

DECISION-MAKING IN WOMEN'S CAUCUS:

How to increase participation and involvement.

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In the wake of the past few months, it is more and more apparent that we are having very great difficulty in discussing plans and ideas openly and freely - the direction that various of us want to see the Caucus go, the organization of it, and the specific issues and campaigns to undertake. We have been plagued by the almost inevitable formation of a "core group" or "elite" of women who are more active and more central to the functioning of the group. We have been unable to deal in any collective fashion with events which were thrust upon us without notice, and we have all had the experience of voting for things when the issues were not at all clear in our minds, the alternatives not spelled out or discussed - i.e., participation zero. We were recently faced with disagreements over how to relate to other groups, and we have never resolved that question, nor what to do if disagreements persist.

1. Elites and how they grow (and how they can be chopped off at the ankle!)

In any group from S.D.S. to the W.C.T.U., there will be some members who are more active than others. Some will have more time to spare for group activities, others will have a strong sense of the group's importance and make time. Still others will be geographically favoured to spend more time at the central office, or will live near, or work with, others in the movement and thus participate more in the group. Political activity is foreign to many women, which makes it more difficult to become involved.

Emerging from all these differences is an identifiable "core" of members who take on more of the organizing roles and tend to initiate more of the discussions and issues that the group focusses on. For example, in Women's Caucus, if we gave all the members the complete membership list of over 300 names, and asked each woman to rank those names in order of relevance to Women's Liberation, I would estimate that there would be 90% agreement or better on the top 15 names: the core.

How do we undercut this? One way is to decentralize - to concentrate less on the General Meeting and more on work groups, because in the smaller groups, often with only one of the core, there is far more potential for new members to become really involved. And by involved, we mean to actually contribute ideas about what to do and how to approach the problems - to participate in decision-making and planning right from the beginning, not simply to vote yes or no on someone else's plans.

The new organization of Women's Caucus should help us to decentralize and to break down the concentration of influence and decision-making by a small group. However, this can only work well if we also recognize the dangers of solidifying into some kind of representative system, for the group representatives can become a

new core - the people who know what's going on, while group members remain isolated. To prevent this from happening, two things: one, that Committee meetings will be open to anyone who wishes to attend - to debate, and to vote; two, that different women from each group agree to represent the group at each Committee Meeting. Sure, there will be some members of the work groups that can't spare the time for another meeting in the week, but what if they only had to go once every two months? And even after exempting those who can't attend (after all, baby sitters do cost money, and women ARE paid less), there will presumably be at least three or four women in each group to share the responsibility and the experience.

It is the responsibility of all of us to develop the ability to speak publically, the ability to present our point of view, to discuss and argue our differences. These skills are an important part of our liberation, and can be more easily developed in the small groups. The core group has a responsibility to encourage these skills in other women, so that they can play a more central role in the general meetings, the co-ordinating committee, and in our public engagements.

The trick about participatory democracy is that it is more work for everyone in the group. Gone are the days that one could simply vote yes or no for an idea and have others then do the shit-work of implementing it. Participation means involvement AND responsibility: you become responsible for seeing that your group carries on its program; for putting forward your own ideas so that they can be debated and used to promote the activities of the group.

2. Workshops: their relationship and responsibility to the group

Problems arise when workshops undertake activities on behalf of Women's Caucus of which the general membership is not aware and might not be in agreement with. A recent example was the presentation of plans by the Abortion Campaign Workshop to have a mass cavalcade to Ottawa. Although the cavalcade had been generally agreed upon, the focus of the campaign - whether national or provincial - had not. The plans were subsequently revised through a general discussion. In this case, the plans had not gone far enough to commit Women's Caucus to a particular strategy it was unsure about. However, workshops have to be very careful of the danger of doing this.

There is also the question of the responsibility between workshops, particularly when they are working in related areas. Another example from the abortion campaign will illustrate this point. In order to raise money, the Abortion Campaign Workshop wanted to contact sympathetic doctors from a list compiled by the Abortion Information Service; the Abortion Information Service did not make the list available because they felt that such an appeal might jeopardize their attempt to involve these doctors in setting up an abortion clinic. Rather than going ahead regardless, the Abortion Campaign Workshop brought the matter up before the Thursday night meeting, and the conflict was resolved.

Often, these kinds of conflicts can be resolved between the

workshops themselves. If they are not worked out at this level, people at a co-ordinating committee meeting, or ultimately, at a general meeting, would be able to help resolve the dispute.

3. Why do conflicts, REAL conflicts, arise; and how do we deal with them?

Women's Caucus is now a large, diversified group, encompassing women from widely divergent backgrounds, life styles and working worlds - which is why we must be careful not to commit others to strategies not fully agreed upon. We are no longer able to assess what the rest of Women's Caucus will think about some cherished brainstorm - and that makes it more important to bring ideas forward for discussion before action is taken.

Now - in the realm of that discussion -

We have always been very sensitive to the fear women have about presenting their ideas to a group - the fear of speaking in public, the fear of being even KNOWN to have ideas. With our sensitivity, it becomes damned near impossible to criticize proposals, for fear of hurting the originator. We all do identify with our work; we take criticism of our ideas as criticisms of ourselves. The problem is whether we can criticize constructively without having to pull our punches, and it seems there is no way - that we have to be as critical as the idea warrants and as constructive as our imaginations will allow - always within the context of how much the person can take. At the same time, we all have the responsibility to consider whether our criticisms are really relevant or important to the issue - or whether we are being picayune in order to demonstrate our keen intellects, or overly sensitive to every deviation from the "correct line".

We all have the strength to cope with criticism, and as women "declaring war" on society, we must learn not to back away. Moreover, women are sensitive to other people's feelings and do act quickly to smooth out differences, wounded feelings, etc. In fact, being a part of the women's movement gives us the collective strength to face criticism from outside of the group.

4. Towards a more open discussion

When disagreements do occur, we tend to choose the alternative most available, which is often the position prepared and written in advance. If a member is committed to an activity and prepares a statement of her ideas and suggestions for group discussion and ratification, that can predefine the situation so narrowly that whole areas of discussion are closed prematurely. We ratify decisions sometimes, because the arguments presented are so logically consistent and "sensible" that we fail to even look for alternatives or pool our knowledge and experience to come up with more imaginative ideas. We can feel so impressed/intimidated at the amount of work already done - a list of priorities already drawn up, or mimeo'd plans of a demonstration, that we hesitate to suggest changes that would negate a leaflet already run-off, or plans already being acted upon. The result is our guilty silence - agreeing to things about

which we have serious reservations, but letting it slide for the sake of the effort already expended.

A written proposal should include all the possible consequences of the action that the woman can foresee, and possible alternatives. By presenting more than one idea, the group is in a better position to discuss the issue and make new suggestions. In addition, if the proposal means a new course of action for Women's Caucus, this should be pointed out.

We should remember that often the most exciting plans come out of the process of many women talking about an issue and an action, and planning together, with one woman's ideas stimulating the imagination of others around her - real, collective political work.

5. Our relationship with other groups

The recent conflict in Women's Caucus over the "March Against Repression" brought us face to face with the problem of how we as a women's movement relate to other political groups. The march was sponsored by the American Deserter Committee (ADC), the Red Collective at SFU, Campus Left Action Movement (CLAM) at UBC, radical students at V U, Vancouver Black Action Group (V-BAG), the Native Alliance for Red Power (NARP), and Vancouver Women's Caucus, in an effort to bring these groups together around their common oppression, and to mobilize unorganized groups of young people such as hippies and "street people".

Although Women's Caucus was one of the sponsors of the march, many in our group had serious reservations about our participation, and felt that we need a strategy conference to clarify our relationships with other political groups.

My own position has become more clear in the light of these conflicts. I am convinced of the need for an independent women's movement focussing on the problems that women face in their day-to-day lives. Therefore, organizing women is a priority. We are best able to reach the people who have shared our experiences, felt oppression in the same way. People will fight when there is the possibility of directly affecting their own lives. That is why we have been drawn into the women's movement, because we are fighting for our own human rights. It is removing ourselves one step, to fight around the oppression of others.

In terms of action, then, our participation with other groups will come about when women and other groups are actively fighting around the same, concrete issue. When women are demanding that Canada Manpower end job discrimination, for example, and ADC or V-BAG is demanding the same, our struggles will be linked in a meaningful way. It is not a matter of us supporting V-BAG or ADC, but both or all of us fighting together.

Women in other groups have the responsibility to raise the question of women's liberation within their groups, but they should do that as individuals or as a lobby within that organization, not

as Vancouver Women's Caucus. All political groups should be aware and concerned about women's issues, and should integrate them into their own struggles.

For the woman involved in both the NDP and Vancouver Women's Caucus, or the SFU Red Collective and Women's Caucus, a conflict can arise between the priorities, goals and strategies of the two groups. Often a woman will agree with the strategies of another group, and can present them to Women's Caucus for discussion. However, if Women's Caucus takes a different position on the issue, I feel that the decisions of Women's Caucus take priority for every woman. Because of the way society is organized, and the roles which have been forced upon us as a group, our primary identification (and stereotype) is that of a woman. We can never avoid the fact that throughout our lives we will be discriminated against, denied jobs, given low pay, because first of all, we are women. The primary arena for deciding our strategies and goals as women clearly is within Women's Caucus, where we can draw upon the collected knowledge and experience of every member. Women's issues in Vancouver Women's Caucus ^{NEVER} take on a secondary importance; they are our reason for being together and working together.