

Community Research: an Approach from the Perspective of Women

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La Recherche communautaire: une perspective féminine.

Le Centre de Recherches sur la Femme à Vancouver poursuit sa recherche communautaire de façon à fournir un lieu de discussion pour toutes les femmes et à donner la priorité à l'expérience propre aux femmes ainsi qu'à la perception qu'elles ont de leur réalité.

The traditional approach to the study of communities is to focus on defining types of organization, patterns of leadership, administrative structures, and local political problems. The aim of these studies is to provide an analysis and description of how things function in particular local settings. But women's work, their lives, and their experiences are rarely part of these accounts.

The social relevance of housework and child-raising is ignored. Neighbourhoods and friendships that provide support systems for women, the problems that arise from working both in the home and outside it, and other issues pertaining specifically to women, are noticeably absent from such traditional studies. Because of this we are forced to turn to research focusing on the interests of women.

We believe the work done by women in the home and the community is crucial to the maintenance of society. But conventional analyses of the world of work trivializes or totally omits reference to it. For instance, James W. Rinehart looks at women's work from this perspective.

At present the work situation of women, in and out of the home, is a focal point of resentment and pressures for change. Throughout this century more and more females have joined the labour force, and today about one of every three adult women is an income earner. Their presence is most noticeably in the worst jobs and in 'women's jobs' like elementary school teaching and nursing. A growing proportion of women are no longer content to accept their traditionally defined roles as housewives and work subordinates. *The Tyranny of Work*, pp. 4-5.

While this statement recognizes some aspects of women's problems in the workforce, it is indicative of the way in which one whole segment of women is excluded. Housewives' work rarely occupies any part of traditional analyses, for only work outside the home is seen as 'work'. This omission creates difficulties, for if what you do is defined as unimportant and trivial, and furthermore is also unseen, it is hard to claim the right to speak of your problems, or to insist on change that would benefit you.

The goal of the Women's Research Centre in Vancouver is precisely to claim this right — to carry out community research in a different non-traditional way.

In our work we seek to facilitate the process of defining the nature of local problems and the structure of the local communities *from the perspective of women*. As researchers our task is to provide a forum in which women can speak to each other — and to the wider public — and in this way to accumulate data that explain the exclusion of women. Through this process women become confident that they have the right to be heard, and to have their understanding of the world and their experience in it taken into account. In this way 'woman's work' is validated in both the home and the community.

The following words of a homemaker sum up the image women themselves have internalized:

How would I describe myself? It'll sound terrible — just a housewife. [Laughs.] It's true. What is a housewife? You don't have any special talents. I don't have any. . . .

Somebody who goes out and works for a living is more important in the business world. What I do is only important to five people. I don't like putting a housewife down, but everybody has done it for so long. It's sort of the thing you do. Deep down I feel that what I do is important. But you just hate to say it, because what are you? Just a housewife? [Laughs]

I love being a housewife. Maybe that's why I feel so guilty. I shouldn't be happy doing what I'm doing
Working, Studs Terkel, pp. 299-301.

It is this concept of woman as 'just a housewife' that must be overcome. In providing research that includes all the aspects of women's work, we lay the basis for making change. Without this kind of understanding, one that is drawn from all our experiences, we cannot even begin to formulate the policies directed towards change.

The first step then is to make women's work visible, and it is a step that must be taken by women from different positions in society, for we should not be represented only by a few spokeswomen, but by as wide a range of voices as possible. Hence the Women's Research Centre's emphasis is to encourage women to do their own studies, write their own briefs, take part in their own local community government and so on.

It is important to stress that we work on the understanding that all women are not alike. Class, cultural background, different resources, age, rural/urban location, and occupation differentiate us. And from these different positions and situations we can expect to hear different voices speaking of differing experiences of the world. But the enterprise of becoming

visible is a common one, and having expressed that, we can then go on to understand our differing needs and make the fundamental changes that are necessary to answer these needs. Initially it is the right to speak for and of ourselves that we must claim. In this way policies, changes, analyses will relate to what we have to say as women.



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