



Women's March, Toronto, May 1975.

# Toronto International Women's Day Committee

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*Une femme établit un parallèle entre son évolution à travers les années 70 et sa participation au IWDC, un mouvement de femmes de Toronto.*

This article is an attempt to recount my own perspective on an organization that has, in the three years that I've been involved with it, changed as much as I have. Sometimes I think that the manner in which the two of us has changed is remarkably similar.

I think of myself as someone who is out of sync with the times. For example, I am fascinated by the Sixties. However, at the time the Sixties were playing in my neighbourhood, I was disinterested and withdrew physically to foreign parts and books. As for the early Seventies, when there were a lot of angry women in the streets, I was forging a new identity as someone's wife and an academic department's lowest person on the totem pole. Working through that one took up more than half the decade, and although throughout it I was being influenced by the Women's Movement, I was (as you might suspect) definitely peripheral to it. It came to me as something talked about by women, something that I was getting to know through my academic life and through the day care centre where I volunteered.

By the time I went to my first International Women's Day meeting in 1978 I had put together a nascent and very fragile identity as a socialist feminist lesbian. At the second or third meeting, that new identity very nearly unravelled as my loyalties went flying in different directions over the 'Men Debate.' The Men Debate had been shaping up in the fall of 1977 within the organization Women Against Violence Against Women. Protests against the screening of "Snuff" and the birth of WAVAW were the catalyst for a

reconstitution of the Toronto Women's Liberation Movement. WAVAW for a time drew in a spectrum of women—from radical feminists to socialist feminists with a good many of us somewhere in between. There had already been a few skirmishes but the real knock 'em down drag 'em out debate occurred not in WAVAW but in a similarly constituted grouping that was meeting to plan International Women's Day 1978. The debate was ostensibly over whether men should be encouraged, permitted or discouraged from participating in the march. I say 'ostensibly' because I think the debate was at least partly over whether radical feminism or socialist feminism would/could triumph in the city of Toronto.

The meeting voted to allow men on the march. The socialist feminists considered it a win. Insofar as a third of the meeting and most of the lesbians left the room never to return (at least until the same debate the same time next year) I wasn't so sure where this 'win' left me. Friends tried to console me with comments like 'You think that was bad? You should have been in Montreal in 1971!' At least these comments helped to alert me to the fact that there was more than the current debate going on. I have come to the conclusion that a good part of the emotional intensity of such encounters (and I have lived through others) is generated by the fact that old battles with the same protagonists are being replayed.

I have also come to the conclusion that one of the advantages of having missed the early rounds of the Women's Movement at the beginning of the decade is to have missed a certain amount of weep-

ing and gnashing of teeth. At the same time, and on the debit side, one missed a certain amount of euphoria. We have had some euphoria of late, especially but not exclusively on International Women's Day. But generally, although women are active, the atmosphere is low-key and certainly without the validation of media coverage.

The times are conducive to patient plodding souls, to mediators rather than to militants. There are those who would say that I have not yet learned the lessons of herstory (well, come to think of it they would say 'history'). I self criticize for being wishy washy and sometimes even a bleeding heart, but my sense is that those of us who are surviving in the International Women's Day Committee are fairly like-minded. I see the IWDC as an organization for patient plodders. There's a little gnashing of teeth here and a little euphoria there but mostly lots of hard work.

But IWDC is also an organization with a vision and I stick around as much for that as for the hard work. Perhaps the best way to organize my description of the IWDC over the last three years is to first describe the euphoria part, then the gnashing of teeth part and then finish with the visionary part. It also seems a good way to assess the past and to go in to the next decade.

## Euphoria

The rally and march to celebrate International Women's Day 1978 showed the city of Toronto that the Women's Liberation Movement was not dead. IWDC became a year-round committee. Looking

back over the minutes from that period, I see that we were planning two meetings for June (one on unemployment and one on abortion), we were starting to make plans to be involved with Organized Working Women on a women's day of action at the Fleck strike, we were planning a series of educationals throughout the summer, especially for new women, and a province-wide conference on major issues in the Women's Movement for the late fall. At the same time we were criticizing ourselves for our poor attendance at an anti-Anita Bryant rally! Minutes from the fall indicate that although the educationals had not been carried through and the conference was no longer on the agenda, we were planning a support day with other women around the York University Staff Association's strike and were starting to talk about a Toronto benefit for the Wives Supporting INCO. So we were doing plenty.

### Gnashing of Teeth

In the spring of 1979, following another round of debate, preparation and high-spirited March 8, IWDC went through a very reflective period about her identity. The need for self definition crystallized out of our experience in two events—the INCO benefit and March 9, 1979. Both of them made us feel like the reliable ladies' auxilliary to the union and women's movements. In fact there was some confusion as to who we were. Were 'we' the four hundred names on the mailing list or were we the forty some women who worked long and hard to build such events?

There had been an earlier move at an all-day meeting in the spring of 1978 to define ourselves more specifically as a socialist feminist or at least anti-capitalist feminist group. At that time, some of us had predicted that the organization would never hold together through the long series of discussions that such definition would require. Indeed, as predicted, the identity discussions which took up the spring of 1979 drove some of us from the ranks and the rest of us to distraction. But we did resolve to define ourselves as an anti-capitalist feminist group. This allowed us to pare down expectations and rationalize what we were trying to accomplish. In doing this we solved several problems.

The first problem was that it was difficult for new women to see the logic of many of the decisions that were being made. Why did we choose some issues rather than others out of the array of issues around which women were or could be struggling? The discussions about who we

were helped to clarify this for others and for ourselves. It made us more conscious of what we were willing to put our energies into and the terms on which we would do this.

There was another problem as well. Since we saw ourselves in a very amorphous way as the Women's Movement in Toronto (we would never have said it that way of course) we were constantly trying to expand and were always concerning ourselves with the needs of the new woman, who more frequently wanted a consciousness-raising group than a debate on 'Free Abortion on Demand' versus 'Repeal the Abortion Law.' We had within our midst, women who found it difficult to speak in a group that was larger than six persons and women who could speak clearly, informedly and passionately on any important issue. Most of these vocal women had participated in the Women's Movement for a number of years and had also attended the finishing schools of organized left political groupings.

By defining ourselves more specifically we have stopped trying to be all things to all women. Still, we recognize that even though we didn't need a consciousness-raising group, we all needed support. For us in IWDC, support and friendships are nurtured in the pub after the meeting. This, alas, is not an ideal solution for those who have babysitters at home and/or an early start in the morning and/or a long distance to travel. We have also learned not to underestimate the power of pot-luck suppers in building solidarity.

But mostly we rely on working together as the mechanism by which we get to know each other. The committee structure is very fluid. Women get on and off committees on a self-selecting basis, depending on their energies of the moment. While this could leave us open to problems of responsibility and accountability, for the most part it does not seem to have been an issue—people finish their task before moving on. The actual committee structure is almost as fluid as the membership of the committee. The only committee that meets regularly and consistently outside the main meetings is the coordinating committee. At times other committees have been particularly dynamic and have acted as caucuses within the larger group. The outreach committee in 1978 carried forward the all-day marathon self-examination session. A Lesbian Perspectives Committee (so-called because a caucus sounded too antagonistic) has met for over a year and is both a support group and a forum for the increasing number of les-

bians coming into IWDC. Women who are part of organized political groupings on the left have also caucused within the meeting. This informal rotation of duties means that everyone can get the experience of doing the various tasks that have to be done.

IWDC sees herself as but one current of the Women's Movement in Toronto. We know that there are women who will not feel comfortable among us but hope that there is some other spot in the movement where they can find a niche. But being a current presents its problems when it is hard to find the stream—the WLM in this city is more like a series of puddles! We have seldom had the opportunity to work concretely with one another in the past few years. Important as they are, debates have demobilized us. This year we would like to see a real coalition of women from various groups building March 8. Working together and the building of working relationships are as important as the day itself.

### Vision

And what is the vision that I referred to? All of us in IWDC want to build an autonomous women's movement. What that means in practical terms is often up for debate. I think all of us see an autonomous women's movement being (at various times and for various issues) allied with other movements and struggles. We recognize that such alliances *sometimes* run the risk (although not always and not automatically) of compromise. The key is to learn how to support other struggles which we see as important without merging our identity into them and subverting all our issues into the issue as defined by those other struggles.

For us in IWDC one of the most potent forces for the transformation of women's lives is the increased participation of women in waged work. But the transformation of our lives as women is not going to occur without gaining other rights—the right to control our own bodies, for example. Some revolutions have been won without this right; the 'longest revolution' will not.

The women who are currently active within IWDC have the capacity to work in other milieus and other struggles. We are all feminists, many of us are trade unionists, many of us are lesbians, some of us are all three. It is the linking and interconnectedness of the issues of such milieus that is the basis of our vision. In the meantime, if you are an anti-capitalist feminist in the city of Toronto, IWDC is a good place to keep your identity together.