Feminist Success Stories - Célébrons nos réussits féministes

Blackford, Karen A., Garceau, Marie-Luce, Kirby, Sandra

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Women share the common experience of being treated “differently” from men. What many of us do not share is the experience of being able to articulate how oppression, inequality, and sexism determine our “different” treatment. In general, we are not exposed to environments which can assist us or which encourage us to learn about our unequal status. This is in keeping with a patriarchal culture which dictates what is “normal” for us.

In our view, feminizing means two things. First, particular attention will be paid to the sociological and political circumstances and context of women’s lives. Feminist action means enabling women to learn about power differences based on gender. As we gain knowledge about the meaning of living in a patriarchy, we become better equipped to contextualize our reality and to work towards change. It is vital for all women to contemplate their place in the world. Thinking through how patriarchy governs our society is of particular importance for sexual abuse survivors who become empowered by understanding that the abuse they have suffered is not their fault. The program we have developed addresses the context of all of our lives. It also aims to empower women by raising their consciousness about that male-dominated context and by giving them tools for resistance and reframing.

Second, feminizing includes recognizing and acknowledging that women are “experts” on their own experience. Therefore, the perspective of women must be taken into account in the provision of any services for women rather than the assumption that we are “sick” and in need of “expert cures.” As Hill (1990) states, feminism was born out of a phenomenological philosophy; that is, we know what is real by trusting our own experience and that of other women. Also, feminizing our programs means that we try to balance the power relationships between the women and the facilitators and seek to build egalitarianism based on cooperation and a consumer orientation (Brown and Brodsky 1992; Lundy 1993). Feminist therapy strives to eliminate hierarchical relationships and empowers women by educating them about their choices (Pressman 1989). Armed with a sociopolitical understanding, women will have better resources to demand what they need and want.
Background

The development of this counselling program has been a process that has sustained significant systemic impacts. Most agencies such as the Community Counselling Centre of Nipissing were in part created by already-existing government or private structures and institutions, in which patriarchal fibres can still be observed throughout every level of hierarchy. The conception of feminist programming in such structures has not been a natural trend; rather, it has been a culture shock to a system intent on maintaining the status quo.

If not for feminist activism, public policy reform, and eventual government funding for violence against women programs, this agency and other Family Service Ontario member agencies would likely not have adopted programming which takes a feminist perspective into account. Throughout the 1980s, violence against women counselling programs were shaped and formed through the guidance of feminist literature (Sinclair 1985). The ultimate direction of these programs was almost exclusively influenced by women who were dedicated to eradicating violence. As a result, the larger agency system had little directive impact and "allowed" the lead to be taken by women's programs to meet government funding standards for appropriate and current programming. This has been the evolution of certain feminist programs within mainstream agencies. Our violence against women program, which includes a sexual assault counselling program for women who have been abused as children, and a woman abuse (wife assault) counselling program for women abused in a relationship, have recently developed a sociopolitical and educational sexual assault group program.

Program Rationale and Objectives

The overall objectives of this program are to bring women together so that they can meet, learn about, and discuss the sociopolitical factors that influence their lives.

Counselling programs offered within family service or generic counselling agencies typically do not offer group programs explicitly aimed at examining the broader context of women's lives. As a result, the majority of sexual assault programs offered by these types of agencies present women either with long-term individual or group counselling, which may or may not include an analysis of patriarchy. These practices convey the belief that all women require counselling to effect change in their lives. This, in turn, pathologizes women as the assumption is made that all abused women are in need of expert service and guidance. Indeed, as Greenspan (1983) points out, the dominant, male point of view...
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teaches us that female “symptoms,” such as passivity and dependence (the way we are socialized to be) are indicators of pathology.

Penfold and Walker (1986), in an examination of the psychiatric paradox and women, point out that feminists believe much of the misery women experience does not require therapy in the “traditional” sense. In fact, consciousness-raising groups may be far more relevant for women. By offering a sociopolitical/educational group program, we convey the belief that not all women need counselling and that knowledge is a powerful tool.

Women who suffer sexual assault often blame themselves for the abuse. The female socialization process teaches women that we are less important than men and that we are to blame for our own victimization. We are socialized to be dependent, passive, and accepting of responsibility for keeping intimate relationships intact (Auerbach Walker and Browne 1985). As a result, throughout history, women have been blamed for the assaults they suffered. These personal struggles are at the same time political issues in that women suffer violence as a result of inequality and oppression (Levine 1982). In the 1960s, it was feminists who began to describe sexual assault as a form of domination and control, as an act of violence, not sex (Donat and D’Emilio 1992).

Therefore, any counselling program that does not address these political issues continues to pathologize women and risks re-victimizing them as well. The sociopolitical/educational group is an excellent forum in which issues of inequality and their relationship to violence can be discussed. Feminist counsellors assist women in recognizing that part of women’s pain is a result of being powerless and not a consequence of personal inadequacy (Malmo and Laidlaw 1990).

Indeed, we have observed that women who develop their abilities to analyze their lives within a sociopolitical framework effect positive change more readily than women who have not yet developed this skill. Women who understand that they have been and continue to be victims of violence because they are women can place the blame for the violence where it rests — with the abuser.

It is particularly difficult in rural areas and smaller communities, such as in Northern Ontario, for women to access appropriate forums in which they can discuss their concerns. In many areas, Women’s Centres and other resources do not exist or the demand for services outweighs the available resources. Also, transportation to services and resources is an issue for many women who reside in remote or rural areas. It may be more difficult for women in the North to immerse themselves in a “women’s community,” as the community is often small, difficult to locate, or non-existent. Since our agency is one of the few organizations in our area that offers violence against women counselling programs,
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we have an even greater responsibility to provide the most helpful services.

An additional rationale for the development of this program arose out of our concern that, within our own agency, women who were abused as children and women who were abused in relationships were being seen in isolation of each other. This led to women's feeling "compartmentalized" and supported the belief that there was, in fact, a distinction between different types of violence. We know this is not the case and that violence against women constitutes systematic oppression; it takes many forms and affects all women to different degrees (Caputi 1991).

Since a sociopolitical/educational group had already been developed for our woman abuse (wife assault) program, the logical next step was to develop a group program specific to women who had been sexually assaulted as children. We support the belief that the causes of violence against women are the same, regardless of when the violence is inflicted during childhood or adulthood. As MacLeod and Sarage (1988) point out, child sexual abuse is one part of a spectrum of male violence against women and children.

Given that women's services are inadequately funded and that women's needs are not identified as priorities, we struggle with long waiting lists for service. Consequently, women are forced to wait unacceptable lengths of time for service. Within our own agency, women have waited for over one year before accessing counselling. Therefore, an objective of our program was to address this issue by offering women prompt service. The group helps women decide if they, in fact, want long-term individual or group counselling and helps them to focus on specific issues for counselling.

Program Description

The group program consists of four sessions in total; each session lasts approximately three hours. The format of the groups is structured with facilitators leading the women in participatory exercises and discussions. Videos and handouts pertinent to the discussions are also utilized throughout the group. A contract espousing confidentiality is signed by each woman before the group begins and each session ends with a closing exercise in which the women share a positive characteristic or strength.

The first session sets the stage for understanding the sociopolitical context of sexual assault. Statistics are examined concerning sexual assault. For example, women learn that some 50 percent of all women in Canada have been victims of an unwanted sexual act (Badgley Report 1984). Various definitions of sexual assault are examined. The myths
perpetuated by society concerning women who suffer sexual assaults are analyzed.

The second session examines victimization in a social context. Particular emphasis is placed on the socialization process (how it is damaging to women) and on the media's portrayal of women. The third session focuses on the causes and costs of violence against women and children. The sociopolitical causes are stressed and the costs of violence to society in general are discussed. This discussion helps the women to understand that violence is a societal problem, not an individual problem or a woman's issue.

Finally, the fourth session focuses on the many roles or jobs a woman has, along with her skills and strengths. The women quickly learn that they have an inordinate number of skills, but that these skills have been devalued and taken for granted. During this last session, we have a "celebration" which provides us with time for group closure. We also facilitate an evaluation of the program during this session. We ask: "What would you change? What did you like? What effect has this group had on your understanding?" and similar questions. Initially, when we first began running this group, the facilitators discussed the questions with the group and recorded their responses. We now recognize the importance of having women discuss and record their responses to these questions privately. The women are also offered an opportunity to meet confidentially with a group facilitator to discuss any further concerns or ideas about the group.

Systemic Barriers

The program referred to above has encountered almost no resistance from the larger agency structure. It was introduced to people in other sections of the agency with a feminist analysis, which corresponds with the philosophy of the violence against women counselling program. While there exists some acknowledgement of feminist principles and practice in certain other program-specific areas of the agency, a feminist-driven systems vision is lacking. An objection that we must not "abandon" the entire agency to feminist principles has been expressed by agency administration and by workers in some programs who appear to have an incomplete understanding of the feminist analysis. Much philosophical tension also exists between feminist-driven programs and other agency service areas. The tension is observed particularly at times when the feminist "agenda" is being considered for global agency consideration. A reluctance to adopt a feminist philosophy can best be explained through an analysis of the agency's historical connections. For example, the Community Counselling Centre was founded and developed through years of affiliations and connections to myriad
patriarchal systems. The agency's survival and growth often depended on these affiliations. This agency fondly remembers its "forefathers" and their contributions to building an agency that still exists today. In adopting a feminist framework, the agency would have to re-examine history and risk losing past connections.

Program autonomy in the agency continues to be encouraged within the boundaries of feminist programs. This has led to significant developments in the area of feminist programming which are recognized and encouraged. However, service users face a discontinuous service approach when they become involved in more than one agency counselling program. Thus, the effects of the resistance to feminize the entire institution can clearly be observed at various levels. In the following section, program outcomes concerning the sexual assault group and the larger agency system are presented.

Program Outcomes

In evaluating programs, our responsibility is to listen to women. Since our philosophy is that women are experts concerning their own experiences, it is crucial for us to seek this feedback. This assists us in improving our program delivery and provides us with ideas about the future direction our services should take. With regard to the sexual assault group program, women have conveyed to us the following insights.

All women reported that the program had increased their awareness of how society viewed them. Although this increased understanding of our patriarchal society understandably angered and upset them, most of them viewed their growing awareness as positive and strengthening. With respect to program structure, some women stated that they would have preferred to have completed this particular group program before attending individual or longer-term group counselling. They thought that the awareness they gained through the group would have facilitated the counselling process. Further, they also told us that they would have preferred having a longer group experience, given the extensive amount of information presented in four sessions.

Women also shared with us their personal growth experiences resulting from their participation in this group. Some women reported changes in their daily interactions with partners, spouses, and children. They stated that these changes were based on their ability to no longer blame themselves and they were less anxious. They reported that they would without hesitation recommend the group to other women.

Based on the above feedback, we conclude that the group has been a success. The program's objectives have been met and women have benefited from their participation in this particular program. As
women developed a conscious understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy, and as they learned to articulate how they are oppressed and viewed by society, they became able to demand their rights, to feel better about themselves, and to understand their victimization. Clearly, as women came to understand the context of their lives, they became more assertive and more self-aware. This group also provided a base from which service users made informed decisions about their future counselling choices. In addition, the group ensured that participants were not faced with a long wait before service was available.

We have found that, upon completion of this program, many women opt to take part in a counselling group instead of waiting for individual services. Besides the fact that this allows many more women to access our services, some argue that group counselling is the preferred service modality as it lessens dependency on a counsellor and encourages helpful relationships with other women (Pressman 1989).

The development and implementation of this program have been positive not only for the service users but for the larger agency system as well. As we mentioned earlier, concern was felt for the underlying effects of a feminist program not embodied within a feminist agency structure. We had assumed that systemic change needed to be ordered from top down. Without first having a feminist agency structure, we believed we could not successfully ensure the survival of permanent feminist programming. This belief justified continuous challenge of the agency structures to adopt a greater level of feminist analysis. Resistance to these challenges led to much frustration and painstakingly slow progress. Nonetheless, the challenges continued, fueled by the belief that we were having an impact on feminizing our agency. What had not been fully considered was the extent to which the client system could, in fact, impact the organizational structure and, thereby, instigate a shift.

When we consider differential power experienced by individuals at various levels of this hierarchical organization, we begin to observe at which level pressure can be exerted to create change. Board members and managers have power to effect change through policy. Service workers have influence through their practice. Not usually considered are those individuals who articulate a level of power through needs; that is, service users. In keeping with feminist principles, an egalitarian approach to organizational structure must be respected (Pressman 1989). Such an approach is seemingly contradictory to a hierarchical system unless power and power differences are openly acknowledged.

One might assume that policy makers would necessarily be the force behind most structural change. However, this has not been representative of our experience in the violence against women program. Women, when given a forum to do so, express their needs. Based on
the needs they articulate, programs are developed. For example, needs expressed by women in an earlier, more heterogeneous group for dealing with violence in the family taught us that we needed to provide services with a more specific focus. Out of the feedback from these women emerged the educational, consciousness-raising group for women who had been abused in relationships (wife assault) and, later, a similar group for women survivors of childhood sexual assault which is the main focus of this paper. Returning to the women involved in evaluating the group's strengths and weaknesses resulted in very positive evaluations. This feedback encourages policy makers to continue in their support of this program's efforts. In turn, board members and managers are also beginning to adopt language and concepts which at least reflect an appreciation of the feminist perspective. What is becoming clear is that the community we serve, if served well, will, in fact, dictate organizational structure as well as individual needs.

Future Directions

One of our next challenges will involve bridging the gap in power between the client system and the organizational structure. In order to meet this challenge, we need to acknowledge the valuable contribution the women's community provides. We need to assure the involvement of women in our programs through various means. For example, input and involvement will be secured through the training of women to act as co-leaders in our groups. These women can provide support to women at beginning levels of counselling. In so doing, service users will be formally recognized for the power they should rightfully hold in the system and will be more systematically included in the decision-making equation.

We also recognize the value of having other members of the agency, with their particular expertise, involved in our programs. Specifically, we have listened to service users and colleagues alike tell us that the language, concepts, and structures of our program are not always clear to outsiders. We are very concerned that our program not be elitist, and we will therefore look to people throughout our generic agency who can assist us in making our language, concepts, and structures more accessible. Through such partnerships, mutual training will be provided with respect for both specific client needs and for the sociopolitical context of program development.

In looking forward to a more feminized organization, we continue to look for direction from those individuals who are accessing our services. In providing them with a forum for concrete input, we will continue to shape our programs to meet their stated needs. As all of our feminist guided programs increasingly respect and report such feedback,
the agency will be influenced to support these programs, and policy shifts will thus occur throughout the larger organization.

References


Endnote

1. We would like to thank all of the women who have participated in our programs and who have provided us with the feedback necessary for the ongoing development of our services. We would like to give credit to Patricia Tobin and Judy Duncan for developing the original sociopolitical/educational group format within the woman abuse (wife assault) program. Jeanette Belanger and Annette Rondeau must be acknowledged for their contributions to the development of the group for women survivors of childhood sexual assault. Finally, we would like to thank the members of the violence against women program for their relentless dedication to feminizing this organization.