

Women as Advocates in Their Communities

by Pat Cooper

ABSTRACT/RESUME

Les perceptions senties par les femmes envers elles-mêmes et envers leurs talents ont énormément changé. En disposant de cette confiance personnelle agrandie, elles sont maintenant mieux préparées à s'appuyer l'une sur l'autre et à travailler ensemble dans le but d'améliorer la qualité de la vie. De plus en plus d'organismes bénévoles s'affirment dans le but d'influencer l'opinion publique. Une

coalition d'organismes bénévoles est souvent essentielle afin d'arriver à regrouper ensemble les connaissances, les techniques et l'expérience nécessaires. Mais avant de rechercher la coalition avec un ou plusieurs organismes, il faut se demander si un conflit ou un rapprochement de consensus ne vaudrait pas mieux pour régler la question et est-ce que les groupements accepteront le rapprochement nécessaire?

Nous avons mis sur pied au Manitoba une coalition se composant d'environ 40 groupements féminins représentant des milliers de femmes provenant de professions, d'origines et de religions différentes, afin d'étudier l'adoption des Lois sur les droits familiaux. Les groupements féminins ont formé des comités afin de surveiller tous les litiges.

Le Comité d'action du Manitoba sur le statut de la femme a fait appel à toutes les femmes afin d'entreprendre des pressions auprès des deux paliers de gouvernement afin de les enjoindre à apporter des changements aux lois actuelles. Des activistes ont été nommées dans chacun des comités fédéraux. Elles étudieront les méthodes propres au lobbying. Ces femmes ainsi entraînées participeront à des stages de formation et assisteront à toutes les assemblées politiques et devront demander à chacun des candidats et des candidates des questions mor-



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dantes auxquelles le candidat ou la candidate devra répondre publiquement. En temps de campagne électorale, ces mêmes personnes entraînées ainsi que d'autres bénévoles, feront du porte-à-porte pour les candidats ou candidates qui auront fait le plus de promesses quant aux changements à apporter à la condition féminine une fois qu'ils ou elles seront à Ottawa. On a demandé aux femmes de renoncer à leur allégeance politique et de voter pour le candidat ou la candidate qui se sera engagé à défendre la cause des femmes aux prochaines élections fédérales.

When talking about women in Community groups today it is important to keep in mind what has happened to women. Probably what has changed most profoundly and has the greatest impact on the way in which women now live are our expectations--our expectations for ourselves. Women no longer consider their life to be a triangle of children, husband and home, and they are certainly not advocating this triangle for their daughters. The world now, it seems to me, has enlarged for most women, even those without the benefit of a university education, job training and labour force experience.

We are all aware that women have little input into our laws and pathetically little input into our institutions. What is really at hand as women obtain more options is how these options will be used. If we are going to repeat

the patterns of men, little will be accomplished. It is my hope that the liberation of women will produce a restructuring of society, which will, in fact, be not only a revolution for women but for society as a whole.

I see community groups as a means of educating women and in turn assisting them in advocating change in the quality of life. Here we are at a moment in history when mankind may either destroy itself through the abuse of its environment or power, or may give meaning and leisure to all. For the first time in human history, we do have the technological know-how to assure all peoples food, clothes and shelter. What we must do now is place a new meaning on the quality of life. But this cannot come about without the woman's view point in such matters as the family, recreation patterns, questions of genetic control and child rearing. The pleasures and pains of all society must become ingredients of social planning. It will also have to include a new appreciation of volunteers, who within Canadian society have been major advocates for examining and improving the quality of life, whether through the support of the symphony orchestra or the establishing of a Block Parent System. Not only have volunteers in the past seen a need and gone about getting it done; they have also been very active in creating whole new occupational categories. This process of social change must go on, but must also be recognized for its

full value. It is also important that women in voluntary groups use their power to promote the necessary social change.

More and more voluntary organizations are making commitments to influence public policy. Women are using their organizations first to educate the membership about the community and, secondly, to actively lobby decision-makers on gaps in services to their community. I will address myself to the question of advocacy, for it is this trend in women's groups that is so new and dynamic.

The curse of some women's groups, as is well known, has been the glancing blow--a little work on this committee and on to the next one; a little work on that committee and on to something else. Too often the woman active in community affairs is essentially a dabbler never getting in deep enough to have any effect; never getting far enough below the surface to understand how the machinery works in whatever sector she is trying to change, just lingering long enough to sign the committee report, not staying long enough to see what the consequences of the report are.

This problem may not be completely eradicated but the situation is improving. More and more women want to be where the action is; they want to influence and help shape the forces

of change. Women as volunteers are telling themselves that they have a responsibility to be advocates and to speak out affirmatively, even militantly, on issues that affect their membership. They are beginning to consider one-on-one service projects as band-aid efforts that only help to perpetuate a faulty system.

Whether one talks about advocacy, influencing public social policy or engaging in social action makes no difference. The objectives may be many and diverse, from a neighbourhood group trying to get a stop light to changes women want in the Income Tax Act. The type of activities involved in advocacy may also be varied from peaceful group protests to expert briefs presented to a committee of the legislature.

The programs and activities of the organization must be tailored to the needs and resources of the community. But, more importantly, the interests of the members are vital in determining the scope of the group's involvement. Since women in community groups are not being paid for their time and services, they have every right to impose certain restrictions on their involvement.

For women in volunteer community groups the following decisions have to be made:

--Do you want a short-term or on-

going involvement?

--If you are interested in on-going, would you prefer a series of discrete projects or do you want a major project which will require your attention for a number of years?

--Do you want sole responsibility and sponsorship of a project--or do you want to co-sponsor an activity with one or more other groups?

If you want a long-term project, but a short-term commitment, or if your interest is great but your resources limited, co-sponsorship might be the best choice.

Without a doubt the most effective voluntary involvement is long-term and on-going and is based on the collaboration of many groups; no one group alone has the strength and resources to resolve major problems. This is particularly the case in the battle nearly every province is fighting to reform matrimonial property laws. Coalition with other like-minded organizations is essential in order to gather the necessary knowledge, expertise and experience.

But coalitions may not always be the answer. There are some considerations that must be thought out carefully before seeking a coalition with one or several other organizations. Will a conflict or consensus approach be needed to resolve the problem? Will your group support both conflict and consensus? Often in researching the

target problem you learn there are groups with a vested interest in the status quo. To improve the situation you may have to knock heads with some influential community people. Also many agencies are insulated with red tape protecting them from outside pressure for change. Before you start you must know if your group will support conflict when needed. Or better still, will they support a consensus approach even when dealing with arrogant do-nothings?

There are other considerations which groups should take into account if they plan to influence public policy. First is that the function of social action should be the responsibility of designated members. It is not something that can be done effectively as an ancillary part of another function.

A second consideration is that an organization must thoroughly educate its own membership. The total group must feel competent and sensitive to the issue being lobbied for because they all act as lobbyists on their own initiative either in their neighbourhood or through other groups they belong to.

Advocacy always implies change and change frequently implies resistance to change. Overcoming this resistance sometimes implies confrontation and controversy. You will always find some women within a group who quickly

equate change through public action and advocacy with civil war, riots at the Legislature, and with coercion. The important point is to educate group members about the political process. Our political system is not composed solely of elected representatives. Interest groups and lobbyists abound. Those with power--money, influence, knowledge, status--are able to protect their rights and interests either through their own intervention or by hiring professional spokespersons--lawyers, lobbyists, publicists--to act on their behalf. Canadian women have been slow to realize that lobbying is a logical extension of what they have been doing for years in their service-oriented projects.

Women's groups in Manitoba have had the unique experience of being unified in a four-year battle for equitable family laws. A Coalition on Family Law was formed consisting of some 40 women's groups. This coalition, representing thousands of women from different professions, backgrounds and religions were united to take action. Though laws declared them powerless, they were powerful in numbers, and there was not a politician in Manitoba who did not get a jolt. It shook them into the realization that these women will not go away. Even with the passing of the Family Law Bills, the women's groups have held a Family Law Memorium and established committees to monitor all litigation. With the momentum gained, advocacy was then

focused on the Federal politicians. A mass meeting organized by the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women (MACSW) invited all women to ratify position papers on changes women want in the Income Tax Act, the Social Services Act, the Divorce Act, the laws governing abortion, rape, employment, pornography and Indian rights for Indian women.

What distinguished this meeting from many others of a similar nature was that a plan of political action was mapped out in precise detail. Every woman attending the meeting was given copies of all position papers. After these were ratified or amended in group workshops, lobbyists in every constituency were appointed. The appointees will then go to school to learn how to lobby. Women within MACSW will act as teachers. And one of these trained experts will head every group.

When the Federal election campaign heats up--and, indeed long before it--every candidate will be lobbied to ascertain his views and, if they are not sympathetic to the cause of women, urged to change them. If he refuses, he loses the women's vote. MACSW, by means of what they hope will be a gigantic political publicity campaign, proposes to publish the views of every candidate on women's issues and to urge women to vote apolitically, that is, only for those women who pledge support for the women's causes.

The trained lobbyists will attend every political meeting from the smallest to the largest. They will ask every candidate pointed questions to which he or she must give a public reply. Then, at election time, the same trained lobbyists and other volunteers will canvass, door-to-door, for the candidates who promise to do the most for women when they get to Ottawa. Women are asked to forego party loyalties and vote for the candidates who pledge themselves to defend the cause of women in the next Parliament of Canada.

The tendency among voters--and among candidates during the coming election--will be to focus attention on the crumbling economic structure and the dangers of the future if the cracks in the fiscal wall are not mended forthwith. They will probably ignore women's issues, feeling--and probably saying--

that these are minor, mere frills that can be attended to when the important housekeeping is taken care of.

It is this kind of thinking that the Manitoba Action Committee wants to attack. Half the working force is women and a great many working women are sole support mothers. The interesting phenomena is that the women who spearhead this committee and the Coalition on Family Law are not bearing a personal cross or grudge. They are working their heart out for their "sister" who, because she is in a disadvantaged position, cannot lobby for herself.

So to the psychologists who promote the Queen Bee Syndrome, I say it is dead. Women have now accepted women as hugely talented equals.