer worth wishing for. I felt like I could not escape my circumstances and that I had to accept them. I tried to leave, but each time the consequences would be worse.

On September 21, 2007, I had my most brutal and final attack. When I look back on that day now, I see it as the day that my true fight against domestic violence began. When I woke up in my hospital bed, I couldn't move, I couldn't talk. I didn't even have the energy to cry. I sat in that bed and just

kept asking myself "Why, why did this happen to me? Why would God choose me to endure all these years of pain?" As the days, weeks, and months went on, I continued to ask myself that same question. My shattered bones, bruises, and cuts healed, but my heart and spirit were still broken. I felt defeated and angry.

One day, about a month after my attack, a friend of mine suggested that I get out of the house and take my daughter to the park to get some fresh air and enjoy the day. While we were at the park, my daughter fell while running to the swings. I remember her turning to me with little tears running out of her sweet, innocent eyes, and I felt so helpless, so heartbroken that the little girl who I loved more than life itself was hurt. I quickly picked her up and gave her a big hug and kiss. She looked at me, wiped her tears, and found the courage to go back to playing. It made me think of the helpless, heartbroken look on my own mother's face when she saw me beaten and hurt.

That night as I lay in bed, I thought about my day, my sadness, and many other things, but the look on my daughter's face when she fell kept coming into my thoughts. I began to think maybe all this did happen to me for a reason. My mother always told me that God will never give me more than I can handle, and although at that time I felt like a train wreck and as if I wasn't handling anything at all, I was alive; he did not defeat me. I realized that by continuing to live in fear, anger, and sadness, I was still allowing him to win. At that moment, I realized that my nightmare was over and that he could not take one more moment of my happiness away from me if I didn't allow him to.

I sat and thought about how empowered I felt and about how he left me with the ultimate weapon—my voice—a voice of experience, a voice of strength, a voice of survival. Later on, during the final attack he made, many bones in my throat were shattered, and I could not talk for some time, but I got my voice back. Now, I have a responsibility to use that voice to make sure that I never have to see my daughter the way that my mother had to see me—that no mother ever has to see her daughter like that. So, the experience that was meant to defeat me, to silence me forever, was really the experience that made me realize my strength and the power that I held within myself. I needed to use my nightmare to help other women.

After a lengthy trial by jury, my abuser was sentenced to 24 years in a maximum-security prison for my attempted murder. Many would consider that a success; my success will be when no other woman has to feel pain at the hands of an abuser. I am here today not as a victim of domestic abuse but rather as a survivor. I wear my scars as badges of strength and honor, rather than badges of fear and shame. I believe we must continue to ensure that our shelters and crisis centers receive adequate funding. We need to push for greater awareness and education regarding abuse; demand higher and stricter penalties for abusers; stop blaming victims; and, as a community, stand up and shout that we will not tolerate abuse anymore.

Suzette's Story

I grew up in New York City. My mom had gotten really sick when I was about 6 months old and had a nervous breakdown. I don't know the exact details, but I was told she had me by the ankle and wanted to throw me out of the window. My uncle, who was her brother, somehow intervened. He saved me. The ambulance came, and I was dropped off to foster care, and she was taken to mental health treatment. I reconnected with my sister later, and she told me that I came to the foster family with no clothes, only a diaper and a blanket, which indicated to me that there was an emergency situation. I was in a wonderful family from the time I was about 6 months old until I was 10 years old. We stayed in touch with each other even after that.

I first met my partner in 2004. I wasn't divorced yet from my first husband, but I was separated from him. I was living with my children and raising them, getting things situated and keeping the bills paid and the mortgage because at the time we had a house. But when we got divorced, I lost

the house because it was divided up, and the mortgage took most of the money and the bills took the rest of the money. Whatever was left—which wasn't very much—I had to share with him.

So, I was in this relationship with this man, and he seemed like a good man at first. He seemed helpful and supportive, and I was really vulnerable at the time. I had never dated anyone like him before, and I didn't really have a lot of insight into violent or controlling men. So I really didn't pick up on the signs that I would pick up on now. I didn't know what he was until I was well into the relationship and had a lot of feelings invested, so it was very hard for me to walk away from the relationship at the time. I had always hoped that things would get better. It would get better sometimes, and then there would be really ugly—violent—situations when he would be hitting me or threatening me or controlling my life. It was very hard for me to break away from that cycle.

I thought the controlling behaviors were love. I never had a relationship with my father because he was never in my life, and, you know, I never really laid eyes on him at all. I was always insecure about someone really caring about me and loving me just for who I am. But I think a part of me wanted to have a relationship with someone whom I could feel secure with, and it just didn't turn out that way. It took years finally to leave him for good. I felt guilty about leaving, or he made me feel as though I was giving up on something wonderful. You know, "we'll get better," "we can work things out," or things like that. That just never happened.

Besides support from friends, I reached out to a community-based program. I went to counseling. I would go. I didn't go. I didn't complete the cycle of counseling, like the full thing, but the few times that I did go, it was a group type of a meeting, and one of the staff members there was a hard person and was rigid in the way that she spoke to us. She was very dominating, as much so as the abuser. I just couldn't go anymore, but they did give me some resources about the cycle of abuse and about hiding my social security card and birth certificates and having them in a convenient place where if I did have to start over, that I wouldn't have to lose all those documents. So, I got something out of it, but I did not stay with them because they didn't allow people to make their own decisions.

Eventually I left my abuser. After moving around and staying with different people, I went to a shelter upstate. I had 90 days initially at the shelter, which is really not enough time to come out of a devastating situation and be under all that stress and then, you know, you have this 90-day period where you must find a place to live. You may get an extension if you don't have an apartment in the 90 days or you may not. Then, you end up going to the public shelter where there is no protection; your abuser could follow you in the public shelter system. It would have been nice if I didn't have to come out of the domestic violence shelter.

I needed help securing an apartment with money for the rent or security deposit or both. I did get some help from social services for a security deposit, but I had to come up with the first month's rent out of my Social Security Disability that I was on at the time. But I just wish that I could have had more resources in making my home more livable. I had no towels or anything, no dishes. And I had to get all of that from scratch. Right now, I need new living room furniture, and there are no pictures on the walls because the important thing is to pay rent [and] the light bill and to buy food and clothing.

I did eventually get some group counseling. I got individual therapy, too, and that was very good because I learned a lot about domestic violence, and I learned a lot about setting boundaries, recognizing the signs of a bad relationship and what a good relationship is. And I learned that I don't have to look for a man to give me what I need, that I could do it for myself. So, it took a lot of practice to validate myself and get to know myself and be at peace with being alone.

Dealing with legal issues has been challenging. It is difficult to get a legal appointment. Sometimes you have to wait a month to get an appointment, and, you know, after that there's a whole procedure just to get into court. I think that's why a lot of women don't bother to leave; they just end up staying in bad relationships because it's very hard to get out of it and really stand on your feet because the resources are limited.

I lost my children because of domestic abuse because my kids' father used the abusive relationship as leverage in court. He was awarded custody of our children when I went to apply for custody and visitation. It was very difficult because I had to go into the court where the children lived, and they lived in New York City and I lived upstate, and traveling from the city all the time and then going to court and then even having decent clothing to wear or the bus fare, lunch, or personal items that I may have needed, I didn't have it. So it was a very stressful situation, and I just wanted it to be over. So I ended up just settling for visitation. I got a lot of visitation, but I didn't feel like I was represented well. Now, he also is getting child support because he has the children. That's one of the things that I just have to deal with. It's just a part of life, and it's never really over. So, I'm still dealing with the repercussions of the abuse.

I'm in college now because I want to better myself. I wish that there was a scholarship available that I could take advantage of. I wish that there was truly a real alternative, a bridge that I could cross so I could really get myself together, but the reality is that I have to get loans and pay for it out of my pocket. It's worth the effort though. Going from not working at all, having someone controlling your money, not having any credit because someone ruined your credit or you didn't work and you didn't file any taxes and you're really not on the books at all to working and going to school is very hard.

I think more resources for economic change are necessary because that is what is going to empower a person. The resources that are available are very minimal; they are always making cuts, it also makes it difficult for domestic violence workers to help people because there's just not enough funding. I mean, I did have some subsidized rent but that was only 30% for the first year they paid, and the next year it went down to 20%, then 10%, then nothing. It would be better if I got maybe 80% and I would have had to pay 20%. That would have been much better. I could have saved more. I could have had a car by now. I think that there just aren't enough resources for victims of domestic violence. It's very frustrating to go down to social services and try to get food stamps. If your income isn't at a certain level, you get rejected.

My heart goes out to women who are taking abuse every day—physical, emotional, mental. I want to say to them that you are not alone, you are not forgotten, and there is hope and you can do this, you can win, you can get out of it. Be brave and take the first step. And what I would say, too, is this: Courage is not the absence of fear, but it's doing what you need to be doing in spite of the fear.

Discussion

Each of the stories presented here is unique. The survivors come from different backgrounds, and their experiences of abuse are as varied as their pathways out of the relationships. Yet, one can see that these encounters with gender-based violence share commonalities—the cycle of violence, a wide range of control tactics used by abusers, the difficulties of breaking free, economic injustice, the complexities that children bring to leaving, and the multiple barriers in community services, particularly for low-income and immigrant women. The women also articulated how they found their voices and expressed their solidarity with other survivors of violence. The scholarly literature on gender-based violence has echoed these findings (Davies, Lyon, & Monti-Catania, 1998; Flaherty, 2010; Hadeed & Lee, 2010; Ham-Rowbottom, Gordon, Jarvis, & Novaco, 2005; Lindhorst, Casey, & Meyers, 2010; McLeod, Hays, & Chang, 2010; Moe, 2009; Pyles & Banerjee, 2010; Raphael, 2000; Rodriguez, Valentine, Son, & Muhammad, 2009).

The Capabilities Approach

The capabilities approach emerged from the fields of development economics and philosophy and has informed the creation of the United Nations Human Development Index and other measures of

poverty and global development. Sen (1999) proposed that human functioning is determined by more than just material conditions; indeed, the freedoms that people enjoy are fundamental to what they are actually able to do and to be. Nussbaum (2000) argued that there are 10 core capabilities that are necessary to achieve full human functioning. While both Sen and Nussbaum were concerned with women's vulnerabilities, Nussbaum offered an explicitly feminist perspective, introducing the capability of bodily integrity as core to human functioning. Nussbaum's 10 central human-functioning capabilities are (1) life (to live life without dying prematurely); (2) bodily health (to have good health, nutrition, and shelter); (3) bodily integrity (to have freedom of movement and freedom from assault, including sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, and domestic violence); (4) senses, imagination, and thought (to have adequate education and the ability to express one's imagination, to have the ability to search for the ultimate meaning of life in one's own way, and to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid unnecessary pain); (5) emotions (to experience a full range of human emotions and to avoid one's emotional development from being thwarted by fear and anxiety owing to abuse or trauma); (6) practical reason (to engage in critical reflection of one's life and to be able to plan for a life that is based on meaningful choices); (7) affiliation (to engage in various forms of social interaction, including having relationships with other workers, and to be free from discrimination and humiliation); (8) other species (to live in relationship to the world of nature); (9) play (to play and enjoy recreation); and (10) control over one's environment (to participate in political choices and have political rights, to have property rights, and to have the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others).

If a person falls below a minimum threshold of capability in any of these core areas, then, according to Nussbaum (2000, p. 74), society "has not enabled [that person] to live in a truly human way" (see also Pyles & Banerjee, 2010). The capabilities approach affirms that public policy must provide the provisions and conditions for every individual to achieve full human functioning. For women who are surviving violence and aiming for safety and self-sufficiency in their lives, the appropriate public and community supports must be in place.

The Stories Through a Capabilities Lens

Katie's story reminds us that victims may cry out for help only to find there is no one there to help them, while Suzette's story affirms that sometimes those who are there to help can actually create more barriers when the values of dignity and self-determination are not honored. Research has shown that ethnic minority women like Suzette face significant barriers to services, such as mental health supports (Rodriguez et al., 2009). Effective responses to gender-based violence require a general ethic of community care and concomitant public policies and protocols that ensure that all people can attain their human capabilities. To attain full human functioning for women at risk of violence means that there must be community accountability among the various professions that encounter survivors of domestic violence, including law enforcement, the courts, health care, welfare, social services, mental health, and education (Lindhorst et al., 2010). What is particularly remarkable about this group is that they have survived during a time of significant cuts in social welfare spending, in an era when the government has not been providing the social conditions for women in similar situations to achieve full human functioning. Like other survivors, they have navigated systems, such as domestic violence programs, legal aid, housing, and welfare (Lindhorst et al., 2010; McLeod et al., 2010), which have experienced draconian reductions in funding in recent years. These cutbacks are part of a larger trend of neoliberal economic policies that are systematically defunding public support for social services and privatizing traditionally public services (Pyles, 2009).

Resources and support have made a difference in the women's lives. There is a dynamic interplay between the need for practical resources and social and emotional ones. The latter resources are intimately connected to Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities of bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and

thought; emotions; affiliation; play; and control over one's environment. Even if the abuse is no longer a part of daily life, the psychological and material effects on a survivor can last for years. Suzette's story reminds us how women continue to struggle both emotionally and economically long after the abuse ends. In one study, many survivors reported financial difficulties, such as running out of food and having their utilities shut off, and although 75% reported having a job, roughly half regularly received public assistance (Ham-Rowbottom et al., 2005, p. 116). Katie can no longer work at her chosen profession because of the traumatic brain injury she suffered at the hands of her abuser. With amazing resilience, she is forging ahead to create a new path for herself as an advocate for other survivors. Organizations, such as domestic violence programs, and groups like Building Bridges can serve to foster the capabilities of practical reason and affiliation.

Many victims of gender-based violence do not disclose their experiences to their family members, the police, or health care providers (McLeod et al., 2010). Their reluctance to come forward may be due to their fear of repercussions, stigma, or feelings of shame. A significant number of women who make complaints to the police will subsequently withdraw their complaints. The reasons why they do so may be due to pressure from the abuser, fear that their abuser will receive only a slap on the wrist and then be free to come back and abuse again, fear of losing their children, or fear of losing the abuser's economic support. To support full functioning, including the capabilities of life, bodily health, and bodily integrity, the police must provide safety for victims and pursue abusers' accountability.

Both Mariame and Katie made powerful references to their refusal to be silenced. While "breaking the silence" about domestic violence is an old theme in the domestic violence literature, it is noteworthy that society still grapples with this issue. Thus, sharing these stories and speaking out as the women have done are potent acts of resistance. Capabilities theorists have made clear that fostering basic freedoms and creating community spaces to articulate what is of the most value are critical to human development (Nussbaum, 2000).

Gender-based violence is an issue that is not bound by race/ethnicity, economic class, religion, or age. Yet, we know that some groups, such as immigrant women like Mariame, are particularly vulnerable. Mariame's story provides us with an opportunity to think about the situation of survivors who are also immigrants or refugees. The barriers to safety are more complex and require public policy and advocacy that is attentive to the unique needs of immigrant women who are in abusive relationships. While social policies, such as the Violence Against Women Act, have included provisions to make battered immigrant women safer, the general anti-immigrant climate and policies in the United States render immigrant women's safety elusive (Futures Without Violence, 2009). From a capabilities perspective, public policy should support the full human functioning of all individuals; unfortunately, immigrant women are at a significant risk of experiencing deprivations in capabilities.

Women with low incomes or who are poor are also especially vulnerable to violence (Raphael, 2000). Indeed, economic justice continues to be one of the most elusive forms of justice for women throughout the world. Without access to economic opportunity, it is difficult to be self-sufficient enough to live free of abuse (Hadeed & Lee, 2010; Nussbaum, 2000; Pyles, 2006; Pyles & Banerjee, 2010; Raphael, 2000). Mariame's abuser had limited her and her child's access to education as a tactic of abuse; indeed, he denied her the capability of senses, imagination, and thought. Although she is still working on finishing her education, the economic abuse she has suffered because of her ex-husband's financial exploitation keeps her working two jobs at a time just to get by, which has made schooling an arduous process. Mariame receives child support infrequently, which is similar to the experiences of many survivors in one study in which only one quarter received this support, even though many more were eligible (Ham-Rowbottom et al., 2005). While some domestic violence programs have transitional housing that may assist a survivor with housing and case management for 1–2 years after the initial abuse, domestic violence services are most equipped to respond to

an initial crisis and have neither the funding nor the capacity truly to support survivors in creating new lives and attaining full human functioning. Survivors need not only economic supports, such as housing subsidies and welfare benefits, but access to education and living-wage job opportunities (Postmus, 2000; Pyles, 2006). Survivors should be given priority in housing assistance, social services, and education; bodily integrity should not be a privilege afforded only to women with economic resources but to all women.

Conclusion

The stories convey the nuances of gender-based violence, depicting the ways in which it affects multiple dimensions of women's lives—health, children, family members and friends, and economic well-being. It is clear that addressing gender-based violence requires a concern not just with the violence itself. It requires a concern about the social and cultural structures that perpetuate it, as well as the resources and economic opportunities that can empower women to live safely and achieve their capabilities.

Creating safe spaces for women to heal and strategize is as important today as it was 40 years ago when women were first giving each other informal support in the early days of the battered women's movement (Schechter, 1982). The efforts of those early grassroots activists had a significant impact on social policy in the United States and elsewhere, resulting in specific policies, such as making the rape of a spouse illegal, the Victims of Crime Act, and the Violence Against Women Act. The movement to end violence against women continues to gain strength with important notable gains across the globe, particularly efforts coming from grassroots women in the developing world (Critelli, 2010). The women of Building Bridges are part of this movement; they represent an important subgroup of actors who are resisting some of the institutionalization and professionalization of the movement in the United States that have marginalized their voices from social change efforts.

Women's bodies are on the front lines of a culture that continues to devalue them. Building Bridges stands in solidarity with women throughout the world who experience violence against their bodies and minds and that deprive them of their capabilities. Although the realities of domestic violence are grim, there is hope. The hope stems from the belief that with clear public policy, community education, resources, peace-building activities, and support, all women can be safe in their communities, free to raise their children, further their education, and pursue their dreams (Flaherty, 2010).

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Equinox for in-kind supports and Susan Walsh from the University at Albany for transcribing and other support.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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