

## Original Research

### **Belonging to something greater than self: Flint women giving back to the community**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Having meaning in life promotes happiness and wellbeing across the lifespan. A community-based participatory qualitative study was conducted to understand meaning in life, having a voice and the different ways women give back to their community by serving others. Interviews were held with participants (n=100) who were community residents, people serving women, or both. Participants defined meaning in life as having a sense of significance, a deep connection to their community, and a sense of acknowledgement for their overall contributions. They emphasized the importance of opportunities for women to contribute to something greater than themselves. Participants suggested organizations would be responsive towards the needs of women when women have a stronger voice. Women served their community in many roles. However, despite some societal progress, women continue to be underpaid and their contributions undervalued. Rectifying these inequities might contribute to better addressing the needs of women.

**KEYWORDS:** Women, Meaning, Qualitative Research, Flint, Michigan, Serving others

## Background

The presence of and the search for meaning in life influences human actions. Growing evidence suggests that having meaning in life is a requirement of happiness and broader human wellbeing across the lifespan [1, 2]. Meaning in life is defined as a sense of purposefulness or engaging in valued activities [3]. Being a part of something greater than oneself is part of having meaning and may help people to make sense of their lives. A study by Steger et al. [2] found that one's knowledge of their place in the world and the understanding of how that fits in with a broader picture increases happiness and contributes to better health and wellbeing [4, 5].

This sense of being part of something greater than self has been found to enhance resilience [6]. Previous studies established that having meaning in life contributes to stronger adaptive response for individuals experiencing stressful life events [7, 8]. Individuals experiencing adverse life events were able to cope better when they were able to give themselves a meaningful explanation as to 'why' something happened to them [6]. A lack of meaning in life, conversely, is associated with poorer psychological wellbeing and physical health outcomes including depression, suicidality and substance use [9-11].

Meaning in life can be drawn from an act of self-transcendence whereby people pursue values such as altruism and community service with an intent to make the world a better place for others [12]. The desire to belong to and meaningfully engage in one's community is one of the innate desires of human beings. Engagement with neighborhood organizational and civic groups in the form of volunteering or other neighborhood-focused activism can promote social integration, which contributes to better physical and mental health [13, 14]. Positive engagement in the community is also associated with increased independence [15], improved health [16], decreased mortality, and a more active lifestyle [17].

Women play a significant role in shaping the future of their communities. Giving back to the community and engagement in meaningful activities is one of the key aspects of the lives of women in various communities around the world. They play a vital role towards ensuring their communities are safe, secure, developed and progressive [18].

Flint, Michigan is a small city experiencing social, economic and health challenges. However, the city also has vibrant groups of residents who are taking active part in creating a better future for themselves and their community. The Flint Women's Study is a large (n = 100)

community-engaged qualitative project designed to identify needs and strengths of women in the Flint area and to gather their suggestions for creating collective responses to addressing those needs. Details of the broader study are reported elsewhere [19].

### **The Partnership Process**

Authors KK and BLJ who served on the Faculty Review team for Michigan State University interviewed the last author (JJ) before moving to Flint. Upon taking a position in Flint, JJ began attending local community meetings and partnered with the Community Based Organization Partners (CBOP), which KK and BLJ are members. For the past six years JJ has partnered with community members from CBOP on several initiatives. Initially, the last author (JJ) started an informal discussion with some of her long-time community partners about the needs, hopes, dreams and strengths of women in Flint. The take away from those conversations was that women in Flint had many needs before the water crisis. However, the Flint Water Crisis overshadowed those needs and became the primary focus [20, 21]. This prompted the group to refocus efforts on the needs of women in Flint. The discussion eventually evolved into the Flint Women's Study, a large qualitative study involving 100 participants. Community and academic partners (affiliated with the Flint Women's Study) were engaged in the planning and design of this study, served on the executive board which made all decisions on the study, including study design, data collection and analysis and dissemination. This partnership yielded an opportunity for community partners to engage in the data analysis, coding, and identifying final key themes of qualitative findings. Based on the findings of the study, the Flint Women's Study Community Action Network (FWSCAN) was established. FWSCAN is a formal structured action council that works to address the needs of women identified as part of the Flint Women's Study. This platform serves to facilitate continued discussion around the ever-growing and evolving needs of the women of Flint and Genesee County.

### **Rationale for the current paper**

Flint's women have experienced the brunt of Flint's iconic challenges [22]. However, they are also a strong and resilient group who led the fight to restore health and wellbeing of their community. This paper presents women's efforts to address challenges in their community, and their descriptions of needs and solutions for women in the community that relate to a sense of belonging to something greater than self. We describe women's perspectives, suggestions, and activities in the areas of (1) having meaning in life; (2) having a voice; (3) ways women serve others; and (4) role and position of women in their society.

## Methods

### Study design

The current community-based participatory research (CBPR) project was conducted in Flint, Michigan. The rationale and methodology for the Flint Women's Study is described elsewhere [19]. The analysis of this large qualitative data set employed three dimensions of the belongingness framework [23]: (1) belonging to self (i.e., basic needs and ability and resources to reach one's goals); (2) belonging to others; and (3) belonging to something greater than self (including meaning, purpose, etc.). The current study reports on results from the third dimension: *belonging to something greater than self*.

### Sampling

Participants of the study were women living in Flint or those serving women in Flint, Michigan. We used purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Participants were eligible if they were: (1) age 18 or older, and (2) identified as a woman living in the Flint area (i.e., Genesee County, the county that houses Flint), and/or (3) identified as someone serving women in the Flint area. Potential participants were contacted informally through networks of respective community partners or by reaching out to individuals in social service agencies (consumers and providers) and public settings. To identify more potential participants, we asked interviewees to name another potential participant that we should interview about the needs of women in Flint. Recruitment also utilized flyers displayed in public places in the Flint area, such as faith-based organizations, social service organizations, or residential areas. The research team reviewed participant backgrounds before the end of data collection to ensure a diverse, representative sample of women in Flint. We made additional efforts to recruit participants who were underrepresented in the existing sample midway through the data collection phase. These included women with disabilities, religious minorities and sexual minorities.

### Data collection

Open-ended qualitative questions were developed by a team of community and academic partners affiliated with the Flint Women's Study. Interview guides were designed to explore topics related to the needs of women and suggestions for improvement of wellbeing of women in the

Flint area (e.g., *What are the greatest needs of women in Flint? What would give women more hope and dignity?*). Interviews were conducted by experienced researchers (JJ, MH) from August 2017 to February 2018. Privacy of the interview location was considered for all participants. As such, all interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations that were most convenient for study participants. Duration of interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes and were all audio recorded.

### **Qualitative data analysis**

Interview recordings were transcribed, and transcripts were assigned de-identified codes to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Five dyads of community and academic partners were trained in qualitative analyses, including coding procedures, the coding framework and NVivo qualitative analysis software. The data analysis followed a framework analysis, a convenient and systematic approach for team-based coding [24]. We used the three dimensions of the belongingness framework [25] (i.e., belonging to self, belonging to others, belonging to something greater than self). An NVivo file was created with all three dimensions of the belongingness framework. Each dimension of the belongingness framework consisted of smaller codes that were related to the main dimension. Additionally, the team extracted codes under each special population group for analysis. Description of the coding framework is published elsewhere [19]. All transcripts in the current dataset were double coded (by a pair of community and academic partners). Five dyads of reviewers (i.e., 10 people) individually coded 10 transcripts and then later double-coded with another person to establish consensus. After the coders reached consensus, the data were merged into a masterfile accessible to the lead researchers only (JJ and MH). For the current study, we focused on one of the three categories of responses (belonging to something greater than self). The four themes described below were emergent subthemes in that category.

### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The Flint Women's Study was reviewed and approved by the Flint Community Ethics Review Board (CERB; protocol #2018-01). CERB is an independent volunteer-run community body which uses community reviewers and perspectives to undertake ethical review of potential and actual research proposals. The study also received ethics approval from the Michigan State University Biomedical Institutional Review Board (IRB) (#17-772). All of our community and academic partners completed the Michigan State University's online human subject research

protection certificate training. We obtained written consent from all study participants. Participants also received a copy of the study information sheet and consent form for their records.

## Results

### Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

In-depth interviews were conducted with 94 women and 6 men. Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 84 years old ( $M=47.95$ ,  $SD=15.25$ , range = 66). About half of participants identified as African-American (52%; see Table 1 below). Most participants identified both as women who lived in Flint Genesee County and also as individuals serving women in the area. Many had roles as health care professionals, volunteers, or in other forms of community advocacy (87%; see Table 2).

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics ( $n = 100$ )**

Gender	N (%)
Female	94 (94%)
Male	6 (6%)
Age	
M = 47.95 (SD = 15.25)	
Range = 66	
Race	
African American	52 (52%)
White	41 (41%)
Other	7 (7%)
Relation to women in Flint	
Woman living in Flint	1 (1%)
Someone serving women living in Flint	12 (12%)
Both	87 (87%)

**Table 2: Ways women served their community**

Occupational Category	Description	
Volunteer	Faith Community Women in the Community Recovery Community Education and tutoring Organizations for young mothers Student Association Homeless Outreach Domestic violence programs Health service organizations Food and gardening	Park and youth leadership programs Community events that focus on women Jail and prison community Retirement homes Groups serving women's issues National organizations Senior companion Neighborhood associations
Faith Leader	Ministry for women Ministry for Youth Study group Pastor Bereavement Sunday schools	Evangelist Director Ministry for mothers National Boards Ministry for homeless Outreach
Mentor	Mentors women at church Resident mentor	Mentor for DV survivors Mentor for women in community
Management	Investment Women's Shelter Community Shelter Parenting program Court and justice settings	HR Publishing House Marketing Human services
Family and friends	Friend Neighbor Daughter Mother	Sister Wife Elder Grandparent
Health professional	Children with Autism HIV services Health advocate Substance Abuse Counselor Occupational therapist Psychologist	Doctor Medical Society Adolescent medical specialist Healthcare provider for adolescents Director
Educator	Pre-school teacher Teacher Medical Education Professor	Reading interventionist Sports coach Librarian
Social Worker	Care for people with disabilities Nursing home Access screening	Foster care services Psychiatric Unit High risk children and families
Non-profit	Education Initiatives Foundations Job Skills programs for women Workforce development Life skills training Shelter Coordinator	Creator of youth serving programs Programs to empower women Community building organization Park programs
Law	Human Resource Specialty courts	Women and families in court Child support enforcement



	Probation	
Other professional roles	Photographer Architect	Research coordinator Business

Results are presented according to the theme related to belonging to something greater than self as contextualized for the study. Women’s perceptions of purpose, meaning in life, sense of community, and sense of identity are presented. Four themes, including: (1) having meaning in life; (2) having a voice; (3) ways women serve others; and (4) role and position of women in society, were used to present the study results.

**1) *Having meaning in life***

Having meaning in life was one of the repeatedly mentioned desires of women in Flint. Participants defined meaning in life as having a sense of significance, a deep connection to their community, and a sense of acknowledgement for their overall contributions. Women emphasized that they want to leave behind a positive legacy and be remembered for the good things they did for their community.

*I think across what everyone wants, to have a life fulfilled, like knowing when they die they fulfilled something in life... that’s how I feel. I want to make sure I left my mark on this world, even if it’s a small print... **Behavioral technician, age 29***

Almost all the participants endorsed that maintaining social connectedness would then counteract negative impacts from social isolation.

*I would say [women’s] needs are to be connected, and to find meaning in their social networks and in their community. I think there are pockets or I think there are a lot of women who aren’t very connected or loosely connected who could be, if they had increased connection they would feel I think—social isolation brings a lot of things. **Social worker, age 49***

Throughout the interviews, activities that fostered meaning in life were discussed. Interpersonal activities, such as helping others, volunteering, or carrying out intentional activities to build their communities were said to promote a sense of meaning. Community service that transcends family and kinship networks was mentioned as a key component of having meaning in life.

*I am an evangelist by calling. Some might say I'm a minister, too, but I feel more compelled to say that I'm an evangelist. What an evangelist is is a person who really goes out into the world and compels individuals to want to be more, do more, live more, help more, serve more, and not okay with the status quo, for themselves, for their family, and for society at a large—at large. At heart, that's who I am. At my core, that's who I am. I've been that way since I was a child. **Community member, age 47***

Participants discussed how having meaning in life is fostered through more affirming and positive resources that build on their capacity, skills, or potential. Examples of these included mentorships, strengthening capacities through job trainings, or other resources aimed at promoting recognition of women's voices and successes.

All women want to feel valued and recognized for what they have to offer. However, older women in particular may sometimes struggle for an outlet for a meaningful contribution.

*I feel like women need to be aware of who they are that they are very important, that they give a lot, have given a lot to the community. They have a lot of wisdom and knowledge on what to do, how to do, and a lot of that has just been put to sleep and nobody wants to know. Nobody really cares and it's just been put to sleep. **Volunteer for program for the elderly, age 80***

## **2) Having a voice**

Being heard and having their concerns followed through was one of the main needs of women. Being heard was said to promote one's self-worth, and a sense of being valued and appreciated. Having a voice meant having the ability and power to change their surrounding environments, policies, and infrastructure to be able to contribute to the greater good.

*[What do women want?]* *I think feeling that their voice matters and that if they work hard enough and they find those avenues that they can change things. **Swimming coach, age 45***

The inclusion of women's voices into the community promoted a sense of dignity and respect to women as a whole. One advocate shared how having a voice encourages one's hope for change in the Flint community.

*...as we start to move forward in the community and we continue to allow the voices of the community, and we're talking about women in particular, I guess, to be heard, I think that will help give more dignity and respect to the women in the community as a whole. If you*

*feel as though what you have to say is not important, there's no reason to say it, and there's no reason to have hope that things are going to change, **Advocate, age 47***

Others discussed the power of having a voice to impact change by creating infrastructures for accountability. Some participants emphasized how having a voice includes being heard by leaders. Women explained that this mutual understanding results in shared accountability and greater impact.

*You need to have a voice and somebody who on the other end is actually going to listen to you. **Homeless shelter employee, age 40***

A social worker emphasized that there needs to be people who are willing to act, speak up, and mobilize others to create resources that can empower women's voices in Flint.

*There has to be people out there who aren't comfortable with this uncomfortable silence. Someone has to be willing—a collective body of people have to be willing to speak up. **Social worker, age 47***

More importantly, participants agreed that active efforts to integrate women's voices into decision-making processes are needed to create change, foster hope, and to amplify the relevance and urgency of women's needs in the community.

*Don't pacify me or patronize me. Really hear me out and put me in places that show you understand and represent that I am valued, not just lip service, but also action. Invite me and allow the gifts that I bring to this world to flourish. Stop putting up policies and issues that hinder me from being who I am. Don't enforce society norms that squash us and silence us. Be a silence breaker. **Pastor, age 46***

There was strong consensus that women's voices are not necessarily welcomed into decision-making processes for policies, programming, or other plans surrounding their community.

*...Women have been invited to the table, but they're not always welcome. **Business professional, age 39***

Several participants suggested bringing women's voices forward by developing a council that serves as a collective platform to voice concerns.

*...I think you create a special council of women to determine what their needs are, so somethin' like this. If you do a special council or a focus group, you wanna determine what*

*their needs are because I can say, from my perspective, that my need is safety, reliable transportation, but then, the woman sitting next to me may say, “Well, my need is access to jobs and clean water.” You just have that council of women to get what their opinions are and to get what their needs are because they’re ultimately the community members, the experts about what’s needed. **Social worker, age 35***

### **3) Ways women serve others**

Participants described that serving others is linked to positive self-concept and meaningful existence. Women served other women in Flint in many roles, including as family members and friends, educators, health professionals, program directors, business owners, church leaders, or volunteers that prioritized the needs of underserved groups to address issues of inequity. Table 2 summarizes the different ways women served others with examples of affiliated organizations conveying how women engage in everyday lives of others.

Many women reported that they worked with other vulnerable women including domestic violence survivors, older women, women with disabilities, survivors of human trafficking, and children. The support they provide was said to help women feel good about themselves, feel empowered and help them take control of their health and wellbeing. One respondent described how she helped other women move their lives forward and provided them with basic necessities.

*I have worked with women in terms of self-development, helped them with essential needs like daycare, housing, utility assistance and things of that nature as far as their human service needs. **Human resources director, age 62***

Women also served to promote reading development and education. A library worker shared how she served other women by implementing programs on parenting, childcare and literacy promotion.

*I do programs for families all the time from everybody from babies to—well, I mean, I have a book club for old ladies too, but I give talks to parents about reading to their kids, about literacy. I work with teens. Teen girls. I work with—I just went to the juvenile detention center and worked with girls there. Just women in every capacity. **Library worker, age 50.***

A volunteer also shared her experience in using her personal network as a parent advocate for middle schools to connect families to other resources or to additional parent training opportunities.

Another participant who was a pastor developed educational resources through her personal networks to help parents navigate school system and resources better for their children.

*... I helped develop something called a Parent University. It was really designed to help women understand the role of their children in education, so helping them to be better advocates when they go to school, parent/teacher conference, how to get the most out of that. **Pastor age 46***

Women also served others to protect their surrounding neighborhoods. A community worker emphasized how women in Flint take social issues in their community into their own hands.

*Some amazing, strong women in the neighborhoods who have wrapped their arms around some of these problems and said, "No. Not in my neighborhood." I could name some of them. They are just such an inspiration. I was with the Neighborhood Coalition for a long time and I was always blown away by the strong women who had a Ph. D. in adversity and came out of it even stronger. **Community worker, age 67***

The vast majority of the women assumed more than one formal role to serve their community. Some of the participants served to inspire women in the community by increasing their visibility, representation, or encouraging them to take up leadership roles.

*I'm a pastor so I interact with women that way. I have, for the past 15 years, helped women at the Genesee County Jail through monthly sessions with them. I've also, of course, through my nonprofit organization, [name of organization], I host an annual women and girls summit..., to help inspire and empower, as well as educate women. **Pastor, age 46***

Women also worked with other women in more practical ways that benefit them in their day to day lives. Through these and the many other ways they served their community, women found a sense of belongingness and community.

*My sister started the [local volunteer and social organization]. She's taught a lot of people how to knit and crochet, which was empowering to them. That was a good networking community for them to meet people of all different ages, who then knew how to sew, how*

*to make cloth pads, how to bake, how to, you know, fix a bike, how to do these things.*

***Customer service worker, age 22***

Participants also reported that as women in Flint continue to serve others, they are learning how to work together and break silos to pull resources for the betterment of their community.

*I've been involved with a lot more women of color which has been great because I know I have a certain privilege as a white woman. Being able to really get more involved in helping and being an ally with women of color has been really awesome in the neighborhoods and being like, "What do you need? What can I provide for you through [my coalition] and through my time at [a local organization]?"* ***Community organizer, age 27.***

Women also served their community in a less formal capacities. The importance of having positive examples was said to help younger women aspire better. Moreover, they stressed that older women feel valued and appreciated when they are connected to their community and have the opportunity to engage with and mentor younger women.

***Role and position of women in society***

Women's sense of belonging to something greater than themselves was also influenced by their perceptions of how they are treated by their society. Although many of the participants discussed general improvements in position of women in society, pervasive inequalities remain in some areas of life as described below.

Participants reported that women are underpaid, and unlike men, their contributions are not valued in a way that is demonstrated by equal compensation for the same work as shown in the excerpt below.

*... 40 some years ago, were makin' 59 cents for every dollar that a man made. Now, it's gone up significantly, but we still don't have the same wage parity. So, a woman attorney and a man attorney can be interviewing for the same job, but a woman will be offered less because she's a woman and it's so un—people don't even know what's happening because we're just so used to thinking automatically. If we have women candidates—and the work that I do...it's largely all women in this field, and it's been notoriously underpaid because it's all women. It's like the pink ghetto.* ***Grant supervisor, age 66***

Our participants suggested that equitable compensation and valuing women's work would dramatically benefit the lives of women in the community.

*The role of women in the family structure, as you know, has shifted as more of our males have gone into incarceration or have passed away or just absent for whatever reason.*

*The woman is now head of household in many cases. Having that person's, her role, her voice being heard by city, state, and federal governments is important. Also, to be heard from other women, women to women, I think is important, those that can make change, those that can create policies on their behalf. **Pastor, age 46***

This view was shared by a healthcare worker who described the need to include women in influential roles to tailor policies and resources that serve and protect women. Having more women take on leadership positions has helped other women feel a broader sense of meaning, empowering them to take on higher job positions and to voice their perspectives.

*I think it makes a difference because, as a woman, when you see a woman leader, you may be more apt to speak up a little bit. You can picture yourself in a role a leadership cuz you see somebody in that role a leadership. **Educator, age 35***

When asked what would give women hope, participants described a need for ownership, recognition, and freedom to challenge traditional views on women's role in society. A board member shared how women want to have their own ideas and opinions, challenging those imposed by their surrounding cultures.

*... women want something of their own - Especially I feel like overall in just different social media aspects of seeing a big pushback of women in general who are just like, "No. We have thoughts. We have opinions. We deserved to have our opinions. We have our own feelings and it's okay that we express these feeling." No, it's not okay that you do that. I know you feel like you're okay in that sense of explaining something, but no, I can have my own opinion on that. I like that there's a pushback of that now of just no, it's okay. Women have ideas, wow, weird concept. **Board member, age 27***

Additionally, a social worker discussed how traditional roles and positions of women across multiple levels—in the workplace, community, and family—must be challenged to ultimately make positive changes for the future of women. Participants called for recognizing the value and contributions of women. Another necessity to strengthen women's sense of belonging

to something greater than self was related to having freedom for women to pursue their aspirations without the permission of men.

*I think the greatest need is to have the environment or such as a culture to allow us to be free to be who we are. You know to get that point of freedom, freedom to speak, freedom to act and freedom to be visionaries and freedoms to act out on what it is that we see as best for us as individual women and as women as a whole, the freedom to support without being ridiculed, the freedom to not feel that we have to have the permission of men to accomplish the goal that we have set for ourselves and as for women... **HR director, age 62***

### **Discussion**

This study is one of a series of three main papers reporting on three dimensions of belongingness (i.e. belonging to self, belonging to others, belonging to something greater than self) as evaluated as part of the Flint Women's Study [23]. In this paper, we reported on the dimension of belonging to something greater than self using the emergent sub-themes of (1) having meaning in life; (2) having a voice; (3) ways women serve others; and (4) the role and position of women in society. The study is unique because it describes women's search for meaning and position in their community in a predominantly low-resource setting within the context of a high-income country.

The belief that one's existence has a meaning or a purpose that is beyond themselves often helps people to enjoy satisfaction in life [26], contributing to better health and wellbeing[27]. On the other hand, lack of avenues for a productive engagement in their community and in society, more generally, was said to contribute to low-self esteem, frustration, and dissatisfaction. Confirming what was previously reported [28], in this study meaning in life was linked to a feeling of connection to something larger than themselves. Therefore, our participants suggested that meaning in life matters, and creating and strengthening avenues and opportunities for women to offer their skills and expertise to their community benefits them and their community.

The opportunity to be heard and to have ones' concerns taken seriously was a recurring theme in our study. Previous research reported the positive relationship between having a voice, health, and wellbeing [29]. Historically, women constitute one of the most underrepresented groups in various professional and policy settings [30-32]. In this study, for genuine inclusion and



empowerment, the participants noted the need for their concerns and suggestions to be heard and acted upon, and a need for stronger voices of women in leadership roles.

In many high-income countries, progress has been made to achieving gender parity and equitable representation of women in different organizations and positions [33]. Despite the positive progress, less than a fifth of public and private positions are held by women [33]. In low-resource settings, representation of women is particularly important because women's issues get amplified when women are represented and heard [34]. Thus, organizations can benefit from women's leadership by creating opportunities for women leaders to develop and thrive [35].

In our study, women from all different walks of life had something to offer. They served other women both in their personal and professional capacities as change makers, managers, leaders, professionals, advocates, friends, parents, grandparents, siblings, volunteers, and neighbors. Some of the homeless women we interviewed served other women by teaching them practical skills. Women in low-resource settings may rely on their social networks with other women to ensure that their needs are met. This is particularly common for women who are poor, older, disabled, or vulnerable in some way. For example, a study from an urban slum in Ethiopia reported that women drew meaning from their service to others and depended on what other women had to offer to have some of their pressing needs met [36]. Similarly, another study found that many women in pockets of low-resource settings within a high-income country also rely on other women to have their needs (including basic needs) met [37]. Thus, our study expands the literature by reporting on the experiences of women in a predominantly urban, underserved community experiencing pervasive poverty, environmental racism and depopulation.

Recent trends indicate that attitudes towards women's work in their family and community has evolved [38]. However, our participants pointed out that large disparities in compensation persist. In addition, gendered division of labor remains a challenge as referred by one of our study participants as "*the pink ghetto*". A disproportionate number of women served in non-profits and other human service organizations with fewer women in sciences and engineering. This finding is consistent with what was previously reported as women engaging in professions with communal goals and more interpersonal components [39]. Women in those gendered professions often make less money and have limited opportunities for upward mobility. Our participants emphasized the need for inclusive and equitable work places.

Many respondents described a need for having examples and role models for successful and empowered girls and women in Flint, especially given the poverty, racism, and other challenges around them. In a previous publication from the Flint Women's Study focusing on the needs of special populations (including young women, women with disabilities, elderly women, perinatal women, new mothers, and LGBTQIA women), respondents indicated that there is a great need for role models and mentors [40]. In this study, as well, participants endorsed that amplifying women's voices and sharing stories of successful women would inspire others in the community.

This study has several strengths. First, the study was strongly community-partnered. Our community partners participated in every step of the research process (design, data collection, analysis, publication). Second, the study reports women's search for meaning, roles in their community, and their place in their society, as described by the women themselves in a predominantly underserved community. Third, this study included a wide range of responses from 100 participants, allowing for rich descriptions in a qualitative study. The study also has limitations. We did not specifically analyze the data for racial differences in conceptualization of our themes. This is mainly because Flint is a small community, and that would make participants traceable. However, it is worth mentioning that we did not see major differences in understanding of these concepts.

## **Conclusion**

Recognizing the many ways women contribute to their communities and utilizing their skills and expertise might contribute to better addressing the needs of women. Moreover, women emphasized the importance of having opportunities to use their skills, talents and social networks to advance efforts and causes that are meaningful to them. Women identified meaning in life or a sense of belonging to something greater than self as an important emergent topic, both for their own personal wellbeing and in terms of greater opportunities and equity for other women and girls in the community.

## **Abbreviations**

LGBTQIA- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual

CERB- Community Ethics Review Board

### **Authors' contributions**

MH is part of the Flint Women's Study Executive Board along with KK, BLJ, JM and JJ. JJ is the PI of the study. JJ, BLJ, and JM, designed the topic guides. MH drafted this paper with the help of TB. RM, MS, DG, FR, KK, JW and MH coded the qualitative data. JWF contributed to the drafting of the discussion. All authors contributed to the draft and approved the final version.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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