

Women & Economic Development in Northern B.C.

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Cet article décrit la tentative des femmes dans des petits villages à une seule industrie en Colombie Britannique de participer directement dans la planification du développement économique.

This article is written to describe the organizing process used to explore the issue of Women and Economic Development in BC. It is also about women's work in the women's movement and women's work in the home. For many women, the workplace is in homes, in tiny rented premises that act as women's centres, and in the church basements, libraries, and union halls used for women's group meetings. The workforce of the movement is women, and we work for little or no pay, completing our movement work after all other 'home' and office work is done. The benefits do not appear as pension plans, sick leave or pay increments. Instead they appear, we hope, as some kind of change in the way people view the position of women in the private and public worlds—either as a changed self-concept, a changed policy or program within government and other institutions, or a changed social attitude.

The work of BC women on this issue of women and economic development reveals the invisible (it shows how women actually do their work in and out of the home, and how this is not considered to be part of economic production). This particular article touches on some of that content and outlines the organizing methods women have used, and the analysis developed around the issue of economic development as it relates to women. It further shows how the Women's Movement, that nebulous oft-proclaimed 'dead' non-entity, is in fact, a very real workplace.

If economic development terms of reference are drawn up with the basic assumptions that women exist as dependents of men and not as persons responsible for their own economic future then the studies, planning agreements, or development schemes will be such that they deliver programs that validate and reinforce the original dependency assumptions. Economic expansion rarely results in economic development for marginal groups unless a conscious decision to change the position of these groups is built right into the terms of reference.

Those words were spoken to a northern women's conference in September 1975 by Eileen Caner, Director of the Women's Economic Rights Branch of the BC Ministry of

Economic Development. They tell us that women will not be considered in economic-development decisions, i.e. we will be invisible, unless we speak to our experience and concerns within the economic-development sphere, thus placing our words in that world.

What do women have to do with economic development? The *Report of the Northern BC Women's Task Force on Single Industry Resource Communities* gives one answer.

We are convinced that if there is to be any positive change for women in presently existing single industry communities, and if there is to be any positive development for women in future such communities, we must voice our own perceptions of what life is like for us and demand full participation in the planning, governing and evaluating process.

The *Report* points out that this is not easy for women to do as 'we learn to believe that our own problems and experiences are not as important as those of men in the public world.'

I want to outline for you a process about northern British Columbia women organizing themselves around the issue of women and economic development; how they are understanding it in relation to their own lives, where they are taking this issue, and its importance for the rest of the country.

In April of 1976 the Secretary of State's Women's Program, as a follow-up to IWY activities, hired me as 'Consultant on Women's Issues' in Prince George, BC, a central interior city five hundred miles north of Vancouver. My job was to assist in the organizing and development of women's groups and issues in Northern BC and the Yukon. In doing this work I was struck by the special intensity of problems faced by women living in single-industry towns. These towns reflect in microcosm all that is wrong with our system. There were no jobs to speak of for women—they were there because they had followed their men who had worked in the mine, mill, or smelter. Women's work was as a support-service worker and as such not considered important. There were few shopping facilities, totally inadequate medical services, ill-designed houses and neighbourhoods, no community centres, no public transport, minimal childcare facilities, and few support groups. Wife-battering, child-abuse, alcoholism, drug-abuse and family breakdown were, and still are, endemic.

It was from hearing these women's stories, relating them to work being done within the Women's Economic Rights Branch of the provincial government and the Women's Research Centre in Vancouver, and knowing that these women, living hundreds of miles from one another, needed to communicate with each other, that led to the formation of the Northern BC Women's Task Force on Single-Industry Towns in the fall of 1976. The issue of single-industry towns is but one issue within economic development, but we needed a specific place to begin our work; and certainly women had much to say about what their lives were like in these communities.

The Task Force members, chosen because of their community location, industry, and feminist involvement, were Joan Kotarski (Mackenzie, pop. 5,300, forestry), Tamitik Status of Women (Kitimat, pop. 11,500, smelting), and Gina Baker (Fraser Lake, pop. 1,400, mining). Kitimat and Fraser have active women's groups and Mackenzie has developed one since the work of the Task Force. Each group was approached and told the stories of women in other communities, and a tentative work plan was put forward. After discussion, which took place over several months and twelve hundred miles of travelling, it was agreed that the newly formed Task Force would utilize Women's Program contract monies in order to carry out the following tasks:

1. To assist and involve women living in each of the three communities to define the needs of women as related to the community.
2. To develop techniques that would more effectively identify the problems relevant to women in single-industry towns.
3. To prepare a report that would outline the needs and research developed.

There were two things we were building into our work. The first was to build a base through communicating with one another—to reveal who we were, what we did, and where we lived. The second was to develop an analysis of single-industry towns, and, from there, of economic development in general, that would speak from our perspective as *women*. We didn't want yet another collection of statistics and graphs. It was important for women to accept and validate their own experiences in these communities, to present those experiences to the world, and to insist that these life experiences be seen as evidence that to continue omitting women from the economic-development decision-making process would be to continue a cycle of depression, isolation, and illness for both women and their families.

The Women's Research Centre played a key role here. It was contracted to lead the 'how to do research' workshops for the Task Force and it was their expertise in developing research from a women's perspective that gave a particularly meaningful direction to the work being undertaken by northern BC women.

With the creation of the Task Force a long organizing and learning process began. Available resource material was read and shared, verifying for all of us the fact that women and families were missing from all research done to date. Long letters telling of work plans and research findings were sent to and from the research centre and task-force members. Two workshops were held for everyone, one in January in Prince George and another in Kitimat in the spring. The amount of commitment was tremendous—women travelled hundreds of miles by plane, car, and train, with small children, in a northern BC winter, in order to attend these meetings. Members of the women's centre in each town hosted the workshops, offering potluck dinners, billets, and meeting space, and in return were offered the opportunity to sit in on the workshops themselves. It is especially important

to note that all this work, including travel, mailing, phone costs, etc., had to be completed within the \$5,000 contract budget we had available to us.

Helga Jacobson, Gene Errington, and Linda Yanz of the Research Centre spent long hours working with Task Force women on their research—offering support, suggestions, and clarifying over and over again the importance of women's documenting, in their own words, what it was like for them to live in their towns. Most of us had to be convinced that our stories were really worth writing down, but once we had that conviction a tremendous sense of purpose and power began to develop within the group. By the end of the second workshop in March, the Task Force women were ready to begin writing the final reports and were also wanting to begin planning some kind of action that would take these reports beyond their own communities. Conversation began to focus on the need for a Conference on Women and Economic Development that would reach out to women in single-industry communities throughout the province.

During the summer of 1977 the original task force expanded to become a steering committee for the Conference, and once again women travelled hundreds of miles to attend planning meetings. Eventually a hundred women from forty-six single-industry towns throughout BC and the Yukon attended the Conference on Women and Economic Development held in Prince George last November, producing the beginnings of a new information and communication network between women while sharing an analysis of why it is that women are not included in economic development plans and why they must be.

It is important to clarify this analysis and tell you what we mean when we talk about women and economic development. Paolo Friere in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* says:

Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim their right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing experience.

We know that women have been denied their right to speak their word and are not permitted to dialogue. Friere also says:

We must realize that our view of the world, manifested variously in our action, reflects our situation in the world.

We know it is women's view of the world that has not been documented nor recognized and therefore we know women's situation in the world has not been considered. Therefore our task is, to quote Helga Jacobson,

to speak through the silences that have so far and in most areas stood for our lives as women, to make visible our experience in and out of the world, and to see that our tasks are a necessary and important part of the world of work.¹

The action comes from taking this analysis and applying it to ourselves as we look at economic development. Where does it fit? Where can we speak to it? At the present time, women in northeastern BC and the Yukon are monitoring the development of the Alaska Highway Pipeline Project and are finding that they fit everywhere, yet appear nowhere. In their brief to both the Commons and the Senate committee reviewing the Northern Pipeline Bill, northern women stated their grave concern that the already insufficient social services of their communities would be stretched beyond any usefulness to meet the housing and service needs of prospective workers and families that both government and pipeline companies are claiming no responsibility for. All groups are preparing critiques of the socio-economic terms and condi-

tions of pipeline development from the perspective of their lives as northern women, and are lobbying the Northern Pipeline Agency to release funds to enable them to complete adequate research into the effect of massive pipeline construction on the lives of women and their families.

On another front, the Women's Research Centre recently reviewed BC's new Forestry Act and said, in response to a proposal to concentrate the industry further in the hands of multi-national forest companies: 'the workforce of the forest industry, both women who work directly in the industry and those who are the wives of workers, will be forced to uproot themselves to follow the demands of the company....This enforced transiency has a very damaging effect on families.'

We must develop for ourselves the vocabulary of women and economic development in the same way that native peoples have developed the vocabulary of land claims. It is a matter of convincing ourselves of our rights not only in the courtroom, the bedroom, and the workplace of home and office, but in the decisions that are made about how this land is to be developed, if it is to be developed, and for whom. As well, we must do it not just as human beings interested in the environment, but as women whose particular needs have not even been looked at, much less met.

This is not easy work to do. We are not used to reading the business pages and thinking about mines, the price of copper, fishing boundaries, or natural-gas agreements. Already critics have stated their doubts about the effectiveness of trying to combat the corporate and bureaucratic world. The point is, we can only name what is close and real to us, and as we name it and use it—then we can move on. Two years ago there was no Northern Women's Task Force in BC, no report, and no conference plans. Now it has all happened, much work has been done, and it has led us from a group of six to a gathering of hundreds. The women of Kitimat said it so well in their introduction to the Task Force report:

We are not sociologists or anthropologists, and we have made no pretence at being academic. In trying to set down the life experiences of women living in our town it seemed only logical to us that we should turn not to 'experts' (who are usually men) for information, but to ourselves, our friends and our neighbours. As a result this report is written by women, deliberately from the perspective of women. It is a beginning. . . .

This article on women and economic development chronicles the process we used to organize ourselves rather than describing all the problems of single-industry town life for women. You can read the Northern Women's Task Force Report yourself—it is available free from the Women's Research Centre, 517 East Broadway, Vancouver, B.C. You can also ask the Research Centre to send you a copy of Helga Jacobson's paper on *Community Research from a Woman's Perspective*.

It is important here to point out to women across Canada that women and economic development is an issue we must be involved in, that it is a new issue yet encompasses nearly all of the 'old' issues, that the response to our work in BC has been tremendous, and that it is vital that our research methodology reflect our real needs, not the needs of the computer. Friere says that 'liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information.' The politicization and liberation of northern BC women who have recognized where they are placed, as women, in the public world of economic development and the private world of the home is one of the most exciting developments in the women's movement today.

Note: The Women's Research Centre, based in Vancouver, B.C. has been funded since January of 1977 although it existed as an organization for a number of years prior to funding. The centre is committed to helping women do research into the needs of their communities; research that is not defined or aimed primarily at academic, professional and government audiences. Most of their work is with women who are disadvantaged or who do not normally have access to funding for research work. Present projects include: Immigrant Women, Wife Battering, Sexual Harrassment on the Job, and Economic Development.

1. *Community Research from a Women's Perspective*, Helga E. Jackson, Ph.D. (Women's Research Centre, 1978).

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