A Review of Current Literature
on Feminist Process

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ARE THE MOVEMENT'S ORGANIZATIONS OPEN TO THE MOVEMENT'S MEMBERS? A STUDY OF THE DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES IN WOMEN'S GROUPS IN QUEBEC

—by Jennifer Beeman, et al (in V.30, nos.1/2 of New Feminist Research, an academic journal of interdisciplinary feminist scholarship and research, published by the Centre for Women's Studies in Education at OISE/UT)

The article details an academic study of ten women's groups in Quebec, chosen to provide the greatest heterogeneity possible, and representing a cross-section of groups that make up the women's movement in Quebec. The study examined the processes of participation in the groups, and asked in what ways accessibility, representivity and accountability were applied and achieved. The focus was on the perspective of the women using the group's services and their inclusion in decision-making processes (so not from the point-of-view of paid staff or boards).

The authors begin by stating that in the past 30 years, women's groups in North America have multiplied and developed a large number of organizational forms. Yet despite the attention in literature given to values of collectivist structures and democratic process, the authors believe that "feminist practices of small sororial collectives, composed of staff and activists, often supercede practices of open, democratic structures for members. This development is problematic for the women's movement as a whole because, if women's organizations have become the backbone of the women's movement, what do these trends indicate about the accessibility, representivity and accountability of the movement in general?" (p. 101-2)

The authors note that "community control" is often a hotly contested issue within the organizations, but just what exactly constitutes community control, or more importantly, who represents the community, is strikingly absent from most literature.

Further: "service users and activity participants are thus noticeably absent from most analyses of organizational practices. If any reference is made to participants it is generally in a discussion of empowerment practices or, in other words, in terms of intervention practices. But they are generally excluded from discussions of representative or participatory democracy." (p. 103)

And finally: in one study cited (of a shelter), the author stated that "a two-tiered structure existed – collectivist for the staff, but hierarchical between staff and residents!" (p.103)

Of the Quebec groups studied here: "one of the most striking characteristics of all the women's groups is how they are in constant evolution and development. Their workers, and for some groups, their members, experiment with and rearrange their activities, interventions and structures." (p. 106)

The ten included: a women's centre which offers educational activities, self-help groups, counselling, etc., and which mobilizes members to participate in protests and press conferences; four shelters; an advocacy group which offers services, activities and

advocacy to its members, who are workers in a profession particularly vulnerable to serious exploitation (strippers? Sex-trade workers?); a local chapter of a major Quebec women's organization (AFEAS – l'Association feminine d'education et d'action sociale, a provincial org with about 30,000 members active in local groups across Quebec); a women's health group; a sexual assault centre (CALACS); and a group offering employment services to women.

The authors go into detail about the structures. Suffice to say they range from a collective which has no employees, and is effectively run by member volunteers (AFEAS), but which has a director/board (which attend to a strictly defined slate of technical chores like accounting, etc), all the way through groups with as many as 8 unionized permanent employees, working under a director/board (shelter for women victims of conjugal violence). In the middle somewhere is a collective with three permanent employees (CALACS) but no board or director.

Over all, the authors seem to conclude that truly democratic participation by org. members is difficult to achieve. "Democratic processes require deliberation, negotiation and compromise and therefore require organizations that can accept shifts, changes, experimentation and difference. Our study…indicates that groups capable of working within such a climate of movement and change share certain principles: seeing membership in a group as an active and a passive status, seeing democratic participation as intimately associated with the empowerment process, and seeing groups as belonging to their members, even where complex services are provided. In groups where democratic practices with the members are limited, workers and board members exercise a higher degree of control over most aspects of the group's work and life and subsequently leave little for the participation of members or service users." (p119)

However, having said that, I'd point out again the one group, AFEAS, manages to combine a collective structure with a board. It is "controlled by the rank and file members who elect an executive to oversee its more technical affairs, but programming and organizing members are undertaken by members at their monthly meetings. Thus the group is managed by its members at all times." (p.108)

The authors also concluded that four of the groups, despite having very different histories, structures, orientations and services offered, shared a variety of basic practices that work to foster democracy. "For these groups, the active participation of members is central to their orientation. Their groups provide many different activities and forums outside of their services in which their members can participate, and there are many levels at which women can enter into group activities. Workshops, information and training sessions, brunches permanent and ad hoc committees, etc., are all organized with a view to simultaneously responding to women's needs and interest…etc, etc) (p. 109)

"These groups question actively what structures would best meet their needs for the democratic management of their group. Two of the groups have developed unique hybrid structures which promote the integration of participants into the decision-making process. The advocacy group has created a two-tiered board structure to meet the variety of needs

and abilities of its group's members….one an "orientation board" whose members do not have to be landed immigrants, and are elected, meets monthly to oversee questions of orientation, programming and promotion. The official board of directors meets quarterly and handles more technical matters of contracts, fund-raising, and some budget questions. The board of directors of the sexual assault centre is similarly a hybrid, in their case it is a collective composed of three permanent staff and six elected activists who are most often former service users." (pp. 109-110)

(p. 111) "The local chapter is controlled by its members who make all decisions concerning subjects to be discussed and activities to be organized. The chapter does have an elected board that oversees the more technical aspects of the group's operations (budget, small contracts and technical aspects of programming).

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INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST FRAMEWORKS: AN EMERGING VISION

—a thought piece produced by The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) 2006.

This critical reflection piece describes the emerging thinking around the possible contributions of IFFs to creation of alternative approaches to re-envisioning policy change and advocacy.

Although the piece is largely written in terms of analyzing the failure of women's groups and social justice advocates to stem the growing tide of poverty, especially among women and children, in Canada, several general trends can be identified.

"One challenge that feminist and social justice advocates face is that our approaches have not kept pace with the growing complexity of contemporary social, political, economic and cultural conditions. Based on our work in women's movements, CRIAW believes that different and diverse approaches are urgently needed in struggles for social and economic justice." (p.4)

The piece describes "old thinking" around *gender-based analysis*. This type of thinking analyzes policy as it affects male versus female. While this at the very least has brought about awareness of gender-based inequalities, it ignores the complexity of women's lives. GBA uses a "gender-only" lens to examine issues. It prioritizes one identity entry-point, gender, or one relation of power, patriarchy, to the exclusion of others, such as race, class, etc.

IFFs attempt to understand how multiple factors work together and interact to reinforce conditions of inequality and social exclusion. So, common themes underlying IFFS include: use of multi-pronged analyses; centering policy analyses on those most marginalized; refusing to think within policy divides that don't recognize women's lives

in holistic ways, or keep women alienated; acknowledging that power relations also shape feminist politics and research and that feminist orgs. are embedded in relations of power and privilege. This latter point means feminists must remain self-reflective about their own positioning in relations of power. IFFs also: validate alternative world views that have historically been marginalized; understand that women experience diverse histories and are thus positioned differently in hierarchical social relationships; challenge binary thinking like able/disabled, gay/straight, etc, and reveal how such conceptual limitations are both the outcome of, and foster, social rankings and unequal power relations.

"This critical reflection piece lays out our emerging vision of IFFs so that it can be used by women's and social justice organizations to reflect upon, analyze and transform: the development, content and delivery of programming activities, such as workshops, conferences, forums and seminars; the analysis, design of and recommendation for public policies, such as immigration or welfare policies; and the **internal policies and ethics of social justice organizations** (my bold)." P.6

"Today's women's movements are increasingly diverse, consisting of many voices, representing many different sectors of society. No longer can socially-dominant groups assume that their identities and interests are representative of all women." (p.7)

"The history of women's movements in Canada has been one of change. Second wave feminists put the issue of gender equality on Canada's political agenda…(but)GBA developed out of what is now an out-dated traditional liberal feminist definition of gender: the universal categorization of "women" as one discrete group in opposition to "men" based primarily on biological differences. (p7-8)

The authors of this paper suggest that second-wave feminism left many women behind, and that throughout the second wave, minority women's movements challenged the assumption that white middle-class women could make claims to represent all women when many were unable to identify with this homogenous definition. "Identity politics" served to open up spaces for marginalized women to speak out, but the authors conclude that although this was important, it failed to go beyond issues of representation and recognition.

"In debating questions of authority and authenticity – who should speak about what and why – and in claiming categories on our own terms, identity politics will not independently destroy underlying systems and structures of disempowerment, though empowering for some." (p.8)

Further, the authors claim: "Today, the landscape of the feminist struggle has changed. Many women who have invested years in putting issues central to marginalized women onto the political agenda are moving away from or bypassing identity politics and focusing their energies elsewhere. Participants in today's women's movements have worked to take apart categories such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, citizenship, disabilities and sexualities to show how categories of identity are socially constructed.

Using IFFs, social categories such as race, class, gender, sexualities, abilities, citizenship, and Aboriginality among others, operate rationally; these categories **do not stand on their own, but rather gain meaning and power by reinforcing and referencing each other."** (my bold) (p.9)

Remarkably, the paper goes on to describe CRIAW's own struggle with its internal structure and function or dysfunction. It is a typical organization, constructed with a board and staff. It has had to rethink its priorities, and redefine its attempts at inclusion of Francophones, lesbians and Aboriginals. To this day, no Aboriginal women have ever sat on CRIAW's board and the organization is trying to find ways to engage Aboriginal feminist organizations. CRIAW has failed, despite massive efforts, to become fully bilingual.

"CRIAW's transformation is still underway, but the organization's focus has shifted to rethinking its internal structure and policies through the knowledge that multiple perspective and different voices must inform all our work." (p12)

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FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS MAKING CHANGE
—by Kristen Roderick, of the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services (Keystones News Report Volume 17, Winter 2004)
To view online go to www.crehs.on.ca, then click on "publications," then on "Centre News Report."

Very brief article, but good, detailing the changes many feminist organizations have made over the past decade, and in the face of the current economic and political environment.

The author describes the traditional feminist coalition structure, based on participatory, consensus decision-making, and true "pure" models of this type of "structure" do not even admit of staff.

The author details the challenges facing feminist groups in today's climate – "organizations that began as advocacy or consciousness-raising groups with collective decision-making structures have less time and fewer resources to advocate for changes in society and work towards women's equality."

"From my experience working with various feminist groups and women's organizations, commitment, adaptability and a willingness to work together have been key to their survival."

She says a definition of "feminism" is difficult to arrive at, but claims that most feminist orgs. operate from three core beliefs: that women are oppressed because they are women, that women are entitled to equal rights to men and that feminists organize for change. These values are being challenged in today's world because: (1) there is increased

government intervention and control over women's services (2) there is lack of support for and understanding of women's services and (3) there is serious burn-out among over-worked, underpaid service-providers.

She goes on to note that reduced social spending in Ontario in the 90's was devastating and that outreach, advocacy and education in feminist organizations suffered directly because of this. However, ironically, the trend which has developed is for women's groups to partner more eagerly now, and to move to hierarchical structures with boards and staff, although these types of things are antithetical to their original goals, of remaining independent and basing upon collective models. Partnerships with government, in particular, were considered essential to avoid, as they promoted absorption and loss of feminist principles and organizational structure.

Despite this belief, many groups have moved towards partnering and a "collaborative approach." The author concludes that the "recent convergence of the right supports and circumstances has created new opportunities for women's organizations to form partnerships both within and outside their organizations. In the past few years, the collaborative approach has gained importance and legitimacy within Ontario's service system, particularly with regards to addressing violence against women."

Following on the heels of a coroner's inquest into the violent death of Arlene May in 1996 (?), a five-year implementation plan was presented to the Ontario AG in 1999, suggesting a number of strategies for community services, including increasing collaborative, multi-sectoral approaches to violence against women.

The author cites Interval House in Toronto (Canada's oldest shelter) and the Sexual Assault Care and Treatment Centres (31 across the province as of the publication of this paper), as two examples of groups or orgs. using the collaborative approach.

For example, the SACC/TCs work from a feminist perspective, but are funded by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care with regard to operations and specific programs like services for survivors of domestic violence and for early years funding to enhance response to children. They have also worked extensively with the author's Centre, conducting needs assessments, evaluations and creation of various service strategies. The Director of the Waterloo Region Centre states that as an organization with feminist values, seeking to make changes within an admittedly complex system, it takes sufficient funding, buy-in from all the players and the patience to reach the goal.

Regarding Interval House, which also works from a feminist perspective to end violence against women in the community, it continues to operate from within a collective framework. They rely less on government funding, but have worked at drumming up support from the community, and are sufficiently funded in this manner. So, they have complete freedom to operate as they please, and this freedom means they are able to focus on preventive strategies as well as just service provision.

They use a modified collective approach, working with a board of directors and paid staff in order to maintain the shelter's effectiveness and efficiency, and to satisfy what government requirements they do have. However, the collective ultimately determines the shelter's overall management and direction. A quote from an unidentified woman who has worked with the collective for 18 years: "idealistically, it would be great to turn everyone into radicals, but we need to have good people and good operating processes all throughout the system…We have to work together…"

The author concludes: "The increased number of collaborative approaches to violence against women, combined with the support to maintain them, develops a stronger body of change agents in the community and reinforces the importance and place of each of these services."

Further: "Historically, feminist organizations worked for social change by fighting against the systems that perpetuated women's inequalities, and focused on empowering women from within feminist organizations, such as collectives. Today, feminist organizations are evolving this philosophy and expanding their relationships with others in the community and system."

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LOOKING FOR CHANGE: A DOCUMENTATION OF NATIONAL WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS WORKING TOWARDS INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY
—Tobo-Gillespie, Torres (Estable), 1996. Published by CRIAW.

CRIAW started this research project because "many authors and activists have suggested that mainstream women's organizations have not been as inclusive and diverse as they could be." Thus, the goal of the project became "to gain a better understanding of how the decision-making structures of national women's organizations facilitate or hinder their ability to become inclusive and diverse. By *diverse*, we mean the participation of those women who have been marginalized in the past and continue to be so in today's society, including racial minority, immigrant and refugee women, disabled women, Aboriginal women, poor women, francophone women and lesbian women. By *inclusive*, we mean the equitable participation at all levels, be it the Board, Collective, Chapter, staff and/or membership, of all women who wish to participate. We also mean that issues affecting these different groups of women are taken as part of the organization's ongoing work and reflected in their by-laws, contributions and programming."

The study's data was largely collected through interviews with women at 12 national women's organizations.

In summary, the date analysis revealed no apparent causal links between structure and inclusion, or between the different waves of feminism and inclusion. OF the 12 groups, three were at the time of the study engaged in a change process, while the other nine were all at different stages regarding inclusion and diversity.

The authors conclude that the organizations that best moved forward toward inclusion had three factors in common:

(1) powerful and influential individuals from the dominant group who took on the issues of marginalized groups;
(2) availability of state funding and policy that promoted equality and inclusion;
(3) concern to maintain a progressive image in the larger community.

Further, they state that all three factors need to be present for the movement toward diversity and inclusion to begin. Importantly: "organizations also emphasized that they were aware it would be a lengthy process, taking years to get to the policy writing stage, and even more to reach complete diversity and inclusion."

"Given the diversity of our country, it may, however, not be useful to adopt a single model but rather to look at the conditions and recommendations outlined in this study to adapt them to their situations."

There are suggestions and guidelines listed at the end of the publication, drawn up by the authors, based on their conclusions. Though too numerous to reproduce here, it makes great reading for those wishing to work toward change.

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SAVING SHELTER, SEEKING STATE: EXAMINING THE WOMEN'S SHELTER MOVEMENT IN CANADA 1970-2001

–by Kathleen Moss (from Feminist Voices, a CRIAW publication. This article appeared in FV No. 13)

The author notes briefly off the top that feminist groups have historically recognized that there are problems relying on the state when it comes to achieving major or long-term changes in women's subordinate status.

The purpose of her paper is to examine women operating as collective groups and how the movement as a whole took on leadership roles through the form of advocacy groups. The essay is divided into four sections: (1) an overview of the rise of the shelter movement, and an outline of three shelter models. She focuses heavily on the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) because it is the largest women's shelter association in Canada (it's a provincial agency), (2) an exploration of feminist ideology, and documentation of their roles, revealing their organizational/structural form and decision-making power, (3) a look at state ideology and (4) interaction of the state and the role of state funding.

Part 1: the author notes that in the beginning, the feminist movement sought to bring the issue of wife abuse and violence against women into the open, by placing it onto the

public and political agenda. These women formed groups, usually run by volunteers. The patriarchy attacked these groups and criticized their structure. But women continued to band together, raise money, organize, run shelters, educate communities, etc. This environment was free from control by the patriarchy and the threat of abuse. Since the early 1970's three shelter models typically emerged, the first a feminist, liberationist or collective model, characterized by radical feminist ideology and incorporating non-hierarchical decision-making processes. The second was a non-feminist, professional protectionist or hierarchical model, grounded in mainstream social services and traditional organizational practices. The third was a pro-feminist model that combined feminist and professional approaches. She notes that the more "service-oriented" the group, the greater the tendency to use hierarchical organizational practices in order to maximize short-term efficiency of service-provision. The liberationist organizations worked more toward promoting female empowerment and worked at consciousness-raising.

She likens the work of provincial associations which represent shelters (like OAITH) to the kind of work often done by coalitions like OCTEVAW…lobbying for legislative change, advocating for funding of services, ensuring that shelters are consulted by media, funders and decision-makers, and conducting research and educating the community. She also notes that Toronto's Interval Houses get close to half their financial support from private donations, about 40% from government, 8% from the United Way and 3% from GST rebate and investment income.

She concludes the section by noting that with government funding comes a clamp on freedom of decision-making, and the necessity of dealing with the bureaucratic maze. However, this is becoming more and more accepted and she states that many "feminists" now accept government funding not only for service provision but to allow active social action and advocacy work. As well, many of these feminists accept that state involvement has established many social services for women and that "well-integrated" shelters are the ones with ties to, or who collaborate with, government orgs.

Part 2: She begins: "feminists and activists had to ask themselves, 'what are the dangers in partnerships?' and the 'professionalization' of women's groups?' As the movement expanded and searched for legitimacy and funding, key issues evolved that were organizational in nature, whereby decision-making power and money became a mixed blessing."

Ultimately, though, she believes that despite the fact that feminists now enlist government institutions, the latter have political structures and goals that are antithetical to the women's movement, and that at the bottom line, these government institutions do not understand the social or political context of battering.

She goes on to say that although feminists do not necessarily support the professional ideology offered by the medical professions, the criminal justice system or the government, enlisting them none-the-less brings power and prestige to the women's movement.

She notes that political astuteness is all-important (p146), and quotes comparative studies done in Manitoba and Ontario, where different levels of govt. and different ideological government orientation reacted to, and affected funding to women's groups. So, in other words, go after the most liberal level of government, or the most well-funded, but know the difference and target your efforts to the right place.

She cites other work suggesting that women activists need allies and partnerships within bureaucracies as well, in order to have greater input into the decision-making process. (p. 147) A page or two is devoted to noting the gradual shift away from the notion of "wife-battering" to the idea that partner abuse can mean a woman beating a man. Feminists felt the issue was becoming diluted and that power was being taken away from women, once again.

As well, the shift towards hiring professional staff with degrees, and paying them at all, or higher salaries, is still very repugnant to many feminists because they fell it creates divides, and devalues the experience of abused women. Others want professionals to write grants and maximize the political potential of the group.

And: "With the inevitable expansion of shelters across Canada, came complex questions about how best to organize work and to make decisions. While some shelters choose to work collectively, others adapt a hierarchical structure, while others ascribing to the pro-feminist model, organize around a structure that is a blend between collectives and hierarchical structures…" (p.152)
She repeats here that women and feminists are not a heterogeneous group and so there are continuing difficulties surrounding collectives. She claims that although the majority of current literature supports the idea that it is state intervention that is one of the most influential factors in the deterioration of collective structures, you cannot discount the fact that there are clashes of ideology within the feminists structures themselves which also contribute.

She goes into a detailed account of how hierarchical organizations are structured and why feminists have traditionally not liked them, as well as how feminist collectives are structured and why women like them (pp153-4). She concludes: "Within the collective structures, there are structural gaps. Although power is supposed to reside with all, it almost always accrues to a select group. Moreover, collectives have been charged with poor internal accountability mechanisms, for failure to accomplish administrative work and for spending large amounts of time on 'process', rather than on accomplishing tasks and conducting applied social research."

"Today, collectives face a persistent dilemma whose resolution is central to the survival of feminist organizations – how to deal with different skills within the collective and the values socially ascribed to them. Collectives that have survived tend to re-examine their work structures, plan directions, set long-term goals, and build in accountability mechanisms."

Parts 3 and 4: The author does a detailed analysis of the Mike Harris years and the impact his government's funding cuts had on shelters in the province. She states: "in the next decade, the struggle to keep people focused on pushing for the necessary structural change will be difficult because of the economic downturn and the resulting 'more for less' trend that is impacting on all levels of Canadian government."

In her conclusion, she states that feminist organizations need to fine-tune their processes and raise substantive questions that will lead to a more healthy debate about roles, procedures and standards. She says that as a starting point, the next question feminists need to ask themselves is: "does a battered woman or a woman at risk have more options and supports available to her today than was the case prior to state intervention?"

She believes that generally, the answer given by front-line workers and advocates is that women have been provided with more choices, but not necessarily with increased safety. At the very least, more choices mean women can better plan to protect themselves.

Feminists need to keep asking such questions as they move forward, in order to continually remind themselves of their main goal, and to examine if they are still working towards that goal, and not some other goal.

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