



Women Organize Alberta

DISCUSSION PAPER

- THE CONFERENCE COMMITTEE

Alice de Wolff

Judy Dragon

Julie Anne Le Gras

Trudy Richardson

Sandy Susut

Derwyn Whitbread

WOMEN ORGANIZE ALBERTA

- A DISCUSSION PAPER -

The Conference Committee, 1981
ALBERTA STATUS OF WOMEN ACTION COMMITTEE

Historically, the realities of women's lives have been invisible, and in many ways continue to be so. To be invisible as a group means that women's places in the economy, our work, our political movements, our art, science, education, even descriptions of our psychology, physiology, and family relations have been and are defined for us from positions which are not ours. We live with the consequences of the world which have little to do with women's experience other than to provide for our oppression.

When we move outside of the private domestic sphere and become active with others around concerns which are particularly women's, part of what we are doing is voicing, articulating, and documenting these concerns: making them visible. Prairie women have been active in the suffragette movement, in prohibition, in developing health care facilities, child care, services for immigrant women, in unionizing women workers, in taking up matrimonial property law, and in the whole range of actions opened up by the present women's movement. In these and more ways we have all been involved in re-defining women's conditions and in making accessible to other women a more accurate understanding of the inequities we live with and of how to work to change them.

It is this tradition of organizing for change, these understandings and practices that have interested the Conference Committee. The relationship between our economic and political context and how our lives are difficult as women is an essential and exciting inquiry. Alberta is a particular context which has shaped in the past and continues to shape how we organize, what we organize around, and our failures and successes. Knowledge of how we as Alberta women organize, even what issues have been addressed, rests with individuals or active groups, in people's journals or in group documentation that sit in basements or attics. There are few forums for this kind of information. We feel that tapping this knowledge is essential to informed, vital and continued organizing in the 1980's.

In the process of looking at our own experience as a Standing Committee of ASWAC, the Conference Committee has articulated and worked with a set of principles which we want to state here. They have arisen from our particular collection of histories working in communities on the prairies and in the north around women's and international development issues. They reflect our interest in finding ways of working together with respect to individual women's experiences and positions, which are relations of equality, and which develop collectives capable of acting in solidarity with others.

We feel that the act of continuously voicing our own realities and informing others of our developing understanding is an essential basis for women's organizing. The Committee refers to this process as stating one's own interests. It is often difficult to clearly know our own interests or to acknowledge them as important. We have asked each other several questions which assist in clarifying our positions: What keeps you awake at night? What do you have energy to work on? What do you want to learn? What connects with other work you are doing? We have tried to be critical of our own responses which focus on concerns of helping other people. So often our volunteer, not to mention paid, work, is defined by what others think we "should" do. We are continually in the service of others. When women work from clearly stated personal interests, and work on an analysis of the context in which their concerns arise, our motivation is higher, the commitments we make are more realistic, the direction of our activities develops more clarity, and our tendencies (if we have them) to become over-committed and burned-out are more controllable.

Working from one's own interests is a personal-political action in the context of an organizing process in that it potentially exposes the ways in which our realities are masked; the assumptions that structure our world are inadequate. Canadian groups often have difficulty with this principle. It threatens a corporate kind of group behaviour which is based on assumptions of consensus always being attainable no matter what the conflict, on party line agreements which consistently mask the positions of the membership. None of us live in a simple world. We face a real challenge of learning to live and work with complexities, differences and conflict. This writing is interrupted by a neighbour's sound system: "No you can't stand up, can't stand up. You need the touch of a mighty hand, no, you can't stand up alone". We live with the contradiction between the ideology of the sanctity of the individual and our experience of control and uniform behaviour within all our social and economic relationships.

To understand our collective reality as women in Alberta and to work effectively to change it, we must be conscious of our diversity and ground our structures, strategies and analysis in our own descriptions of our lives. One practice that acknowledges and respects individuals' or groups' differing positions and interests is that of negotiation. We feel this is an accurate way of describing the work that takes place within a group while its members establish whether their interests are sufficiently common to proceed with a task or on-going affiliation. It describes similar work which takes place when one group meets with another to establish a working relationship. When this is a conscious process, the agreements made are clear and consequently easier to work with. So are the assumptions about commitments, tasks to be done, and functions of the various parties involved.

Starting with diversity does not preclude establishing a commonality. It allows each group or coalition of groups to agree on the common features for which they have energy, and to assess whether they have differences which will seriously inhibit the work. And it allows for a strengthened solidarity. Our experience is not the same. The economic and social conditions which produce our shared experience of subordination, inequality and oppression are similar

but act in a particular manner for each group of us. When rural women, Indian women, mothers in communities, women on welfare, women in unions, women-oriented-women, immigrant women and women in the churches are first of all acting according to their particular concerns, and then able to act in informed alliance with other groups, each group becomes stronger. The voice of women becomes stronger in this way and increasingly reflects accurately our lived experience.

Through the kind of organizing where the way in which we get together is based upon descriptions and statements of our realities, our common concerns and our differences, we feel that we are leading to the development of an Alberta women's analytical framework. Developing our own analysis of our economic, political and social context is essential if we are to become consistently capable of initiating our own actions and creating strategies for change.

In working to agree on the above principles, the Conference Committee has tried to develop a practise of drawing from our past experience, being critical of our own process and attempting to act consistently with what have emerged as these principles. This work has also provided the frame for the organization of the 1981 ASWAC Conference itself.

Our discussions have highlighted several aspects of our histories with Alberta organizing which we think can generate considerable discussion, debate and a further understanding of what works, where, and for what reasons. The following set of "aspects of organizing" is by no means exhaustive. We trust it will be added to, and re-worked to suit individual or group needs in reflecting on your own experience.

CRITICAL ASPECTS OF ORGANIZING

Although the following sections appear to have a linear order similar to the life of some groups, any one of these aspects could become focal or critical for a group at any point in its history. These are not "guidelines to good organizing", but rather questions which may stimulate your thinking about your own past and present experience with groups.

1. To Be Or Not To Be A Group

- a. There are situations when individual action may be preferable to group action:
- The situation may demand it, e.g., where women live geographically separated from other active women.
 - Time pressures may mean that group-organizing cannot be done and individual responses are possible.
 - The institution(s) or issue being addressed may react more to individual action, as when 50 letters arrive on an MLA's desk from individual constituents.
 - Some individual skills require individual action, e.g., writing poetry, research, theoretical work, music.
 - Strategically, individual action can be chosen when the threat of group action is anticipated to cause an undesirable over-reaction.
- b. There are numerous reasons for group action, mostly variations on the "strength in numbers" theme: advantages of pooling skills, labour, providing mutual support, combined understanding, protection from targetting and isolating tactics, etc.

How have you decided what kind of action made sense? In what situations?

WORKING NOTES:

2. What Kind Of A Group?

Groups form and develop differently according to their original definition. Within each, women's energies are sustained in different ways. In thinking about kinds of groups it is important to identify whether the impetus for being together is a) defined by some external situation, for instance, the need to push for a change in a piece of legislation, or b) defined by the internal interests of the women, e.g., consciousness-raising groups.

Different kinds of groups:

- Issue Groups, for example, groups formed around violence against women.
- Specific Event Groups, for example, International Women's Day Committee, Women's Celebrations, Nurses strike support groups.
- Specific Task Groups, for example, women's bookstore.
- Common Analysis Groups, for example, study groups, NDP Women's Caucus, friends who act well together.
- Umbrella Groups, for example, ASWAC.

WORKING NOTES:

3. Who May Be A Member?

The defining impetus for a group often influences the question of who may be a member. A group based on a shared situation, for instance, has a limited membership. Different situations can require different membership strategies.

- a. Often groups name themselves as being "open", but have an informally limited membership. At times, it becomes crucial to verbalize the informal understanding, usually when the composition of the membership shifts and the definition of the group changes as a consequence.
 - How have the original members of the group come together?
 - Who really decides who joins the group?
 - How do members join?
 - Do members look for others who have similar interests, a similar analysis, or represent formally or informally other groups or constituencies? (Groups whose members are representatives of other groups act very differently from those composed of interested individuals.)
 - Can men join?
 - Can the group be taken over by others with different interests?
 - How do members leave the group?
- b. The act of closing a group is often difficult for women. It involves fear of exclusivity, secrecy, control, hierarchy, in their most negative connotations. It can, however, be a useful strategy for developing an analysis, for stretching the collective understanding, for maintaining control over the direction of the group, or for moving into fast action.
 - At what point in its work does the group close? For how long?
 - How do members understand the rationale for closing the group?
- c. When a core membership is established, groups usually still have the need to extend.
 - Are constituencies (non-members who are able to provide certain kinds of support) of interested people developed?
 - Does the group make alliances with others?
 - How are education, media work, public relations done? Is it clear whether the purpose of this work is to develop membership or to encourage sectors, or the general public, to become sympathetic to the group's position?

WORKING NOTES:

4. How Do Members Make Decisions?

There is often considerable debate within women's groups about how decisions are made, the structure of the groups and members' relations to authority. The debate should be encouraged: women and authority are a complex mix. Women often equate decision-making structures with patriarchal and hierarchical corporate and religious/social institutions. We are critical of those forms because they represent the relationships which we experience personally as subordination. On the other hand, much of the personal discipline we have learned is in submitting to authority and accepting decisions others make for us. To forge new patterns of relations and working, or new understandings of old ones is a difficult task.

- Who does the work in the group? Are the people who do the work the decision-makers?
- Who speaks for the group? How are these people connected to the agreed-upon decision-making structure?
- Does the group have a collective structure, a hierarchical structure, a blend?
- Is there a hidden structure? What are the consequences of making these less formal power relations visible?
- How are agreements made? Are they clearly negotiated?
- How does the delegation of responsibility work? What are the lines of authority? How is accountability assured?
- How is the decision-making structure tied to financial support or credibility-lending institutions?
- What types of interactions are considered to be in conflict with the group? How are individuals' positions established and respected?
- Does the group have a consistent and agreed-upon process for resolving conflict? Does this differ from other decision-making practices?

WORKING NOTES:

5. Setting Goals

It is important that the goals of the group are consistent with the impetus which brings the group together (#2). It is, for instance, difficult and perhaps unnecessary to develop a thoroughly common analysis amongst a coalition of groups or individuals who come together to work on a single event.

- Is there opportunity for members to match their individual interests, establish common interests, acknowledge and allow for divergent interests?
- Are the group's goals formalized (written)?
- How do goals change?

WORKING NOTES:

6. Defining the Problem: Analysis

Women rarely speak as our own authorities. Often we assume that "the problem" has been sufficiently described by others and pay insufficient attention to our own perceptions. Often we relate to each other through the concepts of our external authoritative references. Again, the various kinds of groups (as in #2) have a varying capacity to agree on an analysis which can range from understanding very specific situations to broad economic and political pictures.

- How does the group recognize change? How will members know whether their actions are effective?
- Whose voices enter as external authorities?
- How does the identification of individuals' ideologies, their religious or political affiliation affect the group?
- How do the members' analyses of women's issues affect the group? (Liberal, radical feminist, reform, socialist, etc.)
- How is information collected to identify the context of the issue or problem? What is done with it? How has the group analyzed this information?
- Does the analysis continue throughout action? How does the group's understanding evolve?
- Are the actions of the group primarily in reaction to external pressures? Does the group's analysis enable it to initiate action or develop long-range strategies?

WORKING NOTES:

7. Planning the Work

Women's groups are often thoroughly grounded in our experience of being recognized for our ability to do practical tasks, solve domestic problems. When we tackle new tasks sometimes we don't allow sufficient time for thorough preparation.

- Does the work of the group require that group members learn new skills?
Is this accommodated within the group?
- Are the tasks planned by the group realistic and achievable?
- Does the group have access to needed skills, enough woman power, sufficient funds?
- Who does the planning? How is this communicated to the membership?
- Is there an attempt to match tactics with the group's analysis? Are your tactics ones which attract women? Do they serve an educational function? What seriously challenges the Alberta establishment?
- How does the group establish credibility?
- What strategic alliances with other groups are planned or made?

WORKING NOTES:

8. Funding

As groups seeking financial support, women often encounter financial, corporate and government institutions more directly than in their previous experience. Usually these institutions are interpreted to us by others. We experience their discriminatory practices in our interpersonal relationships with those who do the interpreting. (The needs of financial and real estate institutions have traditionally identified men as "heads of households" to do the banking, hold mortgages, provide collateral for loans, buy property and engage in business transactions.) In dealing with funding sources we come closer to understanding the economic basis for women's experience of subordination. As that understanding develops it often generates considerable debate within women's groups about how to conscientiously interact with these sources.

- How are your group's actions and structure organized according to the requirements of the funding source(s)?
- Does this conflict with the group's preferred decision-making structure, goals, or analysis?
- How much work is involved in local fundraising events, addressing the needs of the granting agencies, doing corporate fundraising, or turning the efforts of the group into a viable business? Does this work complement or conflict with the goals of the group?
- What funding tactics, sources, etc., work?

WORKING NOTES:

9. Elected and Paid Workers

Groups which take on major or on-going tasks often realize that paid workers can provide a necessary consistency of effort and channelling of information. Women's labour is not highly valued or recognized, and the act of paying a woman to work for a women's organization in itself becomes an affirmative and political action. It does, however, place volunteer workers and members, and paid workers in different economic relation to each other and to the group. Again, our group experiences are grounded in women's traditional relationships to those who are paid or whose work is recognized as being more important. Many of us in our personal lives know well the deference we learn towards paid workers. We also know the more public exercise of transferring authority and responsibility through the processes of delegation and election. Working to change these relations is a large task, requiring new recognition for all members' work and an insistence on the part of members to keep the responsibility and authority for work on issues which are in their specific interest.

- Does the paid worker, or the elected board or steering committee, experience an overload of expectations on their work from the membership? Through what mechanisms does this occur?
- How is the work of committees or volunteer groups co-ordinated with that of the paid worker?
- Does the paid worker or the Board/Steering Committee receive sufficient direction from the group?
- How does the introduction of a paid worker affect the existing decision-making structure (and other Aspects)?

WORKING NOTES:

10. Personal Relationships

The interpersonal relationships between members of a group and members' relationships to others external to the group, often are critical to the functioning of women's groups. The private, personal sphere is often our intermediary to the larger oppressive economic and social system: personal relations are generally our experience of the political. Women consequently have a highly developed ability to recognize alliances, allegiances, forms of power relationships, difficulties in individual relationships.

- What kinds of personal relationships affect the group? In what ways?
- Are considerations made for the particular concerns of women with children?
- Are individual difficulties in members' personal relationships focal, periferal, ignored, within the group? Is this consistent with the goals of the group, or affected by the kind of group which develops? (#2)
- How do friendships or alliances affect decision-making?
- How is the group affected by individual alliances made by members with other groups active in the "women's community"?

WORKING NOTES:

11. Into Action

Action, or the event, is really the combination of efforts invested in all the Aspects described.

- If the group is focussed on a single event, has sufficient time been spent in preparation? Do specific Aspects (#1 - #12) emerge as needing more work?
- If the group is engaged in on-going activities, are there structures in place to re-work Aspects #1 - #12?
- Who does the work? What kind of acknowledgement do they receive from the group?
- Do people burn out?
- What is successful? Has the group developed new tactics for dealing with specific issues or situations?
- What are the surprises?

WORKING NOTES:

12. Evaluation and Criticism

The function of evaluation begins when the group starts setting out its goals and considers in advance of an action how change takes place, or how success will be recognized. Criticism is the tool for evaluation and evaluation is the function through which groups acknowledge to themselves and others strategies which worked, others which did not. It allows all of us to learn and push forward.

- Is there agreement within the group about how evaluation will take place and against what standards? Is this consistent with the group's analysis (#6)?
- Who does the evaluating?
- Is there agreement about how on-going criticism, re-analysis, re-planning and re-structuring will take place? (This capacity is essential to the group's growth.)
- Is criticism individualized and personal? Does it threaten group members?
- Is criticism based on an analysis external to the group? If the group is a coalition, how are the various participating groups' internal standards for evaluation and criticism merged?
- Is there provision for the dissolution of a group? (E.g., on completion of a task.) In what circumstances does dissolution prove to be a useful strategy for encouraging new work?

WORKING NOTES: