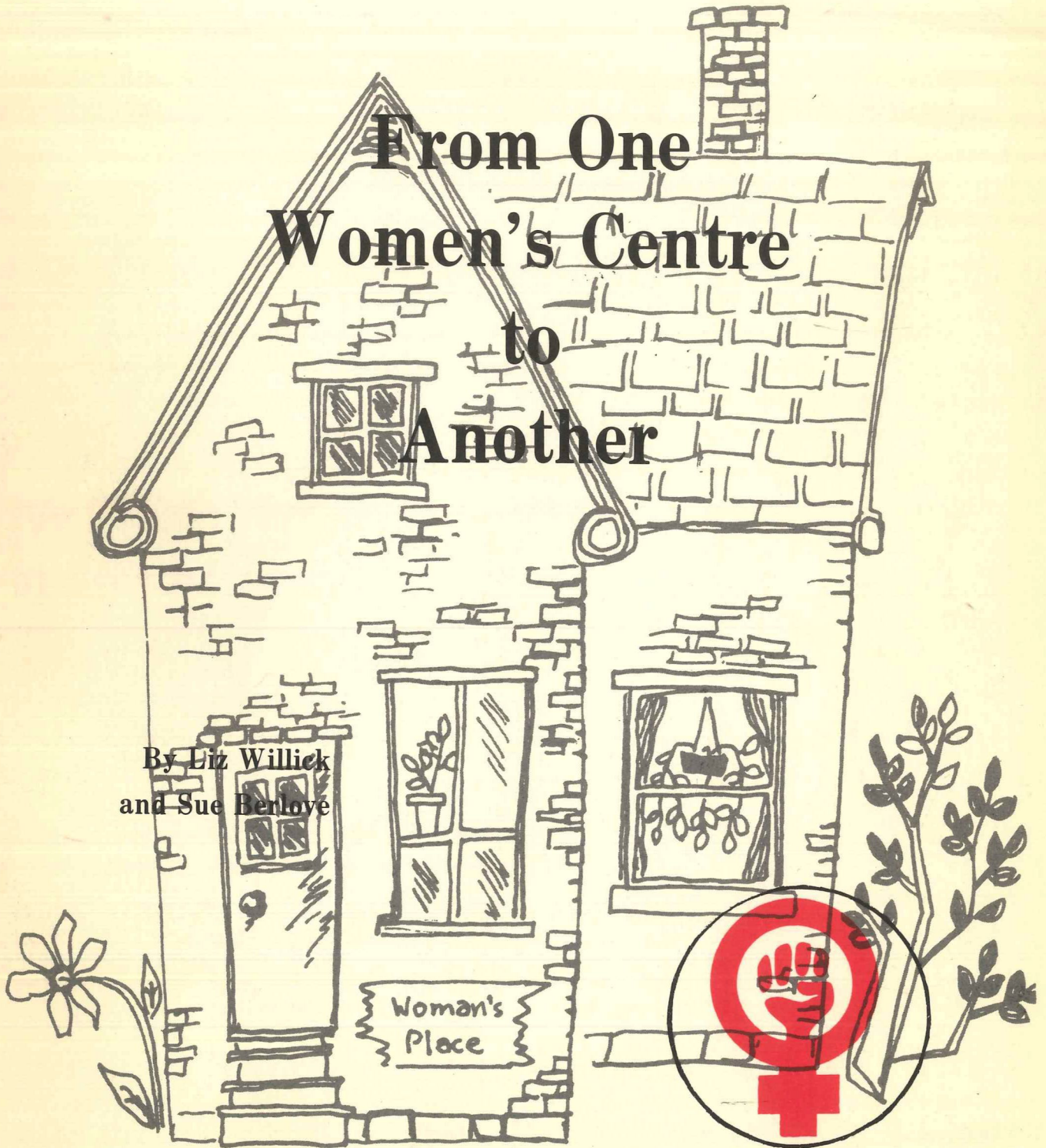


WG-39
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Building the Movement

From One Women's Centre to Another

By Liz Willick
and Sue Berlove



W.R.C. OISE

Published by the K-W Woman's Place

1975

Women's groups are invited to make as much use of this material as you will, when you will and how you will; with acknowledgement please.

We'd like to hear what you think. Questions, comments, criticism to:

**K-W Woman's Place
25 Dupont St.
Waterloo, Ont.**

**Sue Berlove
Box 901
New Hamburg, Ont.**

**Liz Willick
RR no. 2
Bruce Mines, Ont.**

One copy will be distributed free to each Canadian women's centre for which we have an address. Additional copies may be ordered from the Woman's Place at \$1.25 per copy or \$1.00 for orders of ten or more.



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Allow us to introduce ourselves:

Hi! I'm Liz, editor and co-author of this publication. I'm 28, of lower middle class origins, from Southern Ontario (Niagara Falls, Toronto, Ottawa, K-W). I hold an R.N. but haven't practised nursing since 1968 when a Toronto hospital tried to turn me into a 'professional' machine.

I decided to "get an education" instead, and started taking courses at U. of T. Got involved with student politics and the student newspaper and, later in '69, the women's movement. Leaving aside the 'student' (I dropped out of official studenthood six months after I started), I have been involved with all three at some level ever since. Usual source of income: journalism, beer slinging, or UIC.

I'm a feminist and a socialist and still very much in the process of trying to define what each means in terms of my own life. I see a very difficult basic question of long-range necessity for and effectiveness of an autonomous (separatist) women's movement in affecting basic social change. It's disputed by a number of politically conscious men and women, and to adequately and seriously examine it, we must first shed the defensiveness that is very much a characteristic of our oppression as women.

It is also a question which I have a lot of difficulty coming to grips with. In fact, I've shelved it for now in favor of exploring the real potentials within the women's movement and its present reality. (In other words, I assume the necessity for and value of an autonomous diversified, decentralized but united women's movement.

I was active in the K-W Woman's Place for 16 months and actually worked full-time there for a month. (Meaning, I got paid!) Recently I've moved to a farm near Bruce Mines (where people consider themselves North Ontarions) in company with a man I've lived with for six years, another couple, a passel of goats, cattle and assorted other small animals, fowl, fish and (let us never forget) insects.

I'll leave you to ponder the inherent whatever's of that switch.

—Liz Willick

I have been involved in the women's movement for the last four years—first as a member of a consciousness-raising group and then as an organizer of the Kitchener-Waterloo Woman's Place. My experience in a consciousness-raising group gave me insights into my personal oppression as a woman. Although it was a good beginning, I felt the constraints of a purely personal perspective on woman's liberation. I was beginning to be aware of my own need to involve myself in movement-building which would press for social change.

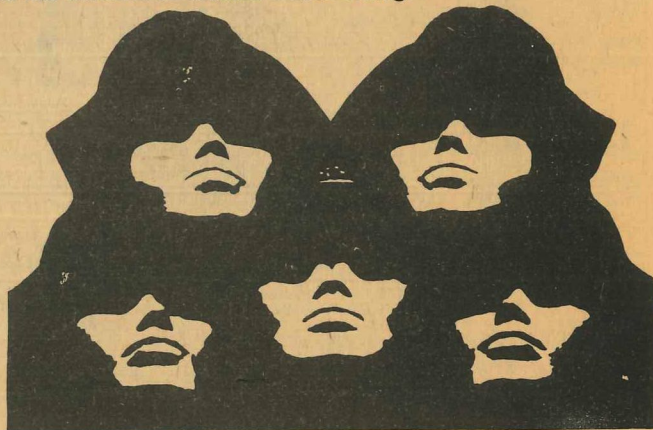
On moving to Kitchener-Waterloo I became involved as an organizer of the Woman's Place. Over the last two years I have been involved in planning a variety of programs, initiating consciousness-raising groups and providing leadership input at the centre.

As well as organizing programs I have been trying to develop a more thorough understanding of feminism. I am concerned about applying my understanding of feminist theory to the actual creation of programs and vehicles for organizing women. At the same time, I find myself struggling with the limitations of a purely feminist analysis, attempting to understand the relationship between Feminism and Marxism. I see my work with women in the context of broader social change.

Initially, I wrote this paper for my masters degree requirements and also to make sense out of my own experience at our centre. I had felt frustrated, depressed and frequently isolated. I wanted to look at that experience and to make some decisions regarding my future involvement in the women's movement. As well, I wanted to decide whether women's centres are viable organizational units in such a movement.

As a result of my writing and our group discussions, I have become convinced that we must always be aware of the theoretical basis to our practice—whether it is explicitly stated or not. In the case of our women's centre we needed to make that theory explicit. The assumptions which were clarified in our evaluation process have enabled us to formulate guidelines for our work so that we can plan programs and evaluate the effectiveness of our centre in the future.

—Sue Berlove



—graphic from the pedestal

Self-evaluation on the part of centres is as important if not more so, than any other type of evaluation for the women's movement at the moment. Through this process, more women will gain experience in setting up manageable priorities, and so lessen the sense of frustration in seeming always to be in the position of trying to destroy a brick wall when your only tool is a darning needle.

—Jane Taylor

What Do You Do at the Women's Centre?



—photo by kate williams

Introduction: The K-W Woman's Place

tions, public speaking, a film night. The Federation of Students at the University of Waterloo published the first newsletter and later donated a month's rent.

A 'pro-woman' position

The purpose of the Woman's Place was to "promote a non-competitive atmosphere in which women could meet and support each other and their personal growth, provide a base for pro-women groups and emphasize self-development of its members."

These are the glib generalizations of the movement—easy to agree to because interpretation is up to the individual. But difficult to implement because 'support for women', which is what such statements boil down to, does not delineate goals for action nor provide any programmatic insights.

As the weeks went by, the founding group became the core group. With relatively few additions or subtractions and with no designated structure for administration and decision-making, the group functioned as it had throughout the process of setting up the centre.

Meetings were now called Business Meetings and "all women" were welcome. Most, however, were not interested and many of those who came once did not return. It took us a year and a half to really understand what would be a given in most other organizations: a business meeting, no matter what you call it, is no good introduction for a new member; and also that most people do not necessarily want responsibility for the groups they belong to.

Programmatically, the first year was a busy one. A wide range of activities were experimented with. Courses in auto mech, self-defense, yoga, creative dance and home maintenance were taught. There were Tuesday night discussions and Wednesday night seminars. There were film nights and parties and innumerable public speaking engagements. There was co-sponsorship of a month-long women's community/university program.

Many of the original core group remained centrally involved. Most of the organizational and work responsibility was carried by 8-10 women. And they were beginning to wonder where they were going and why. K-W's community

—continued on page 4

In the spring of 1973, a week-long event of speakers, seminars and discussions was held at Waterloo Lutheran University. The subject was women and the attendance was high.

One of the results was a small group of women who formed to discuss creating an ongoing centre for women in Kitchener-Waterloo. There was little organizational or movement experience among the original ten or twelve; but their need for a self-help centre for women was great enough for the project to move ahead.

They approached the YWCA as a logical organization to provide space and backing, but—"the Y wanted a contract by which we worked for the Y and the Y received recognition for the centre." With few apparent plans for structure, policy or program, the women set out to find and finance a place of their own.

Some problems were encountered and recorded in the summer of '73. Two married women said their involvement would be limited unless free babysitting was provided: a co-op arrangement was suggested, but was never functional. An excess of meetings brought the women together without allowing them to really get to know one another: they cut the frequency and length of meetings to allow informal social gatherings after the formal ones. There was also subliminal tension over unequal work loads and the beginnings of personality and political conflicts.

In September, the present two-storey, eight-room house was located and rented for \$160 per month. Downstairs were kitchen, office, living room and kids' room; upstairs were library, three meeting/class rooms and bath. The house was cleaned, some painting done, furnished by donations and opened September 24, 1973. Funding came through dona-

of women had not taken the centre for its own. Attempts to organize groups of women around work, day care, child education, and separation got off the ground briefly or not at all. Enough women participated or passively consumed its programs to justify the centre's existence, but it was not living up to the hopes of the organizers, ill-defined though they were.

Leadership women began to burn out and leave the centre. Their personal energy and commitment was not being replenished. They began to find themselves too busy talking about basics to ever-changing groups of women to spend much time focussing on their own growth and development.

Crisis and Response

By fall of '74, things had reached crisis proportions. The response took the form of two working papers about organization at the Woman's Place. One suggested a structural answer to over-all problems at the centre by suggesting autonomous collectives of women grouped according to interest and/or function and coming together periodically as a unifying co-operative. This proposal was written and presented by Sue Berlove. It was adopted after a fashion, but without much examination. We still weren't clear on the problems, let alone ready to critique solutions.

The other working paper was directed primarily toward organization and integration of the volunteer staff at the centre. It stressed individual initiative and responsibility as ways of bringing out the unrealized creative potential of staffing the centre. This paper was written and presented by Liz Willick, and followed Sue's structural outline of autonomous units feeding into a representative umbrella group.

In both cases, the basic structural concepts were followed.



—photo by liz willick

Various Interest Groups (e.g. Staff, Education, Newsletter) attempted to reorganize and called themselves Collectives. General Meetings were called Co-operative meetings and each Collective sent a rep. Staff similarly broke down into functional units with specific tasks (e.g. Maintenance, Library, Staff Ed.). For the first time there was a serious attempt at self-education programs **within** the staff group.

However, the new structures turned out to be hollow. Lacking the solid content of why, whence and whither, and neglecting the people dynamics involved, the new structures simply collapsed in on themselves leaving more or less the same old small group of women pulling the cart and holding the reins at the same time . . . and feeling more frustrated and disillusioned than ever.

That brings us to the beginning of 1975. This spring we set up the Evaluation and Planning process. A group (which closed to new members after three meetings) met weekly to discuss the whithers and whences and wherefores of it all. We talked about Needs and Power and Politics; about Organization and Structure and Program; about Leadership and Women's Movement.

In the process, we hired a staff member to work full time for one month.* There were a number of major papers presented to the group: "An Administrative History of the Woman's Place",** "Leadership, Responsibility and Power", "Principles, Policy and Goals", and "Structure: A Proposal", all by Liz Willick and "A Study of the Kitchener-Waterloo Woman's Place" by Sue Berlove.

The former were written partly because of the space created by being paid in return for putting full-time energy into the centre; the latter partly because Sue was already at work on a paper about women's centres as a major part of a Master's degree in Human Relations. None of them would have happened without the impetus and input provided by the women who met as the evaluation and planning group.

What follows then is an edited, refined and précised version of those working papers. It is an attempt to set down for others as well as ourselves some of the things we have learned about our centre and (we are pretty sure) about most women's centres. It is also a concrete attempt to implement a few of the torrent of words about co-operation, support, learning and criticism which flowed through the National Conference of Women's Centres in Thunder Bay last March.

The rest of the Canadian centre story will be up to you . . .

—liz willick

*The K-W Woman's Place has never had paid staff. I was hired for one month to a co-ordination and research position. The money for my \$400 salary came from a donation from a woman working on a federally funded project. Our centre is the only one we know of which actually turned back \$10,000 in federal monies because of the damaging effects suffered by other centres who allowed short term funding to stimulate premature growth—which could not be supported when the grant ended. We're not so sure any more that it was a principled stand to be proud of. The question of self-reliance and economic survival for and within the women's movement is vital. Volunteerism simply will not be able to take us where we want to go.

**This paper was an important first step in really understanding our history. It quoted policy statements and program ideas from the centres records and tried to draw out implications, contradictions and drawbacks as well as underlying assumptions.

All action aimed at transforming reality is doomed to failure if it is not based on an understanding of reality. All attempts at understanding reality **without involvement in it** is illusory. If one accepts these two premises, how then does one move forward to break the vicious circle between **understanding** and **action**, or, in other words, between theory and **practice**?

—Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira, "Liberation of Woman" in Quest Vol. I, No. 1, P. 65

Leadership, Responsibility and Power

The modern women's movement has a history as old as itself of inability to realistically come to grips with internal leadership, responsibility and power. Within it, we did not want to pattern ourselves, our organizations and our relations to one another on the familiar modes of the governments, the schools, the institutions, the families we came from. At times, we opted for no pattern at all.

We talked about co-operative work and life styles. We talked about collective work and life styles. Often, we developed neither. We condemned hierarchy and embraced equality with little regard in our enthusiasm for the sometimes fine but crucial distinctions between our dreams and our realities.

Instead of evolving structures and life styles within our movement which could facilitate each woman's development to her fullest potential, beginning where she was at, we sacrificed leadership for the concept of sisterhood that poses (falsely) an existing common consciousness, commitment and ability within the movement. We told our theoreticians and intellectuals to shut up so others could speak. Sometimes it almost meant that if we couldn't all develop together at the same speed at a given time and place, then we couldn't develop at all.

This was one of the ways we tried to build a non-oppressive and non-hierarchical movement. It was based on a valid and important concern that our sisters who are new to women's consciousness find the space within our organizations to grow and build the strength and confidence to begin to take control of their lives. Now we are learning that these methods do not necessarily have the desired effect of bringing masses of newly committed women into the movement as activists (or leaders). We are learning too, that these methods were inadequate to effectively build a movement capable of critical self-examination and one which could define methods of acquiring the power to accomplish the tasks before it.

At the K-W Woman's Place

In the past, the centre's leadership has not defined its membership, its responsibility or its power. Often, in fact, leadership women have resisted any open acknowledgement of their position. They have filled some of the functions of leadership because they had to carry most of the work load. But they have not necessarily wanted to be leaders and they have not fully accepted the responsibility of their position.

The Woman's Place leadership group has been variously called the Core Group, the Administrative Committee, the Administrative Collective, the Co-operative. For the first eight to ten months, their meetings were often held separately from the General or Business Meetings. This formative period was the only time (until the E & P group) when leadership actually met independently and openly (minutes were kept).

—continued on page 6

* We perceived two assumptions within leadership of the past: 1. women generally would wish to be leadership. 2. that the wish would be somehow directly translated into the event. I think we see now that neither assumption is warranted, yet while they exist, leadership remains covert.

However, since there was no common agreement as to the division of responsibility and power for the centre, charges of 'cliquishness' soon arose. The key women stopped meeting independently. (This may have limited the potential development of the women involved and hence, the centre.)

Nonetheless, although General Meetings looked more representative and were longer and more formal, the hands which really held the decision-making power remained basically the same. General meetings were not an effective way of ensuring broader participation and input.

In the long run, the basic assumptions within leadership (of sisterhood, of the need to alienate no one, and of their own position as 'representative' of all current and potential users of the centre) were quite sufficient to prohibit careful definition of their own, their group's or the centre's politics, purposes, goals and structures. I characterize these assumptions as being, for all practical purposes, myths.

The Mythology

Sisterhood:

We've been talking a lot about this one in the last year or two. All women are not our sisters. Some are fighting to withhold from others legal rights to make decisions about our bodies. Some are furthering their careers by exploiting others as well as any man could. Some are doing birth control 'research' leading to unwanted sterilizations and experimental animal status for third world women. Some are too comfortable in their prettified roles to hear those less privileged.

These women have never really come close enough to be alienated by what we do or say. They may be counted on to look after their own interests. Let's get on with ours.

We don't want to alienate anyone:

Let's face it. Although the women's movement sometimes cuts across race and class lines, its very existence can be threatening to the types listed above. Surely one of our goals must be the building of a strong movement of women with the social power to demand major reform of the social system. Helping women find the strength (for example) to demand of their husbands a few hours off each week from household and children is a necessary prerequisite for many of them to get involved. But if they choose to spend that time studying yoga and are content that this makes their frustrations tolerable, what then? It is as important to share ideas as it is skills and support. "All women" should not be expected to get involved with our movement.

Representivity:

Does Otto Lang represent you? Pierre Trudeau? Margaret Birch? Rosemary Brown? Barbara Frum? Do I? Of course not. You are represented really, only when you have agreed with your rep on the content and limitations of statements she may make on your behalf.

From what I've seen so far of the women's movement, I would say that it is not so much a solid, steady advancing line; but rather small thrusts, some farther ahead than others, some stationary, some moving laterally, and some even marking time. A lot of it is very like guerilla warfare: isolated attacks and then withdrawal. There are a lot of new recruits and an even greater number of potential participants but a very, very insufficient number of knowledgeable women to both point the way and at the same time, instruct others, plan strategies and do KP as well.

—Jane Taylor

What Do You Do at the Women's Centre? p. 16

When we talk to groups or reporters or women who drop into the centre, we are in fact representing Place people to the public. That's how our statements are received.

Since no body has ever clearly defined the Place except in vague generalities, we interpret them as individuals—and we do not all give the same picture.

What makes us different, I hope, from the Y or the UCW or Family Planning is that we really aren't just trying to help women cope with a rapidly changing world, or fill up increasing leisure time for some of them or keep them from going stir crazy at home, or help them to play their pre-ordained roles better. We're trying to help them to help us to change themselves and ourselves and the world around all of us. But where is this reflected for them to see in our structure, program or policy? We must tell them who we are. They will decide if and to what extent we can represent them.

Who are our leaders?

Recognized or not, conscious or not, leadership exists within almost any group of people working together that you can think of.* Leaders are people with more extensive knowledge of their situation than others have; the ability to use that knowledge to analyze and plan; the energy to organize and carry through those plans; the social and verbal skills to teach others. (Or at least convince others the leadership knows what it is doing; and in the worst cases, simply to give orders authoritatively).

* An exception might be a collective which involved the sharing of knowledge and responsibility to the point where the usual manifestations of leadership are eliminated. Such groups are rare.



—photo by harriet kideckel

Leadership involves Knowledge:

In the case of a women's centre, the knowledge of its history and/or operation. This type of knowledge qualifies women to participate in immediate discussion and decision making.

Another type of knowledge which has been the portal of entry for new leadership from outside the centre is knowledge about the situation of women generally and about the history of the women's movement.

Most new women who walk into the centre do not have either type of knowledge. They may provide valuable input about their needs and perceptions of themselves, their community and the Place. But it is unfair to them and to the women who have taken responsibility for the centre to expect new women to make decisions for the centre and the women it affects.

It is useful to assume that new women should be included in General Meetings. It is a place for them to meet other women and learn how decisions are made, and to receive basic information about the groups and programs in operation without having to attend the activities of each. (We should be clear that even this level of valuable input for new women will only happen if the general meetings are really fulfilling the communication and support function for which they were intended.)

Not all women will be prepared to give even informational input right away; but some will and we should take care to use that self-knowledge when they do come. We should not expect them to make the decisions that are our responsibility as leaders; first we must interest them in acquiring the knowledge which goes into making those decisions.

Leadership Involves Commitment:

Leadership-level commitment is difficult to define without stated goals, priorities and principles of agreement. It must involve more than an interest in self-development. One basic principle is implicit in the centre's very existence: we wish to educate, organize and work with other women around their concerns and ours. (Although, where we are taking these activities has never been generally agreed upon.) At any rate, we are now aware that setting foot in the centre or trying out as a volunteer or attending a business meeting does not neces-

sarily indicate leadership level commitment—which does include accepting considerable responsibility.

Leadership Involves Responsibility:

This is directly linked to commitment. Responsibility to and for the Woman's Place means the willingness to take chances by making decisions. It means accepting that mistakes will be made and learning from them, not being demoralized by them. It means not missing meetings which are important to the future of the centre, or at which others are counting on our participation as leaders. It means learning to accept criticism, assess it honestly, and be prepared to change when it is valid. It means learning to criticize others honestly and openly as the need occurs and before systems of accountability and responsibility begin to break down. It means finding ways to pass on to the women with whom we work a sense of responsibility and commitment as well as our knowledge and skills. (So that we too will have room to grow and change without jeopardizing the activities we wish to move out of.)

Commitment and responsibility mean putting yourself on the line. If we do not take enough risks to fail, we will not succeed.

Leadership Involves the Ability to Analyze and Plan:

A much-neglected skill at our centre which we are trying to learn now. In the past, we tended to latch on to anyone who had a new idea (the it-can't-do-any-harm approach). Sometimes we adopted proposals involving an unrealistic level of commitment and responsibility from ourselves and/or other women.

We must understand ourselves, our centres and our resources well enough to base our plans on the reality of our skills, womanpower and commitment. Good mechanical organization of tasks needs to be coupled with developing people-oriented mechanisms necessary in a volunteer operation if a system is to outlive the individuals who set it up.

When we, as leaders, make organizational plans with which we and others are to work over periods of time, we must be prepared to be more than just one of the workers—at least until the system is functioning autonomously or clearly ready to be relegated to the 'historical working papers' file. Our structures need to allow space for leaders to teach, explain, reinforce, assess, criticize and listen.

—liz willick



—photo by amanda bankier

The way to deal with the 'problem' of subjectivity, that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities; is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience into something much larger: growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares.

—Doris Lessing
The Golden Notebook p. 13

Our ultimate objective is to build a society in which women will be able to realize their full human potential. This can only be achieved in a human society, a society in which one sex does not oppress another, and one class does not exploit another, in which relationships are not based on domination, but on love and friendship. This means not only women's liberation, but men's liberation and children's liberation.

—Winnipeg Women's Liberation
"Questions and Answers"



—photo by jann van home

Policy, Principles and Goals

The Evaluation and Planning group at the Woman's Place looked back at the newsletters and Minute Book. We found that we really had to read between the lines to find where various policy statements had come from and what they actually implied.

Sometimes statements were made purely for public consumption and imposed by the attempt to keep up a front of universal sisterhood and by having to alienate no one. The women who wrote a public policy statement for the centre refusing to take a stand on abortion (so everyone could make up her own mind) also refused a meeting room to a local anti-abortion group. But because of their policy statement, centre women couldn't refuse the group because it worked to limit the freedom of others. Instead, they said there was no room.

They attempted to affirm and develop their own pro-women politics while denying that the means they used (building a women's centre) was political. Difficulty with leadership roles cannot be seen as the individual failure or lack of commitment of the early activists. They built a women's centre where once there was none. This business of being leaders, organizers, theorists, activists is, after all, pretty new to most of us.

The single most influential (and public) policy of the centre was an unqualified "The Woman's Place is a centre for all women." No one really believed it, yet the recorded history of our centre and probably many others is full of contradiction

and compromise and disparities between the internal and external positions of the leadership.

Frustration

Women were unwilling to take responsibility for putting forward their own common beliefs as goals or principles of agreement for the centre. And there was no structure or form of organization available to provide varying levels and modes of involvement. That the centre could not be all things to all women was a constant source of frustration.

Over and over we asked ourselves about taking political stands on women's issues, about supporting others' protest actions. Always there were women pushing for a clear statement of goals and principles. But there was never consensus. Each time we opted for being non-controversial to maintain an essentially directionless universal appeal.

Occasionally we would wonder whether we wouldn't be better serving those women whose awareness had reached the point where they could seek out the centre by actively challenging their beliefs, self-concepts, life styles. Because we lacked the experience to give a definite affirmative answer, we did not dare to try it.

Our role with new women has remained one of support and empathy, seldom critical, gently suggestive of alternatives. Sometimes this is very necessary. Often it's not enough. As women, we can as easily reinforce our weakness as build our strength.

We must expect to make mistakes, to lose some women by pushing too hard or responding inappropriately. But if we are to maximize our positive effects on ourselves and others, we must be prepared to take some risks.

At the Woman's Place, we came to the conclusion in the E & P sessions that we must set out at least the basic core of our ideas about women and the world. We decided there were some things over which we could no longer compromise. We also decided we needed a clear flexible structure for making decisions and operating the centre.

—continued on page 10

Our addiction to sisterhood as the credo of being all things to all women kept like-minded women from organizing around their mutual interests. Many women felt guilty when they found themselves at odds with a "sister". We unwittingly encouraged an impossible interpretation of sisterhood—'love all women, no matter what.' It became an excuse to avoid creative conflict among ourselves. In the future we hope to further the ideal of sisterhood—not as a blanket acceptance of women's weaknesses—but as an ideal to give us the strength to criticise, to learn and to grow with each other.

—Windsor Women's Place
Introduction



—photo by harriet kideckel

The following chapter will outline for you the words and ideas adopted as Place policy at our May 1 general meeting. They represent our attempt to make theoretically operative the insights gained in the evaluation and planning process. What will happen with them in practice remains to be seen.

We are hopeful that in stating our basic principles of agreement and setting out at least a rudimentary structure, we will have given the centre's women the framework within which to make basic changes. We are looking at the possibility of starting a new chapter of the centre's history; of ceasing to be a multi-purpose women's centre and developing an advocacy or clinic function around the specific issue of women and health.

The E & P process itself was a valuable experience for all concerned. We think this process or something similar can and should happen at every centre. But, to make full use of the resulting experience, learning and plans, we must share them with other centres. Until we have become strong enough to build solid inter-centre links, the onus will be on a few women at each centre to find the ways and means of communicating the results of our work.

Some Suggestions

Here then are some mechanisms we found useful in evolving our own E & P process:

- Put a time limit on the length of both the meetings and the process. Our meetings usually ran for three hours weekly with an eight-week limit (which we went over by a few weeks in developing the actual working papers and proposals)
- Close the group after two or three meetings.
- Insist from the start that if people want to be part of the group, they must be prepared to commit themselves to regular attendance and possible readings on the side.
- Record your sessions extensively. Make sure records are available for interested women. Report to general and/or small group meetings. Invite comments. Talk to other women about it. (We taped our meetings; but since a three hour meeting is a three hour tape, only the seriously interested will sit through it, so make written summaries available periodically. If you tape, listen to yourselves from time to time. It's surprising what you may pick up that you missed the first time round.)

- If at all possible, encourage the writing of working papers. They can be very valuable in distributing knowledge, focusing discussion and drawing out newer or less confident women by allowing them time to consider what they wish to say.
- Don't try to discuss a working paper at the session at which it is distributed unless it's very short or a summary.
- Meet where people can be comfortable. Drinkables help.
- Try to summarize each meeting a bit and to outline where you want to take it next time.
- Be prepared to digress, wander and stall. Be prepared to interrupt, be interrupted and sometimes be firm about staying on topic.
- Be prepared for at least one fairly personal getting-to-know-you session that will probably happen along about midway through the process.
- Above all, keep in mind that you are attempting to understand your past in order to more effectively direct your future. You are trying to develop **concrete** plans, directions, structures which may enhance the goals of the centre. Commit yourselves to putting the end results of your meetings in a form which may be voted on by a general meeting.

You have power

It is inevitable that a group of this nature will become a leadership group. It may include women who have been with the centre from the beginning as well as women who have only recently become involved. What they have in common will be a commitment to the women's movement and to making your centre as effective a vehicle as possible for building that movement.

You will have to accept responsibility for leadership. The greater the lack of direction and structure at your centre when you begin, the greater will be your actual power as a group to determine its future. Often, although final decisions will be made at your regular centre meetings, the work and thought on the part of a small but disciplined group will almost guarantee the adoption of the proposals you will make. It is important to understand this from the outset.

—liz willick

Structure: One Proposal

Structure can help people to work together and facilitate development of an effective group process. It can not create them. Structures are set up by people so that each will know where others stand with relation to themselves and to the work at hand. And people are what make structures rigid, exclusionary and oppressive or creative and open.

We feel that the lack of structure at many women's centres is a major contributing factor to the problems which plague them (from how to involve new women to how to hang on to the old; from the groan-another-meeting syndrome to the inability to make decisions, to the unwashed dishes and unanswered mail).

There has been a great deal of talk about 'the tyranny of structurelessness' but little action. In large part, this is because we are familiar with few (or no) structural models we like. We must invent our own. And soon.

Starting with our local groups and centres, we will learn by trial and error and will be able to build outward to regional, provincial, national, international link-ups.

The appendices to this booklet contain the outlines of policy, principles, goals and structures which were adopted by the General Meeting of the Woman's Place May 1, 1975. They were presented by the E & P group, voted on by all present, and passed unanimously.

Whether they will contribute substantially to the progressive growth and development of the centre remains to be seen. A great deal of thought, discussion and effort went into their formulation, halting and confused as the process sometimes seemed.

...But there are problems to solve if the feminist movement is to achieve its end of eliminating sex roles. A euphoric period of consciousness-raising has come to an end, and a more sober evaluation has replaced it. Women are beginning to see that consciousness-raising is meant as a stage of growth, not the ultimate stage of growth. It is limited as a tool. If we don't move on from consciousness-raising both as individuals and as groups, we face the danger of stagnation. Instead we must begin to use the knowledge gained to make both internal and external changes. Groups must move to analysis, small group actions and, most difficult, large collective actions and organization.

In moving from the small amorphous rap group toward a more outward-directed group, the problem of "structure" arises. The women's movement will need to work out for itself a satisfactory form which can avoid the typical pitfalls of



—photo by liz willick

authoritarian leadership or inflexible ideology which so many other movements have experienced. With so many women's present dislike for authoritarianism, perhaps one of the major achievements of feminism will be to work out new ways of organizing ourselves that will encourage responsibility in all members, but discourage elitism—a form which can encourage strength in all women rather than create followers. Our success in accomplishing this goal will in no small part depend upon our ability to be as actively supportive of each other's new strengths and achievements as before (especially during consciousness raising) we have been supportive and compassionate of each other's failures...

—editorial
Notes from the Third Year:
Women's Liberation 1971.

Philosophy and Policy of the K-W Woman's Place:

1. We believe that the role and participation of women in this society have been limited by forces beyond our individual or collective control as women.

2. We see ourselves as part of an International movement for improvement in the status of women—for women's liberation.

3. Within this context, we believe it is important to support and contribute to the concrete efforts of women to gain greater control over their destinies, both as individuals and as half the population of our society. The Woman's Place supports the efforts of women to educate and organize in at least the following basic areas (Law and lifestyles are additional areas needing women's efforts and support):

a) Education

- for an educational system which enables women to develop to full potential;
- for an end to sex-typed curricula and materials;
- for woman-controlled women's studies courses at all levels;
- for an end to the sexism so prevalent in all forms of public media;
- for encouragement for women to enter non-traditional fields.

b) Employment

- for an employment climate in which women can exercise their productive capacities to the fullest extent;
- for cessation of sexual discrimination in hiring practices;
- for equal pay for work of equal value;
- for training programs for traditionally male fields, for women returning to the work force in middle years, for native and immigrant women.

c) Childcare

- for accessible high-quality, non-sexist, 24-hour child care.

It is extremely important to clarify misunderstandings, resolve differences, and deal with problems as they arise, both in a one to one situation or when in a group. If these problems are not dealt with quickly, a whole chain of misunderstanding is likely to occur, and it often becomes difficult to determine the underlying causes.

One of the pitfalls it is easy to fall into is that of liberalism. Essentially this consists of rationalizing. We tell ourselves that a sister will be hurt or that we might lose her as a friend if we struggle with her. However, we are more apt to hurt people by dealing with them dishonestly and more apt to lose friends by letting resentments and frustrations build up.

—Introduction

The Windsor Women's Place

d) Health

- for comprehensive mental and physical health education programs at all educational levels and including sexuality, venereal disease, birth control and nutrition;
- for more extensive use of para-professional personnel;
- for additional high quality facilities for rural and northern areas;
- for alternative, supplementary health services and programs for women;
- for safe, accessible abortion regardless of marital or geographic status or age.

4. Our immediate goals in creating a women's centre are to provide:

a) A place for women where we can be apart from our usual relationships and tasks, a supportive atmosphere for building confidence and strength;

b) A place for women to learn from other women skills and knowledge which have not been made readily available to many of us;

c) A place where women can get a sense of the strength we can have when we work together, a place where we can learn about the roots of our movement and the broad scope within which we can choose to participate in it;

d) A place which can be a resource for women wishing to organize and learn together. (We can offer a typewriter and a Gestetner, a library, files and meeting rooms and a variety of resource women with various types of skills and organizational ability.)



—photo by Jann van Horne

Structure of the K-W Woman's Place

Membership:

There shall be three membership categories for the Woman's Place:

1. *General Membership*: those women who support the centre, wish to stay in touch and participate in programs or services occasionally. They will be asked for a donation of \$5 per year and will receive the newsletter monthly.
2. *Active Membership*: those women participating regularly in Interest Groups. They will be contacted from lists kept by the Interest Groups for important events or meetings. They will also donate \$5 yearly.
3. *Voting Membership*: those active members who also have voting powers for important decisions.

General Meetings

The Voting Membership:

Voting Members of the Woman's Place shall be women who:

1. have an active interest in the Woman's Place and have participated in some aspect of its activities for at least one month;
2. have attended at least one previous General Meeting;
3. have read and agreed with the statement of philosophy and goals of the Woman's Place;
4. have expressed to the General Meeting that they wish to be a Voting Member and have met the above criteria;
5. have agreed that should they wish to withdraw from the group for any period of time, they will inform the group and give their reasons;

6. have committed themselves to fulfilling the responsibilities and duties of a Voting Member.

Voting Procedures:

1. A current list of Voting Member's names, addresses and phone numbers will be posted at all times at the Woman's Place.
2. Votes will be taken on all issues which:
 - a) involve a public statement on behalf of the Place (other than speakers);
 - b) involve changes or additions to overall policy, principles, goals or structures;
 - c) involve centre support or action for or around an external issue;
 - d) involve a decision in some other area on which consensus can not be reached by the General Meeting.
3. For a vote to be taken, at least two-thirds of all eligible voting members must participate (by phone or proxy if necessary).
4. Women who support a decision but have no time or energy to implement it, should declare support in principle but abstain on the vote.
5. For a decision to be implemented, the total of 'yes' votes should be at least half the number of available voters. *The yes's would be responsible for assuring the organization of implementation.*

Responsibilities and Duties

Each Voting Member will:

1. attend all General Meetings or notify chairperson of inability to attend and if possible give her a proxy vote on major agenda issues;
2. Familiarize herself in advance with the agenda and any background material for voting issues, read the minutes from the previous meeting;
3. Be prepared to learn to do public speaking for the centre;
4. Notify the General Meeting of intention to leave the group giving reasons;
5. maintain an active involvement in some other aspect of centre activity.

The Voting Membership will provide:

1. A Treasurer—responsible for bookkeeping and cash transactions. Should involve co-signer (also a voting member) in her function, so both are familiar with the job.
2. A Chairperson—would compile and post agenda one week in advance of General Meeting. Should an important last-minute item likely to require a vote come up, she would be responsible for notifying voters, urging attendance and accepting proxies. Position could rotate.
3. A Secretary—would take minutes, posting a copy and putting another in minute book within one week. Would be responsible for up-to-date posting of Voting Members. Could rotate.

Woman is the gateway to another world; Woman is the earth mother; Woman is the eternal siren; Woman is purity; Woman is carnality; Woman has intuition; Woman is the life force; Woman is selfless love.

"I am the gateway to another world," (said I, looking in the mirror). "I am the earth-mother; I am the eternal siren; I am purity," (Jeez, new pimples) "I am carnality; I have intuition; I am the life-force, I am selfless love." (Somehow it sounds different in the first person, doesn't it?)

Honey (said the mirror, scandalized) Are you out of your fuckin' mind?

—Joanna Russ

The Female Man p 205.



—photo by harriet kideckel

Women's Centres: Building a Movement

My purpose in writing this paper is to attempt to understand what functions women's centres have in the context of building a Canadian women's movement (specifically by an attempt to evaluate the Kitchener-Waterloo Woman's Place). It is my opinion that women's centres might serve as one possible vehicle to building a movement whose theory and strategy reflect the needs of women as they themselves define those needs. Also, I see such centres as potential grass roots for a larger organization which defines its power base and structure as an alternative to traditional hierarchical power.

Canadian women's centres have generally operated in isolation until recently. Examples of the trend toward getting together are the province-wide organization, the British Columbia Federation of Women; regional exchanges such as that in Kitchener in 1974; and the First National Conference of Women's Centres held in Thunder Bay in 1975.

The national conference was funded by the federal government to discuss a national organization. In rejecting any form of top-down organization, representatives from fifty centres recognized that no other type of structure could be set up in so short a time by a preliminary congress. The organizational focus for the present will be smaller regional units:

Many of us had come to the conference against a background of severe problems within our own centres—problems that ranged from the financial survival of the centre to lack of energy, staff, leadership and self-determination. A strong national organization would have been a Good Thing for us: but only if our own problems were not generally reflected elsewhere; only if the majority of centres had the real sustaining roots in their communities on which national strength could feed.

—Liz Willick, "First National Conference of Women's Centres: A Report"

Through an examination of the problems common to centres (through regional communication and support systems and exchange of internal evaluations) and the struggle to overcome these difficulties may come the eventual strength of a nationally organized movement.

While the theoretical writings on women's oppression are abundant, we have had difficulty in evaluating our work within women's centres. Clearly some frame of reference, some criteria need to be the focus of such evaluations and should come out of the larger articulated theoretical concerns.

I see two issues which stand out as central to the theory and strategy of women's liberation. The first is to recognize per-

sonal needs (as defined by our social reality) as the basis for determining our strategy for change. It is important that we define our collective needs as both legitimate demands and the immediate goals through which we mobilize our strength. We must define what we mean by personal needs and collective demands and out of these, identify both short and long term goals.

Secondly, as a political movement, we must understand the meaning of power. As we build our internal structures we should attempt to redefine power relationships, and be aware of the power which groups of women can have in forcing the existing social structure to account for women in new ways.

The CR model

The creation of a consciousness-raising model for the North American women's movement was the beginning of an explication of women's needs. I would like to describe how this model has been used in defining the collective goals of the women's movement.

The assumption that the oppression of women in our society is first understood through an examination of one's personal life experience has been commonplace in the movement. The emphasis on the creation of small groups has been a conscious attempt to break down the idea that women's personal needs are separate from some other political reality. To legitimize those subjective awarenesses and to define common needs in a supportive setting has been the task of consciousness-raising groups.

Another assumption in the creation of these groups has been that the task of defining our needs as women must take place apart from our involvement with men. It is the purpose of such groups to go through a process which begins with the individual exploration of life situations. As areas of commonality emerge, a larger definition of women's oppression comes with it. In this process, the relationship between needs and demands is clarified as is the understanding that needs are grounded in the objective conditions of women's societal powerlessness.

It is important when we talk about 'needs' to be clear that we are talking about reflections of political reality. Frequently the word need is used to describe some type of emotional dissatisfaction, and one looks for its roots in the context of interpersonal relationships. Merely satisfying a 'want' for personal closeness will give us a movement, like that for human growth, void of any direct political meaning.

This limited concept of consciousness raising substitutes for an analysis which would look at women's needs in other contexts. The connotation is purely subjective; needs are the product of individual life situations rather than social and economic conditions. This becomes the basis for dichotomiz-



—photo by amanda bankier.

ing the 'personal' and the 'political' solution. What consciousness-raising should be and sometimes is, is the process of teaching women that liberation is the change from the personal to the collective solution.

The criticisms

Those who see consciousness-raising as attempting to find only personal solutions criticize the model as another kind of group therapy or a political dead end. They suggest that such groups merely bring women together to complain, socialize and work out individual solutions without moving to an analysis of their common oppression. This criticism is valid if women are not aware that only limited personal change is possible without societal change.

Another aspect to the criticism concerns the supportive dimension of CR groups which both identify and meet particular needs of women. If the group defines needs as personal and solutions as individual, it should be possible for those needs to be met by the group itself. But without attempting to deal with needs as socially common to all women, the process actually supports individual isolation, and thus, limited change.

A group from San Francisco has described these needs as they might be examined by a CR group:

Before we can know how to change either (society or ourselves) we must understand our own needs. Women's needs are more complex than our society admits. First we have a need for a financially secure, satisfying and stable private life. Second we need outlets for creativity which have social

Our greatest contribution to the movement was to provide emotional support for emerging consciousness. We have seen many women discover their own strength by realizing that they are not freaks for being dissatisfied with traditional feminine roles. While the rewards of helping women in this way were gratifying to the staff, it became an emotionally draining effort for them. There was not much feedback from women who received emotional support from the Centre. Energy was being channeled out and not being reinvested into the Centre.

—As the Movement Turns
Hamilton Women's Centre

relevance, i.e. which exist outside the world of our private life. And third we need a framework for perceiving our reality, an ideology based on the premise of self worth as individuals who are women.

—Pamela Allen
Free Space, p 33.

Such needs are not merely stages of growth; they reflect different facets of women's reality. We are not talking about a separation of personal and collective needs; we are looking for an ideology to reflect and support the complexity of an ongoing and multi-dimensional process. Women must constantly examine their personal needs and attempt personal solutions, while at the same time developing an understanding of their collective needs, and the societal changes necessary to meet them.

In defining needs as more than one's personal subjective experience, we see that needs exist in the realm of necessity, determined by objective conditions of women's oppression. To describe these needs as the product of an emotional state, is to imply that they originate within the individual and thus must be solved within that individual. The strength of the small group is its potential to redefine how such needs are part of a social reality for women:

... We must always take the personal needs of women into account when determining actions. These needs should not determine policy but rather, policies should incorporate needs... Our energies need to be channeled in ways which positively affect both the individual and the total movement whenever possible. For that, we need an understanding of the numerous ways in which individual needs can be met, an understanding of the needs of our movement, and an understanding of the ways we can approach our goals successfully. For this we need an ideology.

—Pamela Allen
Free Space, p 46.

Women's centres

Turning to women's centres, we can see how they are a response to the personal dimension of women's needs. Such centres seem to be governed by basic assumptions which are not necessarily explicit, but which reflect women's reactions to their roles, their powerlessness in this society, their felt needs. The small group process of change begins with personal feelings and the struggle to channel a new awareness into constructive personal and interpersonal solutions.

The beginnings of the Kitchener-Waterloo Woman's Place are similar to those of other women's centres: a small group of diverse women created a place for women to learn, share and give and receive support. It is a kind of 'free space' where women can be themselves, examine their life situations apart from men which helps enable them to affect change. A women's centre is a symbol: a place for women exists in this society where the traditional role expectations do not.

It is also a symbol of autonomy for individual women looking for personal strength to become whole people. It is a

catalyst for the personal resources and ambitions of women. Coming together is only the first prerequisite for social change: it is the acknowledgement and legitimizing of individual needs.

The initial stages of women uniting in a common place—be it a consciousness-raising group or a women's centre—is exciting. It gives women their first sense of their ability to make personal changes and of the personal strength to be gained from support and sharing with other women. It is an exciting experience. The problem for centres occurs in the leap from personal to the search for common goals to unite women in pressing for social change.

Women's centres use a consciousness-raising process to respond to personal needs of women and help individuals to gain the strength to change. Ideally, CR develops an awareness of the close relationship between individual and social change.

In a women's centre, the process of moving from personal to collective needs can be described as defining and implementing the goals of the centre. A centre should first identify and legitimize personal needs; but in the process, women must develop a consciousness of their **common** oppression. Recognition of this commonality should lead to the articulation of collective goals, and examination of the ways to obtain them.

Defining power

When we talk about **how** to achieve common goals, we are concerned with creating organizational structures. For this, it is essential to be aware of power relationships. Just as the various needs of women are complex and rooted in social conditions, so the dynamics of power and the process of obtaining it are complex. That process only begins with taking control of one's personal life, fulfilling one's personal needs. This process needs to be supported by the building of a movement which redefines internal power relationships and which also confronts the external power relationships in a male dominated society. At this point, we are clearly describing a political phenomenon.

Much of what is political for women is based on the immediate personal experiences of male dominance and power, as well as on contact with its many socially legitimized and institutionalized forms. Whatever form this dominance takes, women are directly rendered powerless by it.

Attempting to understand the extent of male supremacy and our collusion in its continuing existence, we are creating a political analysis known as Feminism, and we are building an autonomous movement which struggles, as it brings women together, to redefine these power relationships. This growing union of women opposes the traditional hierarchical model of power which gives some individuals influence over others, because of innate superiority, knowledge and/or strength.

Because women are questioning equating biological status with an earned right to control, women's groups have tended to support the right of every individual in the group to develop her personal strengths. Emphasis on individual contributions and acceptance of the need for personal fulfillment strengthens the individuals who accept shared responsibility for themselves and the group (as opposed, in other situations, to taking direction from father, teacher, boss, husband, etc.). Ideally no individual is denied access to power arbitrarily; it is shared in an open egalitarian fashion and not maintained through a mystification of status.

The internal strength which women are gaining enables us to exercise power in personal relationships, to make demands toward becoming whole persons. When we use this strength to press men to respect us and to move beyond role limitations, we directly experience a bit of our own power. In recognizing the commonality of our experiences as women in a male-dominated society, we are confronting the meaning of power in patriarchal institutions.

In our work together, we must be constantly aware of the use and misuse of power. We must experience ourselves as possessing collective strength which can be mobilized against the entire system of male domination. To this end, we must not idealize or dismiss power, but rather accept responsibility for converting the good feelings of togetherness into an active power base which can make collective demands on all our behalf. We must envision the women's movement as a force to be contended with, while recognizing that the responsibility for making it so lies with us alone.


Without this understanding of our potential strength, we cannot see our movement as a vehicle for social change. At best we will be a glorified therapy group. I see it as imperative that our ideology and strategy entail both an awareness of our own personal needs and strengths as well as a societal perspective; we can and must intervene at both levels. While change can occur simultaneously in these two spheres, intervention at a societal level is the only way in which the sys-

If the movement is to grow beyond these elementary stages of development, it will have to disabuse itself of some of its prejudices about organization and structure. There is nothing inherently bad about either of these. They can be and often are misused, but to reject them out of hand because they are misused is to deny ourselves the necessary tools to further development. We need to understand why "structurelessness" does not work.

—Joreen, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" in *Radical Feminism* p 286.

—photo by harriet kideckel

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tematic causes of women's oppression will ever be reached. Personal solutions will necessarily be limited unless such intervention occurs.

Identifying assumptions

A major difficulty in clarifying the criteria for evaluation of women's centres has been identifying assumptions upon which we as leaders act, which are never made explicit. In looking at needs and power through the K-W Woman's Place, I will be looking at assumptions which went unstated and unchallenged, and will attempt to describe how they made ongoing evaluation impossible.

A discussion of the needs of women was begun in 1973 when the centre's organizers set down the first statement of "The Philosophy of the K-W Woman's Place". The description began with a brief paragraph about the ways in which women have been socialized so that "our own needs were always subordinate to those around us". In seeking alternatives to traditional roles and male definitions through a women's centre, women would find a self definition of their own and could begin to take control over their lives. Changes in personal relationships were discussed next:

Changes must begin in our daily lives, in our relationships with others. We must learn to relate to men as human beings. We must stop seeing them as property or status objects or as the means for extending our limited self concept. More importantly, we must learn to relate to our sisters as human beings. We must reach out to them . . .

—Woman's Place Newsletter, Sept. '73

The concern about redefining relationships between women is further expressed in the goal of creating "an informal and non-competitive setting where women can meet and learn to relate to each other as human beings", rather than

remaining isolated. The Woman's Place became a drop-in centre open to all women.

While not clearly articulated in this philosophy paper, the view is that women's roles have remained rigidified partly through the isolation imposed by the nuclear family. In bringing women together to discuss the limitations of their roles, the dialogue which raises consciousness about the position of women in society begins.

We who are women must learn that our position of relative powerlessness is not an individual failure. We must learn how and who our socialization is determined by: the same society that fosters poverty and racism.

—Woman's Place, Newsletter, Sept. '73

The first step

The Woman's Place was seen as a place where women could discuss these issues and "become conscious of what is happening to them, because consciousness is the first step toward change". This process was to be facilitated by a library, consciousness-raising groups and general discussion between women who used the centre.

Because women have not had access to certain types of training, the centre would offer educational courses. In teaching such skills as auto mechanics, carpentry and self-defense, women would have the opportunity to develop resources which had never before been tapped.

The policy paper ends by stating that the Woman's Place was "run by" a non-political group. The centre was seen as a co-ordinating place for action groups which might emerge, but the leadership group describes itself and the centre as neutral with regard to political issues (abortion is cited). It was to be a centre for supplying information, education and support to enable women to take their own personal stands on issues.

The articulation of needs as revealed in this philosophy statement is limited to the personal sphere, with a vague description of the common socialization of women. The paper suggests that women feel a common powerlessness and isolation, which may be changed if they meet and talk at a women's centre. However, the specific goals which emerge are not a statement of collective needs and there is no hint of how exactly change is to be facilitated. One is left with the sense that each individual is free to work out her own understanding, and her own personal changes.

What does emerge is the need to be together; to form new types of relationships (particularly with women who drop by the centre); to learn about how women have been socialized and to develop new skills. These goals are part of what is frequently called a 'pro-woman' stance. It involves unconditional support for the needs of 'all women' and acceptance of a common sisterhood as the basis of unity. It supports the right of each woman to find the meaning of her oppression without pressure for adoption of a particular theoretical view.

This pro-woman stance is an underlying assumption for

The chief weakness of the (early) movement's concentration on suffrage . . . lay in its failure to challenge patriarchal ideology at a sufficiently deep and radical level to break the conditioning processes of status, temperament and role. A reform movement and especially one which has fixed its attention on . . . the sort of superficial change which legislative reform represents . . . is hardly likely to propose the sweeping radical changes necessary to bring about the completion of a sexual revolution—changes in social attitudes and social structure, in personality and institutions.

—Kate Millett

Sexual Politics p 85.



—photo by liz willick

"My upbringing was... that I had to be a lady. But how does a drug addict/prostitute be a lady. How can you be a lady and steal? The way I lived I had to be as aggressive as I could...Circumstances have made me very aggressive, very pushy to survive on the streets...All the little pressures that you get from society went against everything I had been taught in school."

—quoted in "Women in Prison"
from *Women in Canada* p 75.

most new centres and it creates much difficulty in evaluating the work of the centres. It is a useful take-off point for beginning discussion about feminism, but is of little use as an organizational principle. The common denominator mentality of the pro-woman stance makes the goals of the centre so diffuse as to be limiting. It may attract a wide variety of women, but it gives no direction for defining collective goals and structures around which women might unite for change.

My analysis of this pro-woman stance is that it cannot articulate the tactics and goals for building a movement concerned with social change. Bringing women together may temporarily draw them out of isolation and may aid women in making personal changes, but if we view this type of change as an end in itself, we have lost sight of the necessity to change social conditions. Built into the goals of a women's centre should be the exploration of personal oppression and the way in which it is reflective of social conditions, as well as some notion about changing those basic conditions.

A paradox

Personal change and universal sisterhood alone do not necessarily give rise to action nor consolidate the potential power of women together. In fact, the personal warmth of uncritical sisterhood may help to make tolerable women's oppression, while obscuring the need for societal change and inadvertently fostering the very isolation it is attempting to destroy.

I am concerned about women's centres being able to respond to personal issues which emerge while moving toward defining collective issues. Some of the many questions yet to be answered by Canadian women's centres are: what are effective ways of aiding women with personal solutions without buying into an individualistic approach? How can we initiate a process by which group concerns can be raised without alienating women for whom individual solutions are currently primary? In defining common concerns, how do we avoid appearing representative of all women when we have limited support?

The process of defining goals for our movement must allow women to make the connections between their personal lives and the social matrix which defines their conditions and roles. If we as leaders do not build such a perspective into all our work with centres, we have stopped addressing ourselves to the issue of social change and the building of a strong women's movement; and have abdicated the complex task of creating a supporting ideology.

To appreciate the complexity of this problem, I think it will be helpful to look at identification and response to individual needs at the K-W Woman's Place; and at the ways in which centre women have attempted to clarify the collective needs of women. In both cases we will be looking at the approaches taken and the problems which resulted.

The Woman's Place programming was geared to individual problem-solving, particularly courses and open discussions. It maintained a drop-in function so that individual women could talk informally with others. Often when women drop in, they are having personal difficulties which they simply want to talk over with another woman.



graphic by jan johnson

The drop-in aspect of the centre provides immediate individual support to women in difficulty. The telephone information and referral system also allows individual women to establish contact with the centre usually around questions related to legal problems, advice about doctors, counsellors, discrimination or enquiries about the centre itself.

The service approach

These educational, drop-in and phone-in services are typical examples of most centres' attempts to meet individual women where they are, to help them find solutions in a supportive environment. It is a service approach determined by the immediately perceived needs of the user-women. Increased consciousness about the women's movement is often incidental, not built in. Such services are ways of giving women positive feelings about female support and strength without moving them to an understanding of women's position or politics.

The service approach gives the centre's workers a chance to understand where women are coming from, the amount of movement and consciousness in Kitchener-Waterloo. It is a useful way of identifying women's needs whether or not they themselves are looking for changes. It keeps us in touch with women's fear of change, a corollary of the conservatism fostered by isolation within their families and roles. Our experiences in serving women give us the opportunity to understand a wider variety of life situations.

Usually individual women receive support and feel accepted. But often we are left with no idea of what was contributed to her ideas about the women's movement; or to her own capacity for change and strength. Was she reassured her problems are not unique, or did she leave with the same sense of isolation and powerlessness she felt when she came to the centre? These are important evaluative questions we must find ways of answering.

The awareness of new women varies, beginning with some



—photo by harriet kiddeckel

women who do not see themselves as any part of the movement at all. Recognizing that it exists for women because so many are dissatisfied with their lives, they are yet unwilling to acknowledge their own relationship to these problems. They may attend educational programs sponsored by the Woman's Place, but are generally content within their traditional roles. Such women make use of the service functions of the centre which require no personal involvement or commitment. It is impossible to receive feedback from such women in terms of the questions I have raised.

Another major group of women who drop by the Woman's Place express vague feelings of discontent or frustration with their lives. It may be difficult for them to understand these feelings clearly in either a social or a personal context.

Still other women are aware of their needs and the commonality of women's situations, but the concept of change which would encompass the welfare of a majority of women and how to go about achieving it is beyond their individual grasp.

Finally, there are activist women with developing political positions and their own opinions about the type of change necessary to liberate women.

The educational approach

The Woman's Place response to women who are developing an awareness of their frustration and of the need for change has been an educational approach: from consciousness-raising and study groups to conferences, workshops, formal and informal discussion groups and courses. Some programs have been internally as well as externally educational, with a group of women working together to determine goals and programs in a given area.

Other programs have presented a more formal topic; a

In some ways, what we see as our most important overall function is that which cannot be quantified or classified in precise terms—being a "clearing house" and catalyst within the women's movement and the larger community. Statistics cannot be kept on informal conversations, correspondence, idea and information sharing which keeps the movement vital, and which leads to concrete events; but not necessarily in any clearcut cause and effect manner.

—YWCA Women's Centre, Montreal
Annual Report 1973.

speaker or a film as food for thought and a discussion leader to draw ideas together. More women responded actively to this approach, perhaps needing direction or stimulation on women's liberation issues to draw them out.

While easy to identify on a small group level, the core group at the Woman's Place has never been certain how to provide direction more generally. A group called the Education Collective was formed in March '74 in hopes of providing continuity, leadership and a philosophical framework for the educational programming at the centre.

Discussions and various more formal programs followed. Often they were well-attended, but they were not on-going; they did not feed energy back into the planning group through new women. Although there was increased opportunity for support and learning within the Education Collective, the programming itself differed little from previous individual or committee efforts. And the Collective lasted no longer than did the small committees, folding late in the fall with several of its members drained and discouraged.

Planning and evaluating programs in these small groups with only vague criteria and without an overall direction for and from the centre is extremely difficult. To those of us involved in such projects, it seemed a dead end because we were unable to make the connections between individual and collective solutions to common problems. It is impossible to substantially aid women who sporadically attend disconnected discussions for which there is no follow-up mechanism.

Although the theory of the leaderless small CR group is to create a format for connecting individual and societal questions, in practice, it is a constant struggle. Resolution of the individual/social dilemma requires a commitment to both the women's movement and the small group; a desire on the part of the women involved to develop awareness together; and some ability to extrapolate a direction for each stage of the process. The need for self-direction and discipline can be extremely discouraging at times.

Through discussion groups and consciousness-raising groups, I have had contact with women in various stages of awareness. Each time, I have found it difficult to know how to help them understand what women's liberation can mean to them. My frustration has been how to make issues real; how to use individualized approaches (e.g. service and education) to awaken women to the larger social questions. How can I meet a woman where she is and help her through a process of understanding? How can I teach her more about her oppression? My work needs a direction which responds both to the issues I see as important and to the life situations of the individual women with whom I talk.

While I recognize that women view their needs in very different ways and are at different stages of awareness, I find it difficult to put off indefinitely the development of more in-depth programs of theory generation, political education and action. These feelings are typical of many activist women. We recognize the necessarily individualized and often slow process of developing awareness, yet we also feel a need to provide a broader direction both for ourselves and those women with whom we work.

You only want what everybody wants, things to go your way; you want a devoted helpmate, a self-sacrificing mother, a hot chick, a darling daughter, women to look at, women to laugh at, women to come to for comfort, women to wash your floors and buy your groceries and cook your food and keep your children out of your hair, to work when you need the money and stay home when you don't, women to be enemies when you want a good fight, women who are sexy when you want a good lay, women who don't complain, women who don't nag or push, women who don't hate you really, women who know their job, and above all—women who lose. On top of it all, you sincerely require me to be happy; you are naively puzzled that I should be so wretched in this best of all possible worlds, Whatever can be the matter with me? But the mode is more than a little outworn.

As my mother once said: The boys throw stones at the frogs in jest.

But the frogs die in earnest.

—Joanna Russ

The Female Man pp 195-96.

Defining an ideology

One method of defining a direction was attempting to take public stands on specific issues. We hoped to state more clearly what the centre was for in order to have a role in describing women's collective needs to the community. As well, it would provide some framework with which to make decisions about how the centre should be used; e.g. what types of programs to offer, what kinds of groups to support.

Problems with defining such policies developed because of pressure from a conservative community, the constraints of our pro-woman position and our concern not to make statements which would not fit women's immediate understanding of their oppression. We were uncertain that we could accurately represent other women's feelings as we felt we should. Eventually we simply agreed that individuals could speak on issues publicly as long as they indicated that their views were not necessarily those of the centre. The only ideology we defined was liberalism: anything goes as long as it can be ascribed to an individual. It's an easy way out.

When policy decisions were made, they were compromised to the point of being void of content. The struggle over statements which could define women's condition while accepting the need for individual solutions is best illustrated by what was meant to be a statement on abortion (though the word is not used) and which became centre policy at a general meeting in November '73:

The Woman's Place is a centre for all women; where women may feel accepted regardless of their personal beliefs and where all women will be encouraged to take responsibility for their own lives... In order that women may have a basis on which to make adequate choices concerning their own bodies, the Woman's Place will seek to provide a file of factual information...

—*Woman's Place Newsletter*, Nov. '73

Believing that we should alienate no woman, we could not declare our belief in the right to safe abortion. Having no clear, stated ideas of where we wish to go as a group or a centre it is difficult to evaluate our work with individual women.

Defining goals

One way of finding direction might be to address the issue of change: What are our goals? What is the relationship between long and short term goals? Can we define long term goals in a way useful in evaluating our work with individual women?



—photo by amanda bankier

The long range goals which we set will necessarily reflect individual needs as we come to understand them in our contact with other women, and will help us to remain aware that we are in the process of developing a larger strategy for change.

With regard to short term goals, it is difficult to evaluate their intrinsic value. Gauging their worth with respect to a long range goal such as building a women's movement for fundamental social change is another question however. A recent article on reform and reformism by Charlotte Bunch points out some essential questions which women's groups must ask in evaluating the effectiveness of short term goals in the process of social change.

Bunch's long range goal is the elimination of patriarchy and capitalism. It is in relation to such long range fundamental goals that we assess short term goals (sometimes seen as reforms in a negative sense) as part of a broader strategy. Reforms are needed by women and they should be struggled for, but they are stepping stones and not ends in themselves.

Bunch suggests the following criteria for evaluating the place of a particular reform in weakening the social fabric of male supremacist ideology and capitalist economics of the present:

Does this reform materially improve the lives of women, and if so, which women? Does it build an individual woman's self-respect, strength and confidence? Does it give women a sense of power, strength and imagination as a group and help build structures for further change? Does it educate women politically, enhancing our ability to criticize and challenge the system in the future? Does it weaken patriarchal control of society's institutions and help women gain power over them?

—Charlotte Bunch

"The Reform Tool Kit", Quest Vol I, No. 1

Long range change is more than adjustment to an intolerable situation.

It is the responsibility of leadership to transmit a vision of change which is not so vague as to be universally pro-woman; not so specific as to be ideologically limited; and which encompasses personal needs for immediate improvements in life situations (reforms).

Defining leadership

In order to define and work toward such long range goals, we need to look at who will have the guiding responsibility—our leadership. For instance, can we define the direction of the Woman's Place without the support of a constituency? What is the representivity implied by a pro-woman tendency? Who is to be represented and who is to represent them? Since women are at different stages of awareness, who is to take responsibility for articulating the goals of our centre? Do activist women have the right to decide what it means to educate women politically?

If these questions are to be answered (or, at times, even asked) we must examine some basic assumptions. One of our problems has been uncritical adherence to the myth of sisterhood. It is the operational assumption which produces a pro-woman stance of unconditional support for all women. In not differentiating between those few women who profit from their existing positions and those who feel the limitations of their roles in social and economic terms, we make the mistake of attempting to appeal to everyone in creating our centre.

This myth also has clouded our ability to make distinctions between experienced women and those new to the move-

ment. We adopt a common denominator approach to our work. Out of our own sense of empathy with new women, we commit ourselves to that commonality, sacrificing our own heightened awareness of women's oppression. The myth of sisterhood keeps us silent except among ourselves about ideas we view as essential to our movement. We are pretending that we know no more than women who visit the centre for the first time: that we have no notion of the purpose and direction for our centre beyond social services to needy women.

To admit these differences would be extremely liberating for us as leaders. To find the space to work with our own ideas of change and of teaching would free us to mobilize women and to use our knowledge to provide the necessary direction. But first we must define and accept our leadership.

From the beginning of the K-W Woman's Place, we have been ambiguous about our roles as leaders. Our self-definitions have been tenuously based on our perception of what others want the centre to be; we tried to be responsive and representative of "women in Kitchener-Waterloo". This approach put us in a contradictory situation: we attempted to be teachers and leaders at the same time as our pro-woman and sisterhood assumptions implied that our knowledge and abilities were no different or more useful than any other woman's.

Without an ideology, assured support, a clear direction, or a strategy, we are in a difficult position. The courage to stand up for our beliefs, to test new directions is essential if we are to offer women new ways of viewing themselves and alternatives to oppressive roles. To accept the right and responsibility to lead will allow us to be responsive to Kitchener-Waterloo women and to ourselves while being principled in taking responsibility for acting on our political convictions.

Unchallenged assumptions

We became caught in a sense of failure partly by evaluating our work using unchallenged assumptions. Many of them had no rational basis and made it impossible to define our role as a catalyst in a process of change.

Another assumption which caused much difficulty is the idea that a women's centre should "belong to all women". It implies that not only should all women be allowed to use the centre, but they should be able to participate in the governing of it as well, regardless of knowledge, commitment to the centre, or willingness to take responsibility for implementing decisions. In other words, membership in the governing body is not based on any particular criteria.

This participatory democracy which defines all women as equal has been the basic principle of our governing structure; and participation was expected of all women interested in the centre. Expecting women to contribute when they couldn't or had no desire to, we were continually disappointed and frustrated. We attempted to minimize the differences between women, in hopes of building a united front. We spent considerable time and energy worrying about how few new women came to business meetings.

What happened when we operated on this assumption is the history of the centre. We catered to women who had no knowledge of the centre's functioning, past or present. We

From the day a woman consents to growing old, her situation changes. Up to that time she was still a young woman, intent on struggling against a misfortune that was mysteriously disfiguring and deforming her; now she becomes a different being, unsexed but complete: an old woman.

—Simone de Beauvoir
The Second Sex p 549.



—photo by Jann van home

struggled through endless meetings trying to conduct the business of the centre with women who were newcomers to it—the priority being to bring them up to date; make them comfortable and able to contribute to discussion. There were no guidelines to the structure and decision-making process for new women except “everyone has a voice”.

Discussion was maintained at a level which would best include all women present: often superficial and vague or businesslike and brisk. We never asked for commitment or responsibility or even evaluated whether such automatic participation was really feasible. (Instead we tried to make meetings more informal—or more formal—or shorter—or more fun...)

Evaluation and planning based on concepts of movement building and social change were impossible at general meetings and there simply was no other suitable forum. Rather than learning from our mistakes, we went through irregular cycles of ups and downs, trying new ideas on for size, wondering where so much energy had gone and for what.

Awareness of differences is essential in building a movement and using to the full the talents and knowledge available. Leaders are individuals who possess, ideally, some of the resources which our group needs to build strength. They have knowledge, commitment, a sense of responsibility and the ability to analyze and plan. The movement goal of allowing every woman to develop to full potential can hardly be furthered by refusal to fully use the resources and skills of already committed women.

We must struggle with these differences individually and as a group. Too frequently, we pretend we have nothing special to offer, abdicating responsibility for sharing our knowledge with other women. Our ambivalence is a product of our socialization: it is difficult for us to admit to strength. We are often hesitant to believe, in the face of the personal problems we share with less experienced women, that we can provide direction for others.

Accepting differences

Sometimes, at meetings, as potential leaders, we attempt to play down our strength, and we don't challenge other women to test theirs. Often there is an atmosphere of humility (or defeat perhaps); a “we-can't-really-do-it” feeling. When we so support our common weaknesses, we perpetuate and actualize our fears of failure. We accept the assumption that we are weak individually and as a group. This is a high price to pay for unity.

A more realistic way of looking at the functioning of a women's centre is to see women as belonging and contributing in a variety of ways. Accepting that some women will provide direction and some may not want to be involved in decision-making frees us to define and legitimize the different contributions essential to the operation of our centre. We may then each choose our contribution and responsibilities according to individual needs and priorities. Then we can be

It seems to me that our problem in women's caucus is not only how to prevent unwanted children but also how to create the possibility of **wanted** children for ourselves. How can we have babies in a society that makes babies burdens to everyone, particularly to women, and at the same time not lose our ability to work effectively to destroy this inhuman system?

If we do not come to grips with this question we will either spend childless lives or suddenly find ourselves entrapped by motherhood and depoliticized as a result.

—Melody Kilian
Children are Only Littler People

clear about what to expect from others and from ourselves.

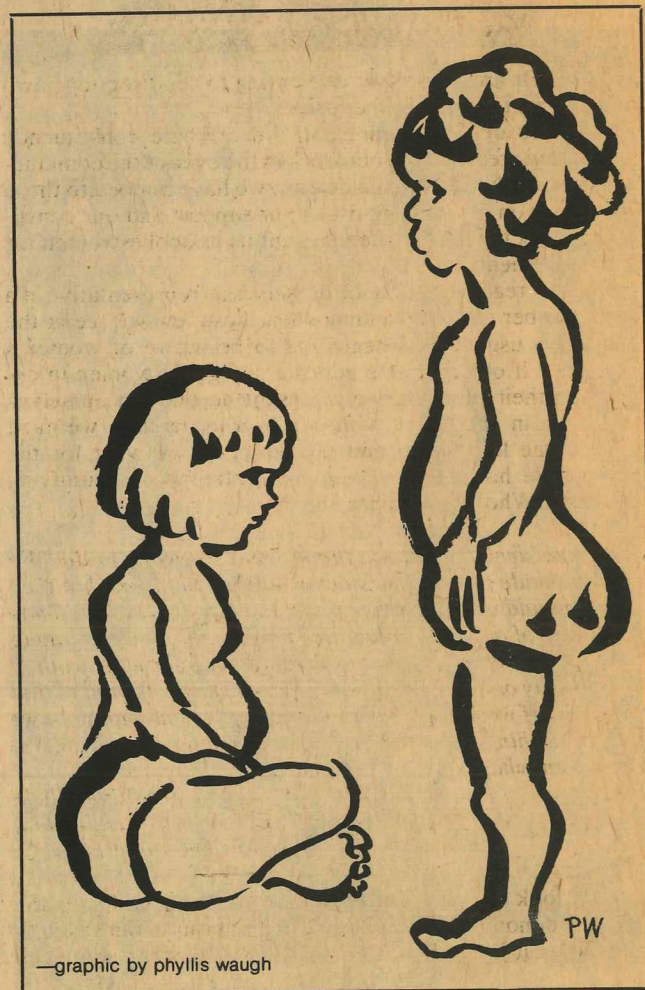
As leaders, aware of a broader movement, we have a need to reach other women, to work for individual and social change. We must organize the programs which will give us the opportunity to do this. Other women need to get out of their homes and feel useful and respected (often this is particularly true of women who become volunteer staff).

The organization we build must capitalize on such differences not deny them. In making room for new women, we must realistically assess the kind of involvement such women are prepared to handle—perhaps staffing the centre or organizing a consciousness-raising group. Being responsive to other women does not necessarily entail expecting or inviting all women to participate in the leadership of the centre. To be an effective leadership group means acting responsibly to ourselves and other women. Passing on knowledge through educational programs, giving personal support for individual change, helping others to organize activities to meet their own needs, are some ways we can be responsive to women.

Redefining sisterhood—accepting and assessing our differences is only the beginning. Another assumption which limits our organizational capacity is the attempt to include or represent as many women as possible in the decision-making process.

‘Representivity’

The problem with being representative lies in the question of whom we represent and whether and how they have given us a mandate to lead. Are we representing all Kitchener-Waterloo women? Do we represent The Women's Movement



—graphic by phyllis waugh



—Photo by harriet kideckel

in K-W? Or are we simply attempting to represent our own beliefs about women's liberation?

The idea of being representative of some constituency would lend credibility to our work in the eyes of the community. Frequently (if not realistically), we have pointed to those 700 names on our mailing list as our support and our constituency. Yet the media often present us as spokeswomen for The Movement.

But how realistic is it to see ourselves as representative of a large number of K-W women when those few we see at the centre are usually just beginning to be aware of women's potential? If our role is to educate and guide women in developing their strength, we represent no one but ourselves and those in agreement with us. As a leadership, we must identify the key issues and the direction we want for the centre. We have agreed that the centre needs a unifying direction. Who else can provide it?

We can decide what we think, what we want to do. We cannot decide for other women what they think or what they can or should do. If what we think and do accurately reflects the reality of our situation at this time, in this country and in these twin cities, then other women will recognize the truth of what we say or the value of what we do. They will want to find out more. If we do and say nothing that is challenging, if we ask for nothing but their bodies in our house from time to time, then what?

—Liz Willick,
"Leadership,
Responsibility and Power".

If we look to represent too many women, we foster the common denominator mentality which saps us of our strength and makes it impossible to assert our own ideas about the

I think that people like and need productive work, and when we're not allowed any, we make up games to make what we have to do seem productive. Filing, for example, was a task I really hated, but I spent many hours working out an elaborate and unique filing system, so that nobody could find things except me and I could feel I was at least of **some** use around the office.

—from "The Secretarial Proletariat"
in *Sisterhood is Powerful* p 93.

function and direction of a women's centre because they are not everyone else's.

For example, the original self-definition from the core group of the Woman's Place was set down because of a possible threat of anti-abortion women taking over the consensus decision-making process at a meeting. The statement was more defensive than a real assertion of leadership responsibility.

Structure: one attempt

In a paper titled "Structure", the core group outlined criteria for membership in the "Administrative Collective". The core group members declared themselves leaders with voting rights and proposed that others could join the administrative group by attending three consecutive meetings. Only members of the Administrative Collective could determine policy and those decisions would be made by consensus.

The new 'structure' did not challenge the basic assumptions of open participation and representation because it was designed only to cope with a minority threat which never materialized. No formal vote was ever taken. No individual was either invited to join the collective or asked to resign in any formal way. For all practical purposes the group functioned on the open participation model as it always had, although the core group did grow somewhat more cohesive.

In describing a minimal structure and then not implementing it, the leadership group expressed ambivalence about its role. It was an attempt to keep the decision-making group from becoming too open. At the same time, afraid of appearing to be an elite, the group constantly (and indiscriminantly, except for anti-abortionists) sought more women's involvement.

Vacillating between the felt need for a defined leadership and fears of not being an open group (and hence, elitist), it was unsuccessful at defining a responsible leadership role. Despite the potential to be an effective leadership, the group took on the characteristics of a self-appointed elite; largely because of the natural concentration of knowledge and control which contradicted the rhetorical equality of sisterhood.

I have suggested that leaders not look to the community for a mandate, that leadership in centres must be taken, not given. But if a core group is to be effective, the individual's responsibility within leadership must also be defined. Women should have power in centres who have demonstrated a commitment to the centre and have accepted the responsibility of decision-making.

The original paper on structure described the only criterion for leadership as meeting attendance, surely a minimal expectation of a leader. That individual commitment and responsibility was so loosely defined, may account for the charges of elitism. A woman could attend a monthly meeting and feel she had earned the right to hold a position of control at the Woman's Place.

The old hierarchy

If we compare the participation expected of volunteer "staff" and "administrators", we see that different criteria

were operating. The staff role was to maintain the daily functions of the centre and be responsive to individuals in need of support. The administrators were committed to the idea of the centre and made decisions about its operation. They did not always commit themselves to any regular concrete input into the actual functioning of the centre. Their responsibility did not even necessarily extend to keeping close tabs on who was using the centre, their expressed needs or how they were being handled.

The division of labor between the two groups created a labor/management hierarchy in which management was not responsible to labor. This division was described in a paper which reviewed the staff role after one year of operation:

There tended to be an unhappy division between the women who staffed the centre and administrators who "ran" it. Staffers met the new women and answered their questions on the phone; they projected the image of the place to visitors; they kept the place clean, received the mail and used whatever tools the administrators provided in their work. But they did not make the decisions; they did not assess their experience with a view to new or needed programs or supplies. Often they did not even answer incoming mail because they felt that they had not the authority to speak for the centre!

—Liz Willick
"Year One"

The role of the Administrative Collective was business administration and decision-making. Staff members were encouraged to attend meetings, but essentially they were powerless. Women who staff the centre tend to be involved in order to get support and build their own self-confidence. The lack of definition of their status and that of leadership could not help but discourage them from involvement in administration meetings. Neither group was in a position to demand accountability from the other while the core group held the historical and operational knowledge and staff were not expected to collate and pass on their own experiences.

Without clear-cut criteria for membership and internal delineation of responsibility within the Administrative Collective, participation became arbitrary and led to the emergence of covert power positions and the inevitable charges of elitism.

Our misuse of the idea of "collective leadership" has not helped us confront the issue of individual participation. In many cases, we have latched onto the concept without understanding how to operationalize it. We assumed that if we used a collective model, we transferred responsibility to the group. But what was the relationship between individual members and the collective?

Only when a revolutionary theory and strategy of women's oppression is developed that challenges our 'democratic' governments can we decide which issues are reforms and subordinate them to the struggle for freedom and socialism. In the absence of such a strategy, these 'reforms' may well turn out to be its first stepping stones.

—Juliet Mitchell
Women's Estate p 73.

Collective organizing

Collective organizing can be an attempt to redefine traditional hierarchical power relationships. By using the small group as a vehicle to establish lateral systems of accountability, we are redefining power in a number of ways. The group can challenge individual women to: change and grow by expecting responsible participation within it; to develop direction for the centre in terms of policy and programming; to be responsive to the women we reach; to fully use personal resources in planning and evaluation; to learn about the strength we can have together.

Because we are often unclear about how to hold individuals accountable, we tended to substitute group responsibility for individual initiative. It seemed no decision, however small, could be made outside a business meeting.

Early in the history of the centre, one woman had responsibility for organizing the monthly newsletter. When she ran into difficulty, she was not expected to communicate her problems and solutions. Nor was the group able to challenge or criticize. Instead the group dealt with the problem by taking over newsletter responsibility collectively. Being a collective seemed to mean group responsibility in a way that did not allow individuals to define the group's functions and internal relations.

The core group would meet an hour early each month to collate, stamp, address and staple. Some women resented this imposition on their time and it frequently meant the business meeting was cut short. Since the newsletter woman could not be either challenged to improve her skills or replaced without at least implying criticism, the group decided to support her by taking on her responsibility. The underlying issue of accountability and work relations (support, criticism, etc.) were never examined or resolved.

In theory, a mutual support system is intended to help women use their potential and learn from each other in a non-threatening atmosphere. However, there is frequently a tension between the need for a system of accountability and the group's attempt to provide mutual support for its members. Women's groups too often tend to avoid conflict as a disruptive rather than illuminating adjunct to the group process. The failure to demand responsibility from all members seems to be rooted in this fear of conflict and the uncritical support for 'sisters'. Yet in the end, it perpetuates the irresponsible use of power, creation of an elitist image, and discourages individual initiative and identification of mistakes.

Uncritical support

A group based on uncritical mutual support also plays down



—photo by harriet kideckel

individual differences. For example, an individual who felt she was carrying too much responsibility wanted to demand a similar commitment from others in the group. But the assumption we operated on was that we were all equally knowledgeable and committed. We did not challenge those who took on responsibility verbally to see it through. And we rarely sat down as a group to help members analyze and plan for their areas of responsibility. While individual commitments in terms of time, energy, knowledge and skills were not clearly identified, we were unable to criticize anyone for not holding up her end.

I have found myself feeling isolated when I took responsibility in the leadership group. There were at once reactions of praise for my work, fear that I might become too dominant and withdrawal from women who sensed I disapproved of their unequal commitment. Without acknowledging these differences, a levelling happened which made it impossible for the collective to determine the strengths of the group and how to use them. We need also to be able to identify areas of weakness if we are to honestly evaluate our work.

For the group to work effectively together, the individual potentials can be tapped if we look realistically at what to expect in the way of participation from each member. We are then free to teach each other and build on that potential. We can learn to be responsible only if we expect a commitment from each woman to look at our work in terms of growing and learning from our mistakes. This is what I mean by accountability.

Our recent evaluation sessions emphasized the role of leadership to analyze and plan our work at the centre. One reason for our lack of success in this area at the Place is a lack of perspective through which to separate organizational questions (which should reflect theoretical and strategic concerns) from personal and interpersonal relations.

Was it some one's fault that the newsletter was not always on time; or was it the fault of the group for not having a better system of organization and responsibility? If there was a problem finding volunteer staff, was it the staff co-ordinator's fault or was it inherent in the recruiting system and the organizational separation between staff and Administrative Collective?

This confusion between organizational and interpersonal posed further difficulty with evaluation because of personal defensiveness about our work areas. We did not attempt an evaluation of our organizational structures based on realistic comparisons (and criticism) of the theory and the practice.

In order to evaluate our work in the women's movement, we must be able to link our understanding of Feminist theory with our practice in women's centres. Doing this will help clarify goals and develop organizational structures to implement them. Often this analysis is done cursorily, as a reaction against patriarchal power structures and the values inherent in them. A common assumption is that to re-structure means to de-structure—the process can as easily be simply anti-authoritarian or negative as creative.

Once we are working on a reform, we need not only criteria but also conditions that will prevent its co-optation or dilution, that keep the reform consistent with our long-term goals, and that help us to know when to move on . . .

Unless we are determined to prevent it, reforms most often enhance the privilege of a few at the expense of the many. Unless good political education accompanies work on a reform, success can lead to the conclusion that the system works or failure can lead to cynicism about women's ability to bring about change.

—Charlotte Bunch, "The Reform Tool Kit" in *Quest*, Vol. 1 No. 1

Demystifying leadership

Equating the redefinition of power with structurelessness has blinded us to power relations within our own organizations. The development of many of the unchallenged assumptions mentioned here reflect this difficulty. We tend to avoid power in reaction to the way it has been used to oppress us, but this does not mean that we are ourselves free of power and its misuse. It is my belief that neglecting to understand the use of power within our organizations has made it impossible to clarify our goals and structures. This neglect has led to great confusion about the kind of leadership our movement requires. If what we are after is the power to change a social system, we had better be pretty clear about our concepts of power and how it works—both to oppress us and to liberate us.

A collective model of organizing involves in theory a fundamental redefinition of power. Through a commitment to work in small groups where we can share knowledge and strength, we can create common goals which we will work together to achieve. In the creation of women's centres, we can recognize that our goals as leaders are to respond to the needs of individual women and to help clarify the necessary dimensions of a long term change process.

We who are the activists cannot clarify our common goals when we also attempt to include "all women" in that process. Our collective leadership should provide a model of strength and create alternative uses for power. This is quite different from viewing the organization of a whole centre as an "open collective" (or a series of them).

Too frequently we have equated collectivity with leaderlessness. We set leaderlessness as a goal when what we needed was the knowledge that leadership is inevitable and necessary, and the know-how to make it responsible, committed, and well-defined.

In a much-quoted article "The Tyranny of Structurelessness", Jo Freeman suggests that leaderless groups consider themselves free from power relationships and their problems, while avoiding the reality that more informal types of power structures will always emerge. Because such informal power

You fought for your voice. Now use it!

You're getting close. To equal rights under the law. To a fair crack at the good jobs, at the same pay as men.

But now, just as you're savoring a bigger slice of the pie, the pie is shrinking. The economy, beset by recession and lingering inflation, no longer provides the growth to create opportunities for women. (Or for men, for that matter.)

What's to be done about it?

Battle some more, of course.

A starting place: apply common sense to the energy problems so critical to America's economic troubles. If necessary, knock sense into some male heads. And buttonhole Congressmen and state officials. But, one way or another, make sure 1975 becomes the Year of Energy Action.

Not women's work? Why not? Women, as well as men, suffer because of our country's over-dependence on oil from abroad. From foreign countries that charge four times as much as they did before the energy crisis. Countries that can cut off supplies to the U.S. for political reasons at any time.

So insist that your elected representatives support measures to produce more energy right here in the United States. With environmental safeguards, of course. There's nothing incompatible between clean air and clean water and such essentials to the economy as offshore drilling and more coal mining.

Reducing energy waste can help, too. But over the long pull, America must have *more* energy, not less. So that opportunity can start growing again. For women. And for that other sex. YEA '75!

—Mobil Oil Corp. ad
in *Ms.* April/75

is not explicit, it is often difficult to discover where the leadership really lies and how to gain access to it.

Another common myth of women's groups is that structure is equated only with the inflexibility of patriarchal institutions. Structures reflect the people who make them and what they are for. It is possible to have flexible structures which define leadership responsibly and collectively.

A clear operating structure with definition of various roles within it will make it accessible to more people. Women can use the structure to further their goals rather than being tyrannized by it. Accepting the need for structure enables us to evolve a positive overt concept of leadership which will function for women. Flexibility is enhanced not endangered by this openness.

Principles of organizing

Without adhering to such assumptions as total participation, representation, structurelessness, total sisterhood, there are some basic principles with which to look at the organization of the Woman's Place:

- We must attempt to respond to the felt needs of women so that we are involved in creating immediate alternatives for individuals and groups.
- We must be aware of the need for a strong self-supporting leadership group.
- We must be aware of our responsibility to building a strong women's movement with a potential for achieving larger social changes.

In evolving the structures and programs of our centre, we need to keep these principles in mind and use them to evaluate our work. We are a nascent movement and as such we are constantly moving back and forth between how individual women perceive their needs and what that suggests about the theory and practice of our environment.

In order to evaluate and to follow up work or correct mistakes, we must attempt to determine why women come to the centre and what they learn there. This will give us feedback on whether our programs have any relationship to what women are feeling and thinking. We also need to listen carefully to what women in the community are saying when we speak about the women's movement. Finally, we should utilize whatever research methods are feasible in seeking an understanding of how we might help women in our community.

This approach to defining short term goals will allow flexibility and help us to move beyond programming for the initial stages of awareness without going too far to make contact (either of which can lead to immobilization). Such an assessment of needs should enable us to take responsibility for helping women through a process of learning. We should be challenging them to think in new ways.

Learning from the past

We need to understand from our history where and why we failed to bring women out of isolation. We may have had their

The very nature of a woman's centre is such that, if effective, it should render itself obsolete. It is my belief that women's centres will disappear within the next few years, probably as suddenly as they began.

There seems to come a time when the talking must stop, the courses are over, some awareness reached. When women are ready to fight for changes, women's centres may be unnecessary. Groups will continue to meet but with definite aims and objectives that will unify those involved.

—Barb Peltz

Women's Centres: A Comparative Analysis

bodies in our house, listening to a speaker or a film, but we have not necessarily involved them in a process of taking control over their lives. In the past, we operated on the assumption that giving women information would enable them to deduce the necessity of social change. But we cannot expect women to be aware of alternatives if it is not our responsibility to present the alternatives and hopes that are part of our various personal politics. This presentation is only possible if we accept our role as teachers, the diversity of movement women and the need for challenge and dialogue.

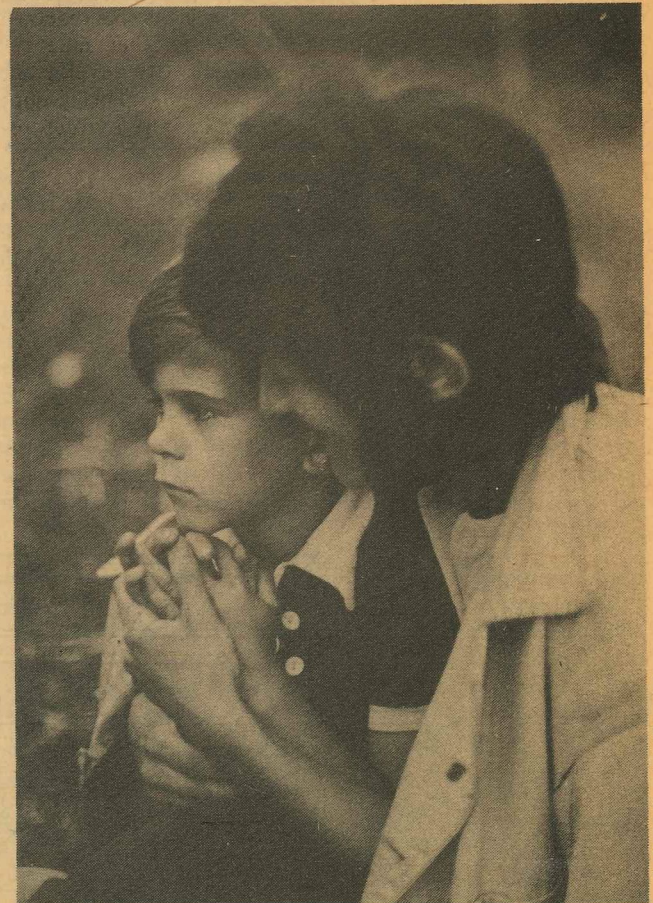
It seems we have a lot more to lose if we continue to present a vague description of women's liberation. We lose our own vision of change and our own sense of commitment to the building of a movement when we water down our beliefs so that we stand for nothing. If we are to help build a strong movement, we must work with women on the basis of the long range goals of a movement committed to social change.

We as leaders must define issues as we see them, using our attempts to understand what women are saying, and in tune with the relationship between individual perceptions and collective demands.

In the past we have had difficulty distinguishing between long and short term goals. For me, short term goals are our programs, based on the perceived needs of women and immediate responses to those needs.

Our long term goals are based on the need to build a movement of social change which responds to the collective needs of women. We must attempt to incorporate both dimensions into programming. We need a structure which accounts for both perspectives and which allows leadership to evaluate our programs as they reflect and create social change.

In the past, participation at the Woman's Place usually involved simply consuming Place programs or becoming a worker. Putting non-consuming time into the centre very



—photo by harriet kideckel

quickly lead to expectations of attendance at business meetings and quasi leadership involvement with decision making. We did not take into account that the majority of women involved in the centre are interested in and capable of participation in planning activities without leadership responsibility.

A look at staff

For instance, the volunteer staff group provided a service and support function. Generally, they seemed disinterested in decision-making, but often committed to the centre's existence. Their contact with local women should have provided valuable input into the programming of the centre.

Assuming that staff are solely involved to help other women may be misjudging their needs. To involve them further in the centre's activities, we need to clarify what their involvement means to them and create with them a staff structure which will meet their needs and enable them to grow from the experience.

More creative activity for staff (such as providing educationals on shift) could tie them less exclusively to the service dimensions of the centre if some open-ended possibilities included in the 'job description'. They need also to know that input about their work is expected and valued.

Leadership women on the other hand, must be free to maintain a broader perspective on centre work, while staying in touch with its normal functioning. In K-W's recent evaluation sessions, we discussed the importance of maintaining a group of leaders concerned about analyzing the direction of the centre in terms of a theory and strategy for change.

In the past, we have been plagued by definitions of participation which have not made a place for evaluating the short term work of our centre in the context of building a movement. We discussed a leadership collective which could be a resource group, providing input into program discussions (particularly long range considerations) without sole responsibility for decisions or implementation. We felt there must be a group of women who take the responsibility to develop an ideological basis for our goals and programs. This group should be accounted for formally within the centre's structure



—photo by jann van horne

(by describing membership, function, etc. as for other groups).

My feeling is that in clarifying our structure we make participation in it more open. Open communication channels are essential if new women are to receive encouragement for becoming involved and have the knowledge to do so. Lack of communication and definition of roles at the centre created isolation for staff, administrators and users, defeating the purpose of creating a place to bring women together to experience their power as a group.

As well, the use of general meetings and our newsletter could be more productive. At general meetings we might maximize participation by maintaining continuity through newsletter commentary and by getting details of meeting agendas out ahead of time. The newsletter should function as a communication link between women at differing levels of involvement, describing and solidifying our structure and giving more women access to the operations of the Woman's Place.

Internal support systems

I have characterized responsible leadership as clarifying the long range goals and as responsive to immediate needs of women in setting short term goals. I have described a perspective which will enable our centre to connect with others in building a Canadian women's movement. But I have not discussed the responsibility which leadership has to itself, which is where internal support systems come in.

As leaders, we must understand our personal commitment to the women's movement. We must see our work as responding to our personal needs as well as those of other women. If our needs are not met, then why are we organizing women (or how long will we keep it up)? We must recognize how we too will benefit from the changes we advocate. To take an altruistic view of our work is to lose the sense of struggle which should be motivating us as women to push for change. We must create systems of support to help us grow to meet the challenge of our role and to overcome personal, political and geographic isolation. We need this support to maintain the self-sufficiency to keep us from losing perspective on our work.

We must keep in mind our commitment to ourselves, to other women and to the movement we see is needed. We also must understand the need for a strong leadership and accept that we have chosen to take on some part of that responsibility. To be honest about what we feel and know is our most important responsibility in upholding our beliefs.

We must always be aware of the theoretical basis to our practice. To me (and within this paper), this has meant looking carefully at what we mean by "needs" and how we translate our perceptions of women's needs into clear long and short term goals for our movement. As well, I have suggested that an understanding of how we address the question of power is essential in building a movement. Unless we accept the need for leadership and the responsibility for defining that leadership in such a way as to build our collective strength, we will have no way of finding a direction, describing the change process, and implementing those changes.

—sue berlove

I have seen the Bird of Paradise, she has spread herself before me, and I shall never be the same again.

There is nothing to be afraid of. Nothing.

Exactly.

The Life I am trying to grasp is the me that is trying to grasp it.

—R.D. Laing

The Bird of Paradise, p. 156

Now after all these years, I realize I'm just another human being, a woman with many of the same feelings that my friends have. Building a wall around me was keeping me isolated and terribly lonely. There is a solution to every problem if you stay with it and prepare to make any changes in the present that will improve the situation in the future.

—quoted in
Our Bodies Our Selves, p.234



—photo by Jann van Horne

Editor's Prerogative

Otherwise known as getting in the last word.

It's close to four months now since we started work on this publication. And the closer it comes to being sent off to the typesetters, the more I realize is still to be said.

Early in 1974, I devised and sent out a lengthy questionnaire to Canadian women's centres. I was planning an article for a magazine which never came to be. The demise of the magazine group and the lack of response from centres dampened my ardor for the task sufficiently that much of the information I did gather has never been used.

Some of it was incorporated by a centre woman into a comparative analysis paper for a university course. Most of the quotes from other women's centres found in this publication came from that body of research material. One of the reasons for using so many diverse and disconnected quotes was to hint at some of the questions to be raised and the wealth of material to be looked at in analysing, understanding and building the women's movement.

If the quotes and the pictures bring to mind questions, problems, hopes and new directions which the scope of the copy could not, they will have done their work.

There is one potentially important aspect of the new structural proposals for the Woman's Place which ought not to be left out, although at present it remains at the discussion stage.

As outlined before, one of the difficulties with many women's centres is developing and hanging onto women with leadership-level skills and commitment. And at least part of that problem is a result of restrictions placed on overt development of political theory and practice by the multi-purpose, general appeal aspects of the centres. Women's centres can, for some women, become a stifling as well as a liberating experience.

A possible approach to alleviating the problem has been tried by the centre in Saskatoon (and probably others we didn't know about). The idea is simply to set up a separate but independent women's liberation group with a clearly defined relationship to the centre as a whole. In Waterloo, we discussed and liked the idea, but shelved any organizational attempt at implementation—at least until after the anticipated summer activity slump.

When a number of women wish to move beyond the

theoretical and practical limitations of the centre, a women's liberation group would be set up in addition to the structure outlined on pages 11-13. It would stand in the same relationship to the overall structure as any other Interest Group (i.e. it would **not** be in a position of control for the centre).

The Statement of Principles for the Place would probably be expanded and would be accepted by group members as a statement of goals and demands around which to actively organize (as opposed to being merely an indication of support in principle).

It would be a consciously political group, able to meet quickly when necessary to issue statements of support or condemnation of others' actions and to organize actions or programs on its own or in conjunction with the centre. It could also lead to internal and public discussion about history, politics, the movement generally or whatever.

Hopefully, such a group would be a forum for theoretical development, evaluation and planning as well as a vehicle for action. Members would not be restrained by the structure or nature of the centre as a whole, nor would they attempt to speak for its broader membership.

It could become a place for women for whom the CR, service and support functions of the centre had stimulated an interest in more in-depth examination of and participation in the Women's Movement.

People interested in the idea could perhaps contact Saskatoon or other centres in their area which have tried something similar. Primarily, the idea is applicable to smaller cities and towns where a women's centre is about as much activity as can be supported on an ongoing basis. In metropolitan areas, population factors alone usually allow women to choose the type and amount of involvement they prefer . . .

What else then is left to say . . . Well, there is this song I often sing when I'm alone—barrelling down the highway or bumping over the backroads; milking the goats or mopping the kitchen floor. The first verse goes like this:

When the movement's inspiration through the women's blood shall run,

*There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun,
For what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one.*

*But the movement makes us strong.
Solidarity Forever . . .*

So, with an acknowledgement but no apology to the IWW, I wish you love, luck, warmth and strength. And together we can be strong.

Liz Willick
August, 1975

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*bracket indicates year of original publication.



*For now I am in touch with sisterhood,
It must be right because it feels so good,
I'm fighting for the right to live a woman proud and free
Sweet joy
For now I can be me
—from the Mother Song*