



September 1978

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Recommended Citation

McShane, Claudette and Oliver, John (1978) "Women's Groups as Alternative Human Service Agencies," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 5 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol5/iss5/2>

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WOMEN'S GROUPS AS ALTERNATIVE
HUMAN SERVICE AGENCIES

by

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Introduction

The radical movements of the 60's were punctuated by the revival of feminism. As the movements demanded that disenfranchised citizens be allowed to actively participate in societal decision-making, women became cognizant of the fact that even within the movements they continued to be relegated to second class status. This realization served as a catalyst for the reemergence of the women's movement within American society. Feminist ideas spread rapidly among the social movements. Women held political meetings to discuss social inequities and their impact upon womanhood. From these meetings consciousness-raising groups evolved as a forum to raise non-movement women's consciousness of their oppression through social support and the sharing of experiences. The members of consciousness-raising groups founded more feminist groups and by the end of 1969 the women's movement had become nationally known.¹

Feminist organizations and groups have often affiliated into coalitions to strengthen and unify the smaller groups and to provide a broader base for social action. As the issues have become more delineated, the coalitions have supported the growth of alternative services for women. In the 70's numerous organizations have been founded to serve previously neglected women in such areas as abortion, health care, woman battering, rape and alcoholism. These organizations are alternatives to the conventional human services which have been ineffective in understanding and solving

women's problems.

The purpose of this paper is to identify salient dimensions which differentiate women's alternative organizations and conventional human services; to identify and discuss select problems of feminist service groups; and to present strategies that enhance the survival potential of women's services.

Alternative Feminist Groups Vs. Conventional Services

Theoretically, the utility of alternative services lies in its responsiveness to consumer needs, the coherence between program design, implementation, and consumer life styles, and the inclusion of consumers in the organizational decision-making process. Alternative services indirectly help to improve the utility of conventional services by pressuring these agencies into an awareness of their limitations, thereby enhancing initiation of problem solving, ameliorative activities. Alternative agencies also alleviate the workload of conventional human service providers by their willingness to service "unwanted clients" who fall through gaps caused by service fragmentation.

Alternative feminist agencies within the human service sector provide needed services in addition to developing and implementing strategies that enhance the political, economic and social viability of women as an oppressed group. The necessity of forging linkages between service work and political activity has been discussed by Gil² and Withorn.³ The advantage of linking service and political activity according to Withorn, lies in "the hope that people can become radicalized through such services, that they can begin to see the connection between one specific need and other needs, and finally to understand the deeper causes of their troubles."⁴

As used in this paper, alternative feminist agencies are defined as those organizations which evolve from grassroots efforts as a means of providing direct services to women and advocating for equal rights and status for women. Since these agencies fill existing service gaps and challenge the limitations of existing conventional agencies, they are generally perceived with suspicion by traditional human service providers. Consequently, from inception, the efforts of feminist agencies are fraught with problems, and survival is always a paramount concern.

The organizational structure and services of alternative women's groups are distinctly different from conventional agencies

along the following dimensions: the authority structure, performance guides, problem solving process, planning personnel, public service model, the agency's orientation toward consumer problems, the agency's pattern of accountability, and the feelings and attitudes engendered in consumers by the agency. Figure #1 depicts these salient dimensions and the difference between alternative and conventional agencies in respect to each factor.

FIGURE #1 ⁵

	Alternative Feminist Agency	Conventional Agency
Authority Structure	Collegial/Collective	Hierarchical
Performance Guides	Internalization of Organizational Goals/Feminist Ideology	A-priori rules/ white male system ideology
Problem Solving Process	Collective Decision Making	Bureaucratic
Planning Process	Persons delegated by representatives of women	Experts
Public Service Model	Help women to advocate for selves	Maintain (Status- quo) System
Agency Orientation Toward Women's Problems	Preventative/Responsive	Curative/Reaction- ary/Consumer Pressure oriented
Pattern of Relating to Women	Humanistic/Personalized	Impersonal
Accountability	To consumers and collective	To Taxpayers and Agency Adminis- trators

FIGURE #1 (cont.)

	Alternative Feminist Agency	Conventional Agency
Feelings and Attitudes Engendered in Consumers by the Agency	Belonging/Solidarity/ Collective potency	Unwanted/Ind- ividualism/ Competiveness/ Personal Impo- tence

As figure #1 indicates, the structural components of alternative women's agencies generally conform to an ideological framework whose major thrust is social, economic, and political egalitarianism. Feminist agencies exist to promote the welfare of women by addressing their needs through political and service activities. Conversely, conventional agencies' structural components preclude initiation and implementation of activities that aren't by nature supportive of the status-quo. Conventional agencies are characterized by a schizophrenic quality which manifests itself in a pseudo helpful consumer/provider relationship. Galper⁶ refers to this duality as one of the political functions of social services. The objective of social services' duality is political, economic and social control of disenfranchised individuals and groups.

Conventional and feminist alternative agency structural components are theoretically quite different. However, social forces tend to pressure both conventional and alternative agencies in the same directions. The resulting compromise produces agency structural types which conform "more or less" to the structural components identified in Figure #1. We believe that in spite of this reality, the degrees of difference between the structure of these two service approaches is both striking and important.

The authority structure, utilization of planning personnel and problem solving process of conventional agencies conform to notions which undergird principles of scientific management and the male system. Hierarchical structures that result in the final decision-making process residing within the position of the person at the apex of the organization, coupled with a problem solving approach which utilizes experts in an area of concern is widely accepted as a method of optimizing agency resources and goal attainment. Of course, the nexus of this approach to

human services lies in the somewhat overstated assumption that the largely inanimate products of human service agencies are quantifiable as are assembly line products. The results of this belief have been a reduction in the volume and quality of female input and decision-making. This approach to human services promotes dependency; it is dehumanizing, and perpetuates a false consciousness regarding social change by advancing the false notion that social problems are resolvable through individual efforts or personal behavioral changes when clearly, these issues are only resolvable through collective action.

The antithesis of the conventional service model for women is a humanistic, egalitarian and feminist service model. The purpose of this model is to service women, advocate for their human and civil rights, and to act as a catalyst for political and economic self-determination. Agencies characterized by these dimensions emanate from ideological frameworks substantially different from those that give birth to conventional service models. The belief systems supportive of feminist agency development tend to emphasize collective purpose and well-being in lieu of individual prosperity and competition. This ideological framework typically gives rise to operable features which include egalitarian governance, participatory planning and meaningful consumer involvement in the decision-making process. Feminist agencies' structural components, and related activities attempt to enhance women's sense of belonging, encourage solidarity and feelings of collective political potency.

Problems of Alternative Feminist Agencies

The problems of alternative feminist organizations are as varied as the diverse needs of the women they serve. In addition to encountering many of the same structural, performance and inter-organizational environmental problems as conventional agencies, small alternative agency difficulties are often exacerbated by acute budgetary, personnel and technological inadequacies. These latter problems, often a consequence of concessions made by organizations during their early stages of development, are identified as:

1. Forced modification of original goals and objectives;
2. Lack of organizational structure and development;
3. Reduced staff efficiency through constrained generalization;
4. Inability to attract and hold top level employees;

5. Heavy reliance on volunteer staff;
6. Poor organizational relationships;
7. Limited growth as an effective alternative to the conventional service sector; and
8. Confrontation with the male system.

The influence of national decisions on local human service activities has been emphasized by Alvin Gouldner. He maintained that, "The locus of reform initiatives and resources is increasingly found on the level of national politics and foundations, rather than in the political vitality, the economic resources, or the zealous initiatives of elites with local roots."⁷

The shift which Gouldner identified has a detrimental impact on both conventional and alternative services. However, the burden of this change weighs more heavily on alternative services due to the enactment of legislation which dislodged planning authority and resources from neighborhood and residence organizations, and returned it to the chief executive of the city.⁸

There are numerous external decisions that negatively impact on the ability of alternative agencies to function at maximum efficiency.⁹ Staff morale, work satisfaction and inter-organization relationships are often negatively affected by these decisions. The impact of external decisions on determining organizational goals, structural and environmental factors can modify feminist groups in unforeseen manners. For example, Women In Transition, Inc. (WIT), a Philadelphia based women's crisis center began to operate in 1971. Within four years, the agency had expanded to such proportions that it necessitated a \$100,000 a year budget and could no longer be supported by small grants and private foundations. Negotiations with traditional funding sources resulted in a reduction of WIT staff from seven to two and an affiliation with a local community health center which had an "unspecified degree of control over programs and expenditures."¹⁰

The fact that alternative feminist agencies are particularly vulnerable to environmental factors and inter-organizational field forces underscores the importance of organizational development. The relationship between organizational development and survival of alternative organizations was identified and discussed by the late Saul Alinsky.¹¹ He maintained that prior to initiation of programmatic activities, salient organizational structural components must be firmly established. This is seldom the case with alternative agencies. The movement from issue identification, ad-hoc committee proposal submission, and acceptance of the

proposal by the funding body to providing services prior to development of organizational structure is commonplace.

The lack of organizational development among feminist agencies is reflected in the limited number of specialized occupational categories represented by agency personnel. While there are of course, numerous variables which explain this deficit, agency financial limitations loom as the most plausible and cogent explanatory factors. It should also be noted that agencies fortunate enough to secure the services of highly skilled planners, evaluators, program developers, etc., are seldom able to provide self-developing activities, or financial incentives to ensure retention of their services over a reasonable time span.

These problems which confront feminist organizations also affect the growth potential of the agency. The grassroots groups are limited in their growth by low budgets, inadequate personnel and technological inabilities. These problems limit the growth of the organization in a practical, as well as, philosophical sense. Many organizations cease to exist or are coopted into large bureaucratic structures, while others maintain a level of functioning which can only be forecast on a year-to-year basis. Survival, therefore, becomes a major energy drain and service delivery often is only of secondary importance.

These kinds of problems which affect any alternative service organization are especially burdensome for feminist endeavors. The constraints and pressures of the conventional sector magnify the impact of the male system upon women's groups. One of the major beliefs of the male system is in the scientific method as the only valid indicator of success or failure, while the female system's primary belief is in the validity of process in and of itself. Other male system/female system inconsistencies center around issues of sex-role stereotyping, responsibility, interpersonal relationships and definitions of people and things.¹² Women within an alternative feminist organization, therefore, confront additional obstacles to the success or survival of the group since they are not only providing an alternative service in a hostile environment, but they also represent a direct threat to the validity of the supremacy of the male system.

Survival of Feminist Organizations as Effective Alternatives to Conventional Human Services

A feminist group which succeeds in establishing an alternative service organization may struggle against the status quo for

a number of years prior to being recognized by the community as viable service for women's problems. Unfortunately this "credibility" does not translate into survival and the group continues to encounter survival threats. Eventually the feminist organization will reach a crossroad in its existence as initial funding sources begin to withdraw support, the organization realizes that it can no longer rely on volunteer staff and/or the organization expands to necessitate an increase in funds. These variations compel the group to reconsider its financial and survival options as an effective alternative service for women. It is at this point that the feminist organization makes decisions crucial to its future impact on service delivery. In a functional sense, when this occurs, the organization has reached a survival crossroad. Decisions made at this juncture are restricted to a choice between two systems and the group may select to survive within the male or female system. This decision, which is based on a series of local, as well as, national variables related to funding and other sources of support, is diagrammed in Figure #2.

FIGURE #2

FEMINIST ORGANIZATION SURVIVAL CROSSROAD

ALTERNATIVES

	MALE SYSTEM	FEMALE SYSTEM
1. Initial decision to ameliorate problems:	Attraction to male system as potential security and financial stability.	Commitment and belief in the female system as a pragmatic and philosophical means of survival
2. Exploration of survival techniques through:	a.submittance of proposals to conventional sources; b.collateral support from status quo; c.modification of original goals and objectives.	a.decentralization; b.formation of local feminist coalitions; c.solicitation of financial and in-kind support from the female system; d.maintenance of original goals and objectives.

	Male System	Female System
3. Continued existence dependent on:	Alterations which fit within the male system.	Identification of the female system.
4. Funding consequence:	Original philosophy and goals compromised or threatened; service delivery adversely effected.	Maintenance of original feminist ideology; effective service delivery.

The implications of the above choices on the feminist organization are noteworthy. While it is evident that the male system is more constraining and restrictive in its allowance of deviancy from the status quo, the option to survive within that system should not be entirely disregarded. The male system, it must be remembered, controls the vast majority of financial support for human service projects. There is, therefore, a fair chance that a well-written proposal by a well-supported feminist organization will be funded. This money would then be channelled into a feminist service area and even though the goals and objectives of the original organization may be modified, the funds are still being deflected from the conventional male sector. The feminist organization which obtains financial support from the male system consequently is pervading and diluting that system.

Another advantage of pursuing funds from the male system is that the duration of the funding period may allow the feminist organization the time and money to devise a strategy for working solely within the female system. A Pennsylvania group, Womens Way, is a fund raising coalition which is devising such a strategy while it has secured a three year grant from the William Penn Foundation.¹³ Again funds are being deflected from the male system and in this instance strong feminist principles are maintained. Women's Way is an example of a feminist organization which has opted to enter the male system only as a stepping stone and not as a long term survival strategy.

Although feminist ideological purity can only be maintained within the female system, many organizations which remain totally within this system will encounter awesome administrative and organizational difficulties. Since the female system is often viewed with suspicion by both men and women, it is generally weak and unsupported. The tasks of an organization wishing to be supported solely by the female system, therefore, include identifying and

solidifying the very system which will ensure its continued existence. This is a laborious project which can take precedence over the original goals of the organization. If the organization, however, can survive the lack of financial support and stability until the female system is able to sustain the group, the feminist ideology will not have been compromised. The female system also appears to afford an organization more financial security, since small donations from many sources are more stable than one very large grant.

Summary

Feminist reformist efforts will not yield successful outcomes until a fundamental alteration is made in their conception of the task at hand. Toward this end, we have directed attention to the detrimental impact exerted by the inter-organization human service sector on the success or failure of feminist alternative human service agencies.

A review of the experiences of feminist service organizations and their problems clearly indicated a need for a conceptual scheme that identifies alternative decisions which women's groups could exercise when faced with the inevitable question of whether to assign primary importance to mere existence or feminist ideological integrity and self-determination. Attempts to answer this question place feminist organizations in a predicament which we refer to as a survival crossroad. When feminist groups reach this juncture in organizational development, the utility of their services and activities for women depends on whether they decide to join the male system as a condition of survival, or whether they opt to remain within the female system.

We maintain that, feminist organizations that depend exclusively on other feminist groups for enhancement and survival serve a valuable purpose. Feminist interlocking activities (limited decentralization) ensures that decisions relative to need determination and plans of action for service programs fall within the domain of feminist organizations.

The survival strategy which we have outlined provides an added measure of assurance that program decisions will be made by those most familiar with the consuming population; ensures that women retain prime sponsorship of feminist programs; enhances accountability, and improves the survival potential of feminist perspectives by counteracting the capricious decisions of male dominated, and controlled service bureaucracies.

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