

The Doors Are Shut and the Organization's Closed: Notes Exploring How this Story Unfolded

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the thoughts and feelings of grassroots anti-racist feminist activists who created, maintained and eventually were forced to close an advocacy organization for ethnocultural minority women in Northern Ontario. This analysis can enable others to reproduce accomplishments and gains and to avoid reproducing failures and losses.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet exposé fait la synthèse et discute des pensées et des sentiments de quarante-deux activistes anti-racistes féministes qui ont créé, soutenu et qui ont été éventuellement forcées à fermer un organisme défenseur des femmes de minorité ethnoculturelle dans le nord de l'Ontario. Un bon nombre de tendances et de pressions que ces femmes ont vécues sont partagées par d'autres féministes qui ont des ressources matérielles et humaines limitées.

FEMINIST ANTI-RACIST RESISTANCE, ORGANIZATIONS, AND FUNDING IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

This paper will synthesize some of the thoughts and feelings shared by forty-two anti-racist activists (board members, volunteers and paid staff) about their organization's future (and unanticipated closure) as a consequence of conservative agendas. These women were all activists with a grassroots feminist anti-racist organization in Northern Ontario (Coldtown) called *Women of the World Initiating New Formulas for Equality and Wisdom* (WWINFEW--a pseudonym). I have chosen the pseudonyms "Coldtown" and "WWINFEW" because I believe they capture many themes. Coldtown demonstrated a coldness towards ethnocultural minority women's needs and priorities. In spite of this coldness WWINFEW's activists did manage to make a few gains and these women certainly learned from our losses. WWINFEW's mission was "to enhance the lives and expand the options of ethnocultural minority women". Our mission was demonstrated through activities such as conferences, adult education, training, employment skills development, advocacy, peer counselling and discussion groups. WWINFEW opened and became "a room of our own" in December of 1988. Its doors

were shut in June of 1995. These interviews took place in the months before closure. I propose that within the story of the birth, life and death of WWINFEW is at least part of the story of hundreds of other grassroots women's organizations.

The experiences of WWINFEW activists highlight how overwhelming and painful it can be to resist conservative agendas. These WWINFEW women also highlight the complexity involved in trying to be many things to many people (as most feminist organizations try to be). Elsewhere I have discussed this complexity (Transken, 1995, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d). The complications related to funding processes are not far beneath the surface as WWINFEW women describe their organization, its accomplishments, its challenges and its ultimate closure. However, not all of WWINFEW's women were **conscious** of the impact of funding on their relationships with each other, with the organization, and with other organizations. Most of these interviews took place in the six month period preceding WWINFEW's seemingly sudden closure. A few interviewees shared premonitions that the organization was doomed but, nonetheless, (and sadly) none of them were able to prevent the closure.

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The qualitative data presented here is part of a much larger research project which explores many dimensions of the organization of WWINFEW and its participants. Throughout this project I use Reinharz's approach to becoming a social scientist (1979) and her multiple methods approach (1992, p. 197). My research approach and theory is discussed extensively elsewhere (Trancken, 1996). Reinharz advocates that to produce quality feminist research we benefit from becoming emotionally involved in our work, doing participant observation, being guided by feminist theory, and using multiple techniques in our collection of data (interviews, document analysis, ongoing feedback from key informants, etc.).

In this paper I analyse only two of the twenty-three semi-structured interview questions from the larger project. These two questions are "Briefly, how would you describe WWINFEW as an organization?" and "What do you imagine WWINFEW will be like in the future?". Although all of WWINFEW's women activists were committed to WWINFEW for various reasons, in differing intensities, and for a wide range of durations (Trancken, 1995a, 1994b, 1994d) many of them **also** had grounded knowledge from other organizations in which they had been activists. The knowledge accumulated from elsewhere deepens and enriches their descriptions of WWINFEW.

In this paper I reflect on the women's discussions of the above two questions. I supplement their testimonies with five years of my own participant observation in the organization; analysis of documents produced by the funders; analysis of documents produced for funders or produced for the public; and insights shared with activists in organizations connected to the work WWINFEW women were attempting to do. As the economy and the social climate changes it is vital for organizational activists to understand how our organizations can be shut down and thus, our voices silenced and our visions erased. Without organizational form our energies can become diffuse and lost. It is vital that feminist organizational activists look to each others' past mistakes and strive to not repeat these mistakes.

Very little of the path we are trying to pioneer is simple.

In contrast to the stereotype that feminist organizers are just 'naturally' warm, co-operative and able to come together in solidarity **and** able to move mountains a spoonful of dirt at a time, feminist organizing efforts and organizations are startlingly complex and difficult to maintain. Feminist theory on organizing has certainly grown in the recent past with works like Adamson, Briskin, McPhail, 1988; Albrecht, Brewer, 1990; Amatt, Matthaei, 1991; Backhouse, Flaherty, 1992; Bannerji, 1993, 1995; Bishop, 1994; Bricker-Jenkins, Hooyman, Gottlieb, 1991; Brodie, 1995; Brown, Root, 1990; Bunch, 1986; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks (1984, 1990, 1992) Henderson-King and Stewart, 1994; Lakeman, 1993; Maceda-Villanueva, 1990; McAllister, 1991; Mies, 1988; Ostrov and Fleischner, 1994; Pal, 1993; Taylor, 1994; Van Den Bergh and Cooper, 1986; Walker, 1990; and Women Working With Immigrant Women And Cross Cultural Communication Centre, 1992. These authors make clear to us how complicated it is to simultaneously address race, class, gender and other issues in effective ways.

Additionally, my case study of WWINFEW is benefitting from the rapidly growing collection of case studies and/or insiders/activists' testimonies written for and about women's organizations. Some of the excellent resources now available include the work of: Acker, 1995; Bunch, 1983; Cooper, 1995; Egan, Gardner and Persad, 1988; Eisenstein, 1995; Farge, 1987; Freeman, 1995; Fried, 1994; Glassman, 1992; Griffiths, 1993; Iannello, 1992; Katzenstein, 1995; Kohli, 1993; Lee and Weeks, 1991; Loseke, 1992; Marx and Martin, 1995; Mitchell and Greaves, 1989; Morgan, 1995; Mueller, 1995; Ng, 1988; Remington, 1991; Ristock, 1990, 1991; Rothschild, 1976; Strobel, 1995; Taylor, 1995; Tom, 1995; Vickers and Appelle, 1993; Vickers, 1980; Weeks, 1994, and Wolf, 1994. What these case studies make clear to me is that women are learning how to fight these multiple battles (against oppression, against internalized oppression, against absence of resources, against ignorance, etc.). We are learning as we move forward but we also often hurt each other in the process of learning. We sometimes lose sight of how

the enemy has blurred our vision.

WWINFEW'S CLOSURE: PONDERING WHAT WENT WRONG

WWINFEW closed after seventy-nine months of existence. Below I synthesize my assessment of factors that contributed to that closure and discuss different dimensions of WWINFEW's structure, funding, and style that made the organization vulnerable for closure.

A primary reason for the organization's closure was the chronic lack of funding and I have explained funding complexities elsewhere (Transken, 1994a, 1994b). There was never adequate and assured funding that allowed for the full-time permanent pay of even one staff. All staff were contract and/or part-time. This staff turnover resulted in interpersonal competition, underdeveloped knowledge, blaming, silencing and exhaustion among insiders. Chronic underfunding inhibited women's ability to deeply commit to the organization's long-term future; women's limited commitment gave funders an excuse to limit their financial commitments to the organization.

A secondary reason for the organization's closure was the constraints and complications created by existing funding processes (such as mandatory reports, the production of extensive statistics, conference or project topics being chosen for us externally, etc.). A third reason for the organization's closure was the activists' misunderstanding of, or innocence of, how funding realities can create subtle but destructive undercurrents among activists. Activists often directly or indirectly held each other responsible for the troubles of the organization rather than holding funders and other interfacing organizations responsible. Insiders' motives and interpersonal dynamics can be both intense and complicated (Transken, 1994c, 1994d).

A fourth contribution to closure was that too many of the organizations' insiders either did not know how to assess indicators of "trouble", left when they perceived trouble, did not know how to reorganize the group to turn away from trouble, and/or put their personal needs to "prove a point" too

high on their agenda for the organization as a whole to benefit. The ability to work through trouble when it is in front of us is actually a skill cluster that can be learned and passed on but often this skill cluster is not consciously cultivated.

Given all these diverse forces creating potential disharmony the organization became that much more vulnerable to the covert and overt oddities and unpredictability of charismatic leadership. A final factor in WWINFEW's closure is that from the beginning of WWINFEW's existence its right to be part of the community was resisted by other social service organizations (women's organizations, multicultural/ethnicity centred organizations, mainstream social service organizations). These organizations wanted to claim their share of government money and community money, but did not, or could not provide appropriate and effective services for low income ethnocultural minority women. Some of these organizations continually lobbied funders to discontinue support for WWINFEW.

One of the most tragic aspects of the whole unfolding of this organization's story is that very few of the activists **were able to really see the whole big picture** of how the organization was situated on the terrain. The few WWINFEW activists who did deeply understand the big picture were unable or unwilling to meaningfully translate that knowledge to the whole membership of WWINFEW. I will now expand on the factors which contributed to WWINFEW's closure.

CHRONIC UNDERFUNDING

During its six years of existence WWINFEW's budget ranged from a low of approximately thirty thousand dollars to a high of one hundred thousand and these funds came from places like Northern Mines and Development, Secretary of State, Citizenship and Culture, Canada Employment and Immigration, Oxfam, Bingo licenses, or special events profits. Compared to the weight of the many issues the organization was attempting to respond to these amounts of money were always minuscule. At no moment in WWINFEW's herstory were we

adequately funded to address the concerns that women faced. Therefore, the whole organization was chronically anaemic.

At some moments in our seventy-nine month herstory we were more hopeful because some government sources are more keen to allocate **start up** funding than to continue providing funding after the initial start up phase. The first third of WWINFEW's life seemed to contain more optimism. Activists were more committed to a new and exciting project with the unspoken belief in their hearts that once things got started the government would begin carrying their fair share of the responsibility for the well-being of ethnocultural minority women.

CONSTRAINTS AND COMPLICATIONS RELATED TO EXISTING FUNDING PROCESSES

WWINFEW's first major project was a Needs Assessment (encouraged by potential funders) which involved extensively interviewing one hundred and thirty ethnocultural minority women (Wilkinson and Transken, 1990). This Needs Assessment also collected and assessed the results from two hundred and fifty-one social service providers' survey responses. The Needs Assessment confirmed there were huge unmet needs in the areas of accessing educational and employment opportunities, escaping male violence, finding affordable childcare or housing, and resisting racism.

Regardless of these "scholarly findings," WWINFEW had to continually **prove** and **re-prove** that ethnocultural minority women's needs existed and that WWINFEW was effectively responding to these needs. In the beginning most of us were hopeful that once we had clearly and vividly documented the struggles women faced the documentation demands would subside. Unfortunately, this did not prove to be the case.

Every dollar of resources that entered the organization demanded excessive documentation. The statistics and formal processes of recording were too complicated for many volunteers and underskilled staff to produce. Our staff were underskilled in that many were new immigrants unfamiliar with such

processes. Others were at WWINFEW **specifically** to learn and develop employment readiness skills. All staff were underpaid. Since WWINFEW was usually able to only offer minimum wage, no benefits, no security, and, usually part time contract work, we were limited in the skill levels that were possessed by the employees we could attract and keep.

A further ongoing structural complication existed because these pernicious conservative agendas offered us "Trick Packages", which seemed to be organized constantly by funders. An example of what I mean by "trick packages" involves our organization being told we were eligible for a small amount of funding, but that **first** we had to raise a percent (usually around twenty percent) of funding for the project within the community and **then** the government funders would cover the other eighty percent. As most of us who have done any community fund-raising understand it **costs** money to raise money. Creating fund-raising projects involves advertising, labour costs, transportation costs, and supplies. Also, this type of fundraising is facilitated when your volunteers all speak fluent English and French, have cars and drivers' licenses, home computers, leisure time, childcare resources, etc. Most WWINFEW women did not have these resources, privileges and opportunities.

Further, when every non-profit organization in the community is vigorously competing (*Globe and Mail* Special Sponsorship Section, 1996) for their percent of community money then working class ethnocultural minority women are forced into a comparatively weak position. These other organizations, of course, have many characteristics which I value and celebrate but they are distinct from ethnocultural minority working-class women's organizations. For example, when the Canadian Cancer Society (CSS) is seeking donations and WWINFEW is seeking donations more people are going to contribute to the CCS because firstly, CCS is long-established and well-known. Previously cultivated relationships with reliable contributors gives them a huge head start.

Secondly, demographics have impact. Statistically, in Coldtown, there are more people who may worry about waking up tomorrow and having

cancer than there are people who worry about waking up tomorrow and being a working class ethnocultural minority woman. A third difference between organizations like WWINFEW and CCS is the role of professionals. Organizations like the CCS have professional fundraisers, professional special events people, and professional support staff on their teams (i.e. it takes money and knowledge to raise money and knowledge). These professionals know how to work the community and know how to use the media.

A fourth consideration is organizational maturity and sophistication. Organizations like the CCS have an accumulated wealth of organizational sophistication both about the dynamics inside the organization and the dynamics on the social terrain. A fifth factor that differentiates places like WWINFEW and CCS is the role of structural racism. Endemic racism, classism and sexism mean that supporting WWINFEW could be politically volatile or perplexing for many potential contributors. Therefore, they would prefer to donate to groups like the CCS because of an established 'comfort level'.

A final factor is that many people (because of racism, classism and sexism) blame the victim when working class ethnocultural minority women have struggles (i.e. "they should go back where they came from", "they should leave their husband if he beats them", "they shouldn't have had kids if they can't afford to feed them", "why can't they pull themselves up by their own bootstraps like everyone else", etc.). In contrast, few people blame the victim when the victim has cancer. Cancer victims are not perceived to be "tainted" with blame the way that ethnocultural minority women who are struggling with poverty issues may be tainted with blame for their struggles. We feminist activists always know and remember that the struggles that WWINFEW women face in the first place are **not** the inevitable forces of nature--these problems are socially constructed. But not all financial contributors to social causes share a feminist anti-racist world view.

In addition to the above factors, my impression is that in the last few months when WWINFEW became fragile those who were the most organizationally insightful and/or who had the most resources available to them "jumped from the sinking

ship". This pattern then quickened the organization's closure and facilitated mean-spiritedness among the few who remained to finalize the "burial". Also, the few who remained to close the organization felt bitter, disenchanted, abandoned and exhausted. These multiple dynamics described above came together to predispose the organization to vulnerability. Many feminist grassroots organizations are presently facing these threats.

THE FINAL CRITICAL INCIDENT

In the last few months of WWINFEW's life a critical incident occurred in which the last energies and final hopes of the organizations' supporters and activists were put on the table. Using the Civil Court system an immigrant, visible minority, religious minority woman, who had been employed as a project worker, charged the President of WWINFEW (who was an immigrant, visible minority, religious minority woman) with "racism" and "wrongful dismissal". If the organization had any reserve of positive energy, material resources, interpersonal goodwill and trust we might have been able to make it past this trauma. Had we been working together with **one shared** goal, with a high sense of trust, with a belief in a solid future then we would never have ended up in court with this situation in front of us. I will not describe the details of the case but I will state that this was the final blow which resulted in even more divisiveness and people felt forced to "take sides" because subpoenas were issued. The organization closed a few weeks before the court date. Some WWINFEW activists suggested that the few insiders doing the work of keeping the doors open decided to give up and close WWINFEW with the belief that this move would mean they would not have to go to court. Neither 'side' in this internal division 'won'. Ethnocultural minority women in Coldtown lost. Coldtown lost the opportunity to enrich its community with the vibrant contributions of these interesting and diverse women. WWINFEW's mission was "to enhance the lives and expand the options of low income ethnocultural minority women". The diffuse, complex and covert impact of funding/chronic underfunding directed

most of WWINFEW's life and prophasized WWINFEW's downfall. There may have been other ways that this story could have unfolded. To some extent, we lost our "room of our own" because too few of our activists were **conscious** of how funding was shaping our thinking, feelings and behaviour. Hopefully, other organizational activists can refocus their thinking, feeling and behaviour as a result of learning from our experiences. WWINFEW's doors are shut and our organization is closed but maybe others can rethink, reshape, and resist so that their story unfolds differently.

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