Gather the Women:
Listening to women through an empowering program

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Abstract: *Gather the Women (GTW) is a program for women with limited financial resources that includes groupwork and is designed to guide participants toward economic advancement and personal growth. The participants were interviewed to understand more about their perspectives of the group and how it has affected them. This article presents an overview of the program, a description of each woman in her own words and identifies several themes regarding reasons for joining the group, group norms, relationships, future outlook and program factors. Results indicate that the group has improved their trust in other women, self-confidence, self-esteem and views of the future. These outcomes may contribute to an overall sense of empowerment and are necessary for working on their goals for economic advancement.*

Keywords: *women; low-income; empowerment; economic; evaluation; qualitative groupwork; user led groups, group work*

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Gather the Women (GTW) is a program for women with limited financial resources designed to guide participants toward economic advancement and personal growth. It evolved from the dreams and vision of a patron and supporter of YWCA Carlisle, PA (USA), who wanted to help women without money along the path to what she described as 'healing from the inside out.' Her dream was to assist women in moving ahead economically while at the same time helping them deal with emotional 'baggage.' Her personal experiences influenced the decision to promote this program and the research supports that economic empowerment takes more than just an increase in income. Simply focusing on economic self-sufficiency, a debatable term, is not enough to help women achieve economic and personal stability (Gowdy & Pearlmutter, 1993; Kneipp, 2000; Austin and Lemon, 2005). Managing the difficulties that often go along with poverty such as trauma, conflict, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety must be part of the process of achieving self-sufficiency (Broussard, Joseph & Thompson, 2012; Grote, Zuckoff, Swartz, Bledsoe & Geibel, 2007; Lehrer, Crittendon & Norr, 2002; St. Thomas & Johnson, 2006). Other programs have recognized the importance of sharing personal experiences and stories as low-income individuals seek employment. Traditional programs focus on skills such as creating resumes, job searching and interviewing skills.

Gather the Women began following the completion of a six-week program called Respectful Leadership, held in April 2005. The class consisted of 11 women living in public housing. During the sessions, topics such as effective communication, conflict management, active listening, defusing anger, domestic violence and drug and alcohol awareness were discussed. To assist the women, dinner and free childcare were provided for each family. This program was offered by YWCA Carlisle in partnership with the Housing & Redevelopment Authority of Cumberland County. At the conclusion of the program, the participants expressed the desire to continue meeting. A focus group was conducted to determine what their needs might be and how they could be addressed. The desires of this group were in alignment with the vision of the YWCA patron and the first Gather the Women group began meeting in January 2006 with nine women and three facilitators. The original three facilitators included two of the authors and the former Department Chair of a university social work program, Dr. Anne Gero, who was vital in helping to plan and implement the program.

The members of Gather the Women meet twice a month on alternating Thursday evenings. Free childcare is provided for each participant. The group provides a support system where members are encouraged to share their goals and experiences. The group members also provide resources and accountability for each other in order to resolve economic and personal issues and obstacles in their lives. Most of the members are employed, but they are in low-wage jobs that offer limited upward mobility. Group meetings focus on goal progression, self-awareness, developing strengths or talents, identifying and improving potential, enhancing quality of life, improving health and building employability. The group is facilitated from a social justice approach and examines these issues not only from how they experience them as individuals but also places their experiences within the political and structural conditions (Broad, 1991 as cited in Lewis, 2006). The facilitators plan activities for each session, based on the individual and group needs. As is the case for most groupwork, the activities are a starting point but the facilitators are flexible in their execution of the activities.

The participants have direct influence on the planning of the group. At times, they are part of the decision making process for the group. There have been both successes and failure in group member decision making. Successes have included members' decision to move the time of the group, their decision about the topics to include in a special weekend retreat and their decision to coordinate a voter registration drive after hearing a speaker from the League of Women Voters. There are also times that the group members are asked to share opinions for planning purposes, but they are not the final decision makers. For example, they often identify topics of interest for the group that are taken into consideration for planning and each year they provide an evaluation of the group. Several years ago, the facilitators asked the group members to meet with a former member who wanted to come back and make a decision about whether she could. It did not go well because it ended in more of a personal 'attack' than an opportunity to hold each other accountable. They have not tried to do this again, but there were other efforts to include group members as facilitators. There was an intentional effort to encourage the members to facilitate meetings and two of the women were trained as support group leaders through a YWCA training. There was limited success with this approach. One woman shared a craft project and another led a book discussion, but

this approach did not continue for several reasons. It may have been too early in the program and the women had limited self-confidence, expressed discomfort with leadership among their peers and there were issues with reliability (that is regular attendance). As we prepared this article, we discussed that it may be time to consider this approach again, particularly if the members indicate they would like to try it.

All of the participants set modest but measurable goals for both personal growth and economic advancement on a quarterly basis at a one-on-one meeting with the program director. Along with co-facilitating the meetings, the director of the program provides individual support, accompaniment to appointments, advocacy, referrals, resources, learning opportunities and encouragement for each member. Outcomes for the first year were promising – 85% of the participants set and achieved modest goals for improved economic advancement – one graduated from a nursing program, two paid off past debt and two enrolled in school. Every six months, a status review is completed that assesses economic empowerment from several aspects including financial management, financial accountability, personal growth and wellness and economic freedom. The primary focus is personal growth and economic advancement, but there are social components because they have also found friendship. For example, the group may attend local events together and there are holiday parties. One of the reasons that we wanted to conduct this study was to emphasize the importance of the women's experiences in the group, as they expressed them. Women who are poor, particularly mothers, are often left out of discussions about policy, research and practice (Broussard et al, 2012; Teater, 2010). The program regularly collects quantitative data about income and success in meeting goals, but we wanted to make sure that this study, or evaluation of the program, included their perspectives of the group and not just the quantitative outcomes such as employment, income and housing status. Lewis (2006) emphasized the need to analyze group process, not just outcomes and consider how participants identify effectiveness of the group. This issue of *Groupwork* which is a special issue on service user voices was particularly appealing, providing an opportunity to share their experiences and include a qualitative methodology that is better suited to complex experiences (Boonzaier & van Schalkwyk, 2011).

Background of group members

All of the current nine members of Gather the Women were invited to participate in the study and seven chose to participate. The profiles that follow were created from case files and by asking the women to describe themselves. All of the women reviewed and approved their profiles and chose their pseudonyms for the study.

Eva

I would describe myself as a very kind, helpful, loving, caring person. At first I might seem like the total opposite if we are going off my facial expressions but that's why you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. I am a person whose kids are her world & a person that is a mother first & foremost. I'm also a very family oriented person. A great listener & a great mother, daughter, sister, aunt, cousin, & friend!' She is a 30-year-old single African American woman with three children. She lives in public housing, has a high school diploma, and has been in Gather the Women for 4 years. Eva is employed part time as a hostess at a restaurant.

Marie

Kind hearted, loving, & will do anything for anyone, just don't disrespect me or be disloyal once I trust you. I have a hard time trusting people especially women. Excluding the women in my group!!' She is a 31-year-old single African American woman with three children who lives in public housing, has a high school diploma and has been in GTW for 5 years. Marie is employed part-time as a server at a restaurant.

Loren

Loud, talkative, funny, caring, loving, people-person, independent, strong.' She is a 31-year-old Hispanic woman with two children. She currently lives with her mother, has a high school diploma and a certification in phlebotomy and has been in GTW for 6 years. Loren is employed full-time as a cook at a restaurant.

Faith

I am a kind, loving person who attempts to be sensitive to others' needs and circumstances. Although I'm 41 years old now I am still learning about myself. I'm not an individual who will immediately share my feelings as I have reservations about people, especially the ones I do not know. I'm not one who needs to be praised, but I need to be appreciated. When appreciation doesn't reveal itself, I feel used. I enjoy helping others as helping others revitalizes my spirit.' Faith is a 41 year old single African American woman with four children who lives in public housing, has a college degree, and has been in GTW for 5 years. Faith is employed full-time as a Lead Teacher at a day care center.

J.-roo F

Anxious, desirous of everything, impatient with a countenance of patience, bright, even tempered, well meaning, eager, sometimes quiet, sometimes talkative, mostly understanding, a planner when the energy and resources are available, can do attitude, analyzing, emotional, skeptical. May be unimpressionable of myself. Every so often spacey, sometimes lovely, grumpy when exhausted.' She is a 31 year old single African American woman with three children who lives in public housing, has a high school diploma, and has been in GTW for one year. She is unemployed.

Olivia

I can be funny and outgoing or just mellow out and relax on the couch and watch a movie. I have a vast knowledge of trivial information. I am a hard worker and will do what it takes to provide for my daughter. I like to learn new things. I have many dreams and goals, I sometimes start things and then not finish them, not because I don't want to but because I have so many ideas.' Olivia is a 30 year old bi-racial woman with one child. She lives with her parents, has a high school diploma, and has been in GTW for 2 years. She is employed full-time as a school aide during the school year and also works part-time cleaning and working the concession stand at a theatre.

Malaya

I am a worry wart, LOL, outgoing, love to talk and listen, very understanding and loveable.' Malaya is a 25 year old African American woman with two children and another on the way. She lives in subsidized housing, has a high school diploma and a Medical Assistant Certification and works full-time at a dry cleaner's.

Background of group facilitators and researchers

The facilitators of the group bring diverse experiences, following in the tradition of groupwork (Lewis, 2006). One of the facilitators is a 67-year-old Caucasian woman, who has two grown children, and has been at the YWCA Carlisle for the past 28 years, 23 of those as Executive Director. The Program Director has been a co-facilitator with Gather the Women for seven years. She is an African-American woman with 4 daughters and 3 grandchildren. Her history with the YWCA began when, as a resident and President of the Tenant Association of Public Housing, she completed a leadership skills course designed for the tenant association. After moving out, she obtained the position of Assistant Property Manager with Family Public Housing. She was in this position when she first started working with Gather the Women. The primary researcher in this study worked as a co-facilitator for Gather the Women for three years and continued working with the group on special events such as a retreat and program evaluation. She is 37 years old, Caucasian, has two children and teaches social work at a nearby university. Her history with the YWCA Carlisle began in 1997 when she worked as the Youth Director and created after school programs in low-income housing neighborhoods with the GTW Program Director and YWCA Executive Director.

   When conducting groupwork research, the researchers can be located in one of two places (McDermott, 2005). The 'outsider' or 'researcher-only' location and the 'insider' or 'practitioner-researcher.' Two of the researchers were part of the 'insider' location because they were the current facilitators of the group and met with the women twice a month. The primary researcher was part 'insider' and part 'outsider' due to her previous role as a group facilitator. Most of the women knew her as a facilitator but at the time of the study, she was only in a researcher role.

Interviews and journals

The research question for this study was, 'What are the experiences and struggles of participants of Gather the Women and how has the group approach led to empowerment?' This question was answered through qualitative methods with interviews and journaling. The interviews were conducted by graduate assistants, rather than the GTW facilitators, to try to reduce bias. They were conducted at YWCA Carlisle, where child care was provided. The interviews were approximately one hour long and they were audio recorded and transcribed.

There were 14 interview questions that helped participants talk about why they joined Gather the Women; things they liked, their experiences in the group, and things they would change. There were other questions about social service experiences in general. This article focuses on the interview questions related to GTW group experiences, with plans to publish their responses to social service questions in another article. The interview questions were developed by all three researchers and the GTW participants.

The women were given journals with four questions. Two of the questions were used for this article. The first asked, 'How would you describe yourself to someone who does not know you?' and was used for the descriptions of each woman. The second, 'How has the group influenced or not influenced how you describe yourself?' was analyzed as part of the interview responses. The other questions were related to perceptions of women in poverty and what can be done to address these perceptions and will be analyzed separately.

The research study was approved by the Shippensburg University Human Subjects Committee and precautions were taken to protect the identity of the participants. One of the interesting dilemmas that arose with the study was that the participants wanted to use their real names in the article. They indicated that they wanted people to know their stories and what it is like to be part of Gather the Women. The researchers struggled with this request as we wanted to honor their right to self-determination but also needed to follow ethical research guidelines. We discussed as a group and the participants agreed that it made sense to use pseudonyms although they would like to publish their stories in other venues in the future, using their names. It was important that the women's stories were not used as simply a way to

substantiate need for funds or continued programming. In other words, there is a conscious effort to continue to work with the women so that their voices are heard and their stories 'used' to further social justice issues (Costa et al, 2012). They wanted to see their stories in print and expressed interest in how their stories could be included in works to change policy and practice.

The researchers read through each transcript and responses to written questions several times looking for patterns (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). These notes were then reviewed and codes created using open coding. MaxQDA, a qualitative software program, was used to assist with the data analysis.

Findings: Experiences and impact of the group

There were several categories of responses that help to answer the question about group members' experiences and how the group affects the members. These categories include: reasons for joining the group, group norms, relationships, positive outlook and program factors. There were several themes within each of these categories.

Reasons for joining Gather the Women

The reasons for joining the program revolved around seeking relationships and resources. The most common reason the participants joined the program was to meet other women in similar situations and find support. Some of the women also joined because they knew group members already or knew the staff at the YWCA. J-roo F. said,

> *I saw it as a support group where I can meet other women and see that I'm not the only one going through situations that seem impossible to mount …*

The participants talked about what was going on in their lives at the time they joined GTW. Some had relationship issues with the fathers of their children; two had recently moved to the area and did not know many people; others described generally being in a difficult time of their lives.

Faith went into the most detail about her reasons for joining the group.

I also recognized that there was a need for a change because I was struggling in a relationship and at the time I was also pregnant with my third child. I was inundated with problems at home with my teenager and I was overwhelmed with the fact that I was going to have a third child and I was by myself in essence, although I really wasn't by myself but I was going through an abusive relationship and I had never been through an abusive relationship before and I couldn't understand why I was still in it because my mother was in one and I just needed an outlet. I needed some help. I needed some support. I stayed in the relationship because I wanted to show my boyfriend at the time that there was a different way to do things. I wanted to show him that even if he hit me I would show him kindness and I thought he would stop, but basically, that's why I joined the group cause I was going through some hard times financially, emotionally, and I really wanted to be in the relationship but at the time it wasn't helpful to me.

Malaya described how she was interested in the group because she heard other group members talk about it

I'm going to group, I'm going to group, and I was like what is this group? I want to be a part of it. You know what I mean? I want to do something different, you know, um, and have something that I'm dedicated to, and just to, just be there and you know I was like, okay, Imma do this, I, I need this.

At least one of the participants recognized that she joined because she already knew a facilitator,

I just joined (pause) I knew the staff previously. I've grown up with her daughter, so I've always known her, and when she presented it to me, it just seemed like the right thing to do, and it was time to, like, get away for a little bit from my life (laughs) and come here.

Three of the women specifically mentioned that they were having difficulty financially and needed help figuring out what to do and connecting to resources. Olivia stated,

I was referred by someone because I guess they thought the group would be a good match for me I guess for resources. I was kind of in limbo being a single mom living with my parents and I didn't know what was out there and available so that's why.

Group Norms

One of the most important themes related to group dynamics was the feeling of confidentiality and commitment. Almost all of the women described how safe they felt sharing in the group, knowing that what is said in group will not be heard outside of group. Eva stated one of the rules of the group,

I also love the fact that to join the group you have to be committed. Like we take confidentiality…there's a zero tolerance, so if you would ever hear anything outside of group come back to you that person would be immediately dismissed. It's not ok and not allowed.

J. Roo F. expressed her comfort with group confidentiality,

It's not like sharing a secret with somebody out in the world. It's not like sharing a secret with a neighbor that could potentially mean you harm. It's a group and everybody is treated with respect …

Another key aspect of the group was that the women feel like they are listened to and respected. Faith reported,

I'm not judged for what I say and I am allowed to have the feelings that I have and I'm not belittled because I have the feelings that I have.

Olivia talked about how you can ask for advice if you want it, but 'if you don't they just listen and that's great'.

Relationships

Gather the Women offers limited direct financial support. There are occasionally gift card raffles during group time or holidays and there are times when the program pays for something directly related to increasing income. For example, one woman needed to take a licensing exam to enter into a health care field and the program paid for the exam fees. This was clear in the responses to the questions. The women knew that this program was not about receiving 'handouts' and that seemed important to them. They expressed appreciation for the fact that the responsibility for change is theirs. The women described outcomes

of group related to empowerment that included building trust and decreasing isolation.

Five out of the seven women specifically identified trust as something that is difficult for them and that the group has helped them build trust, particularly with other women. Eva talked about building trust,

I wouldn't talk for the longest cause I don't really have trust, especially for females but now I have no problem and I open up a lot and I can also offer advice to other women who have questions or anything so …

Malaya described the importance of knowing that she is not alone (decreasing isolation),

That we all need, you know um, going through what we all go through our daily, you know, trials and tribulations, in life. Seriously, and sometimes there is just no outlook, when you don't have someone else there, that's like oh! I've been there.

Loren described the feelings of being supported no matter what,

They're just always there. It's nice to know that someone's in your corner, regardless, all the time.

J. Roo F. summarized it by stating, 'we belong to something'. This theme was also reflected in their descriptions of how the group has impacted how they would describe themselves to someone else.

Positive Outlook

When asked about how their thinking has changed as a result of the group, most of the women indicated they think more positively. Eva said,

I must say that I think a lot more positively when it comes to things concerning myself. Like I was always one that was always there for everyone else and I'll help you out, but when it came to myself, then it was just like it didn't matter. It was irrelevant, but my thinking has changed.

She went on to talk about how she is more optimistic because she recognizes that change takes times and that taking the small 'right'

steps is progress. Other women also recognized the change in how they think about themselves and their futures. Faith said,

I, initially, had very little hope before I started the group. I really did and they provided hope and my thinking has changed because I'm more hopeful because they provided opportunities to show us that there was hope and even through our discussions…I'm more mature about my thinking because of Gather the Women.

Olivia specifically mentioned parenting,

I think I have a more positive outlook on the choices that I make, the parenting that I do, and just my future in general because of the support that they give you that anything is possible and you can achieve whatever you want.

Loren described changes in her thinking in terms of gaining more control over how she sees things,

As far as my feelings, the way I feel about situations, people. They can't control that. They can say things, but I have to be the one, if I want to be happy, I have to believe that I'm happy. I have to want to be happy. I can't blame everyone else for everything that's happened.

Marie also described feeling more in control of the way she handles difficult situations,

I felt like I had to be aggressive to get my point across and I learned that I don't have to be aggressive, I can be assertive and there's nothing wrong with that.

They also identified more positive views of themselves as a result of group.

The group has influenced how I describe myself simply by encouraging me to speak. They too have made me look in retrospect on my past occurrences to recognize my growth and to recognize how I am someone to be described in a positive light.

Program factors

There were several program factors that the women identified as

important. This included things such as an overnight retreat that they took within the past year and annual holiday dinners that are often in new locations. They also mentioned some of the activities that are done as part of group including journaling and art projects. Faith described,

I get to do things that I don't or I won't make time to do, like I enjoy writing, I enjoy drawing, and oftentimes they have us journaling and it helps me, the group allows me to express myself in those two areas through writing and sometimes through a little bit of artwork. I guess in essence, it's medicinal to me and once I leave the group I'm a different person. I may go in a little discouraged, but once I get the time to draw or journal, then I get to relax and think about things differently.

When asked about things that they would change about the program, the most common response was to meet more often and/or longer. They highlighted that the two weeks between meetings can make it difficult. Faith said,

Sometimes we have really good discussions and we have to cut it off so we can rush and go get our children and those are the times that I wish that we had more time to finish with the group because our discussions can get very serious. It could come to the point where we could use more time for someone to come to a breakthrough if that makes any sense.

Olivia talked about the difficulty getting to group because she does not have her own car, but she still wanted to meet more often,

I wish they would meet more often … because you have all these things pent up within you and you have to wait, you know, two more weeks until I can release it all.

Some of the women talked about ways to expand the type of support and resources that are offered through the program including more information about higher education, transportation and daycare. Faith identified that the group needs more diversity

We've had different ethnicities, however, I'm concerned that most of us are minority and sometimes I wonder if why, if I could use the word, Eurocentric, why some Eurocentric women don't stay with the group. I don't understand that unless it's kinda like me being a black woman, like living (here), I'm used to not seeing me,

people like me, and then in the group it's just us. I just wonder why white women don't stay with the group.

She also identified that the group is not particularly diverse in terms of age. Over the 8 years that the group has existed, there have been varying levels of diversity in terms of age, race/ethnicity and religion. There have been women as young as 18 years old and women who were in their 60s. The community overall is 84% Caucasian, but the majority of group members are African American (U.S. Census, 2010). Many of the women who join are based on referrals from current group members which contributes to a lack of diversity. Faith raised an interesting question about the group's changing diversity. We plan to follow up on this and discuss what has happened with the group.

One of the most consistent themes in the interview results is the importance of having childcare that the women trust during the group. Even though there was not a question specifically about this issue, the interviewees talked about being able to meet with other women without their children and knowing their children are safe. J. Roo F. described it well,

When I come to the group, the kids go in one place and I'm in another. They're in the same building I am in so I feel like they're safe and I can relax.

Discussion

The interviews confirmed our ongoing discussion about progress for the participants. Week by week, it sometimes does not seem like there is progress. The facilitators wonder if they are doing the right thing, if the women are making 'enough' progress…if they are, in fact, becoming more economically empowered. We have been tempted to do individual casework in group settings or 'casework by numbers' (Lewis, 2006). We also discuss quite often whether dependency has developed, but continue to come back to the fact that there is so much emotional healing that occurs that is related to their economic advancement that it takes time. It has also taken some of the women this long to trust the facilitators and the group, often due to traumatic histories. We do not want women to leave when they are continuing to grow and/or

provide support to the other women. We have come to the conclusion that it is not dependency, it is a sense that someone is in their corner and that three hours per month is not setting up a system of unhealthy dependency. The interviews support our observations, with the women identifying 'hope' as one of the primary outcomes of the group.

What is clear from these interviews is that things are changing for the women. They no longer feel alone, they have learned to trust, they have learned to ask for help, they have learned to listen, to support each other, to believe in themselves and to think more positively. Each of these things alone may not seem like much when the goal is to move out of public housing or buy a car or pay all the bills each month. But when put together, these things add up to the confidence to finish a degree, go to a first-time homebuyers' workshop, persist in waiting for subsidized childcare to be available or even change jobs when under-appreciated and underpaid. Based on what they have told us, they would not be doing the same things if they were not part of group. They would not be empowered to do those things. They would not believe that it was possible. The support, through group, is making a real difference in their lives. The results of this study have practical implications that are also supported by previous literature. Social support is an important coping mechanism for women living in poverty (Broussard, 2012). Further, meeting childcare needs is essential and the participants must view the childcare as safe (St. Thomas & Johnson, 2006). In order to establish a sense of trust the facilitators need to talk about confidentiality and make sure that participants feel there is mutual respect for it. Finally, group facilitators often feel pressure to 'prove' that their programs are successful and there are increasing requirements to demonstrate effectiveness in order to obtain resources (Lewis, 2006). These sometimes narrowly defined outcomes of success can lead to

> denial of the notion that small positive experiences in groups can have a cumulative effect in terms of enabling individuals to develop skills, confidence and self esteem within a safe environment and transfer these skills, experiences and feelings from one group to another. (Lewis, 2006, p. 86)

The participants in Gather the Women clearly identified these types of changes in trust, confidence and self-esteem as a result of the

groupwork. This study provided an opportunity to listen to what service users are telling us about their experiences in the group and the results help to support the existing quantitative program evaluation. Outcomes related to individual and group progress both need to be included in assessing groups and include process related outcomes such as trust in group members, self-confidence and changes in outlook or vision of the future.

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