

Women Helping Women

The Unpaid Work of Women Board Members

by Rusty Neal and Jane Gordon

Les auteures rapportent le contenu d'une série d'entrevues avec les membres du conseil d'une organisation féministe et nous disent comment ces femmes voient leur travail comme membres bénévoles d'un exécutif communautaire.

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The women's movement makes extensive use of boards in the governance of the many service and activist bodies to which it has given birth. In rape crises centres, women's centres, and shelters for battered women, the work of governance by boards has not always been easy. Labour or management disputes and differences among and between women have tested the philosophy and capacity of women's services to maintain the delivery of support services by women to other women.

If we accept the feminist redefinition of work and include paid and unpaid work (see Armstrong and Armstrong 1990, 1994), women board members can be said to be working on projects defined as caring for the community or, in other words, responding to community needs through the activities of social welfare (Baines *et al.*). In the light of evolving politics and the lessons we are learning from feminist organizing (see Callahan), it is time to consider what women who accept volunteer positions on community boards of feminist organizations identify as their work.

The project of women helping women

Women Helping Women (WHW)¹ is staffed by paid employees and managed by an executive director. Responsibility for the organization resides in a board nominated by a committee, chaired by the past-president of WHW and two other individuals from outside the board. Nominations are voted upon at the annual general meeting which is announced publicly and open to anyone who identifies with WHW and its services. There are no dues, statements of membership, or other requirements for participation in the annual meeting. The board composition changes yearly, with individual members expected to serve a three-year term. The community volunteers represent the largest

portion on the board. There are also three members elected annually by and from the employees of the WHW. The executive director serves as an ex-officio member.

Seventeen women who worked as volunteer or unpaid workers from the community on the board of WHW took part in a recent collaborative research study on the subject of their work. All were elected community members of the various boards, serving between 1990 and 1995. All shared an identification with the issues or causes served by WHW, a commitment to some form of feminist process, and appreciated the importance of volunteer work in developing and sustaining community.

The women in the project represent one-third of the total number of board members who served during the five years and appear typical of many women's organization boards. They vary considerably in age, from their 20s to their 60s, in their labour force involvement, employed, unemployed, and retired, in their family circumstances and involvement in community as well as feminist issues. In this instance, all believe in the idea of "women helping women" and all "wanted to make a difference." They support the agenda of challenging the status quo on issues such as "wife battering," "violence against women," "sexual assault," and "woman abuse." Some call themselves feminists, others do not. Assessments of their experience on the board varied. Some were extremely positive about it while others were disillusioned with aspects of their experiences. A very small number were clear that they would be extremely reluctant to ever participate on a board again.

Identifying work

Identifying the work of boards is not always easy for outsiders and is often complex for those who actually undertake the work. An orientation session often provides an opportunity to learn more about the organization, how it functions, who the key individuals are, as well as an occasion when board members begin their acquaintances. It also can provide an opportunity for a discussion of what the organization and what individual board members see as the responsibilities of individuals on the new board.

Many women who take positions on community boards are unclear about the expectations of board membership. In this project many had never served on a board before. Some had been volunteers in community organizations but had not had governance responsibility. Others came to the board because of personal contacts and/or a general interest or history in women's issues.

The various backgrounds women bring to a board account for the diverse perspectives on the nature of the

work itself. There are multiple dimensions to the work identified by board members as "their" work.

Giving advice

The most common perception of both board and nominating committee members is that individuals are invited to join the board because of the expertise they possess. This may be a professional qualification or a skill. The nominating committee of WHW looked for a mix of individuals with legal, financial, education, and health training, as well as skills in union negotiations, carpentry,

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and/or other trades useful in maintaining a physical facility, access to monied people in the community, and membership in various community groups.

Board members, once elected, identified their initial work on the board with the professional or skilled expertise they possessed and for which they believe they were invited to serve on the board. Sarah, for instance, a board member with limited women's community involvement had managerial experience in her own professional life and accepted an invitation to join the board because she was looking for volunteer experience using those skills. She prided herself on being well-organized, analytic, experienced in managerial issues, and hard-working; skills which she thought would be an asset to any board.

Another woman, Catherine, joined the board of WHW because of her involvement with trade unions and labour negotiations. She had been asked to accept the nomination by individuals concerned about the labour situation facing employees who were looking for understanding from the board. Catherine felt a sympathetic labour voice would be helpful on a board where labour relations were sometimes tense. A third woman, Claudia, says that when she was asked to serve on the board as treasurer, she was assured that the financial aspects "would not be overwhelmingly taxing, so there would be nothing that would be beyond my technical ability." Over time her comfort level and board expertise increased, so that where her initial contributions and activities had been related to her role as treasurer, by the third year of her term she was less involved in financial issues and more interested and involved in the social and ethical issues as applied practically. She credits her experience with having broadened her perspective, although her original involvement was as an individual bringing financial and budgeting skills.

Because Sylvie had been an original founding member

of WHW she was able to describe the longitudinal change in the board since her reinvolvement with WHW. As she put it, the women who originally volunteered knew first-hand about violence against women, and were motivated by a wish to provide more institutionalized supports for those who needed help, with regular and secure funding, in a permanent setting. In her second term, the motivation to help others was still present, but the services were institutionalized and career development and professionalism were also incentives for board members. In her words: fewer social workers, more accountants; meetings in board rooms, not basements; and professionalized minutes, rather than hand-written minutes.

The opportunity to develop new professional skills attracted many women with expertise and they saw the reciprocity of the give and take using old skills and developing new ones. Anna-Maria describes this interplay,

It was very educational. It gave me an opportunity for practicing skills, negotiating union contracts, staff and personnel concerns, directing a group of people through a firestorm—the whole experience was educational.

Representing a constituency

Some women joined the board of WHW because they saw this as an opportunity to speak for and make known the perspective of particular groups of women. In addition to professional and skilled expertise, the board—through the nominations committee—looked for individuals representing some of the various ethnic, racial, and socio-economic groups which make up the local community. Acknowledging the bylaws of the constitution and the concern of the board that it represent the range of women who might use the service it provided, conscientious effort was made each year to recruit constituency representatives. The response of the women who accepted this responsibility varied.

Sandra accepted nomination because she thought her cultural and ethnic perspective needed representation. She also felt that the service provided by WHW should be better adapted to meet the needs of women in her particular community. She believed her community needed to be heard on two different counts—who provided the service and how it was provided. In particular, Sandra felt that the hiring criteria were often difficult for members of her community to meet because of a bias in favour of educational achievement. She believed other forms of practical or life experience were acceptable alternatives to find individuals who were likely to be able to do the job well. Sandra's comments about equity were not, from her point of view, heard during her board service and thus she eventually resigned.

Maria, by contrast, also made reference to her minority cultural and linguistic origins as factors in her invitation to serve on the board. She believed that her background was

a positive factor in her nomination to the board and continued on the board to do the work of representation that she saw was necessary. Linda talked about another kind of representation—she was an “out” lesbian. After a controversial board personnel decision she supported, she was treated by members of that group as having betrayed the community. Nevertheless, she continued her work on the board representing lesbian issues as well as responding to the work of the organization as a whole. Finally, Dominique, like others, commented on her relationship, as a member of one community, the dominant community of the area, with another board member, a member of a

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visible minority community. This other woman believed—as did other board members who were representative of various constituencies—that although she was important to the board in terms of representation she felt that WHW did not take as much care as they might have in allowing for a diversity of participation.

Board members also saw the necessity of representation beyond ethnic, racial, linguist, and sexual identity. The women of WHW did not overtly articulate a class identity but the nominating committee deliberately searched for women from different socio-economic groups and socio-economic differences became evident during board service. These differences were manifested in the arrangements for rides to and from meetings, the willingness or ability to join pre-board meeting restaurant dinners, and the critical commentaries that were made in considerations about employee salaries during labour negotiations. Several women commented on the salaries being negotiated between board and staff in comparison to their own (lower) earnings. The higher-income women did not make these comparisons.

Finally, former users of WHW's services were seen as a particular constituency requiring representation. This representation may, in fact, have occurred, however, even when the nominations committee secured former service users to work on the board, those individuals were not so identified. When women choose not to reveal that they have used the services of WHW, the rest of the board would not, unless inadvertently, be aware of this. Given the choice of silence, many board members lamented the lack of representation of this group, unless these women spoke as representatives, even though the representation was almost always minimally present. At the same time this representation was taken on by some staff in the absence of visible representatives.

Helping with the provision of service

Hands-on work is seen as the direct provision of service. Although the board of WHW thought of itself as a working board, it also acknowledged that its work was different than the paid work of the employees of the organization. The board saw itself as providing the supporting activities to allow the paid staff of the organization to do their work. This commonly included fundraising; addressing envelopes; speaking to various public audiences; providing various forms of education; public appearances as representatives of the WHW or its issues; and advocacy and lobbying with politicians and government.

Most board members expected to help indirectly in supporting and sustaining the services of WHW and did not expect to provide the service directly. Some board members, however, did see themselves as helping directly with service provision. This perspective may have been facilitated by a part of the orientation process which provided the opportunity for new board members to orient themselves to the service, to assist paid staff in hands-on tasks.

Lita, for example, was interested in women's issues and willing to serve on the board when asked. She wasn't entirely clear what a board did, but felt she had a fresh perspective and energy and concern about the issue addressed by WHW. As she said “you can sit around and talk but I wanted to act.... I sort of like to get down and do something.” Lita had gone on the board expecting to be able to do concrete things and carried that vision of board work throughout her service. She felt regret or frustration at not being involved in direct provision of service and as she summed up her experience, “I would have liked to have done more.”

Other women were clearer that their work was to provide the services that freed paid staff to do the actual hands on work. Janet, a former board chair, described her work as support work which averaged two or three hours daily. The dimensions of the networking, fundraising, and political work she did to raise public awareness of the issue addressed by WHW and to insure its political and financial support took time. As she said, “I had letters from members of the legislature, and talking with them and being at other functions and addressing these people” was but one small aspect of her work.

Enabling the work of others, as a task in itself, was evident across the board, both interpersonally and inter- and intra-professionally. Mary, for instance, with her background in health, worked hard to sustain the physical health of women who used WHW services and to network with others on the service issue addressed by WHW. She felt health practitioners could be both sources of referral to WHW and front line workers for women who were unable to come to WHW. She also went out of her way, doing the extra tasks of individual social support, to make others feel comfortable with board procedures and meetings.

Making tough decisions

Board members had to learn what were appropriate areas for their involvement and then how to make decisions which were in the best interest of the organization. This was not always articulated as work, even though it absorbed an enormous number of meeting hours and many lengthy deliberations and consultations. Nadine saw her understanding of how board, management, and staff divided up the work as something she had to offer the organization. As she said,

I had some experience in a variety of organizations and I know how they worked and I knew some of the tensions and balances between the governance and the work of the organization and that was very clear to me in my related work and the responsibilities that lie with the director or manager and with the board. The distinctions and the tasks with the staff, I understood these and how it worked.

However, not all board members brought her experience to the task of governance.

Board members had constitutional responsibilities for the administrative personnel of the organization, budgeting and financial management, and labour negotiations, all of which proved to be difficult at times. The women felt challenged to make fair and equitable decisions in the best interests of the organization. As Lois said,

It amazed me that a group of people who were as diverse as the people on the WHW board could put away their own agendas and whatever they might have and focus on and try to do what was best for the organization.

Not all board members saw it this way, however. Margaret, for instance, described how what she saw as historical antagonism between some staff and some board members resulted in a deep political rift. During this time the board was dealing with turnover in the position of director, firing, and non-continuation of both staff and management, and the pressure for improved fiscal management. Financial cutbacks in funding and protracted labour negotiations required decisions that were not easy and board members reported both agonizing over the decisions and feeling torn about the options. Decisions were made with what was hoped to be in the best interests of the organization. Rita, for instance, described her involvement in the non-renewal of a person in an administrative position in the organization. She and the chair of the personnel committee spent hours reviewing assessments, considering the needs of WHW, the administrator, and trying to find a solution that would be fair. The two women ultimately charged with the decision-making tried to find a positive resolution considering the variety of views within the organization and the efforts of the manager. A reconciliation was not possible. In the interim

both individuals experienced intense criticism and scorn from individuals on both sides of the decision—criticisms which were both political and personal. Apparently simple decisions, like this and many others, always had more serious implications.

Board members, as a whole, accepted the difficult decision-making tasks as their responsibility as board members. What they often did not appreciate, until they became part of the decision-making process, was that this decision-making required lengthy and difficult board, committee, and consultation meetings that often seemed as if they were wasting time. Although profoundly essential, women did not generally use the word “work” to describe these board discussions and tasks.

Social relationships and interpersonal support

Board members socially interacted with each other, with the employees of Women Helping Women, the executive director, and members of committees on which they served which included service users. While they did not always see socializing as work, it is clear from everyone's comments that they recognized the value of good relationships as an crucial factor in furthering the work of WHW. Most women also remember the friendships they formed while on the board as the most significant positive aspect of their experience.

Several women said they found board meetings intimidating at first, both for the physical space in which the board met and the variety of new people they were required to interact with. Even a very experienced committee member said she found her first few board meetings difficult and said little. Another less experienced woman said that although her early experiences at speaking were frightening, she also found a supportive audience from the board which she valued.

Relations with staff, at a political but not necessarily a personal level, were among the most difficult for community board members. As Angela described it, “I think there was a portion of the staff and a portion of the board that had a historical antagonism and it was an argument about how the organization should be managed.” Wendy reported that her previously amicable relationship with a staff member with whom she worked on a committee became strained once she was elected to the board. Jackie, a former volunteer with WHW identified this tension as a result of divergent aspirations between staff and board members which precluded recognition of the authority of the board by some staff representatives. Board members all spoke positively of the work of the various executive directors who managed the organization. There were preferences for individuals, their styles and choices of issues, but respect for their efforts was acknowledged. Board members were especially grateful for the professionalism and hard work of effective directors. Board members did not always identify interpersonal relations as part of the work they did on the board. But some did. As Rebecca said,

I don't know if WHW operated any better because I was on the board... but what I took away was very definitely the relationship between people on the board... and an enhanced awareness of the women's community. I think I learned the power of people with different perspectives with the same objective trying to combine their skills to get somewhere, to get a goal, to reach a goal and make choices.

Conclusion

It is invigorating for women to participate on a board that works well. The multiple dimensions of board work, especially of a working board, can often create frustration among women and internal organizational strife can be disheartening. Feminist debates over what constitutes board work need not be fruitless. They may open up new ways of thinking about and doing old tasks. They may also address the tendency to discredit the unpaid work of women as community-based volunteers.

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¹Women Helping Women (WHW) is a pseudonym for an organization in eastern Canada which operates a human service identified by the contemporary women's movement. The phrase typifies how the members see this organization. For reasons of research confidentiality the names of the board members in this article are also fictitious. The research from which this article is derived was part of a larger study called "Caring for the Community: Women's Work in Feminist Organizations."

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