

# INTRODUCTION

Today's political climate is precarious for women's services, especially those that are clearly feminist-based. Current governments, notwithstanding party politics, strongly favour gender-neutral services, which appear to be moving toward a health-care catch-all of counselling regarding violence against women and children. Agencies that have been woefully underfunded and shamefully ignored for years still do not receive enough government money to operate, relying on fundraising to sustain the most basic of services. Instead of restoring funding cuts made a decade and more ago and topping up funding to humane levels, our government is providing monies for fundraising training. The media is quick to zone in on mismanaged anti-violence organizations, and ministries are eager to support audits of these services whether they are warranted or not. Women's services are pitted against one another to compete for funding that is far too meagre for the need.

The writing is on the wall. Funding will be cut unless women and men raise their voices to ensure that the issue of violence against women is not lost amid an agenda of policing and health, returning woman abuse back to the dark ages of the pre-1980s. Anti-violence organizations need to be structured to withstand this war upon them by a public and government that find truth distasteful. We need to be ready to transform outmoded and unworkable models and bring in a new organizational structure that can serve as a healthy container for this unique work. We need to create agencies that are sustainable and healthy and models for other workplaces. We need to become workplace coaches to show mainstream organizations the strengths of feminist organizational theory and how they can adapt it for themselves. We must become role models for organizational health and practice. We need to put into practice what we know and preach, instead of destroying ourselves and our own organizations. There are plenty of enemies who relish watching us fail. Many of them even work among us.

Recently I have been drawn to workshops and presentations on healthy workplaces and related topics and have discovered that there has been a shift in thinking regarding the creation of organizational health. I was dismayed however to realize that instead of being at the forefront of such ideas, women's organizations are sadly lagging behind the mainstream. Why have feminist organizations not addressed these issues and why are we not the model of organizational health?

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This book offers a glimpse into the problem areas of feminist organizations and creative suggestions from women working within this field. It contains the voices and experiences of women who have vast collective experience, voices and ideas that are too often suppressed and discounted. At the very least, perhaps these ideas can spark further brainstorming on how to facilitate effective change to maintain our essential services before they are lost. We must not have a hand in their undoing.

Much of the research for this book has been accomplished during twenty years of work in women's shelters and sexual assault centres, both collectives and hierarchies. During the last seven years in particular, I surveyed women within many anti-violence organizations: women's shelters, rape crisis centres, community-based outreach services — services that self-identified as feminist and those that did not. In those anti-violence agencies that did not identify as feminist, I found that the majority of the individual staff did and that the choice of the agency to identify as non-feminist was most often a decision by a board of directors that felt that it was a more accurate representation of its community.

In conducting my research, I found some resistance, often not where I anticipated it. Those who did resist this work did so mostly out of fear that it might be used to further marginalize the gains women in the anti-violence sector have made. I understand and wholly appreciate this fear. However, I have witnessed the destruction from within of several organizations and have found myself at a place of spiritual emptiness. What I have come to is the need to be true to the feminist commitment to self-analysis and critical thinking about systems and structures, even if that means our own. This book is a starting point for dialogue and self-examination, the beginning of an open discourse that can lead to promoting organizational health.

I feel that many of us in the anti-violence sector are committed to feminist theory and its application in a way that simply applies rhetoric. We are not continuing our own critical analysis. Such complacency is dangerous and is too often felt and carried alone by women of colour and lesbians within our organizations. It will eventually spell our own demise. In not actively examining our own work as anti-violence advocates, we, and I mean in particular we as white women, are permitting that cosy comfortable place of white privilege to once again give us a nice quiet place to snuggle up in. As Laura Brown states, "We must build an ethical imperative of self-confrontation of racism as a first step.... This first step makes all others possible because it allows us, without shame or guilt, to attend to reality so as to change" (1991: 124).

After examining the material I had gathered and read and re-read, several themes emerged. These provided me with a structure by which to group ideas and concepts, although I still struggled with the order that should be

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given to these themes. The general intent is not to say that all or any of these themes apply to any given organization at any one time, but that many are present at various stages of organizational growth, moving with fluidity as changes move through the internal climate.

This book is not intended as a history lesson about the feminist movement or the shelter or rape crisis centre movement, or as any sort of comparative study of male/female led organizations. I began with the assumption that the reader will be at least familiar with anti-violence work, anti-violence organizations, feminist organizations, feminist theory or women's workplace studies.

This book is not intended to be a rant about any specific organization; themes emerging reflect those common to anti-violence workplaces. I do think that many observations can also be applied to other workplaces, but there are certain unique characteristics of agencies that deal with violence against women and children that have helped to create unique problems. I have included some quotes from women who participated in my research, identified only by initials, as a compromise for those who were fearful of identification.

Many valuable resources already exist that organizations can draw from to create workplace health. Many of my findings mirror what is highlighted elsewhere, and what I hope can be achieved is a continued dialogue within and among agencies to promote sustainable organizations. Such existing materials and new ideas birthed from this book will ideally serve to stir debate and introspection.