

## NORTHEASTERN ONTARIO WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

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The NEOWC is a collective of women activists in Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie, Timmins, New Liskeard, Hearst, and Elliot Lake. We have put on four conferences for women in this area. Out of these conferences we have effectively created a network of fifty or so women who share a common vision of the world they want to create and a commitment to achieving it. Increasingly we have come to understand why there is such an enormous gap between what is and what we would like to be.

Basic to this achievement has been our attempt to design a conference that gave the participants a sense of their own power and creativity. Because we believed that the key to developing a real strategy for social change lay in the participants' experience, we wanted to create a conference environment where this kind of experience could be expressed, examined, and flower.

The conferences have taught us a great deal, and as our analysis develops, we all feed it back into the other organizations with which we work.

We have learned that all people (here at least) share a common dream for the future. A vision where people have security and receive according to their need, where there is an integration of urban and rural life, where the cycle of life is respected and death is accepted. A world where people have useful and creative work, and where shit work is shared. Where there are many choices of family and sexual relationships. Where decisions about everything are made collectively and at a community level, and where neighbourhood self-sufficiency is encouraged. A world where we do not have to fear for our children.

The conferences have taught us that the reason why we are not building toward this vision is the social control exercised by the corporations and the state. In this part of the twentieth century, we are dealing with a "working class" that has been shaped by television, deskilled labour, fragmented community, and a class-biased and humiliating educational system. Most "ordinary people" are functionally illiterate; many of them are appallingly misinformed about their own history and the world. They are divided against each other at work, at school and in their play. The definitions and structures of opposition organizations such as the communist parties and pressure groups alienate most people, and exclude women and the unemployed. Working class people have been taught to see their own history as one of defeats, instead of looking at the gains they have wrested from capital as victories.

We do not have the world we want because of the deliberate disorganization of ordinary people by capital. Overcoming this ignorance, fear, and cynicism is our task. To us, this meant applying the organizational lessons we have learned. From the feminist movement came non-hierarchical structures, consciousness-raising, the integration of the personal and political. From community organizing we took the use of facilitators, working on gut issues, and cooperative strategizing. And from adult education, community theatre, games, and videos. We transferred these to our political work, and found out from experience which of these methods work and which don't.

For us, one of the hardest things to overcome was our own attachment to old ways of doing things.

When we first planned the conference, we addressed a number of practical issues.

First we needed to know each other quickly and intimately. This meant that the conference size had to be small, no more than 60-80 people. We needed to develop situations where total strangers could really talk: small groups that varied in their composition were given tasks to complete together. People were made comfortable and kept together as much as possible. Good food (that was not intimidating), play, letting people sleep in on Sunday were all part of this. People were allowed their vices (smoking and coffee). Long and short exercises were alternated. In the long exercises, groups were self-directed, taking their breaks and so on when they wanted. During plenary sessions, facilitators did not get involved in the discussion, but checked on participation and suggested small groups as necessary. Lots of informal breaks were used to allow informal caucusing.

Playing is very important: local groups present skits and music. At one conference, we had a dance workshop and sang together. We use little reliance on written materials as many participants are semi-literate. Increasingly we are trying to find ways to rely less on verbal expression.

Our resource people are chosen with great care. They must respect the process of the conference and they work very hard. There are no "stars". We do not present political lines, but try to describe what exists. Resource people have spoken about multinationals, corporate health care, management systems and so on.

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A few of the activities we use:

**THE GAME OF LIFE.** A board game with no beginning and no end, no winners or losers. Played by groups of five or six. The little "person" goes round the board landing on squares called MONEY, EDUCATION, COMMUNITY, DECISIONS. For each of these, there is a pile of cards. Each card is a decision: "you decide to live in a co-op house", "you decide to spend \$350 on an antique vase", and so on. The person who draws that card then has to discuss the decision with the other players and they collectively decide who profits from the decision: I, WE, or THEY (also defined by the group.) On the DECISION squares, a problem is presented for solution: "your best friend comes to visit and brings her favorite porn film", etc.

**POWERFUL/POWERLESS.** Small groups list those events or circumstances that make them feel powerful or powerless.

**CARROT/STICK.** The participants are asked to check off on a list what motivates them to participate in some activity, and then they discuss whether these motivations are "carrots" or "sticks"...a very useful way to learn how so many of our strategies punish rather than tempt people into participating.

**SIMULATIONS.** Small groups are given a problem to solve together by developing a strategy. Sometimes questions are given out with the problem. The problem is usually set in a composite community like "Northton". We try to discourage people from working on the same problem that they work on in reality. These simulations put into action the ideas and information they have absorbed from resource people.

**THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED.** A theatre-forum where a short skit reflecting a reality familiar to the audience is presented. The skit is then re-enacted and the audience is asked to intervene and say "stop" when they see an incidence of direct oppression between two people. However, if you say "stop" you must also suggest alternative behaviour for the oppressed person. This is then incorporated into the skit and the audience can see whether or not it works.

**DANCE WORKSHOP.** At a conference in Timmins, a resource person from Montreal led a workshop where we did a number of meditation exercises and movements and created a dance collectively. We also learned some beautiful songs in round that felt like magic when we sang them.

**COMMUNITY THEATRE.** The women from Sault Ste. Marie presented a visionary comedy that ended with a "wake" in which the entire audience participated, dancing and carrying on.

VISION EXERCISE. When we dream in small groups about the world we would create if we could start over. These exercises give us a direction and a standard by which to judge our activity.

For these methods to work, the NEOWC has to trust the participants to make decisions and to know where they want to go. "Politically correct" or not, they're sure a lot more fun than anything we've done for a long time. And that's a CARROT.