

# Feminist Career Counselling —An Account of One Successful Experience

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Ce qui suit est un article sur un service féministe qui conseille des femmes au sujet de leur carrière.

Women's Career Counselling Service is a community service funded through the Outreach Program of Employment and Immigration. Its mandate is to provide employment-related services to women who are experiencing extreme difficulty in preparing for and/or entering the paid labour market. Its clientele is composed of sole-support mothers, chronically unemployed women, welfare recipients, and other women who have not worked for many years and require help in overcoming the fear, apprehension, uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety experienced in attempting to enter the paid labour force.

Women's Career Counselling Service has been in existence for four years, has a staff of four, and like most other funded projects it operates under the pressure of uncertain year-to-year support. When new federal and regional priorities are established and the word comes down that women and youth are no longer considered a priority, we begin the familiar chameleon-like behaviour of trying to make ourselves fit the new priorities whatever they are, or we hope to slip by unnoticed and unscathed, or become consumed by statistical justifications for our existence, or, finally, seek alternate funding. The sad reality of this situation is that women do not have the money to pay for such a service, especially the women of our target group. Funding for women's services is a necessity in this country at this time; women are not affluent, labour market conditions are treacherous, and Canadian women have not yet asserted their power and influence sufficiently upon the political system.

We are familiar with the distressing statistics of women in the labour force. Roughly half the Canadian labour force is composed of women (48%) who earn roughly half of what men earn (56%). The average income of working men is \$13,472, of working women, \$7,564. We know that 78 percent of sole-support families are headed by women and that 45.5 percent of these live below the poverty line. In 1975 372,000 sole-support families were headed by women, 66,000 headed by men. The average income of female-headed sole-support families is \$8,580 which would include any child-support or alimony payments.

While the myth of the woman working for pin money is beginning to be taken less seriously, our employment needs have not been taken seriously; our most visible asset as an employable group remains that of filling labour-market demands in typing pools and other ghetto occupations.

Therefore, beyond the terms of our mandate, or reading between its lines, our function as feminist career counsellors is twofold; first, we must respond to the articulated needs of the many women we see with a service that will facilitate their successful approach to a difficult and often hostile labour market; then, we must engage in consciousness-raising at the level of service delivery, in the community, with employers, within the funding establishment, and with government at all levels.

In order to reach the clients, satisfy the funders, and educate the public, high visibility and high profile must be maintained. Solid relationships must be built and nurtured between the service and referring sources such as social-service agencies, community colleges, hospitals, and other services. Also, regular campaigns must be mounted to inform employers of our service and of the employment needs of women, and to solicit employment opportunities through personal visits, mailings, open houses, and telephone contacts.

Owing to our location in Ottawa, Women's Career Counselling Service is in a specially good position to establish and maintain contacts easily with federal services concerned with women. Were we outside the national capital region we would doubtless develop close contacts with our MPs and establish what relationships we could by correspondence with those individuals and offices responsible for aspects of the status of women.

We do not limit our contacts to offices and individuals directly concerned with employment only. So much of what women must cope with extends beyond the job situation to include essential satellite considerations such as day care, sexual harassment on the job, social services and block funding, affirmative action, equal pay for work of equal value, and family law reform. Activity in these areas is also of vital interest to our service.

In our experience we have found that elected representatives at the local, provincial, and federal levels are accessible and willing to listen. We have also observed that they are often either not familiar with or misinformed about the problems encountered by women who are attempting to enter, or are now working in, the paid labour force. We have felt it our responsibility to speak for the five to six hundred women who come to us each year, and to alert our MPs, MLAs, and local council members of the needs of our clients. We want them to be aware of the presence of women as a potentially powerful lobby within their ridings or local constituencies.

In addition to the contacts mentioned, we maintain close liaison with grassroots women's groups, forming coalitions

and pressure groups, when and as needed, to focus on particular issues.

Several times a year we receive press coverage in the form of an article or story about our service, as in the recent case of a client of ours who completed the Employment and Immigration training program in appliance repair, and subsequently opened her own business. We are solicited on a regular basis for comment on articles appearing in the newspaper, and, several times a year, we are asked to appear on phone-in radio programs or television programs aimed at attracting the interest and attention of women. Needless to say, we welcome these opportunities as they enhance our visibility; we receive numerous inquiries for months after any such media attention.

Although we invest in keeping our profile high and our contacts in the community alive, our primary thrust of energy is directed at our clients. We believe that this thrust will yield the greatest benefits in both the short and the long term, for both our service and our clients. We are less concerned with reaching employers who may or may not have jobs for our clients; we are much more concerned with preparing a woman to go out and confidently seek her own job by personally approaching employers. Well-prepared women provide us with the best source of advertisement aimed at employers.

Similarly, to effect change and maximize our impact on the social, political, and employment systems, we believe in politicizing our clients, in increasing their awareness and modelling, and in introducing them to feminist values. We seldom meet a woman who is not at some level a feminist, although we meet few who identify themselves as such. We have no expectations that our clients will become feminist activists; however, we expect that through the valuing of women and women's work within the framework of our programs and structure our clients will increasingly value themselves, their work, and other women.

We regard women as full partners in the process of their development. With each exercise comes an explanation of why we have selected it, what we hope it will achieve, and precisely how it is working toward helping clients achieve their goals. If there is any intention of manipulation or conspiracy in any exercise or program, participants are made well aware of it in advance and are invited to co-operate as co-conspirators.

When a woman calls our office to inquire about our service we invite her to attend an information session, at which time we give her all the details of our service. We recognize that it may have taken a great deal of courage for her to make the initial call and that coming to our service represents a large first step. We share that thought with her and we express our appreciation of her having made the decision to come.

The physical plant of Women's Career Counselling Service very much suits the service offered and the needs of the clients. It is located in a large apartment in an older downtown building. It is gracious and comfortable and filled with overstuffed chairs, chesterfields, the odd gateleg table, and plants. The first thing one sees when entering the apartment is the kitchen. This one feature of our office has amazing effects on our clients; they feel immediately at home. Our library is housed in the kitchen so that clients can sit at the kitchen table, have coffee, and browse through the literature.

Our seminars are held in the living room, which can accommodate groups of twenty women; smaller groups work in com-

fortable adjoining rooms. Although each counsellor has her own office, clients are encouraged to use these spaces freely, as needed.

All work is done in groups, although the occasional woman may be seen privately. For the first years of our operation we counselled clients individually. As we became more familiar with group work, we realized that it is more effective; in accordance with feminist principles, we provide the experience of working together in groups to solve common problems.

Career Orientation is the basis or core program offered at Career Counselling. Each Career Orientation workshop runs for four weeks, and participants meet twice a week.

Week one begins with two sessions of self-assessment exercises. These are written and oral exercises which aid each woman in determining her areas of expertise, her interests, her aptitudes and abilities, and her immediately marketable skills. Throughout the self-assessment sessions, and throughout the rest of the Career Orientation program, strong emphasis is put on self-valuing, on developing a positive self-concept, and on translating skills from the vague realm of 'things I happen to know' to the language of the marketplace. Each woman is given an opportunity to speak before a group, to be introduced as a valuable and productive person by a member of the group, to focus intensely on herself (instead of on the children, husband, etc.), to learn more about herself and to feel pride in her accomplishments.

We also begin in the first week of the program to encourage the development of trust, of mutual support, and of a team network which is so crucial to successful career development and self-discovery for women. It is not uncommon for individuals and whole groups to continue to meet after their programs are finished at Women's Career Counselling Service. The feedback we receive is that these groups and individuals continue to meet to discuss and work on the material they were introduced to in the Career Orientation seminars, to support each other in the job search to the extent of sometimes working in pairs to find jobs for both, to encourage each other during educational programs of study, and to provide other kinds of back-up as needed.

The second week includes an introduction to assertiveness training. We role-play situations which are unthreatening and which will probably lead to success as a result of initial attempts to exercise more assertive behaviour. Other experiential sessions include such subjects as communication skills, money and power, self-determination, decision-making, or problem-solving. These sessions may vary slightly according to the needs and interests of the particular group and on our own interest in introducing new material.

The third week's sessions concern themselves with an introduction to the labour market and to training opportunities, respectively. These are eye-openers for most women; they are surprised to discover the many places and ways to approach the job market, and the numerous educational opportunities actually available to them. Much of the information and content of these two sessions is generated by the group, and participants usually express a great deal of pleasure in discovering their individual and collective knowledge. These sessions often include an assignment to investigate one educational program and/or one aspect of the labour market such as telephoning a large employer for information or gathering information on one occupation.

The fourth and final week of the Career Orientation program is always devoted to résumé writing and interview techniques. All of the work done throughout the first three weeks of the

program is brought together in the preparation of the résumé and in the role-plays of interview situations.

We estimate that it requires approximately twenty-four working hours to prepare a final résumé, and after that minor changes will have to be made to accommodate and respond to the unique features of each job for which application is made. We encourage each woman to view her résumé as a special and personal reflection of herself. Consequently no two résumés are alike; style and format is developed by each woman to suit her own needs and goals.

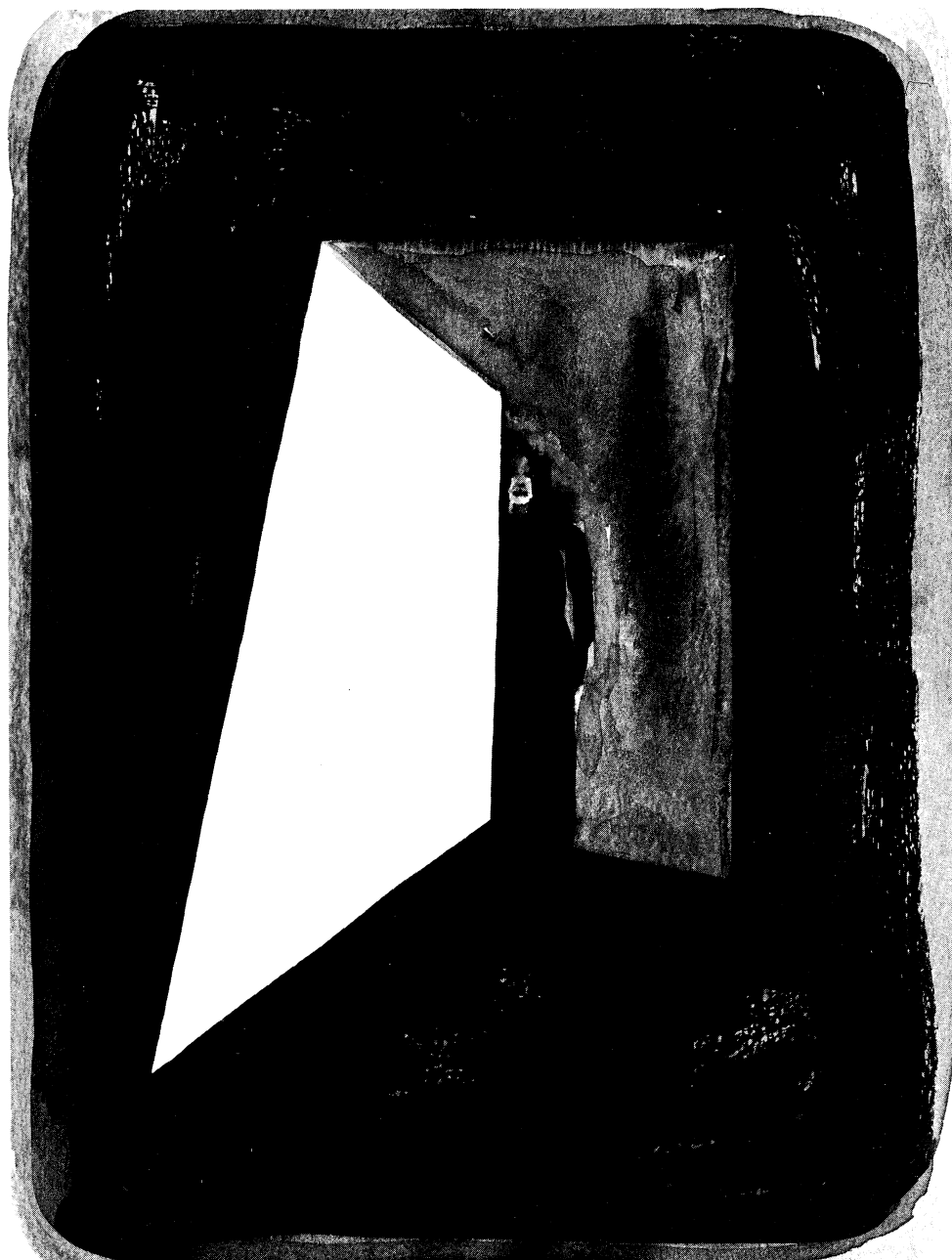
Each interview requires planning in advance, and afterwards an examination of the components that made it a successful or unsuccessful interview.

With this in mind we continue to work with our clients in less formal and less structured on-going weekly meetings, or clinics. These clinics are offered at a regular set time each week and clients may come when and as often as they like. At these times we are prepared to work on résumés and interviews, or just to offer an opportunity to clients to 'rap' about their feelings around the job search. It appears to be of great

benefit to job-seekers to be with others who understand the frustrations, feelings of discouragement, and potential loneliness job-hunting can produce. It is important to be reminded that conditions external to oneself may be responsible for temporary lack of success.

These ideas represent a few of the ways we offer and practice feminist career counselling. Our success is measurable in two ways; first, our statistics indicate that between one-third and one-half of the women who seek paid employment are successful within the first three months of their search. Second, they tend to find jobs in the areas they are interested in rather than settle for a job they find little or no interest in doing. We experience our clients as being creative and assertive in locating positions before they are announced or advertised.

We believe that the experience of this service and of its clients is not unique to Women's Career Counselling Service. Rather, it is characteristic of and unique to the phenomenon of feminist career counselling, a supportive and personalized service to women.



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