

The Theory and Practice of Community-Based Feminist Activism¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the gap between the theory and practice of community-based feminist activism and calls for feminists to develop new decision-making models that are more congruent with the legal and bureaucratic environment of community-based feminist activism.

RÉSUMÉ

Mon article est centré sur l'écart entre la théorie et la pratique de l'activisme féministe opérant dans la communauté et invite les féministes à développer de nouveaux modèles de prise de décision qui s'harmonisent mieux avec le milieu judiciaire et administratif où évolue l'activisme féministe opérant dans la communauté.

INTRODUCTION

In their pioneering study, Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada, Jeri Wine and Janice Ristock claim that feminist organizations--whatever form they take--are designed to bridge divisions between feminists in academic and non-academic communities and to be the sites of feminist praxis, which they define as "the melding of theory and practice"(1991:254). Organizations of this type commonly use an egalitarian, consensual model of decision-making. But how useful is the model in the real world of community-based feminist activism? This paper will develop two arguments: first, that our egalitarian structure of decision-making does not take into account the external legal-bureaucratic environment many community activists operate in and secondly, that the consensus method we use to make

decisions can, on occasion, be a major impediment to effective collective action.

EGALITARIAN DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE

For Lena Dominelli and Eileen McLeod, the goal of both the theory and practice of feminist activism is to create egalitarian social relations, and they describe feminist campaigns and networks as "the locations and incubators of egalitarian relations" (1989: 67). In simple terms, this means that all active members in an organization--whether it is an advocacy group or a women's centre--have equal influence and power and an equal voice around the table. No power distinctions are made between members and staff of a feminist organization or even between members and non-members such as volunteers who work on specific projects. We are all equal in the eyes

of feminist theorists. But how realistic is this in practice?

To be eligible for government funding, women's centres and other community-based women's groups in British Columbia are required to be incorporated as non-profit societies. The law of the province governing these organizations makes a legal distinction between elected members and staff. Elected members of a feminist collective, just like directors on a conventional 'malestream' board, are legally responsible for the affairs of their group. They are also collectively designated as the employer with the power to hire and fire staff and to set the terms and conditions of employment.

This legal distinction in the BC Society Act between elected and non-elected members of non-profit organizations, in effect, imposes a power differential on our decision-making structure that will not go away just because feminist activists refuse to acknowledge that it exists. In my view, our failure to recognize this externally-imposed power differential and to be clear and honest about our respective roles has created nothing less than havoc in several feminist organizations across Canada, including the well-publicized case of Nellie's Hostel in Toronto where intense board-staff conflicts over the issues of racism and homophobia almost forced the closure of the shelter (see Freedman 1993). The survival of a women's centre in Victoria was also threatened by public allegations of abuses of power by the elected members of its collective (see Scott 1995).

The external environment also imposes another type of power differential on feminist organizations that depend mainly on government funding. All funding agencies

require that certain elected members of the group--usually the chair and treasurer--are held accountable for the expenditure of taxpayers' money. The fine print of funding contracts spells out the dire consequences of non-compliance for these individual officers as well as the collective as a whole.

In my view, this requirement also needs to be recognized in some way in our decision-making structure. Currently, however, theories of community-based feminist activism suggest that power and influence are shared equally by all members of the group. But the bureaucratic-legal reality is that they do not have equal responsibility for what goes on.

CONSENSUAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

In community-based groups, decision-making often takes place in an organizational form known as "a collective" which is a consensual, egalitarian or non-hierarchical group. All members of the collective have an equal voice and equal decision-making power around the table. Discussion takes place in a round where each woman, if she chooses, shares her personal thoughts and feelings. The purpose of the discussion is to arrive at a consensus on an issue, and consensus, usually defined as unanimous agreement, replaces a majority vote as the method of deciding what to do.

In my experience, consensual decision-making works well in small groups where everyone knows and trusts one another and shares a common passion about a cause whether it be a common faith (e.g., Quakers) or a common interest in a relatively narrowly defined issue (e.g., women's poverty). Without

this communality of interest, though, the consensual decision-making process becomes a major impediment to effective collective action. Why?

Research on the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee revealed that rounds often become "personal group therapy sessions" resulting in situations where people are incapable of moving to the next step, and also that once this committee adopted the practice of rounds and other features of the collective model, it became known as "the Board that didn't do anything" (Blais 1992: 98).

The consensual decision-making process can also be very exhausting and frustrating, resulting in burnout. It offers little opportunity for dialogue. Instead, to quote Joni Mitchell, it often goes 'round and round like the circle game.' This happens because process on its own has no sense of priorities. As a result, community-based activists often find themselves in a situation where the consensual process becomes more important than the outcome. Unanimity, however, is not really an option in a polarized situation. As well, in my experience, the practice of rounds is not immune from ego-tripping and manipulation. For example, where you sit in the circle may determine when you speak and the timing of your intervention can be important in influencing the outcome. While I have no problem with individual voices having an opportunity to be heard, not all feminist activists appreciate that decision-making involves compromising one's perspective, one's resources, and one's place at the table.

In conclusion, I think we need to consider developing different decision-making models that take into account the external legal

and bureaucratic realities within which community-based feminist activism takes place, but without compromising the principles underlying 'traditional' feminist process. Experiments with different structures are already taking place at the grassroots level. For example, a women's centre in Victoria has revised its constitution to clarify the respective roles of elected and staff members; and an aboriginal women's centre in Ottawa is using a modified collective that combines a consensus-based structure with guidance from a grandmothers' advisory council (see Lahey, 1996).

While ad hoc experiments of this type are valuable, they are not sufficient on their own to overcome the limitations of 'traditional' feminist process. There still remains the pressing need for feminists in academic and non-academic communities to develop together new decision-making models. These models need to take into account, while still challenging, the limitations that legal-bureaucratic structures impose on community-based feminist organizations and the internal weaknesses that impede, at times, effective collective action.

ENDNOTE

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