Working Together for Empowerment:

Feminist Social Service Collectives in Canada

by Janice L. Ristock

"It's 10 minutes to three. The collective meeting started at 9:00 a.m. but we still haven't reached consensus. Should we give Mary an extension on her stay at the shelter even though she came in stoned, and it was one hour after curfew? The collective is certainly divided. Susan feels that rules are rules, and there can't be any exceptions. Mary was both late, and stoned which isn't tolerated in the house. Jackie has been challenging Susan and suggesting that she is just reacting to the fact that Mary was out with her lesbian lover. Marie adds that Mary's kids are ill, so it's a bad time to have her move on, while Kate is beginning to think we should call C.A.S. because she feels that Mary is neglecting her children. Chris reminds us that we have to have the grant application finished by today and she is suggesting that we move on in the agenda and have Mary wait another 24 hours before we tell her our decision. And I find myself getting angry and impatient because that would mean an emergency meeting tomorrow which is my day off. My mind wanders as I wonder if we will ever reach a decision and I laugh sardonically, thinking that this kind of work is supposed to be empowering — why do I want to work collectively anyway?"

Working collectively is a common organizational form for many feminist agencies and groups. A collective structure is non-hierarchical and reflects the feminist values of ending oppression and domination by providing a work environment where ideally power, participation and wages are equal. Collectives emphasize the sharing of knowledge, skills and information; the use of participatory decision-making; and the value of women's experience for fostering personal and political change. In particular, women's services such as rape crisis centres, shelters, hostels and women's centres are often organized as collectives in order to provide empowering alternative services and to work for social change within the mainstream social service system.

I recently conducted a survey of Canadian social service collectives which elicited information about their social service work; their processes and difficulties; and their social change role (Ristock, 1987). I was able to compile a list of 72 social service collectives in Canada (excluding Quebec). There were collectives in every province and in both rural and urban settings, with the majority of collectives found in Ontario. Most of the collectives formed because of women's involvement with the feminist movement. The collectives' services are primarily a response to some aspect of violence against women. Women see collectives as a place where their feminist political values and work lives can be integrated.

The results further suggest that collectives provide more than a service to the service recipients. That is, of the 34 survey respondents in this sample, 94% see themselves as changing the position of women in our society through their work. In addition, 97% report that they are able to work for social change by providing a feminist analysis in their social services work, by providing an alternative service (94%), by acting as role models for the women who use the services (91%), and by providing a service that is empowering for both the workers and the service recipients (91%). Yet many feminists have criticized the work of government funded social service provision for its socially controlling function and evaluate it as work that is co-opted by the state. In addition, many feminists have left collectives because of 'burn-out' and/or because of conflict between collective members. Working collectively isn't easy!

What emerges in this work is an area of contradiction. On the one hand feminist collectives are struggling to create empowering, social change oriented services, while on the other hand, they are embedded within an oppressive social service system whose roots are in individualism and patriarchy. Also, we are struggling to work co-operatively in a society where we have been taught to be competitive. On the whole, we have overlooked these areas of contradiction. An analysis of our contradictory locations (e.g., as social service workers & feminist activists) and the inherent power relations may serve to foster our struggles for mutually empowering work environments.

Working for Empowerment

The value of empowerment is a central part of working collectively because it conveys a meaning of mutuality and sharing. Webster's defines empowerment in the following way: to give power to; to authorize; to enable. It suggests something quite different from power which implies authority over something. Many feminist collectives have written basis of unity statements which further reflect the value of empowerment for collectives. The following is an example taken from

one collective's basis of unity statement:

At (name of agency) we attempt to empower both our clients and the women with whom we work. In order to do so we validate each other's feelings, opinions, ideas and experiences. We share our knowledge and encourage each other to grow and expand self-awareness.

What is also implicit in these statements, is the ideal that we are trying to create within our feminist organizations and between women. We are struggling to build an environment where we feel strength through our support and validation of one another: we want to be united. This idea, then, is in contrast to the world of power where women are identified as 'other' and experience invalidation, separateness and powerlessness.

The ideal that feminist collectives are attempting to establish is a desirable one. Yet, what comes to my mind is an experience I had when first starting to work at a hostel for women. I was a relief worker and hadn't worked a lot at the hostel. It was a rainy, cold day and everybody was staying in. There were thirty women thrown together from different backgrounds, staying at the hostel for a variety of reasons, chain-smoking and drinking endless cups of coffee, while six children of all different ages were running around trying to get the women's attention — and I was supposed to make this experience empowering? I found that I stayed in the staff office a lot, hiding from the women whose lives felt so different from mine. When I needed to emerge from the office, I made sure that the full key-ring was visible as a bulge that jangled in my pocket. The keys were the sign that I was not one of 'them,' that I was 'staff.' I wore it as protection against difference and felt it as my power. This embarrassing recollection of my early work in hostels makes me think about the power relations that inevitably operate in collectives despite our struggles for empowerment.

The longer I worked in feminist collectives the more comfortable I became. I soon forgot about my initial reactions and looked forward to interacting with the women in the house. Yet, my personal comfort at work did not remove the power differences that exist between workers and service recipients — although it made me less painfully aware of them. Our attempts to create an environment of empowerment will never get rid of power differentials. It is important for us then to begin to acknowledge and problematize the power relations in our work rather than dichotomize our understanding of power and empowerment.

Feminist Collectives in Context

In order to understand power relations, it is important to consider the work of feminist collectives in context. According to the survey results that I compiled, 100% of the respondents in this study's sample receive all or a portion of their funding from the government. As we are all well aware, this funding comes with strings attached. Therefore we are immediately thrown into a relationship with the state and this relation involves power. Often mandates are prescribed by the funders; a board of directors is required; and a name of an executive director might also be required. The collective structure then begins to resemble a hierarchical structure. The survey respondents were quick to point out, however, that they strategize to get around these imposed restrictions on their work. Often they have an executive director in name only; they hand pick a board of directors that also works as a collective and that may only serve as a "rubber stamp"; and they provide a service that goes beyond their service mandate.

This work context is filled with tension and struggle. The possibility of the funding being revoked or cut back at any time always exists. Thus a great deal of our energy must be spent keeping our relationship with the funding sources smooth. It is also difficult to provide a service imbued with feminist values within the rules and regulations set down by the bureaucracy. For instance, the collective may decide that Mary can have an extension on her stay at the shelter. They may reach consensus because they believe that a longer stay will provide her with the kind of supportive environment she needs. Yet the bottom line may be that Mary will have to move on to another shelter, perhaps a non-feminist service, even if she isn't ready. The funding sources have defined and created a system of short term, emergency or transitional services. We only have so much room to push and strategize if we want to hang on to our funding. In this way then we are both controlled by the funding sources, and we impose control over the women who use our services.

I describe this context because it becomes clear that feminist collectives are embedded within a hierarchy of power relations and that many contradictions inevitably arise. In particular, the goal of empowerment becomes difficult to achieve because so much of the collectives' energies are directed towards external relations. We want to preserve both our salaries and the service. Our contradictory locations, then, create both internal and external difficulties and levels of power and powerlessness.

Contradictions In Our Work

External tensions such as collectives' relations with the state and the social control aspect of social service work are just two examples of problematic relations that create contradictions. In addition, internal tensions such as power and leadership within collectives, differing feminist analyses, tensions between lesbian women and heterosexual women, white women and women of colour, and service providers and service recipients are also areas that set up contradictions in our work between our ideal goals and our real practices.

These tensions are always felt but difficult to acknowledge and respond to. The reaction that I have both experienced and engaged in is to try and create a homogeneous collective that then pits itself against the external forces. The collective becomes 'us' and we are against 'them.' This tactic often helps us to strategize and feel stronger in our external relations. But with the creation of homogeneity comes the denial of differences. Our focus on support, unity and empowerment seems to suspend our critical evaluation and our recognition of diversity. Our personal sense of self is expected to fit with the 'cohesive' collective's identity in a way that is often prescriptive. This also assumes that there is and should be a collective identity. All too often this has meant that women who are different cannot remain as part of the collective. Conflict often ensues and is explained as being due to "personality differences." Many women also leave collectives because of "burn-out." Yes, why are personality differences problematic? What is burning certain women out? These are questions we should ask within the collective. This jargon of "personality differences" and "burn-out" merely individualizes the problem and ignores the social complexities that give rise to them.

Working With Differences

The question arises: can we acknowledge and work with differences and still build a successful collective? There isn't an easy answer to this question. However, we can begin to address the area of differ-

ence by reflecting on the contradictions involved in the context of our work and by becoming aware of the power relations that are operating. These complexities are often not solvable. They are the given reality of our work. Therefore our focus should not be on finding simple solutions but rather on working with differences. Bell Hooks (1984) discusses the necessity of experiencing difference in order to build and understand solidarity. She asserts:

> *...when women come together, rather than pretend union, we (should) acknowledge that we are divided and must develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, etc.... Safety and support have been redefined to mean hanging out in groups where the participants are alike and share similar values. While no woman wants to enter a situation where she will be physically annihilated, women can face one another in hostile confrontation and move beyond the hostility to understanding. Expression of hostility as an end in itself is a useless activity, but when it is the catalyst pushing us on to greater clarity and understanding, it serves a meaningful function. (p. 63)*

I have not been a part of any feminist organization where we have been able to reflect critically on our internal and external interactions. We have not looked at our diverse identities (e.g., as lesbians, heterosexuals, women of colour, white women, etc.) and our multiple roles (e.g., as workers, clients, mothers, lovers, etc.) with regards to power relations and differences. This in part has been because of the demands of social service work, but also because the complexities are frightening and we have little experience in dealing with difference in a positive and respectful way. When doing the survey on feminist collectives, I was struck by the number of women who were eager to find out and learn about other collectives. I was also struck by the small number of collectives who engage in evaluations of themselves and their work (only 44%). What are we afraid of? If we are to continue to develop feminist organizational forms then I think we need to engage in regular evaluations where we can both criticize and validate our work, and force ourselves to begin to acknowledge the contradictions and differences. Regular evaluations will also allow us to work with differences before they reach a level of crisis.

Conclusion

Feminist collectives are present in every province of Canada, yet little has been written that documents, challenges and develops our unique feminist form of work. I am eager to have women respond to this article — I want to know more about how collectives struggle with difference and contradictions. I would like to see a network of feminist collectives so that we can discuss our difficulties and strategies and prevent further isolation in our work. I would also like to correspond with women who are working or have worked in collectives and document our diverse and valuable experiences with difference, power, contradictions and empowerment.

There are both strengths and difficulties involved in our work as feminist social service collectives. Our ideal of being empowering within our agencies is embedded within an oppressive social service system and is tied to our funding sources. This context is necessary to understand if we are to move beyond the "us and them" dichotomies that get created in both our external and internal practices and relations. In particular, real differences exist between women because of our different roles and diverse identities. These differences need to be grappled with and not denied. Bringing forth an understanding of and respect for differences and an analysis of contradictions into our collective processes will enrich our struggle for mutually empowering work environments.

References

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Levitation

begins when she gives away
her possessions when words weigh
too heavy, like sandbags weighing
a balloon filled with tepid air. It starts
when, like so many kilograms per
packet,
new clothes, memoirs are tossed
over the side, she begins to rise in a
basket
of dry woven reeds; comes after
she invited us to tea, gave her cats to
B
for a little while: she seemed calm
then,
unlike the frenzied soul we knew.
What did we know?
She was going with S, she said,
emptied the 'fridge, disconnected it;
we heard ice shifting; even then
we noticed her levitating:
a few more kilograms
gone, and the basket rising, we below
with keys to fussy ivy reaching
across
panes.
How could we know, and who was
that
strange man
anyway, to carry her out of her house,
we thought at last she'll be free.
With signs as black and dull as sullen
pupils,
we should have known,
could have stopped this final parting.
Now she shoves the heaviest sandbag
over the side,
unsmiling, recedes below a balloon
too red, too yellow, too visible for
minutes
into hours. Now she's dying, oxygen
slowly
sucked from her lungs with each kiss
from Suicide
(a close friend we thought), her eyes
attempting
destination, the nozzle of the balloon
opening intermittently, a balloon
filled with tepid air, rising, so many
kilograms
of air escaping into thin air, her lungs
inside out,
a fancy delirium rising over the trees,
short of everything,
while Suicide's artificial heart keeps
pumping.