

**WITH WOMEN, FOR WOMEN:  
A STUDY OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AS WORKERS IN  
FEMINIST ORGANISATIONS**

Thesis submitted by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis reports on a study of the experiences of women who work, paid and unpaid, in three feminist organisations. The research aims to identify the issues that impact on this experience and to particularly consider issues of difference and inclusion in feminist organisations. The research also aims to examine what strategies women use through their participation in feminist organisations to influence their own work experience. The thesis explores the assertions of the literature that discusses traditional organisational life and the role of organisations in social movements. The feminist critiques of each of these fields and the alternatives proposed are examined to provide background and context.

This research employs a feminist qualitative methodology embedded within the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint. Data was primarily collected through semi structured interviews with twenty six women who worked with three different feminist organisations in Darwin, Northern Territory. The content of relevant organisational documentation was also analysed to enhance and provide context to the interview data.

The findings presented in this thesis identify a number of significant issues which impact on women's experience as workers in feminist organisations. Issues about structure and process are resolved by each organisation through informed, purposeful action that is relevant to their unique history and context, including the relationship of each organisation with the external political environment. Organisational strategies for attracting women from diverse backgrounds are experienced as not particularly successful, despite a collective and individual commitment to inclusion. A number of reasons for this are suggested including the limitations imposed by the white western definition of terms like 'activism' and 'exclusion'.

Close, friendship based relationships with other women workers are identified as the most significant single element that influences women's experience in feminist organisations. These relationships are understood by these women as simultaneously a source of pleasure and of pain. Undertaking work that 'makes a difference' is also very important in the way women understand their experience.

The thesis concludes that while working in feminist organisations is hard, demanding and potentially exploitative, the experience of these women is that being part of a feminist organisation is preferable to any other work environment and allows them an opportunity to pursue the political goals of the women's movement even at times when feminism as an ideology is under siege or in abeyance.

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# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction: Conception, Focus and Structure of Thesis**

### ***1.1 Conception***

My own journey to feminism was one that came later in my life, though with the benefit of hindsight, I see that the seeds of feminism were planted during my childhood. For me it was an awakening that was fuelled simultaneously by personal experiences (the birth and early childhood care of my first child) and the academic discovery of feminist writings. Adrienne Rich (1976) seemed to be writing directly to me and about me when she spoke of the "institution" and the "experience" of motherhood. Such was my delight with the discovery of this new way of understanding what was happening to me and around me that I sought out other feminist women with great enthusiasm. I joined a local women's centre as a volunteer. I completed a Masters degree undertaking mainly women's studies subjects, using this as an opportunity to discuss my experiences and my developing feminist identity in a supportive, intellectual environment.

The friendships I made during this period of my life have been enduring and the discoveries I made about myself, my family, my understanding of feminism and my view of the world have become integral to my self identity. Much of this I attribute to the way in which other women, most of whom were much more knowledgeable and informed than I about feminism, included me and shared with me their thoughts, ideas, suggestions, and ways of understanding the world and events. I was able to ask questions, make mistakes and many 'faux pas'. I never felt ridiculed or wrong, merely learning and unaware. Through this process I became confident enough to call myself a feminist. My own journey reflects the journeys of many women as identified by Cheryl Hercus in her study of how women become involved in feminist collective action.

...becoming and being a feminist is a process of construction where women create themselves and create the movement along the four dimensions of knowing, feeling, being and doing. There is no one starting point to this process and there is no single end point to the story of becoming a feminist. This process does not occur in a vacuum, but in an environment which constantly produces alternative and hegemonic ways of articulating experience, formulating understanding, and acting (Hercus, 1999, p. 256).

When my family and I moved to a new town, it seemed quite natural for me to seek out other feminist women with whom to connect. I joined the management groups of two feminist organisations that were involved in the delivery of social welfare services to women. I developed friendships with the women who were part of these organisations, and these friendships provided

me with social companionship and intellectual stimulation. Connecting with feminist women by participating in feminist organisations was an important part of creating a life for myself in a new place. I made assumptions about the women that I would meet in these organisations. I also made some assumptions about what it would be like to work in a voluntary capacity in these organisations. I expected it to be a different and more personally fulfilling experience than that in my paid work - a bureaucratic, male dominated university. These expectations were met.

Throughout this period of some ten years, there were small, but nonetheless meaningful, ruptures in the landscape of sisterhood I had created (at least in my mind). One of my acquaintances claimed a women's group had excluded and rejected her; made her feel left out, different and unwanted. A feminist colleague gasped in horror when I told her I was joining a feminist collective and regaled me with stories of the collective's exclusionary tactics and elitist attitudes towards some women. A student tearfully told me of being physically assaulted by her work colleague in a feminist refuge. Another woman told me, with some passion, that despite being a feminist she would never become part of a feminist organisation again.

Eventually it became clear to me that some women did not experience feminist groups and feminist organisations as positively as I had. Some women, despite identifying strongly as feminists, were critical of, unhappy with, and even mistreated and abused by their contact with feminist organisations. The literature at that time did not help me understand this. According to what I had read feminist, women-centred groups, services, and organisations should have been 'doing it' better than the traditional, 'male-stream' organisations. Women should have been creating 'safe' spaces where all women were accepted, respected and valued as women.

I acknowledged then that this was indeed a one-dimensional, naïve view of feminist services and organisations. These women-centred spaces were clearly more complex and diverse than my initial experience led me to believe. This acknowledgement had serious implications for me personally as a feminist and professionally as a social worker working in feminist organisations with women, for women. As such it provided the impetus for the research reported in this thesis.

## ***1.2 Focus and Aims of the Research***

The intention of this research was to explore the experience of women who were working in feminist organisations. What is it like to be a part of a feminist organisation? Is it different to being a worker in a non-feminist organisation? What makes it different? If it is a positive experience, what makes it so? If it is not positive, how do women understand that experience? What do women gain and what do women give as members of a feminist organisation? These questions began the development of my ideas and plans for this research.

The beginning of this research coincided with a number of events that provided further impetus for this line of questioning. A number of negative and detrimental assessments of feminism and its impact on and for women received significant media, and therefore public, attention (Roiphe, 1993; Sommers, 1994). There were claims by some feminists that feminism had become institutionalised (Bart, 2000) and that the women's movement had at least declined, if not completely died (Epstein, 2001). Australian governments, at both national and state/territory levels, implicitly, and increasingly explicitly, demonstrated hostility and antagonism toward feminist values and goals (Summers, 2003). I wanted this research to allow feminist women working in feminist organisations, and therefore dealing with the multitude of dilemmas, contradictions, and issues that arise from living one's ideological commitments, to have an opportunity to express their view and opinion about these issues and to have their voices heard.

At the time that I commenced this research I lived in Darwin in the Northern Territory. This location created an important contextual feature of the research as is discussed in some depth in chapter four. Darwin is the capital city of the Northern Territory and at the time of these interviews had a population of around 88,000, including the outlying rural areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). In many ways the population demographics of the Northern Territory and Darwin are an anomaly in comparison to the rest of Australia. In general, Northern Territorians are younger than their national counterparts and twenty five percent are indigenous. The total Northern Territory population accounts for only 1% of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). This fact and the significant distances within the Northern Territory and between Darwin and any other Australian capital city results in both a sense of isolation and a sense of being part of "the frontier" (Primary Health and Coordinated Care Branch, 1998).

Because this research is about women and their organisational experience I chose to contact potential participants through the organisations of which they were a part. I was an active member of two of these organisations and was known to and knew a number of the workers in the third through professional, work, and social contacts. I wanted to talk with women who worked in the organisations in either a paid or unpaid capacity rather than to women who used the services. I chose to understand 'work' in a manner reflective of the feminist critiques of traditional definitions of 'work' and include paid and voluntary workers in different organisational roles. In her research about women's health centres, Dorothy Broom describes the three working parts of an organisation.

the *staff* who do the day-to-day work of providing services to women and who are normally but not always paid; the voluntary management group or *board* ...who meet regularly to determine policy, hire staff and make major decisions; and the

*association*, a larger group of members who meet at least annually to elect the members of the management group and to discuss the long term directions and concerns of the centre (Broom, 1991, p. xvii).

These were the women I wanted to speak to, though the distinction between the three groups was not as clear as Broom's description suggests. Some women were part of all three of these groups, or at least had been at various times during their association with the organisation. Some of the participants had at some point used the service as a 'client' but that experience was not the focus of the research. This was not research into the effectiveness of service delivery but more about how feminist organisations were experienced by those who sustain them and are sustained by them, that is the women who were the working constituents of the organisation (Ferree & Martin, 1995a).

The purpose of my research, then, was to explore with women who worked in feminist organisations, that working experience. I was particularly interested in what aspects of organisational life were positive and what aspects were less so; what were women in feminist organisations doing that might be different to workers in other organisations; what difficulties did they experience as workers in feminist organisations and how did they deal with these. In particular I wanted to explore the ideas these women had about inclusion and difference. Were women of diverse backgrounds part of these organisations; if so what was their experience; how were they included; what issues if any arose in their working experience. If the women who were a part of the feminist organisation came from similar backgrounds how were these similarities understood and explained; what did the organisation do, if anything, to attract different women?

The aims of this research were:

1. To identify and explore women's experiences in and of the feminist organisation in which they worked either voluntarily or for remuneration;
2. To explore the importance of issues identified in the literature as contributing to women's organisational experience such as the existence of hierarchical authority structures, perceived participation in decision-making, flexible working conditions and the perceived value of women's contribution;
3. To discover how women understood the inclusiveness of their organisation and what variables impacted on inclusion for the organisation; for example race, class, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity;
4. To discover what strategies women used through their participation in feminist organisations to influence their own work experience.

I expected that the research would provide an opportunity for women to consider their own experience in contrast to and in comparison with both the ideal feminist organisation and the ideals of feminist organisations and the feminist movement. I thought the results could contribute to increasing our understanding of the actual and potential contribution feminism and feminist women can make to organisational life and to the context of the delivery of health and welfare services.

### ***1.3 Defining Feminism***

The title of this section in many ways overstates its possibilities, however as the description of my personal journey to this research suggests, feminism is integral to both the content and the process of this research. There are many understandings and definitions of feminism making it impossible to consider feminism as one coherent and homogeneous theory. Many authors consider feminism to consist of a number of diverse strands each signaling “to the broader public that feminism is not a monolithic ideology” but is instead marked by a “range of different approaches, perspectives, and frameworks [which] a variety of feminists have used to shape both their explanations for women’s oppression and their proposed solutions for its elimination” (Putnam Tong, 1998, p. 1-2). An example of the diversity of feminist thought can be found in Tong’s first introductory text about feminism when she identified liberal, socialist, radical, psychoanalytic, postmodern and existentialist feminist traditions in her overview of feminist theory (Tong, 1989). In a second edition, ten years later she added eco-feminism and global feminism (Putnam Tong, 1998) and since then Lotz (2003) has described a number of versions of what she labels ‘Third Wave feminism’.

Even though this research does not locate itself within any one of these categories in particular and few of the participants chose to do that, it is useful to consider some of these strands of contemporary feminist thought as a way of considering some of the core ongoing debates within feminist theory and practice.

*Liberal Feminism* is fundamentally concerned with justice and equality. This way of thinking about women and their lives focuses primarily on eliminating any overt disadvantage and discrimination experienced by women, without major upheavals to the economic and political structures of contemporary capitalist democracies (van Acker, 1999). The two main goals of liberal feminism are, firstly, to expose as unfair any ideas that women are different or should be treated differently to men and, secondly, to ensure women have access to the same opportunities and social rewards as men. Liberal feminists have consistently claimed that women have not been granted the same rights and freedoms as men because of their sex. Overcoming these

discriminatory practices opens the way for each woman to achieve her full potential as determined by her ability, unhampered by stereotypes and practical obstacles. Liberal feminism advocates a reform of existing institutions particularly those that impose obstacles and barriers to women's full participation in the public sphere (Freedman, 2001).

It was liberal feminism that had the greatest impact on mainstream society, appealing to many women who... identified with its liberal ideas of equality of rights for women with men. That it was liberal feminism which most affected the mores of the wider society was facilitated by the fact that it was the least challenging of the feminisms, the least offensive to men, the one whose demands could be met with the least anxiety (Burgmann, 1993, p. 83).

While many other strands of contemporary feminist theory define themselves in reaction against traditional liberal feminism, without liberal feminist efforts it is doubtful that many of the educational, legal, and professional/occupational gains for individual women could have been achieved (Putnam Tong, 1998). Opportunities for individual empowerment and increased social freedom for some women are directly attributable to liberal feminist endeavours.

*Radical Feminism*, in contrast, has consistently argued that liberal feminist reform strategies are unable to overcome the causes of women's oppression as society is a patriarchal system, characterised by male power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition. Typically radical feminism proceeds from the basic assumption that this domination of women by men is the oldest and most fundamental form of oppression in society. Radical feminists emphasise that *all* men, regardless of other variables such as race and class, oppress *all* women (Burgmann, 1993).

The structural theory of patriarchy suggested it wasn't simply men who were the problem but all things associated with men and masculinity. This meant not only did men dominate - but so did masculine values, ideas and typical modes of living. This basically covered everything, including such things as the mind, knowledge and emotion. Or science. ... It's not just that men were largely responsible for producing scientific knowledge or machines (although they were). The more significant point was that men and the values and priorities of masculinity were responsible for deciding and controlling what counted as scientific knowledge, or anything else. Radical feminists decided to turn that upside down and place women at the centre (Zalewski, 2000, p. 12).

Amongst radical feminists there exists a diverse range of views though in general their focus is on sexuality, gender and reproduction as the core sources of women's oppression (Putnam Tong, 1998). Through strategies like consciousness-raising, many radical feminists seek to politicise the life experiences of women - to argue that 'the personal is political'. These strategies work to prioritise another radical feminist goal - the celebration of the common bond between women - all women - on the basis of their sex. Radical feminism identifies women's difference from men as a source of strength. Female qualities like gentleness, emotion, nurturing, creativity, and



consensus have consistently, according to this analysis, been devalued. Radical feminism aims to rectify this and connect women with their own innate strengths and with each other (van Acker, 1999).

Through the politicization of women's personal experience, radical feminist theorizing has exposed previously invisible social issues, such as pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, and violence against women, to public debate. While not necessarily presenting a consensual view around such issues, radical feminism has highlighted their existence and provided a political analysis of issues previously dismissed as private, and caused by an individual's personal inadequacy (Putnam Tong, 1998). As a result such issues have moved from the margins to the centre of political and social consciousness.

*Socialist Feminism* developed from a critique of capitalism and class analysis and in many ways is linked to and inspired by Marxism. As such, socialist feminism argues that gender inequality develops from the economic inequalities of capitalism as well as patriarchal social structures and that strategies to combat inequality and oppression must jointly attack male domination and capitalism (van Acker, 1999). Socialist feminism has attempted to engage with a number of different theoretical feminist debates which contribute to its complexity and appeal. For example, socialist feminism has analysed women's work in the home as both crucial to the functioning of capitalism and consistently under valued and for the most part invisible. Integrating issues and debates about the meaning and construction of feminism for women who are other than white, middle class, Western and able bodied has also been a challenge initially posed by socialist feminism (Zalewski, 2000). While this has become a crucial project for other strands of contemporary feminist thought, many socialist feminists have, through debating the existence of a singular women's reality, begun to acknowledge the existence of differences between women and to debate the meaning and consequences of such differences.

Do women, simply because they are women, see reality differently from men? Although the answer to this question is a qualified yes, the fact remains that even if women see reality differently to men, not all women see reality the same. A women's race, class, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, physical condition, or psychological condition, for example will affect what position she occupies on the feminist standpoint platform. Realizing this, many socialist feminists have begun to consider seriously the 'epistemological consequences' of the differences as well as the similarities among women (Putnam Tong, 1998, p. 128).

*Postmodern Feminism* continues these deliberations but seeks to avoid reinstating the absolute, fueling feminist debates about plurality, multiplicity and difference (Putnam Tong, 1998). Key to an understanding of postmodern feminism is the idea that gendered identity is not natural or static but is developed through and within language.

Rather than taking for granted the fixed meaning of 'woman', postmodern feminists support its deconstruction, stressing the need for a new language that does not rely on traditional dichotomies such as reason/emotion; public/private and nature/culture. This suggests there is no essential female voice or experience, which leads to the possibility of change as meaning is unstable; it can be the site of political struggle and potential resistance (van Acker, 1999, p. 12).

Postmodern feminism is opposed to any universal position including that of 'woman' and resistant to the search for one 'truth'. The point is not to look for the truth about women or gender, as truth cannot be defined as a reality. The crucial project for postmodern feminists is to investigate the mechanisms of power that have forged female identities in order to resist those identities (Zalewski, 2000). While there are many distinctions that can be made between postmodern feminists, in general their writings and theorizing has highlighted how the efforts of feminists to achieve unity and cohesion among women has resulted in different and marginal women being excluded and alienated. As a result of these exclusions, the feminist, and indeed human community, has been impoverished. Post modern feminists have encouraged the feminist movement to celebrate multiplicity and embrace the "enriching differences of race, class, sexual preference, ethnicity, age, culture, religion and so on" (Putnam Tong, 1998, p. 210).

*Global Feminism* (Putnam Tong, 1998) or *Third-Wave Feminism* (Lotz, 2003) also speak a language of difference and are embedded in the experiences of exclusion of both women of color and women of Third World countries. In critiquing the erasure of difference explicit in the theorizing of liberal, radical and some socialist feminists, this way of thinking encourages feminists to consider the experience of others and to seek ways and means of working with women whose life experiences are different. These goals present a great challenge for feminism and some (Bhasin & Khan, 1993; hooks, 1984) have even suggested that 'sisterhood' can only exist in political solidarity rather than personal friendships between women whose life experiences are poles apart.

Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression... We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation of diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity (hooks, 1984, p. 404).

As these discussions of the differences in the scope and implications of feminist thought and debates indicate, feminism is a dynamic concept. This research purposefully resists categorizing itself against the descriptions above, however it refers to and resonates with (as do many of the participants) many of the elements of these ideas and strategies. From liberal thinking come ideas of equality and equal rights and strategies of reform within existing structures. Radical streams of thought contribute to a celebration of feminine values and traits such as nurturing and caring,

and stress the need to respect and value these attributes. As well, radical perspectives identify patriarchy or pervasive male domination of society, as a root cause of women's oppression. Socialist feminism emphasises the possibility of a woman's standpoint but also identifies the interconnectedness between the oppression of women and other oppressions based on class, race and other social, economic, cultural and political factors. This language of difference is further taken up by Postmodern feminism and Global feminism where the need to work at different levels and with different means to attain the goal of women's empowerment is highlighted.

These concepts all form the theoretical context in which the participants in this research go about their work. Their understanding of what they do, how they do it and why they do it is influenced and guided by feminist thinking. Any complex definition of feminism is not useful to this research, as the women involved are as diverse and complex as the strands of feminist thought described above. However they do agree that women have an inferior position in our society and encounter discrimination and disadvantage as a result of that inferior position. The participants in this research recognised that the oppression of women is related to inequities based on sex, in poverty and in racial injustice. Aspects of feminism guide them to work toward social, political, cultural and economic change in order to overcome and change this situation.

#### ***1.4 Feminist Service Organisations in Australia***

The organisations described in this research are feminist social welfare services. They provide a range of social welfare services to women and their children who need assistance because of violence, homelessness, poverty, or other forms of exclusion and oppression. In some of the literature, particularly from the United States (Ferree & Martin, 1995b; Martin, 1990; Mueller, 1995; Staggenborg, 1989), the term "feminist organisation" is used to describe a wide range of entities including service organisations, large national political bodies, and small self managed groups like book clubs or artist collectives. Some authors (see for example discussions in Kravetz & Jones, 1991; Mueller, 1995) challenge the authenticity of service organisations, (like refuges, sexual assault counselling agencies and accommodation services), to call themselves 'feminist organisations', primarily because of the assumed co-option of 'services' once they receive government funding. This certainly remains an enormous challenge for many Australian feminist services but does not, as this research confirms, negate their identification as feminist. In fact the impact of explicitly feminist services within the social welfare sector and within the women's movement has been significant (Weeks, 1994).

Feminist services have ventured into areas others have avoided; they have effectively modeled alternative structures, leadership and service delivery; and they have forced mainstream human

services to take women and women's concerns seriously (Egan & Hoatson, 1999). But as many authors (Broom, 1991; Egan & Hoatson, 1999; Hoatson & Egan, 2001; Weeks, 2001b) have identified, the gains made by and for women in past decades are fragile and forever in danger of at least erosion, if not complete disintegration. Kaplan comments:

The shift from the sociological model of the world to the 'dry' economic model has bought with it a shift in perspective so vast that one wonders how long the hard-won territory can be kept (Kaplan, 1996, p. 204).

Even as I write, Kaplan's concerns from eight years ago remain at least a worry, if not an ever-increasing threat. Gains and achievements are eroded away daily. Since 1996 and the election of a Howard-led conservative government, many of the unique features and outcomes of the Australian women's movement have been either abolished or enfeebled. In describing the swift and hostile nature of Howard's attack on women's rights and opportunities for equality, Anne Summers claims:

First, he hacked into funds for services that helped women to achieve economic independence. Secondly, he either abolished or slashed the funding, reduced the prestige and more importantly, the authority of those government offices whose job it was to ensure women's interests were protected. By the end of Howard's first year in office, the Women's Bureau ...had been shut down, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner had been forced out of office, and...the Office of the Status of Women...had had its budget and influence slashed (Summers, 2003, p. 12).

The consequences and impact of these political tactics on decision-making about, and funding levels for, organisations providing services to women remain significant. Government departments have restructured, community based services have been de-funded and certain women's services have been amalgamated with larger services (Weeks, 2001b). Competition between women's services has been not only encouraged but demanded, in some cases contributing to an unravelling of relationships between and within feminist organisations (Hoatson & Egan, 2001).

Despite this climate of hostility, Wendy Weeks reports that many feminist organisations providing services to women have survived in a manner that is a tribute to workers' tenacious commitment to their service ideals (Weeks, 2001b). In order to survive, organisations have utilised a range of creative strategies. Some of these strategies have been challenging to implement, and in turn, have challenged feminist organisational ideals. While some research has considered these issues from an organisational perspective (Melville, 1994; Weeks, 1994) very little has examined the experience of the women who make the difficult decisions and, on occasion, the concessions, that keep these organisations afloat.

Bringing passion, idealism and desire for change to the table day after day quickly becomes an exhausting process in the face of so many lives in crisis, so many women who need the tools just to keep themselves going, get their families out of danger and meet basic needs....Our personal struggle is part of a much larger movement (McCarry, 2001, p. 29).

The feminist organisations and the feminist women whose stories and experiences are the subject of this thesis are part of a much larger movement and it is their ongoing struggles, both personal and political, which offer the best opportunity for women to hold on to the gains made by the women's movement. It is within these service organisations that women have often been introduced to the ideology of feminism and been given the space to explore its meaning in their private and public lives regardless of the hostility of the external environment. Hercus (1999) identifies that this participation in feminist services is one of the varied and diverse ways in which women "do" feminism, "know" feminism and can "be" feminist. Weeks (2001a) proposes that participation in feminist services is an expression of Australian women's participation in civil society and their contribution to the social fabric of their community. This type of social contribution demonstrates "the capacity to initiate change, to commit oneself to a certain transformative course of social action" (Weeks, 2001a), and as such can be understood as an expression of women's social citizenship. This understanding of the role these organisations play in women's lives, and the role the women themselves play in the life of the organisation, is an integral part of this research.

### ***1.5 Structure of the Thesis***

This introductory chapter has provided an opportunity for me to situate the conception of this research within my own story. I have identified the focus of the research and provided some contextual background to the organisations involved in the study. This chapter has also acknowledged the importance and relevance for myself, as a researcher, and for the nature of this topic, of a feminist theoretical perspective. Such a perspective provides the philosophical base for the selection of the research method and methodologies as detailed in chapter three.

Chapter two is a summary of the literature relevant to this research. It examines traditional organisational literature and particularly focuses on the ways women have been situated within mainstream organisations. The contribution of feminist analyses to both the understanding of mainstream organisations and the development of alternative organisational forms is also detailed. Feminists have documented the issues of structure, hierarchy, women's value and decision-making as key dimensions which feminist organisations strive to create differently (Ferree & Martin, 1995b). The literature has documented some flaws in the ideal feminist

organisation and questioned the ability of feminist organisations to provide a real alternative experience for all women. The chapter also explores some of the core themes of the literature concerned with social movements and their associated organisations. In particular, issues of collective identity, framing, culture and emotion in social movement organisations are considered.

The third chapter outlines the way in which I approached and carried out the research. I discuss the underlying feminist philosophy of the research and how this has influenced the choice of method and process. I explore, in particular, the nature of my involvement in the participating organisations and the implications of this involvement for the integrity of the research. This chapter introduces the women who participated in the study, describing their particular demographic attributes and roles within each organisation.

The history of the Australian feminist movement is discussed in chapter four and serves to situate the history and development of each of these feminist organisations. I examine the major events that occurred in Australia during the different eras of the feminist movement and specifically explore the dilemmas that confronted the movement around inclusion and difference. This chapter also documents the context of feminism and the position of women in the Northern Territory, in particular.

In chapter five each organisation is introduced and described in detail using material from reports, newsletters, and the words of individual women. This chapter explores the women's development of and responses to organisational structure and processes. This provides the reader with an understanding of the specific organisational features that impact on the women's experiences. In particular the chapter examines and highlights the different strategies used by women in each organisation to create, influence and sustain the organisation. The outcomes of these strategies and the ongoing issues confronting each organisation are identified.

Chapter six continues the exploration of the data collected in this research as it describes the experiences of the women around particular issues of importance such as friendships, activism, exploitation and power. The way individual women attempt to understand and resolve issues of difference and inclusion are discussed. The elements that contribute to women's experiences are also highlighted.

Finally in chapter seven I consider what the findings add to our understanding of feminist organisations and the women who work in them. Theoretical implications, practical applications and recommendations for areas of further research are also presented.

### *Chapter Summary*

I began this chapter with the story of my own journey to and within feminism. This story reflects the fluid process of constructing an identity along the intertwined dimensions of 'knowing', 'doing', 'being', and 'feeling' feminist (Hercus, 1999). The aims of the research are to explore the experiences of feminist women who work in feminist service organisations. Feminism has been broadly defined as an understanding of women's disadvantaged position in society and a commitment to work towards changing that disadvantage at some level. Feminist service organisations have been an important feature of the Australian social welfare landscape and have played an important role in providing the opportunity for women to 'be' feminist (Hercus, 1999) and to purposefully contribute to their communities. As such, the women who work in these organisations have developed, and in some cases pioneered, feminist ways of working together and feminist organisational processes and strategies. These organisations, and therefore the women who work within them, are threatened by the hostile, gender neutral environment of Australian health and welfare policy. Through this research I hope to contribute to a greater understanding of the realities of feminist organisational practice beyond the ideal structures and theoretical typologies found in much of the literature. I move now, in chapter two, to a closer examination of that literature.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of the Literature**

This chapter explores the literature that has contributed to the development of this study. It looks firstly at the literature that describes and analyses organisations. A particular focus is an examination of the way women have been situated within mainstream organisations and the contribution of feminist analyses to both the understanding of mainstream organisations and the development of alternative organisational forms. The chapter also explores some of the core themes of the literature concerned with social movements and their associated organisations. In particular, issues of collective identity, culture and emotion in social movement organisations are considered. Definitions and analyses of feminist organisations are examined and some of the issues, dilemmas, and conflicts for women who work in such organisations identified.

#### ***2.1 Traditional Organisation Theories***

This chapter begins with a consideration of organisation theory in general. The main focus of this research is women and their experiences in a particular kind of organisation, but an examination of the traditional organisational theories and analyses serves as a backdrop to the issues raised.

Blau and Scott suggest that organisations come into existence when “a number of *men* become organised into a social unit – an organisation- that has been established for the explicit purpose of achieving certain goals ” (*emphasis added*) (1963b, p. 1). The assumption embodied in this description, that it is men who will organise, has been the significant feature of the organisational literature. Women are ignored and invisible.

In a later work, Blau & Scott (1980) identify four different types of organisations. They categorise these types by establishing the key beneficiary of the organisational activity. Of particular interest is the type of organisation described as a ‘mutual benefit association’ where the primary beneficiaries are the organisation's members. Examples of such organisations provided by Blau & Scott include political parties, unions and professional associations. The gender blind nature of this account ignores the organisational achievements of women, though the issues, concerns and threats faced by 'mutual benefit associations' are also relevant for feminist organisations. The crucial issues for such organisations include the maintenance of control by membership, the development of oligarchies, and member apathy. The authors go on to identify the conditions which heighten the ability of these organisations to resist and resolve such problems. These conditions include the autonomy of local groups, the absence of severe external



threats, a high level of skill and education among members, and the absence of large disparities between members in terms of salaries and status (Blau & Scott, 1980, p. 119). These conditions are similar to the elements that have been reported as influencing the survival of some feminist collectives (Riger, 1994).

The other types of organisations identified in Blau & Scott's analysis are:

- 'business concerns', where the owner is the main beneficiary and the key problem confronted is obtaining maximum gain for minimum cost;
- 'commonweal organisations', a term which refers to all those organisations that have the general public as their key beneficiary and where the maintenance of external democratic control over the internal bureaucracy is the most apparent difficulty; and
- 'Service organisations', which prioritise clients as their main beneficiary. The key dilemmas faced by service organisations are, firstly, the potential to confuse client's wishes with client's needs and, secondly, negotiating the resultant client dissatisfaction (Blau & Scott, 1980, p. 123 - 132).

This final organisation discussed in Blau and Scott's typology is also of relevance to feminist service organisations. Mueller (1995) notes that feminist service organisations face a number of competing demands as they attempt to meet both the needs of members and the needs of clients. These issues will be explored in greater depth in chapter five.

An understanding of organisations in terms of their key beneficiary is only one way of viewing these phenomena. The study of organisations in the social sciences has led to a plethora of literature describing, prescribing, defending, and critiquing organisations. This literature demonstrates that there are a number of perspectives, many competing, which contribute to our understanding of organisational life. This review will briefly consider some of the perspectives that have been particularly influential in understanding human service and feminist organisations. Any examination of organisations, and their impact on those who are a part of them, must consider the emergence of bureaucratic organisations as documented by Max Weber in the late 1800s. Weber was primarily interested in the nature of the power and authority that existed within different organisational forms and structures (Jones & May, 1992). He identified three types of authority: traditional authority, charismatic authority and legal-rational authority. Traditional authority he described as that which is sanctioned by its own history and established over long periods of time. Charismatic authority is that which comes to individuals as a result of some personal feature or characteristic they possess while legal-rational authority is embedded in the rules, policies and procedures of an organisation and accepted as legitimate by the people concerned. If the rules and policies provide for authority in a particular role or position, then

people are likely to accept direction and authoritative behaviour from the individual fulfilling that role. It is this type of authority/power that Weber determined as not only the key feature of bureaucratic organisations, but also the essential characteristic that set such organisations apart from those that had gone before.

Kinship, friendship, personal influence, were, like corruption and nepotism, to have no place in the enlightened bureaucracy: only impersonal rules were to govern the structures and processes through which modernity was to bring its enlightenment to the world (Leonard, 1997, p. 79).

Issues of power and authority are important dimensions for both traditional bureaucratic organisational forms and the alternatives proposed and developed by women. These issues will be revisited in later sections of this chapter.

Weber identified a number of other key principals as integral to his concept of an ideal bureaucracy. These principals were:

- A division of labour with each member filling a distinct position that had its responsibilities and authority clearly defined;
- Positions arranged in a hierarchy of authority resulting in a chain of command;
- Formal qualifications demonstrating technical expertise as the basis of recruitment and promotion;
- A formally established system of rules and regulations governing the decisions and actions of all levels of the organisation; and
- An impersonal attitude toward clients and other workers so as to foster formality. Such detachment was to prevent personal feelings or relationships from distorting rational judgment (Blau & Scott, 1963b; Jones & May, 1992)

It is these features of the bureaucratic model that continue to most strikingly influence the organisation of public life and workplace environments. There have however been many other analyses and theoretical descriptions of organisations. Each of these offers a unique orientation and serves as a critique of the others.

One such orientation is that of scientific management. Fredrick Taylor developed this theory in the early 1900s, when he proposed a rational theory of organisation to overcome what he described as the irrational tendencies of workers (Mathews, 1989). Taylor advocated a 'machine' like approach to organisational life, emphasising routine methods, rational planning, and the design and development of administrative processes to ensure tasks were carried out.

This approach assumed the greatest efficiency would be obtained by fragmenting the overall production assignment into smaller and smaller operations, each to be performed by an individual....Job tasks were devised not by the workers themselves

but by trained industrial engineers, on the premise that all “brainwork” and all physical labor must be separated into different strata of the firm (Mathews, 1989, p. 31).

There are significant similarities between Max Weber’s ideal rational/legal bureaucracy and Taylor’s vision of a scientifically managed organisation. Their work continues to influence current thinking, with many large-scale work organisations taking on the imagery and metaphor of the ‘machine’ to describe their work environment.

These approaches have been heavily critiqued for their failure to account for the significance of social interaction between workers, assuming instead that financial rewards were the key to worker motivation (Jones & May, 1992). This observation led to the development of the human relations approach to organisation theory. Such an approach pays particular attention to issues such as the organisation’s informal structure of relationships that operates within and outside the formal structure of positions as detailed on the organisational chart. This approach considers the quality of relationships between people and identifies the inherent conflicts between management and workers. A human relations approach seeks to develop structures and strategies that acknowledge the personal life situations of each worker. However, while the quality of human relations in an organisation is undoubtedly a factor in effectiveness and productivity, what constitutes ‘good’ human relations remains a point of argument (Jones & May, 1992). Feminist organisations have confronted these issues in their analysis of the nature of women’s relationships, and in attempting to prioritise relationships and process in the work environment. Their efforts and the dilemmas that have resulted are addressed later in this review.

Another significant contribution to the understanding of organisations has come from the theorists who view organisations as similar to biological organisms – the systems approach. This perspective has made three key contributions to the understanding of organisational experiences (Jones & May, 1992). The first was the recognition of the nature of interdependence within an organisation. Such an understanding highlights the dynamic and fluid nature of interactions and interrelationships between the various elements and units of an organisation. The systems perspective also emphasises the concept of organisational needs. This concept, in contrast to earlier models, suggests that organisations are not the rational instruments previously described. Instead they are social systems that adapt and change according to the internal and external requirements for survival. This understanding leads then to the last significant aspect of this model - the relationships organisations have with their external environment. Organisations, like all social systems, are engaged in an ongoing process of exchange with other organisations and groups in their environment. Adjusting to the demands of this external environment has an

impact on the goals, structure, and culture of the organisation. An organisation then is "a network of interacting, overlapping, conflicting or cooperating subsystems, each part receiving something from others, influenced by the behaviour of others and itself behaving in ways which have consequences for other subsystems and the organisation as a whole" (Warham cited in Jones & May 1992, p.45). This organisational paradigm has relevance for this research as the external environment and particularly the socio-political context in which feminist organisations operate has a significant impact on organisational outcome, processes, and culture.

## ***2.2 Fordism and the Entrenchment of Hierarchy***

Even this brief examination of the theories of organisations identifies an assumption of an organisation as a hierarchy. In fact this assumption is exemplified in the often synonymous use of terms like 'organisation', 'bureaucracy', and 'hierarchy' in the organisational literature. The concept of hierarchy can be described as a system in which the "distribution of power, privilege, and authority are both systemic and unequal" (Iannello, 1992, p. 15). The assumption of hierarchy as the only true form of organising activity and work is influenced by the work of Michels in the early 1900s. In his study of the German Social Democratic Party, Michels referred to an "iron law of oligarchy", which he claimed was an inevitable consequence of human organising activity and inherent in all organisations. Michels' "law" asserted that, despite the presence of even the most ideologically committed members, egalitarian organisational principles would fail because "every organisation has a need for a division of labor and that as soon as these divisions are created, so too are special interests" (Iannello, 1992, p. 4). These special interests allow for the development of specialist knowledge and information, which immediately advantages one group over another - a 'ruling class' thus emerges. Michels was clearly influenced by scientific management perspectives of organisations and by Weber's description of the bureaucracy. Both these approaches assume a hierarchical structure and, as noted, continue to form the starting point of many current understandings of organisational experience.

In the 1980s some organisational analysts linked the proliferation of hierarchical structures with the Fordist vision of mass production, mass consumption and mass standardisation (Mathews, 1989). The organisational form influenced so strongly by Weber's legal/ rational bureaucratic ideal and Taylor's scientific management model became entrenched as the only way organisations could meet demands for production efficiency and consumer satisfaction. Terms such as "hierarchies", "division of labour", "surveillance", and "control" became synonymous with concepts of efficiency, effectiveness, and consequently, with consumer well being (Leonard, 1997).

Both the owners of production and the organisers of labour shared this hegemony of vision and as a result it had an enormous impact on the creation and development of work organisations (Mathews, 1989). Not only did hierarchy become entrenched in the operations of work organisations, so too did the differential valuing of work. In a process reflective of Taylorism, 'brainwork' belonged at the top of the hierarchy and physical labour belonged at the bottom.

As the work process is increasingly fragmented, a crucial division of labour emerges, that between intellectual and manual work. The intellectual work, the creative, planning and designing function, previously activities all performed by the craft worker, are now removed and carried out by the senior strata of the organization: planners, designers, managers (Leonard, 1997, p. 91).

Whilst women rarely rate a mention in much of the literature described to date the differential experiences of men and women within hierarchical and bureaucratic workplaces has been identified and challenged. These differential experiences prompted a feminist critique of organisational life that has highlighted the gendered nature of organisational culture and structures and the ways in which these perpetuate disadvantage for women.

### ***2.3 Women in Traditional Organisations***

Cynthia Cockburn claims that mainstream organisations place two kinds of barriers in the way of women's equal participation in organisational life: institutional and cultural.

The institutional impediments include structures, procedures, and rules. Cultural impediments arise in discourse and interaction. They influence what women and men think feel and do (Cockburn, 1991, p. 45).

The impact of both organisational structure and culture are evident in descriptions of women's experience in hierarchical organisations. These experiences included the differential valuing of men's and women's work, the direct and indirect discrimination experienced by women in organisations, and the exclusion of women from positions of decision-making and power in organisations.

#### ***2.3.1 Of Unequal Value***

The earning disparity between men and women is but one example of how men's and women's positions in organisations are far from equal. This area of research has received much attention since the equal pay decisions of the late sixties and early seventies (Burton, 1991; Murrell & James, 2001; Murrell & Jones, 1996). These analyses identify that women receive less pay for the same or similar work which suggests a cultural understanding of women's place in the world of public work as something of a whim; an understanding that views women as supplementary earners rather than the key breadwinners in families and therefore requiring and deserving less

remuneration. Despite the efforts of various equal employment opportunity mechanisms, this disparity continues. Murrell and James (2001) suggest the main reason for the persistence of this difference between men's and women's earnings is the existence of a dual labour market where men are the major participants in the primary labour market allowing them to access better jobs and significantly higher rates of pay. Women are clustered in the secondary labour market with little opportunity to move out. It is this dual labour market that erects "an impermeable barrier for career advancement and is of critical importance in explaining the gender gap in earnings" (Murrell & James, 2001, p. 245).

Even within this secondary labour market women are overwhelmingly represented in certain occupations and in certain levels of work organisations. These occupations, such as clerical work or service industry work, are characterised not only by low pay, but also boring, repetitive, work and poor, if any, prospects for upward mobility. Even in professions such as teaching, nursing and social work, areas where most of the employees of organisations are women, management and decision-making positions are held by men (Gumprecht, 1985). The experience of women in such organisations is one of powerlessness and indignity. "Women working in these female-dominated, low-level jobs experience the weight of bureaucratic power and the devaluation of their work on a daily basis" (Ames, 1996, p. 38).

Not only is women's work devalued in direct remuneration and prospects for advancement, its intrinsic nature is usually invisible and ignored by others. The work women are allocated in organisations is likely to reflect social stereotypes of women as nurturing, caring, supportive individuals. Such work is rarely valued to the same extent as tasks that promote the individual and inevitably lead to organisational rewards. For example, Lynda Ames (1996) discusses women's work status as secretaries and their place in the organisational hierarchy and identifies the gendered principals used to define such positions. She claims the job of secretary is described in a manner that identifies feminine traits that the female incumbents were deemed to possess, qualities such as being caring, supportive and nurturing. This description was then used to reflect the qualities of a perfect secretary.

Being a secretary involves supporting the work of others, taking care of others in terms of scheduling, preparing and cleaning up after them....Being a good secretary requires more than just technical competence; it requires a "sunny" disposition and "cooperative" attitude, and it often requires being "sexy" or "attractive".... The job of secretary is women's work by virtue of women's essential nature (Ames, 1996, p. 42).

While the individual manager may value the competence of female support staff, the skills of women are invisible to the organisation and are in fact more likely to be incorporated into an

assessment of the male manager's competence. The job of this male manager is, in comparison, defined in terms of controlling and directing the work unit and as such is visible and rewarded. Clare Burton and her colleagues recognised this phenomenon in university workplaces stating that

the skills women use which tend to be undervalued or not recognised are those which relate to levels of responsibility, communication, information management and administrative work, as well as skills and knowledge requirements for effective service to clients....technical skills are more readily identified than organisational or social/communication skills (Burton, Cook, & Wilson, 1997, p. 77).

### 2.3.2. Discrimination

In the same report, Burton and colleagues identified that women experience organisational life as discriminatory and difficult. In particular women report that their capabilities are not recognised and their suggestions are ignored unless a man reiterates the idea. Women also report feeling intimidated as members of decision-making committees and boards, and that they regularly experience interactions with male seniors that are dismissive and hostile (Burton et al., 1997).

Experiences such as these lend much weight to the view that women are systemically disadvantaged by the masculine culture of the organisation and the subsequent gender biased nature of organisational life. Organisational culture refers to "shared motives, values, beliefs, identities and interpretations (meanings) of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives" (House, 1999, cited in Bajdo & Dickson, 2001, p. 400). Bajdo and Dickson go on to suggest that recent research has been consistent in its identification of male-oriented organisational culture as a major barrier to women's (and other minorities') satisfaction, advancement, success, and influence in organisational life. They identify male-oriented culture as being characterised by "hierarchical authority, independence, autocratic leadership styles and top down communication" (2001, p. 400).

Women's experience within organisations is also disadvantaged by the inflexibility of organisations to accommodate women (and men) that have significant family responsibilities. Despite a growing number of partnerships between men and women where both partners consider child-care and domestic arrangements their responsibility, organisational structures invariably force one or the other to take primary responsibility for the family and suffer the consequences. It is overwhelmingly women who take this 'option' (Harris, 1998). The consequences include a broken career path, constant negotiation with child care arrangements, a perceived unreliability because of an inability to work long hours at the workplace (Burton et al., 1997). Women continue to report that organisational values, which prompt some staff to work very long hours (visibly at the workplace), has led to negative perceptions of their work commitment because

they require consistency in their hours of paid work to be able to fulfill their family roles and unpaid work responsibilities (Burton et al., 1997).

Again, despite the fact that these issues have been identified over many years, and have been the subject of a range of strategic interventions by individual organisations and government bodies, recent research suggests that married men with a partner who does not work outside the home, are the most likely to succeed in their careers and move up the organisational hierarchy. Further, this same research establishes that there is no family structure that allows women similar success. In fact, women are found to be more successful if they remain single but even then they do not reach the heady heights of organisational advancement experienced by those with a wife at home (Scheer & Reitman, 2002). This pervasive discrimination results in significantly unequal outcomes.

The inequitable incline of the playing field is reinforced by men in their roles as life partners and spouses, when they fail to provide the same levels of domestic support to their wives and their wives' careers that they expect for themselves or their own careers.... Work and family systems are not only tightly coupled; they are both gendered, albeit in asymmetrical ways. The inequitable division of household labor and childcare handicaps women and privileges men in the competition for organizational rewards (Maier, 1997b, p. 944)

Traditional organisational analyses have tended to view hierarchical organisations themselves as gender neutral (Read & Ross-Smith, 1996). Through a neutral lens any disadvantage or discriminatory practice experienced by women is attributed to the deficiency of women in general or the unsuitability of individual women or (in some rare instances) the gendered attitudes and behaviours of the individual men involved (Acker, 1991). Therefore issues such as sexual harassment are viewed and analysed as the deviations of gendered actors not as intrinsic and inescapable components of organisational structure and culture.

However, recent research (Bell, McLaughlin, & Sequeira, 2002) identified clearly that sexual harassment was a gendered problem entrenched in the fabric of organisational life that discriminated against and disadvantaged women so powerfully that they were often likely to choose positions of lower pay and less prospects in order to be safe. Women who venture out of the women-dominated occupations and choose workplaces unconventional for women experience frequent harassment, which some research (Bell et al., 2002; Stanko, 1988; Wajcman, 1999b) identified as deliberate and resentful behaviour designed to deter women from entering these traditionally male-dominated positions.

The sometimes virulent harassment experienced by some women in male dominated environments...makes the suggestion of the intentional, purposeful creation of an inhospitable working environment appear credible (Bell et al., 2002, p. 68).



Acker (1991) argues that it is the failure to acknowledge the integral role which gender plays in organisational life that allows masculinity, if not individual men, to consistently win out - either in terms of self respect for men at the bottom and /or power for men at the top. The ongoing myth of organisations as gender neutral serves to perpetuate the disadvantage and oppression of women within organisations. Perhaps more alarmingly, Belle (2002) identified that the women in her study accepted the gender neutral description of their organisation and claimed that merit rather than gender influenced company decisions. However their descriptions of what the company defined as merit reflected definitions of an androgynous person and as Belle argues "it is more comfortable for a man than a woman to be androgynous" (p. 157; p. 157).

### 2.3.3 Exclusion from Power

In recent years women, at least anecdotally, have been encouraged to believe that barriers to their advancement in hierarchical organisations have largely been overcome. For example, the Department of Labor in the United States proudly claims that the percentage of women in management positions in the United States in 1997 was 40% compared with only 18% in 1970 (Bajdo & Dickson, 2001). Wood (2003) identifies that Australian women now comprise about 30 % of all managers, representing a massive increase in the last decade. The media attention, focused on individual women who have managed to reach the top of their profession or trade, maintains the perception that women no longer experience disadvantage and the practices that once created some hardship for women have long since ceased.

A widespread assumption is that the barriers have been coming down, women have been moving up, and equal treatment is an accomplished fact. ... Hewlett Packard's first female CEO at the time of her appointment [said]: "the accomplishments of women across industry demonstrate that there is not a glass ceiling" (Rhode, 2003, p. 6).

How then, do we explain the fact that the presence of women in senior managerial positions remains unusual in most areas and most countries? Mike Savage's (1992) research into the banking industry in Australia suggests that while women have been able to move into professional or skilled management positions, rarely are they able to secure positions of real managerial authority within organisations. He identified that organisations are often restructured in direct response to the entry of increasing numbers of professional and skilled women. Positions are created that recognise and utilise their expertise but deny them any authority or decision-making power (Savage, 1992).

This research is supported by more recent findings showing that women are more likely than ever before to acquire the title of 'Manager'. However, new positions (e.g. 'executive manager' or

‘senior manager’) have been created and vested with the organisational authority and decision-making responsibility previously held by ‘managers’. Women remain as unlikely as ever to achieve this new status (Bell et al., 2002). In fact, despite the increasing numbers of women managers cited by Badjo and Dickson (2001) and Wood (2003) above, less than 5% of senior managers in Australia and the United States are women.

The barriers that result in such disparities are often subtle, and include gender stereotypes, lack of opportunities for women to gain the job experiences necessary to advance and the lack of top management commitment to gender equity and equal employment initiatives (Bell et al., 2002, p. 68).

The traditional organisational literature has tended to explain these disparities in terms of women's choice and preference or women's inability to demonstrate the necessary skills required for leadership and management. For example, the absence of women from positions of authority and power has been explained as women's lack of ambition or women's natural preference for family life at the expense of organisational life, as for women the two are seen as mutually exclusive (Murrell & James, 2001). Rosabeth Kanter's response to such claims over thirty years ago is still pertinent.

The structure of organisations plays a powerful role in creating work behaviour. Women in low mobility organisational situations develop attitudes and orientations that are sometimes said to be characteristic of those people as individuals or “women as a group”, but that can more profitably be viewed as more universal *human* responses to blocked opportunities (cited in Deacon, 1982, p. 246).

The concept of women's choice as the cause of the experience they report in organisations fails to recognise the lengthy analysis undertaken by many women in assessing options and identifying the attractions and disincentives involved when working in different types of organisations or in different parts of an organisation. Margaret Gibleman (1998) reports that it is the costs of advancement women choose not to pay, rather than an aversion to advancement itself. Gibleman suggests these are costs not required of men.

The participants view advancement up the organizational ladder as coming at a price. Not only does a woman need to be clearly superior to the men around her to succeed, but she must give up a lot in exchange (Gibleman, 1998, p. 152).

In addition, many women report feeling uncomfortable with the behaviour expected of those who manage to push through the glass ceiling and find themselves in positions of decision-making authority. Combative and aggressive management styles incorporating male values and male viewpoints are identified as preferable in many organisations. For example, an article in the Weekend Australian nearly ten years ago suggested that senior management in Australia needs “aggression, dominance, stimulus seeking, risk taking competitiveness, an interest in money, a

single minded and obsessive concern with career, success, ambition and the commanding presence to lead” (McIntyre, 1994). There is little to suggest that the perception of what is required from organisational leaders has changed. Maier, in his analysis of the organisational culture that contributed to one of the space shuttle disasters, states:

...the cultural system that predominates in most organisations is marked by an emphasis on objectivity, competition and 'getting down to business'. Being hard-nosed and adversarial are taken for granted. Managers are generally expected to be single-mindedly devoted to organizational goals and objectives, to be competitive, logical, rational, decisive, ambitious, efficient, task-and results-oriented, assertive and confident in their use of power (Maier, 1997b, p. 945).

More recently, theories of leadership have stressed the need for managers to have interpersonal qualities more commonly associated with women, such as cooperation and collaboration (Van de Boon, 2003; Vinnicomb & Singh, 2002). However, women aspiring to leadership still face discriminatory attitudes based on stereotypes.

They risk appearing too 'soft' or too 'strident', too aggressive or not aggressive enough. What is assertive in a man often seems abrasive in a woman. An overview of more than a hundred research studies involving evaluations of leaders indicates that women are rated lower when they adopt 'masculine', authoritative styles... women face trade offs men do not (Rhode, 2003, p. 8).

Clearly women continue to confront organisational barriers to their entry and advancement in corporate and human service organisations. Despite the interventions and ongoing analyses of feminists, the institutional and cultural barriers to women's equality in traditional organisations and workplaces continue to exist. As Wendy Parkin has described

The mere fact of accepting a job outside the home does not liberate a woman or begin to make her equal with men. Rather it usually means coping with two jobs, with her position in the work organization being little different to her position in the home... She will rarely have the energy, time or facilities to research her position or be an activist for change. Most of the apparently generous provision for women workers by organizations is little more than tokenism and does not alter power relationships (Hearn & Parkin, 1992, p. 338).

Perhaps because of this insidious persistence of male domination within hierarchically structured, impersonal, and segmented organisations, feminist women sought to identify alternative forms of organisational structure and alternative ways of creating workplaces. They were however not alone. Before focusing specifically on feminist alternatives to mainstream organisational forms, I will proceed first to consider the contribution of other analysts who have envisaged more co-operative possibilities, and have therefore made attempts to identify organisational alternatives.

## 2.4 *Alternatives to Hierarchy*

Initially these alternatives focused on the development of worker co-operatives, communes, and collective workplaces (Brandow & McDonnell, 1981). Many of these alternative organisations were for profit businesses where workers owned the means of production and jointly contributed leadership and skills to the business (see for example Brandow & McDonnell, 1981; Pearson & Baker, 1982). These co-operatives were primarily influenced by Marxist theory, linking the use of alternative organisational forms with the struggle to decrease worker alienation and powerlessness, and the promotion of social change.

The collective movement is a potentially powerful part of a movement for social change, because it appeals to deeply felt ideals. People want to control their work and their lives. They want institutional structures that guarantee their right to this control. The collective movement provides a way for people to assume some of the control in their work lives. People in collectives aim to spread their ideals throughout society. We want to show that worker ownership and control is not a pipedream, but a real possibility that has been blocked by those who will lose their power in a worker-controlled economy (Brandow & McDonnell, 1981p. 89).

One of the most comprehensive analyses of these co-operative/ collective workplaces was developed through research conducted by Joyce Rothschild and J. Allen Whitt. In their book “The Cooperative Workplace” Rothschild & Whitt (1986) analysed five different organisations that had deviated substantially from mainstream notions of organisational structure and design. In comparing these organisations with traditional hierarchical bureaucracies, Rothschild & Whitt identified eight elements of difference between a bureaucracy and a collective or cooperative. Obviously the description of these elements reflected the ideal of both models, but an understanding of some of these features serves as a starting point from which to analyse the impact alternative models of organisations may have on those who are a part of them.

The first element discussed was that of authority. In contrast to the bureaucratic structure, authority in a co-operative workplace is not vested in the individual according to position or rank, but to the collective as a whole. If authority is delegated by the whole to an individual or small group, then this is a temporary situation and subject to immediate recall. “Compliance is to the consensus of the collective which is always fluid and open to recall” (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986, p. 62).

The nature of rules and regulations was another element identified by Rothschild and Whitt (1986) where collectives and bureaucracy differed. In a cooperative organisation rules are minimal and based on the substantive ethics of a situation. In contrast the rules in a bureaucracy are fixed and strong emphasis is placed on conformity. A third element of difference was found in the strategies of social control utilised by the two organisational types. Hierarchy and

supervision of subordinates by superiors are the strategies used to achieve social control in bureaucratically organised models. In collective/ cooperative types of organisations social control rarely becomes an issue due to the homogeneity of the group (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986). When necessary “social control is based on something akin to peer pressure” (Iannello, 1992, p. 28). The nature of the social relations between organisation members was also seen as different. For the collective organisation, social relations are personal and holistic. This contrasts strongly with the professional impersonality demanded in traditional hierarchical organisations (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986).

The ways in which an organisation's members were recruited and promoted was the fifth element of difference. Friendship networks and identification and compatibility with organisational values are the basis for recruitment into collectives, while advancement in such organisations is rarely sought given the lack of hierarchical rewards. In a bureaucracy recruitment is based on qualification for the position, usually in the form of some formal or external accreditation. Advancement is important and achieved through formal rules and individuals are assessed against these rules, before promotion to higher levels and higher rewards (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986).

Each of these organisational models was identified as having a different incentive structure, which was integral to the nature of that model. Cooperative organisations promote incentives such as solidarity, and other normative rewards rather than the material and remunerative incentives of the bureaucracy. The social stratification of organisational members in a bureaucratic hierarchy allows domination and power over others to be key features of such organisations. In cooperative workplaces the organisation strives to be “flat” and egalitarian, a significant move away from the traditional organisational strata (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986).

Another element of difference was identified as differentiation. As we have noted in descriptions above, a key feature in both the historical development of bureaucratic forms and their current function is the division of labour and the “dichotomy between intellectual work and manual work and between administrative tasks and performance tasks”(Rothschild & Whitt, 1986, p. 63). In cooperative / collectives the division of labour is minimised and tasks shared in an effort to demystify so-called expertise.

There are, however, a number of potential costs in democratizing and collectivising organisations. Rothschild-Whitt (1979) raises a number of issues that have remained consistent criticisms of collective and co-operative structures. For example, she discusses the concept of consensus decision-making where every member of the organisation contributes to and agrees with a decision. This consensual process requires two-way direct communications, which in turn can require an impractical amount of time in meetings. Attempts to streamline meetings can only

occur to a point or else collective planning and input is at risk (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). However, Kathleen Iannello points out that this criticism of consensus gives the false impression that bureaucratic decision-making processes are, by nature, quick and efficient. She comments that

...real world experience has demonstrated that the endless rules and regulations of bureaucracies can also lead to protracted disputes... The issue of time is specific to the issues and circumstances facing the organisation (Iannello, 1992, p. 29)

Rothschild-Whitt (1979) also suggests that in order for consensual processes to work, members of collective organisations should be relatively homogeneous in background, values and goals. Bureaucracies on the other hand can utilise the diversity among its members, often resulting in the generation of creativity. While this may be so, Iannello (1992) counters that collectives in fact often fostered creativity to a much larger degree than bureaucratic work places. She claims creativity and risk-taking is more likely to thrive in the safe environment of a collective insulated by the security of sameness.

Organisations using consensual processes provide opportunities for face to face communication. As a result conflicts are more visible and extract a higher cost. The impersonality described as a key feature of bureaucratic organisations can also act to protect individuals from personally facing the consequences of their decisions and actions (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). The emotional intensity that these personal confrontations can create in the collective/ cooperative workplace can mean that some members leave the organisation for the impersonality and relative emotional safety of a bureaucracy.

Given our overwhelming experience of hierarchy as the dominant form of social organisation, Rothschild-Whitt (1979) identifies that some people are unsuited for collective organising. They bring values and attitudes that undermine consensus and cooperation, learned undoubtedly from their earliest contact with the social world. Brandow and McDonnell agree, though they are more hopeful of our capacity to undertake change. They suggest:

We need to be patient when we're learning democratic decision- making skills. Our society does not prepare us for democratic worklives, despite its democratic ideals. Whatever democracy our country has usually ends at the workplace (Brandow & McDonnell, 1981, p. 91)

Rothschild-Whitt claims that the external pressures to which collective organisations are subjected are more intense than the usual constraints experienced by organisations. This is because such organisations are invariably formed in opposition to an issue or structure of the mainstream society. They often contest or take on adversarial positions. This is certainly true of feminist organisations. At times however this oppositional position may be a source of strength in

attracting membership to the organisation as it offers alternatives to mainstream participation, thereby strengthening the organisation (Iannello, 1992).

Rothschild & Whitt's (1986) analysis of the two organisational types is polarised between two ideals and whatever the criticism of bureaucracy there are also challenges and dilemmas involved in collective work. Proponents of collectivity (Brandow & McDonnell, 1981; Ferguson, 1984; Iannello, 1992) are understandably cautious about generalising and overstating these concerns and suggest that they apply to all organisations in some way or another. While this may be so, I will discuss in a later section some of the specific dilemmas of feminist collectives - many of which reflect the issues raised by Rothschild- Whitt (1979).

Before turning specifically to feminist organisations, it is important to also examine the literature which explores social movements and social movement organisations. Feminist organisations, (including those in this research) are products of the women's movement. The impact of the women's movement and the consequences for feminist organisations and women in Australia will be discussed at some length in chapter four. Here, though, it is relevant to consider some of the more influential theories of social movement analysts.

## ***2.5 Social Movement Theory***

Feminist organisations are integral to that broader social movement known as the women's movement. Myra Ferree and Patricia Yancy Martin, in their collection of accounts about feminist organisations, argue that

...the women's movement exists in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship with its organisations, giving them their broad purpose, specific agenda and supply of activists while drawing from them a set of practices, political and material resources and a supportive context within which activists can carry on their lives while struggling for change (1995a, p. 7).

An examination of social movement theory is important as many women come to feminist organisations not only as a workplace but also because they offer an opportunity to be involved in the women's movement. The theory of social movements is a complex one. This description and review will consider the four major schools of social movement theory and some of the key analytical concepts used by social movement theorists to understand the development and action of individuals involved in social movement organisations.

Jan Pakulski (1991), in his analysis of mass social movements, claims that the term social movements is elusive and at times used to describe a "bewildering variety of different groups and various forms of collective action" (p. xiii). Similarly, Crossley (2002) suggests that most definitions of social movements found in the literature are problematic either in terms of what is

left out or in their misguided attempts to include everything. However the understanding offered by della Porta and Diani (1999a) is considered to be most useful for the purposes of this thesis because it highlights some of the important concepts from social movement theory that have informed the analysis here. This definition argues that social movements are

1. informal networks, based on
2. shared beliefs, and solidarity, which mobilize about
3. conflictual issues, through
4. the frequent use of various forms of protest (p.16).

There are a number of theoretical streams in the study of social movements and this review will consider four of these. Like all attempts to limit and list complex and diverse phenomena, some unique strands or contributions to social movement theory have been left out and differences between individual theorists or positions glossed over. Each category has areas of overlap and similarity with the others, or at least aspects of the others, that have not always been fully explored. However this section identifies what the dominant perspectives in the analysis of social movements have to offer in understanding the experiences of women who are part of feminist organisations. It is this theme that has guided the inclusion and exclusion of concepts in this overview.

### 2.5.1 Collective Behaviour Theories

Most accounts of social movements begin with an analysis of the group of theories that consider social movements as particular examples of collective behaviour (Burgmann, 1993; Crossley, 2002; Hercus, 1999; Pakulski, 1991). This theoretical perspective discusses social movements as irrational or, at most, semi-rational responses to "structural strain" - that is the "disparity and tension between major societal institutions that cause malfunctioning of the whole social system" (Pakulski, 1991, p. 37). According to this theory, social movements are attractive to people who are already isolated and marginalised, with their needs and wants unfulfilled through mainstream social opportunities. Collective behaviour theorists view panics, fads, riots, religious cults, *and* social movements as essentially similar phenomena. They are all side effects of over-rapid social transformation - essentially crisis behaviour (della Porta & Diani, 1999b).

However some proponents (namely scholars of the 'Chicago School') identified that social movements, while at their core irrational and the product of marginalisation, could still act as "engines of change" (Pakulski, 1991, p. 39). As a result of these insights the concept of 'collective behaviour' was modified now to be viewed as an important part of maintaining a healthy, dynamic society.



When traditional norms no longer succeed in providing a satisfactory structure for behaviour, the individual is forced to challenge the social order through various forms of non-conformity. A social movement develops when a feeling of dissatisfaction spreads, and insufficiently flexible institutions are unable to respond (della Porta & Diani, 1999b, p. 6).

Even though most collective behaviour theorists continued to focus their attention on some of the unexpected and unexplained actions and behaviours in social movements, the assessment that collective action was essentially irrational was revised, thus ensuring the transformational aspects of the concept continued to have some influence.

Collective behaviour theorists are certainly responsible for the attention brought to the role played by social movements in the development of new social rules, customs and institutions and as such are particularly influential in examining the meaning movement participants attribute to structures, processes and norms (Hercus, 1999). These features of collective action are particularly relevant in examining the existence and functioning of feminist organisations as representations of dissatisfaction with the traditional norms, and of attempts to promote and foster change.

### 2.5.2 Resource Mobilisation Theories

Resource mobilisation theories of social movements arose in the United States as a response to criticisms leveled at the theoretical understandings described above. Collective behaviour theorists were accused of being conservative and their claims that collective protest was disturbed and illogical were being used to discredit the evolving protests of civil rights and anti war groups. It was also becoming clear that many of the individuals involved in these particular movements were not irrational or marginalised; nor could their issues be described as temporary, passing examples of malfunctioning social institutions (Hercus, 1999; Pakulski, 1991). Resource mobilisation theories addressed these issues by identifying conflict as normal and social movements as extensions of 'conventional' politics.

Social movements aim at influencing policies by mobilising (that is, deploying, transferring, exchanging and converting) a broader range of 'resources' than conventional political bodies. This includes material resources - money, goods and services - and non-material assets - authority, mass publicity, popular support, friendship and moral commitment.... Actions of social movement participants are calculative and rational; their goals are realistic and tangible, and their means - although sometimes unconventional and eccentric - are nevertheless, in line with the dominant liberal-democratic political idiom (Pakulski, 1991, p. 13).

The central themes of resource mobilisation theories include the following: an emphasis on the accumulation of human and non-human resources necessary for movement action; the focus on

social movement organisations in the collection and involvement of resources; a concentration on attracting individuals and organisations from outside the movement; a reliance on economic concepts, such as supply and demand models and cost/ benefit analyses, in understanding the way in which resources are attracted to and are utilised in social movements (Hercus, 1999).

Of particular interest to this research is the attention paid in resource mobilisation theories to social movement organisations, particularly to the purposeful development of certain forms and types of organisations as symbolic and mobilising forces of resources such as solidarity and moral engagement. In these theoretical perspectives, social movements are understood as interaction networks between a number of individuals, groups, and / or organisations. These networks may be loose and dispersed or they may constitute tight, clustered, almost exclusionary, groups. It is through these networks that essential resources for the movement, such as information, expertise and material resources, are identified and mobilised (della Porta & Diani, 1999b). Social Movement Organisations (SMOs) may be large, formal organisations such as Greenpeace or Women's Electoral Lobby or they may be smaller, looser networks such as communes, conferences, email lists or feminist literary groups. Such organisations respond to demand in the community, emerging at times when interested individuals seek the opportunity to 'do something' such as participate in some form of action or campaign (Crossley, 2002).

Social movement organisations (according to research mobilisation theorists) regardless of their size or formal structure will tend to become preoccupied with their own survival.

Whatever movement they have emerged to service and whatever demands that movement makes, the SMO has basic prerequisites of survival and flourishing with the mere fact of being born. If it fails to attend to those requirements it will perish and will be of little value to the movement except perhaps as a symbolic martyr to the cause. This means that SMOs generally become preoccupied with securing resources (Crossley, 2002, p. 88).

The survival of an SMO depends on the number of participants it can attract, the homogeneity of those participants and the age of the organisation itself. Older organisations are more likely to weather downturns in support because of their more established position in the community (della Porta & Diani, 1999b).

The main critique of resource mobilisation theories is their apparent disregard for the "why" question of social movement emergence and development, though they certainly offer some understanding of the "how". These critiques, however, are addressed by other approaches to social movement study.

### 2.5.3 Political Process Approaches

In a manner that mirrors the emergence of resource mobilisation theories, political process approaches to the study of social movements emerged from the context of civil unrest in the United States in the 1960s. Theorists interested in this area have spent considerable energy exploring what conditions encourage the development of social movements and if differing political conditions suppress or merely change the development of the social movement process. The key contribution of such approaches is the attention paid to the actual properties of the external, political environment that influence the development of social movements - in particular the concept of "political opportunity structures" (della Porta & Diani, 1999b, p. 9). This concept refers to elements such as:

the nature of the chief executive, the mode of aldermatic election, the distribution of social skills and status, and the degree of social disintegration...the climate of government responsiveness and the level of community resources.... These factors... variously constrain or facilitate institutionalized political participation for citizens and, as such, have a direct effect upon the likelihood of protest and movement formation (Crossley, 2002, p. 106).

These factors and elements such as electoral instability, the availability of influential allies, and the general tolerance of protest by the political elite, all contribute to the degree of openness or closure of a political system to the formation of social movements. Such input help us understand social movement participants as significantly more than irrational, marginalised individuals and alerts us to the influence and importance of the external environment in the emergence and nature of movements, and their organisational offshoots (della Porta & Diani, 1999b).

### 2.5.4 New Social Movements

While these theoretical perspectives were emerging from events in the United States, Europe too was experiencing a rising tide of ecological, anti nuclear, and feminist movements. These were, according to some theorists, 'new' movement phenomenon differing from the traditional movements in their move away from Marxism as their core ideological platform and in the civil and cultural nature of their emergence. The work of Habermas, (cited in Crossley, 2002), is seminal in ascertaining the nature of the 'newness' of new social movements.

In the past decade or two, conflicts have developed in advanced Western societies that deviate in various ways from the Welfare State pattern of institutionalized conflict over distribution. They no longer flare up in domains of material reproduction; they are no longer channeled through parties and organisations; and they can no longer be alleviated through compensations that conform to the system. Rather the new conflicts arise in areas of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization. They are manifested in sub-institutional, extra- parliamentary

forms of protest....In short, the new conflicts are not sparked by problems of distribution, but by questions having to do with the grammar of forms of life (p.160).

Like collective behaviour theorists before them, advocates of the 'new social movement' approach locate the causes and mobilising issues of social movements in the macro-structural contradictions of modern society. However, in contrast to collective behaviour approaches, and drawing from the other contrasting views discussed above, new social movement theory see mass mobilisations as not only rational but potentially therapeutic phenomenon - "as promoting self awareness and collective learning, developing new forms of participation, ... forming new identities, experimenting with cultural codes, and reviving ...the public realm (civil society)" (Pakulski, 1991, p. 28).

New social movement theorists claim that movement participants are not motivated solely by material gain (as proposed by resource mobilisation theorists) but instead look to challenge and resist the invasion of the state into individual's daily lives (della Porta & Diani, 1999b). The political paradigms of the 'new' movements focus on conflicts in cultural production and the ability movements have to

challenge the dominant language and codes which organize information and shape social practices. The crucial dimensions of daily life (time, space, interpersonal relations, individual and group identity) have been involved in these conflicts, and new actors have laid claim to their autonomy in making sense of their lives (Melucci, 1995, p. 45)

New social movement theorists claim that collective action in contemporary society is both cultural and political; through processes that operate at a cultural level, they expose the hidden agendas of decision-making and expose the power inherent in daily life. It is this focus on the role of social movements in the production and reproduction of culture that is of particular interest in this thesis.

## ***2.6 Important Concepts in Social Movement Research***

There are a number of commonalities in the concepts central to all the theoretical perspectives discussed here. These concepts have significant impact and influence on the analyses in this thesis and include organisational form, collective identity, culture production, framing, and the role of emotions.

### ***2.6.1 Social Movements and Organisational Form***

Della Porta and Diani (1999a) suggest that "the choice of an organisational model...was an important strategic decision for movements" (p139). Proponents of the resource mobilisation theories particularly identified that, rather than spontaneous, reactive conglomerates, social

movement organisations are the cornerstone of movement activity, capable of gathering resources from their surrounding environment and allocating them to other movement participants or sites. Most social movement organisations make claim to structural characteristics such as democracy, participation and decentralisation. However such claims can not be considered a constant reality:

In reality, a plurality of organisational forms coexists within any social movement. The various organisations have different degrees of structuration, centralization of power and grassroots participation....Some organisations become institutionalized ...; others become more radical...; some turn commercial ...; yet others turn inward. It is not possible to determine any 'iron laws' (della Porta & Diani, 1999b, p. 163).

However the categorisation of organisational form in the study of social movements has occupied significant literature attention. Suzanne Staggenborg (1989) classified social movement organisations against two central characteristics, namely bureaucratisation and centralised power. In true 'resource mobilisation theorist' style, she then analysed the organisations in terms of the costs and benefits to the organisation of adopting these structural characteristics. Her research showed that organisations that adopted a centralised, formalised structure are able to maintain organisational stability over time, though this came at the cost of limiting and narrowing their tactical repertoire. In contrast, organisations which maintained an informal, decentralised organisational form were able to utilise innovative strategies and tactics in pursuit of ideological goals but are often unable to sustain the organisation as an entity for any significant length of time.

Some theorists (della Porta & Diani, 1999b) suggest that this may relate to the level of evolution that the organisation is experiencing. When organisations are just beginning and preparing for protest and initial mobilisation, they rely primarily on existing networks and connections to accumulate resources (della Porta & Diani, 1999b). It is during this time that new members are co-opted by current members and when the organisation may seek to break from traditional institutions. These traditional sites may well have been the breeding ground for both the feelings of dissatisfaction and the sense of solidarity necessary for a social movement to begin. It is therefore likely that the early stages of a social movement organisation may be characterised by structures and processes that reflect their oppositional nature and by a degree of homogeneity among members as they recruit from within their own social background (Riger, 1994).

As more action orientated activity becomes necessary to achieve goals, organisations inevitably have an increased need for coordination. Differences between members, between simultaneous activities and between ideologies, become more apparent and require some level of coordination. As the initial flurry of collective activity declines, organisations face difficulties in maintaining commitment, identity and visibility and therefore can require some adjustment and change in

organisational form (della Porta & Diani, 1999b). However Riger (1994), speaking specifically of the women's movement's organisations, is far less deterministic, suggesting that organisations are capable of choosing the direction they wish to develop. While she shares with Rothschild-Whitt (1979) an acknowledgement that certain characteristics may make it easier to maintain participatory and collective structures, she also provides examples of the myriad of choices organisations can make apart from disintegration or hierarchy and suggests:

The adoption of hierarchy is a choice made by organizational members, not an inevitability.... Perhaps collectivist forms best serve some organizational purposes while structures that are larger and more differentiated enable other goals to be reached more easily. To some extent the question of whether to expand turns on the relative importance of the organisation as an end in itself or as a means to an end (Riger, 1994, p. 288).

Della Porta and Diani (1999a) similarly note that generally the structure and form adopted by social movement organisations tends to reflect the objectives and strategies paramount for the organisation at that time. However the resources and constraints that exist within the immediate environment significantly influence these choices. For example the acquisition of more resources in the form of either members or funding has a significant impact on the structures, process, and forms of decision-making chosen by the organisation. These issues have been confronted by the organisations that participated in this research and, as will be seen, despite similar objectives and espoused commitments, each have chosen different organisational forms.

### 2.6.2 Collective Identity

Social movement scholars agree that one of the distinguishing features of a social movement is the assertion by individuals of membership to a collective identity in public life. Melucci (1995) considers collective identity to involve three dimensions.

First, collective identity as a process involves cognitive definitions concerning the end, means and field of action. These different elements or axes of collective action are defined within language...they are incorporated in a given set of rituals, practices and cultural artifacts .... Second, collective identity as a process refers to a network of active relationships between actors, who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate and make decisions. Forms of organization and models of leadership, communicative channels and technologies of communication are constitutive parts of this network.... Finally a certain degree of emotional investment, which enables individuals to feel like part of a common unity, is required. Passion and feelings, love and hate, faith and fear are all part of a body acting collectively... (44-45)

According to Rupp and Taylor (1999) people do not bring ready-made identities - gendered, racial, sexual, or national, for instance - to collective action. This is achieved through their involvement with a social movement organisation or the wider social movement. Collective

identities result when activists come together in social movement contexts and construct a shared and politicised view of the world, their personal experiences, the groups goals and the movements opponents (Reger, 2002). In some circumstances identities may have to be consciously created and in some circumstances they can be the result as well as the cause of protest action. Membership of certain organisations is also a potential basis for collective identity (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003).

In an attempt to understand collective identity as a characteristic that is constructed, activated, and sustained through interaction in social movement communities, Taylor and Whittier (1995) point to three processes involved in the formation of politicised collective identities. First, activists consciously create boundaries that mark off their particular group. Secondly there is effort to develop a consciousness of the group's distinct and shared disadvantages and thirdly groups look to politicise everyday life through the use of symbols and actions that connect the members of the group to each other and link their everyday experiences to larger social injustices. So social movement organisations serve as the context for certain groups and individuals to articulate and act out these collective identities. How individual understandings of the cause and the organisation are incorporated depends on factors such as the social and political environment in which the organisation exists and the diversity of membership tolerated within the organisation (Reger, 2002).

### 2.6.3 Framing and Frame Alignment

In order to attract people who join and remain committed to a social movement, its issues must be presented or 'framed' in a way that resonates with the beliefs, feelings, and desires of potential recruits. Frames are described as interpretative lenses that allow individuals to "locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life spaces and the world at large" (della Porta & Diani, 1999b, p. 69). Using the metaphor of a picture frame, that highlights what is in the frame and excludes what is outside it, social movement theorists identify the filtering devices, or 'frames' used by movement organisers to simplify the issues under debate (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003).

The task of 'framing' is three fold. Firstly, social movements seek to identify some event or aspect of social life as problematic; secondly, they propose a solution to this problematic event and thirdly they provide a rationale for joining collective action to resolve the problem (Hercus, 1999). Social movements work hard to find the right frames or 'frame alignment' that will appeal to potential recruits and / or maintain the commitment of those already involved. Frame alignment then is " the linkage of individual and SMO interpretative orientations, such that some

set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals and ideology are congruent and complementary" (Hercus, 1999, p. 39). In addition to defining and finding agreements on the meaning of a problem, social movements work also to attribute blame for this problem. Therefore, if people are to be engaged in collective action, the issues must be framed in a way that places the cause of the problematic event outside the actions of the movement (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003). This suggests at least an element of passivity on the part of movement participants, accepting the interpretative frameworks created by movement leaders. However Hercus established, quite clearly, that the feminist women in her study were active in their involvement in feminism.

When feminist narratives resonated with lived experience they were accepted, but when contradictions and tensions arose, these women questioned the ideas put to them and insisted on being part of the ongoing construction of a fluid and changing collective identity (Hercus, 1999, p. 257).

Women in this situation were not passive recipients of independently developed 'frames' but were engaged and active in the process of creating the identity and understandings of their group. The agency of women in this process is a concept not fully developed by some social movement theorists though more apparent in the feminist discussions of framing and collective identity.

#### 2.6.4 Culture and Social Movements

An understanding of the concept of 'collective identity' and of 'framing' in the social movement literature leads to an exploration of social movement culture. Most social movements consciously cultivate an internal culture that is different from the culture in which they are embedded.

Participants in movements often share beliefs, norms, ways of working, forms of decision-making, emotional styles, sexual practices, music, literary, and sartorial tastes, etc, that are distinct from those of the larger culture. Sometimes movement cultures are warm, jovial, and inviting; sometimes they are austere, serious, and even intimidating. Some are cultivated to attract the greatest number of people; some are intended to attract or produce a relatively small number of highly committed people (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003, p. 135).

This culture works through symbols, rituals, and rhetoric and can act as a resource that can be used to attract recruits, inspire calls to action, or maintain solidarity and commitment. Social movement theorists have for some time recognised the importance of 'safe spaces' or 'free havens' within movements in creating and nourishing an oppositional culture (Staggenborg, 2001). By creating autonomous spaces, activists are free to develop collective action frames, skills and leadership, and solidarity.



But there has also been criticism aimed at the development of movement culture especially if it occurs at the expense of collective action. The creation of 'safe spaces' aimed at nurturing the development of an alternative culture can also encourage escape from, rather than engagement with, the unequal social structures. Critics of 'cultural social movements' identify the way some movements prioritise building a sense of internal community and working toward individual change and growth, rather than energising movement participants toward collective action targeting political and social institutions (Staggenborg, 2001).

However more recently, social movement authors (Bernstein, 2003; Staggenborg, 2001) have come to acknowledge the important connections between movement culture and ongoing collective social action. These analyses focus on the way the development of culture within a movement sustains participants in times of abeyance and ensures the ongoing existence of loose networks that can be activated when movement gains are threatened or when the political climate is more open to collective action.

Rituals and discourse within women's movement communities help to create a feminist collective identity and interpretative frames that challenge existing culture... Participants who share an oppositional collective identity are likely to challenge mainstream culture, either by engaging in collective action to further movement goals or by individually challenging existing culture in sites such as workplaces (Staggenborg, 2001, p. 509).

#### 2.6.5 Emotion and Social Movements

In the traditional accounts of social movements, the emotional dimension of collective action and protest has been inadequately considered (Hercus, 1999). Emotion was either defined as irrationality or has been completely ignored. A variety of social movement concepts such as identity, injustice frames, motivation, and others have been discussed as if they were entirely cognitive and their often highly charged emotional dimensions hardly mattered. However during the 1990s, some social movement scholars have begun to examine the ways in which positive and negative emotions pervade all social life, social movements included (Jasper, 2003). For example, the generation of empathy for the oppressed, anger at inequality, outrage at pain and suffering, are all emotions that serve to motivate movement participants into action. These emotions can be nurtured and shared within the movement acting as a 'frame' for understanding the actions of the opposition (Hercus, 1999).

Some emotions generated within a social movement can be described as reciprocal as they are concerned with participants' ongoing feelings towards each other. It is these types of feelings that create the 'pleasures of protest'.

I have found that women who carried the torch during the darker periods of feminism's history have often been motivated not only by a deep sense of anger at

gender injustice but by the joy of participation, the love and friendship of other women, and pride at having maintained their feminist convictions in the face of strong opposition (Taylor, 1995, p. 224).

Emotions are one of the products of collective action generated often by conscious rituals. Collective rites remind participants of their commitment and solidarity. Jasper (2003) describes the use of singing by Martin Luther King, Jr.

‘The opening hymn was the old familiar ‘Onward Christian Soldiers,’ and when that mammoth audience stood to sing, the voices outside ... swelling the chorus in the church, there was a mighty ring like the glad echo of heaven itself.... The enthusiasm of these thousands of people swept everything along like an onrushing tidal wave.’ It is hard to imagine more powerful emotional materials (p. 161).

Social movement organisations are often the initiators of the rituals and rites aimed at fostering and developing emotional connections and responses in movement participants.

The discourse of cause commitment embraces intimacy, love, hate, confusion, exhilaration, routines and decisions about when to stay and when to go. This intimacy simultaneously cultivated and was cultivated by a strong ethos of sacrifice for the organisation....sacrifice became the norm (Hyde, 1994, p. 56).

Hyde's (1994) research also revealed that the intensity of the emotional attachments to an organisation were paralleled by a strong sense of betrayal if the organisation failed to nurture and provide all that was promised. There were even feelings of contempt for those who were unwilling to sacrifice all for the cause or by default, the organisation.

This chapter now examines the specific nature and features of feminist organisations as described in a range of literature. In many ways, the impact of the women's movement may be indicated by the sheer number of feminist organisations that have developed, some tenuous and some massive, in the last three and a half decades. It is these organisations in which this research is primarily interested. These are the organisations that are sustained by the women who participated in this research and the organisations themselves sustain these women (Ferree & Martin, 1995b).

## ***2.7 Feminist Organisations***

Describing organisations as 'feminist' has proved to be a challenge for the women's movement. There is no consensus on what constitutes the essential qualities of a feminist organisation (Martin, 1990). In fact, despite the experiences of women noted in the sections above, some liberal feminists have argued that hierarchy and bureaucracy need not necessarily be seen as "anti- feminist" (Eisenstein, 1990; Freeman, 1975). Others, particularly radical and socialist feminists, not only reject hierarchical structures but view bureaucracy as an institutional vehicle

for patriarchal culture. Feminist organisations which are collective and participatory, they believe, offer better social outcomes and could lead to the elimination of bureaucracy altogether (Ferguson, 1984; Freeman, 1975).

Martin (1990, p. 184) defines a feminist organisation as "pro-woman, political, and socially transformational." She argues strongly against prioritising one aspect of an organisation as the defining feature of its essential feminist nature.

Feminist organizations are profit making as well as not-for-profit, hierarchical as well as collectivist, national as well as local, illegal as well as legal, dependant as well as autonomous. Feminist organizations include the National Organisation for Women (NOW), with its 250,000 dues-paying members and full time staff, the underground Jane collective that provided illegal abortions to women through voluntary labour prior to the 1973 Supreme Court decision, rape crisis centres that rely on volunteers or paid staff to help rape survivors and educate about rape, consciousness-raising groups, and for-profit recording companies that market feminist records. Organisations that disavow feminist ideology may have other feminist characteristics. These are the organization's founding circumstances or it's espousal of feminist values, goals or outcomes - such as societal change to improve women's status, the development of women's personal skills or relationships or self esteem as a process of micro-political change, or transforming women's political consciousness (Martin, 1990, p. 185)

Given all these possibilities Martin defines an organisation as feminist if it has one or more of the following attributes: a feminist ideology; feminist goals; feminist values; produces feminist outcomes or is an outgrowth of the contemporary women's movement. She includes feminist social service agencies in this description though many of her contemporaries claimed that organisations accepting government funding in order to provide services to women had by necessity "sold out to the state" (Martin, 1990, p. 183).

Kravetz and Jones also reject the idea that feminist services are always co-opted and describe as feminist those agencies that "are feminist in their philosophies, goals, structures and services, and are developed to stand in direct opposition to the ideology and structure of traditional service agencies" (Kravetz & Jones, 1991, p. 233).

The definition provided by Wendy Weeks (1994) in her analysis of Australian women's services attempts to reflect both the ideal and the reality. Weeks describes feminist services as those

run by and for women, who organise their work according to feminist or women-centred principals of practice. They are typically small organisations, either 'community-based' or autonomous units under the umbrella of a larger non-government organisation. Their work focuses on public education and action towards social change as well as providing a range of services or activities for women participants or service users (1994, p. 2-3).

Weeks' (1994) discussion identifies three elements which can be used to differentiate feminist services from mainstream welfare services. Firstly and primarily these organisations provide services to individual women and to groups of women as their priority. Such services attempt to address women's general health and welfare concerns in areas such as sexual assault, violence against women, accommodation, financial support, and family and child concerns. Secondly feminist organisations providing services to women are involved in social action aimed at changing the conditions in which women live and the structures that inhibit their opportunities and life choices. Such action often focuses on policy and legislative reform. Thirdly, feminist services provide education in the community about women and women's issues with the specific goal of challenging the misconceptions and negative attitudes to and about women (Weeks, 1994).

### 2.7.1 Features of Feminist Organisations.

The definitions provided in the section above imply that feminist organisations and services operate in accordance with particular principals that set them apart from, and even in opposition to, other non-feminist traditional services and organisations. Certainly some feminist organisational analysts suggested the development of completely different organisational forms is the only way to address the difficulties encountered by women participating in mainstream organisational life (see for example Ferguson, 1984). Feminist women have also been critical of the ways in which the structure and organisational practices of the traditional health and welfare services impacted negatively on women, imposing and perpetuating dangerous myths and oppressive roles on the women seeking support and assistance (Roberts, 1981; Van Den Bergh, 1995). Feminist services aimed to be different in structure and practices.

However, as Martin (1990) has highlighted in seeking to identify how these differences have been and can be created, feminist organisations have been essentialised in a way that has limited awareness about the diversity and creativity of the women involved in these organisations. Martin identified five features of feminist organisations, which can be used to compare such organisations to each other and to non-feminist organisations.

- *Feminist ideology*: Martin's analysis seeks to identify whether an organisation officially, or even unofficially, endorses feminist beliefs as identified by the women's movement.
- *Feminist values*: An organisation is identified as subscribing to such values if practices like mutual caring, support, personal growth and development, and empowerment are important to the organisation.

- *Feminist goals*: These are identified through an examination of both the internal and external action agendas of an organisation. Feminist organisations have agendas that identify women as disadvantaged and oppressed and take actions to change this situation.
- *Feminist outcomes*: Such outcomes are apparent if women are changed or transformed through their contact with an organisation.
- *Feminist beginnings*: if the organisation was founded at the time of, in response to, or in conjunction with, the women's movement it can also qualify as feminist (Martin, 1990, p. 190).

Martin identifies issues of organisational structure, organisational practice and activity, the recruitment and expectations of members, organisation size, and the organisation's relationship with the external environment, as all being potentially important for feminist organisations, though again, not necessarily their defining characteristic.

Wendy Weeks (1994) in her analysis of women's services lists a number of principals of organisational practice which feature in Australian feminist women's services. These principals are:

- Maintaining goals of social change through community education and social action aimed at addressing women's disadvantaged circumstances;
- Claiming and maintaining a feminist analysis and ideology which is derived from the lived experience of women;
- The use of collective and participatory - democratic processes reflected in decision-making, relationships and service delivery practice with women who use the service, the division of labour and in leadership and authority structures;
- Effective organisation of internal work processes characterised by protocols, policies and practices which were durable, systematic and which illustrated 'best practice' ;
- Building community between and for feminists activists and for women using the services through the presence and protection of women-only space and only women workers;
- The development of inter-organisational relationships through networking and coalition building (Weeks, 1994, p. 132-149).

Kravetz and Jones (1991) identified similar characteristics as features that are prominent in the descriptions of feminist organisations. For example they highlight as feminist:

- a flat, non-hierarchical authority structure;
- a cooperative/ collective basis of decision-making;
- personal and humanistic relationships between service users and service workers;

- the organisational inclusion of staff, including volunteers, semi professional and professional women and service users;
- accountability primarily attributed to women who use and are a part of the service;
- woman-control of the service at all levels, with men excluded from the staff, the management groups and from using the service;
- activities that contribute to broad social change such as community education, media watch, development of policy and legislation as well as direct service delivery (Kravetz & Jones, 1991, p. 241).

Given this theoretical attention to the distinction between feminist organisations and bureaucracies either in structure, practice, goals, or outcomes it is easy to forget that the reality for most feminist organisations is that they too struggle with “inconsistencies of goals and practice; the decoupling of structure and activity; conflicting values, goals, practices and outcomes - circumstances that characterise practically all ongoing organizations (Martin, 1990, p. 189).

Rebecca Bordt (1997) comments that her research revealed that women interested in forming feminist organisations are rarely constrained by issues of structure and that feminist principles appear to be fundamentally compatible with any organisational form, though she attributes this more to historical accidents and indiscriminate responses to external events.

Kravetz and Jones (1991) also caution against using compliance with predetermined structural characteristics as the key to defining an organisation as feminist or not. Even by using the criteria outlined above an organisation may prove very ‘feminist’ along one dimension but less so along another. This absence of purity, they claim, is not reason to question an organisation's feminist legitimacy. Rather than seeking out an ideal type and structure, Martin (1990), Bordt (1997), and Kravetz & Jones (1991) urge that questions of legitimacy remain open and that a wide diversity of structures and practices be analysed to determine the feminist nature or otherwise of an organisation.

### 2.7.2 Collectives, Consensus and Role Sharing

Despite these urgings, certain structural characteristics have been integral to the practice of many feminist organisations. Feminist women paid a great deal of attention to organisational structure and process when developing groups in the early years of the contemporary women's movement (Freeman, 1975). This attention is reflected in the way in which structure, processes, and procedures in feminist organisations, dominated movement discussions, writings, and practices through the 1970s and 1980s (Ferguson, 1984; Ferree & Martin, 1995a; Freeman, 1974; Martin,

1990). Many of the women who were involved in the early development of feminist organisations believed that the hierarchy of workplaces "created a system of dominance of superiors over subordinates that mirrored the dominance of men over women" (Riger, 1994, p. 278). Ending or at least minimising the existence of dominant - subordinate relationships called for organisational practices that validated women emotionally and experientially, embodied the concept of commonality and 'sisterhood' and sought to equalise power and share skills and opportunities (Riger, 1994).

Collectivism was promoted as the ideal and many women's groups worked to translate this ideal into organisational practice though by no means was consensus about the virtues of collectives ever reached (Bordt, 1997). The specific characteristics of collectivism in women's organisations closely resembled those described by Rothschild –Whitt (1979) and discussed earlier:

- Authority was distributed among all members
- Leadership was a temporary role assumed by each member through the rotation of facilitation positions;
- Decision-making was participatory, preferably consensual;
- Division of labour was minimal and specific tasks were rotated among individuals;
- Information, resources, and rewards were equally shared among all members;
- Power was conceptualised as empowerment rather than domination;
- The processes of the group or organisation were seen as valuable as any outcome;
- Social relations were based on personal, communal, and holistic ideals (Kravetz & Jones, 1991).

Despite the commitment to these participatory principals seen often as the cornerstone of feminist ways of working, issues of power and interpersonal conflict between women marred many collective experiences. Much of the literature (Kohli, 1993; Vidler, 1998; Wilson, 1996b; Woosley & McBain, 1987) and many anecdotal commentaries identify the existence of a taboo in collectives about confronting the existence of power and powerlessness within the feminist group.

Collectives can become the groundswell of alliances only if there is political will to look at *power* not only as it resides in patriarchal institutions, but in the political processes of collectives and in each of us [*emphasis in original*] (Kohli, 1993, p. 419).

Consensus decision-making strategies attracted considerable attention in the literature as one of the processes necessary for collective practice. This process of decision-making focused on allowing all members of the group input into the decision and an opportunity to voice their position about the issue concerned (Wheeler & Chinn, 1989). While perfect consensus required

all members to agree with the decision, most organisations agreed that if members had the opportunity to discuss and modify the decisions to the point that they were at least bearable to even if not completely endorsed by all members, then, consensus was reached. Issues or proposals were brought to the group, discussed, questioned, and all concerns raised. On the basis of these discussions, differences, disagreements, similarities, and points of agreement were drawn out. Modifications and adaptations were made so a new proposal that was tolerable to all, in spite of reservations and differences, was accepted (Brandow & McDonnell, 1981; Wheeler & Chinn, 1989). Consensus decision-making was most effective when the whole group understood the process, the group had access to some firm yet flexible facilitation, and the group had a high degree of homogeneity or shared a strong bonding philosophy (Brandow & McDonnell, 1981). Consensus decision-making is a time consuming process that is built on philosophical assumptions that may not always be shared across the whole group. To be an effective, worthwhile process it requires each group or organisational member to take responsibility for sharing, to be self disciplined in their discussion, to refrain from personal attacks, to show respect for others and work towards cooperation (Brandow & McDonnell, 1981; Rodriguez, 1988). These facilitating conditions were not always available to women and therefore contributed to the difficulties in maintaining collectivity and consensus.

Role sharing was another significant feature of the collectives pursued by feminist women in their quest for different organisational experiences. The purpose of role sharing was two-fold. It was important for women in the early feminist groups to break down the mystique and awe which often accompanied professionalism, particularly male professionalism (Schlesinger & Bart, 1982). Strategies aimed at sharing information across the organisation by sharing all the roles and tasks in the organisation worked to ensure that no single woman became the centre of all organisational knowledge. Role sharing was also seen to contribute to the valuing of women's usual work - work that is traditionally devalued yet vital to organisational functioning. This work included tasks such as cleaning and administration. In many ways these strategies were valuable and successful, contributing to the increased involvement of women in management and organisational administration, using both formal and informal methods of skills development (Stevens, 1995).

However difficulties arose for many collectives around issues of role sharing. It was realised that not all skills could be quickly acquired or easily shared. Women on limited hours with certain expertise were not always able or willing to spend time outside their areas of expertise. Significantly some jobs remained problematic especially cleaning and repetitive administration work.



It is ironic that one of the basic areas of work - that is the sharing of the routine work involved in housekeeping which was strongly addressed by feminists... became one of the most difficult problems to resolve in collectives organised by women (Stevens, 1995, p. 77).

As issues such as these arose for collectives, women sought to resolve differences without undermining the essential nature of their feminist commitment. As a result there is a growing body of literature (Bordt, 1997; Iannello, 1992) that points to the development of 'hybrid' organisations, thus continuing the shift in focus away from the internal structures of feminist organisations towards an analysis of their goals and values. Iannello (1992), for example, documents the use of "modified consensus" in the organisations involved in her research. This was a form of organisational practice that allowed routine decisions to be made by small groups while directional or philosophical decisions continued to be made by the whole group via consensus.

Modified consensus falls outside ...categorizations and contributes to new understandings about the ways in which non- hierarchical structure works. While retaining the practice and spirit of consensual process, modified consensus at the same time efficiently meets internal and external environmental demands placed on organizations (Iannello, 1992, p. xii).

Similarly Rebecca Bordt found that the extreme ends of the organisational type continuum - (bureaucracy and collective) - were extremely rare in the real world of women's non - profit organisations. "Much more frequent are hybrid forms that combine various dimensions of both bureaucracies and collectives" (Bordt, 1997, p. 33).

This is not to suggest that all points of difference in feminist organisations, and within the women's movement in general, have been equitably resolved, via consensus or some other modification, in a pain and blood-free manner. In fact quite the contrary. The literature abounds with personal stories and organisational exposés revealing conflicts and disparities that have threatened to splinter the whole movement and have certainly contributed to the demise of some individual groups, services, and organisations.

### 2.7.3 Power and Conflict in Feminist Organisations

The practical implementation of the principals of participatory democracy and collectivity has been difficult for many feminist organisations. The most divisive issue for many has been the equitable inclusion of women from diverse backgrounds. The debate within feminist organisations around these issues is reflective of the debate within the movement itself (see for example Freeman, 1974; Mansbridge, 1982). Certainly before the 1980s there was limited

acknowledgment in the literature about the differences between women and what this may mean for organisations assuming sameness.

In recent years however, there have been challenges to some of the feminist principles that originally guided and informed the development of organisational forms. The concept of 'unity' between all women and the ability of the women's movement to 'speak with one voice' has been challenged by women who see themselves as outside the mainstream interests of feminist politics. Jeffreys (1991) suggests that even the "claim to common identity on the basis of a shared experience of gender oppression...becomes increasingly problematic" (p. 6). There is considerable acknowledgment among many feminist authors (Jeffreys, 1991; Kohli, 1993; Lewis, 1996b; Murdolo, 1996) that differences in race, ethnicity, class, ability and sexual orientation do not merely add to women's experience of oppression, but significantly change it.

The experience of racism changes the experience of gender and so on....[B]lack women and white women...experience gender oppression of a qualitatively different kind (Jeffreys, 1991, p. 6).

In failing to recognise and incorporate essential aspects of difference, much of the feminist theory which has provided the basis for women's alternative organisational structures has been exclusionary and has resulted in racist and classist practice. Women of non English speaking background (Vasta, 1993) and Aboriginal women (Wilson, 1996b) have spoken of the explicit racism experienced by some women in feminist organisations because of the priority afforded to, and the assumption of sameness made about, the experience of 'gender' at the expense of other experiences women may have. Rita Kohli, for example, describes regressive and disempowering practices within a women's shelter that resulted in the marginalisation, exclusion and silencing of Indigenous women.

Due to the predominance of gender, any analysis of race, class, sexuality and ability get relegated to secondary importance....Consequently when these issues are raised they become "single worker issues." Persistence in bringing visibility to these issues typically meets with resistance in the form of either denial or attack on the personality of the woman raising the issues. As a result, few alliances were made and if any were made, those alliances were usually with other racialized workers, who left in quick succession (Kohli, 1993, p. 418).

Commenting on her experience in an Australian shelter, Wilson (1996b) also identifies concepts that serve to legitimate white race privilege as the norm within feminist services. She claims the usual worker in an Australian feminist service is a white woman and when other than white women are employed by services, their presence is seen as special or evidence of generosity on the part of the white women involved. There is little, if any, analysis of the role of white women in the colonisation and violation of Aboriginal women. Wilson claims white feminist women

insist on maintaining their belief in the "sisterhood and any focus on race undermines the feminist project" (1996b, p. 11). Multiculturalism also serves to ensure that difference is accommodated but that the core values of white Anglo feminism remain unchallenged.

Following the logic of the multicultural framework, white refuge feminist values constituted the 'core values' of the service, and they were not only largely non-negotiable, but were protected and enforced by the white women who had a moral commitment to them. These core feminist values formed the basis (or at least the legitimisation) of the exclusions of the Koori women (Wilson, 1996b, p. 14).

Even with the recognition of the potential for exclusionary practice, many feminist organisations have been unable to prevent the rise of debilitating internal conflict. Vidler (1998) suggests that this inability to manage conflict is related closely to women's inability to acknowledge and accept personal and institutional power. She states:

women will deny the presence of power in their relationships due to inexperience with managing power and will often interpret the having of power to always mean 'power over' the other with the inherent implications of one misusing power or of victimizing the other woman (Vidler, 1998, p. 22).

Similarly Eva Cox (1996) claims:

Sensing and owning our own power are not experiences many women share or find familiar. Instead we are often socialised to share pain and develop forms of resistance to perceived male power.... Thus, for the majority of women, the concept of power is both alienating and alien (p. 57).

The function of power within feminist groups and organisations is a predominant theme in the literature. Freeman (1974) identified early in the women's movement that the laissez faire, apparent structurelessness of early groups in fact masked an internal hierarchy and power distribution that existed but went unacknowledged.

Thus structurelessness becomes a way of masking power .... The rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few, and awareness of power is curtailed to those who know the rules, as long as the structure of the group is informal. Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion and suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware (p.203)

Riger (1994) suggests that conflict in feminist groups is different from that which can occur in other groups and organisations, primarily because of the importance women attach to the group itself. Conflicts can be seen to threaten the reality of 'sisterhood' that attracts so many women to feminist endeavours. It appears evident that conflicts among members of feminist organisations are much more painful and soul-destroying than general conflicts.

The disappointment of finding differences among women when the desire for solidarity, both emotional and political, is so strong exacerbates the pain of conflict in feminist organisations (Riger, 1994, p. 297).

And

To work in a women's organization and be abused by women...it is worse than that from men...The abuse is intense. How can you be a feminist and be racist! This disdain for those endeavoring to unlearn racism and denial has to change and white women have to be accountable for their racism...White women have to relinquish the control and power-share... I remember leaving the shelter feeling really battered ...bitter...I remember I just bled for three months straight - a direct result of being at the shelter, the stress level (Kohli, 1993, p. 400).

Woosley and McBain (1987) suggest four interpretations which assist in understanding the intense rage and irreconcilable differences which are embodied in the comments above. The first and most significant way of understanding this conflict is to understand the existence of power imbalances between women. As previously discussed, power is a complex concept and so the possession of power is difficult to define. Woosley and McBain contend that there are two broad understandings of power. The first is to see power in an objective way or as the control of outward, objective resources. Alternatively power can be viewed subjectively or as a personal belief in one's own ability to be powerful. Woosley and McBain (1987) claim that this subjective understanding of power has the greatest impact in women's groups and claim that some all-women groups have been devastated by one woman, who perceives herself as powerless, lashing out at someone who appears to have a strong sense of subjective power. They claim little can resolve such interactions once they occur as behaviour becomes locked into destructive patterns. Woosley and McBain (1987) also claim that the indirect ways in which women express anger can result in an increase in hostility. Feminist norms, which prioritise the affirmation of women in order to strengthen ties, can at the same time imply that criticism is unacceptable. Therefore hostility and resentment can be buried until such time as it explodes, again devastating those who become the target or who are in the immediate vicinity.

Similarly women can experience intense levels of rage when their expectations of unconditional nurturing and sympathy from other women are not met. Riger (1994) comments on these expectations.

...a female leader unwittingly arouses expectations that she will be the perfect mother who provides selflessness, total acceptance, self-abnegation, lack of aggression and criticism, and nurturance. When she does not live up to this ideal, irrational and intense anger and criticism may befall her (p. 293).

Lastly, Woosley and McBain (1987) suggest that the intensity of pain when women's relationships in feminist groups or organisations are less than perfect, may be the dark side of the

emotional richness women experience when their relationships with other women are positive and fulfilling. There is, in many feminist organisations and groups, a high degree of emotional involvement between women which magnifies both the level of intimacy experienced in the early stages of the group and the level of hostility expressed if relationships break down. All-women groups have been seen to be more successful if these issues are spoken of and named early in the group development when members are more likely to be open to discussions of power and unrealistic expectations (Woosley & McBain, 1987).

Riger (1994) however suggests that women's fears of conflict and their apparent expectation that women should only work together in cooperative modes denies reality and is essentially a useless task. Instead she suggests the goal of feminist organisations is to develop a method of dealing with conflicts that allows for differences to be negotiated but ensures connections between women are retained. While she acknowledges the enormity of this task, Riger (1994) encourages feminist women to see conflict as an organisational growing pain rather than an example of personal deficit.

### ***Chapter Summary***

This chapter has examined literature from the field of organisational theory and from social movement theory. Both these contribute to an understanding of why and how feminist organisations have developed and how they may be experienced by the women who are a part of them. The varying ways in which feminist organisations have been described has been noted and some of the particular features of collectives have been detailed. Issues and conflicts that arise in feminist organisations have a particular nature and this has been explored. The thesis moves on in chapter three to consider the way in which the research informed by this literature review was designed and conducted.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

The intention of this chapter is to describe the research methodology used in this project, providing insight into the underpinning philosophical assumptions and the subsequent dilemmas. This project was envisaged from the outset as a piece of 'feminist research' however the complex implications of such a claim have become apparent over time. A number of feminist writings (for example Harding, 1987; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992) have also explored the complexity and diversity of feminist research and some of these discussions and their influence on the development of this research are summarised here. The particular methods used in the research are discussed and linked to the overall framework. Significant issues of researcher reflexivity, power imbalances between researcher and the researched, and objectivity are also discussed.

#### **3.1 Introduction**

During the late 1960s and 1970s, the burgeoning interest in women's issues and women's lives extended to the field of social research, and feminist researchers (for example Oakley, 1972) identified quickly that traditional research texts, projects, and reports were similar in one important way - they made invisible the experience and perspective of women. In critiquing these male-dominated and male-controlled projects, feminist researchers also critiqued and rejected "many of the epistemological, methodological and ethical assumptions of mainstream, positivist social science" (Hercus, 1999, p. 69)

Early feminist researchers challenged that positivist, scientific research was, could be, or even should be, objective and 'value-free'. Instead they identified that these traditional frameworks described the world from the view of the powerful, and then represented this gendered, partial view as the universal 'truth' (M Maynard, 1994). Feminist researchers are skeptical, to say the least, about the possibility of a general or universal account of life and knowledge, instead drawing attention to the way in which the researcher's social context and status influences and biases the knowledge created (Alcoff & Potter, 1993).

The basic assumptions a researcher brings to bear on her or his research project will influence decisions including what to study (based on what *can* be studied) and how to conduct the research (based on who *can* be a knower and what *can* be known) (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p. 4).

Since those early years, feminist researchers have developed sophisticated critiques of traditional models of research and have challenged hierarchical modes of understanding knowledge and its creation.

Feminists employ a variety of strategies for creating knowledge about women and their social worlds which often lies hidden from mainstream society. A feminist approach to knowledge building recognizes the essential importance of examining women's experience. It often takes a critical stance toward traditional knowledge-building claims that argue for "universal truths". Research conducted within a feminist framework is attentive to issues of difference, the questioning of social power, resistance to scientific oppression, and has a commitment to political activism and social justice (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004, p. 3).

But there is, and always has been, disagreement among feminists concerning what makes a piece of research 'feminist'. As has been discussed in the introductory section of this thesis, feminism itself is not a unitary phenomenon and feminist research is equally as diverse. Feminist research has variously been seen to include research that is conducted by women who identify as feminists (Reinharz, 1992) and as research that has a focus on women and is for women (Stanley & Wise, 1990). While this research meets both of these criteria, it has also been substantially influenced by the related theoretical position of feminist standpoint theory.

### **3.2 A Feminist Standpoint**

In her attempts to describe a uniquely feminist epistemology, Sandra Harding (1987) discusses three phases in feminist thinking about social science research. Firstly she describes a *feminist empiricism*, a process where feminist researchers attempt to 'add women' into existing frameworks of research. The goal of this process is to remove sexist (and other) biases from research studies but often "the prejudiced assumptions that are constitutive of science *per se*" (M Maynard, 1994, p. 19) are not questioned.

The second phase described by Harding (1987) is the development of a *feminist standpoint*. In the development of such an approach, feminist scholars have pointed to a privileged male consciousness, which is highly abstract, individuated, oppositional, hierarchical, and orientated more to control than to nurture, as the dominant feature of much social science research (Sprague & Kobryniewicz, 2004). In contrast, a feminist standpoint epistemology begins with research questions that are embedded in women's everyday lives. Feminist standpoint theorists place women's knowledges, as they emerge from women's situated experiences, in the foreground of research accounts.

The third position of a feminist epistemology as discussed by Harding (1987) is that of *feminist postmodernism*. Such a position, along with other variants of postmodernism, rejects the

concepts of a universal reality and an authentic self. Instead the focus is on multiple subjectivities and plurality allowing for the telling of many and multiple stories by different women (M Maynard, 1994). A feminist postmodernism identifies the use of the universal, essentialised 'woman' as problematic and highlights the importance of considering difference as constituted by one's race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ethnic background. In summarising this position Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004) highlight that "[p]eople in different social locations live their lives very differently due to different structures, trends, and events. People internalise social oppression differently and as such have different survival processes" (p. 109). So feminist postmodernism seeks not only to highlight the differences between essentialist groupings of men and women but between and within women themselves. Women's experience of self is not static; they do not remain fixed and tied to only one set of responses to their world. Their responses and understandings of their experience change depending on the nature and context of that experience (Naples, 2003). While the insights from feminist postmodernism, particularly discussions of multiplicity, subjectivity and power, have usefully enhanced the theoretical understandings of this research, it is feminist standpoint theory that has significantly influenced this research project. It is to some of the details of this approach that this discussion now turns.

Dorothy Smith (1974; 1987; 1999), a key figure in the debates and discussions of feminist standpoint, suggests that feminist researchers must begin their explorations from the direct "everyday/every night experiences of women" (D. E. Smith, 1974, p. 8). A feminist standpoint identifies the experiences of women as unique as they reflect "the workings not only of the female world but also much of the male world" (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004, p. 16). Women are familiar with the dominant worldview, which presents the male experience as 'truth', because it is this experience that they learn and negotiate through their participation in public life. But women's material, everyday life experience in the 'private' realm provides a view of events and concepts that reflects a different reality, often a reality that is invisible to, or ignored by, male researchers (D. E. Smith, 1987).

Most women have experience of the mundane tasks and the minutia of life that together create and impact on our social life, but are not taken seriously or identified as significant in any public account of that life. For example, Marjorie DeVault (2004) uses this understanding in her study of the work that women do within families. She sought to explore women's experience of housework (in particular, meal preparation), but in the process found that the English language does not have words to describe the full meaning of how women experience these apparently straight-forward tasks. She was forced to use a number of phrases and to connect usually



unconnected words, which initially sounded clumsy and inarticulate to her, but were immediately meaningful to her respondents. She explains,

Though I knew what I wanted to study, ... I had no concise label for my topic. Eventually I began to call it "the work of feeding a family", and later just "feeding". Almost all my respondents, both those who loved cooking and those who hated it, spoke easily and naturally. Looking back, I can see that I identified, in a rough way, a category that made sense to my respondents because it was a category that organised their day-to-day activity. For women who live in families and do this work, feeding is a central task and takes lots of time. Strategizing how to do it leads to the development of routines, to frequent rearrangements and improvisations, and to pride in the "little tricks" that make the work easier. The topic is easy for women to talk about (DeVault, 2004, p. 230-231).

De Vault's (2004) experience here illustrates the idea that it is within women's lived experience that feminist research can elicit accounts and highlight practices that have to date been invalidated. The exclusion of this lived experience creates a breach between the means by which we explain our social life and the concrete work of keeping that life going. Women occupy a position that allows them to view both (Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 2004).

In discussing Smith's contribution to feminist standpoint theory and acknowledging its influence on their own work, Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) identify the intrinsic connection between a feminist standpoint in research and feminist activism for women's liberation. The primary purpose of starting from women's experiences is to build explanatory frameworks that inform activism, so to create knowledge which makes a difference in the lives of women. Naples (2003) asserts that the link between the use of feminist standpoint theory and feminist political goals is one of the most salient themes to resonate through the collective works on the topic. Importantly she draws attention to the usefulness of a feminist standpoint in defining what women really contribute to their communities both socially and politically. Naples' research with urban community workers in the United States revealed

a broad-based notion of 'doing politics' that included any struggle to gain control over definitions of self and community, to augment personal and communal empowerment, to create alternative institutions and organizational processes, and to increase the power and resources of the community workers' defined community. ...I conceptualized their community work as 'activist mothering' which I defined as 'political activism as a central component of mothering and community caretaking of those who are not part of one's defined household or family'. ...This analysis offered a new conceptualization of the interacting nature of labor, politics and mothering from the point of view of women whose mother work historically has been ignored or pathologized in sociological analyses (Naples, 2003, p. 21).

Naples' description here provides a clear example of the ways in which a feminist standpoint embedded in the reality of women's everyday experiences (for example their mothering) can be

useful in reconceptualising issues and events in ways that are useful to individual women and to the political goals of the women's movement.

Dorothy Smith's (1974) work in the area of feminist standpoint theory, has been critiqued and further developed by the theorising of Patricia Hill Collins (1986) who identified that standpoint theory as described by Smith and others (for example Haraway, 1988) subsumes all identifying characteristics under the umbrella of gender. As opposed to essentialising on the basis of gender, she charged feminist researchers with the responsibility to resist the 'universal woman', and look instead at the "intersectionality of race, class, and gender in defining a person's standpoint, thereby shaping their experiences, viewpoints and perceptions" (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004, p. 17). In a recent work Collins (2000) describes an interlocking matrix of oppression which recognises that women's experiences are diverse and shaped not only by gender but also by their racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual preference, age, and economic background.

Theorizing from outsider-within locations reflects the multiplicity of being on the margins within intersecting systems of race, class, gender, sexual, and national oppression, even as such theory remains grounded in and attentive to real differences in power. This, to me, is what distinguishes oppositional knowledges developed in outsider-within locations *both* from elite knowledges (social theory developed from within centres of power such as Whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, class privilege, or citizenship) and from knowledges developed in oppositional locations where groups resist only *one* form of oppression (e.g. a patriarchal Black, cultural nationalism, a racist feminism, or a raceless, genderless, class analysis). In other words theorizing from outsider-within locations can produce distinctive oppositional knowledges that embrace multiplicity yet remain cognizant of power (Collins, 2000, p. 8).

Feminist standpoint theory as used here then, is multiple, historically specific, changeable, and sometimes conflicting. Current feminist standpoint theorists reject the concept of the essentialised, universal woman and instead seek the voices of situated women with experiences and knowledge specific to their own everyday life including their place in the sexual division of labour and the racial stratification system (Olesen, 2000). This understanding of women's knowledges builds on earlier feminist views that all knowledge claims are socially located. Further, knowledge from a feminist standpoint is accepted as always partial knowledge. Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002) claims the partiality of knowledge is "both in the sense of being 'not-total' and in the sense of being 'not- impartial'" (p. 66). This is not to say that no general knowledge can ever be derived from a feminist standpoint but such a view rejects the 'universalizing discourse' in favor of local, regional knowledges from different contextualised positions.

This research begins from the multiple and diverse experiences of women in a particular space, a feminist organisation. The women participate in this space for different reasons, as workers or volunteers, and have different experiences of each of those roles. It is assumed that the women themselves are best able to describe these experiences. It is not a goal of this research to 'discover' the 'true' nature of working and being in a feminist organisation. Instead the aim is to give voice to some women who have experiences in particular organisations in a particular geographic location at a specific point in history. However these experiences have something to offer in understanding how certain contextual and biographical dimensions influence and impact on the quality of women's working experiences. The compelling similarities and commonalities discussed by these women suggest that aspects of their experience may speak to experience of other women in similar situations.

Any focus on the multiplicity of women's experience raises important considerations for a feminist researcher in understanding her position in the research. The researcher using feminist standpoint theory can only ever claim a specific and partial location, and this location must be questioned and exposed in order to make this specificity visible. By making the researcher visible, a feminist standpoint also "makes the power relations between women a critical feature of understanding the complexity and variety of gendered power relations" (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 65). Thus the notion of the feminist researcher as an "all-knowing, unified, distanced and context-free seeker of objectified knowledge whose gender guarantees access to women's lives and knowledges" is destabilised (Olesen, 2000, p. 226).

While not a complete solution, reflexivity is one strategy used by feminist researchers to diminish the ways in which domination and repression are reproduced in the processes and outcomes of research activity.

In simple terms, reflexivity is the process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how her social background, positionality, and assumptions affect the practice of research. The researcher is as much a product of society and its structures and institutions as the participants she is studying. One's own beliefs, backgrounds, and feelings become part of the process of knowledge construction. .... Reflexivity also requires that the researcher makes visible to both the research audience and possibly the participants one's own social locations and identities (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 115).

Such reflexivity has been an enduring feature of this research from its very conception. As detailed in an earlier section, the topic for this research was developed from within my own experiences and personal history. In fact, as I admitted earlier, the topic was initially located in the naïve confusion that all women did not share my experience. I have come to this research as a forty-year-old woman of Irish/Scottish/Australian heritage. I have been educated within the

private school system and tertiary education institutions, and have had a professional career from my twenties. My employment, while I conducted this research, afforded me flexible working conditions and reasonably high remuneration. This background asserts me distinct privileges in the world in general and these privileges are present within this research. Acknowledging this privilege and its impact on the research has been an important feature of the journey. I have had to acknowledge, for example, that in the early stages I may well have been seeking justification and support for my own experience, rather than truly hearing the experience of other women. The impact of my position of privilege in the data collection and analysis is discussed later in this chapter.

Feminist standpoint theory is not without its critics. It has been accused of being overly simplistic and too essentialist (Olesen, 2000). Others have raised issues about validity and the risk of relativism (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). In responding to these criticisms, Harding (1987), Smith (1999), and Collins (2000) have further developed their insights drawing particularly on some of the postmodern analyses described earlier. Interestingly they too reject the postmodern preoccupation with relativity preferring instead an approach which values difference and diversity *and* maintains an analysis of shared experience. The result of these discussions is that the ongoing debate about a uniquely feminist epistemology has been further strengthened (Olesen, 2000). Thus feminist standpoint theory is a dynamic ever-developing view from which to approach social research. The concept that a research project should begin and flow from women's multiple, diverse and complex lived experiences (including, though not confined, to those of the researcher) has been a particularly useful concept in contemplating this research from the outset and has framed many of the research decisions in both the data collection and analysis phases and has contributed to the interpretation and understanding of the data.

### **3.3 *Qualitative Research Methods***

Given the theoretical framework underpinning this project, a qualitative research methodology was identified as the most appropriate approach to the processes of data collection and analysis. Initially this choice was based on the erroneous assumption that qualitative methods were synonymous with feminist research. Quantitative methods have been strongly critiqued by feminist researchers as responsible for the silencing and distortion of women's voices, something this project is committed to avoiding. The decision to use qualitative methods, however, requires closer examination beyond this assumption. As Maynard (1994) has identified quantitative methods have usefully contributed to our knowledge about women's lives. She points to studies

that have shown the extent and severity of violence against women as making a significant contribution to the knowledge and activism about this issue. As such, quantitative methods can not be dismissed as antithetical to research for and about women.

It is also acknowledged that a qualitative methodology of itself does not guarantee that women's voices will be heard and their experiences brought to the forefront. Hercus (1999) describes an example "of a male sociologist who, in his qualitative study of middle class friendship patterns, dismisses a woman's account of who her best friend is in favour of her husband's definition of the relationship as an acquaintance" (p. 71). Despite using established qualitative methods, clearly it is possible to continue the tradition of silencing and distorting women's stories.

While recognising that qualitative research processes may be used in this way, Maria Mies (1991) asserts that "[t]he difference between quantitative and qualitative methods lies...in the fact that qualitative methods...do not break living connections in the way that quantitative methods do" (p. 67). This distinction has been an important influence on the selection of qualitative methods here. This research asks women to describe their experiences and attempts to communicate those in a manner that reflects the diversity and multiplicity of those experiences. The research concentrates on the processes women use and the relationships women develop within feminist organisations. It asks questions about women's own agency in the organisation and how this impacts on their experience. The nature of this inquiry makes a qualitative approach to the project most appropriate. In particular, semi-structured interviews are used as the primary method of collecting data.

### 3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are one of the most popular strategies used by feminist researchers including those informed by a feminist standpoint framework (Darlington & Scott, 2002). The primary focus of the interview is to understand the significance of experiences and events from the perspective of the respondent. As such the interview allows researchers access to and an understanding of the social world of another (Harris, 1998). The use of interviews takes seriously the notion that women are experts of their own experiences and so are best able in their own words to report on how they experience events and conditions.

The use of interviews as a form of data collection has a number of strengths. Interviews can provide immediacy and a relational quality that can allow for significant flexibility in terms of areas explored and the flow and direction of the discussion. These qualities also allow both the researcher and the participant to explore the meaning of questions and negotiate a mutual understanding. Interviewees therefore participate actively in the creation of knowledge

(Darlington & Scott, 2002). Feminist researchers have been particularly attuned to the potential of interviewing women as a means of finding out how they think and feel about their lives. Much of the feminist commentary on the process of interviewing is influenced by Ann Oakley's (1981) essay critiquing the taken-for-granted assumptions that were presented in formal research texts at that time. Oakley claimed that traditional interview protocols required interviewers to confine themselves to "a question asking and a rapport -promoting role" (p. 57). A more recent text provides an enlightening description of such a role.

Instructions to interviewers include the following guidelines:

- Never get involved in long explanations of the study; use standard explanation provided by supervisor.
- Never deviate from the study introduction, sequence of questions, or question wording.
- Never let another person interrupt the interview;...
- Never suggest an answer or agree or disagree with an answer. Do not give the respondent any idea of your personal views on the topic...
- Never interpret the meaning of a question; just repeat the question...(Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 52).

Inherent in such an approach is the manipulation and objectification of a participant as a subordinate and passive supplier of data. Oakley's (1981) critique of the traditional interview included a reformulation of what an interview should look like, drawing particularly on feminist thinking about relationships between women and the development of non-hierarchical, equitable interactions. In particular, Oakley suggests an interview process which is non exploitative, which provides information and feedback to women and which is mutual and reciprocal as the researcher shares elements of her personal identity with participants is a preferred model in feminist research (Oakley, 1981). Since Oakley's critique, the nature of the relationship between interviewer and participant has been an important debate in feminist research literature. Part of this debate has focused on the degree of structure incorporated into the interview process. Interviews may be structured where the aim is to capture specific and precise data within pre-established categories or they may be unstructured seeking to understand complex behaviour without imposing any prior categorisation (Fontana & Frey, 1998). This research uses a semi-structured format where broad themes are established from the literature and used as guiding parameters. Within these parameters respondents are encouraged to follow through their own thought processes and explore ideas and events in their own way and time (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Even so some ethical issues particularly about researcher power and objectivity arise.

### 3.3.2 Ethical Issues of Power and Objectivity

Some feminist researchers have claimed that feminist women interviewing women ensures a particularly empathic and sensitive quality in the interview, as women are more likely to share their stories in a significantly meaningful way with another woman. For example, Finch (1993, p. 174) suggests "being placed as a woman has the additional dimension of shared structural position and personal identification which is ... central to the special character of the woman to woman interview". Other researchers, who bring a view more cognizant with my own experience in this research, challenge Finch's essentialist view.

More recently it has been recognized that, while it is sometimes comfortable to be a feminist researcher interviewing women, that coziness does not simply come from shared gender but is often partly the result of shared social class and /or shared colour. The interview relationship is partly dependent on the relative positions of investigators and informants in social formation. Simply being women discussing 'women's issues'...is not sufficient for the establishment of rapport and the seamless flow of an interview (Phoenix, 1994, p. 50).

Similarly Cheryl Hercus (1999) identifies the possibility of power imbalances, and even the "possibility of the abuse of this power to manipulate, exploit or control research subjects" (p. 75), as a major issue in feminist methodological debates. Feminist researchers have suggested that the women who participate in research interviews are often in relatively powerless structural positions (Hercus, 1999) and /or are emotionally vulnerable to exploitation because of loneliness and social isolation (Finch, 1993). Given the multiplicity of women's situated experience, this exploitation is not necessarily avoided just because the researcher is a woman and/or a feminist. Pamela Cotterill (1992) points to factors such as social class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality as significant determinants of relative power in the interview situation. She also warns against the assumption that power always resides with the interviewer, pointing out that respondents can exercise control over the interview by remaining detached or by withholding information. Hercus reports similar issues in her interviews with feminist women about their experiences of becoming a feminist.

It was noticeable in some interviews that my status as a middle class, graduate student created an imbalance of power that to some extent affected the interview. My power as interviewer was most obvious and probably more real for those interviews conducted in my office and least obvious when they were conducted in the interviewee's workplace. One interview was conducted in the respondent's office across her desk. The interview was amiable and the respondent was cooperative and willing to respond to questions, however I did not feel like the powerful party in the interaction. It was only when transcribing the tape of another interview that I realised the extent to which the interviewee had controlled the interview, answering questions in general and abstract language, being careful not to disclose personal views or experiences (1999, p.71).

In most of the interviews conducted for this research it was clear that my middle class status, my occupation as an academic and my membership of two of the organisations created an imbalance of power. I was in control of the research as a whole and of the interviews in particular. The general guiding themes I had identified for discussion reflected my goals for the research, not necessarily the interests of the participants. I attempted to reduce this power imbalance by allowing participants to choose where the interviews were conducted and by sharing my personal story about how I had arrived at the research topic. This story was often treated as a typical example of an academic's general lack of 'real world' knowledge (as indeed it was) and as such assisted in reducing the discomfort of some of the women who may have felt uncomfortable with my position as an academic. I did not hesitate to disclose some of my own experiences if appropriate and I often provided food and drinks for the interview. I told various participants at various times (depending on appropriateness) about my family, my past and present work, and my fairly traditional, non-feminist upbringing. However despite these approaches, I cannot deny that for about half of the women I was in a position of privilege, particularly class privilege that may have impacted on the interviews and the experiences they shared.

In the notes I recorded after each interview I tried to identify if these features had impacted on the interview in any way. I challenged myself to get beyond the participant's surface friendliness and seek examples of discomfort or disempowerment. I tried to begin interviews with fairly unobtrusive topics like the structure of the organisation and develop through these discussions a relationship based on trust. Some women shared sensitive or difficult issues with me towards the end of the interviews, which indicated that they were waiting for me to prove my willingness to hear something outside the norm. For example, a number of women who were members of the collective, shared feelings of ambivalence and misgiving about collectives. These were feelings not openly discussed in the collective and often difficult to share with me. One of my post interview memo's records:

*It was really hard for N to talk about her doubts about the collective... It took about an hour for her to finally get to it...though I could see where she was heading. I think she was testing whether I would be shocked that a collective member would criticise collectivity (researcher notes, 20/7/99).*

This reflexive process also helped me identify that I did not always feel comfortable in the interview, especially if it was conducted in the interviewee's place of work. My discomfort was usually embedded in an acute awareness of the generosity of the women sharing their time with me and the relative insignificance of what I provided in return. On many occasions I thoroughly enjoyed the interviews and felt inspired and enthused about the topic and the possible outcomes



of the research. These feelings were in stark contrast to those of complete inadequacy, which featured during some periods of this research process.

The potential for ethical dilemmas to arise in this research is further heightened when it is acknowledged that many, though not all, of the women I interviewed were women known to me as colleagues and that I occupied a role within each of the organisations which was not limited to that of outside/objective researcher. This role was different in each of the organisations and included that of collective member, management group member, university liaison person and invited speaker. Within some research frameworks, including those used by feminist researchers, this may be viewed as a violation of the conventional expectation that a researcher be detached, objective, and value neutral. However this research proceeds from the assumption of many feminist researchers (Naples, 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Stanley & Wise, 1990, 1993) that objective knowledge (i.e. that which is free from bias, subjectivity or the personal) does not exist. Feminist research has a significant contribution to make in presenting valid knowledge, (i.e. knowledge that tells better stories about women's experiences) by specifying connections between ideas, multiple realities, and diverse experiences. The use of reflective strategies and enhanced reflexivity on the part of the researcher contribute to determining and highlighting the complexity of relationships between researcher and researched. But the knowledge that results is always situated knowledges positioned within the subjectivities of the respondents and the researcher, and the historical and geographical context (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

Not only has this principle of feminist research assisted me in seeing the possibility of locating myself within the research experience as legitimate, I have come now to see it as important. It is a tool I have drawn on as I have listened to women's experiences, as I have reflected on the meaning placed on those experiences, as I have written these words to describe what I have heard and seen. The positioning of my own experience as central to this research process has been a valuable source of insight and motivation. It has also been a source of concern and contradiction. I accept, as I hope readers do, that this research project does not describe the 'truth' about feminist organisations or the 'real story' of women's experiences. It is instead an interpretation and integration of multiple truths and stories "as I understand it" (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 197).

### 3.3.3 Interviews as Empowering Processes

Bristow and Esper (1988) suggest that feminist research should also provide opportunities for women to be empowered through the consciousness raising possibilities of the research interview. Women may feel empowered because they see themselves as part of a research project that raises issues of social importance to all women. Alternatively women may

experience empowerment because the research process allows them the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences (Bristow & Esper, 1988). Many of the women involved in this project expressed some of these ideas, though given the nature of the topic it is unlikely that they would describe the interviews as ‘empowering’. Some did say it had been a positive experience for them and assisted them, illuminating some ideas about the work they did. Some women stated that they felt the research was important and may assist feminist services, which they perceived were threatened by anti-feminist assumptions or gender-neutral analyses of violence and oppression. Other women stated that they found that the process of telling their story helped them clarify their own thoughts about issues in the organisation.

Despite these instances I hold the firm conviction that I was the major beneficiary of these interviews and that the women who participated did so as an act of generosity and support to me. This belief was somewhat challenged about six months after I finished the last of the interviews. I had by this time left Darwin and was working at another University though I maintained contact with some of the women who had participated in the research. I received a phone call from a woman who I did not know and who asked to be a participant in the research. I explained that the project had focused on the experiences of women who were part of three specific organisations and, as she was not a member of any of these, it may not be possible. She told me that she had heard about the research from a woman who had participated, and who had claimed the interview process assisted in helping make sense of some of her experiences. This woman went on to explain that she had been part of feminist collectives in Sydney and Newcastle and had much to offer on the topic. Not all her experiences were negative she explained but she really wanted the opportunity to talk about them and make sense of them. We talked for about two hours by phone and I asked her about some of the themes I had used to guide the interviews. I wrote up my notes about this interview and sent them to her for her perusal, again expressing some hesitation about my ability to validly and ethically include the interview as raw data. I received a short note in return thanking me for the time taken and wishing me luck with the research. It was no longer important to this woman if the interview was in the project or not. It seemed as though the opportunity to describe and reflect on what were some painful experiences was more important than inclusion in the research. This whole event was given some perspective as I began to consolidate and interpret some of the other data, and while I have not included the interview with this woman many of her comments confirm the findings and conclusions here.

### ***3.4 Negotiating Entry and Participation***

As has been previously discussed, I involved myself in this topic because it was important to me at that time in my life. I was extensively involved in women's services, I was concerned about their future and the labels and stereotypes attached to them. The women I wanted to interview were the women who I thought were sharing these experiences and many of these concerns with me. I was a member of two of the feminist organisations that I approached to participate in the research. I had a work-based relationship with some of the women who were part of the third organisation. Because of my personal relationship with each of the organisations it was possible to identify a contact person to assist me in approaching both the organisation at a management level and individual women who worked in the organisation. Two organisations (The Women and Children's Refuge and the Young Women's Accommodation Service) suggested the request be made in writing for consideration by the relevant management bodies. The Rape Counselling Service asked me to present a verbal outline of the research to a general membership meeting. Members who were present at that meeting determined the organisation's involvement and the process for approaching individual women. Appendix A details the 'cover story' (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) used in these introductory contacts with the organisations. All three organisations not only agreed to be involved, but expressed support and encouragement for the research as a whole. As an expression of this support all three organisations agreed that their staff could be interviewed during work hours with no reduction of pay. While not all interviews occurred during working hours, many did and a number of women who agreed to be interviewed commented that this support from their organisation was a factor in their agreement to be interviewed.

Having achieved an organisational mandate, I sought the advice of key women already known to me about how best to contact individual women. All organisations included details about my project in their newsletter to staff and / or members and I was encouraged to make personal contact. I targeted the selection of some participants as I was keen to hear from women in a range of roles and positions in the organisations – direct service workers, women on management, coordinators, women who had been a part of the organisation for a long time, women who had recently become members of the organisations. It was my intention to use this form of purposive sampling with all three of the organisations to allow for a reasonable cross section of ideas, experiences and involvement (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). However each organisation responded to my strategies differently and so I adjusted my approach accordingly. At The Rape Counselling Service I had close regular contact with all the women who worked in the organisation and friendship based relationships with some of them. I asked them personally if they were interested in participating and all agreed they were. With their consent, I made

mutually convenient times for the interviews and asked their preference for setting. I offered women the option of meeting in my house, at their work, at a café or restaurant or at my workplace. Women varied in their preference and interviews were conducted in all the options mentioned.

At Women and Children's Refuge, I knew some of the women very well and others were more acquaintances. Because this was a larger organisation I targeted some women purposefully and contacted them personally to ask them if they would be interested in participating. Most of the women I spoke to agreed to participate and again I made interview times and offered options about meeting place. Again preferences varied and the interviews were conducted in a range of locations.

The Young Women's Accommodation Service was the organisation with which I had least previous contact. I approached the coordinator of this service first. Not only did she agree to participate in the research herself, she also personally approached some of the women on the Board of Directors and in the staff group on my behalf to ascertain their interest. Not all agreed but many did. At this service I used snowball sampling (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) where I asked women at the end of the interview if any of their colleagues or fellow staff members would be interested in talking to me. On three occasions I identified interested women and sought their involvement as a result of this technique.

In my initial approach to each organisation I also asked for permission to access documents and reports that were relevant to the history, philosophy, policy, procedures and practices of the organisation. It was my intention to utilise this material in a way that enhanced the stories told by the women themselves and as an example of the public statements made by each organisation (Reinharz, 1992). Each organisation indicated a willingness to provide such documentation and I was given annual reports, copies of each organisations constitution, newsletters, pamphlets and booklets which described service delivery principles and in two organisations duty statements for staff positions.

#### 3.4.1 Ethical Issues of Voluntary Participation and Confidentiality

All the participants involved in this research were assured verbally and in all the written information that their involvement in the research was completely voluntary. The women were all asked to indicate their understanding of my request and their consent to participate by signing the formal consent form attached in Appendix B. I am, however, aware that some of the women may have felt they were obliged to participate in the research either because of my relationship with them personally or because I was a member of the management group with their

organisation. One woman at The Women and Children's Refuge told me she felt too pressured in her part-time position to have time away from it and she was too busy outside of work to consider the interview. I was pleased she felt able to say "no".

At the same time my attempts to be flexible may have been interpreted as pressure and meant that some women participated because of my personal approach when they have may not have responded to a general invitation in a newsletter. For example, one woman who initially indicated a willingness to participate in an interview did not appear on three consecutive occasions. After each of these missed appointments she expressed apology and an apparent willingness to make another time. She was a single woman, with a number of children, limited finances and numerous transport difficulties. Eventually we agreed it was very difficult to find a time that she was available and that the interview would not be possible. I think she may well have been relieved and this heightened my awareness of the possibility that, despite my assurances, some women may not have felt comfortable refusing to participate. My research notes indicate that I was initially very disappointed at the cancellation of these appointments because I believed this woman had much to offer. Reflecting on my disappointment and how my enthusiasm could be interpreted by the women I became particularly alert to women who offered reasons for their unavailability and offered the opportunity to not participate before I offered to change times, venues and other practical adjustments. As important as this research was to me, I was informed and humbled by a timely reminder in the research literature that both the research project and the researcher are simply not as important in these women's lives as they are in ours (Phoenix, 1994).

I was similarly concerned about the nature of the confidentiality I could honestly offer these participants. I was committed to ensuring that all the information and discussions in the interviews were considered to be completely confidential. However I was also aware that the power imbalances that I have discussed previously may have impacted on the women's understanding of that commitment. I attempted to address this by naming the issue, highlighting and acknowledging the relationship I had with the organisation, and wondering out loud what might be the consequences of that relationship for the interview. This strategy often led to the verbalization of concerns or a statement of how women wanted sensitive issues dealt with. In addition I provided all the women with a copy of their transcribed interview and encouraged them to change or delete any statements.

I was also aware that I was unable to assure these women of complete anonymity. All organisations are identified in this thesis by pseudonyms, as are individual women. However the research is clearly situated in Darwin and as such, identification of both the organisation and an

individual is not completely impossible. This geographical context is important in locating the research and the women's experiences. I discussed this with all the participants openly, offering the possibility of disguising the geographic location. However the participants agreed that Darwin was an important variable in the shaping of their experiences and as such they all indicated a preference for specifically naming the geographic location.

### **3.5 *The Interviews***

I conducted interviews with twenty six women. I concluded the interview process after I had conducted this number of interviews for two reasons. Firstly I had managed to interview a similar number of women in each organisation and in each level of the organisation. The second reason was more practical - I left Darwin and was prevented from travelling back for personal reasons.

Each interview lasted between forty five minutes and three hours, and I formally interviewed each participant once. The interviews began with an explanation of the research and a description of how I hoped to use the information obtained. This preamble is attached in Appendix C. With the permission of each participant all the interviews were tape-recorded. From my initial reading of the literature I had determined three broad themes that I used to guide the interviews. The first theme was about women's experience in the organisation and included prompts about organisational structure, decision-making, conflict management and the woman's feelings about the organisation. The second theme concerned issues of inclusiveness and difference and the third theme asked women to talk about strategies they used to influence their own organisational experience. Appendix D provides an outline of the interview themes and some prompts that I used if the interviews began to falter. Though I began the interviews in very similar ways, they inevitably took on a unique life of their own depending on the particular interests of the individual women. My goal was to allow women to choose the direction and emphasis of the interview within the broad themes to both reduce my control and power in the interview and to implement my commitment to hearing women's stories in the order and form that they considered important (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1991).

One unexpected outcome of the interviews was the interest and enthusiasm generated within the organisations. I had initially intended to include structured though informal focus groups as part of the research design, but time constraints and the practicalities of moving from Darwin, forced me to abandon this option. However all three organisations asked me to make a presentation about the research at various small group meetings just prior to my departure. All three agreed to my request to make these presentations interactive and part of the overall research process

(though not included in the formal data). The Rape Counselling Service, for example, asked me to talk at a strategic planning day where the principle of collectivity was one of the topics. At this point I had not completed any formal analysis though some very preliminary work had been carried out. The women asked me to tell them what general ideas had come from the interviews and from the literature, following which the group engaged in some very intense, soul searching discussion about the meaning of collectives and the practical challenges of implementing this structure. Since most of the discussion reflected the ideas and issues raised by the women in their individual interviews, this group discussion served to verify much of the interview content. The Emergency Accommodation Service and The Women and Children's Refuge both asked me to speak at their Annual General Meeting, and while not so intense, the discussion that followed again corroborated the data from the interviews.

### ***3.6 The Participants***

The women who participated in this research brought unique and complex lives to the interviews. Table 3.1, Table 3.2, and Table 3.3 provide a brief biographical description of each woman and her role in the organisation.

**TABLE 3.1*****PARTICIPANTS FROM THE RAPE COUNSELLING SERVICE******WORKERS:***

*Olivia* (42 yrs) identified as an Anglo-Australian who resided with her partner and four school age children. She had been involved with RCS in many roles for a number of years.

*Connie* (41 yrs) has two children, the youngest of whom was in primary school and lived with her partner. Connie identified as a woman of Anglo background and had worked with RCS for three years.

*Amy* (23 yrs) identified as a single woman of Anglo-Australian background and had been employed at the service for two years.

*Maria* (37 yrs) a single woman of Anglo-Australian background, with nearly eight years experience. During the course of these interviews she resigned from the service.

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***COORDINATING COLLECTIVE:***

*Barbara* (36 yrs) resided with her partner and was of Anglo-Australian background. She had been a member of the collective for about two years.

*Thea* (35 yrs) identified as a single woman of Anglo-Australian background and sometimes was formally employed on a contract basis to co-facilitate groups run by the service.

*Sophie* (42 yrs) a single woman of Anglo-Australian background, who had been a member of the collective for five years

*Melanie* (33 yrs) identified as a Chinese-Australian woman and had recently married her long term partner. She had been a member of the collective for two years.



**TABLE 3.2*****PARTICIPANTS FROM THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN'S REFUGE******WORKERS:***

*Kara* (30 yrs) an Anglo – Australian woman, with one daughter aged 10 years. Kara was not living with a partner and had been with the refuge for two years.

*Audrey* (29 yrs) a woman of Anglo Australian background and shares a house with two or three other young women.

*Stella* (41 yrs) was employed as the refuge coordinator. She has three children, is of Anglo Australian background and had been employed at the refuge for four years.

*Rosa* (37 yrs) is a woman from East Timor, who lived with her husband and two children and had been only recently employed at the refuge.

*Helena* (46 yrs) moved to Australia from Argentina ten years ago with her three school age children and her second husband. Helena had worked at the refuge for three years.

*Lois* (38 yrs) identifies as a woman of Anglo -Australian background and had worked at the refuge for about twelve months.

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***MANAGEMENT GROUP:***

*Jane* (31 yrs) lives with her partner of some years and identifies as an Anglo –Australian. She had been a member of the management group for three years.

*Valerie* (37 yrs) identifies as an Anglo-Australian woman, resides with her partner and had been a member of the group for three years.

*Lynne* (46 yrs) identifies as a woman of Anglo-Australian background and had been a part of the refuge for two years.

*Sara* (53 yrs) moved from Scotland as a teenager. She was a long term member of the refuge management group.

*Naomi* (38yrs) had also worked as a casual refuge worker with the WCR before joining the management group twelve months earlier. She was a woman of Anglo-Australian background.

**TABLE 3.3*****PARTICIPANTS FROM THE YOUNG WOMEN'S ACCOMMODATION SERVICE******WORKERS:***

*Beth* (48 yrs) a Maori woman with two children in high school. Beth lived with her husband and had worked with the service for eight years.

*Anna* (29 yrs) an Anglo-Australian, single woman, who had been employed by the service for two years.

*Zoe* (33yrs) an Anglo Australian woman with one young child aged three years. She lived with her partner and began work with the service two years previous.

*Emma* (42yrs) was an Indigenous Australian woman who resided with her three school age children and husband. Emma was employed as the Executive Director of the YWCA three years ago.

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***BOARD OF DIRECTORS:***

*Jennifer* (54 yrs) identified as an Anglo-Australian woman living with her partner and teenage children. She had been President of the Board for three years and was due to retire at the end of her current term.

*Kathy* (30 yrs) an Indigenous Australian woman who resided with her husband and small child. She was expecting her second baby in ten weeks. Kathy was the coordinator of a crisis shelter and the only Indigenous elected member of the Board. She had been a member of the YWCA for six years.

*Christine* (63 yrs) identified as an Anglo Australian woman who lived with her partner. She has three adult children who lived independently and had been involved with the YWCA for thirty years.

### 3.6.1 Comparative Demographics

*Age:* The participants' ages ranged in the main from late twenties to late forties, although one participant was in her early twenties and one was in her early sixties. The women who were members of management groups tended to be older. The mean age for the fifteen women workers was 36 years while the mean age for the eleven management women was 42.5 years. This difference is partly explained by the fact that the youngest participant was a worker and the oldest participant was a management committee member. With these two extremes removed from the range, the differences are less significant with the mean age of workers nearly 38 years and of management women 40.5 years. Age is also relatively similar between each organisation despite the fact that one organisation identified as a service for younger women.

*Family Circumstances:* At the beginning of my interviews I talked with the women about their own personal situations with regards partners, children and their care, and sexual orientation. I asked these questions because the literature and anecdotal experiences have commented on issues such as the relationship between married heterosexual women caring for children with the feminist movement and similarly the relationship between feminism and lesbian women. It was relevant to identify whether these organisations attracted women in certain living situations as opposed to women in other living situations. For many of the participants their family situation was not static. Some had previously had partners but did not identify as partnered at the time of these interviews. Some women had previously been in heterosexual relationships but now identified as lesbian women. In general it appeared these variables were neither over nor under represented. Fourteen of the women identified as having partners at the time of the interview. Ten women had children though one had no children living with her. Six of the women identified as lesbian women at the time of the interviews.

*Cultural/Ethnic background:* Only eight of the women did not describe themselves as Anglo – Australians, and two of those agreed their background was Anglo, though one was from Scotland and one from New Zealand. Other cultures represented included Indigenous, Chinese, South American, Maori and East Timorese.

### 3.6.2 Organisational Roles and Service

*Length of involvement:* Most of the women had been involved in the organisations for between 8 months and 5 years. One woman had been a member of the organisation for about 30 years and one woman had begun work only weeks before we met for an interview. Interestingly nine of the fifteen paid workers commented that they were considering some sort of imminent change – such as, leave without pay, resignation, maternity leave or a reduction of hours to pursue other

activities. One worker had recently left her position after 7.5 years and commented that she had been there too long. Except for one worker (who had been in the same position for 6 years) even those with longest work history had had other positions, leave of absences or a break of some kind. Longevity as a paid worker in women's services appears to be rare among these participants, with burn out and the difficult nature of the work being discussed by some as a major issue. In contrast, the women who were involved as members of the management group had often been involved in the organisation for much longer periods of time and none expressed a desire or intention to disassociate themselves from the organisation in the foreseeable future.

*Multiple roles:* Many of the women talked about their multiple or at least dual roles within the organisations participating in this research. For example, one participant was a member of one organisation's management committee and was a worker with another organisation. One young woman talked about the need for clarity in her dual roles as worker with the organisation and as a management committee member. Another participant talked about her experience as client, casual worker and a member of the management committee all at the same time within one organisation. These examples were unusual but not unheard of throughout the history of all of the organisations. Much more common was the experience of women in a sequence of roles within one organisation. One participant describes her journey through the organisation as initially a client, then a member of the management group, then a project worker, back to the management group, then on to a casual relief position and finally permanent full time work. Her involvement in the organisation had spanned six years and every position the organisation had available including cleaner and gardener. This was not greatly unusual - at least six of the participants listed multiple roles making comments like

*You never really get away from the refuge; you've always got to have some involvement. No one can fully let go (Valerie, WCR).*

*Initial Contact:* The women's first contact with the organisation varied. Three participants began their association with their organisation as students, either on placement or participating in an organisation/university project. Another two were initially clients of the organisation and then either became workers or joined the management group. A number of participants who were now involved in the management of the organisations were purposefully targeted or 'headhunted' because of their perceived skills and experience. For example one woman believed she was pursued by the organisation because of her lengthy experience in unions and her knowledge of industrial relations. Another felt her legal background was sought after by the organisation.

*Work, experience and qualifications:* An examination of the background and experiences of the women who were paid workers in the organisations reveals much diversity. They had formal academic qualifications in areas such as community welfare, law, politics, women's studies, research, psychology, journalism and sociology. They described previous work experiences in aboriginal communities, radio, disability organisations, ethnic community groups and unions. Surprisingly only a few (3) women had significant experience in other women's services, though two participants talked about feminist women they had previously worked with but not in feminist organisations.

In contrast, women participants who were part of the management groups of the organisations were, without exception, women with full time professional / academic careers in areas like social welfare, law, finance or business areas. As a consequence of these differences the socio-economic status of women who were part of management groups was significantly higher than that of the paid workers.

This section has provided a brief description of the women who participated in this research. This chapter now considers the methods of analysis of the data derived from the interviews.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a critical stage in the research process but, as a number of authors (for example Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Maunther & Doucet, 1998) have commented, the analysis of qualitative data remains a relatively neglected topic in many research manuals and guides. Equally as absent from much of the literature is detailed guidance in the specific practice strategies of analysing qualitative data. This is despite the integral nature of this phase of the research process to the outcome. Data analysis refers to the organisation of all that has been seen, heard and read, and is the time when explanations are created and stories linked with other stories (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). While in many ways this is an exciting period in a research journey, qualitative research inevitably results in such a huge mass of raw, unstructured data that the task of organising and categorising inevitably appears daunting.

At the end of the data collection phase in this research, I was faced with twenty-six two to three hour tapes and a return to full time work. The pragmatics of this situation led to the decision to employ an experienced transcriber to transform the taped interviews into the written word. This decision was a difficult one as many researchers describe the transcription of interview tapes as an opportunity to immerse themselves in the data and continue the ongoing process of analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996b). It was also of some concern that someone else would have access to the data. All participants were informed of the necessity to employ a transcriber and

pseudonyms were utilised during interviews to help protect confidentiality. Nevertheless, ensuring the transcriber understood the parameters of the confidentiality assured to participants was an important feature of the initial negotiations (Dey, 1993b).

The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim, including long pauses and small utterances like 'umm' or 'hey' and the transcriber was asked to record any obvious emotional displays such as laughter or sighing. This detailed transcription was undertaken to ensure that as much of the intimate detail as possible was available for recall (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996b). The transcriptions also included question marks whenever the transcriber could not understand or properly hear the words of the interviewee. Despite my concerns about losing touch with data by involving someone else in the process, it is unlikely the research could have been completed without the accuracy, attention to detail and consistent good humour of the woman who transcribed these tapes. Each written transcript was then read while listening to the tape-recorded interview as soon as possible after transcribing and the notes and memos made after each interview were consulted in an attempt to correct any inaccuracies or absent words. The end result of this process was about five hundred pages of transcribed interviews, and a similar amount of related documentation such as worker reports, annual reports and minutes of meetings. Such a mountain of data was certainly daunting.

It is recognised that discussing the process of data analysis in this way obscures the ongoing nature of the data analysis process. The whole process of analysing the data was one that commenced in the early stages of the research process and continues even as I write. During each interview I actively listened to each of the women and made detailed notes about my impressions, concerns, and intuitive feelings after the interview. These notes were a key tool in the data analysis as they provided perspective and context (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I returned the transcripts to all participants prior to commencing any analysis so that changes could be made. None of the participants requested that I make alterations to the transcripts and in most situations the participant and I engaged in a discussion about the transcript. In these conversations with the women after they had read their transcripts, certain aspects of the interview were considered as was the meaning of the interview content for the overall context of the research or for that particular organisation. This strategy contributes to the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I made thorough notes of these discussions and they also contributed to the analysis of the data. To suggest that all the themes and categories arose solely from the transcribed interviews and other sources of raw data, is incorrect. While this research cannot claim to be totally grounded in the data, the women who participated in this research brought not

only their stories but also their self analysis and insights, all of which have contributed enormously to the understandings recorded here.

Despite some serious contemplation of the benefits, I decided not to use a computer program for analysis, so my coding and categorisation of the data proceeded manually. I used the computer to cut and paste the original interview documents (it also saved paper) but the process of systematically considering the data was essentially a manual operation. The process I used is similar to that described by Herb and Irene Rubin:

Coding proceeds in stages. First you set up a few main coding categories, suggested by the original reading of the interviews and the intended purpose of the report...As you go through the interviews, you can put in brackets, or underline, or otherwise mark off each word, phrase, sentence, paragraph or extended story that you are using as a single coding unit ... After you have marked the interviews with coding categories, you put all the material with the same codes together ... Once you have all the material that belongs together in the same place, you can analyze the material within and across categories. Examining the material in individual categories allows you to refine what a concept means, compare examples of a theme, or piece together the separate events in a narrative. Comparing material across categories allows you to figure out which themes seem to go together or contradict each other (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, P. 239 - 241).

While useful, this simple description obscures the time consuming, rigorous process involved. I began my analysis by reading the transcripts seeking to colour code parts of the interviews according to the broad themes initially identified from the literature and used to structure the interviews; namely '*organisational experiences*', '*inclusion and difference*' and '*strategies for influencing the workplace*'. I then re-read each interview, this time identifying any events, ideas, relationships, and concepts that seemed important. To these I attached a specific code word or phrase such as '*what is feminist*' or '*hard work*' or '*grievance policy*'. Having identified very specific codes, I then categorised these into broader bands such as '*feminist identity*' or '*conflict management*'. Each of these broad bands were then located within the three colour coded themes. Initially the themes were grouped within individual organisations, however, after the broader categories were established from specific codes, I regrouped the material across all three organisations identifying similarities and areas of consensus but also seeking issues of difference and contradiction.

### 3.7.1 Retaining Women's Voice: Ethical Issues and Dilemmas

I found it useful at this point to begin writing about the grouped categories as a way of capturing my emerging understandings of themes, related ideas, and linkages. I incorporated examples and quotations in the women's own words to illustrate ideas and to ensure that their voices stayed with me during this part of the process and were not drowned by my own. This latter possibility

presented a dilemma at this point in the research. It was clear that despite all my self reflection and reflexivity, at the end of the day it was I as researcher who was making choices about which issues to select, what words exemplified these issues and how these words should be interpreted. While I have claimed, and have truly tried, to begin from each woman's life experience as she has told it to me, the power imbalance between researcher and the researched during the analysis stage was a cause for much concern. One of the strategies, suggested in the feminist research literature, to keep the participants voices alive is to involve participants in the analysis of the data (Maunther & Doucet, 1998). However such an approach was beset with both practical and emotional difficulties. By the time I approached this distinct analysis stage I had left Darwin and was no longer in ready contact with all of the women. I attempted to use email with some of the key participants but their responses indicated that, while they were still supportive and interested in the research, they considered this part to be my responsibility. I felt unable to press them for more of their time and insight and again it was clear this research was much more important in my life than in theirs (Phoenix, 1994). I am further informed and influenced by the words of Natasha Maunther and Andrea Doucet about this issue:

As we have gradually come to appreciate our omnipresence throughout all the stages of the research, we now feel that the feminist aim of listening to women 'in and on their own terms' is to some extent impossible. We are thus critical of the tendency by some feminist researchers to simplify the complex processes of representing the 'voices' of research respondents as though these voices speak on their own (see for example Reinharz, 1992: 267), rather than through the researcher who has already made choices about how to interpret them and which quotes and interpretations to present as evidence ... on the one hand we play a critical role in transforming private lives and concerns into public theories and debates and in voicing what might otherwise remain invisible and /or devalued ... On the other hand, in the process of transformation, the private account is changed and infused with our identity - and thereby becomes a different story. We have to accept the losses and gains in this process ... we must document the paths, detours, and shortcuts we have chosen at each stage of the research journey (1998, p. 140 - 141).

I have resolved this dilemma by accepting my own power as a researcher in selecting, organising, and presenting the data (Parr, 1998). In acknowledging and continually challenging my own position, the occasions where my own voice dominates have been made explicit.

### ***Chapter Summary***

In this chapter I have outlined the theoretical framework that has guided and influenced this research as well as the actual conduct of the research and the analysis of the data collected. I have discussed a range of ethical issues as they have arisen in the course of the research process and described in detail the strategies and reflections I have used to address these ethical concerns.



I have also discussed the methods used as I have attempted to operationalise my ideological commitments to feminist research and to the women in this study. Influenced by feminist standpoint theory, this chapter has emphasised the importance of understanding the knowledge and stories in this thesis as contextualised, situated knowledges. With this understanding in mind the following chapter addresses the historical and political development of feminism and feminist services in Australia, and specifically in the Northern Territory.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Connecting History and Context**

This chapter describes the external socio-political context of the feminist organisations that participated in this research. The history of feminism and of feminist services in Australia, and in the Northern Territory specifically, impacts on this external environment and the experience of the women who work in these services. This chapter reviews that history and notes the peculiarities and particular issues that effected and continue to influence the feminist organisations offering services to women in the Northern Territory.

#### ***4.1 Introduction***

The organisations involved in this research originated in their current form around the 1970s and 1980s when the vigorous advocacy of the apparently 'reborn' women's movement led to an increased political visibility of women and women's issues. Ferree and Martin (1995a), in their analysis of feminist organisations, describe this 'second wave' women's movement as "a new type of women's movement that emerged as a clarion call to millions of women to rethink their priorities and question the social arrangements that define them as second class citizens" (p. 4). However, while these authors do acknowledge that feminism and feminist organisations were not unique to this period, there is (and was) little knowledge about or acknowledgement of the battles and issues pursued in the name of feminism from as early as the 1800s in the UK, the USA and Australia. Even the title of 'second wave' gives the illusion that for many years of the twentieth century, women were inactive, non political, passively awaiting this 'clarion call'. Curthoys (1994) claims that women involved in the second wave of the women's movement "...thought they were doing something entirely new, speaking out in a way that no-one ever had before..." (p. 15). However, others *had* gone before and women joining together in mutual, collective support of each other, and of women in general, can be traced consistently through the 1900s (Perry, 1993).

What follows does not claim to be a comprehensive history of Australian feminism. Instead, what I offer here is an overview of the way in which past understandings, gains, and losses have firstly resulted in the landscape of feminist organisations that presently exist, and secondly, motivated the women who work in them. The importance of understanding the history of the feminist movement and the organisations that have sustained that movement cannot be underestimated. As Hercus (1999) suggests

...organisations...provide...ideological bridges between different upsurges of activism....Past gains in legislative reform, changed collective consciousness and continuing organisations all form part of the social environment in which women today discover feminism and become feminist (p. 96).

Even though I have contested the notion of "waves " of feminism as incorrectly conjuring images of women in retreat between waves, I continue to utilise that terminology here as a method of denoting the historical period.

#### ***4.2 Feminisms of the 'First Wave'***

While the organisations in this research were all founded during or as a result of the 'second wave' of the women's movement (1960 -1980), the context of their foundation is influenced by the organised protests of women in the 1800s, often described as the 'first wave' of feminism or the Woman Movement (Lake, 1999). It is most likely that women's resistance to the effects and burdens of patriarchy preceded Australia's colonisation (Hercus, 1999) however the late 1800s were a time of heightened social debate internationally and this fostered a climate of change, idealism, and reform in Australia that was to have a lasting impact. Conflicts between workers and owners of production gave rise to the Labour movement, which was to mobilise many men and women to seek better working conditions. At the same time women began to campaign for female suffrage as the mechanism that would obtain for women equal status with men (van Acker, 1999). Feminists of this era spoke out as a collective around issues of social justice for women, calling for reforms in marriage, divorce, child custody, education, and in the work place (Hercus, 1999; van Acker, 1999). The first suffrage organisation was established in Melbourne in 1882 and soon after each colony established suffrage societies encouraging women and men to consider the virtues and benefits of supporting women's rights (Lake & Holmes, 1995). The suffrage movement was rewarded in 1902 when white, Australian women were enfranchised, years before their counterparts in Britain and the United States. Martin Pugh (1997) cautions however, that this achievement should not be misconstrued as evidence of great bipartisan support for the feminist cause in Australia, but more as an indication of how desperately frontier states like Australia needed women to contribute to the economic and social development of their communities.

Pugh (1997) also draws attention to another strand of organised resistance to women's oppressed status, the temperance movement. The first branches of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) were formed in Australia in 1884 (Now We The People, 2001) and they immediately began campaigning against a range of "male vices and male inflicted injuries" (Burgmann, 1993, p. 78). The WCTU worked closely with the many suffrage societies in the

colonies, challenging male authority by calling attention to the battering of women and children, the plight of homeless women and children, the injustice of divorce and child custody laws, the right of women to not be subjected to the sexual demands of men and the right of women to education. Many of the reforms proposed by these feminist women focused on their roles as mothers and carers: a 'maternal' kind of feminism. In fact it was this understanding of feminism which led many women to express their dissatisfaction with male domination through temperance organisations rather than through formal suffrage organisations - the temperance movement stood for family and the home (Lovejoy, 1989).

The notion of maternal citizenship was important for increasing women's political activism.... Feminist citizens adopted maternalist politics to advance women's status, enhance their political influence, and secure their economic independence. 'Maternal feminism' attempted to assign a value to caring work and motherhood as a basis for claims to citizenship benefits arguing that these were not inferior to claims based on work or universal citizenship (van Acker, 1999, p. 46).

A focus on women as mothers has led to an assessment that 'first wave' feminism was in general "fearsomely respectable, crushingly earnest, socially puritanical, politically limited and sexually repressed" (Magarey, 2001, p. 2). However such an assessment is less than fair. The feminists of this era were active in many moral issues and in fights for equal pay, childcare and equal access to education - all issues which continue to be important concerns for women. Lake (1999) documents that feminists of this period were also conscious of the inequality and injustice inherent in sexual relationships between men and women, including husbands and wives. An Australian feminist journal of the time, *The Dawn*, published many articles exposing rape in marriage and other violence against women and children, as well as those promoting the right of women to control their own destinies through the control of male sexual activity (Lake, 1999).

The women engaged in *The Woman Movement* – what today is most often called First Wave Feminism – were as various as we are, their politics complex and wide ranging, usually far more adventurous than current representations of them could even begin to suggest. It was the sexual double standard governing heterosexual relationships that they objected to. Not sex itself. Indeed, rather than being opposed to sex, they were centrally preoccupied with sex, and with the pleasures as well as the dangers of heterosexual union. Rather than being grim and earnest, they were passionate, and passionately engaged in their political campaigns. Rather than being socially puritanical, they challenged social convention on every side. Rather than being repressed, they were utopian visionaries (Magarey, 2001, p. 2).

They were also politically wise and the importance of motherhood and of the concept of "citizen mother" in a relatively new nation preoccupied with population growth, provided feminists with an audience and an opportunity to promote their various issues. It was also a means of uniting white women and ensuring mass support for the suffrage cause. The diversity of women's

politics of this time can be seen in the broad range of organisations they formed and joined, often more than one simultaneously. There were many organisations fighting for political and civil rights such as the Woman Suffrage League of South Australia (1888), Women's Franchise Society (1890), the Womanhood Suffrage League of NSW (1891), the Women's Progressive League (1899), and Women's Federation (1902). Others combined their commitment to women's equality with social reform aims through the Women's Christian Temperance Society, the Victorian Vigilance Society (1890) and the National Council of Women (1901) (Y. Smith, 1988). Involvement in all these organisations gave women the practical experience in public work that they were to use over the following century.

Temperance attracted women from the same Protestant middle class as did charity work. But temperance was a more emotive issue than, for example, the deaf, dumb or blind; and so it not only brought women out of the home but it stood them on the platform and for the first time gave them an issue on which to air their views in public. It also gave middle class women their first taste of public ridicule (Teale cited in Lovejoy, 1989, p. 397)

Involvement in these organisations also gave women the opportunity to be involved in working with women and on behalf of other women. For example, in 1871 the Young Women's Christian Association began in Victoria with the goals of providing opportunities for young women to "develop their full potential and ...to strive for peace justice and freedom for all people" (Y. Smith, 1988, p. 9). In 1892 the Women's Christian Temperance Union opened a hostel for girls. In 1909 the WCTU opened a kindergarten with a school for mothers attached. This became the forerunner of Maternal and Child Health Clinics (Y. Smith, 1988). Many of the organisations that were active in the promotion of women's rights were also involved in the provision of services for other women who experienced disadvantage and an abuse of these basic rights (Weeks, 1994).

#### 4.2.1 Inclusion and Difference

As has been alluded to in the previous section the various women's organisations pursuing the feminist cause in Australia were often but not solely middle and upper class women. Their campaigns though appeared cognizant of the issues confronting working class women. The various women's organisations seemed to support each other despite some differences in tactics and goals. For example in 1891, activists from both the suffrage and temperance movements united to call for women's political equality with a 'monster petition' containing 30,000 signatures. This process and the way it captured public imagination graphically demonstrated the connection between suffrage and temperance (Lake, 1999).

Despite this apparent connection between women who were members of different organisations, there were many conflicts and divisions between feminists of this era. These were sometimes along class lines and often caused by differences in ideological understandings of feminism. There were differences in support for Federation and for different pieces of legislation (such as the contagious diseases legislation). There were also debates and divisions that erupted between those who sought to utilise the machinery of the state, despite its male dominance, to further women's struggles and those who claimed women's differences and special needs were ignored by men and could only be addressed by processes dramatically different to those operated by the men of the day (Magarey, 2001; van Acker, 1999).

Feminists of this era were, however, similar in their inattention to the situation and rights of Indigenous women and most of their speeches, campaigns and public announcements reflected the racist policies of the time. There appeared to be few calls for solidarity between indigenous and white women though some of the early white feminists certainly expressed sympathy for the plight of Aboriginal women. The concept of maternal feminism relied on an argument that non-white people were not suitable for citizenship; hence the importance of white women as "the source and protectors of virtue and reproducers of nation and race" (van Acker, 1999, p. 48).

Aboriginal people were, during this period, being brutally dispossessed of their land and forced onto missions and reserves. Aboriginal women were specifically excluded from the Franchise Act of 1902 and from later legislation that provided a maternity allowance to all white women (Magarey, 2001). The sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by non-Indigenous men was identified only as a problem because of the increasing presence of light-skinned children in Aboriginal communities. Missionaries, pastoralists and government officials systematically and often callously removed these and other Aboriginal children from their families at their whim. "Although deemed ineligible for motherhood, Aboriginal mothers fought hard to retain or reclaim their children" (Lake & Holmes, 1995, p. 2). This fight was to prove to be a long and difficult battle which Aboriginal women continue to wage even today.

#### 4.2.2 Women in the Northern Territory

Historians of the Northern Territory have little to say about the Indigenous or non – Indigenous women who resided or travelled there in the late 1800s and early 1900s. That which is recorded is romantic and seems unlikely to reflect the true hardship of these women's lives. For example, Barbara James in introducing her account of women in the Northern Territory writes:

Much of the mystery and allure of the Territory is due to its Aboriginal history and people. Certainly part of this story is that of Aboriginal women, of how they were changed by the coming of the Europeans and of how they changed the Europeans who

came. One early commonwealth public servant believed that the special qualities that people developed in the Territory were due at least in part to the presence, and the help, of those women who had been there the longest and knew the land most intimately. He said: 'This land has built up its special type of character, kindness and courage. White women were stronger because they were closer to the ruggedness of Aboriginal women.' They played a significant role sometimes tragic, sometimes triumphant, in the human evolvement of the Territory (James, 1989, p. 9)

The "human evolvement" clearly refers to white humans and the changes they brought with them in many cases amounts to genocide. This invisibility of the pain and suffering of Aboriginal women, often at the hands of white women, has become central to challenges and debates raging in present day feminism (see for example Huggins, 1998).

Prior to 1863 there were three doomed attempts to establish European settlement in the Northern Territory and some European women were at least a temporary part of these settlements. However most died in childbirth or of disease and their presence is not well documented (James, 1989). In 1863 the area now known as the Northern Territory came under the control of South Australia. James notes that while South Australia itself was founded with the specific goal of ensuring enough white women resided in the colony to provide a "sound and superior social structure" (p. 42), the demands of potential landowners ensured there were no such commitments made in the attempts to establish settlement at Port Darwin in 1868. A census in 1871 revealed a population of 172 white men and 29 white females, only 12 of whom were adults (James, 1989, p. 48). The domination of men numerically, socially and politically in the Northern Territory has remained an important feature of the social and political landscape. Early accounts of life in the Territory debated endlessly the ability of white women to tolerate the conditions of Northern Territory living. The pattern of ignoring women's needs and then suggesting any problems were really about women's innate weakness was established early. In 1874, the South Australian government began the transportation of indentured Chinese labourers into the Northern Territory (James, 1989). This proved to be an enormously contentious decision however it was one which made the lives of the few European women living in the Northern Territory somewhat easier, as the Chinese were quickly employed as cooks, tailors and laundry workers thus helping "many European women cope better with domestic chores in the dusty, sticky climate" (James, 1989, p. 50).

The few women who did travel to and remain in the Territory experienced all the disadvantages and curtailments of other women in Australia at the time. The female teachers were paid significantly less than their male counterparts, many women were subjected to male violence, and all women were governed by and controlled by men (James, 1989). However the Northern Territory was also part of South Australia, in many ways the most advanced and reformist of the

Australian state governments. South Australia granted white women the right to vote in 1894. Not surprisingly both the Northern Territory representatives in the South Australian parliament at the time voted against the bill, claiming that by becoming political, women would neglect their homes and families and more importantly, if able to vote, the working class women of the Territory (the significant majority) would likely vote Labor (James, 1989). By 1905 there was growing awareness of the importance of women's votes and male politicians were quick to woo them with promises of increased rights and representation. There is no evidence that Territory women participated in the Woman Movement of the time, but James (1989), in keeping with her romantic notions of Territory women, claims that the frontier conditions and pioneering spirit of the Northern Territory lifestyle allowed them more freedom and independence than their southern and eastern sisters. Despite such claims, the Northern Territory was then, and still is a male dominated environment, enjoying and practising a 'macho' image. It is more likely that rather than being satisfied with their lot and liberated by the lifestyle, the issues of importance to the women of the Northern Territory were subsumed in the wider debate of political representation for all Territorians. In 1911 the Northern Territory was handed over to the Commonwealth, a decision that left Territorians without State or Commonwealth representation (James, 1989). Effectively all Territorians were disenfranchised.

#### **4.2 *Feminism in Abeyance?***

The right to vote in federal elections was achieved for all white Australian women in 1902 and in 1908 Victoria became the last of the Australian states to extend the vote to white women (Y. Smith, 1988). There is a popular belief (Lake, 1999; Y. Smith, 1988) that feminism languished after the achievement of the vote with no issue to inspire women. However evidence from more recent examinations of women's history suggest the complete opposite. Lake (1999) reports that established organisations such as The National Council for Women and Women's Christian Temperance Union joined with newer, explicitly feminist organisations such as the United Associations and the Australian Federation of Women Voters and continued to promote women's rights and agitate for recognition of their role as full and equal citizens.

It was a period of mass mobilizations. So, for example, when in 1923 a conference was organized by the National Council of Women in the then federal capital of Melbourne to defend the 5 pounds Maternity Allowance from a cost-cutting federal government, hundreds of women from all classes and parties travelled there from around the country, non-party feminists joining women from the Labor party to press (successfully) for retention of the allowance as the mother – citizen's basic right (Lake, 1999, p. 10).



Politically women stood for parliament working to consolidate their gains of the early 1900s. Women not only attended but graduated from university with degrees in male dominated areas such as medicine and law (Y. Smith, 1988). Many women worked tirelessly to demand and agitate for equal pay. These demands continued even during the Great Depression when women were targeted as scapegoats for men's ongoing unemployment (van Acker, 1999). Women in the labour movement particularly pursued these claims, formulating a three-pronged platform that called for a Maternity Allowance, a Child Endowment payment and equal pay for women.

Motherhood endowment was necessary to free women from sex slavery; that is from depending on an individual man for their living. Childhood endowment was necessary to support children, while equal pay or an individual living wage could be justified only if men's dependents were provided for by the state (Lake & Holmes, 1995, p. 44).

This was also a time when strong international feminist alliances were forged as women across the world united in efforts to end war and promote peace. Vida Goldstein, a prominent Australian feminist, established the Women's Peace Army in 1915 and travelled to Zurich for an International Women's Peace conference in 1922 (Lake & Holmes, 1995). During the period between wars, feminist activism was sustained by strong friendships between women as well as by formal organisational networks. These were extensive and world wide with many Australian feminists taking lead roles in international organisations (Lake, 1999).

World War II was to have a far-reaching impact for Australian women. Roles shifted and women were encouraged to work outside the home in munitions factories and acceptable areas of the armed forces. This often meant an experience of independence and economic freedom, something many women resented giving up at the end of the war. Feminists agitated for appropriate, publicly supported childcare and maintained their claims for equal pay. This new call for childcare centres, external to the home and staffed by experts, was a significant shift in the thinking of feminists during this period - it was to be an important one (Lake, 1999). In 1942, the Commonwealth government introduced a means tested widow's pension to further supplement the aged pension of 1909 and the invalid pension of 1919. Feminist women had campaigned long and hard for these forms of state support. Despite their eventual success, these campaigns served to highlight for Labor and socialist women the lack of support from men of the Left who more often than not sided with conservatives along gender lines, despite their class differences (van Acker, 1999).

Feminist women during the 1940s and 1950s confronted many difficult issues which threatened to split their apparent solidarity, not the least of which was that of sexuality. For over forty years feminists had been advocating voluntary motherhood and bringing attention to the inequality,

injustice, and often cruelty that were the features of sexual relationships between men and women in and out of marriage. Their strategies however had focused on encouraging men to act differently, to curb their appetites and give up on sexual desire (Lake, 1999). Such strategies proved unsuccessful for most women and while access to safe contraception was advocated by many, some feminists and feminist organisations opposed such strategies. Nonetheless when, in 1946, the NSW government attempted to ban the advertising of contraceptives, a delegation of women from numerous women's organisations gained access to the Minister of Justice. The delegation included representatives from some organisations that had not initially supported freely available contraception such as the YWCA, the United Associations and the Australian Federation of Women Voters. Despite the formal policies of their individual organisations, the delegation argued strongly in favour of the availability of information about contraceptives for the sake of women's health and well being. Feminist historian, Marilyn Lake (1999) suggests this is an example of women's organisations' responsiveness to the needs of women in general, despite differences in ideology and belief. She claims the support of formal organisations for access to contraception was not an indication of a change of policy by leading feminists but instead reflected an understanding and commitment to their membership, most of whom were clear about their needs for contraception.

Again women's organisations were one of the vehicles through which women participated in their communities and voiced their concerns and demands. In 1943, the United Associations of Women organised a Women's Charter Conference (Y. Smith, 1988) at which the representatives of over ninety women's organisations attended.

The Women's Charter conference of 1943, initially billed as a National Women's Conference for Victory in War and Peace, was a big event. Meeting in Sydney in November, and attracting delegates from approximately ninety women's organisations, it was the largest, most representative women's conference yet held in Australia, in many ways a high point in the history of Australian feminism.... The conference addressed the diversity of women's lives and interests - as citizen, mother, home maker, wage earner, voluntary worker, member of the services, professional woman - and formulated a charter of rights for women in the post-war world (Lake, 1999, p. 190).

The issue of equal pay for women remained firmly on the feminist agenda. Women's organisations first made submissions in support of women receiving equal pay to men in 1949. Despite being unsuccessful they had at least found a collective, female voice. The environment in which they campaigned was often hostile and unsupportive, and their goal remained, in the main, elusive for most women. However many other political and social reforms were introduced during this post WWII period. Women stood for and were elected to parliament,

discriminatory legislation was overturned (e.g. the NSW Married Teachers and Lecturers Act in 1947) (Y. Smith, 1988) and women were actively engaged in a wide variety of protests and mobilizations demonstrating their commitment to the eradication of a range of oppressions. For example, Yvonne Smith describes a protest attended by hundreds of women against the rocket range in Central Australia and the related fate of 1000 Aborigines who had resided nearby. Using a strategy recently resurrected by the Howard government, the establishment of the day tapped into the Communist paranoia that existed and public interest died down, though feminist outcry maintained a vigil for some months (Y. Smith, 1988, p. 76).

The importance and significance of these events in the history of the Australian women's movement, at a time when mainstream historians are likely to describe feminism as being in abeyance, speaks volumes about the invisibility of women's real history. Perhaps it also gives some indication of the monumental nature of the 'second wave' of feminism that was to come; with hindsight all before it seemed insignificant.

#### 4.3.1 Inclusion and Difference

Throughout this lengthy period many differences between women manifested themselves. As briefly mentioned above there were significant differences in belief between women's groups about women's sexuality and reproduction. While women like Jessie MacDonald from the Australian Socialist Party advocated birth control, others like Adele Pankhurst canvassed against it on the grounds that the white birthrate was falling (van Acker, 1999). Women had different ideas about marriage and motherhood. While most feminists wished to improve women's conditions within the family, others advocated choices outside it. Other women opposed such moves and worked to develop anti-feminist campaigns advocating that women's position in the family should be reinforced and protected as the natural state for women (van Acker, 1999).

Lake and Holmes report another example of women's differences.

'New Women' often distinguished themselves by their appearance, their pastimes and their clothes. Some observers regretted this challenge to traditional femininity and sexual difference. Younger women seemed to be aping men, adopting masculine styles of dress and comportment, which suggested to some that a 'third sex' of mannish women was emerging .... The freedom to drink and smoke, to be 'naughty and still be nice' was not, however, a freedom championed by some feminists, who joined with the critics in condemning these unashamed pleasure-seekers (1995, p. 39-40).

Aboriginal women continued to be mistreated and exploited and this period saw legislation which was to be the most devastating yet to Aboriginal people. By the 1920s all states in Australia had legislation allowing for and, in fact, instructing government officers to remove fair skinned,

Aboriginal children from their communities. The trauma inflicted on Aboriginal women as a result of these policies is beyond imagination. Margaret Tucker, taken from her mother as a child, writes of the effect that removal had for her mother:

I heard years later how after watching us go out of her life, she wandered away from the police station three miles along the road leading out of the town to Moonahculla. She was worn out, with no food or money, her apron still on. She wandered off the road to rest in the long grass under a tree. That is where old Uncle and Aunt found her the next day.... They found our mother still moaning and crying. They heard the sounds and thought it was an animal in pain.... Mother was half demented and ill. They gave her water and tried to feed her but she could not eat. She was not interested in anything for weeks, and wouldn't let Geraldine out of her sight. She slowly got better, but I believe for months after, at the sight of a policeman's white helmet coming round the bend of the river, she would grab her little girl and escape into the bush, as did all the Aboriginal women who had children (cited in Lake & Holmes, 1995, p. 58).

Many feminists sympathised with the plight of Indigenous women. Fiona Paisley (2000) has documented the story of a number of women activists, primarily involved in feminist organisations, who campaigned to improve the status and conditions of Aboriginal people. Mary Bennett, for example, an active and prominent member of the Australian Federation of Women Voters was one of the few critics of the Aboriginal child removal policies on the basis of cruelty.

She maintained that, far from causing Aboriginal women little anguish, child removal psychologically and emotionally damaged both mother and child: "The mothers are utterly wrapped up in their children... I know of aboriginal mothers who are hunted by the police who take their half-caste children from them to the remote government settlement. These women suffer an agony of fear and the effects may still be seen in their children" (Paisley, 2000, p. 81-82).

As well as protesting these atrocities, the lynchpin of assimilation policies, women activists called for greater protection policies especially against "irresponsible white men" (Lake, 1999, p. 111). While acknowledging that "wandering white men were causing great racial, sexual and psychological damage among indigenous populations" (Paisley, 2000, p. 43), white feminists mixed their analysis of gender oppression with an ongoing involvement in the race politics of the time.

The man who eugenically wandered, lowered his moral status, and that of the white civilization generally, by inseminating his whiteness into the non-white races. The production of racial hybrids caused moral, social and cultural damage to colonised people, but also to the colonisers (Paisley, 2000, p. 43).

It is argued that distinctions between white 'civilised' and black 'primitive' womanhood was crucial to the development of the feminist project in the early half of the twentieth century (van Acker, 1999). White middle class feminists worked towards independence for Aboriginal

women and envisaged a time when they would be assimilated into Australian culture, assisted by more knowing and more civilised feminists. “Therefore when some white women attempted to speak out for black women, they reinforced racist assumptions and assumed that they ‘knew what was best’ for all women” (van Acker, 1999, p. 51). Jessie Street was an exception and exceptional. Jessie Street was a leading feminist of the day, co-founder and president of the United Associations of Women for more than 10 years. She joined with Aboriginal men and women to protest and agitate for significant change in the treatment of Aboriginal people. In 1958, she was a co-founder of the Federal Council for the Aboriginal Advancement and was a key player in the call for a referendum to alter the Federal Constitution for the benefit of Indigenous people (Bandler, 1997).

During the 1950s and 1960s Aboriginal women were also speaking out more and more for themselves, though their struggle and debate was focused on political rights for Aboriginal people rather than any gender based debate. Pearl Gibbs, for example, played a prominent role in Aboriginal protests. From the 1920s Pearl worked tirelessly with Aboriginal people challenging the inequality and injustice they experienced and calling for citizenship and an end to the Protection Boards. She was particularly concerned about the plight of Aboriginal women indentured to domestic labor and the segregation Aboriginal people experienced in health and education services. She was an influential member of the Australian Aborigines League and together with Faith Bandler established the Aboriginal Australian Fellowship in 1956 (Torney - Parlicki, 2001).

Pearl's activism continued for another two decades. She established a hostel in Dubbo for Aboriginal hospital patients and their families in 1960, organised a fellowship conference in 1965, attended other major conferences on Aboriginal issues ..., and in the 1970s lobbied the New South Wales government to enact land rights legislation (Torney - Parlicki, 2001, p. 237).

Pearl Gibbs' story is an example of the tenacity of Aboriginal women and a signal that their priorities were not always (if ever) reflected in the concerns and demands of non-Indigenous women.

#### 4.3.2 Women in the Northern Territory

Non Indigenous women remained a significant minority in the Northern Territory for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is not surprising therefore that it is the activities and achievements of men that are reflected in the pages of history. As always though women influenced many of these historical events, invisible to all except the men they supported and promoted. For example Barbara James (1989) reports that Harold Nelson, a famed union organiser and supporter of the working masses

of the Territory, as well as the first Territorian elected to Federal parliament, relied on his wife Maud for advice, ideas and coaching in most of his famous speeches. Maud Nelson, herself, was actively involved in union organising, as were many Darwin women. In 1921, a Ms. 'Billy' Wilson was elected as president of the Shop and Clerical Assistants Union (James, 1989). As well as these working class women, the wives of various Northern Territory administrators were also influential in developing women's organisations (James, 1989).

The treatment of all Aboriginal people but especially Aboriginal women during the years between 1911 and 1940 in the Northern Territory remained an issue of great contention. *The Northern Territory Aboriginals Act 1910* established the Northern Territory Aboriginals Department and was followed by Commonwealth legislation in 1911 that appointed the Chief Protector of Aborigines as the legal guardian of every Indigenous child in the Northern Territory regardless of whether the child had parents who were living. The Chief Protector was able to assume the "care custody and control of any Aboriginal or half caste if in his opinion it is necessary or desirable..." (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p. 98).

Baldwin Spencer was the Northern Territory Chief Protector in 1912 and ordered that no half cast child be allowed to remain in Aboriginal camps. In town areas he organised the establishment of compounds in which Aboriginal people would be contained (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). He also allowed the practice of chaining Indigenous women in the compound at night to ensure they could not associate with white men, allegedly to stop the spread of venereal disease and leprosy (James, 1989). The Kahlin Compound was established in Darwin in 1913 and The Bungalow was in operation in Alice Springs in 1915 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Both housed many thousands of Aboriginal children over the ensuing years, most forcibly removed from their families and traumatised by their experience. At fourteen years of age these children were sent to work on stations or as domestics with non-Indigenous families. The conditions in the compounds were generally appalling, overcrowded with insufficient food and the regular use of harsh physical abuse as a disciplinary measure. This practice continued through to 1940 and was clear in its goal of the ultimate and speedy eradication of Aboriginal people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). The 'Bringing Them Home' report cites a statement from Cecil Cook, Chief Protector in the Northern Territory in 1927 as claiming:

Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian Aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half castes will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p. 107).

There are recorded examples of non-Indigenous women of the Territory speaking out in support of Aboriginal people in particular Aboriginal women. For example, in 1928 Mrs. John Mackay the founder of the Aborigines' Friends' Association in Alice Springs addressed her fellow association members in Adelaide, expressing her concern for the plight of Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory, particularly at the hands of white men. She was soundly criticised in the Territory press as a result (James, 1989). Paisley (2000) also notes that most of the feminist women who took up the cause of Aborigines at this time, resided in southern and eastern states, probably because the male dominated nature of the Northern Territory made it extremely difficult for women to have a voice and speak out. Some women were to learn this through bitter experience. Sister Annie Locke, was a missionary who lived as the only non-Indigenous person in an Aboriginal community about 160 kilometres from Alice Springs. In 1928 she gave evidence at an inquiry set up to investigate the massacre of at least thirty-one Aboriginal men, women and children, and in her evidence criticised white men and their treatment of Aboriginal women. She also described and criticised the way in which white men hunted Aboriginal people away from water-holes (Paisley, 2000). Her testimony was not well received.

She had clearly upset some people in positions of power. One particular journalist created sensational headlines by claiming that she wanted to marry an Aboriginal man, with some papers suggesting she had already taken one as a lover. She was treated with jeers and hostility by many of the Alice Springs residents....After hearing evidence from thirty witnesses, the Board of Inquiry concluded that the shootings of the Aborigines were justified. The Board gave several reasons for the uprising by Aboriginal people, which was said to have provoked the massacre. Included in the ten reasons was that of 'a woman Missionary living amongst naked blacks, thus lowering their respect for whites' (James, 1989, p. 123-124).

If this insult and injustice was not sufficient, Sr. Locke was immediately arrested and charged with taking two Aboriginal children from Central Australia to Northern Australia without permission from the Chief Protector (James, 1989; Paisley, 2000). The retaliation against women who stepped out of line was swift and fierce.

During the Second World War Darwin became a war zone. The military had built up a significant presence in the town and on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1942, Japanese planes bombed Darwin. Eleven war ships sank in Darwin Harbour and about 240 people were killed (James, 1989). Following this initial attack nearly all the non-Indigenous women and children, and many Indigenous children from the various missions and orphanages, were evacuated from Darwin. As a result Alice Springs, seen until this time as even more unsuitable for white women than Darwin, became an important site of women's activity (Paisley, 2000).

Women began to return to Darwin in 1945 and were quick to mobilise in protest against the appalling housing conditions, high prices and limited food availability. The Darwin Housewives Association formed in 1947 and was instrumental in forcing the government of the day to provide adequate and affordable housing for women and to commence a housing commission scheme for low-income families (James, 1989). In 1951 the reformed Country Women's Association established the Darwin Outback Mothers Hostel, having campaigned actively to bring attention to the accommodation difficulties that often beset women and their children in a town barely rebuilt from the war and primarily focused on the needs of men. In 1960 the YWCA established a hostel for young women in Alice Springs and soon after also opened an emergency accommodation service in Darwin (James, 1989).

In 1947 the Northern Territory was granted a limited Legislative Council through which some semblance of self-government was achieved. Women were almost immediately active in seeking political office. In 1947, 1951 and 1957 three women of the Northern Territory attempted unsuccessfully to gain a seat in the legislative council. Finally in 1960, Lyn Berlowitz, a Darwin businesswoman, was elected as the independent member for the Darwin based seat of Fannie Bay. Berlowitz advocated better living conditions for families and lobbied for the availability of freehold land. Her argument - unless women were encouraged to stay in the Northern Territory, men too would leave, - was a stance that gained her many male as well as female votes. But she had only one term in office and it was to be another decade before women were again politically represented in the Northern Territory (James, 1989).

The practice of removing Aboriginal children recommenced with a vengeance after WWII though there appears to have been some louder criticism and outcry from the Territory. The Bringing Them Home report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) documents official protests during this period from patrol officers having to effect such removals, though the practice continued with official sanction in the Territory until 1958. But Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory remained active in their struggle against oppression. In 1963 the Yirrkala people presented the Commonwealth House of Representatives with a bark petition opposing plans by Nabalco to mine bauxite on their land. In 1966 the Gurindji people walked off the Wave Hill station in protest – they demanded equal pay and better conditions (Torney - Parlicki, 2001). It would be another decade before any result was seen from these protests but Aboriginal women played an important part in the grass roots movements for land rights and equality. In 1962 Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory were granted the right to vote in both Territory and Commonwealth elections, some five years before the referendum extended this right to all Australian Indigenous people (James, 1989). However Commonwealth and



Territory policies remained firmly embedded in the ideology of assimilation. In 1961, Paul Hasluck, Minister for the Territories told the Native Welfare Conference that "all Aboriginal people of full and mixed descent were expected to attain the same manner of living as other Australians, and observe the same customs and be influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as white Australians" (Torney - Parlicki, 2001, p. 234).

Assimilation and the subsequent move of Aboriginal people from reserves to towns brought new pressures to bear on Aboriginal women. They were subjected to increased scrutiny and assessed according to middle-class standards of housekeeping, which in areas of the Northern Territory still without running water, were impossible to meet (Torney - Parlicki, 2001).

#### ***4.4 Feminisms of the 'Second Wave' and Beyond***

A number of authors (Burgmann, 1993; Lake, 1999; van Acker, 1999) commence their discussion of the Women's Liberation Movement in Australia with an account of the actions of two women who, in 1965, chained themselves to a hotel bar in Brisbane to protest the exclusion of women from hotels. This action sent clear signals that feminist women were now prepared to use militant tactics to bring attention to their cause. In 1969, Zelda D'Aprano, a long term member of the Communist Party and an active advocate of equal pay for women, became so disillusioned with the lack of support from men in the Communist Party for the claims of women, that she too chained herself to the doors of the Commonwealth offices in Melbourne. This action heralded the beginning of the Women's Action Committee, an all-woman group with the agenda of protesting women's unequal pay (Burgmann, 1993). In Sydney in the same year (1970), leaflets were distributed at a anti-Vietnam War rally inviting women to a meeting aimed at "freeing women from oppression" (van Acker, 1999, p. 54). So began a tumultuous period of women's liberation.

By 1971 each major Australian city had women's liberation groups, which were not affiliated with any political party, trade union or church. The women involved, however, had been a part of those institutions and brought their usually negative experiences with them. In addition, women's experience in peace and anti-war organisations not only educated women about activism but also inspired them to conduct themselves in radically different ways.

Women's Liberationists drew extensively on overseas literature and were particularly influenced by radical feminist ideas emanating from the United States.... They eagerly accepted the idea that 'the personal is political', and, along with the practice of consciousness raising, adopted new models of organisation based on non - hierarchical and collective principles. Within a year there were 34 groups in Melbourne alone and by 1972 the Women's Action Group had several thousand members (Hercus, 1999, p. 106).

The issues raised in these early Women's Liberation groups were similar to those that had always been issues for feminist women. The institution of marriage was identified as oppressive and the double standard of sexual morality for men and women was attacked. The potential for marriage and nuclear families to be sites of violence for women and children was again exposed (Lake, 1999). Economic independence remained a central concern and feminist women continued to argue for women's entry into and complete equality within the full-time, paid workforce. The Women's Action Group was notable in its strident demands for equal pay, equal opportunity in employment, child care and equality in education (Hercus, 1999).

There were some important differences between the issues raised by feminists of this second wave in comparison to 19<sup>th</sup> century feminists. For example, women liberationists soundly rejected the notion of maternal feminism and instead exposed the institution of motherhood (though not necessarily the experience) as one of the forces subjecting women to oppressive and exploitative conditions within the home and the family. Women who were active in this second wave of feminism rejected sexual abstinence as a means of achieving reproductive freedom and instead claimed that "access to family planning advice, to freely available and cheap contraception, and to safe abortions, were all ... fundamental rights" (Hercus, 1999, p. 109).

As early as 1972, some feminist women (as had many feminist women seventy years before) identified the value of involvement in parliamentary politics as a means to improve the status of women. In 1972 the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) was established "based on the principle that members should work within existing legislative, governmental and judicial frameworks to improve the social and economic conditions for women and to challenge discrimination" (van Acker, 1999, p. 55). Their impact was immediate. Burgmann (1993) reports:

At the December 1972 federal election, WEL sent a questionnaire to every parliamentary candidate, then ranked the candidates for every electorate in the country, enabling women voters to bring their feminist opinions to bear upon the electoral process. WEL's slogan was 'Think WEL before you vote' (p. 93).

The election of the Whitlam-led, Labor government in December 1972 is attributed at least in part to the recognition by Labor candidates of the importance of women's votes. Once in government the federal Labor party embarked on a program aimed at furthering women's access to public life (Lake, 1999). The election of this party meant that the feminist movement was to develop differently in Australia than in other parts of the world. Here, more than in either the United States or Britain, women worked through the structures of the state to achieve the goals of the women's movement. Unlike other countries, a particular relationship developed between the social-democratic Labor Government and the Australian women's movement. The emergence of

both almost simultaneously, after many years of political conservatism was a feature not experienced in other political landscapes (Dowse, 1983). This relationship led to the development of a "femocrat" strategy (Eisenstein, 1990), a strategy that involved the incorporation of feminist women into the central policy-making structures of the federal government. These women, 'femocrats', considered themselves (and were considered by many others) to be spokeswomen for and responsible to the women's movement (Rankin & Vickers, 2001). Public servants involved in femocrat units were recruited directly from women's organisations or at least had feminist credentials and enjoyed considerable legitimacy. For example when Elizabeth Reid was appointed to the position of Women's Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister, she reportedly received thousands of letters from Australian women telling her what they wanted and what they thought was important for the government to focus on. This level of accessibility to the constituency is unusual in countries like Canada, the USA and Britain (Rankin & Vickers, 2001).

However there was, and remains, significant criticism of the femocrat strategy. There is little doubt that WEL's activities in the 1970s and the continuing activities of femocrat machinery at all levels of government reflect liberal feminist ideologies. Their goals were to achieve equal access and opportunity for women, not necessarily to radically change the political structures themselves (Burgmann, 1993). But femocrats were in a no-win situation - accused of overt and unnecessary radicalism within the government circles and criticised heavily by the women's movement as being co-opted and not being radical - or worse, not feminist, - enough (Dowse, 1983; Eisenstein, 1990).

Some women were more motivated by a personal rebellion than political agendas. The social change imagined by some feminists in the 1970s was, at the very least, ambitious.

No longer interested in the fruits of full citizenship – the cherished goal of interwar feminists – Women's Liberationists hungered for 'revolution', for the overthrow of existing social and political structures. They aimed at social and personal transformation, not the acquisition of political power (Lake, 1999, p. 231)

These women, like their sisters in WEL, were primarily middle class and white, beneficiaries of post war prosperity and keen to assess their own oppression. They called for the liberation of women from roles that confined them to sexual stereotypes, embracing the phrase 'the personal is political' and actively identifying and naming the myriad of ways in which power and privilege was located with men (van Acker, 1999).

Consciousness raising groups became important vehicles for these discussions and their intensity and emotional exchanges often formed the basis of friendships that were to last lifetimes (Lake, 1999). Reading groups also flourished as women avidly devoured books like Germaine Greer's

*The Female Eunuch* and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. These small intimate gatherings, purposefully without formal structure and procedure, proliferated throughout the country providing many women with relief from feelings of personal failure and isolation (Lake, 1999). While these two groups, Women's Liberationists and WEL supporters - revolutionaries and reformists - approached their demands for women's equality differently, many women were members of both camps and many more joined together in events like International Women's Day marches and Reclaim the Night rallies, both of which mobilised thousands of women across Australia.

The women's movement put their alternative analyses into practice, developing women's health centres, safe houses for women escaping violence, and rape support services. All these services provided opportunities for women to care for other women and a savage critique of the existing social, legal, and political system that left women hurt, vulnerable, and without support. Members of the women's movement initially provided these services voluntarily and, as will be seen in a later section, most feminist services have a beginning that can only be credited to the hard work and unfailing perseverance voluntarily given by a core group of committed women. One of the possibilities available in Australia, because of the femocrat experience, was that services, initially provided voluntarily, quickly became state funded, thus allowing their development in most towns and major centres in Australia. At the same time this phenomena created problems for the feminist women who had first identified the need and developed the service models. On the one hand the women's action of stepping in and providing the services needed could potentially absolve the state from responsibility to provide for women's needs. In addition the reliance of women's shelters, rape support services and women's health clinics on the unpaid labour of women perpetuated the exact situation feminist women were critiquing – the exploitation of women's caring work. However to accept government funding carried with it the possibilities of co-option and introduced a new vulnerability to funding cessation which was to impact on feminist women and organisations for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Burgmann, 1993; Kaplan, 1996; Weeks, 1994).

Major achievements in areas in which women had lobbied for over a century were realised. In 1972, the Child Care Act allowed for federal funding of child care centres and the commitment of the Whitlam-led Labor government saw a massive increase in funding which established publicly funded childcare centres across the country. Successive governments since then have been forced to consider and publicly state their commitment to childcare (Burgmann, 1993). Changes to the Family Law Act in 1975 instituted fault free divorce and in 1974 Edna Ryan made a successful submission to the Arbitration Commission for an adult minimum wage which

effectively did away with the concept of a male family wage (Lake, 1999). In 1983 the Hawke-led Labor government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and in 1984 translated this international commitment into national legislation by passing the Sex Discrimination Act. This legislation outlawed discrimination and harassment against women in employment, education and in the provision of services (Lake, 1999). In 1986, Affirmative Action legislation was passed that required public and private sector employers to institute policies that increased the opportunities for women to gain employment and promotion (Burgmann, 1993). Many Australian women can now access safe and legal abortions, though the pro-life movement remains a major stumbling block to maintaining this access for all women.

Politically women continued to make inroads. In 1989 there were eighty three women in Australian parliaments and fifty-three of them were Labor women (Lake, 1999). In 1990 two self-proclaimed feminist women, Joan Kirner in Victoria and Carmen Laurence in Western Australia, were elected Premiers of their respective states. All through the 1980s and early 1990s women took on ministerial positions and senior government positions further consolidating the gains made by WEL in the early 1970s. It was clear that the strategy of entrenching feminism in the bureaucracy had, at least until the mid 1990s, ensured the survival of women-centred projects despite the fate of particular parties.

Installed in the political machinery of government, the programs developed a life of their own, so that the implementation of policy initiatives continued, if in more straitened circumstances, when the Labor government was removed from office in controversial circumstances in 1975. Indeed, because feminist programs had been put in place, many developments reached fruition under the less sympathetic Liberal government, led by Malcolm Fraser...Fraser still had to answer to a continuing and outspoken women's movement (Lake, 1999, p. 260).

Violence against women was an issue continually on the feminist agenda and from the mid 1980s through to the 1990s successive Australian state governments repealed archaic legislation that placed victims of rape on trial and introduced new legislation that expands the understanding of what constitutes rape (Lake & Holmes, 1995). Feminist surveys throughout the 1980s have highlighted the enormity of violence against women in their own homes and at the hands of their partners. In 1987 the federal government funded the National Domestic Violence Education Program to the tune of \$1.6 million (Lake, 1999; Weeks, 1994). This program led to a gradual shift in the community understanding that individual acts of violence against women were gendered crimes with systemic patterns. In 1992 the National Committee on Violence against Women was formed and many state governments followed in setting up policy apparatus to combat the ongoing issues of violence against women.

In 1996 John Howard was elected Prime Minister and he remains in that position at the time of writing. He was Prime Minister at the time that the interviews for this research were conducted and his personal and party ideology that designed the attack on the gains of the women's movement was evident. Anne Summers succinctly describes the process.

In 1996, shortly after being elected to office, the Howard government began its assault on the employment opportunities of women. It could do this with relative impunity because...over its first year in office it had taken the precaution of abolishing or enfeebling all the government agencies charged with protecting women's entitlements and monitoring their equality. With the Women's Bureau shut down, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner forced from office and the Office of the Status of Women 's budget and influence slashed, there were no internal obstacles to turning back the clock for women....The Howard government has made ruthless use of childcare, employment, family assistance and taxation policy to steer women with children out of the workforce and into fulltime motherhood...In the 1996/7 budget funding for childcare was drastically cut...Altogether around \$850 million was taken from childcare between 1996 and 2000 (Summers, 2003, p. 142-143).

A number of feminist women who were a part of the early achievements of the second wave women's movement point to the demise in feminist activism as one of the key reasons why this has been able to occur. As has been pointed out earlier, even unsympathetic governments in the late 70's and early 80's were held accountable by a vocal and active feminist lobby and grass roots women's movement. Certainly some young women of the 1990s have claimed the battles have been won and the goals and aspirations of their foremothers achieved (Roiphe, 1993). They are less likely to call themselves feminist or to see much worth in the collective struggles of women. Instead feminism and the women's movement have been transformed in 'Girl Power' or 'DIY' feminism where young women and girls claim they can do what they want when they want and experience no inequality.

In its latest DIY mode, feminism seems to have given away politics completely, announcing its project as one of 'attitude' and 'individual practice'. In her introduction to the collection *DIY Feminism*, Kathy Bail recommends the virtues of 'disorganised feminism', her contributors part of a generation that wants feminism to be feisty and fun...Bail tells us that the do-it-yourself-for-yourself feminists...want to be identified through their interests and passions...before their gender (Lake, 1999, p. 281).

Most commentators agree that much has indeed been gained by the women's movement and in many aspects a woman at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be unrecognisable to her sister at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However the norm of Australian life is still male, and as the women involved in this research attest to there are still too many women experiencing too much pain for our vigilance to wane.

#### 4.4.1 Inclusion and Difference

As with the feminisms of past eras, the heady days of women's liberation and the times since have been marked by the issues of difference. Again it was white, middle class women, educated and skilled, who were in the best position to take advantage of the changes and benefits which were directly attributable to the second wave women's movement. In the early days these women claimed a unity between women, a sisterhood. It seemed from their position of raised consciousness that all women experienced gender based oppression and all women were limited and disadvantaged in their relationships with all men. Early differences arose between women on the basis of strategy and ideology. As mentioned earlier some women influenced primarily by liberal feminist ideas pursued political activism through organisations like WEL. Other women, embracing radical feminist ideology, were heavily involved in the women's liberation groups. By the late 1970s, lesbian women, inspired by many of the radical feminist writings that challenged and critiqued heterosexism were vocal in their criticism of the consciousness raising groups where all lovers were assumed to be men (Lake, 1999). While lesbianism was not illegal, lesbian women confronted discrimination and were denied basic freedoms other women took for granted. However the women's movement was slow to acknowledge these issues and individual feminist women even slower to identify their own prejudices.

Tensions escalated when Zelda D'Aprano expressed her misgivings about the increasing presence of lesbians in the women's centre, who 'seemed to find it necessary to huddle together in couple situations while they almost constantly displayed their affections towards their partners'. Moreover it was perplexing that 'some of the lesbian women who are feminists found it necessary to wear men's clothing'. Zelda worried the numbers of lesbians in Women's Liberation would come as a great shock to ordinary women 'and more than likely turn them away from the movement' (Lake, 1999, p. 243).

Lesbian women were it appeared faced with two choices – neither particularly empowering. They could devote their time and energy to issues focused on homosexuality though these issues were of primary importance to gay men ( e.g. decriminalization) or they could be part of the women's movement where their sexuality was of secondary importance to their womanhood (Kaplan, 1996).

Aboriginal women also questioned the relevance (as they have throughout history) of the women's movement to their lives. Lake (1999) contends that feminist women of the 1970s were acutely aware of their own privilege and agonized over the inclusion of Aboriginal women, working class women, and migrant women. However they were unable to comprehend that their analysis of oppression may not be the same for all women. Instead they considered the oppression of Aboriginal women as different in degree, but not in essential nature, to their own.

They were blind to the poverty and devastation faced by many Aboriginal communities (Lake & Holmes, 1995). Burgmann (1993) argues that even though there had been an active Aboriginal movement for many years, and Aboriginal women had participated in feminist marches and rallies, most white women knew little of their cause. Those who did recognise the existence and needs of Aboriginal women often pushed for their inclusion into the women's movement with little awareness of the racism inherent therein or the lack of appeal of white women's demands.

While the concept of the family has been challenged by white feminists, the family unit is very important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Family planning has been regarded as a deliberate strategy to reduce the size of the Indigenous population. The white women's movement's support for abortion conflicts with black women's fights against enforced sterilization and to have healthy children. Young Aboriginals have been taken away from their mothers, because it was assumed that whites knew what was best for these children (van Acker, 1999, p. 61).

The lack of understanding of the Indigenous experience by white feminists was an issue of some significance from the mid 1970s. In 1976, Pat O'Shane, Australia's first Aboriginal barrister, called on non-Indigenous women to consider their personal and political aims and those of black women, for it "seemed to her that for the majority of those women the fight was against sexism, whereas medical, housing, education, employment and legal statistics showed clearly that for Aboriginal women the fight was against racism" (Alexander, 2001, p. 244). It appears that despite all the questions and debates that have raged between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women there is still much to be learnt. Jackie Huggins (1998) claims to have consistently felt marginalised at Women's Studies conferences and feminist groups and sees the only way forward as the establishment of limited alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women.

Aboriginal women have engaged in political struggle within their own groups demanding improvements in health, legal services, land rights and employment. At times non-Indigenous people have been there in support. For example in 1988, Aboriginal activists organised a large protest to demonstrate against the celebration of the bicentenary of European 'settlement'. Many non-Indigenous supporters were present and provided the Aboriginal protesters who had travelled from all over Australia with food, clothing and blankets (Torney - Parlicki, 2001). In 2000 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people again united to participate in the Reconciliation walk over the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Various Royal Commissions have given Aboriginal people the opportunity to give voice to their experiences and to highlight the injustice and persecution they have experienced. Aboriginal women have made valuable and important contributions to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody initiated in 1987 and to the Royal Commission into the Separation of Aboriginal Children from their Families concluded in 1997.



The reports from both these inquiries identify that the most urgent priority for Aboriginal people – men as well as women- is to address the effects of dispossession and the destruction of Aboriginal culture and communities (Lake, 1999).

Women from non English speaking backgrounds have also claimed to have been marginalised and excluded from the second wave feminist movement. Kaplan (1996) reports

Migrant women of different linguistic backgrounds were by and large not welcome in the women's movement. Here the question, 'what can we do for you?', became patronising. To move on from this *modus operandi* to the question : 'What can we do with you?' or even more typically : 'What can you contribute to our goals ?' was often too demanding. Few treated migrant women as their equals. I keenly recall an instance when a feminist organisation was asked to propose six nominees for one coveted position on an outside body...Hostility raged when an immigrant was selected (p. 127).

However many groups of migrant women were very active in promoting the needs and enhancing the status of women from non-English speaking backgrounds. Many feminist organisations ensured their information and publicity was multi lingual at the request of migrant women. In 1975 the Australian Migrant Women's Association was formed after receiving funding through the International Women's Year grants and in 1979 after years of consultation and political pressure a Migrant Women's Coordinator was appointed to the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (Kaplan, 1996). In 1985, a national conference attended by over 100 women from a variety of government and community based organisations joined together to develop the priorities for federal and State Ministers of Immigration/Ethnic Affairs.

The nature of the four priority areas highlights not only divergences but also the similarities between migrant women's priorities and those espoused by 'mainstream' groups such as WEL. Their priorities were improved health safety and working conditions for the female immigrant workforce; improved access to language classes, education, training and retraining for immigrant women; improved access to culturally appropriate child care; and improved services for aged and aging immigrant women (Lake, 1999, p. 268).

Vasta (1993) however describes the emergence of two major immigrant women's organisations in the same year, namely the Immigrant Women's Speakout Association of NSW (Speakout) and the Association of Non-English Speaking Background Women of Australia (ANESBWA), as forming "specifically to respond to issues of importance to migrant women, many of which had either been ignored or marginalised in the mainstream movement" (p. 10). She asserts that migrant women claimed that the women's movement in Australia had failed to understand the diversity of women in Australia.

This meant that important issues such as racism, class experience, sexuality and the family were either ignored or it was thought that all women would adopt the

mainstream position on these issues.... For migrant women to identify themselves outside the mainstream women's movement was both a political gesture breaking the notion of homogeneity and an act of self empowerment. Hence the rise of immigrant women's organisations such as Speakout ... and the numerous ethno-specific groups and associations (Vasta, 1993, p. 10-11).

It is likely then that Kaplan's (1996) claim that she knows "of no single immigrant woman of NESB background who is a stranger to the experience of ostracism and exclusion by other women and other feminists" (p. 128) is reflective of many of the experiences of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in their engagement with so – called mainstream feminism.

#### 4.4.2 Women in the Northern Territory

Women of the Northern Territory were not unaffected by the events in other parts of Australia at this time. The Women's Electoral Lobby was established in 1972 and immediately began interviewing political candidates and publicising their responses, as they did in other parts of Australia. At that time Dawn Lawrie was the lone female voice in the conservative Northern Territory Legislative Council, a role she was to keep for twelve years (James, 1989). She was an inspiration to many other women in the Top End. WEL also recognised the need for women's services in Darwin and in 1973 they were instrumental in the establishment of a Family Planning Clinic. During 1974 women in WEL, and those associated with the Family Planning Clinic, prepared a submission for funding to the Community Health Program for a combined refuge and health centre to be established in Darwin (Broom, 1991). The submission was successful, despite the presence of a conservative Northern Territory government, an indication perhaps of the far-reaching influence of the 'second wave' women's movement in those early years.

Indigenous women and men were also active during this period taking the opportunities provided by the 1967 referendum and demanding that more attention be paid to the situation and circumstances of Aboriginal people. In 1971, the Northern Territory Supreme Court upheld the concept of *terra nullius* and allowed bauxite to be mined on Yirrkala land. The Larrikia people of Darwin raised the Aboriginal flag outside the courthouse in protest (Danila Dilba, 2001). The appalling health status of Aboriginal people was an issue of major concern and a number of activist women worked towards the establishment of an Aboriginal controlled health service in Darwin. Aboriginal Medical Services were being established in all major cities in Australia in the early years of the 1970s and women like Barbara Cummins, Hilda Muir and Kathy Martin were active in attempting to lobby the Northern Territory government for funding for similar services in Darwin and Alice Springs (Danila Dilba, 2001).

On Christmas Eve 1974, Cyclone Tracey annihilated Darwin and readjusted the priorities of all her citizens. James recalls her experience:

For nearly eight hours thousands of Darwinites scrambled to find safe shelter as their homes were ripped from them, collapsing like card houses. Possessions, some accumulated over a lifetime, hurtled past, at times moving in almost surrealistic slow motion, as if to make certain we understood the ephemeral quality of material things. Sheltering in the remains of bathrooms, wardrobes, laundries; clinging desperately to totally exposed floorboards, or lying, as we did, sodden and shivering outside, next to a metre-high cyclone fence to protect ourselves from flying debris, many wondered if they would survive the night. Remarkably, most did, though some still suffer the psychological effects of the night and the traumatic aftermath. It changed many lives, exposing both strengths and weaknesses in individuals who had never had to face themselves in such a way before. By dawn, the extent of the destruction became appallingly apparent - Darwin had been destroyed (1989, p. 265-266).

James goes on to report that women up and down the 'track' (the Stuart Highway) led the way in providing relief services and supporting the rebuilding efforts. Over 6000 people, mostly women and children were evacuated from Darwin, and were required then to apply for a permit to return to the town (James, 1989). This strategy ensured that women were excluded from the rebuilding efforts. As a result, residential action groups sprang up spontaneously throughout the city to protest the exclusion of Darwin citizens, primarily women, from the decision-making processes involved in disaster recovery. Dawn Lawrie was the first to organise such a group in Nightcliff, followed quickly by Pam O'Neil in Fannie Bay. Dr. Lyn Reid, an original member of WEL and one of the key women behind the submission for the Women's Health Centre, was elected as the first chairperson of the Darwin Citizen's Advisory Council which advocated and agitated for the inclusion of Darwin citizens in the rebuilding process (James, 1989). The residential action groups and the Citizens Advisory Council were also active in campaigning for the building of appropriate housing and provision of adequate facilities as a priority to facilitate the return of families.

Slowly residents did begin to return and with their return the issues and concerns which had prompted the original Women's Centre submission reappeared. The Darwin Women's Health Centre was opened in late 1975 with Lyn Reid as its only doctor for the first year (Broom, 1991). The centre was primarily a shelter and the provision of health services concentrated on the needs of women and children in need of refuge and safety. The centre found itself almost immediately on the defensive from a hostile Northern Territory government and enormous demands from the community. This was one of the very few services of its type in Darwin at the time and ensuring that women and children escaping violence were prioritised became a time consuming and difficult task at times. The existence of an openly feminist service in Darwin was confronting to

the 'macho' Territorian image built up over nearly one hundred years (James, 1989). In 1978 a group of women who had been instrumental in the development of the Women's Centre applied for separate funding from the Commonwealth government's National Women's Refuge Programme and were successful. This was the beginning of the Women and Children's Refuge which has participated in this research. The Women's Centre however was not to enjoy such longevity. It was closed in 1980 when funding was withdrawn (Broom, 1991). Broom claims this was a conscious and concerted move on the part of the conservative Northern Territory government to oust "the more radical, collectively organised women who took over the health centre" (Broom, 1991, p. 18)

In 1975, the Alice Springs Women's Centre also opened its doors though for the first two years it was without funding and staffed by volunteers. This centre also operated as a combined refuge and health clinic for women and children in need. In 1977, perhaps as a result of increased female representation in the Northern Territory Legislative Council, the centre received funding and was able to expand its refuge and health services to include counselling, advocacy and community education (Broom, 1991). But the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in the town were to cause divisions and differences that eventually closed the service. Broom describes the dramatic events:

The sheer pressure of numbers increased dramatically, since many Aboriginal women were accompanied by a large network of kin. They were not used to appliances or the confinement of a conventional suburban house, and some people felt that... the refuge placed them in accommodation that was inappropriate to their needs. Those who defended the Centre's use charged their critics with racism; those expressing reservations accused the Centre of being hostile to men and excluding of non-Aboriginals. ... The situation was inflamed by a threatened takeover of the Centre by a right-wing group. ... Feelings ran high, and women from both sides say that there were threats of violence, verbal assaults, and cars run off the road.... They were issued with a summons to vacate the premises and a mass public meeting was held outside the house. ... The police were present at this meeting where members of the Right to Life Association and other extreme conservatives called for funding to be stopped and the collective to be evicted. The collective moved back in, but the situation was beyond redemption. Funding was withdrawn, the Centre closed and the building demolished (Broom, 1991, p. 22-23).

Providing appropriate services to Aboriginal women, responding to extreme conservatives and operating within a hostile political environment were and remain constant issues of concern for feminist women working in feminist services in the Northern Territory. Since the 1970s women working for and with other women in the Northern Territory also had to combat a social setting marked by misogyny or 'woman hatred'. While not necessarily reflective of the values of all Territorian men, the very essence of Territorian values and culture remain white male dominated,

at the expense of all else. In many areas of the Territory this amounted to misogyny as Alexander (2001) reports

Robyn Davidson noticed the 'aggressive masculine ethic', the 'cult of misogyny' when she moved from coastal Queensland to Alice Springs in the 1970s. She worked as a barmaid, and saw plenty of men like the typical misogynist she described, 'almost devoid of charm. He is biased, bigoted, boring and above all, brutal. His enjoyments in life are limited to fishing, shooting and drinking.' He would not accept as equal any woman or any Aboriginal person or foreigners. One night one of the regulars in the pub told her she should be careful, that she had been nominated by some men as the next rape case. Robyn was devastated, and frightened. Then one night, going to bed, she found a large lump of excrement on her pillow. She handed in her notice at once (p. 230).

Aboriginal people returned to Darwin after the cyclone more aware of the lack of appropriate services - particularly Indigenous controlled and managed services - in Darwin. Groups of men and women worked tirelessly toward the provision of appropriate health, legal, educational and support services for Aboriginal people. Some Aboriginal women were invited to be members of the groups that established the Darwin Women's Health Service but their priority was always the development of Aboriginal controlled services (Danila Dilba, 2001).

Politically women were proving to be a force to be reckoned during this early period. In the 1977 Northern Territory elections, three women were elected to the Legislative Council, joining Dawn Lawrie and allowing the Northern Territory parliament to claim the highest representation by women of any Australian parliament at the time. Three of the women, Pam O'Neil, June D'Rosario and Dawn Lawrie were Labor members or radical Independents and together they agitated for progressive policies in areas such as abortion reform and Aboriginal affairs (James, 1989). In 1978 the Northern Territory was finally granted full self government rights and these political women were part of the first Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. But their days were numbered and the hostility of the Territory government to any women-centred policies is well documented. The Chief Minister in the early 1980s, Paul Everingham, is reported to have stated that he did not need a women's advisor as he had a wife (Sawer, 1990). Everingham went on, in 1983, to convince Territorians that the hand over of Ayres Rock to its original owners was a move that represented gross interference in Northern Territory affairs by a Labor-led Federal Government. As a result those politicians who were seen to advocate reform, including the three activist women, were ousted in an emotional election (James, 1989).

During the 1980s various instruments of women's policy development began to appear within the Northern Territory government despite the absence of female representation and the conservative nature of the Country-Liberal party. Sawer (1990) credits this to pressure from WEL and

describes the processes and achievements of the women's policy machinery in the Northern Territory.

In 1982, as a result of pressure from Women's Electoral Lobby, the position of Ministerial adviser for women's affairs and equal opportunity was established in the Chief Ministers Office. The following year a Division (later Office) of Women's Affairs was established in the Chief Minister's department, and a Women's Advisory Council was also set up...The women's adviser had access to all Cabinet agendas and to Cabinet submissions. She was able to seek the advice of the WAC on legislative proposals before they went to the Legislative Assembly and to ensure that both Ministers and the bureaucracy received this advice. She also attended the regular Commonwealth/state women's advisors meetings and used Commonwealth contacts to facilitate the expansion of children's services and women's services such as refuges. A major achievement was work on domestic violence law reform, leading to the introduction of amendments in the Parliament in 1988 including an 'ouster' provision to remove suspected offenders from the home (Sawer, 1990, p. 177).

Chris Sylvester was the women's adviser from 1983 to 1988 (Sawer, 1990). While she saw many achievements for Territory women, including the reintroduction of funding for the Alice Springs Women's Refuge and the commencement of funding to the Rape Counselling Service that participated in this research, her term was plagued with difficulties. The political volatility of the Northern Territory meant that there were four separate Chief Ministers during Sylvester's term, all conservative leaders of the Country/Liberal party. Developing and maintaining useful and workable relationships over and over again was time consuming and inevitably detracted from the time and resources available to the women's adviser to pursue feminist agendas. In 1988 the latest Chief Minister, Marshall Perron, forced Sylvester from her position supposedly because he needed her office for a public relations man (Sawer, 1990).

In 1980 Pitjantjatjara women of the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia formed the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council, as a means of ensuring that their role as cultural custodians of their traditional country was not ignored by the male dominated land councils or overlooked by white officials assessing land rights claims.

The Women's Council has assisted in acquiring funding for women-only vehicles to enable women to attend meetings, to conduct ritual business and to collect material for hunting and art production: the registering and protecting of women's sacred sites at Uluru; the research and planning of the Congress Alkuru birthing centre in Alice Springs; and support for women to participate in public debate at national conferences. The Council employs sixteen women full-time, who have worked in community outreach projects including Disability Employment Support, Domestic Violence, Commonwealth Respite for Carers, Nutrition Support for Young Mothers and Babies and Aged Care Support Services. This model of organising was replicated in other parts of the country. A Central Australian Women's Council formed in 1983 and in New South Wales the Western Women's Council was formed in 1984 (Lake, 1999, p. 272).

Many of the leading women of the Northern Territory of this period continued to influence policy debate and community attitudes. Dawn Lawrie became the first Northern Territory Commissioner for Equal Opportunity and continued to campaign for women, Indigenous people, and those who are disadvantaged (James, 1989). Pam O'Neil moved from the Northern Territory and became Australia's first Sex Discrimination Commissioner (Lake, 1999). However the general political environment was overwhelmingly conservative and a difficult environment for women working in women's services. Robyn Priestley (1996) writes,

It cannot be denied that the dominant ethos...is very conservative. It would appear the more public spheres of women's lives are heavily impacted by this conservative nature... . This situation really reflects a subtle underpinning covert on the freedom of speech. No one is actually stopping them from expressing their opinion but the reaction of others could be a powerful censure on their freedom of speech in the future. This is one of the powerful but disabling realities of living in these communities (p. 15).

Priestley is writing specifically of Alice Springs and while a slightly larger town, a similar ethos existed in Darwin and in fact most of the Northern Territory in the late 1990s. Many women including Dawn Lawrie were subjected to public ridicule and denigration if they opposed the decisions of consecutive Chief Ministers Shane Stone and Dennis Bourke. Finally in 1999 Dawn Lawrie was forced from office, demonstrating that the political environment of this time remained what it had always been: hostile and unrelenting to women who stepped out of line.

In 1999, 47.2% of the 187,000 Territorians were women and about a quarter of these were Aboriginal women, with another 20% being born overseas. Twenty six percent of women spoke a language other than English. The average age of women in the Territory was 26.6 years, seven years younger than the national average and indicating the large number of children and young people residing in the Northern Territory (Northern Territory Women's Health Unit, 1999). Isolation remained, as always, a major fact of life for all Territorian women, even though some towns like Darwin and Alice Springs were reasonably metropolitan. Women in remote communities were especially cut off from services and resources, but a large majority of women from all over the Territory described the isolation as 'profound' (Northern Territory Women's Health Unit, 1999). This same report claims violence against women and children was described by women as "almost a part of Northern Territory culture" ( p. 46) and often remained unreported and hidden.

### *Chapter Summary*

This chapter has described a selected history of feminism and feminist organisations in Australia. It has identified that there have been significant issues of difference between women throughout this history. In particular, Indigenous women and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have struggled for recognition and meaningful inclusion in what has been essentially a white woman's movement. Women of the Northern Territory are described here as a diverse group. They have evolved from an intriguing assembly of courageous pioneer women who were viewed by many as the domestic backbone of the Territory, creators of the social infrastructure, the ever faithful wives, mothers and daughters of the much acclaimed Territory men (Priestley, 1996).

This chapter has discussed the activities of many Indigenous and non-Indigenous women all of whom have made significant contributions to the diversity of women's services and organisations in the Northern Territory. The chapter concludes that despite the achievements and triumphs of these many spirited women, the Northern Territory remains a politically conservative, male dominated environment that is at times quite hostile to the demands of feminist women and feminist organisations.

### *Post Script*

At the time of completing the writing of this thesis, John Howard remains as Prime Minister and the strategies described by Anne Summers earlier continue. Funding for domestic violence projects remain unspent and the focus of many supposedly women-centred campaigns is the production of websites and glossy brochures rather than funding for service delivery (Summers, 2003).

However in 2001, about eighteen months after the last of the interviews for this research was conducted, in an event that amazed even the most optimistic supporters, the ALP in the Northern Territory was swept into power and Clare Martin became the Territory's first woman Chief Minister. After this election seven of the twenty-four members of the Legislative Assembly were women, including Dawn Lawrie's daughter, Delia, as the Member for Karama and an Indigenous woman, Marion Scrymgeour, only the second indigenous woman to ever be elected to an Australian parliament. Clare Martin had been a member of the management group for one of the organisations in this research at the time of the interviews though she was not interviewed for the research. She is a self-declared feminist and had publicly expressed support for all three of the organisations in this research. The political environment in which these organisations now operate is much less hostile than it was at the time of the interviews. After the election, women I



had contact with reported that the need to justify their existence and hide their explicit feminist agenda was no longer necessary. Creative and innovative projects were seriously considered and some even funded and groups were able to focus on developing their services according to their aims and mission. The implications of this event for ongoing practice and future research are discussed in the final chapter.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Creating Feminist Space: The Organisations**

One of the major achievements of the 'femocrat' strategy described in the previous chapter was the acquisition of secure government funding for women's services established by women committed to the feminist movement. In fact, it has been suggested that "the femocrat phenomenon is a significant aspect of the institutional environment which has shaped the nature and characteristics of feminist organisations" (Melville, 1994, p 60). This chapter explores that assertion as it describes the nature and characteristics of the three feminist organisations that have participated in this research. These are feminist services and have as their primary goal the provision of supportive, welfare services to women and children.

#### ***5.1 Introduction***

Carol Mueller (1995) claims that feminist service organisations, while similar in many ways to both small, radical feminist collectives and to large, politically-orientated, feminist hierarchies, have, at the same time, many features that distinguish them. Feminist service organisations vary in structure, strategy and program (as will be clearly demonstrated in the following discussions), but maintain feminist or, at least, anti-bureaucratic (though not necessarily anti-hierarchical) values and are committed ideologically to equality, empowerment and democratic participation (Mueller, 1995). Kaplan (1996) comments that the proliferation of these types of feminist services for women is clear evidence of the enormous success of "feminist infrastructure and culture building" (p. 71) and that the development of these organisations "has been among the most intelligent, well-informed and successful activities of the women's movement"(p. 72). The success and effectiveness of such organisations can be assessed against various criteria including the outcomes reported by women who use the services or by the level of community awareness of women's issues. But some literature (Ferree & Martin, 1995b; Staggenborg, 1995; Weeks, 1994) suggests that these organisations have been similarly 'successful' in providing a valued and valuable space for the women who work, paid or unpaid, within their structures. It is these experiences that have been explored in this research.

Chapter Two outlined the literature that describes and analyses feminist organisations. I draw now on that work as a context for introducing the three organisations that participated in the research. Referring particularly to the organisational principals identified by Wendy Weeks (1994) and the feminist features described by Patricia Yancy Martin (1990) (Section 2.7.1), I consider each organisation in the light of the following characteristics:

- Unique historical context;
- Espoused philosophical principals including the public identification of feminist ideology, analysis, and goals;
- Staffing and remuneration practices;
- Organisational structure, membership and management;
- Decision-making structures and processes;
- Conflict resolution strategies
- Policies and practices focusing on inclusion and diversity

These are some of the organisational features and practices that feminist women have challenged and sought to modify or change in attempts to address the disempowerment and disadvantage experienced by women in mainstream organisations. As will be demonstrated in the following discussions, the three organisations that have participated in this research have travelled different paths in pursuing these challenges and these differences allow some insight into the complexities which confront women in their moves to create spaces which are empowering and women-centred.

I have used material from reports, newsletters, and the words of individual women to provide a picture of each organisation. This chapter explores the women's reactions and responses to the organisational structure and processes. In particular the chapter examines and highlights the different strategies used by women in each organisation to create, influence and sustain the organisation. The outcomes of these strategies and the ongoing issues confronting each organisation are identified.

## **5.2    *The Rape Counselling Service***

This first section introduces an organisation, which I have called 'The Rape Counselling Service' or RCS. Though some literature (Bordt, 1997) claims that the existence of pure collectives is a rarity, the Rape Counselling Service originated as and remains a feminist collective. The women who worked in the service at the time of this research were acutely aware of the uniqueness of the collective structure and expressed some pride in the ability of the service to maintain this structural form as a visible commitment to its ideological objectives.

*...people, when I've been down south, they'll say to me 'where do you work?' and I'll say, 'the Rape Counselling Service in Darwin' and they'll say 'is it a collective?' and I'd say 'yes'. And they'd say 'does it work?' And I'd say 'yes!' And they'd say 'Oh - tell us the real story' and I'd say 'that is the real story'. It really does work.... And I was always really proud and I still am.... I think we are probably one of the few well functioning women's collectives into the 1990s (Maria, RCS).*

While the evidence presented here supports Maria's claims of a well functioning collective organisation, the women who work with the Rape Counselling Service also describe many dilemmas, concerns, and confusions.

### 5.2.1 Historical Context

'Second wave' feminism's response to and analysis of the rape and sexual assault of women and children began in the early 1970s. Liz Orr (1997) documents the development of feminist services for women who have experienced rape as occurring through three distinct eras. In the first era, women's consciousness-raising groups began to identify the prevalence of sexual violence in women's lives and proposed a radically alternative analysis of rape to that which informed the traditional medical, legal, and social services of the time. This analysis identified that while not all men raped, all men benefited from the act of rape. The terror and ever-present threat of rape ensured women succumbed to male dominance, as to live without men was to be vulnerable to attack (Burgmann, 1993). They also identified rape as an act of violence, not sex or passion, embedded in and fueled by the oppression of women in society in general. This feminist understanding of rape recognised that when women who had experienced sexual assault attempted to seek justice and redress within the legal system, they were further violated and traumatised by laws "designed for men to exact vengeance on the rapists of their wives and daughters and not concerned with justice for women in general..." (Burgmann, 1993, p. 96). Hence the sexual history of the 'victim' was treated as an issue of great consequence as, unless she was a virgin or a 'respectable' married woman, her story was unreliable.

One of the early advocates of this alternative analysis was an organisation called Women against Rape (WAR) which established the Melbourne Rape Crisis Service in 1973, soon followed by the Sydney Rape Crisis Centre in 1974 (Weeks, 1994). These organisations were strongly influenced by radical feminist thought and provided support and advocacy to women in a manner dramatically different to the victim/ woman blaming practices of the police, the courts and the medical services of the time. At the same time the Women's Electoral Lobby, influenced more by liberal feminist politics and committed to a working relationship with government and bureaucracy, was lobbying heavily for appropriate and adequate government support for women who experienced sexual violence (Orr, 1997).

Together these feminist strategies of directly providing alternative services which highlighted and made public women's experiences, and the lobbying of and ongoing negotiation with the health and legal bureaucracy resulted in the development of sexual assault services attached to hospitals or government psychiatric agencies (Weeks, 1994). The development of these types of services

is described by Orr (1997) as the second era of service development, after the initial heightening of awareness and understanding. Such services incorporated extensive state involvement in their structure and practices and as such did not necessarily eliminate the perpetuation of stigma or the victimisation of women who had been raped. Women against Rape therefore, continued to campaign strongly for the establishment and funding of independent alternative services, which espoused a radical feminist analysis of rape and provided women with options and opportunities for healing and personal growth. The development of such services heralded the third era of sexual assault service development (Orr, 1997), and resulted in an extensive network of feminist-informed sexual assault services throughout Australia including several in the Northern Territory (Weeks, 1994).

The Rape Counselling Service in Darwin considers itself a part of this network of feminist rape crisis centres developed as a result of these national and worldwide campaigns and it began operation in 1987. Its history, however, dates back to the early 1980s in circumstances reflective of Dorothy Broom's observations about Women's Health Centres.

The formal opening of a centre may be its first manifestation to the community at large, but the opening is typically preceded by a period of months, or even years, of informal discussion in which women develop their ideas...and formulate a commitment to having a centre (1991, p. 85).

During the early 1980s, Darwin's small but active feminist community, influenced by the campaigns and activities of WAR, became acutely aware of the need for rape crisis services throughout the Northern Territory. In 1984, a small group of women started meeting regularly to work toward the establishment of such a service. In October 1984 this group organised a public meeting in an attempt to establish a sense of community support for sexual assault services. The public meeting was by all accounts very well attended and an action group was formed to write a submission for federal funds to establish a community-based, non-clinical, rape counselling and support service for women and children that operated on feminist principles (*Annual Report 1996-1997*).

While this application for funding was being developed, the Darwin City Council provided a small grant to enable one of these women to travel to Adelaide to attend the Inaugural Rape Crisis Centres Conference in February 1985. When she returned in March 1985, the action group organised a public forum aimed at disseminating information from the conference to as many interested community members as possible. The large public attendance at this forum was seen as a sign of significant community support for the establishment of a rape crisis service in Darwin. The day after the successful forum, a representative of the Commonwealth government contacted the group and offered a small grant to enable the group to complete the comprehensive

submission for funding. Funding was approved and the first coordinator (albeit part-time and home based) was employed in March 1987 – some three years after the first action group was formed (*Annual Report 1996-1997*).

This beginning is similar to descriptions of many new feminist services (Broom, 1991; Stevens, 1995). Riger (1994) discusses this time of organisational creation as one of "innovation and creativity, demanding enormous amounts of effort, time and even physical labor" (p.276) from a small committed group. The women who established the Rape Counselling Service apparently negotiated through these tumultuous early stages with vision and dedication. They are remembered in the present as women who did remarkable things in a difficult environment and as an inspiration for present day workers and members, many of whom never personally knew these original pioneers. For example, a Rape Counselling Service newsletter in 2001 reports:

*It is worth remembering the environment in which women founded the Rape Counselling Service. They identified the need for a service, lobbied politicians, developed funding applications, overcame setbacks, wrote a constitution, employed counsellors, found and set up the house, operated as a collective and did all this in their own time! The Northern Territory has the highest rate of sexual assault in the country. These women believed they could make a difference and worked to make it a reality. Without them, we wouldn't be here - a strong woman-affirming collective (p.7).*

Riger (1994) describes the key issue confronting feminist organisations during this creation period as the inevitable tension that arises between the oppositional stance of a feminist organisation and its survival needs in the broader political, economic, and social environment. The original vision of the women who established the Rape Counselling Service was almost immediately challenged by its external environment, namely the Northern Territory Housing Department, which found many of the Rape Counselling Service's ideological commitments confronting. For example, the goal was to operate a women-only service from an ordinary house in suburban Darwin, and to maintain this address as secret to provide a sense of safety and privacy for the women and children who used the service. Negotiating a tenancy agreement with the conservative, male dominated Northern Territory Housing Department with these provisos proved lengthy and challenging. The initial agreement with the Housing Department in 1987 was probationary with the collective being informed that if just one complaint was received from neighbours in the following twelve months, their tenancy would be terminated (*Annual Report 1996 -1997*). Apparently though, the Rape Counselling Service proved to be a reasonable neighbour and, in early 1989, the service was granted secure tenure of a three bedroom home in a central suburb of Darwin.

This issue of external threat, opposition, and hostility has been and remains a source of tension and concern for the service and for some of the women who work within the service. The women's particular responses are explored in the next chapter but in general the service has used a non-confrontational, educative approach with its external environment (which includes funding bodies and essential networks such as the police and the hospital), without compromising its feminist values. A review by the funding body demonstrates that some success has been achieved, at least in the relationship with the funding body, using this approach.

*The Rape Counselling Service gives every indication of being a well-managed service with a strong client focus, high quality administration, financial accountability and HRM practices...It is a well respected agency offering specialist counselling skills, employs intervention strategies to assist clients in crisis situations and takes a broad advocacy and community education role. The collective -style of management is strategic in its operations with regular evaluation and review...(SAAP Service Overview, 1998).*

However not all the Rape Counselling Services' networks view the service this positively and the women are often involved in negotiating hostile, anti- feminist attitudes and responses. The philosophical principals that underpin the service inform this negotiation, however the constancy and vehemence of some opposition can take its toll on individual women. The organisation itself offers women a haven from hostility and misogyny. As discussed in an earlier chapter this is a feature of social movement organisations and certainly the Rape Counselling Service creates a cultural refuge for feminist women within the male dominated Northern Territory community. The analyses of Staggenborg (2001) and Bernstein (2003), which highlight the importance of culture building in maintaining social action and sustaining activists, are useful in understanding the way in which individual women understand their involvement with the organisation and will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. Suffice to say at this point the organisation prioritises the development of rituals and the creation of feminist space as part of its commitment to feminist philosophy and social action aimed at eradicating rape. The following sections give details and insights into these processes.

### 5.2.2. Feminist Philosophy and Practice

The original statement of philosophy, aims and goals are part of the Rape Counselling Service's constitution and as such are enshrined as guiding principals for organisational practice. As one of the women workers commented,

*I remember...- at our tenth anniversary luncheon, one of the original members gave a speech at the lunch and she said, 'remember women, whenever you are in doubt, look back at the constitution, It's where you come from'. And she's right. It is all*

*there and when in doubt, check it out and see what that original wording was... It's a good starting point (Olivia, RCS).*

From the very beginning the Rape Counselling Service identified strongly as a feminist service. A feminist analysis of rape and a commitment to the strength and personal power of women who have been raped is included in the organisation's constitution as philosophical principals on which the service is based. This statement of principals reads:

- *We recognise that rape exists within a political and social context. With this in mind we work towards the eradication of all forms of rape and sexual violence.*
- *We work towards empowering women to make their own choices, recognise their potential and act on their own decisions.*
- *Within recognised constraints we work towards empowering children to make their own choices and to be self-determining.*
- *We endeavour to share our skills and to communicate honestly and directly.*
- *We endeavour to provide a safe, non-institutional and homely environment.*
- *We endeavour to provide a service that is not racist, sexist, ageist or classist*
- *We endeavour to use collectivity, consultation, and consensus decision-making.*
- *We believe all women's services should be fully funded according to needs identified in the community.*
- *We endeavour to ensure strict confidentiality of the address and confidentiality of information relating to service users.*

*(Constitution, Section 3 "Philosophical Principals").*

In addition the Constitution requires that the Rape Counselling Service aim to change "*society's attitudes about rape and sexual abuse, in accordance with our philosophical principals, through continuing education and by raising public awareness*" (Constitution, Section Four, Aims).

The Rape Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to women and children who are survivors of sexual assault. A report to the funding body describes the service as one

*... founded on feminist principles, which place an understanding of sexual assault within the wider context of social power relations. A client is deemed to be her own expert, having the right to define her own experience and to be believed. The knowledge women hold of themselves and their lives places them in the best position to make decisions and choices about how they will go about resolving issues arising from their experience of rape.*

In addition the service is committed to activities and tasks that provide education, training, public awareness, and social action aimed at the eradication of rape and sexual assault. In an information booklet about the service, it is claimed "*our long term goal, through ongoing community education, is to work towards creating a society in which rape does not exist*" ("*The Facts for Rape Survivors*" booklet, p.3).

The service's commitment to feminist principals of practice is also evident in the physical environment created by the women members of the organisation. The house from which the service operates has been slightly modified to include an open plan workroom for the counsellors



and two private counselling rooms. There is also a library area furnished with comfortable seating and a fully functional kitchen. The atmosphere is homely, with many cushions, rugs, and beanbags, and women centred, as evidenced by the title of the library books, the posters on the walls and the constant supply of tampons in the bathroom. The house is surrounded by a lush, tropical garden typical of the Darwin area and highly valued by the service. This is a woman-only space protected and maintained by the secret address and the commitment of all members to keep it that way. If visitors are invited to the centre for maintenance or networking, then every effort is made to ensure this visitor is a woman. If the presence of a man in the house is unavoidable (which happens at times, as the presence of female trade persons is rare indeed in Darwin) then staff and members were warned. During the interviews for this research, women were asked if their desire to be inclusive of all women could challenge their commitment to a woman-only space. Hypothetically it was suggested that some women could, for a variety of reasons, want men included in their personal and political fight against sexual assault. The women who worked at the Rape Counselling Service agreed that the maintenance of the service as a woman-only space was not negotiable. In the words of one of the women,

*Because before we are an inclusive organisation we're a woman's support - we're a safe place for women to be. And - to be totally safe, there needs to be no men... That safe space for women - it's an absolute foundation stone of what the Rape Counselling Service is... - that we couldn't compromise (Thea, RCS).*

In addition to individual counselling and support, the Rape Counselling Service facilitates a range of support groups for women survivors of sexual assault. Groups meet in the garden or in the lounge room and focus on women's strength, resilience, and healing. Workers draw on a range of sources and resources for their work including other members whose varied skills and personal life experiences are all valued and respected. One woman who was a member of the management collective and also worked on projects in the organisation reported how her experience as a woman who had survived rape was treated as a strength.

*I feel like I've got stuff to give - like [a Counselor/Coordinator] and I were talking - she was struggling with one of the members of the group this morning and counselling her and stuff and started to ask me in my personal experience as a client and how I shifted through those blocks and - so being able to give, give that stuff as well, which is really valuable to the organisation (Thea RCS).*

The Rape Counselling Service is also an active and vital link in many of the feminist and women-centred networks in Darwin. The service commits time, workers and financial resources to the Reclaim the Night collective each year and the workers' reports indicate they are represented on over a dozen local, Territory and national committees and groups which work towards the eradication of sexual assault. Involvement in these committees and groups was often difficult for

individual women for different reasons and their experiences are explored at more length in the following chapter. Despite these difficulties, as an organisation, the Rape Counselling Service was committed ideologically to broad networking and active involvement in political and social campaigns that reflected their philosophical principals. This discussion has demonstrated that the Rape Counselling Service incorporates all the elements suggested by Weeks (1994) as core purposes of feminist services. They provide services to women as a priority, engage in social action and provide community education that specifically challenges the misogynist and inaccurate views about the sexual assault of women and children. While providing this high quality service to women, children and the community the Rape Counselling Service also works hard at creating a woman-only, feminist space which acts as a protective cocoon for workers, members, and women seeking support.

### 5.2.3 Staffing, Roles, and Remuneration

During the period in which this research took place, the Rape Counselling Service employed three women on a full time basis as 'Counsellor/ Coordinators'. This title was used to indicate that each position was of equal standing and each woman had service coordination as well as counselling responsibilities. Each of the women in these positions was paid at the same hourly rate. Counsellor/ coordinators shared responsibility for a range of tasks such as

- *Emergency and ongoing counselling and support*
- *The provision of medical, legal and resource information*
- *Organising and facilitating self help and support groups*
- *Establishing community education programmes with a view to increasing community awareness and changing social attitudes about rape*
- *The provision of training for staff of various community and government agencies*
- *Monitor and evaluate the present and future needs for services, prevention, and education programmes on rape in the NT (Duty Statement Counsellor/Coordinator position, December 1999).*

Potential employees were asked to demonstrate a feminist analysis of rape and to indicate their willingness to participate in collective structures and processes. Each counsellor/ coordinator participated as an active member of the coordinating collective as a condition of their employment. One of the women described her position as thus:

*It's so different from other workplaces. There is no comparison ... there is nothing like it - in terms of the diversity of the workload - and that changes not only throughout the day but from day to day and week to week. You might have three weeks working on a report and you don't lift your head from the computer, followed by two days of community education, half a day counselling, preparation for the general meeting, writing out the newsletter. It's just so diverse - liaison meetings, committee meetings, visiting services, working on the library, research, or*

*something - it is just vastly diverse. And that's ...part of the appeal of the job, but its also very demanding (Olivia, RCS).*

Most work tasks are shared between the counsellor/coordinators though the service recognised that some workers may develop expertise or interest areas and such development was actively encouraged. Therefore, during the period of this research, one of the counsellor/ coordinators expressed a preference for community education work and was able to limit her counselling role and take on added responsibility in conducting training, education, and public information forums. Similarly one of the counsellor/ coordinators expressed a particular interest in developing her skills and the service's response to children who had experienced sexual assault and was provided with this opportunity. She attended conferences specifically in this area, developed a caseload that included mostly children and developed networks and alliances with children-specific workers and services in the local area and nationally.

During the period of this research the Rape Counselling Service received short term specific funding from a range of sources to undertake a number of different projects. These projects included specific school based education groups, the production of 'Stop Rape' booklets which aimed at refuting common community-held myths about rape, and the creation of large colourful banners with 'Stop Rape' messages and slogans for use at marches and displays.

The relationships between the staff employed at the Rape Counselling Service were as described by Rothschild & Whitt (1986), deeply personal and holistic. For example one worker just prior to her departure from the service wrote

*What can I say about the workers at the Rape Counselling Service? I have worked with many women ...They have all become respected colleagues, and some have become precious friends. In part, a bonding happens around shared feminist values and a belief that the world we live in can be different. The work itself demands particular skills e.g. counselling, educating etc, but more importantly it seems to me that women who work here are prepared to open up to their own vulnerabilities and learn to sit comfortably with them. An atmosphere of trust and acceptance is engendered which in turn creates a welcoming and safe environment. As workers are willing to look into themselves, so they are able to walk with women exploring their own dark places (Newsletter June 1999).*

However as Rothschild – Whitt (1979) identified this intensity of emotional involvement between co-workers and colleagues was a double-edged sword, enjoyed when relationships were positive but incredibly painful when conflict arose. The experience of this closeness between individual women is discussed at length in the following chapter.

In addition to the counsellor/coordinators, the service employed a part-time gardener (who had a clear mandate to create and maintain a peaceful and relaxing outdoor area), a part-time administrative worker (who dealt with salaries and maintaining the funding reports) and a part-

time cleaner. These women who worked part-time were all paid the same hourly rate as the counsellor/coordinators, in a reflection of the services commitment to non-hierarchical structures and valuing women explicitly for women's work. In justifying this arrangement the service states:

- *The practice is consistent with the service's commitment to the principal of collectivity which values individuals for their contribution to the whole;*
- *This practice undermines the assumption that organisational structures which operate as a hierarchy (and reflect this in differential pay rates) represent a 'natural order';*
- *This practice recognises that money in our society represents power, and that differential pay rates imply greater value and authority for those who are paid more, and diminished worth for those who are paid less (Report of the Coordinating Collective, January 2000).*

While their positions were equally remunerated, the non – counselling workers did not participate in the decision-making of the organisation and were clearly not equal in terms of power or authority.

The Rape Counselling Service also attracted members who wanted to participate in the activities of the service in some capacity. These women often volunteered their time to assist with bulk mail outs to membership, to update the media watch files, and to catalogue and sort the library acquisitions. However as a reflection of the services commitment to adequately remunerate women for their work, the use of women as volunteers was minimal and was more likely to reflect individual women's desire to contribute than the service's need for labour.

#### 5.2.4 Structure, Membership and Management

The Rape Counselling Service was managed by a collective referred to in the service as the Coordinating Collective or the CC. The collective included all three counsellor/ coordinators and at least four women who were Full Members of the Rape Counselling Service. This group managed the day-to-day functioning and the future planning and vision of the service. The Coordinating Collective met monthly, though most CC members are in touch with service at least weekly. Consensus decision-making was used in meetings and facilitation and minute-taking roles within the collective were rotated each month. The collective was responsible for meeting funding guidelines, supporting and monitoring the activities of all paid and unpaid workers and making decisions about how monies would be spent. These duties and roles were all specified in the service's Constitution.

The organisation had a broad membership base and invited women in the community to apply to become a member. In their application for membership (which could be either verbal or written), women were asked to share their understanding of rape and sexual assault and what should be

done to prevent it. The Coordinating Collective screened each application to ensure that potential members shared a structural, feminist analysis of rape. Women were, at first, included in the organisation as Associate Members and were asked to participate in a range of service activities as a demonstration of their commitment to the organisation. For example, members were invited to attend general membership meetings every two months, or to assist with the development of the quarterly newsletter or actively participate in the service's ongoing media watch campaign. Women who were active within the service were then able to become Full Members of Rape Counselling Service and were eligible to join the CC.

The women were deeply committed to the collective and the principals it embodied. They believed that collectivity was a key principal that made their organisation feminist and provided real alternatives for service delivery to women as clients and also real alternatives to women as workers, activists and citizens through their membership of the organisation.

*So I think when I first got involved I think the collective had just a sort of pizzazz to it you know. In the context of the Northern Territory...it was the only feminist collective in the Northern Territory, you know, and so it had a sort of rebellious element to it... Since then I've found the approach is quite - very inclusive of my involvement, you know, or very respectful or acknowledging of my own investment in the organisation through my being a member. So in that sense, I guess...there's not the hard boundaries around the work practice and workers and the distant members who look in at a fishbowl...being able to say 'well, can that go down on the record?' or something. If there's a particular thing you want to make known...those are the ways I've experienced the collectiveness around the ownership of the organisation and the work practices of the organisation (Barbara, RCS).*

*I find there are not too many collective meetings that I miss. ...I do feel that I participate more and I actually am able to come up with ideas on the collective. The structure of the collective, where things are tossed around, is much better for me, because... I like to mull things over a little bit, and I ...pick up something that somebody else says, in discussion and then I think 'oh yes that's a good idea and maybe this' (Sophie, RCS).*

But these women, members of what they experienced as a supportive and successful collective, were acutely aware the difficulties involved in making collectives work, and of both the potential and actual problems that arose. These women were not naive and blind to these issues. They recognised the issues of power, of inequality, and of dishonesty, which existed within many women's collectives that they had been involved with.

As discussed earlier the literature is also informative about the potential for problems in collective organisations. For example Rothschild-Whitt (1979) claims that the external pressures faced by collectives because of their oppositional status are a significant burden for such organisations. Additionally she draws attention to the emotional costs born by individuals in

such organisations because of the close, holistic relationships developed. Blau and Scott (1980) identified the major concern for 'mutual benefit associations' as the resistance of oligarchies, an almost impossible task. Rebecca Bordt highlights recent literature which she claims "encourages women to be more discriminating among organisational structures, rather than uncritically assuming that collective structures are the only ones consistent with feminist ideology" (1997, p. 33). While the women who were part of this organisation would agree, the implication that those who choose a collective structure do so naively and uncritically is strongly contested. In fact these women appear to be very well aware of the struggles and choose this structure despite these cautions, not in ignorance of their existence. The women who were part of the Rape Counselling Service were discriminating and very familiar with the ambiguity of organisational life.

*...like there's just no ideal form-I mean sometimes it works but its sheer luck. You know...the more you hang around, the more you hear - just absolute messiness, you know.... The humanness of organisations makes it messy (Barbara, RCS).*

The issues identified by these women who worked within the collective reflected much of the literature but also added unique insights. They agreed that many women have different understandings about a collective and how it would or should function. This was particularly the case when women first became involved with the collective. Clarifying these basic understandings became an important task for the collective and for individual women.

*I had a really different notion of what a collective was and how a collective worked than other people who had been in the place. There was quite a wide spread view that a collective meant you all did the same thing at the same time. And that wasn't my view. My view was much more that a collective was that you all have the same power and the same responsibility, but not the same tasks to carry out (Maria, RCS).*

*I don't think I really understood it. To be honest ... I think I still don't understand it. ...I mean I do know at a theoretical level but, its funny, its like I feel like I'm coming up against it - against what is this notion of a collective - more and more. And so it was a fairly trite understanding that I had...I had no appreciation really of the depth of thought that I'm sure was given to 'will we have a collective?' and the depth of feeling that's injected into that ethos (Barbara, RCS).*

*I thought maybe it was because the workers had been working together for a while so they were very clear about where they sat and the same with the collective members from outside - that there were some long timers there so I thought well, ok, this is - everyone really knows what they're doing and everyone's clear about it. But as time went on I became conscious that maybe not everyone was clear, but again it was a taken for granted situation that everyone was aware...(Sophie, RCS).*

In the early 1970s, Jo Freeman (1974) alerted committed feminists to the dangers of confusing collectivity with structurelessness and the possibility of a collective ethos masking the actuality of divisive oligarchies and cliques. The women who worked in the Rape Counselling Service

agreed that such occurrences could happen and that a lack of transparency in organisational processes could mean that the rhetorical claims of collectives did not always resonate with the actual experiences of the women who were a part of them.

*Well the thing was that - my interpretation of how RCS worked when I started and certainly for the first year and a half, was that it did work as a hierarchical organisation - ... There was one person calling all the shots, telling people what they thought they should know (Connie, RCS).*

*I remember when I first became involved, it was amazing how agreeable everyone was, at the meetings, and while there was discussion it tended to be - I guess - decisions were - tended to be a fait d'accompli...then I realised even though there were some questions and discussion it was fairly superficial (Sophie, RCS).*

Another problem identified consistently by the women who were members of The Rape Counselling Service was the close and friendly relationships between the women who were part of the collective. In agreement with Rothschild Whitt (1979), they recognised that such relationships made it difficult to tackle issues, particularly those which had the potential to cause conflict. For example the idea that a worker may be working inappropriately was a major dilemma, especially with workers were members of the collective.

*I mean that's still my biggest impression at the moment is that I was really naive about it because we are making decisions about running the organisation and yet I notice my overwhelming urge is to maintain that sense of camaraderie above - above asking difficult questions and all that sort of stuff - ... because I am friends with these women and so I'm limited in my capacity as a CC member (Thea, RCS).*

*That was the hard part - it wasn't so much that we weren't being heard, it was like - well how far do you push it? And that's where you get into that bind because we all got on so well...if I'm the one that pushes this issue that extra step, then is so and so going to think I don't like her or I don't think she is doing a good job, and who am I to say anyway (Sophie, RCS).*

*I think there has been a tendency for the coordinating collective to see their role as nurturing and supportive rather than management.... At times I would ask questions about money, which made people uncomfortable and I don't think there was any communication - like 'its ok for you to ask questions about what's happening here' (Olivia, RCS).*

This issue of friendships and relationships inhibiting the discussion of difficult issues is a major theme. It connects to some of the particular features of power in feminist organisations and strategies that women utilise to deal with conflict and power abuse. These issues are explored in the following chapter.

In summary the women who were part of RCS were informed and active in creating a positive collective experience, and could not be described as indiscriminating or naive in their choice of

this organisational form. They had significant knowledge about the issues raised in the literature about collectives but also demonstrated their own practice wisdom acquired through their experiences in this collective. They worked toward resolutions of conflict and difference slowly and with some trepidation. Often they needed to do this over and over again as new women joined or circumstances changed or even more challenging situations arose. However at the time of this research they remained committed to the collective structure as the core defining feature of the organisation.

#### 5.2.5 Decision –Making Processes

The collective of the Rape Counselling Service was committed to consensus decision-making as a cornerstone to their collective processes. Like collectivity itself however, what this meant and how it was experienced was often very different among the women who participated in those processes. Many of them acknowledged a simplistic understanding of this concept at least initially and again most of them were able to identify difficulties and problems that they had experienced or had observed. For most of these women it was about remaining committed to the concept and being prepared to put in the effort to make it work.

*I think, with consensus decision- making, people have to practice and feel confident with it. I mean I'm entirely different now than what I was at the start. Or even, you know, like a year ago, I mean I feel really more comfortable now. But that's probably because I've got more information, I've got more knowledge, I'm more sure that what- that my input is useful... (Connie, RCS).*

*I think there was a feeling that consensus was - was ... just agreeing...not going through the process whereby you discuss, different people bringing different ideas and often change the original decision to be something different...(Amy, RCS).*

*I think the reality is you have to acknowledge that consensus decision-making takes time. I mean it is a process and it's quite lengthy. Whereas a show of hands, majority rules, it's a lot quicker - ...Certainly consensus decision-making is a good process. I like it. In terms of feminist ideology it sits well with me. But you've got to work at it too and acknowledge that, yes it's not perfect either (Olivia, RCS).*

More than one of the women in this organisation acknowledged the imperfections of consensus decision-making. In discussing their involvement and understanding of how decisions were made within the Rape Counselling Service collective, it became clear that not all of them had felt part of some decisions.

*I wasn't entirely comfortable with the decisions that the CC came to in the end...But it was just me against - like it was just part of that group decision that I had to surrender to... I think what happens in the Rape Counselling Service, is that if the workers get together and they decide something should go through, it's very difficult*



*to stop it, and I think that's what happened ... the other workers were sort of united and were taking – the CC was taking information from them ...not to say that the outcome would have been different or whatever, but it was that access to information that people who are on the ground every day, and particularly if they're united, it can sort of snowball to decisions that are being made. And it does take a lot to question that further (Thea, RCS).*

This view highlights a dilemma for many collectives in terms of the development of expertise and the reluctance of women to challenge each other. Many of the issues identified here are particular to the structure of this collective – not all collectives have workers as active members of the management group. In this collective there were at times significant differences between the knowledge and information available to the women who were paid workers and some of the women who participated in the CC as management only members. Management only members relied on the information provided by the workers in order to actively participate in the processes of the organisation. As described above consistently seeking that information did not come easily. The counsellor/ coordinators indicated that the management only members of the collective were advantaged compared to women who were part of more traditional management committees.

*I mean when I think of hierarchical organisations ...the CC is probably more advised on what's going on than a normal management - a normal management committee would be more focused on finances and is the manager running the service ok (Connie, RCS).*

However there is little doubt that the process of resourcing and informing the voluntary members of management groups places at least one worker if not the entire group in a position of some power. This is not a dilemma confined to collectives, though within a collective where the aim is to equalise and make power visible it can create tension and debate. The Rape Counselling Service had in some ways acknowledged the dilemma but their strategies for addressing the concern were still being developed. Workers developed knowledge and had information because of their work, their commitment and their daily involvement in the functioning of the organisation.

Despite these differences the RCS demonstrated a commitment to consensus- decision-making that was enshrined in the constitution and all the women I spoke to were dedicated to those processes. However this commitment was not oblivious to the difficulties which can, and in fact did, arise especially if the decision or issue was likely to create a conflict between members of the collective. For the most part these difficulties were acknowledged and addressed in a variety of ways.

### 5.2.6 Dealing with Conflict

The women who worked with the Rape Counselling Service recalled few major episodes of conflict during its operation. Those they did talk about as problematic all related to conflictual interpersonal relationships between women in the organisation. These were episodes which the women described as painful and, despite the use of a range of conflict resolution strategies, not well handled.

*...what I'd say is it's [conflict] dealt with in a very female way. And that is that - wherever possible, it's dealt with maintaining that nice, warm, fuzzy, everyone's ok, sort of thing. And generally most of the issues that are dealt with... have been able to be dealt with in that way - still maintaining that sort of thing.... What I think when serious interpersonal conflict occurs is that - it's not dealt with very well-...it wasn't up front...there was obviously a lot of anger and frustration and I don't think that did get dealt with particularly well (Amy, RCS).*

*Like big conflict issues everyone talks about them. I don't think that we deal with them well. I mean there were two issues - oh, no three- major issues of conflict and they were about workers rather than issues...and I don't think as an organisation we dealt with it very well. And I think that individuals didn't do it very well (Melanie, RCS).*

When first asked to consider the nature of conflict and its management within the Rape Counselling Service, many of the women referred to the formal policies. There was a formal policy, which could be followed if a client was unhappy with the service or had a grievance with the organisation and a similar policy for staff and RCS members if they were concerned or disturbed by an issue of relevance to the organisation. However the women indicated that the formal policy was not specific enough to deal with the interpersonal conflicts which created the most angst for these women. The women discussed a number of different strategies which they considered useful in such situations.

*...as for internal conflict in the workplace - our structure is set up to make it possible for people to speak out in the workplace with one another... We have our weekly staff meetings and standing on that staff meeting agenda is an item called 'straight talking', at which workers are expected to - if they have a problem in the workplace, raise it then and discuss it with their co-workers (Olivia, RCS).*

*I don't think the complaints procedure has ever been laid by a worker against a co-worker in that formal sense, though workers have been taken to the management. On one occasion it was dealt with by management in a quite formal structured way, in terms of reviewing work practices and- giving notice of - you know, these are problems and they have to be addressed, they can't be ignored. Obviously if it doesn't work out you'll have to go.... That was - I think - probably the smoothest- but I think*

*there's also a combination of different women's skills available to us for conflict resolution – if you get the right ones at the right time, things go well (Barbara, RCS).*

*...we'll have a[n external] facilitator, which I think will make the [conflict resolution] process a bit easier. I mean I think we could do it ourselves as a collective but I think the normal meetings that we have, it's too big an issue...and I think we need someone to facilitate – they're objective, they're outside- and they can actually control the process more ... (Sophie, RCS).*

These comments suggest that the women did not find the formal conflict resolution policies useful when they were engaged in conflicts of an interpersonal nature. A range of different strategies had been tried and experienced by different women in different ways. The success or failure of these strategies seemed to depend on the women available to help with the process, the actual nature of the conflict and the lessons learned from previous conflictual crises. Staggenborg (1995) and Mueller (1995) both comment on this describing the intense nature of conflict in small feminist collectives and claiming that this intensity is created by the nature of the relationships between the women and the physical and emotional space in which the conflict occurs. This was certainly true within the Rape Counselling Service where conflictual issues were discussed in the lounge room of the house. Women were required to be critical of each other or disagree with each other in very close physical proximity to each other and amongst a group that considered itself close and connected in an emotional sense.

The experience of conflict in the Rape Counselling Service was not common due in the main to the homogenous nature of the membership. Conflicts were more likely to occur with the external environment as would be expected of an organisation that saw itself as oppositional in both its politics and practices. Mueller (1995) suggests that the degree to which an organisation sees itself as oppositional and unique has an impact on the experience of internal conflict. While internal conflict was minimal within the Rape Counselling Service on the occasions that it had occurred some women were left with feelings of bitterness and betrayal of an intensity uncommon in larger organisations.

### 5.2.7 Inclusion Policies and Processes

As was discussed in the review of the relevant literature in an earlier chapter, one of the most divisive issues for feminist organisations - especially smaller organisations operating as collectives and pursuing goals of participatory democracy - was the equitable inclusion of women of diverse backgrounds. The women I spoke to usually commented that cultural and social diversity among clients and staff was one of the organisational goals.

*[For] ...employees - we've actually got a reasonable range - the range is quite good in terms of age. There have been sometimes more older women and younger*

*women, so the age range is there. Cultural backgrounds, there's a bit of a range of backgrounds - but not in terms of non-English speaking - if that makes sense, so its like English-speaking but from various cultures...(Melanie, RCS).*

*Since I've been involved in the collective, it's always been very clear that ideally they would like to have an Aboriginal woman there. Because, again, it would encourage Aboriginal people, as well, to use the service. ...And again, just break down those barriers a bit. And similarly, they've expressed the view that it would be great to have a - an ethnic woman, as well. And again, they wouldn't hold out for qualifications, they would look at someone that had experience, the right philosophical background.... And that's how I would see the ideal situation - Aboriginal woman, ethnic woman and an Anglo woman (Sophie, RCS).*

The Rape Counselling Service sought to attract women to its membership and its staff on the basis of shared values and common identification with certain principals, namely a feminist analysis of rape and a commitment to act towards its eradication. Workers employed by the collective were expected to demonstrate a similar analysis and have some experience in counselling, but formal qualifications were not part of the selection criteria. In general the women who worked at and were members of the RCS were fully supportive of this process despite the possibility that it may be seen as exclusionary.

*Membership apply, they're not just accepted because they put their hand up. They must apply and reveal something of themselves. Their politics and their attitude toward women.... That touches on exclusion and inclusion processes - but I rationalise it - ...its not just about counselling for women, its also about changing social [structures]. (Maria, RCS)*

During the period that this research took place the RCS collective was relatively homogenous around dimensions of race, class, ability, and even age. As the comments above suggest, many of the women would have liked more cultural diversity among collective members but it was not their highest priority.

*I think that you can't be all things to all people. And that the commitment to the philosophy and the aims - the commitment the service has to the philosophy and aims - will benefit all women ultimately. I mean the revolution hasn't come, and its not going to happen next week, but in the mean time, I take a post-modern approach, which is do what you can, where you can, while you can (Olivia, RCS).*

*I know what we have is imperfect...but we just have to get on and do what we do - because otherwise we will all sit here all day, immobilised by diversity and no one wins, so we are all losers and we've actually worked to disempower each other (Barbara, RCS).*

In avoiding this "immobilisation by diversity" the women of the RCS developed a work environment where difference was minimal and conflict rare. The Constitution, philosophical principals and organisational entry processes worked together to create the organisation as a safe

space for women and children who had been raped and for women who sought a feminist haven in the conservative, male-dominated, environment of the Northern Territory. As has been discussed in the review of the literature, while there are critics of these processes as potentially depoliticizing the feminist voice, others identify that “belief in female difference, the practice of limited or total separatism, belief in the primacy of women’s relationships, and the practice of feminist rituals create a world apart from the mainstream in which women can claim feminism as a political identity” (Taylor & Rupp, 1993, p. 51). Similarly this service contributes to the development of an ongoing, oppositional voice within the social and political landscape of the Northern Territory and sustains feminist women during periods of particular conservatism. This chapter now examines the policies and practices of the second organisation involved in the research.

### ***5.3 The Women and Children’s Refuge***

The second organisation included in this study is one which I have called the Women and Children’s Refuge (WCR). This organisation is what Rebecca Bordt (1997) would call a hybrid, an organisation that shares some of the features of a collective and some of a bureaucracy. The hybrid nature of the Women and Children’s Refuge is most obviously manifested in the position of the coordinator who acts as a link between the management and staff groups. Negotiating the role of the coordinator within the organisation, and striving to maintain the principals of empowerment and participatory democracy that the organisation claims to value, is very demanding. However in a manner distinct from Bordt’s observation that most hybrid organisations choose their structure randomly and without significant forethought, the women who work within the Women and Children’s Refuge have made some very conscious and deliberate decisions in this regard.

*...[Our structure is] not really in keeping with the theory of collectivism at all - in fact we've gone away from that. And become more honest about the way we work, because there were expectations that we'd work, even though it wasn't a collective, we would work collectively and complete consensus decision-making on every issue and things like that. Where in practice that's not how it worked at all. So instead of keeping the dream alive, we've been honest about how we work and said there is a hierarchy and the reasons for it are these, but there are avenues for consultation. And it seems to work a lot better with the honesty (Stella, WCR.).*

Again despite the commitment to transparency and honesty, the women involved in this organisation expressed confusion about processes and could identify issues and dilemmas that were at this point still unresolved.

### 5.3.1 Historical Context

As was detailed at length in the previous chapter, the advent of ‘second wave’ feminism in the early 1970s, provided a catalyst for the development of various women’s groups and organisations. Women were encouraged to join with other women in the consciousness raising groups; reading circles were formed in which the literature and ideas coming from the United States were explored and translated into an Australian experience; “phone-ins” were organised to allow women in the community to share their individual stories. In all these arenas women were sharing experiences of violence within their own families (Burgmann, 1993; Murray, 2002; Weeks, 1994). This situation in Australia was reflective of the experience in Britain, where, in 1971, Erin Pizzey and a group of other feminist women established a community centre to help break down the social isolation experienced by women with children. Despite this initial apolitical aim, the focus of their community centre quickly became domestic violence and the demand for help from desperate women overwhelmed their resources. “By May 1973, they were receiving 100 phone calls each day and accommodated 130 women and children in a building licensed for thirty-six” (Murray, 2002, p. 27). Similarly in Australia the number of reports of violence and the horror of the abuse were so overwhelming that feminist women were galvanised to act, firstly, to meet the immediate practical needs of the women escaping violence and secondly, to expose the silence that surrounded this violence.

It was quickly identified that women had nowhere to go and no way out of a situation of domestic violence. There was little help or assistance for women and children to escape the ongoing nightmare of violence in their homes. Instead women were encouraged by family, friends, the church, and traditional welfare support services to put up with violence; to adjust their own behaviour to avoid provoking more violence; and most importantly to maintain the family unit. This intolerable situation for women and children is described by Vivian Johnson in her description and analysis of the development of the Marrickville Women’s Refuge in Sydney.

Before women’s refuges opened, what practical assistance was available to a woman whose husband became violent towards her? If she went to the police about her husband’s assaultive behaviour, she would be told that the police prefer not to get involved in domestic disputes – too messy and so common that they’d have no time for anything else if they attended every assault complaint.... If she thought of taking the children and leaving him, how would she support herself? In the unlikely event of her being able to obtain work, what would she do for child care? If she went to the welfare department for financial assistance, she would be told that she must first establish herself independently with the children. The government would then pay her an allowance of about half the basic wage to support them (they wouldn’t tell her that to obtain this meagre ‘benefit’ she would have to institute custody and maintenance proceedings against her husband in which she would have to give him her new address). The welfare department might offer to take the children into care while she

found suitable private accommodation, but a lone mother with children is regarded by real estate agents as a poor risk, and it might be a long time before she had the children with her again. If she went to a private charity she would probably be told to stay where she was and consider herself lucky she had a roof over her head...Society's grotesquely inadequate provision for the dependents of unworkable marriages gave women no option but to stay on enduring the misery of violent relationships (1981, p. 2).

As a response to this 'grotesquely inadequate provision' described above, and inspired by the work of Pizzey and her colleagues, Anne Summers and a small group of fellow feminists began to explore ways of providing services for Australian women (Murray, 2002). In 1974, 'Elsie's', Australia's first women's refuge, was opened in Sydney, followed in the same year by the establishment of the Women's Liberation Halfway House in Melbourne (Lake & Holmes, 1995). These two Australian services were the first in a number of safe places for women and children who were escaping violence within their family. Reflecting the adage 'the personal is political', the feminist movement began to lobby widely for an understanding of violence in the home as a gendered crime, and the provision of safety for women and children as an issue of community and public concern.

They were combating significant community based opposition as it was strongly believed that family life was private and all that occurred within the family was of a private nature and not for scrutiny of others, especially feminists. In the beginning combating the myths that left women powerless and without support was a significant contribution of the women's refuge movement.

"[The main contribution was] just the very fact of the existence of domestic violence. It was at that stage a hidden problem that wasn't talked about, or if talked about, it wasn't believed. People generally would say, "Surely the women must have done something to provoke it?" "Isn't it just a matter of alcohol being the problem?" Also the reaction was: "Aren't you trying to break up the family?" And "Women should be staying at home." All those attitudes were very strong.... At the beginning it was simply saying, "women are getting beaten – we've got to do something". I was shocked...I think like everyone else I believed it wouldn't happen in families (Orr, 1994, p. 211).

In 1975 a National Women's Refuge programme was announced and funding was provided for eleven refuges Australia-wide (Melville, 1998). Under the Fraser government this programme was expanded, until by 1992, 187 refuges funded under the programme had been established, including specific services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and migrant women (Weeks, 1994). So many refuges have now been established world wide that it has become a movement within the women's movement.

Women's refuges are based on the premise that women cannot deal with violence effectively while they are preoccupied with defending and protecting themselves and their children. They

need first to be safe, and then to be given time and space to make decisions that are right for their own situation. Refugees quickly took on the role of public education identifying that one of the major difficulties for women was the hidden nature of the problem (Weeks, 1994).

The Women and Children's Refuge in Darwin opened its doors in 1978 about three years after the National Women's Refuge programme was established. When asked to describe the known history of the refuge, the present coordinator commented:

*Some WCR women were part of a collective from around 1976 that was 'the Women's Centre' but the Women and Children's Refuge itself came into existence in 1978 when those women separated off and incorporated the refuge and applied for funding successfully...the women had little trouble gaining funding due to the hard work of women in other states like the Elsie's mob in Sydney... (Stella, WCR).*

While it is not documented it is likely that the women who established the Women and Children's Refuge in Darwin experienced some ambivalence about the acquisition of government funding despite the apparent ease of access. As Roselyn Melville (1998) identifies, not all feminist women involved in the development of refuges were united in their views about government support. "Many opposed it as a form of 'co-option' of feminist enterprises, whereas others took a different political and pragmatic view that 'women' as a group had a legitimate right to make claims on the state for financial support" (Melville, 1998, p. 16). Whatever the position of the original group in Darwin, the acquisition of government funding at the outset cemented the Women and Children's Refuge as a funded service, and required them to meet all the funding guidelines. Some of the women found this hampered the creativity and ability of the service to devote itself to the needs of women and children rather than collection of statistics and data. The ways in which they resisted these imposed limitations are documented in the following chapter.

### 5.3.2 Feminist Philosophy and Practice

The Women and Children's Refuge is an explicitly feminist service. Advertisements for workers at the refuge ask that applicants have "a feminist analysis of domestic violence" (DVIW Selection Criteria, 1999). The service's philosophical principals are recorded in the Constitution and in any documentation publicising the organisation's services. These principals state that "all women and children have the right to be fully functioning human beings, to reach their full potential, to live in safety and without fear, and to see themselves however they choose" (Constitution, 1993, p1)

The principles, which guided the work of the refuge, are:

- *Domestic Violence results from the interplay of perceived power, inherent inequalities and particular attitudes within society. It is often expressed in different*



*forms, including physical assault, emotional abuse, social and psychological isolation, sexual abuse and economic deprivation.*

- *The use of violence by one person against another is unacceptable. All women and children have the right to be safe from violent and abusive behaviours.*
- *Women and children are individuals in their own right and should be treated with respect and dignity.*
- *Women and children have the right to become empowered, self-determining and able to live their lives free of abuse. (Information Sheet, 1998)*

These principals reflect the feminist analysis of violence against women and children within their family as a public issue caused by unequal power relations between men and women within the family and within the broader socio-political context. Reflecting the understanding of the role of women's refuges as described in the literature, the Women and Children's Refuge describes its own role as one of support and empowerment, not forcing women toward any preferred action.

These principals underpin the articulated aims of the service as described in the Constitution.

- *Provide a house of refuge for all women and children, where they can come and be safe among other sympathetic women while they recover from shock or physical or emotional trauma.*
- *Assist women to obtain welfare, legal and medical help and to find accommodation and counselling.*
- *Inform women of their rights to become independent, self determining and self managing, and provide them with the opportunities to do so.*
- *Provide support and minimise as far as possible women's isolation after they leave the refuge.*
- *Encourage women to take responsibility for themselves.*
- *Keep government departments and community services up to date with the needs of women and children in distressed circumstances and make representations to provide improved services suited to their needs*
- *Run suitable educative and support programs for the residents of the refuge and the community.*
- *Share our ideas and experiences so that we grow in strength and thereby contribute to the management of the refuge and care for all women in need of support.*

*(Constitution 1993, p. 1-2)*

In 1998, in response to the changing circumstances of the women using the Women and Children's Refuge and in recognition of the actual practice of the workers at the refuge, the following additions were made to the formal aims of the service.

*Additionally we:*

- *Provide safe shelter to women and children regardless of their economic situation, age, race, color, or their religious, cultural, sexual or political orientation.*
- *Provide a supportive, non-institutional culturally sensitive environment where women are able to care for their children and are encouraged to make their own decisions.*
- *Consider the special needs of children who have experienced abusive situations.*

- *Are committed to the improvement of the status of women and children (Information Sheet 1998, p. 2)*

The physical surrounds of the refuge demonstrate its commitment to the safety and well being of the women and children who use the service and are indicative of the frustrations and conflicts which can result in attempting to meet many competing demands. The first location of the Women and Children's Refuge was a house on a busy main road and was therefore not seen as particularly suitable. Within a few years the refuge moved to its present location in a purpose built complex on a main street but in a reasonably central suburb and set back from the road. Its location was well known, Darwin being a relatively small town in many respects and there were minimal attempts to maintain secrecy about the address. Over the years there were substantial renovations until, in 1999, the refuge was a complex consisting of two purpose built dwellings able to accommodate two families each, one shed-like structure used as a children's play area and a separate administration building. There was also a large undercover area behind the administration block where residents and staff alike congregated for coffee, cigarettes, and long talks. Given the lack of secrecy about the refuges' location, the level of security was quite high with all buildings located behind a solid eight-foot high fence and access possible only through an alarmed gate or a security door. While the staff and management of the refuge would like to make significant changes to the physical setting of the service to allow for creative service delivery options, the lack of space and funds make this impossible. A significant frustration for the staff is the lack of administrative work space available for workers and the very heavy demands for accommodation from women escaping violence. In a manner reflective of their feminist commitment to women and children in desperate circumstances, the refuge assists women to find accommodation and to access support and other services even when they are unable to accommodate them in the refuge itself. The clients of the refuge therefore are those women and children who are residing in the refuge (often referred to by staff as 'resi's') and women and children who are accommodated elsewhere (budget accommodation or with family and friends) but who are supported by the WCR workers to access financial support, alternative long term accommodation and/or to obtain Domestic Violence Orders through the courts.

The Women and Children's Refuge was funded jointly by the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments through the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program. In addition the refuge applied for numerous one off grants both from SAAP and other charitable and community sources. They were variously successful and these grants were used to purchase children's equipment, computer upgrades, run training or planning sessions for staff or purchase additional vehicles. The refuge also received emergency relief funds, which were distributed as

needed to residents and other women and children for things like accommodation bonds, electricity bills, food, and furniture. These funds were received quarterly and invariably ran out well before the next funds were received.

Again as a reflection of the philosophical principals which underpin the work of the service, the Women and Children's Refuge is represented on many Territory and national committees and groups, joining with other feminist organisations to contribute to the lobbying and political agitation for greater recognition of the needs of women and children escaping violence. As with the women who worked with the Rape Counselling Service, the development and sustenance of wide networks and linkages was not without its difficulties and tensions. These are discussed in more detail in the following chapter. There was a perception among the workers, however, that the Women and Children's Refuge was viewed as confrontational and radical by some of the government representatives with whom they had to work and by some other feminist services in the Northern Territory.

This description of refuge activity provides a clear indication of the services compatibility with the organisational elements Wendy Weeks (1994) considers fundamental to the purpose of feminist services. The refuge prioritises its work with women as well as undertaking social action and community education work that is directed at exposing the myths about violence against women. Feminist principles informed workers practice at the Women and Children's Refuge, and the space created focused on the needs of the women and children who resided in the refuge. As a result the organisation was a busy, often stressful place and hardly conducive to peaceful philosophical reflection. However through these work practices the organisation was able to create a sense of being different and politically challenging, particularly in the context of the Northern Territory.

### 5.3.3 Staffing, Roles, and Remuneration

The Women and Children's Refuge in 1999/ 2000 had the capacity to employ 12 staff, all of whom were women. Overseeing the employment of staff and many of the other day-to-day activities of the refuge was the Coordinator. Her position was one of authority in terms of staff supervision and decision-making delegation and she was remunerated at a significantly higher rate than the other staff. In addition to the responsibilities of the day-to-day operation of the service and the supervision of staff, the coordinator was also responsible for communication with management, the development and dissemination of policy and procedure, and the liaison and networking with other agencies, government departments and the community as the public face of the organisation.

In 1998 the Women and Children's Refuge adopted a case management system in line with requirements of the funding body and developed designated position descriptions for all workers instead of the generic 'refuge worker' title. Four workers were appointed as Domestic Violence Intervention Workers (DVIW), two full-time and two part-time. Between them these workers ensured a staff member was available 24 hours a day for residents and those contacting the refuge in crisis. The role of the DVIWs included case management responsibility for all the women and children resident at the refuge and accommodated in other housing in the community, between the hours of 8.00am to 6.00pm. Two other part-time workers provided an emergency phone service to both residents and the community after 6.00pm until 8.00am the next morning. The following excerpt from one of the full-time DVI worker's monthly report to the management group provides a snapshot of the duties involved and the issues confronted.

*This is my first report as the new DVIW, I have to say that so far I'm enjoying the work, finding it challenging and varied as well as immensely satisfying when a woman and her children are helped into a new home, a new independence and a fresh start.... Interaction with government and Christian service providers is interesting and certainly seems to reinforce the wisdom that a feminist approach to the DV epidemic is the right way to go. The refuge provides some stark contrasts, particularly to certain government approaches... The last few months seem to have been varied and full - a great diversity of women and children from different backgrounds. We've also had new clients escaping extreme danger in other states, some distressing sexual abuse issues and several long term outreach clients keeping us busy...ERF has nearly lasted the distance this time around but the last few weeks have been tight with DVIW's spending extra time sourcing food vouchers and financial assistance from other agencies. We have 2 new clients seeking permanent residency on DV grounds, heard the sad news that a previous client committed suicide at an outstation near Maningrida and were disappointed to learn we didn't get the job to run the new shelter in town. It's also been a time of intense communication and collaboration with Child and Family Protective Services for one particular client and DVIW's have spent quite a bit of time in court with clients seeking restraining orders and family court orders (DVIW Report to Management, 1999).*

As well as the DVI workers, the Women and Children's Refuge employed one woman as a Crisis Intervention Worker (CIW), whose responsibilities included answering the phone, taking referrals, organising alternative accommodation for women when the refuge was full, organising files and general maintenance and upkeep of the premises. This supposedly administrative position was in fact onerous and emotionally draining because of the high number of women who were turned away from the service when it was full. The Crisis Intervention Worker spent many hours attempting to find alternative accommodation for women and children under stress and escaping violence, a situation which inevitably took its toll. The following excerpt gives a sense

of the personal costs and sheer volume of client contact involved in this supposedly administrative position.

*I've been working with non-resi clients increasingly in an interventionist capacity at the door and more so on the phone and referring women to other accommodation whilst still offering support. Often there is a queue of one to three women and their children requesting and needing safe, secure, supported accommodation...There has been a steady increase over the last couple of months of assistance and services being offered to women the refuge cannot accommodate. I find it stressful and frustrating when trying to find appropriate accommodation for these families in crisis (CIW Report to Management 1998).*

The refuge also employed a housing support worker who was responsible for helping women find long term accommodation - a role that was largely taken up with applying for priority housing from the Northern Territory Housing Department on behalf of resident and non-resident women, and then inevitably appealing the decision when these applications were denied for often ludicrous reasons. The following excerpt from a worker's report exemplifies the frustrating and time-consuming nature of these interactions with the public housing department.

*Resi allocated house then unallocated it, on the basis that she had only interim custody of one of her children. After intervention from her family lawyer this decision reversed. The client services officer involved has not spoken to me since, even to the extent of not returning phone calls...Client with son who has a psychotic disorder and is, when ill, threatening and abusive to client. However is less often ill when with mum and only able to be released from hospital to mum's custody. Client requested priority housing with a safe room, so that if her son became abusive she and the other children could seek shelter. Refused priority housing ... can't apply for priority housing on DV grounds because her son lives with her and she can't apply for priority housing on medical grounds because her son doesn't live with her (Housing Worker Report to Management, 1999).*

The refuge also employed a dedicated children's worker, a part-time administration worker, and a gardener, all of whom were women. Attached to the refuge were two other positions of counsellor and community development worker, who were supervised by the coordinator of the Women and Children's Refuge and considered themselves employees of the Women and Children's Refuge. However the source of funding for these two positions was different than for the rest of the refuges services and the salaries paid were considerably higher than those of the refuge workers. In addition these women were not located on the site of the refuge and often reported feeling separated and isolated from other staff. This sense of isolation was an issue for discussion at various management meetings.

The staff group located in the refuge, though designated different positions were all paid at the same rate of pay, slightly higher than the SACS award at that time and had access to benefits such as a salary sacrifice scheme and financial support for training and conference attendance.

Despite these slightly higher benefits afforded the staff of the Women and Children's Refuge, the staff group was locked in negotiation with the management group about the formal classification of all positions in response to a new industrial award. The processes of negotiating these industrial conditions was proving to be a major issue for staff and management during the period of this research and referred to by many of the women as a key source of conflict and evidence of inequitable power particularly between the women who were part of the staff group and the women who were part of the management group.

#### 5.3.4 Structure, Membership and Management

A community-based committee managed the Women and Children's Refuge. The management committee had dedicated positions of President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and Public Officer; however the structure was described by the women involved as more collective and informal than hierarchical.

*Well it's my perception that those positions exist because of some funding requirement that you need certain positions to fulfill certain functions...but ever since I've been involved, for example ...the nominal Chairperson doesn't chair the meeting, the nominal Secretary doesn't take the minutes. But those things are circulated, you know...those roles are shared (Sara, WCR).*

There were a minimum of six and a maximum of eleven women on the management group. The coordinator attended all management meetings and was involved in the decision-making processes. The staff group nominated a staff person to attend management meetings on their behalf and as their representative.

The committee, in general, met once a month but on occasions met more frequently if issues arose. For example at one time during the course of these interviews the Women and Children's Refuge tendered for the funding to provide a refuge service to an outlying suburb and the surrounding hinterland of Darwin. The planning of the submission meant the committee met fortnightly for about six weeks. Despite this increased commitment, the long term members of the management group reported that their overall time commitment to the service had significantly decreased since the appointment of the current coordinator – something for which they were all extremely grateful.

*I know that in days gone by the management group would be meeting... all the time. Which was one of the reasons I took twelve months off, I actually just had enough...subgroups for this and subgroups for that, and writing this and being part of that...so it took a hell of a lot of your own personal life and time. And I think that one meeting a month has been – I just couldn't believe it...We've got now I think a coordinator who takes on a hell of a lot (Valerie, WCR).*

These comments highlight the commitment and efforts of the women who work voluntarily within feminist services as management groups. Their experiences and connection to the organisation has been a neglected area of the literature.

The Women and Children's Refuge also had a membership process where women in the community could become members of the refuge. From this membership base women were nominated for positions on the membership committee. The refuge's constitution detailed how this should function with women applying for membership, paying subscription fees and then being eligible for nomination and election to the management committee. The reality of this process was much less straightforward. A number of the women who were members of the management committee recalled a more targeted approach.

*I probably came about it backwards, in that they rang my workplace looking for somebody and I went and did some work for them over there. And I liked the organisation and I liked the people, I've always liked the area, you know, I've always been interested in the area, so it just seemed a natural progression ... and I just felt they might have needed a hand - with the expertise I've got ... So I just sort of came in from there (Lynne, WCR).*

*I was actively recruited and I do remember at the time that I came in following a difficult period at the Women and Children's Refuge ...and there had been an AGM and shortly after a special general meeting and I think I was nominated at that because... some significant personalities had resigned and they were looking for some new people to come in (Jane, WCR).*

As mentioned in the opening paragraph to this section, the Women and Children's Refuge operated as a hierarchy, albeit modified in many ways from that which might operate in a large bureaucracy. As discussed by the women in the following quotes a range of variables lead to a hierarchical structure in the refuge, some clear and visible and others more invisible embedded within the personal characteristics of the women involved.

*There is a hierarchical structure, in that there is a coordinator's position. From the coordinator ... in theory there is no hierarchy for the rest of the positions in the organisation. They're very carefully, in policy and procedure, equal in all facets. In practice that's not the way it is at all.... The full time workers have a lot more power because they have knowledge, they have loads more information than the part time and casual workers. ... But from there within all the full time workers there's a step and hierarchy between people who've been there for a longer time and those who are new. And new people definitely defer to those who have been there a long time, in decision-making, go to them for advice, and then there are also personalities - that create a hierarchy (Stella, WCR).*

*Well, I think the Women and Children's Refuge is certainly a hierarchical organisation...most of the workers don't know what goes on at a managerial level and perhaps would like to know but don't feel empowered to know.... I don't think this is*

*a particularly huge problem here, I just think that, you know, it's kind of – it just exists (Lois, WCR).*

The relationship between the management group and the staff group was one of some tension. While some of the women viewed this tension as circumstantial, particularly relating to industrial negotiations being undertaken at the time of this research, others viewed the difficulties as more inherent in the structure of the organisation and related to past relationships and practices.

*One of the things that I think is a concern, and needs to be worked on continually within this organisation is staff and management – there's no problem with the coordinator and management communicating, or the coordinator and staff communicating, but staff and management don't really communicate, or know who they are – or why they are here... (Stella, WCR).*

*I know there was a lot of effort in the past where they would try and get- invite- have small functions where they'd have management committee and staff, but they'd sit over this side of the room and –... the division was huge – and it wasn't the reality, it was the perception... And it was horrible being part of the management committee where you felt that's what staff thought of you. It's almost like jump to attention as you walk into the refuge, it's almost like you felt someone was going to salute you. (Valerie, WCR)*

*I mean- I think- they probably legitimately – rightly think we don't really understand what they do. And I think that is a common problem in community organisations – the staff thinking 'I don't think management has a good grasp of what we do.' So maybe that's where some of that comes from. It's also because at times we have had to manage things – manage people. So there's been that – you know sort of collective staff memory of us dealing with that staff member, you know - they do remember. (Jane, WCR)*

These comments from women, who were primarily part of the management group, indicate a sense of distance between the two groups and feelings of discomfort for women when this distance was obvious or accentuated, for example when staff were disciplined or even dismissed. These feelings of discomfort reflected the uneasy relationship many women have with leadership and power as they struggled to define and develop a feminist management style (Cox, 1996). These feelings were accentuated by the clear class and educational differences between the women who were part of the management group and the women who were part of the staff group. It was these feelings of discomfort and differences that the coordinator of the service was called on to mediate and actively manage.

The Women and Children's Refuge coordinator has a difficult role as do most coordinators of feminist organisations. Wendy Weeks points out that while many feminist services began as collectives, by 1990 "the ideology and practices of corporate management were being passed down by funders, and many services had introduced coordinator positions, either to conform to



external demands or to assist in focusing and organising the internal organisation of work” (Weeks, 1994, p. 150). The women who were appointed to these positions were confronted with an understanding of organisational leadership that reflected the dominant social image of someone who “is above or out in front of others, and is likely to be male and white” (Weeks, 1994, p. 152). Weeks goes on to describe alternative traditions of leadership which she claims are more likely to be present in women’s services. The first of these is the type of leadership that promotes the whole group rather than seeks individual promotion and which nurtures and cares for individuals in the group. The second understanding of women’s leadership is the explicitly political development of strategies and processes that challenge the “patriarchal, hierarchical organisation of power” (Weeks, 1994, p. 153).

Comments from the staff and management committee women who had been a part of the Women and Children's Refuge for some time indicated that the service had experienced both kinds of leadership and coordination. For example they described previous coordinators as too authoritarian or as misusing the power inherent in the position. They were currently enjoying a form of leadership that reflected the feminist leadership styles described by Weeks (1994) but at least some were aware that different personnel could change that:

*I guess the thing is that at the moment we have a very constant, fantastic coordinator...as opposed to a collective, you're putting a lot more responsibility on that one person, so ... if we had a bad coordinator then it would be much worse than having a collective (Kara, WCR).*

The demands on the coordinator of the WCR were a combination of 'proper' management tasks and tasks that related to maintaining participatory democratic processes and structures (Weeks, 1994). The women who worked at the refuge and the coordinator herself described the role of coordinator as incorporating the following tasks and processes:

- Facilitating positive, respectful communication between individual staff;

*The bottom line though is that sometimes you need the authority to maintain the respectfulness that is meant to come naturally but it doesn't...It's just imposing those boundaries every now and again.... I mean sometimes just a simple line in our day book is enough for people to go 'oh that's right we're supposed to be doing it this way, whoops' (Stella, WCR).*

- Facilitating communication between staff and management committee;

*One of the things I experienced when I first worked here...the management committee were basically inaccessible to most of the staff...people weren't happy with the way information was flowing. And I guess I learnt a lot from that. So in this role, I try – I spend a lot of time working on strategies to connect staff and management ... and facilitating communication. You'll notice every now and again I'll stand back, if there are staff members around management members and just sort of walk away and say –*

*that's not my role, you're here together, it's up to you now. And hope that works for those people – they talk to each other without me (Stella, WCR).*

- Dealing with potential and actual conflict situations;

*Well one of the ways ... and I think the choice I would take - we have supervision with Stella once a month and I would take any conflict there...That is quite difficult because we are supposed to all be responsible together but sometimes you don't really want to...you can't push what they're supposed to be doing ...So I take it to Stella for her to decide (Helena, WCR).*

- Assist staff in identifying how to deal with a conflict;

*Small things, I guess, in terms of communication breakdowns or a process not being followed or a procedure or something like that not being followed - all I do is talk to Stella in supervision. That's what it is there for, bring it up with her - go and talk with her now and she will help work out what to do... (Audrey, WCR).*

- Being the brunt of all criticism - from staff management and outside agencies;

*I think the coordinator is a hard position because it becomes the- the position that is most easily attacked by every aspect - like by the staff, not so much by the clients, but occasionally, by the management and by outside agencies (Stella, WCR).*

- Facilitating the involvement and voice of the organisation in national and Territory campaigns of relevance;

*I know how frustrating it is for the coordinator to put things out that she's doing... you know that is important nationally...an issue or an agenda and it has to be discussed amongst the sector and the sector has to have a voice, and all that kind of stuff, and she'll put it out for us ... but you know people just don't have the time ...it can be hard work keeping those - those sort of communication processes open, like sharing lots of information when you don't get lots of feedback (Audrey, WCR).*

- Taking appropriate lobbying action in the best interests of the organisation;

*The external eye on us is – is so political now, we – the coordinator has been out there whether it's picketing Parliament house or whether it be going to the local member, going to the opposition, you know ...but we have to be open to scrutiny and we have to be so careful about how we run our organisation...we rely on her [the coordinator] for that (Naomi, WCR).*

- Facilitating the management committee without taking control of it;

*If she just puts the issue on the table and then allows the management committee to make the decision about that - but provides no input herself - then that is a really slow process. We need someone who is going to drive the issues, and I think the management committee meetings are about discussing those and seeing whether they are feasible ... but by no means do I believe we just rubber stamp them, because the make up of that committee - no one is going to like to rubber stamp anything (Valerie, WCR).*

- Take responsibility for all day-to-day management of the organisation;

*I don't feel we do so much day -to-day stuff, I mean, I feel like we have a great deal of faith in Stella to just run the organisation...That's my expectation of her role, that's what she does... not like, oh in days gone by - we've had every trifling little thing brought to management - which I must admit frustrated the hell out of me (Valerie, WCR).*

- Support staff in their day-to-day role.

*And I find her really helpful at like case meetings, because she'll listen, you know, people bring their cases...and she'll challenge people as well and certainly me, you know, I really appreciate that kind of - 'have you thought of this and have you thought about this as well'... I mean we do that with each other as well, you know so its – doing that with each other is great (Audrey, WCR).*

The women of the Women and Children's Refuge did not see the existence of the coordinator position as inconsistent with a feminist ideology. Instead this coordinator saw her role as contributing to the feminist nature of the organisation by firstly, ensuring that processes within the organisation were open, accountable and respectful of all participants and secondly, by supporting staff in their use of such processes. She was also responsible for preparing documentation and generally resourcing the management group, a role which carried enormous responsibility.

*I mean, sometimes, I hate the management committee, with a passion. Because it feels like I could walk in there and say this is the agenda, and I could leave out major things to do with the organisation, and no one would know, or no one would notice. Anyway, not for a couple of months, if at all. And I could set the agenda and run the meetings, and on some days I feel like I do at times and I don't like it. ...It feels like a huge responsibility and that's certainly not in the job description that I've got – that I do all these staff support things and all those things with the day-to-day running, and I also basically run the management committee...I feel like it's a dangerous position. Because I could do whatever I want. And I think there's always a danger of the coordinator doing that, but also always a danger of other people accusing the coordinator of doing that...I think that's a concern that needs to be addressed...(Stella, WCR).*

This coordinator could also legitimately ask who is resourcing and supporting her. The overwhelming list of tasks and expectations for just one woman suggest that the role of feminist coordinators is one which requires further exploration. Certainly for this organisation, Stella is their lifeline; she provides the links between the different organisational layers and ensures the smooth flow of information around the organisation. The question remains of how to support and resource the women able and willing to take on such roles and to ensure that the scenarios identified above are avoided.

### 5.3.5 Decision-Making Processes

The Women and Children's Refuge was committed to participatory decision-making however most of the women described processes that depended on the circumstances and the people involved. The coordinator and the women who worked day-to-day in the refuge discussed the informal and collaborative decision-making processes that occurred for what they considered were everyday work situations.

*People tend to come to a consensus - if we don't get agreement, then we leave it for people to think about it and bring it back to the next meeting and talk about it again...There was a suggestion some time ago - one of the workers thought it would be a good idea for everyone to have like individual [phone] lines - ...a personal number for each worker...Unfortunately she was the only one who thought it was a good idea. So it was like, what do we do, I mean how much will it cost and how much will it benefit the other workers and this and that and we didn't really get any kind of agreement and that stayed on the agenda for about three or four meetings and then it was like well let's forget about it because no one was all that keen on it (Helena, WCR).*

*We now have a fairly clear demarcation of who's got the responsibilities because of case management and the children's worker does the children's stuff and the housing worker does the housing stuff. I guess - we only need to make decisions when something comes up that is slightly controversial, something like 'should we give this particular woman a hundred dollars for whatever reason'. So it's kind of informal, if you're not sure you ask whoever's there and that works.... So you know we all work closely physically together so if I come in and people are there and I go 'Julie's just asked me for one hundred dollars, I'm not too sure, What do you think, Lois? What do you think, Audrey?' So, that sort of process - and if Lois and Audrey say the same thing then that would happen (Kara, WCR).*

*If it's something that you wouldn't normally do for a person or if it's a big commitment then it would have to go to a meeting - that's governed a lot by the work situation. You might decide that you could make a decision on something if it was necessary to be made there and then, whereas, you wouldn't decide on your own if you had the chance to get a more group decision-making process...as a worker we have some autonomy - I guess I would use my autonomy to - I'd be more inclined to use it positively, rather than negatively, like ...on the side of giving someone what they're asking for, rather than ...if I was refusing I would be more likely to consult before I refused (Rosa, WCR).*

*...it's a written expectation that workers will consult on any bigger decisions...with each other...not necessarily the coordinator that's not always - the coordinator is not always available, and at times that becomes a tedious process, and the actual hierarchy then ties up the process (Stella, WCR).*

The comments above provide evidence of a collaborative workplace where individual autonomy was valued, and consultation and collaboration with fellow workers was a normal part of daily

work. However the commitment to consultation processes was mixed with a belief that even consultation was time consuming and inhibitive.

*There are also a level of decisions that are made by the coordinator, with or without consultation of other staff, depending on circumstances, and that's one of the reasons for the hierarchy. Because of the size of the organisation and because of the volunteer management committee, there are times when there are decisions that need to be made, that consulting would take too long or be too hard, or whatever. ...So there's someone whose role and duty statement reflects that part of her role is that decision-making when it's necessary, but they're to make those decisions wherever possible in consultation with both staff and management... (Stella, WCR).*

These views were shared by members of the management committee who saw the coordinator's role as a decision-making role which relieved the management committee members of responsibility for day to day issues. The reality of the consultation in relation to daily practices was that it occurred much more frequently with staff than management and that was satisfactory to most women.

The decision-making processes used by the management committee were generally described by the women as consensual between committee members and consultative with staff. The issue of consensus was one that caused some women angst because of the time consuming nature of the processes involved.

*You know, I struggle with that – all the time I struggle with consensus – whilst I think it is great in theory at the end of the day,... it can stifle decisions and action. But in the back of my mind, I suppose as a result of experience – I have always told myself 'got to be consultative and reach consensus.' And yet I find myself, this is the irony, speaking out many times ...putting my opinion quite firmly and I guess I do that to move it on...sometimes I know I can get on with something ...sometimes to me things look so clear and I think you can sit around here talking or you can just get on...(Valerie, WCR).*

*...we do discuss stuff... I think that the issues are teased at as much as possible and then we always revert back to our principals and some of... that guiding framework... we've managed to mould management committee members into – sitting back and listening to other points of view ...I hope every opinion is respected...but with some issues I have often thought, 'here we go again' ...and I think majority decision at times is the way to go (Jane, WCR).*

Despite these misgivings the women agreed that their ideological commitment to participatory processes guided their decision-making actions and that these processes had usually been developed through experience.

The staff expressed a sense of safety in putting forward their opinion within the staff group but not all felt they were heard by the management group. In general the women who formed the

management group of the WCR were much more optimistic and positive about the amount and the quality of consultation between staff and management.

*Everyone is given an opportunity in the current structure for their opinions to be heard. So if somebody does not have – they harbour some sort of feeling or some sort of opinion and they don't say that then as far as I am concerned – so be it (Valerie, WCR).*

*We encourage, you know, whoever wants to come and observe the management committee in action and particularly the staff, we encourage that. ... In the past it didn't happen. The openness that we have now wasn't there. And I think it's also part and parcel of the way we do business now. Consensus decision-making, being consultative, - it's really important, and we went through a stage where we wore the brunt of that style of the past – where we weren't as consultative as we are now. We realised now we have to be and we also realised that that actually fits in with our feminist principals (Naomi, WCR).*

However this sense of openness and inclusion in decision-making processes was not necessarily shared by all staff.

*...about organisational issues, I don't think the staff are encouraged to have any input or have any meaningful input. And what we're usually faced with is directives (Lois, WCR).*

Again it is difficult to determine if these differences in perception are intrinsic to the organisation or part of the current circumstances which existed at the time. The 'us and them' scenario appeared heightened for many of the women because of the industrial issues being debated and negotiated between staff and management however there were a number of women who reported similar issues in the past which suggests that the divisions may have been more structural than circumstantial. Another possibility alluded to by the coordinator was the differences in class, educational background and social-economic background between most members of the management committee and most women employed in the service. These issues of differences between women are addressed in more detail in the following chapter. The decision-making processes employed by the Women and Children's Refuge aimed to be collaborative but this was on occasions experienced ambivalently by women in both the staff and management groups.

### 5.3.6 Dealing with Conflict

The Women and Children's Refuge had established formal procedures for dealing with conflicts between staff and between women who used the service and staff. They also had formal written policies for addressing any perceived problems in worker performance or poor practice by workers. In general staff and management committee women believed the policies and procedures they had in place to be useful and working well.

*There were sort of a few different stages, there was – the idea that if you had a conflict that you would approach the worker yourself and try and work it out that way, if that didn't work you'd go to – you could go to the coordinator and she would act as a mediator, if that didn't work, you could ask a management committee worker to come along or an outside member to come along and mediate that way (Naomi, WCR).*

*So if someone comes and says there's an issue, for example, if it's with another staff member's – some decision they've made or something like that, or attitude or whatever...I'll encourage that staff member initially to talk to the other party. Most of the time they don't want to do that, because they wouldn't have come to me if that was the way it could have been dealt with. So then mediation. So I'll mediate between those two staff members...Sometimes, I'll just take it straight to a staff meeting, with the consent of whoever's complaining and say this issue has come up, this is one opinion, this is another opinion what does everyone think and how can we make sure this doesn't happen again. And usually that's the best way because everyone's aware of it and it's out in the open (Stella, WCR).*

These processes appeared to work well for the staff with a number of women commenting that they could not remember conflict that needed outside mediation, and that any conflicts between staff or between staff and clients have generally been resolved satisfactorily. This was primarily attributed to the skills of the current coordinator in dealing with issues before they reached crisis point.

*Well previously conflict was resolved by formal grievance procedures, regardless of what it was. ... I think there were many grievance procedures that we went through that could have been dealt with way before they got to that formal point... When I first started there was one and it went through a formal procedure - we should be able to solve things before they get to that point. So now with our current coordinator we can give people as many options as they want, on how to solve the problem. It works much better (Sara, WCR).*

*Another process that is offered is the formal grievance procedure but now with limits. So that we'll only go to a certain extent through that process. ...Like the first part of the process is talking to the coordinator and then going through the management committee...but at the management committee level, it's really stressful... it's time-consuming for the management committee to go through and unless it was really serious, I would discourage that process. I'd say we probably have a grievance issue every once a fortnight, in some way, shape or form, but by the coordinator offering different ways to deal with it...it seems the problems dissipate quite quickly (Jane, WCR).*

However in a manner consistent with the comments from women at the RCS, the coordinator of the WCR expressed some internal turmoil about the resolution process

*I'd like to say I always deal with it well and I try and keep that 'conflict is healthy' idea in my mind but like most women I cringe inside when I hear about arguments or someone complains about someone else. ...I don't think I look as uncomfortable on the outside as I am inside (Stella, WCR).*

While recognising the value of effective policies for conflict management, women in the Women and Children's Refuge also recognised the difficulties some women face in using these processes. For example, one woman who was a previous member of staff and now part of the management group, commented,

*I know there was some issues of conflicts with workers,... and I think WCR has quite a good policy - like - well developed policy about conflict - and grievance procedure - I mean it was a good procedure, but there were some women that felt more happy to go through that process than others, and a lot of that was on a sort of personal level that they, you know, didn't want to rock the boat, or you know, because you're working in a small organisation, its really confronting if you've got conflict with a fellow worker, ...so sometimes there might have been a really valid grievance...but it wouldn't go much further than that...some women that worked there felt uncomfortable going through that (Naomi, WCR).*

These comments are similar to the experiences of the women who were part of the Rape Counselling Service and the comments of Staggenborg (1989) and Mueller (1995). The closer the relationships the more difficulty women have in engaging in healthy conflict resolution. The role of coordinator placed distance between the workers of the Women and Children's Refuge and allowed them the opportunity to vent feelings and concerns through a third party. This may have contributed to a perception that the processes worked well and that little conflict existed. It is likely though, as Naomi alludes to above, that some women found even these processes confronting.

### 5.3.7 Inclusion Policies and Processes

The women who were members of or workers with the Women and Children's Refuge were committed to the inclusion of women from diverse backgrounds and explored a range of organisational strategies and processes to create a staff and management population that reflected the diversity of the client group. For example the organisation sought feedback from women who use the service about their experience in the refuge and how that could be improved.

*We've had a deaf woman in the shelter - I mean I sat down with her the other day and with the client evaluation sheet - and encouraged her to be as honest as she could on that evaluation sheet, explaining that we ... obviously need to change the way we deliver services for women in her situation. ...she said scathing things...But that's good because we can use that information. I mean one thing she said is - 'please teach someone here how to sign'. That's such a simple thing...she said 'when I came in stressed and upset and everything - I couldn't communicate and that wasn't fair (Stella, WCR).*



They were aware of and had considered strategies such as quotas and purposeful targeting. When these strategies were successful, the women talked about the positives that had flowed from such initiatives.

*I mean – for example- the ...legal service ...they've got – their management committee has got quotas set aside – a certain percentage of the management committee has to be Aboriginal women, and another percentage has to be non-English speaking women, and they have to fill these positions first before they fill the general positions...it might be something worth looking at maybe ...I don't know how they have managed to do that. It might be lobbying, it might be contract, they might have some arrangement or some factors in their structure that attracts women, I don't know (Sara, WCR).*

*Perhaps a small starting point would be to work really hard at getting – attracting Aboriginal ex-clients to the management committee. And when – when there was – there was one Aboriginal woman who was on it – it was fantastic, it really worked well – she made a valuable contribution and she also found the process of being on it really good (Jane, WCR).*

While the organisation made regular attempts to attract women of diverse cultural backgrounds to the organisation – particularly Aboriginal women - these strategies had not proved to be particularly successful, which all of the women acknowledged. At the time that this research was undertaken, the management group was a white, Anglo- Australian group, all with tertiary qualifications and professional employment. The one exception to this pattern was a woman who filled the management committee position of 'client representative'. She was a white Anglo woman but without tertiary qualifications or employment of any kind. While this research was underway, she enrolled at University in a Bachelor of Social Work degree and resigned her position on the management committee to take up employment as a casual refuge worker. The staff group in contrast was more diverse in background, as the demographic details in chapter three illuminate.

The women who were part of the Women and Children's Refuge had debated these issues and were familiar with the complexity of the arguments about inclusiveness. While the organisation continued to strive for openness and accessibility, many also identify an inevitability of their position and the potential dangers of trying to be all things to all people.

*I think the Women and Children's Refuge is now finally coming to the point of realising that we can't include everyone. And if we try to, we'll destroy ourselves in the trying. So we need to be inclusive of those that we can, and hopefully those that need it most, and when we come up against one of the other groups or issues that we haven't been inclusive of, deal with it then...there's a danger ...a danger of being so careful about being inclusive that your purpose is lost...like a great example is women with disabilities. We can't possibly do all that we would like...we can't even go out and educate women with disabilities about domestic violence and the shelter and that sort of thing, because then we'll up our client load, and we can't afford to do that....*

*Do we educate people only for them to find there is nowhere for them to go anyway. Or do we leave them in the dark, which one? (Lynne, WCR).*

*Well ...that group of Aboriginal women and non-English speaking background women or women of any type of different background – we're always looking for people like that, but it's hard to find them. And the WCR isn't the only organisation that has that problem. Most other organisations that I am or have been involved with who work with Aboriginal people or non-English speaking background people have exactly the same problem. It's very hard. And once you get a woman who's interested in committee work or interested in getting involved in that sort of area, they're like gold. Every organisation wants them and they can just be burned out in six months if they take on everything that they get offered. So it's very hard to find women that want to do it and grab them in front of other organisations that also want them (Sara, WCR).*

Most of the women involved in the Women and Children's Refuge shared the belief that their service was appropriate for women of culturally and linguistically diverse women who were escaping violence and that this was as important as obtaining cultural diversity among staff and management. This belief was informed by the current composition of the client group and their feedback.

*I guess...what it really comes down to is - does the service we provide reflect a privileged white middle class paradigm – and no it doesn't. If it did half our clients wouldn't be Aboriginal women (Stella, WCR).*

*...primarily what we are about is ...how our service is delivered at the end of the day, you know. And if women ...from different backgrounds feel comfortable coming to the Women and Children's Refuge, and they tell us they do - then that's fine, that's what it's about (Audrey, WCR).*

The women who worked in the Women and Children's Refuge shared a commitment to the eradication of violence against women and had purposefully created an organisation that enabled them to work towards these aims in a positive environment. The structure of the organisation in some ways constructed barriers between the women who were part of management and the women who were part of the staff group. The creation of a coordinator position created an axis from which most organisational activity radiated and which appeared to minimise apparent conflict and maximise participation for many of the women. While the organisation enjoyed many benefits and was resourced in many explicit and implicit ways by the coordinator, the stress and potential for exploitation of women filling these positions is an issue unresolved by this organisation. However these were purposeful, carefully thought out decisions, made by women who recognised the imperfections of the systems within which they worked but who nonetheless committed their time and effort to an on-going struggle to support women and children escaping violence.

This chapter now considers the third and final organisation which participated in the research.

### 5.3 *The Young Women's Accommodation Service*

I have called the third organisation that participated in this research the Young Women's Accommodation Service (YWAS). This service was a programme operated by the YWCA of Darwin and consisted of two separate hostels or houses accommodating, caring for and supporting young women who were without other secure forms of housing. The Young Women's Accommodation Service was intrinsically linked with the YWCA of Darwin and while this research focuses on this one programme in particular, there are many references and links with the broader YWCA structure. For example some of the women who participated in the research were part of the management group of the YWAS which also managed all the other programmes auspiced by the YWCA of Darwin. At the time of this research, the YWCA of Darwin was responsible for the following programmes.

- a for-profit backpackers hostel;
- a crisis accommodation refuge for young women and young men aged between 15-18 years;
- a Big Sister/Little Sister programme, a mentoring programme that links girls and young women between the ages of 10 -16 years with volunteer adult women to aid their personal growth and development;
- a Community Placement Programme, which recruits households in the community willing to sub-let a room or living space within their home to young men and women who would otherwise be homeless;
- a hospital accommodation programme which provides short term accommodation for women and families from rural and remote areas who have come to Darwin for medical treatment either for themselves or a family member;
- a long term accommodation house for young men and women able to live without live-in or ongoing support;
- a young women's recreation programme which provides developmental sport and recreation opportunities to young indigenous girls between the ages of 10 and 16 years;
- the Young Women's Accommodation Service.

This research focused on the Young Women's Accommodation Service because it worked only with young women and had three paid staff and at least one volunteer, unlike some of the other programmes which employed only one staff person or employed men. The YWAS provided an opportunity to closely examine the structure and practices of a feminist service that employed

only women, a similar scenario to the Rape Counselling Service and the Women and Children's Refuge. This provided opportunities for comparison and the identification of commonalities and difference.

The Young Women's Accommodation Service was structured hierarchically as was the YWCA of Darwin and had many of the features Bordt (1997) attributes to feminist bureaucracies. The women of this organisation described both themselves and their organisation as feminist and concurred with Riger's (1994) claim that "implying bureaucracy is masculine and dominating, while collectivity is feminine and humanizing, stereotypes not only gender but also organizational structures" (p.287). As has been discussed in the review of the literature available this dichotomous framework pervades feminist organisational literature and as such glosses over the multidimensional nature of feminist organisations.

This framework assumes that whatever is collective, participatory, and grassroots is open, democratic and responsive to people's needs, while all hierarchies and bureaucracies are oppressive, static and unresponsive. There is no room in this framework to explore the oppressive, unresponsive elements in collective practices or the democratic impulses in hierarchical practices (Reinelt, 1995, p. 92).

The realisation of these 'democratic impulses' was a significant priority for the Young Women's Accommodation Service and one that the women who were part of this organisation, as workers and /or members, actively pursued. The impact of the hierarchical structure, which many of the women considered to be beneficial to their work practices, was an important consideration. How the women worked to minimise the potentially oppressive nature of these structures and promote alternative processes was integral to their involvement in the organisation.

#### 5.4.1 Historical Context

The historical context of the Young Women's Accommodation Service is embedded in two arenas, both of significance to the women who were a part of the service. The service originated as a response to the increasing incidence of homelessness among young women and girls but is equally influenced by the origins and history of its umbrella organisation, the Young Women's Christian Association. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) is an international organisation that has been active in Australia since the late 1800s. In 1855, two separate groups started in Britain. One, called Robarts' Prayer Union, was a small group of women who met regularly to pray for all women and girls amidst the social upheavals that beset Britain during the industrial revolution. The second group was begun by Lady Kinnaird when she opened a hostel for young women training to be nurses with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War. By 1877 these two groups had merged to become the YWCA of Great Britain (Gillespie, 1995). With the

merger the twin objectives of prayer and practical action, both aimed at addressing social concerns, became complementary and remain core principals of the YWCA today (Dunn, 1991). In 1880 the first permanent YWCA was established in Sydney, with the aim “to provide, under one roof, a Home for women and girls who need it, and rooms where classes and meetings can be held and a library set up” (Dunn, 1991, p. 7). As has been documented in this thesis, the pioneering women of the YWCA participated in many of the campaigns and activities of first wave feminism in Australia. Their focus was on safe and secure accommodation for young women and girls who were otherwise likely to be vulnerable to a range of social ills. Dunn’s (1991) story of the YWCA in Australia paints the picture of “busy, capable and deeply Christian” women committed to “the spiritual, intellectual and social improvement of young women” (p.14-15), and tenacious in their pursuit of opportunities and resources. She describes many examples of the YWCA women working alongside men to achieve their goals and aims which acquired the association a reputation for conservatism especially when compared with the explicitly separatist policies of groups such as National Council of Women and the Women’s Action Committee. However Dunn describes many other examples of “Y” women challenging the status quo and demanding equitable treatment from the men around them. One such example is the origins of the Alice Springs association (the first in the Northern Territory) in 1960.

Miss Bessie Sweetland who, as Queensland’s Regional Secretary, helped start Biloela, was Adelaide’s General Secretary at the beginning of 1960. In this capacity she went to Alice Springs with the National president, Mrs. Wardlaw, in 1960. The purpose of their visit was to accept a government grant of land on which to build a YWCA hostel. This was very exciting, of course, and they rushed to look at the site almost the moment they arrived. To Mrs. Wardlaw it was a disappointment. Before going to bed that night, she went to Bessie and said ‘I wonder if I will have the courage to tell the Minister I don’t want his piece of land. It’s too far out of town. It’s not suitable.’ With that, she said her prayers, went to bed and woke the next morning with quite enough courage to speak her piece. The Minister was either so astonished or so impressed that he found another – very suitable- block for them...(Dunn, 1991, p. 167).

In the early 1960s the YWCA was keen to expand to other parts of the Northern Territory and the Alice Springs Executive Director, Miss Meysie Law, made many a visit north to promote the aims and priorities of the association, until finally in 1969 the YWCA of Darwin was established (Dunn, 1991).

One of the women interviewed for this research was involved in those initial days and recalls:

*The Y in Darwin was started up by a group of three friends who got together and they perceived the need for a hostel for young women. There was nothing like that in Darwin ...And I met up with them right then - early in the piece, so I've been involved a long time... about 1969. We started to develop a membership base and started to collect builders and architects, with a view to getting a hostel started... the Y was*

*early, very early, in Alice Springs, funnily enough, so you already had one down there. So - the then executive director of the Y in Alice Springs came up to us in Darwin and helped us... Yes, it started off as the hostel. There was nowhere for young Aboriginal women to go for instance, for coming to Darwin and other young women who were coming in from outlying areas. So that was why it started here really (Christina, YWAS).*

Dunn (1991) documents the ongoing difficulties of all YWCA branches in raising money to fund the many initiatives undertaken since the late 1800s and Gillespie (1995) observed that “the fluctuations between prosperity and poverty in YWCA Associations were bewilderingly swift” (p.196). Financial issues beset the Darwin Association at various times from their establishment in 1969. At the time of this research the Darwin YWCA relied heavily on the income generated by a for-profit traveller’s hostel, opened in 1980 (Dunn, 1991) to provide “*clean, friendly, affordable accommodation for travellers that is close to the CBD*” (Annual Report, 1999). The hostel was integral to the wide range of services offered by the YWCA as is noted in the Treasurers Report of 1999.

*We have always relied upon the financial assistance from the hostel to supplement our community activities. We experienced significant falls in occupancy during the low season from December 1998 – April 1999. This is in line with the experience of other budget tourism operators over the same period in Darwin (Annual Report, 1999, p. 2).*

This dual role of private sector entrepreneur and community sector service provider was a complex one for the women of the YWCA and contributed to structures and decision-making processes of the organisation as a whole. For example the Young Women’s Accommodation Service received funding through the Commonwealth/Territory jointly funded SAAP program, however many of the workers activities and initiatives such as support groups, conference travel and involvement in broader YWCA activities were financially supported by the funds of the Darwin YWCA.

The issues of youth homelessness were also integral to the practices of the Young Women’s Accommodation Service. Various publications have documented the work of women with street children (Lake & Holmes, 1995; Magarey, 2001), however prior to the 1980s, youth homelessness was not considered a wide spread social problem. Instead, homelessness was more likely to be seen “as an individual problem affecting a few” (Hollingworth, 1993, p. v), and then mostly older, single men (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989). However during the late 1970s, welfare agencies including those operated by the YWCA in various parts of Australia, began to report a marked increase in the numbers of adolescents, both male and female, utilizing night shelters and accommodation services previously the domain of

the older lone male (Hollingworth, 1993). This increase was related to a number of structural changes occurring in Australian society.

Not only was the transition to independence occurring earlier, and because of a failure of family support, but the independent young person also faced economic crisis and was often without means to establish a stable, independent living situation. Youth unemployment increased from 3.7% in 1971 to 20.3% in 1987. While 16 and 17-year-olds were eligible for Federal Unemployment Benefits, the unemployment rate was considerably lower than for adult unemployed (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p. 10).

Various Commonwealth Government initiatives were undertaken including the modification of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program to include the Youth Supported Accommodation Program (YSAP) as a sub-program. The goals of this program were to provide services for people between the ages of 12-25 years and their dependants “who are homeless as a result of crisis and who need support to move towards more appropriate accommodation including independent living where possible and appropriate” (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p. 12).

Despite these initiatives, by 1987 the increase in the number of young people experiencing homelessness had increased to such a level that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness was instigated. In 1989, the release of the report from this Inquiry, *Our Homeless Children* or the Burdekin Report, confirmed the experiences of youth workers and shelters as it “stripped away the social veneer covering the extent of youth homelessness and the experiences of homeless children” (Sykes, 1993, p. 1). The Burdekin Report conservatively estimated that there were at least 20,000 – 25,000 homeless young people under the age of 18 years with at least 8,500 of those being aged from 12 -15 years. These were staggering figures and, using the words of these children themselves, the inquiry graphically depicted the homeless child’s lifestyle of desperation, exploitation, vulnerability to violence and abuse, and chronic ill health. A variety of causes of youth homelessness including family conflict, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and family poverty were cited. The Burdekin report also identified that most alternative accommodation for young people was largely limited to crisis refuges that were often unsuitable for certain groups of young people, especially young women and Indigenous youth (Burdekin, 1989, p. 43).

It must be acknowledged that mainstream refuges are unsuitable for significant numbers of homeless children and young people. They are alien to Aborigines and people of non-English speaking backgrounds when dominated by Anglo-Australian workers and residents. Young women tend to avoid male dominated refuges and mixed refuges may be unsuitable for girls and young women. Incest and rape victims may also need specialist services, as may pregnant women and those with babies...The Inquiry received several recommendations that YSAP should further

target young women and young pregnant women (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p. 171-172).

It was this gap that the YWCA of Darwin aimed to address through the establishment of the Young Women's Accommodation Service. The first house operated by the service was opened prior to the Inquiry in 1986, funded through YSAP and focusing specifically on the accommodation needs of young women who were pregnant or who had a child and were homeless or vulnerable to homelessness. The second house opened in 1988 initially to accommodate young Asian and Indigenous female students. However as a result of the findings of the Burdekin Inquiry, and the continuing unmet needs of homeless young women for accommodation and support after they leave crisis shelters, this house was modified and is now used to provide medium to long term accommodation for young women under the age of 25 who are homeless. The YWAS also supports young women who are at risk of homelessness through a number of outreach activities including ongoing, intensive support groups.

Since the Burdekin Inquiry many national and Northern Territory initiatives have been instigated to address the ongoing needs of homeless youth. In the Northern Territory the YWCA has been integral to the youth sector's response through the Young Women's Accommodation Service and through the mixed gender crisis shelter that they operate. However the need continues to outstrip service provision placing increasing demands on the services and on the resources of the YWCA. In 2002 the results of a National Youth Homelessness Census were released. This report indicated that the Northern Territory had five times the national average of homeless young people at sixty-nine for every one thousand youths in the population (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002). While the authors explain this extraordinary figure as the result of the high number of remote indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, it remains an indication of the ongoing need for further services and the heavy demands placed on the YWAS and its staff.

#### 5.4.2 Feminist Philosophy and Practice

The Young Women's Accommodation Service viewed its affiliation with the YWCA as integral to its existence. The YWCA was not a distant umbrella organisation; in contrast it provided the overarching framework that shaped the structure and the direction of the Young Women's Accommodation Service. The service considers itself a YWCA service and the workers consider themselves YWCA women. It is relevant then to consider the purpose and mission of the YWCA as the guiding principals of the Young Women's Accommodation Service. In 1999, the Annual Report of the YWCA of Darwin stated the organisation's purpose as:

*Strengthened by the Christian faith and enriched by our world wide membership of women and girls, we seek to provide opportunities for women to develop their full*



*potential; express our concern for the whole community in responsible action; and strive to achieve Peace, Justice and Freedom for all people (Annual Report 1999).*

This statement had been adopted in 1981 as embodying the guiding principals of the National YWCA. Dunn (1991) claims this statement clearly describes the commitment of the women of the YWCA in Australia to “work for the wellbeing of women and girls in a caring community and a peaceful world” (p.237). It was however much less meticulous about Christianity than previous statements which had traditionally spoken of women spurred on by their “faith in Jesus Christ” (Dunn, 1991, p. 212) and of YWCA programmes involved in “extending the Kingdom of God” (p. 75). By moving Christianity to a periphery position in the organisations formal statement of purpose, Dunn claims the national association aimed to attract women whose identification with Christianity was less specific than that of the women who originally founded the YWCA. Certainly some of the women who were part of the Young Women’s Accommodation Service identified Christianity as secondary to the other principles guiding the work of the YWCA in their decisions to join the service.

*It originally started back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where women of the 1800s thought the world was going bad...so they started up all-women prayer groups. And it developed from there. But now – what we try to break from is the stigma of the blue hair – dyed hair, you know, stuff like little women’s crocheting groups. The Y isn’t like that, we’re worldwide...And the only reason why we leave the C for Christianity still in there is because of the other countries... in other countries Christianity actually helps a lot of women.... So definitely...much more a women’s organisation than a Christian one (Beth, YWAS).*

*I was travelling around the world ...a friend of mine was acting executive officer at the Y at the time and needed a secretary...and when she said ‘do I want the job?’ - I thought ‘I don’t know because it’s like so Christian – based and I don’t think I can handle all that’ - I had concerns about that. And she said ‘Oh no, no, no, there’s a whole lot of different people and values as well’...I’ve been here ever since – eight years (Kathy, YWAS).*

*I was a little bit concerned that it might have been a feminist Christian organisation – but luckily it wasn’t so that was okay. Otherwise I probably wouldn’t have applied for the position – with the Christian, you know (Emma, YWAS).*

The YWCA of Darwin as an organisation formally identified feminist values as organisational guiding principles through its mission statement which reads:

*The YWCA of Darwin is part of a dynamic international women’s movement based on feminist principles. The empowering of women and improving the quality of life for the whole community occurs through the promotion of social justice principles and programmes. In partnership with women as workers and volunteers we will endeavour to be pro-active, co-operative, giving individual recognition and respect as we move forward (Annual Report, 1999)*

This explicit commitment to feminist practice principles guided the work of all of the programmes operated by the YWCA, even those which included young men as service users and employees. How the women of the YWAS understand this commitment will be further explored in the following chapter, however this statement clearly positioned the Young Women's Accommodation Service as a feminist service committed to the empowerment of young women. The operations of the YWCA of Darwin were guided by the following commitments and understandings.

*The YWCA:*

- *Is one of the leading women's organisations in Australia. Its primary focus is the empowerment of women of all ages;*
- *Is a membership movement with an active role in the community on issues for women;*
- *Will work in a way that ensures consensual processes and strategies;*
- *Will encourage and promote creativity, equality, social justice, mutual caring and compassion;*
- *Will give specific attention to young women in its activities and decision-making;*
- *Will act as an advocate for women on the basis of the World YWCA priorities, and the policies of the Australian and World movements;*
- *Will promote and develop high quality leadership (Annual Report, 1999).*

The Young Women's Accommodation Service worked within these guidelines to sustain and empower young women who were in need of supported accommodation. The service provided medium to long term housing for women and girls in two separate houses, each of which could accommodate four or five young women at any one time. One house accommodated young mothers and their children or young women who were pregnant and the other accommodated young women who were able to live without direct supervision but who required ongoing support. As well as accommodation needs, the YWAS assisted the young women to develop independent living skills and to seek and obtain financial resources, employment, and long term accommodation. Workers also provided pregnancy and parenting support, as well as emotional and social support in other aspects of the young women's lives. Informed by feminist principles, the service did not place time limits on young women's length of stay in either house identifying that young women often needed lengthy periods to reestablish themselves independently in the community. Nearly half of the young women in each house stayed between three and six months in 1999 and over 60% of the young women moved on to some form of independent living situation after they left the service (*Annual Report 1999*).

In addition to the individual casework support offered to the young women, the service was actively involved in the development, ongoing maintenance and resourcing of two intensive

group work programmes. These groups fell outside the funding guidelines of SAAP and were financially resourced through donations from charitable trusts and through the resources of the YWCA. The first of the groups was initially established to *normalise young women's experiences, reduce isolation, promote the formation of social networks that are integral for inclusion in the community and to facilitate access to community services (YWCA pamphlet 1999)*. This group was aimed at preventing homelessness as well as assisting those young women already resident in the YWAS houses. Its membership was therefore open and girls and young women could join the group at any time.

The second group was an ante-natal and post-natal support group for young women aged between 15-24 years who are either pregnant or already had children and had been identified as at risk of homelessness or as requiring intensive support in their role as mother. This group aimed to *provide the young women/mothers with information, non-judgmental support, recreation activities and linkages with community agencies (YWCA pamphlet 1999)*. Most of the young women who attended this group had been resident in the YWAS house for some period though they could also move on to other accommodation and still attend the group. Free transport, child care and a healthy lunch for the women and their children were all provided. The aim of the group was to enhance life skills, promote positive parenting and self empowerment, and to reduce social isolation.

Both groups were clear in their goals of reintegrating young women back into their communities and assisting young women to develop friendship and support networks between themselves and with other community members and groups. The groups focused on identifying the commonalities of young women's varied experiences and forming connections to overcome experiences of isolation.

The two houses were located in relatively close proximity and the groups took place in a variety of community settings, so the locations and physical settings of the service were more varied than for either the RCS or the WCR. The women who worked here talked less about the physical place and more about the young women or each other or members of other YWCA programmes when they talked about their work environment.

*If I felt uncomfortable then I would rather not work here...I enjoy this...not only the space but the job is fulfilling, the young women make the atmosphere...and the other women, like the treasurer told me to go home because I have the flu but I want to be here – and I think if I was in another workplace where I didn't feel comfortable with the atmosphere and the environment and the whole organisation, and I don't mean just the house, then I probably would have said 'oh well I've got three months sick leave, why don't I just go home'. I'd rather stay and work to be honest...because of this place (Beth YWAS).*

The houses themselves were two storey homes secured from the housing department for use by the YWAS. They appeared from the outside extremely similar to most other houses in the Darwin area (a town where 90% of homes are built according to one of three designs). Upstairs each young woman had a bedroom of her own though the kitchen and living areas were shared. The young women were encouraged to decorate their rooms as they wished and were assisted in sharing responsibility for the other areas. Both houses had large backyards and well maintained tropical gardens.

Downstairs of one house was converted into the youth workers' office, decorated with an overwhelming number of craft items all created during the groups. The office is cluttered with children's toys, prams, car seats, rockers and baby baths. Seating and desks are limited though each worker has a small space to call their own. Visitors are forced to avoid swinging mobiles hanging from the ceiling and squeeze through the various items displayed or stored. The youth workers say they don't mind the surroundings, as they are informal and personal. The young women are welcome in the office at any time but because it is so cluttered, space is very limited and the workers spend considerable time outside of the office area talking with the residents and their children.

In a manner similar to the workers of the other two services, these youth workers were members of many national and Territory committees and groups, both those that related to young women and homelessness and the national groups and committees auspiced by the YWCA. The workers believed they contributed valuable information about indigenous young women and young women with children to these national committees, as their service was still one of the very few that addressed these issues (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989).

The staff of the YWAS encouraged the young women who were resident in the houses to become involved in community activities and to take an interest in issues of particular relevance to women. This is one way in which the staff believed they shared the organisation's feminist principles with the young women who used the service.

*We take the young women here to all sorts of things...women's things to make them proud. Like we always have a banner and marchers at International Women's Day and Reclaim the Night...they love it – the chanting and that (Zoe, YWAS).*

The YWCA of Darwin was also very active in the community as instigators of events and activities highlighting the disadvantages experienced by women and celebrating the strengths and unique qualities of women. For example the National YWCA launched the campaign called "A Week without Violence" during which YWCA branches were encouraged to promote events which highlighted the increasing incidence of violence against women and children and which

encouraged the community to break the ongoing silence that surrounded this issue. The women (including residents) of the YWAS and women from the YWCA Board were heavily involved in activities such as group education programs, candlelight vigils, public speaking engagements, and art groups within schools during this week. One activity during this week in 1999 was the Women's Reconciliation Luncheon attended by about 150 women including many Indigenous women and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This luncheon was advertised as a celebration of the connections and possibilities for real reconciliation that existed between women (Y.W.C.A., 2000).

Despite these activities and community involvement, the self perception of the YWCA women and the perception of the Darwin community was that they were less radical/ more conservative than other feminist women's services.

*I guess we've probably been criticised by radical feminists for not being radical. In that we do tend to appeal to more conservative feminists. And I don't have a problem with that, I mean, I think conservatively minded feminists have had some difficulty in trying to find their place in the world of feminism. And if the Y can be that place for them, that's fine. But then again at the Y you do have radicals, you have conservatives, you have a whole range, but I think we try not to be authoritarian with women about how much feminism they want to involve themselves in...I mean most of our staff are heterosexual and the comments that come from them is that they actually like it being okay to be heterosexual and feminist...so I guess it kind of places us somewhere in the middle of the overall strata of feminism (Emma, YWAS).*

While some of these comments may reflect stereotypes of other feminist women which may or may not be accurate, the identification with conservative feminism also seemed to be closely related to the commitment of the YWCA as a whole to include young men and boys in some of their services. While the Young Women's Accommodation Service does not provide any specific assistance for men, all the workers discussed their commitment to young women as including the recognition and support of young women's relationships with the men in their lives. So while the houses of the YWAS were in theory women-only spaces, the workers interpreted this flexibly, depending on the young woman involved and the nature of the issue.

*...when it comes to maintenance and stuff I only have women, because it is a no male area...but sometimes it just seems stupid when I've had mums in here and fathers at the gate and it's a good relationship and I've got to say the best way to keep it good ...is to teach the young father with the baby and stuff like that...its my discretion how I do that. ...At the other house, say because there is no parenting type thing, it's definitely a no male area (Beth, YWAS).*

This commitment to young men in their relationships with the young women was a consistent theme in discussions with many of the women who were working with the YWAS and also the women who were members of the broader YWCA of Darwin. None saw this as compromising

their commitment to feminism or to young women. On the contrary most of the women who were part of the YWAS believed that this made their service more acceptable to young women and they could demonstrate that feminism was not about hating men but it was about women's rights. So the ways in which the women of the YWAS operationalised the feminist principles of their organisation were different in some practical ways from the Rape Counselling Service and the Women and Children's Refuge. However there were many similarities between the three in their understanding of disadvantage in women's lives and in the celebration of women's strength and courage. The Young Women's Accommodation service also shared with the other services a compatibility with Wendy Weeks' (1994) suggestions for feminist activity in that they prioritised the provision of service to women and engaged in social action and community education aimed at correcting misconceptions and negative portrayals of women in the community.

#### 5.4.3 Staffing, Roles and Remuneration

The Young Women's Accommodation Service in 1999 employed three staff, one as a coordinator and two as youth workers. The youth workers were directly supervised by the coordinator and all three staff answered to the Executive Director of the YWCA of Darwin who in turn reported directly to the Board of Directors. All of these positions were held by women however the Executive Officer did supervise male staff in other YWCA programmes. The staff of the YWAS also had opportunity to work in different programmes when other staff were absent or as relief workers and all of them had done so at one time or another. This meant they had significant experience and knowledge across all the YWCA programmes and had often worked with men as fellow workers and with young men and boys as service users (for example at the crisis shelter). The Executive Officer administered all programmes in the YWCA, controlled the organisation's budget, developed and disseminated policy guidelines, participated in the management of the organisation as an *ex-officio* member of the Board of Directors and attended public functions as a representative of the organisation. The coordinator of the YWAS was responsible for supervision and support of the two youth workers, day to day activities at the two houses, facilitating expenditure within the budget allocated by the Executive Director to the two houses and to the support groups, advising the Executive Officer of the need for further expenditure, issues with residents or outreach clients, and any human resource issues. The coordinator also worked extensively with the young women resident in both houses, though the youth workers facilitated the groups and undertook most of the outreach work.

*I'm the ...youth worker. I support the young women who live here or even if they have left here and still need someone to keep an eye on them – and I just do anything they need basically – help them in crisis situations, help them look after their babies, look*

*for long term accommodation for them, help them get on track, help them be happy in their relationships, help them get back to school or getting them into work or training , stuff like that. So – that’s my role (Anna, YWAS).*

Like the women who were part of the other services, the women of the Young Women’s Accommodation Service were attracted to the particular type of work they were undertaking. This was work that meant something special to them.

*It’s not like, ok, being clocked in, clocked out. Every week is different, every meeting is different, every client is different, so, you’ll be working, like, say you’ve got domestic violence and this and this and this and then someone else comes along and you’ve got to refocus all your energy in another direction - I love it (Beth, YWAS).*

A number of volunteers also worked at the YWAS and at the YWCA of Darwin in general. Often the volunteers moved around the different programmes as their interest and the organisation’s needs changed. Volunteers were sometimes previous service users and most were deeply committed to the ethos of the YWCA. For example, one of the YWAS former residents was a volunteer with that service working alongside the youth workers, befriending the residents, being available for talks, transport, child care and any other tasks. This young woman was also a ‘Big Sister’ in the Big Sister/Little Sister programme and had assisted with the YWRAP programme in the past. This young woman was also a voting member of the YWCA of Darwin’s Board of Directors, a member of the YWCA nationally and was awarded the Northern Territory Young Achiever of the Year award in 1999 for her work with other young people and in acknowledgement of her own journey to independence. Many of the YWCA programmes relied on volunteers like this young woman.

The staff were remunerated at different rates depending on their position. The level of responsibility and decision-making authority was reflected in these pay rates. This was not discussed as an issue of contention by either YWAS staff or the Executive Director.

*Personally I don’t think that putting them on the same money and giving them equal responsibilities is ever going to be feasible because people have different skills and experience, different work ethics. Some people work and they work their heart out and they throw themselves into the job, and are pleased with the outcome of that. Others do the minimum that they can to get by, and you know, I think that those people are where they want to be in the organisation. I don’t think everyone wants to be their own masters. Some people just want to go to work and get a clear list of tasks and responsibilities that they can do and forget when they knock off...personally I don’t think those things [collectives, complete consensus] work in the kind of environment we live in. That’s probably why they hired me – because I was comfortable with hierarchy (Emma, YWAS).*

The YWCA of Darwin was in the process of introducing a new industrial award for workers and had recently undertaken a review of all positions. Unlike the other two services that participated

in this research the YWCA redefined positions to ensure their wages could be covered within their current budget, the wages were therefore lower than in other services. The move to the new industrial award was also the subject of consultation between staff and management and, though it was approached differently, it was the cause of some tension and conflict.

#### 5.4.4 Structure, Membership and Management

As is evident from the descriptions above, the YWCA of Darwin was a hierarchical organisation managed by a hierarchically organised Board of Directors. The Board of Directors was elected from the pool of financial members of the YWCA of Darwin. In 1999, during the period of this research, there were 191 such members. The membership criteria and process was detailed in the Constitution and repeated in the Annual reports and other organisational literature:

*Membership of the YWCA of Darwin is open to any woman over the age of 18 years who accepts the purpose as stated above and who pays the membership fee. A member is entitled to vote and hold office. Any male over the age of 18 years and pays the membership, is eligible for Associate Membership of the Association and is not entitled to vote or hold office. Any young woman between the ages of 5 – 18 years who wishes to join the Association and pays the junior membership fee shall be eligible to become a Junior Member of the Association and is not entitled to vote or hold office ( Annual Report 1999).*

The Board had twelve members and the Executive Director who was identified as an *ex officio* member. The Board delegated tasks as appropriate to one of five Committees, though all decision-making responsibility remained with the full Board of Directors. Each committee was responsible for a particular area of the YWCA activities such as Youth Programmes, Finance, Nominations (accepting applications for membership from the community), Cottages and Lodges, and Personnel. The Board and the Committees generally met monthly though the Nominations committee met as required. At least one Board member was a member of each committee and the Executive Director was a member of all committees.

*The Board isn't involved in the day to day kind of stuff...we're on various committees, like the Finance area – I would be on that as Treasurer – Some Board members are on Youth Programmes and in that way we are involved and we have input into services and so on and so forth. It's recommended that members of the Board are on a lot of committees really. So we keep up with what's happening...We're not a distant committee (Christina, YWAS).*

Members of the YWCA who did not hold Board of Director positions were elected to positions on one or even several of the committees. Associate Members were able to participate in committee work which allowed two men to join the Youth Programmes Committee in 1999 in recognition of the programmes that included young men as service users. These committees



recommended policy direction around each of the designated areas but all recommendations were brought to the Board of Directors for final decision-making and operationalisation.

*It is hierarchical. The constitution establishes management powers to the Board of Directors, the Board of Directors delegates responsibilities to me and I delegate responsibilities to people at different levels of the organisation...in particular what it [the structure] tries to do is let the Board make decisions about policy and direction and let the staff manage the day to day operations of service delivery (Emma, YWAS).*

Staff were also represented on the Board of Directors in a non voting capacity and all the women who worked with the YWAS had attended board meetings and knew members of the board. One member of the Board of Directors in 1999 was the coordinator of the crisis shelter, and had also been elected to the Board of Directors by the membership. She did have voting rights. While any person who met the appropriate selection criteria could be employed in the YWAS, all the women employed there at the time of this research were members of the YWCA of Darwin.

The relationship between the staff of the YWAS and the Board of Directors was quite complex. There were some clear and obvious differences between the two groups of women; differences felt quite starkly by some of the staff.

*It was daunting because we have staff representatives on – at the board meeting, and once a month, a coordinator, we take turns, goes to the board meeting and reports on all our projects, and so in the beginning, I was – that was my insecurities...I had a thing about older, white, higher class, white, ladies...because you have politicians, ... and some very prominent women were on it and so ...it was like very scary...when you look at them like they're white and they've done this and that...But then I realise that they're just women and they're women for women and so I'm able to sit down and relax and not have trouble just because they're members of the board (Beth, YWAS).*

*There's always a level of suspicion between staff and management. I think there very often is and it does crop up...I think it's gossip amongst staff – staff gossip amongst themselves and one person's perception can become the whole staff wide perception...but you just have to keep your ear to the ground. And do something about it when it crops up (Christina, YWAS).*

Despite these comments there were many more that indicated that staff and management relationships particularly between the Young Women's Accommodation Service staff and the Board of Directors, were extremely positive. For example, the coordinator of the service described how she had access to Board members in very informal settings.

*You've got to know who your bosses are, and get to know them as individuals...so different members of the Board ...they can give you lots of ideas and stuff about where you can get money from, you can have a cup of tea, you can get them to come around, and if you've got a particular problem, show them the problem, stuff like that. And they're very empowering (Beth, YWAS).*

Similar to the situation described at the Women and Children's Refuge, the Executive Director role is the link between the two groups and the incumbent fulfills a vital but unenviable function as the organisational lynch pin. The Executive Director had described her position as one of facilitating an environment that allowed workers to develop to their optimum, therefore benefiting the service.

*I think it's also important for people to be given parameters because...it might restrict them in some ways but it gives them a lot of freedom in another way, because if you say to them – don't say 'you can't do this, this and this' – but say 'you can do anything, but this and this'. Give them a whole range of freedoms in the workplace – freedom to control their work structures...I don't really care if people don't start work until ten o'clock, providing by a certain time of the week the tasks are done. But you give them freedom to manage their work styles, and if you set very clear boundaries around that, then people are more likely to stay within their boundaries, do the job they want to do and that they get paid for, and feel good about themselves...I encourage people to find what they've got for themselves and what's inside and support that...I fight constantly against my natural desire to take over and fix everything up... but then one of the comments that I do hear about my management style that's good is that people do feel if they get in too deep that I'll be there to bail them out. That was something that I have tried to cultivate and tried to make them feel that that was okay (Emma, YWAS).*

Emma, like her counterpart at the Women and Children's Refuge, was aware of her responsibilities and the pivotal role she played in the organisation:

*...How I provide information to them depends on, like my skill and intent...you know, if you weren't ethically very sound, I bet you could run amuck (Emma, YWAS).*

Emma had recently negotiated a shorter working week with the Board of Directors which allowed her to combine this position with her desire to spend more time with her family and described this move as one that demonstrated the support and understanding she received from the President of YWCA and other Board members. This flexibility was highly valued by Emma and other members of this organisation and will be discussed in the following chapter. She also described her role in a manner which suggests she was very comfortable with the position she held.

*I mean the reality is, I think that to take ...management responsibility where you have the power to hire and fire staff, which is a fairly big responsibility, the power to control budgets and we've got a one and a half million dollar budget, - I mean you really need somebody who is brave enough to make decisions and who has the skill level and intelligence to do that...that's the kind of person I am. I want to work here because I like the concept of running this organisation (Emma, YWAS).*

#### 5.4.5 Decision-Making Processes

The women who were part of the YWAS described the decision-making style as consultative both within the YWAS service and within the Board of Directors. The workers of the YWAS

confirmed the Executive Director's assertion that, in day-to-day work activities and tasks, women were autonomous within the parameters set by the organisation.

*It's like Emma is the Executive Director and it feels like the way her responsibilities are and the job that she has might be the authority to say what I have to do and deal with every day but really when it comes to meetings and collaboration and talking through issues and decision-making in the organisation and ...things like that, then everyone has a say... So I see her as a co-worker and not the total boss – yes (Zoe, YWAS).*

*I pretty much do have responsibility and can contribute to any decisions about the house – like if there's anything that might go against, say, the guidelines or something like that, or if there's a specific project that might call for more hours or something like that, then I go over things like that with the others, but apart from that I pretty much have my own way of doing things and I can be as creative as possible and I'm allowed to do so. And that's something that is acknowledged as well (Anna, YWAS).*

*Yes well I have my supervision with the Executive Director, which I bring up issues with her, and I have supervision with my staff, and supervision with the peer volunteer. And we all work together...Basically the day to day running of the services is left up to me and I use the core policies that already exist within the Y...If there's something missing then you can add it, so we have a strategy plan meeting, we have meetings with the Executive Director and we say we need a policy, whatever, people throw in their ideas ...and we say yes that's good, we'll go with that (Beth, YWAS).*

These comments demonstrate a commitment to the processes in place and a willingness on the part of the women currently employed in the service to use those. All these women were familiar with strategies for participation not only in decision-making that effected the Young Women's Accommodation Service but also other services operated by the YWCA. They saw themselves as Y women participating and contributing to the total organisation. Consultation has been criticised as a potentially tokenistic process that fails to allow women in particular real opportunities for participation and voice (Arnstein, 1969). This criticism is one the Executive Director is familiar with and as a result expressed some caution about consultation as a process.

*Consultation depends entirely on the skills to communicate. Like I could say 'What do you think?' You know I could say "Do you agree?" So there's a way you can say things – so it depends on open lines of communication, on the skill of the communicator and I guess the specific people involved. Because I've seen complicated management – I mean some Aboriginal organisations and the management of Aboriginal money by the government has been – you know, a really bad example of complicated management. You ask all the wrong questions and you ask all the wrong people. And you end up with a mess...but you can say you consulted. So that's what I mean it can be dangerous. I guess that's the background where I worked before I came here, where consultation was really just a joke. There has to be commitment and heart behind it (Emma, YWAS).*

Women who were part of the Board were similarly positive about their opportunities for true participation in the decision-making processes of the organisation. Despite the existence of a number of hierarchical features, like the positions of President and Vice President and the use of some formal meeting processes in Board meetings, none of the women who were members of the Board considered this antithetical to the feminist nature of the organisation.

*It doesn't [operate hierarchically] I think. Jennifer is the President and that does mean that, in an emergency she may have to make a decision about something, but she always brings it to the Board or rings us all around or something. But – no – we talk about everything. I think that is one of the things women do well (Christina, YWAS).*

*Well if I've got something to say or if I want to discuss something then I do like everyone else, ...but I don't think I have any right to go into that bossy you must do as I say...we try, and the Board and staff are together quite often so that the staff can see the board and how they act and hopefully understand that they – the staff are the ones that have power. They're the ones that know the young women and that have to relate to them... I would never ever think that it's MY Board (Jennifer, YWAS).*

The comments from the women who were part of the Young Women's Accommodation Service indicated that the processes of consultation and the strategies aimed at maximum involvement in organisational decision-making were successful in their view.

#### 5.4.6 Dealing with Conflict

The Women who worked at the Young Women's Accommodation Service or were involved in its management processes, rather flippantly described the existence of formal grievance procedures as the organisations policy for resolving conflict within the service.

*Oh well we have procedures and policies [to handle conflict] – one of the classics at the Y is that we have policies and procedures for everything (Emma, YWAS).*

*Well the organisation has got the good old grievance procedures. Yes so it's got the set-up (Anna, YWAS).*

The women agreed that the formal processes were rarely used especially by staff. Instead organisational conflicts were most often resolved in supervision with the support and mediation of either the service coordinator or the Executive Director. However this was a rare occurrence. The women who were part of the Board of Directors could also rarely remember any instances of intra-Board conflict though they acknowledged that recent industrial negotiations had raised points of conflict between management and staff. In these instances formal processes including external mediators were used and compromise was the eventual outcome. The women were consistent in their claim that conflict was unusual. Mueller (1995) makes similar observations suggesting that formal organisations with structures and processes that legitimise rule-making

and provide distance between different factions and groups within the organisation are less likely to report intense intra-organisation conflict. Certainly this description seems to reflect the experience of the workers of the YWAS where issues of conflict could be referred to a woman with some authority and a 'rule' or policy or decision may result. Mueller (1995) also claims that intra – organisational conflict is dependent on “the extent that they ...try to create a ‘prefigurative’ feminist community” (p. 275). This was not an important goal for the YWAS as previous comments from the Executive Director confirm and as a result it appears painful conflictual situations were less likely to arise.

*You often get the case of people not getting along with each other, and you will find that the coordinator on the premises will try to work with those staff to get them to the stage where they can work together...Most people tend to either resolve the issue or resolve themselves to the fact that they probably don't like each other, but they have to work together. I have let them know that that's perfectly okay, you don't have to be everyone's friend. As long as you can work together (Emma, YWAS)*

However though it was infrequent there had been occasions when the Executive Director felt unhappy and uncomfortable with conflict that had arisen over the industrial award. She indicated that, though a rare occurrence, conflict was difficult for her personally and even hurtful. She admits she has not always been happy with the way resolution is reached.

*Different people have different ways of expressing it. Some people are quite open and honest about their issues and that's okay. I can handle that. People who didn't want to - like say that's okay to your face and then complain behind your back. I made it really clear in lots of groups that I would not deal with that kind of shit, that people needed to be upfront and honest. And if it didn't come to my attention in a formal, kind of face to face way then I wouldn't deal with it...I could have probably handled it better though at the time... it was hurtful, so much behind the back stuff...I could have handled it much better (Emma, YWAS).*

While there was some agreement that serious or hurtful conflict was very rare within the YWAS or indeed the YWCA of Darwin as a whole, when it did arise Emma's comment suggests some of the women found the experience difficult and not particularly well handled. This comment also indicates that the industrial negotiations that all the organisations were engaged in were a source of tension. These were difficult times for the women as they attempted to balance the demands of staff with those of funding bodies and management groups.

#### 5.4.7 Inclusion Policies and Processes

The inclusion of women from different cultural and social backgrounds in the staff group of the Young Women's Accommodation Service was not just a possibility the organisation strived for but was a reality. The coordinator identified as a Maori woman and the other two youth workers identified as an Anglo Australian. The woman who held the Executive Director position was an

Aboriginal woman. The YWCA (Darwin) had recently employed a young woman from Zambia and had many workers in the other programs from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This diversity had been achieved purposefully as a result of some direct intervention on the part of the Executive Director.

*I've kind of – have consciously tried to get a range of people, and I make sure I'm on all selection committees for recruitment of all our programme coordinator staff...we've got quite a diverse range of skills at the moment, we've got a wide range of social backgrounds as well, in that we've not just got different colours, we've got people from different viewpoints on the world, and that makes for interesting discussions at our coordinators meetings...I guess I steer clear of people who are really just being politically correct in all their answers...essentially I look for people's communication style and their intelligence...the last interview that I did was for Big Sister/Little Sister – and the woman we hired is a Malaysian-born Muslim. She's wonderful, she's absolutely wonderful in the job...but I noticed that the other two staff on the interview panel had not included her CV on the shortlist...and I said 'Why? – she's got experience with kids, she's got youth work certificates. Why don't you like this?' And one of them said 'Oh because its handwritten'...So I think a lot of it is actually- before you get to interview stage-is your own biases – and knocking people out because of irrelevant things (Emma, YWAS).*

One of the women who participated in this research was the only Indigenous woman with voting rights on the Board of Directors of the YWCA (Darwin). Despite her presence, as Beth described in an early comment, the Board was seen by staff as “white, middle class ladies” who could be intimidating for some of the staff. Members of the board also recognised this disparity.

*We have a problem being exclusive in that it is the middle class white Anglo-Saxon woman that comes forward for the Board. You know, and we would like to have a much better ethnic mix than we actually do...Yes it's always something we talk about at Board meetings, how can we – how can we have it...(Christina, YWAS).*

For most of the women the lack of diversity at the management group level reflected the homogeneous composition of the National YWCA Association.

*We do have that problem at a national level. Nationally the YWCA is essentially white, middle class women. They've been struggling against the age issue and have really – made- no - forced themselves to not just be middle-aged, middle-class white women, so there's a lot of young middle-class white women now. They haven't quite crossed over to the – the cultural difference. You know, indigenous and non English speaking background are still minorities at national level...and I think they've been rapped over the knuckles from an international – at an international level for lagging behind the other national organisations in racial diversity (Emma, YWAS).*

*When we went to the National we were shocked that there were no Aboriginal women at all and we all thought 'this is an Australian National thing' because I know that the Y in Darwin we all work to make it – indigenous people and non-indigenous people apart from white feel welcome in the Y here. But people still see the Y as the blue haired rinse, oldy type of thing – we're trying to break that down in Darwin (Kathy, YWAS).*

These comments suggest that the localised strategies of purposefully seeking cultural and social diversity amongst staff had been successful in creating an organisation that reflected the multicultural nature of the community of Darwin. But the diversity was certainly not inherent in the structures of the YWCA and was not even widely evident among the Board of Directors of the Darwin Association.

While there are significant differences in the ways in which the Young Women's Accommodation Service operationalises their commitment to the inclusion of all women as part of the service, the women expressed sentiments similar to the women in the other two organisations about the importance of a shared philosophical analysis to the positive functioning of the organisation.

*There is no exclusion at all as far as membership goes. But – another thing that we've got at the Y is the nominations committee and to get on the Board or the staff, you've got to go through the nominations committee. And you have to have conversations with the committee to see where you are coming from.... If they are racist people or bigots of any kind they just wouldn't get past the nominations committee...there would be no exclusion on the basis of race or religion ...none whatsoever. But if they want to work for the Y then they would have to have the right sort of ideology for it – for women (Emma, YWAS).*

### **Chapter Summary**

The women in this research worked and struggled within three very different organisations. The structures, formal processes and policies of each were different and reflective more of their own history and context than any prescription for a feminist organisation. This resulted in many differences in the organisational practices however some similarities are also apparent.

Some of the literature that describes feminist organisations suggests that the development of particular structures and processes in feminist organisations are either random processes (Bordt, 1997) or naïve strategies aimed at compliance with theoretical ideals rather than practical necessity (Staggenborg, 1995). Discussions with the women involved in these organisations describe instead purposefully created entities that reflect their participants' knowledge and vision. The women were aware of alternative forms and aware of the challenges inherent in the processes they used. They worked tenaciously to meet those challenges, reviewed and revisited their decisions often and made clear choices about organisational processes depending on the priorities of the group and the external environment of the time. This supports Stephanie Riger's (1994) claims discussed in an earlier section, that a myriad of options face women in feminist organisations other than disintegration or hierarchical bureaucracy. Women make choices for a

range of reasons, none of which can necessarily be interpreted as a loss of feminist commitment or cooption.

Even though two of the organisations used aspects of hierarchy in their processes, there were also many examples of collective principles at work within all three organisations. For example though named positions of authority existed in both the management groups of the WCR and YWAS, women spoke of consensus decision-making, flat authority structures and were generally confident of their ability and right to contribute to decision-making. Women joined these organisations because of their compatibility with the goals and because they shared networks with other women who were a part of the organisation. The staff groups of each organisation also discussed a number of work practices that are clearly influenced by collective principles. For example, they shared and discussed decisions with each other, sought opinion and views from their colleagues, and considered other women's opinions before acting. The women also talked about opportunities to work in other positions in the organisation allowing them to develop different skills and expertise, as examples of role sharing and gaining proficiency in other areas.

The space created for some hierarchy allowed many of the women who worked in these two organisations the opportunity to separate themselves from face to face interpersonal conflict and appeared to assist in reducing the personalizing of conflictual situations. However the women who filled the position of Executive Director or Coordinator carried on their shoulders some enormous expectations. They linked people and ideas with policy and procedure whilst maintaining, or at least being expected to maintain, feminist values and processes. The toll on the women who held these positions was difficult to assess as both had made clear choices to remain with their organisation for different reasons. However relying on just one woman's skills and abilities to avoid conflict and ensure open and respectful communication in the whole workplace, is a situation that some of the women considered was cause for some apprehensive concern.

Consistent across all three organisations are reports of interpersonal conflict challenging women's ideological beliefs and damaging women's commitment and trust to each other and the processes used. While some of this was minimised in those organisations where there was some hierarchy and a coordinator to protect women from face to face confrontation, the hurt and potential for hurt remained consistent. The women here concur that women don't deal well with conflict fearing the repercussions and sometimes resenting the use of personal power in resolution processes. This issue is considered at some length in the following chapter however the expectation that organisations will be conflict free is clearly unrealistic and unfair. Is more



expected of feminist organisations than others? If so this immediately creates an unachievable goal.

*Its almost an unspoken rule that says you're not allowed - in a feminist organisation- you're actually not allowed to fight, disagree, that kind of thing... but to me, it's a bit like to be seen to be involved in disagreements, blues or whatever - people are frightened to be seen like that and that is almost abusive in itself. You know that it's almost like women's organisations aren't allowed to be as equally spirited as any other organisation - we're supposed to be sitting there 'oh yes', 'is that right' and being, you know, just so - nice and polite (Valerie, WCR).*

But as the following chapter discusses in some detail, it is women themselves who express discomfort with 'spirited' confrontation. They expect to be a part of organisations that treat them positively and the implications of these expectations are significant.

All the organisations expressed a commitment to the inclusion of women from diverse backgrounds but all agreed that a shared political analysis about women and a commitment to feminist values (however these were defined) were at least as important as diversity at all costs. The organisation with the highest level of hierarchy was able to attract and maintain a number of women from diverse cultural, social and political backgrounds on their staff. However a closer examination reveals this was more likely a result of the personal commitment and direct involvement of the Executive Director than any inherent feature of the organisation. It does suggest however that diversity is not easily achieved in feminist organisations despite the rhetoric of inclusion and that purposive strategies such as quotas and designated positions are successful at least in gaining entry for women from diverse backgrounds.

The following chapter continues to explore similarities and differences between the women by examining particular issues raised as influential and important to the ongoing experience of working in a feminist organisation.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Challenging and Nurturing Women**

#### ***6.1 Introduction***

The previous chapter has provided some insight into the ways the women who participated in this research understood the elements and features of the feminist organisations in which they worked. One of the key findings from these discussions was that even though these were very different places, some significant similarities between organisations emerged, particularly in the strategies used and the issues confronted, as the women pursued the feminist mission of each organisation. This chapter continues the discussion of both the joys and challenges that arise for the women individually in their work, highlighting a number of commonalities shared by the women across organisational divides.

In particular, this chapter examines the women's understandings of their own feminist identity and how these relate to their collective identity as members of a feminist organisation. The importance of women's friendships with each other is highlighted and the impact of these relationships for women and for feminist organisations is also explored. Closely linked to this is women's understanding of power as a concept, including their own perceived access to power and how power is used by other women in the organisational context. As has been discussed at some length throughout this thesis, negotiating differences between women has been an enduring debate for feminist women and feminist organisations. While some of the formal and informal organisational policies and processes for the inclusion of women from different backgrounds have been discussed in the previous chapter, here there is consideration of how these women individually understand and navigate these differences. Many of the women who participated in this research talked about their commitment to social action and to the activist nature of their work. This is considered at some length as is the difficult nature of the work and the potential for exploitation that women engage with every day. This potential for exploitation is countered, for these women, by the opportunities afforded by and the reassurances intrinsic to a nurturing working environment. The chapter concludes by identifying and discussing the elements of such an environment.

#### ***6.2 Feminist Identity***

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the term 'feminism' describes a range of different approaches, perspectives, and frameworks which are used to explain women's disadvantage and oppression (Putnam Tong, 1998, p. 1-2). In this research no preconceived

notion of 'feminism' was presented to the participants; instead each woman was asked to discuss if she considered herself a feminist and if so, what did that mean for her. In response, all but one of the women claimed a feminist identity.

Many of the elements and debates discussed in the introductory chapter as core to feminist thought are reflected in the ways in which these women described their own particular understanding of feminism and its impact on their lives. In general their comments reflected two broad views about feminism. The first was a view that focused on personal empowerment and claims for individual equal rights and opportunities for women.

*I think what it means for me is it's about being treated as an equal and it's about empowering women to make decisions that affect their lives and being allowed to do that. And then being really supportive of other women to enable them to do that as well (Sara, WCR).*

*To say what I think feminism is I have to explain how I came to call myself a feminist because when I was younger I probably would have been anything other than a feminist in public but now – I consider that I always was a feminist. It's about injustices and that was like everywhere around me – like in my family and in my friends sometimes- not being treated fairly. There is a really personal side to it – I wasn't treated fairly so I'd define it now as seeing it, recognizing it and raising awareness about the unfairness (Amy, RCS).*

*I think for me it means proud to be a woman. That being a woman doesn't entangle you in marriage and...old ways - obey and all that stuff...it should be a very equal type of partnership. As a woman I also make sure that my daughter is aware and empower her ... let her know what women are capable of doing (Beth, YWAS).*

This view incorporated some responsibility to other women; to not only claim one's rights for one's self but to ensure that those rights are ongoing and universally available to all women.

The second view incorporated a more explicit statement of powerlessness as a collective experience. Women talked about systemic disadvantage and activism as core components of their understanding of what it meant to be feminist.

*It's about being active; it's about changing society and its culture. It's about ensuring that people who come after me have a better quality of life and don't have to suffer the same bullshit that I've had to put up with (Kara, WCR).*

*Being a feminist for me ... is about having power and control over my life as a woman ...but it is also about...working together with other women to make life better for women generally in our society - to address some of the systemic society sort of disadvantages that women experience (Thea, RCS).*

*You have to be an activist and a feminist at the same time. To say you're a feminist and then not do anything for the broader inclusion of women – it's too individualistic – it can't be feminism (Anna, YWAS).*

These two views seem to fall into different streams of feminist thought which, at least at an academic level, critique each other's vision and understanding of women's oppression. While most of these women did not use labels such as 'liberal feminist', 'postmodern feminist' or 'socialist feminist' to classify themselves, a number of women from the Young Women's Accommodation Service, particularly those women who were part of the Board of Directors, used phrases like 'not radical' or 'more conservative' to describe their particular connection with feminism. It was one of these women who chose not to claim the title 'feminist' and described herself instead in the following way:

*...I suppose I am more a community person, but I have been very much involved in women's issues all along the way...And the Y - its whole 'raison d'être' is being there for young girls - the development of women and girls has been its whole purpose in coming into being, so it's always sort of there, as part of my thinking, even if I think it is for the community in general (Christina, YWAS).*

While Christina expressed some hesitancy in using the word 'feminist', her description of her own motivations, beliefs and commitments were similar to those of other women who claimed the label 'feminist' with enthusiasm. Other women with the YWAS, while stating that they were feminist, shared Christina's view that their work contributed to the wellbeing of the whole community and that, since women and girls are usually disadvantaged in the community, improving women's situation was good for the community. This focus on community and the hesitancy in claiming a feminist identity (especially a radical one) was important for women who wanted to be clear about their empathy and connection with men. For example, a worker with the YWAS commented,

*I'm respectful of realising that there are good men out there .... And I think it's also got to be more important amongst us feminists that men have to be helped to change and if women want better lives, they have to change the men (Zoe, YWAS).*

Other research suggests that Christina and Zoe have similar views to many women living in rural and remote areas of Australia. Margaret Grace and June Lennie (1998b) claim that women in rural and remote areas of Australia, like the Northern Territory, experience many contradictions and tensions in pursuing goals which publicly advocate for and promote women. The traditional construction of rural life, as portrayed in Australian history, popular culture and literature, presents a white, andocentric world view in which women are pushed into the background, rendered invisible or mythologised in stereotypical ways. As chapter four identified in some detail, this has certainly been the case in the Northern Territory. When women move to challenge and change these gendered cultures they are confronted with a number of ambiguities relating to identity. For example

- the contradiction between the need for women to affirm traditional identities embedded in patriarchal cultures and their desire to take leadership roles which challenge patriarchal values;...
- the rejection of the label 'feminist' by many rural women while still pursuing an agenda for change which aims to enhance the status of women (Grace & Lennie, 1998, p. 356).

Grace and Lennie's (1998) research identified that many rural women see feminism as essentially an urban phenomena which fails to adequately account for the reality of their lives; lives that depend on cross gender cooperation, family consciousness, and the political influence acquired through a shared 'rural' identity.

While some of the women who were part of the Young Women's Accommodation Service, shared Christina and Zoe's ideas and reflected the comments made by Grace and Lennie (1998b) it was also apparent that women with different personal understandings and definitions of feminism, co-existed in each of the organisations. Anna, for example, was a worker in the YWAS who described herself as a 'socialist feminist', one of the very few women to use labels. She used a class-based, radical analysis in describing her understanding of feminism and had no hesitancy in participating in women-only, feminist events, identified by some of her colleagues as 'too radical'. In contrast, Helena from the Women's and Children's Refuge and Connie from the Rape Counselling Service (both of which were seen as 'more radical') spoke of a commitment to the community and a desire to help men change and evolve as well as working to change situations for women. There was therefore, a comparatively harmonious co-existence of multiple feminist identities within individual organisations. Indeed not one organisation could claim that all their staff, volunteers and members shared a single understanding of feminism. Each organisation tolerated multiple understandings and claims by individual women, while at the same time constructing a collective identity that could be accepted by individual woman. Reger (2002) identifies a similar phenomenon in her research with two chapters of the National Organisation for Women in the United States, when she found "that each chapter constructs feminist identities that embrace a range of feminist ideologies and values in its collective definition of feminism, overall strategies and organizational culture" (p. 711).

Similarly this research suggests that despite collective identification with particular ideological streams of feminist thought, these organisations incorporated women who understood feminism differently and prioritised different feminist goals with little evidence of conflict and strife around these issues. Reger (2002) suggests that this ability to tolerate multiple feminist identities within a collective identity is influenced by the social and political environment within which the organisations exist. Where a hostile external environment influences the organisation, it is more

likely a fluid definition of feminism will be tolerated. This fluidity is evidenced in some of the women's descriptions of how difference in ideology is negotiated and commonality is vigorously pursued.

*This service essentially holds a social analysis of rape rather than a pathological sort of approach. But if someone wrote a comment that was pathological, you know like 'All men are bastards and they should be castrated' then we would approach that woman. Because she may well hold a social view, or at least be open to it but at the time she was really angry about something and that's what she wrote. You know so we don't want to exclude on the basis of words or strict interpretations. It's hard enough here to be pro-women, without us saying you haven't used the right word. So we – not all women come to that view immediately, but we would like to talk to them about whether they are open to that interpretation in some way (Olivia, RCS).*

*I would try to include women who don't share my ideological view. Because I reckon that sooner or later they will come to understand what we're on about, you know. I mean I have been appalled at some of the comments some of the clients that I've dealt with who are outright racist, you know, but given the opportunity...you might be lumped in a house in crisis with someone who's from a diametrically opposed sort of background to you ... sooner or later you're going to share some poignant moments of 'we've been through the same thing'. ... So I don't have a huge problem in the professional sense of joining with women whose ideology I don't totally share or even that I am opposed to. I have no problem with that ...I'd like to find common ground wherever we can because then we can make it work and learn from each other (Lois, WCR).*

*The Board would be prepared to provide the support and encouragement and experiences to assist any woman to become a fully participating member – even if they did have a different theoretical position – there probably would be a bottom line but I wouldn't know where to draw it. First and foremost if a woman wanted to be here – we would try to help her be here to the best of our ability (Jennifer, YWAS).*

So while these organisations consistently claimed a shared analysis of feminist goals and priorities was one of their most important inclusion criteria, they interpreted this analysis in such a way that valued multiple understandings of feminism. It seems, therefore, that for these women, being a particular type of feminist is of little importance to their ability and desire to be a part of a feminist organisation and to work with other feminist women pursuing strategies aimed at enhancing and advancing the position of women. At times they use different strategies or different terminology but these differences in theoretical understandings did not inhibit cooperative work within organisations.

### 6.2.1 Pathways to Feminism

While how the women became feminists was not a major issue explored in this research, some women shared their own journey to feminism because it was important to their current work and/

or their understanding of their own feminist identity. An interesting feature of these discussions was the frequency with which women described involvement in other activist movements such as the socialist movement, the environment movement and the indigenous people's movement.

*I was really involved in socialist parties for a number of years...I first joined the youth sort of branch resistance and then I've always been very sort of - main party for quite a number of years and I'm a member of the Labor Party and I mean, yes, its just something I've grown up with I guess, because my mother is a feminist and I mean I've identified like that for at least twenty years or so now (Naomi, WCR)*

*I guess moving into a feminist consciousness - a big part of that was firstly working with the environment movement where you know if you spend enough time looking at the environment issue on its own, it is impossible to do because its - its so multi, well you know, its an absolute issue, its not just about trees and about earth and about ecosystems - and...you quickly understand the situation of women throughout the world and how profoundly impacted they are as a result of the environmental degradation or as a result of economic policies...(Lois, WCR).*

*I was a member of the communist party, so I was - had a left wing analysis which involved looking at society as being you know divided into class structures and stuff like that, but rather than the class thing...when it comes to feminism its about structures.... So I come from a non-biological viewpoint; I come from a viewpoint that really looks at structures and the way they affect people and - in turn are - those structures are affected by people (Maria, RCS)*

*I grew up in a small mining town and I'm Aboriginal, so I grew up living on the Aboriginal side of a small mining town, so I guess discrimination against people because of their gender and particularly their race were very evident to me.... In my home town, though it was sex. I was told they don't hire single girls because they're not reliable. And so I ended up having to leave to find a job. And once I left then I experienced discrimination because of my Aboriginality. And I - like was so taken aback with that- so then fighting for Aboriginal rights was very important for me (Emma, YWAS).*

These comments are consistent with the findings of Hercus (1999) who identified that 18% of the participants in her study came into contact with feminism through involvement with other social movement activity. However, as Hercus elucidates, the source of original contact with feminism is less important than the cognitive and relational resources available to women during this period of developing awareness.

It is significant that the feminist frameworks they encountered made sense in terms of their own experiences. It is also important that they encountered feminist ideas in an environment that supported feminism as a valid way of looking at the world. In the company of women for whom feminist frameworks also made sense, they were able to develop a feminist sense of identity (Hercus, 1999, p. 129).

While these women rarely, if ever, first came in contact with feminism within these feminist organisations, clearly an environment where feminist values and world views are consistently

validated and nurtured is important for the development of feminist consciousness. This is an important role that feminist organisations like these fulfill and, as such, assist with the maintenance and sustenance of the women's movement as a whole. This issue is discussed in more detail in a later section.

### 6.2.2 Using Feminist Analyses in Daily Practice

The women who participated in this research spoke of the myriad of ways in which their understanding of feminism influenced and impacted on their daily work. This was not a rhetorical attachment to an academic theory. For these women, feminism assisted them in understanding the situations they confronted and guided their responses.

*I often find myself sitting there and going – ‘hang on, feminist theory books, now what would they say at this point? Yes I know what they would say.’ So I take it out of my gut reaction and back into the theory of what is going on and the practice of what this should be. And I say to myself if I do it this way it is more likely to work than if I don’t – so I try not to personalise it and to understand it from that externalised view (Kara, WCR).*

*It just permeates, I suppose, all my life. I don't think of it - oh yes, I'll put on my feminist hat now - it doesn't work like that in the work environment. When I ...[was] working in the prison, so you can imagine what it was like there, but even there subtly I would try and change - well offer an alternative point of view...a woman's point of view (Valerie, WCR).*

*I mean it is no secret that if put into a choosing position the Y will favour a young woman over a young man at all times for all things. And at times that has caused some big dramas. In the community some people see us as primarily a youth service because we have the crisis shelter and we employ male youth workers there. But we are primarily a woman's service and I believe we work in a very feminist way and we will always prioritise young women's needs. It doesn't always go down well with the men there but that's the way it is (Kathy, YWAS).*

*I think in the workplace and on the coordinating collective at the moment there's a strong commitment to feminist philosophy – the theoretical framework, and vision and that sort of stuff. And it takes women who are prepared to work on the ground to achieve those visions and goals ...it takes women who are prepared to move beyond personal doubts and who are committed to the greater good (Olivia, RCS).*

These comments imply that the women who worked in direct service delivery and in the management groups used feminism as a guiding principle in their daily work with women in crisis and with other organisations in the community. It also suggests that being part of a feminist organisation includes an explicit commitment to feminist analyses and involves consideration of feminist practice models.



### 6.2.3 Expectations of a Feminist Organisation

The women all knew that the organisation they worked for identified as a feminist organisation prior to beginning their involvement. For some this was the attraction, for others they pursued their initial contact despite some hesitation about feminist organisations. As with their understanding of feminism, the women varied in what they expected from the organisation, but a number of women spoke about the specific work environment and their expectation that it would *feel* different from other places where they had worked. Their comments suggest that the women expected to enjoy working with other women and to be treated well by other women.

*...I really expected that it would be a respectful sort of environment, it would be pro-women, it would be - have a feminist framework (Amy, RCS).*

*...I suppose I had expectations about the way people might behave towards each other ...better...closer (Connie, RCS).*

*...there would be warmth, and that sense of sisterhood would be very strong and that everything would be done with that - as sort of sitting underneath. That decisions would be made through consensus and that people involved in the organisation would be - it would be a supportive working environment (Thea, RCS).*

*More than anything else my expectations were that it would be a respectful workplace and openly non-discriminatory and... practising non-discrimination...not just giving lip service (Stella, WCR).*

*...to me working in a feminist organisation meant... certain things about how you deal with clients. It means working to further the woman as a whole being... and... to me it means a bit of a trade off between efficiency and - basically being nice to the people you work with and to clients (Kara, WCR).*

*I guess I thought that I would be involved in the decision-making process, that I thought that - my opinions would be listened to and respected. ... I've worked in hierarchical work environments before and I didn't expect it would be like that. ...I suppose I thought it would be a quite supportive environment for both the workers and the women that were staying at the refuge at the time (Naomi, WCR).*

*...my head of staff would be women. It was something I'd never come across...those people in the organisation actually supporting staff ...working in a way ...to allow staff members to have a voice (Anna, YWAS).*

*I thought it would be a fairly sensitive group...they have high levels of talent and they have been hand picked for having their heart in the right place...they really care about each other as well as clients and social issues (Jennifer, YWAS).*

Consistently among the women who talked about expectations prior to their involvement, was the theme of respectfulness. Some women used terms like 'being nice' or 'supportive'. In general,

though, they were referring to similar attributes – nurturing, caring, polite and friendly. For some the concept of respectfulness referred to the absence of conflict though most acknowledged that, even if this had been their expectation, it was naïve and, more realistically, they hoped that any conflict would be dealt with in ways that didn't hurt them or others personally. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, while these women did not work in conflict-ridden environments, there were occasions when interpersonal conflict between women did cause hurt and pain and even, in some cases, irreconcilable differences. This suggests that, despite the women's expectations that feminist organisations would be respectful work spaces, this was not always their experience.

Some research suggests that when expectations like these are not met, quite intense negative emotions can arise. Woosley and McBain (1987) suggest that one factor contributing to the intense hurt and sense of betrayal the women in their groups experienced as a result of interpersonal conflict with other women, is those initial, often unrealistic, expectations of unconditional support from, and nurturing relationships with, other women. Verta Taylor (1995) suggests feminist organisations contribute to these expectations in candid and overt ways but are not always able to live up to these claims.

Finally, feminist organisations make explicit claims to an “ethic of care” that promotes female bonding, even if in reality it may not always be practiced. The emphasis placed on the primacy of women's relationships not only moulds everyday interactions among women; it also dictates democratic organizational structures and separatist tactics that challenge the hierarchical structures and self interested behaviour that are seen as undermining collective commitment and strong emotional ties between women.... The feminist emphasis on caring is conveyed through women's references to each other as sisters and open expressions of love and affection between women who have participated in a common struggle (Taylor, 1995, p. 231)

The women's experiences as described here provide further evidence that women do expect a different emotional connection with other women and especially with feminist women. But questions remain about whether such expectations, fostered as they are by the organisations themselves, are ever able to be fulfilled consistently. The next section considers some of these dilemmas and concerns in more detail.

### **6.3 *Friendship and Emotions in Feminist Organisations***

In chapter two of this thesis the literature that informed this research was discussed and established that the emotional dimension of being part of a feminist organisation cannot be underestimated (Hyde, 1994; Jasper, 2003). The women I spoke with confirm that the experience of working in a feminist organisation is indeed an emotional one, as well as an intellectual and ideological one. The most common emotional experience described was in the context of the

relationships the women developed with each other. Often these relationships were described in positive terms, as one of the “pleasures of protest” (Taylor, 1995, p. 224). For most women, it was their relationships with other women which helped them endure the difficult times. These were experiences unlike other work or volunteer experiences. These were relationships which they worked hard to foster because the women recognised their importance.

*We make each other cups of tea, if we're making one, we ask if anybody else would like one, we take a genuine interest in one another's private life - we know enough about one another to know who's got kids and who hasn't - all that sort of stuff. And I think - I think we just have a genuine regard and interest in other women. A genuine respect for them and their lives. And the fact that we all struggle just to get through the day and some of us are okay and some of us aren't, but we just get there, you know. And that if we support one another, then it'll be a whole lot better than if we don't (Connie, RCS)*

*The first thing that springs to mind is just the rapport with women...I mean it's a conscious and unconscious thing, you know...we all like being liked...so going out of my way to do that especially when there are new women around...I want to have that connection with other women,...for me that is particularly important (Audrey, WCR).*

*I enjoy working with other women. I've worked with men on some other committees and it's not as - it's not the same experience at all.... It's the most amazing experience I've had, being on this board. ...You know, it's - we get things done, we make decisions... we have lots of laughs ... and I find there's compassion.... I think women value people (Christina, YWAS).*

These are women whose organisational relationships are personal and caring; these women are friends with the women they work with in these organisations. Recently the literature has scrutinised women's friendships identifying that while they have always been important in women's lives and integral to their daily existence, they have not always been afforded the social recognition that befitted them.

What distinguishes women's friendships is the easy reciprocity that envelopes the relationship, allowing so many things to be safely discussed and felt. Such is the positive, nurturing side of women's relationships. Women co-operate and support each other and give each other enormous pleasure (Orbach & Eichenbaum, 1994, p. 18).

The second wave women's movement has, in many ways, contributed to the more public acknowledgement of women's friendships with each other as important and enduring aspects of their lives. Movement activities such as consciousness raising groups, protests and marches focused on commonality and connectedness (Taylor, 1995). Women shared many emotions, including happiness, joy, pain and hurt. The early establishment of feminist services often began as an idea discussed and considered by a group of friends. Certainly the early days of the Rape Counselling Service, the Women and Children's Refuge and the YWCA in Darwin featured small

groups of like minded, committed women who were apparently friends. As the social movement literature has more recently revealed, this emotional attachment, not only to the cause but to the other actors who share that commitment and to the entities that are created as a result of that commitment, is intense and intimate (Hyde, 1994).

While reflecting on this intense and intimate connection women can form with each other, Orbach and Eichenbaum (1994) also identify a counterpoint in women's relationships that can generate equally deep feelings of betrayal, hurt and pain. Acknowledging, and somehow being able to understand and work with these equally powerful negative feelings is a challenge that has confronted not only individual women but also feminist groups and women's organisations.

Women's relationships produce a rainbow of powerful emotions. The recent delight and recognition of the importance of women relationships and the ideology of 'sisterhood is powerful' has, in some ways, served to obscure much of the pain in women's friendships. But as we can trust the importance and value of these relationships we are then able to face the fact that they are not idyllic. The relationships have a capacity to produce feelings of hurt and anger, envy and competition, guilt and sorrow. As women have been finding out to their great cost, close friendships, work collaborations, and entire organisations can be disrupted or even destroyed by unexpected negative feelings (Orbach & Eichenbaum, 1994, p. 19).

The women who were part of this research knew of this possibility. They spoke of their own painful relationships within the organisation, of insulting comments made by other women or stories of women who had been treated badly.

*I remember one meeting I was in, and it got quite heated and stuff, and you know, very tense and unpleasant and I was told by one of the other workers - I mean we... were the youngest people there - the youngest workers, and I was basically told by one of the older workers that there was no place for me - or no place for me in this organisation.... It really hurt (Audrey, WCR).*

*I think it's been, like, a huge learning experience and it's something that I guess I've largely benefited from, but it's been really painful. And that could be because of individual personalities... But for me to come to an organisation that portrayed itself as being feminist with a philosophy of looking after women, when the fact is it's been - it's a really dangerous place for me (Connie, RCS).*

*I think a lot of people around here have a very respectful working and open communication style. But it hasn't always been happy. For me personally to be happy at YWAS, it has to be - there has to be honesty, I have to trust it.... Sometimes I didn't trust it and that isn't good for me personally (Zoe, YWAS).*

These issues suggest a very real phenomena occurring within women's organisations. Women are drawn to these spaces often for the same reasons that I was personally drawn. Their desire to change the current state of affairs for women is combined with a desire to do so with other women in an environment that is supportive, understanding and kind; to share the experience of

change with women they can call friends. Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum (1994) concur with Woosley and McBain (1987) in identifying that women create idyllic notions of women to women relationships, notions that are impossible to attain or maintain. We expect other women to always be there, to be selfless and giving, forever nurturing and caring – in fact, we expect them to be ideal women. The potential for disappointment was identified by some of the women in this research.

*There are issues within women's organisations about ... because we're all women, we're all working for the same goal, we all do the right thing. And - you just can't - you know, most women do, most of the time, but you have to take into account that some women won't (Olivia, RCS).*

*So my analysis also told me that just because women are doing it, doesn't mean it's good. What it means is - you've got a chance to do some really good stuff, but it doesn't mean in itself that it will be good.... My feminism came with a built-in look underneath sort of thing and just because they're all women, doesn't mean that it's all beautiful (Maria, RCS).*

Feminist organisations and groups like the ones featured in this research have been at the forefront in encouraging women to challenge traditional stereotypes that essentialise the nature of women. They have encouraged women to pursue separate, individual endeavours if they choose and to express anger and dissatisfaction if such emotions are appropriate. In fact this redefinition of feeling expression rules for women is a distinct goal of the feminist movement and feminist organisations.

To resist patriarchy means to challenge the norms for the expression of emotion inside feminist communities as well as everyday interactions with the outside world. The expression of anger, for example is less acceptable for women than for men.... People tend to be uncomfortable with women when they say they are angry. Yet as we have seen feminist organizations encourage women to trade fear and shame for anger.... It is perhaps because feminism promotes the display of deviant emotions, both positive and negative, that participation in feminist organizations can be such an intense experience (Taylor, 1995, p. 230-231).

Despite these goals of the feminist movement, anger, hurt and frustration are not emotions expressed easily by most women including those involved in this research. Research by Thomas, Smucker and Droppleman (1998a) has examined women's anger experience and determined that the most common consequence of both the expression and internalisation of anger is powerlessness. Women feel powerless when they hold their anger inside and feel equally powerless when it bursts from them as the culmination of built up emotion. Thomas and her colleagues claim women are most likely to feel anger when the relational contract between themselves and others is broken; that is when they experience a lack of reciprocity in relationships.

Narratives of women's experiences of anger disturb as well as enlighten. These findings are important because they provide a clear depiction of women's experience in all its complexity. The essence of the phenomenon [anger] is the perceived violation of the relational contract, which 'hurts most around the heart'. Yet much of the anger is kept inside to preserve relationship harmony rather than 'breaking the circle' (Thomas, Smucker, & Droppleman, 1998, p. 319).

This statement corresponds with the way in which women described their responses to organisational conflict in the previous chapter. Here they described conflict being dealt with by "*maintaining that nice, warm, fuzzy, everyone's ok, sort of thing*" (Thea, RCS) and described themselves as "*cringing inside*" (Stella, WCR) when confronting arguments and anger. This unwillingness to express their real feelings reflects the comments of the women in Thomas, Smucker and Droppleman's study. This study concluded that women were able to express their anger in a way that empowered them if they used it to restore respect and justice in their relationships.

[I]t became clear what would make things right for women: greater reciprocity in their relationships. Would that women could become empowered to ask others for what they need! (Thomas et al., 1998, p. 319 - 320).

At least one of the women in this research shared this understanding of a way to move toward different rules about the expression of particularly negative emotions in feminist organisations. She spoke about women's individual responsibility to unlearn their old ways and accept the challenge of relating to others differently.

*It can be awkward because sometimes I think that hierarchical idea – you know 'I've got a problem, first I'll go to the boss and talk about it' – it would make life a whole lot easier, but then I pull myself up and say, as a mature woman, committed to, you know, this process, surely I can look that woman in the face and say, 'I've got a problem with you'. And if I can't then I should learn. And if I can't learn, then I should get out. ...I would not like to see that change. I like - I like the existence of responsibility and personal maturity ...it has to be (Olivia, RCS).*

But if this level of individual responsibility for the expression of feelings and resolution of differences is the expectation, not all women are aware of it or able to engage with it. The experiences of these women suggest that feminist organisations have not been as successful in communicating the possibilities of intense disappointment and in assisting with how to deal with these possibilities as they have been in highlighting the possibility of enormous pleasure associated with working with other women. Woosley and McBain (1987) agree and suggest that attempting to deal with these issues after hostile confrontations have erupted is rarely useful or successful. Instead they claim,

It seems, then, that the key to working successfully through power issues in all-women groups is, first, prevention – for example, bringing the unconscious determinants of

potential problems out in the open before difficulties arise – and, second, early detection and remediation of power struggles (p. 585).

To do so however requires women in feminist organisations to recognise and appreciate the ways in which power is displayed and used in feminist organisations. These three organisations were committed to working toward increasing women's personal and collective power; however women's inherent power, the possible misuse of that power and what that might mean for individuals and the organisational processes, were difficult topics. At times the empowering spaces women intended to create inadvertently became sites of tension and contradiction.

#### **6.4 Women and Power in Feminist Organisations**

Eva Cox (1996) claims that many feminists consider power antithetical to feminism and this has led to a dearth of discussion about power, leadership and authority in feminist literature and theory. Similarly it appeared that the organisations represented in this research had few formal avenues for the discussion of power and the appropriate use of authority and influence. However the concept of power was, in general, a compelling and frequently broached topic for the women in this study. There was agreement among the women that despite attempts to create and maintain flat structures, equitable processes and consensual/consultative decision-making, certain women were more powerful than others.

*I mean, knowledge is power. Therefore those full time workers do have more power because they have the knowledge, they have loads more information than the part-time and casual workers. They have access to all the processes, like all the meetings, the staff meetings, the case management meetings, that the casuals and the part time staff don't necessarily have because most of them have other work and other commitments, so they can't be there for those other things (Stella, WCR).*

*I mean the other thing about human beings, whether we like it or not, is that we tend to look for leaders. And there are - I mean there are natural leaders and they can't help themselves. And - it will come out. They will be the people that have got the - the quicker analytical skills and the ability to speak up (Lynne, WCR).*

*I don't think you can ever not have power differences. And power differences may be partly personality - you get personalities that are stronger than others - maybe stronger is not the right word - perhaps more vocal maybe - there's some - you always have people who are vocal and articulate... they're very impressive. So sometimes you think 'I can't think of anything to argue against that'...some people will have a bit more power in that way (Sophie, RCS).*

*In the collective it's more about, sort of charismatic power.... It's more about their person- their charismatic kind of personalities (Thea, RCS).*

*I mean, the President I have at the moment is a very – control freak sort of thing, but we get along well, like we like control in the same way. She's actually fairly cluey as*

*to what her role is in relation to managing me and the organisation...there's varying degrees of that. It depends on length of service, skills and experience and time being in that role as well (Emma, YWAS).*

*I mean information is power and they had the power. They were prepared to let us have our own group and what not and let us think we had control and they supported us in it – they gave us finances and the resources we needed to come together and become a group ourselves. So there were two groups – the older women and the younger women...and we said 'Well you made us what we are, you've given us the power, you just never thought we'd take it but we are taking it' – one of the strategies now is that on every single Board of Directors we must have twenty-five percent of women under thirty – Now they need to step back (Kathy, YWAS).*

So women in each of the organisations recognised that issues about power were present and effecting the functioning of each organisation and the experience of each woman. Some of the power structures identified by the women were clear and obvious, like the power inherent in the role of 'President' and 'Coordinator' in a hierarchically structured organisation. The women who worked with YWAS were particularly aware of the legitimate authority and power that rested with the Executive Director. Other influences on who had power and who was less powerful related to characteristics which were not always formally recognised like length of service, a full time presence in the work place, and charisma. When these characteristics were not acknowledged as potential sources of power then, for some women, issues arose.

*...the thing was that the leadership mantle had fallen on my shoulders and it was like I wanted to share it with people but I didn't feel people were actually taking the responsibility to pick it up...and things like saying 'you have too much power, Maria', but in the next breath 'Maria, what do you think of this?' And 'we won't do anything until we hear your views.' 'But you've got really strong views so you're really bad'...but that was about me having been there a long time...that in itself wasn't a problem but what was a problem was not acknowledging that (Maria, RCS).*

In a similar vein, Eva Cox (1996) suggests that power is most often thought of as 'power over' and therefore women are likely to link its acquisition with repressive acts and oppression. Women are therefore unlikely to consider power as a positive entity, something to be sought and used for social change or valued as an organisational resource. Some of the feminist literature (Freeman, 1974; Kohli, 1993) has concentrated on the destructive potential of an individual with power especially within the context of a collective. Many of the women in this research had also considered this possibility.

*I wouldn't work for an organisation that was a feminist collective - it just wouldn't suit me personally... Because I like to be boss - that's my personality - I like to control things. I like to do what I know I think is right and take responsibility for those decisions ... That's why I like this organisation - to be allowed to be called feminist, and actually be a feminist but I can still be boss (Emma, YWAS).*



*I found in collectives because there's no given power to a particular individual, ... if you want something to happen in your organisation then you actually have to think about ways of taking that power but you've got to do it subtly and you've got to manipulate to be able to do it.... I find that much more destructive than 'hold on, I have expertise in that area, I'll do it' (Kara, WCR).*

*Collectives work on the assumption ... that everybody who is either in or part of that group is all on the same power level, they're all on the same understanding, they're all on the same assertiveness level, they're all basically at the same level and that's what actually allows it to function. That's all well and good but it doesn't happen (Lynne, WCR).*

*My experience over four years of being in that [other] organisation was that it was naïve to think that power could be shared collectively. ... So personally as a staff person, I found that I accumulated power by default through knowledge, through the fact that I was sitting in all those meetings, through accumulated experience and wisdom and through... the sheer demands of needing to make decisions and getting things done meant that I held quite a degree of power. And I found that...frustrating that I had to go through the sort of mechanisms of collectivity when that was not the reality...but yet we were pretending it was. So therefore I could be saying 'oh no I have no power, I share power' - when really I had lots of power. And I was exercising that power (Barbara, RCS).*

These comments suggest that women do consider the concept of power ambivalently and have difficulty recognizing the potential strengths of women with power. Even among the women of the YWAS where, as mentioned previously, power clearly resided with the Executive Director and the Board of Directors, the women were unable to identify the positive uses of this. It was more likely to be the Executive Director herself who discussed the ways she tried to use power in a facilitative manner. The women who worked in other positions in this organisation discussed how they tried to minimise the effect of her personal power in their relationships with her.

The women who worked in the other two organisations discussed strategies the organisations had used to ensure the limiting of personal power amongst women, generally seeing individually powerful women as something to be avoided, unless that power was legitimated by the organisational structure. These strategies included encouraging numerous women on the management groups to familiarise themselves with some aspect of the organisation so as to ensure that no one person acquired all the knowledge. Processes were set up to ensure major financial decisions were approved by more than one person. In general, the women seemed to consider that feminists should just know how to deal with power appropriately.

*I remember some of the people who made up the management committee and the membership at that time who in their own personal behaviour weren't following the principles, the feminist principles.... There was a very, very rough period and that was a real eye opener for me because I saw that we had to protect ourselves, I suppose, from external criticism, but internally we all knew there were major problems*

*there. It was with people who were seeking power for themselves in the organisation and doing it by pretending they were being empowering and feminist and all that but in fact they were just abusive (Valerie, WCR).*

There was little overt discussion within the organisations about what feminist power might look like and how it might contribute to the organisation. Clearly, there is room for the women in feminist organisations to engage with some of the debates about women and power and consider these discussions in the light of their own organisational experiences, aspirations and vision. Despite theoretical debates about sources of power and concepts of ‘power with’ rather than ‘power over’, this research suggests that women’s practice experience does not incorporate such understandings and that power is a topic rarely discussed or raised in feminist organisations like these. Instead assumptions are made that feminist women know instinctively how to handle power. Given the literature (Cox, 1996) that suggests women are not familiar with power and its use, such assumptions create impossible situations for women.

### **6.5 Women and Difference**

As was discussed at some length in the previous chapter, all three organisations considered the inclusion of women from different backgrounds, cultures, and places an important part of their organisational mission. While they rarely completely achieved their goals of inclusion, and in some cases consciously compromised the inclusion of difference in favour of a shared ideological analysis, the organisations maintained a commitment to creating spaces that were welcoming and inclusive of many different women. This commitment was also evident among the women individually, and their personal priorities and ideas about the issues of difference were surprisingly similar. These ideas generally reflected confusion. Even the women of the Young Women’s Accommodation Service, where the cultural diversity among the staff group was evident, considered this an exception rather than an indication of successful inclusion. These women were neither blind to issues of difference nor ignorant of the exclusion and its consequences that could result. However incorporating these understandings into organisational practice proved difficult and strategies aimed at inclusion did not always achieve the desired outcomes. Women struggled with these issues and often claimed they did not know how to do it best.

Contrary to some of the literature (Christensen, 1997; Wilson, 1996b) which claims that hard line attitudes to ideology and practice prevailing amongst women in predominantly white, western organisations were responsible for much overt and implicit exclusion, these women presented a more lenient understanding of ideology, one which included compromises, and acknowledged the messiness and complexity of pursuing inclusion. The women were all very aware that their

organisation and, many like it, were predominantly places where white, middle-class, able bodied women were more likely to be workers and management group members. They recognised the links between this occurrence in their own organisation and the nature of the feminist movement as a whole. However many of the women felt ambivalent about using the lack of inclusion as a reason to disparage and denigrate the organisation in which they worked or their own efforts in working with and for women.

*If we were truly representative – and I'm not saying we're not representative and I'm not wanting to be defensive – but the Rape Counselling Service needs to operate professionally... or it won't exist. Now to run an organisation professionally requires a certain level of education. A certain level of confidence. And I guess a certain level of life experience. And so it is like – if there weren't middle class, educated women in there running it, it wouldn't get funding ...and saying we don't represent the client group assumes middle class women don't get raped (Barbara, RCS).*

*I think it is much more important to make staff more representative than management. I've watched the WESNET committee.... Because of having so many special interest representatives, all of those people's role is to push their particular area. That's created a conflict that is going to kill that committee. ...Because there are so many people with such different issues of access and equity. You've got Aboriginal women screaming that you're not addressing my issues, NESB women, women with disabilities, and it just goes on and on and that's all those meetings end up being about now. ... So I sort of wonder about our committee, whether that could happen. And I'd be really afraid of that happening. ...At the moment all the women sitting on that committee are there because of their interest in violence against women. What if you have someone sitting there whose interest is something different (Stella, WCR).*

#### 6.5.1 Inclusion of Cultural and Linguistic Difference

Despite these hesitations the women consistently identified the importance of including Aboriginal women and women of non-English speaking backgrounds within their organisation in some capacity. They recognised that the presence of women from diverse cultural backgrounds in the organisation usually meant women from those backgrounds knew about the organisation, might use the organisation's services and that these services would be more likely to be appropriate.

*I think we have been pretty successful considering, and that is particularly so when we have Aboriginal staff members, which didn't happen that frequently. But one person worked here on two different occasions.... And women would see an Aboriginal face and that just made a difference. And it's a real floodgate sort of thing. Once you get a couple of women going, word gets around. And so you get more. That was really good for the service to have that Aboriginal worker there (Amy, RCS).*

*I think that having no Aboriginal worker here is a serious disadvantage, but I am also aware that we've been trying to recruit Aboriginal women to the management committee and it hasn't happened. But for Aboriginal clients – having no worker here – and not only is there no worker but we don't have anyone we can refer those women*

*to...when about thirty to forty percent of our clients are Aboriginal women, maybe more. And there are specific issues that come up time and time again that really effect Aboriginal women. I try but I feel completely out of my depth sometimes and I know that an Aboriginal worker would just help that (Kara, WCR).*

However, leaving the task of changing the culture, strategies and work practices of organisations which have a predominantly white, western history, to marginalised women is inherently hypocritical. Many of the women who participated in this research recognised the injustice of requiring Indigenous women, non English speaking women, and others, to shoulder the responsibility of creating inclusion. As Aboriginal historian and activist, Jackie Huggins, has commented, the burden of providing white women with solutions to the complex matters of inclusion and difference is an exhausting and arduous role.

Frankly I'm drained by it. I'm really intolerant of being the object all the time. I'm usually the only token Black woman who goes to ...feminist conferences or Women Studies conferences and they turn to me as if to say, well you're the only Black in the room, therefore you're the expert – you should know all the answers to the questions we're going to fire at you and they actually do that. They seize upon me and ask me all these questions, saying what can I do, continually asking how I can solve their problems and its quite draining to tell you the truth.... I say to white women now 'It is not up to me to educate you into doing something about the problem. If you admit that yes, you are white supremacist or racist then it is your obligation to go out and do things yourself' (Huggins, 1998, p. 61-62).

A number of the women in this research spoke about this potential for exploitation and the lack of relevance the organisation's goals and practices may have for women already burdened by social disadvantage and oppression.

*I guess the other thing that seems to happen – and you know thinking about one of the non-English speaking workers – is that we go 'Oh look there's an issue that's to do with immigration or being from a non-English speaking background, or whatever – let's ask her how we should be taking it up' – which you know is valid because she has expertise that we don't, but I think that there's a fine line between acknowledging and learning from someone's expertise and just plain using them – we have to be careful and look at ourselves and make sure we do things properly not just for the sake of doing it because we think it makes us look better (Lois, WCR).*

*The feminist movement is criticised as being a movement for white middle class women – and I think that is a valid criticism, too, because I'd say the reality is...the movement was started by women from that sort of background, who had a certain amount of education, to get themselves into structures and argue the point...whereas a woman with a disability or an Aboriginal woman – it is very unlikely they would even want to think about that sort of thing. Again its where they're at – I mean a lot of Aboriginal women are trying to care for their kids, cope with their families ... they're just trying to survive ...They're not even looking at these issues. And I sometimes think well maybe Aboriginal women have got better things to do than sit around telling a bunch of us how it should be done (Sophie, RCS).*

*Aboriginal women are so busy in life – they're busy being super mums and providers and dealing with domestic violence ... if they end up at the Y it's because they need a job. ...Before I worked here my life was too busy – surviving – and there's lots of other indigenous women like me – that's what it is, just surviving. They've got to deal with the kids and whatever is happening at home before they can be looking at feminist types of things (Kathy, YWAS).*

This suggests that the lack of inclusion of at least Indigenous women in these organisations is perceived by some as a matter of choice. Aboriginal women, they consider, are focused in and on other equally important organisations and issues.

### 6.5.2 Lesbian Women and Issues of Inclusion

Most of the women talked about issues of race and culture when they discussed difference and possibilities for inclusion. However feminist organisations also have a history of debate around issues of inclusion between lesbian women and heterosexual women. Some research has identified that heterosexual women are concerned about being judged as “not true feminists” (Hercus, 1999) in some feminist organisations, while some lesbian women have long claimed the women's movement has excluded them from full participation (Taylor & Rupp, 1993). Not many women discussed inclusion and difference as an issue of sexual orientation, probably a reflection that conflict between heterosexual and lesbian women was not an issue in these organisations. For example in the Young Women's Accommodation Service, none of the women identified as lesbian women and in fact the Executive Director suggested that the YWAS was a place that provided sanctuary for heterosexual, feminist women. However one of the workers with the YWAS recognised the difficulties the lack of diversity in sexual orientation could create.

*It's incredibly hard to train workers in. Because you have to get – whether you like it or not – most women are homophobic in some way, shape or form or just don't have any understanding, so you have to get beyond that first before you can even start training them in complex violence issues...it is so deeply entrenched ...on the surface workers might say 'yes, I understand that' and 'no, I wouldn't discriminate'. But then the language they choose, the assumptions they make, the way that they interact – just everything gives across those kinds of messages (Anna, YWAS).*

The YWAS Executive Director's belief that lesbian women abounded in the other two organisations was not so, however the Women and Children's Refuge and the Rape Counselling Service had a history of significant involvement by lesbian women. This did not exempt them however from confronting issues around sexual orientation. The coordinator of the WCR also recognised the difficulties created for lesbian women when assumptions were made by heterosexual workers.

*For a long time recruitment processes seemed to have the unwritten criteria that you needed to be a lesbian woman.... People make assumptions about sexuality on*

*stereotypical things, like when I first started here I didn't look like a lesbian woman and therefore, I wasn't and I was treated as though I didn't know. Over time it has changed, it is a lot more balanced for clients and the outside world. ... But there are cultural issues that people don't take into account. Like there's – like one of the really basic ones is the automatic assumption when a woman comes in and sits down and starts talking about her partner our workers say 'he' and that happens continually. ...A couple of women come through who come and see me because of the new haircut and say 'I think you might be a lesbian woman', and they say 'I need to tell someone that my partner is a woman and I don't want the other workers to know because they haven't asked.' ...But they want someone here to know so they have someone to talk to ... and that's really hard because that is actually not my job. And its horrible for those women – the very workers we want them to trust and reach out to, they feel they can't (Stella, WCR).*

There were a number of lesbian women involved in the history and establishment of the Rape Counselling Service and this is reflected in the comments of one worker.

*Sexual orientation is not really an issue and we do have diversity in that regard. I think lesbian women were strongly involved in the establishment of this service and that image has stuck even though it doesn't really reflect us any more – not to the same extent. I was lucky here that my first contact with lesbian women was with this beautiful, powerful group of women who I just fell in love with because they loved women and it was just such a wonderful experience for me to meet women who loved women instead of seeing them as competition...it was just wonderful for me. Anyway many of those lesbian women have moved on but an organisation like this does attract lesbian women and we still have many members who are. I love that and I would be very disappointed to see that go from our service. It adds a certain hard edge political side – that, you know, might not be there otherwise (Olivia, RCS).*

The potential for segregation along lines of sexual orientation remains an issue for all three of these organisations though some of this separation is likely to be invisible as lesbian women feel unable to openly acknowledge this aspect of their lives in some organisations.

### 6.5.3 Strategies for Inclusion

Successful strategies to avoid exclusion and to ensure that women of different cultural backgrounds, different levels of ability, different sexual orientation were included in both the client group and the staff and management groups of these organisations were as difficult for individual women to identify as they were for whole organisations. Some of the women had significant doubts about some of the strategies used by the organisation. Tactics of positive discrimination were seen as possible sources of further exploitation and creating specific worker positions was also seen to be fraught with difficulty. Many of these women recognised that there was diversity and difference not just between the groups of women they were seeking to include but also within those groups.

*Doing it an Aboriginal way is a whole lot of things and it will be about that woman going out into the community and operating differently, it won't be about just saying the word 'Aboriginal' in her title. I've never actually worked out what the answer is (Maria, RCS).*

*You talk to some other Aboriginal women and I'm sure you will see lots of women who have different views within the Aboriginal community too. And I think that's something that - often in attempts by women's organisations to become more open and become more diverse - we jump at the first response or comment from someone in the community, which isn't necessarily a reflection of that whole community (Kathy, YWAS).*

*I think it would be quite difficult for women from non-English speaking backgrounds.... How can I put it - I worked with another organisation where women from non-English speaking backgrounds worked and there was a certain amount of positive discrimination in recruitment practices which seemed like a very good idea to me but it brought up a lot of issues I didn't think of. For example one of the women from non-English speaking background felt very -patronised - almost like that was why she was employed, she thought other women didn't see her as competent as other people, and that was very upsetting for her. Another woman from a non-English speaking background was - she was continually saying to us that her special needs for working with Muslim women weren't recognised or weren't supported and I am sure that was true. But when you are working with limited resources it is a big trade off to positively discriminate, because then when you don't have the resources to accommodate that person properly or when it doesn't end just with the employment of someone from that culture then it ends up not being a positive experience for the worker or the organisation- not because of intent just because it is more complex than 'lets have more workers of non-English speaking background' (Kara, WCR).*

There is some evidence here that the hierarchical structures of the YWCA and its programmes such as the Young Women's Accommodation Service are more successful in attracting women of diverse cultural backgrounds to their service, at least in Darwin and at the staff level. This is consistent with other research which suggests "that people of color in mixed race organizations may ... need a more formal structure to prevent racialised patterns of white domination from prevailing" (Ostrander, 1999, p. 635). However, hierarchy has not provided lesbian women or women with disability ready access to the YWAS and the YWCA Board of Directors maintained a distinctly white, middle-class identity.

In summary, issues about difference and inclusion were unresolved in all three of these organisations. It seems that many of the women were cognizant with the debates in feminist literature and recognised the exclusivity inherent in the organisations of which they were a part. Many of them recognised that the sources of exclusion were inadvertently based on unquestioned assumptions and presumptions about sameness so that the exclusionary practices were subtle but inherent in the workings of the organisations.

*It's like we're really good with the Anglo... but I wonder about the whole cultural issue of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal women and feeling valued and included in the Rape Counselling Service as an Aboriginal woman.... It gets really murky when you've got an Aboriginal worker who is burnt out ... was it being excluded as an Aboriginal woman or being excluded as a burnt out worker.... The worker might not be able to differentiate between those and I don't know if we can either. It gets very complex and murky (Thea, RCS).*

*We do the same at the Women and Children's Refuge, the Committee speaks the language of the refuge. We speak in acronyms, we all think we understand what a children's worker does, we all understand what a case worker does. It takes a lot of confidence to question,... you know 'What is? What is? What is?' all the time. Some can persevere but mostly we exclude by our own exclusivity (Lynne, WCR).*

*Those exclusions happen because the agenda is determined by a small group in the first place and you can sit there thinking we've got this great access and equity policy, how come no one else comes along? And so you have to go right back to basics and say 'Well what is our agenda? How do we open our agenda up?' And it's about how you operate -...maybe the answer isn't that women will come to us, maybe we have to go to them and find – you know keep working until we have common ground so that our group does reflect this community – that's something we have struggled with (Jennifer, YWAS).*

The concerns raised by these women are reflected in much of the feminist literature since the mid-late 1980s. Feminist organisations in the United States (Grahame, 1998) and Australia (Hughes, 1997; Kaplan, 1996) have come under increased scrutiny for their failure to incorporate issues of relevance to women deemed “underrepresented within structures of power and influence, or deemed disadvantaged within the larger society” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 85). Kamini Grahame (1998) has more recently challenged the usual attributions used to explain the continued invisibility of women from different backgrounds and cultures in many feminist organisations. She claims that in most analyses Aboriginal women, women with disabilities or women from non English speaking backgrounds are identified as being too busy, too oppressed or just uninterested in participating in formal organisational life. Certainly these reasons are discussed by the women in this research. Sincere attempts to address these reasons have rarely resulted in the inclusion of different women. Grahame (1998) claims this is because the real issue is how white women and white organisations define and understand inclusion. In her research in the United States she found that women of colour were in fact heavily involved in community activism and specific purpose organisations, but that these were often ignored by the white, Western, feminist organisations which wanted women of colour to participate in their activities and on their terms. She comments,

The implications of the foregoing discussions are that organizations... need to develop a conception of their mandate, which is sensitive to existing levels of organization in



the communities, which they claim to serve. Many activist women of color are connected to organizations, which are closely attuned to their community's needs – e.g., organizations concerned with employment training, drug abuse and treatment, and basic educational competencies such as literacy. ...For if they are to move forward with an agenda inclusive of women of color and our issues, they need to develop strategies in which inclusion is not dependent upon... special projects (Grahame, 1998, p. 391).

These ideas provide some possibilities for the organisations like the ones in this research, confronting ongoing issues in their attempts to be inclusive of difference. Certainly, as is evident from many of the comments and statements above, the struggle around issues of difference and inclusion is an ongoing one with which all three groups continue to engage.

*Yes but at the same time I don't think it's not worth the effort...I mean, you know people are only going to learn that we are here and that we are open through invitation, feeling welcome, and feeling included and stuff, so, I mean – it still has to be open and accessible and seen to be accessible and sometimes that means compromising. ... Making sure what we say and do doesn't make them uncomfortable or think they are unwelcome. We have to keep talking and listening to each other and trying to connect (Audrey, WCR).*

## **6.6 Activist Women in Feminist Organisations?**

In recent years some feminist literature has berated the women's movement and feminist women (particularly from the academy) for a decline of feminist activism. For example, Pauline Bart (2000) writes:

The bureaucratization of feminist organizations of necessity resulted in professionalization, with the loss of collective organization and feminist activism. With the mainstreaming of feminism, women's space has vanished...(p. 23)

Barbara Epstein (2001) concurs:

The mass diffusion of feminist consciousness, the bureaucratization of leading women's organisations, and the high visibility of academic feminism are all consequences of the acceptance of feminism by major sectors of society. But these changes have not necessarily been good for the movement. Feminism has simultaneously become institutionalized and marginalized. It has been rhetorically accepted but the wind has gone out of its sails (p. 4).

Both Bart and Epstein link changes in feminist organisations (including service organisations) to a decrease in women's activism and a diminishing vitality in the women's movement. Such arguments reflect a long standing tension between the provision of services for women and feminist political action. Some have argued that feminist activism and campaigns should be pursued through organisations other than service agencies (Campbell, Baker, & Mazurek, 1998; Kravetz & Jones, 1991). Such arguments are not supported in this research. For many of these

women working in a feminist service organisation was about putting into action their values and commitments to the social change aspects of feminism, it *was* feminist activism.

Activism is defined by Anna Yeatman (1998) as a public declaration of one's political values and commitments.

It is a commitment, statement of vision, declaration of values and offering of strategic action, all of which are publicly declared. The activist is the actor who is prepared to stand for and by his and her vision and values within what is openly contested territory concerning which and whose values are to prevail in setting the culture and orientating the structures of a particular ...jurisdiction (p. 35).

The women who worked in these organisations made such a declaration every day. Their work and commitment to the organisation was a form of public declaration of their vision and values.

As was discussed earlier in an examination of the resource mobilization theories of social movement activity, organisations, like the three identified in this research, perform tasks for the women's movement by attracting and resourcing women who will together engage in acts of protest to heighten awareness and further the cause of the women's movement even in relatively hostile environments like the Northern Territory (della Porta & Diani, 1999b; Pakulski, 1991). Some of the women in this research were drawn to the organisations as a way of involving themselves in these political and protest activities,

*My involvement with the Rape Counselling Service is more personal than just improving my knowledge for my work or anything like that, it was...because I'm concerned about the power structures in society, I'm concerned about rape and I wanted to do something to become more involved with women who were working to reduce it or eradicate it – I mean it's an ideals sort of thing (Melanie, RCS).*

*Working in a rape crisis centre...was really exciting ... being able to work in and legitimately discuss the issue, legitimately raise issues about it, in a feminist way.... The other stuff about working in a collective, working in a women's only place, they were all bonuses that came with it (Maria, RCS).*

*It is about providing that unconditional support to women and also being a voice.... That's so important - being prepared to stand up and identify where the system isn't working (Rosa, WCR).*

Acts of civil disobedience, public displays of protest, participation in mass mobilizations are all identified as activist behaviour. Most of these women participated in these types of events, at various times. For example many of the women were active in organising events such as Reclaim the Night and International Women's Day marches and rallies. Many were involved in organising public protest rallies against mandatory sentencing, calling for protective intervention in East Timor and protesting uranium mining. For many women these organisations were not just the detached means through which they pursued their activist commitments. Instead it was

through their participation in these organisations as workers or volunteers that many of these women further developed their feminist consciousness, gathered support for issues they believed were important and rallied each other to 'maintain the rage' in the face of disappointment and hostility. Through nurturing encouragement they renewed each other's commitment and persistence in opposing inequality and contesting injustice.

*My expectations were - it would be a place where I could work with other women in direct action, related to changing women's situations, you know, in the bigger picture-with other women who want to change things (Barbara, RCS).*

*I've been very strongly and actively encouraged by the Executive Director and my supervisor here to be involved in small women's collectives in the community. So things like ...RTN [Reclaim the Night] and IWD [International Women's Day]...I get a lot of young women from the houses and encourage them to get involved, not so much in the collective, but they all painted umbrellas with feminist slogans on them and carried them down the street...So lots of encouragement to look at- kind of like- ways of, you know, utilizing my strong political ideals (Anna, YWAS).*

*I just think never limit yourself to any approach, you know, and that's about social activism, that's about social change, I mean. We try to create progressive change, we don't really have an example to work towards – we don't have any tried and true methods, we're in uncharted waters, so its about being a pioneer and finding a way, and to do that you just – you know you just have to believe that you are going to get there and with each other we get there however we can (Lois, WCR).*

Of equal interest are the many examples of a more subtle form of activism, what Yeatman (1998) calls 'policy activism'. Yeatman discusses policy activism as activity which occurs within the public sector when individuals or groups use their position as insiders to ensure the inclusion of all actors in the policy process therefore allowing for established practices to be challenged, different views to be heard or values to be directly debated. This could include then,

Anyone who champions in relatively consistent ways a value orientation and pragmatic commitment to what I have called the policy process, namely a conception of policy which opens it up to the appropriate participation of all those who are involved in policy all the way through points of conception, operational formulation, implementation, delivery on the ground, consumption and evaluation. Within this conception we may want to distinguish between bureaucratic, professional, practitioner and consumer types of policy activist. It would make sense to do this (Yeatman, 1998, p. 34).

The following example, related by Valerie, a member of the management group of the Women and Children's Refuge and a senior public servant with a government department, describes exactly such an incident of policy activism. She describes how she worked from the inside as a representative of her employing body, a government department, to ensure the inclusion of the Women and Children's Refuge and other service providers on a key intra-governmental

committee, the Domestic Violence Coordinating Committee (the DVCC). This committee was involved in a range of policy activities including advice to the minister, development of Territory policy regarding DV and setting the parameters of the tendering processes for the funding of services for women. At this time, due to a perception of overt radicalism, the Women and Children's Refuge was excluded.

*Well my boss came to me, she was the one who nominated me for the Women and Children's Refuge, and she said I have put you forward for the DVCC. I didn't really want to but she said 'you have to get in there and get something happening'.... So I just kept up – saying the same thing – you know I know they got sick of it and rolled eyes and everything but there were some people on it like ...[people from other Departments] who didn't know the history between the Office of Women and the shelter. So how could they argue against having service providers as part of the committee without coming out and saying that it's personal? They couldn't so eventually the shelters were invited on. I could shut up then – they took the whole committee on, I just backed them up (Valerie, WCR).*

Valerie and 'her boss' both engaged in the 'policy activism' described by Yeatman (1998). Their motivation was to change the way the DVCC operated by ensuring the inclusion of service providers, and through them consumers, into the decision-making forum.

In addition to direct activism and policy activism the women who were part of these three organisations involved themselves in acts of resistance. There is little doubt that during the time of this research, these women operated in a political environment which, at best, considered their efforts unnecessary and, at times, was completely hostile. The Rape Counselling Service and the Women and Children's Refuge shared a reputation for radicalism. There were a number of efforts made to control these organisations through the conditions imposed on their funding. For example the Northern Territory Government imposed data collection requirements which duplicated national data collection strategies and could have significantly increased workloads. In addition the Territory data collection tools sought information that the workers believed could be used to identify women or restrict their access to services. These impositions were resisted by both organisations.

*I find the data really useful, so long as it collects data we can use like supports available and what is the percentage of child sexual abuse and recent rape counselling. But sometimes they want stuff like identifying stuff – we just put unknown if we think anything could negatively effect women or if they seem at all uncomfortable with the information (Amy, RCS).*

*We won't compromise our clients for anyone in any way. And sometimes that brings us into conflict, like, with our data collections, ... we identify codes and things like that where it could be bad for clients – in some organisations they would just blindly nod and say 'yes, okay, we'll do that'. We would never without consulting our clients and our clients would never consent to some of the information they want (Audrey, WCR).*

As has been previously identified the YWCA was considered (and indeed described itself) a more conservative organisation and therefore more likely to comply with the requirements of the conservative Territory government. However during the course of this research, events occurred which suggested to me that maintaining this compliant image was in itself an act of resistance. Throughout the months that I conducted this study, two of the organisations were applying for the tender to operate a second refuge in Palmerston, an outlying area of Darwin. The Women and Children's Refuge tendered as did the YWCA which auspiced the YWAS. Much publicity surrounded the new shelter and the Chief Minister made public comments about the focus of the new shelter on families and the need to include services for men escaping violence. The YWCA was successful in securing the tender and this success was initially attributed to the willingness of the organisation to acquiesce to the government's implied preference for a gender-neutral refuge. But all fears of co-option were dismissed when the service employed a young woman with extensive radical feminist credentials to coordinate the service and the new refuge became a woman-only space. The Women and Children's Refuge and this new refuge became (and still are to my knowledge) closely aligned. This is an example of how so-called conservative groups can resist, however subversively, the imposition of alien values without necessarily publicly denouncing those values.

The women who worked in these three organisations were clearly involved in a variety of feminist/activist endeavours validating the claims that feminist services provide relevant and creative opportunities for social action. Rebecca Campbell and her colleagues (1998), identified similar attributes and comment,

These results suggest that rape crisis centres have not become monolithic social service agencies. Some have become more mainstream, others always were more traditional, but still others remain freestanding collectives. Rape crisis organizations appear to have learned how to adapt to the changing political climates since the 1970s to continue to provide services for victims and to remain politically active (p. 480).

However remaining politically active in a hostile environment took its toll and women in all three organisations spoke of the taxing nature of activism.

*We're not making much impact really no matter how hard we fight... we need to survive so maybe it's time to sit back a bit and do a lot more internal work and near the edge work before it all becomes public and ugly (Stella, WCR).*

*One of my activist skills is working with the bureaucracy and the organisation I am employed by is coming to some common ground on that issue...I need to maintain my energy levels and at the moment I think if you work with them, as hard as it is, you're more likely to get closer to what we want (Emma, YWAS).*

*We have a bottom line which we won't compromise but given our current government it needs to be a bit of a balancing act of what you can get away with – with the bureaucracy of course but also with what our bottom line is (Olivia, RCS).*

It is clear from the comments of the women involved in this research that coping with the ongoing assault of conservative political environments requires individual women and organisations to make some compromises and to even withdraw, at least temporarily, from overt social change activity. These periods of withdrawal allow for a more internal focus within organisations and increase the likelihood of organisational survival.

In discussing their strategies for maintaining a social action presence in spite of an unsupportive external environment, the women who participated in this research revealed yet another form of activism not always identified in the literature. Their daily work practices with service users and with each other were forms of strategic action used to contest the prevailing systems within which they were forced to operate. The women spoke about their daily work practices in a way that suggests they often brought a feminist/activist analysis to this core activity.

*You look at the women I work with at the Women and Children's Refuge. Their daily work is a little nitty gritty, like housing applications, driving women and kids to the doctors, going to court, but they all bring up the big picture if you ask them about their work..... They can all talk the big picture stuff and they all talk the big picture stuff as the reason why they are here.... I reckon it's a lack of ability to see it as a part of the big picture stuff that leads to some extent to the burnout,...because you can't feel the change or you feel like you're not taking part in the change. And that can lead to the feeling that you're just doing some kind of – you know, normal job (Lois, WCR).*

These women did not see their work as 'normal jobs' - it was more than just a job and this made a difference to the way they experienced their organisational life. Lois' comment here also suggests that these women are informed by principles of feminist practice that allow them to attribute meaning to their work practices above and beyond the actual tasks.

Campbell, Baker and Mazurek (1998), made similar assertions in their research with rape crisis centres in particular.

Through helping individual women and raising community awareness about sexual assault, direct service creates social change. Providing direct service can be seen as a method of change as it may raise awareness, prevent future assaults and prevent victim blaming reactions in the community (p. 459).

Understanding work in feminist service organisations in this way suggests that the definitions and explorations of feminist activism could be usefully expanded to include the daily minutia of feminist women's lives. Explorations of the meaning women themselves place on their daily work activities could serve to highlight another facet of feminist activism and illuminate an important function of feminist organisations.

## 6.7 *Hard Work*

One of the consistent features of the women's descriptions of working in these feminist organisations was the nature of the work in which they were involved. This was hard work; the hours were exhausting, the work was emotionally and physically draining, sad and painful situations were commonplace and these women often faced threats and violence. In addition they were consistently forced to justify their role, their approach and their beliefs; at times being subjected to derision and disrespect.

### 6.7.1 *Physical and Emotional Demands*

All the workers spoke of their work as both physically and emotionally demanding. Clearly the women who directly supported women in distress experience enormous pressure.

*It seems that people can't stay in these areas for longer than about three or four years without getting into serious burnout -... I've talked to other counsellors - I remember one counsellor ...from Katherine - she was leaving and I said 'oh, how come you're leaving' and she said 'I'm going to chip off the armour, and just do something entirely different' and I didn't understand at the time but now I do – the physical and emotional stress means you have to build up an armour to handle it day in and day out (Connie, RCS).*

*... the management committee also has to take in to consideration ... how busy the workers are, and what a heavy workload they've got and that they're understaffed and overworked and that's all the time – there is no relief (Rosa, WCR).*

*Usually it is flat out you know, and with funding cuts and things like that it can make it really hard, when someone goes on annual leave then you know we usually try to pull workers from the casuals or something. But still it's hard because it never stops, the young women are always there, always...it's never quiet (Anna, YWAS).*

The daily grind of service provision took its toll as women saw and heard stories of pain and tragedy as an everyday occurrence. That this is work women can only undertake for relatively short periods of time was accepted among all the workers and in fact was identified as a key motive for women moving through the organisations, filling different positions and undertaking different types of work. By transferring between direct service delivery, management groups and special projects, women often found they could avoid burnout but remain involved with the organisation.

The feelings of despair the nature of the work could sometimes trigger for workers were often shared by those women who coordinated the organisation and supervised the staff, leaving them with feelings of ambivalence about their role and ability to help.

*Sometimes it is just damn hard supporting the women who are working with women who are being beaten. It's really hard. So sometimes I get home and just go – 'oh, this*

*is too hard'- but then other times I get really enthusiastic and I guess it just varies, depending on what's going on at the time (Stella, WCR).*

*I fluctuate between loving it and hating it actually – which I think is normal. I needed some space which is why I asked to reduce my hours – burnout was on the horizon. It is better now but I have to watch myself. I love it but sometimes I think 'can't someone else take that on?' (Emma, YWAS).*

Both these comments confirm the issue discussed earlier that the role of coordinators in feminist organisations is arduous. Not only do they carry significant responsibility for administrative and managerial activity but their role in staff support and supervision means they also experience much of the emotional stress inherent in this work.

### 6.7.2 External Pressures

While all the women acknowledge the difficulties of the direct service delivery work they were involved in, overwhelmingly they reported that dealing with external criticism and pressure was the most difficult aspect of their work. The women were involved in community education forums where they were required to provide information to police, magistrates and other groups who did not always share their ideas, commitments or views. They were sometimes the organisational representatives on committees or interagency forums which required them to advocate on behalf of the women using their service. Constantly justifying and defending their philosophical approach and feminist analysis added to the pressure the women already coped with.

*In some ways being on the DVCC and working with that group is really hard, because to walk into the DVCC and explain to them – 'we've turned away four fucking women this week – and its not as simple as you people just sitting here going resources, resources, resources'. I am the one who watches women with slumped shoulders walking away from that door. You know, they haven't. Their blindness to that pain makes it really, really hard (Stella, WCR).*

*You can't relax when you're listening to a client because you hear the most awful things but you can't give in to that...and you can't relax in the community education because you have to protect yourself against reactions. You need two people all the time to handle it...it's such hard work at the start of every education session to make – well - to make a comfortable environment for the people you're talking to and for them to realise we're human but also to know that some will attack if given the chance. You need a really hard stomach for it (Amy, RCS).*

*The Coalition line about family services rather than women only services is actually splitting women's networks – we're being forced to go that way...so we're all fighting with each other – so we'll cut each other down. And be very nasty. At the moment the political stuff is the worst part... we are letting them fuck us around and it's ripping us apart (Kathy, YWAS).*



Not only do women feel attacked in their work environment but even their private lives can be affected.

*I know that my home life and my social life have copped the brunt of working here at certain times. There are people I used to mix with that I don't any more .... You know if someone says at a dinner party or a barbecue or whatever, 'Where do you work?' ...it's like nine times out of ten someone will say 'We're not going to talk about that'. We're not going to talk about rape because people don't like it and because they see my opinion as a very strong opinion (Connie, RCS).*

While some aspects of feminism may have become institutionalised (Bart, 2000), it was clear from comments like these that feminist women and feminist organisations continue to exist in an environment of hostility that impacts on the work the organisations do and the work experience of the women involved. Support structures do not always exist in the external environment, making the internal work place significant in women's ability to cope with the stress and pressure. It becomes particularly critical in hostile environments that feminist organisations are able to be a source of safety and strength for women.

### 6.7.3 Exploitation in Feminist Organisations

Feminist organisations, including those participating in this research, emerged from the dedication and perseverance of feminist women who often devoted themselves passionately to the cause of the women's movement. As was described in chapter four many feminist services relied initially on the volunteer labour of feminist women who committed themselves and their labour, to the service, the collective, and the movement. Many organisations have been faced with the dilemma of relying on volunteer labour but at the same time leading the critique of the undervaluing of women's work within society in general (Stevens, 1995). While only the Young Women's Accommodation Service made significant use of volunteers, a number of women recalled the time when there were arduous expectations of women who worked in feminist organisations.

*As is common in women's services, you know, work eighteen hours a day and drop, you know. Grind themselves down to the ground and be available for everybody all the time.... The coordinator here... was on call 24 hours a day seven days a week for years (Sara, WCR).*

*Workers in the past dropped with exhaustion and nervous tension because they didn't knock off when they should knock off. They've just kept on working telling themselves they were there for the women. They would be going home at seven or eight o'clock at night, every night counselling women after hours (Barbara, RCS).*

All three of the organisations had made significant changes to their work practices since those early days when commitment to the women's movement was equated with hours spent at the

organisation. However, for some, changing those aspects of organisational life had not always been easy.

*There was this real sense of – that – if you worked at the Rape Counselling Service, then you put everything in, I mean everything. And I was really keen to not put everything in, and I said, ‘I’m committed to this organisation and I am committed to it 24 hours a day, but I am not actually employed to work here 24 hours a day and I’m not going to.... It was actually hard to challenge that culture that had grown up since its first beginnings of – you know you go into the Rape Counselling Service and it doesn’t matter if you don’t come out again for two years, you do everything you are asked (Maria, RCS).*

*Like industrial relations stuff, like I was keen to see that worked out. I mean I worked my bum off, there’s no doubt about that, but ...I was paid as a part time worker; that was the position that was offered. I’m willing to be flexible to some extent, and I’m willing to put in extra hours. But basically I wanted to get paid for the hours I worked, so that means I want to be able to go home and that was like unheard of. People were saying – ‘what do you mean –go home’. One worker said to me ‘I don’t know when my job finishes and ends, to me it’s just all the time’. ...I’m a totally committed feminist all day, every day, but I wasn’t a Women and Children’s Refuge worker all day, every day. I could really clearly see the difference between the organisation as an entity and my particular role in it (Naomi, WCR).*

*I know in the past they couldn’t care less if you had kids and you were asked – expected to be at a meeting in the evening. Who cares? We have to care. ...I’ve been in that space of being exploited and the expectations being too much and...knowing what it feels like with kids and the rest of life and being torn all the time (Kathy, YWAS).*

Some of the women identified that the expectation to devote their lives to the organisation was still present among some of the women. The coordinators of services in particular took seriously their role of ensuring women looked after themselves and were not exploited even when the women seemed to be determined to offer themselves up for exploitation.

*I am not doing this job 24 hours a day. I’ve got children, I’ve got a life. Why would I want to do that? How dare you expect me to do that? I make a point usually of walking out into the workers room at a certain time and saying ‘It’s knock off time. Come on, you shouldn’t be here any longer.’ Those things help women, by example I guess, not be exploited because women’s services exploit women more than anywhere else does, really, that I see. So I try to model that it’s not okay to be exploited and your workplace should be safe and healthy for you, not abusive and exploitative. And some women find that incredibly hard. Helena thinks I pick on her because I make her go home on time (Stella, WCR).*

*I do have a couple of world-savers here and I think I have to be very careful with them and caring of them. Let them know that what they are doing is okay, they have the freedom to save the world in their own small way but they don’t have to give everything, and have no personal life because they’re always volunteering or working late. I take that responsibility of making women care for themselves very seriously (Emma, YWAS).*

Interestingly these women, who worked in supervisory roles, were less likely to describe their own situation as exploitative though their hours were as long, their work as hard and their support arrangements less systematic.

This section has identified that the work women undertake in feminist organisations is difficult, both physically and emotionally, with little support to be found in the external environment. Therefore it is understandable that women turn to the internal processes of the organisation for support to cope with the effects of their work. The importance of the organisational support processes in such situations is highlighted in a recent research project undertaken by Wasco, Campbell and Clark (2002). This research examined the self care routines used by women who counselled rape victims and compared these routines to the organisational context in which this work took place. Because of the “secondary traumatization” (Wasco et al., 2002, p. 733) that is likely to occur for women who listen to and support the victims of rape and violence, counsellors and advocates were encouraged to engage in self care routines that not only allowed for the release of negative emotions but which also allowed them to integrate these emotions into their skills and lifestyle in a positive way. The study concluded that workers were more likely to use these positive self care strategies if the organisation in which they worked created a supportive and caring environment. Sharon Wasco and her colleagues identified that such environments were created through strategies like regular staff meetings, individual and peer supervision opportunities, flexible work hours, training opportunities, and supportive management (Wasco et al., 2002). The next section offers some insight into some of the elements that the women in this research identified as contributing to nurturing work environments.

## ***6.8 Creating Nurturing Environments***

The women involved in this research had many varying reasons for being part of the organisations. This work provided them with challenges, with flexibility to accommodate their family commitments and with opportunities for personal and professional development. Most importantly these were places where women were valued as women. All of these elements combined to create work spaces where women felt nurtured, supported and able to engage in their work within the organisation.

### ***6.8.1 Understanding Family Commitments***

As was discussed in chapter two, women are often excluded from mainstream organisations by the inability of such organisations to accommodate workers with significant family responsibilities. Women are usually the carer responsible for the young and the elderly in families, and as a consequence are disadvantaged by limited careers and burdened by either

public perceptions of unreliability and/or private emotions of guilt and remorse (Burton, 1991). The women involved in this study almost unanimously identified the consideration given to women's family responsibilities as an important feature of their organisation which made it both feminist and supportive.

*We'll do anything if it's possible. We've got a lot of women who work here who have children, and I mean there used to be a blanket policy no worker's children on the premises, full stop, I mean how hard. Especially for sole parent women, how hard, when you knock off at, you know, four o'clock and your child finishes at three thirty, half an hour playing on the computer doesn't hurt, and so long as it's not all the time, you know. So we negotiate those things to make it as comfortable as possible (Jane, WCR).*

*I did actually experience discrimination in a job when I was pregnant.... My salary dropped ten thousand dollars a year and I was taken off a whole pile of higher duties, and training was denied to me.... I would never want to be in a situation of putting women through that. ...So like my children are young too - I mean I've actually babysat other staff's children here in my office when they have been stuck without any other option. And I've let staff try and work out interesting ways to manage their children and their work life and I think that's been appreciated..... But it's been like a bolt from the blue for some women. You know they say in shock 'You mean I can actually bring my son in to work' (Emma, YWAS).*

*I think things like taking a holistic view, treating people as whole people with complicated lives that can't be just ignored. How women feel about their work is as important as what they do and I am more likely to feel good at work if I know my son is okay and I don't have to worry if he's sick or if he needs me at school – which has happened at times (Connie, RCS).*

These views were apparent within the staff groups and the management groups. Clearly organisations dominated by women are more likely to consider the burdens women bear in terms of family responsibilities and even those with quite hierarchical structures are able to accommodate these needs with relative ease. The comments of these women lend some support to the idea that the apparent incompatibility of family and work commitments in mainstream organisations is more about a lack of will than infeasibility.

### 6.8.2 Challenges and Creativity

As was discussed earlier, women were involved in hard and demanding work but they were also afforded many opportunities to pursue special interest areas and to take up challenging projects. These opportunities provided the women with a means to express their creativity and to pit their skills and resourcefulness against the establishment.

*So that kind of being able to be creative in your work and your relationships. That's very important. I think it's what makes work interesting for me. I'm not just ticking off something in a diary. It makes it creative, you use a lot of your initiative and it makes*

*it new. I find that so challenging...I can try things and see how they go – it makes me realise I am good at what I do (Zoe, YWAS).*

*I think that within the Women and Children's Refuge ... it is a really supportive environment for you if you had specific projects, that was something specific that you were really interested in, that you are really allowed to run with that as long as it is within the general scope of your position. You know, like as the children's worker, I thought we needed a lot more materials there and money to support the program and so I was allowed to sort of run with that and approach different organisations to get some...financial support, and luckily I was quite successful with that. So that meant that my work sort of maybe changed a little bit... that flexibility I think was a really positive thing because there are some areas, aspects of work which obviously I like or am better at than others and I was allowed to do that. And so as a personal development and to actually feeling personally that I was inputting something to the organisation - it was good that I was able to do that (Rosa, WCR).*

*It is a place where you are encouraged to explore and expand your own self and your own horizons and you're encouraged to be resourceful if you want to be and you get help if you want it (Thea, RCS).*

These challenging opportunities allowed women to experience themselves as successful and competent, creatively meeting obstacles front on in their struggle to achieve changes for individual women using the service and for women in general.

### 6.8.3 Helping Women Learn and Develop

Closely related to this was the commitment of the organisations to the development and personal and professional growth of each woman who was a part of the organisation. These commitments were apparent to the women in different ways, including through the provision of opportunities for women to learn different and useful skills through their organisational experience and the creation of an environment that encouraged growth and celebrated women's advancement.

*One of the things that has impressed me ...is that we've had...women who don't come from a professional or an academic or an educated background, who are new to committee work... each time we've had a woman like that on, everybody here work it to make sure they have a wide sense of committee work.... Using it to expand people's experiences.... And its never been so big that anyone on the committee had become impatient with somebody's inexperience. Its always - that's been one of the things that I thought a women's organisation should do...we do, I think (Sara, WCR).*

*I think it's probably been successful simply because it's encouraging women - and actively promoting and encouraging women. And also - involving themselves in the building of that woman to become the best person that they can be... they're part of the organisation, they're helping the organisation to grow,...the workers feel happy. So there - I guess that- there's more of a want to help and more of a want to actually remain in touch as well... you hear, somebody who used to be here a couple of years ago, everybody will know what they're doing now, and that they'll be happy to hear that they've got a fantastic job somewhere else, but they're still a part of that - family...So there's a lot of encouragement if someone's wanting to move on for, say,*

*personal reasons. They're actually given networks to move on to something worthwhile... and lots of support type of stuff as well (Anna, YWAS).*

*We support as their consciousness grows.... I've seen women come along thinking they knew it all, at their first meeting and then just watching them grow over the years. It's just fantastic and watching the kind of - the depth of their analysis about sexual assault growing. And that's been one of the beautiful things (Maria, RCS).*

So these were organisations that not only devoted themselves to the women who used the services in times of crisis but which also had a clear mandate for the care and development of women who worked in the organisations.

#### 6.8.4 Valuing Women as Women

These women confirm that being valued and recognised as valuable to the organisation is also important to their work experience. Their comments support the arguments that paying women well for women's work leads to greater job satisfaction and all the organisations were engaged in internal negotiations to apply a more generous award. This was a difficult process for all three organisations. None of the organisations were funded to a level that allowed them to apply the new award in the way they would most like to, where all the paid staff were paid equally at a level truly commensurate with their contribution. Even though the RCS paid their staff at the same generous hourly rate, they could only do so by reducing hours and not increasing the number of staff though the workload indicated this was necessary. Each organisation chose to deal with the consequences of the disparity between award and funding levels differently. Consistently these efforts caused angst and concern because it was a negotiation between their desire to value women and their ability to actually translate this value into wages and conditions. While it was not always apparent during the industrial negotiations, many of the women spoke in the interviews of being valued in other ways. The women recognised that these organisations were places that gave them an opportunity to make a difference and to use their experience and skills in a manner that was not available elsewhere. Being valuable or valued was not always considered to be a monetary concept.

*I guess in terms of organisational stuff, this place shows everyday that working relationships can be healing... and by healing I don't mean the ideal ... where there's a healed state but that it's like a never ending process and the workplace is about human messiness and things that we pretend shouldn't be in the workplace. But a good organisation like this one recognises the human dimensions, what women can get out of it, that they can get satisfaction, they get money out of it, they get status out of it, they get self esteem, they get human interaction. So we make our place here enabling and healing and then we all get so much more out of it – that might be a model of feminist organisations (Barbara, RCS).*

*One of the things that I bring to my work here is that I have lived this- I was married for ten years to my children's father and he was desperately abusive and controlling and violent and I acknowledge now- though I didn't when I first started working in women's services – sometimes I come across a woman whose circumstances for some reason reflect what I lived years ago and it's hard and sometimes I have to say I can't work with this woman.... You can work in women's services without having been abused ... and some women can't because they have been abused. But sometimes if that's what you've been through...what you bring to working with women is – I don't know- like gold - that real understanding of what it feels like to be in that space in that moment in time...women can pick it and they'll say 'You know, don't you'. That's when you know this is where you should be (Stella, WCR).*

*I enjoy the company of other women who think similarly to the way I do, and who have got similar goals and perspectives...not only the staff and the other management committee members but also the clients. So yes and I think I get satisfaction out of knowing that we're an organisation that is trying to better the awful conditions for women. I want to know I do something about that (Christina, YWAS).*

These comments suggest that being valued is very important for these women and often lies in areas other than industrial conditions. Knowing that they have something special to give, that makes a real difference, is a significant feature of their experience and it provides some possibilities for sustaining women within the organisations at times when other conditions and circumstances may not appear as rewarding.

#### 6.8.6 Respecting and Caring for Women

The most common element in the establishment of a nurturing, supportive culture in these organisations was the way women related to each other demonstrating their respect and care for one another and for the women who used the services. These were not relationships women experienced or created in other workplaces and they involved themselves in these interactions purposefully.

*I've had women compliment me on my beautiful skin, and say - 'you're like a sunburst', now I mean what a wonderful thing to say to someone. And - because life is full of shit- yes without fail, every morning I will say 'good morning' to my co-workers, ask them how they are, if they're looking particularly gorgeous that day, I'll let them know, if I'm concerned about their wellbeing, I'll ask (Maria, RCS).*

*In this group, women say positive things about one another, - you know, I remember one of the women on the committee always had something nice to say, like saying 'that's a lovely shirt,' I really like that. Positive statements aimed at you being who you are and it's just wonderful – it's very wonderful for your sense of self. And your confidence in the world, to be a part of a community of women ... you feel that connection, we belong to one another. It's a lovely thing and I think it's unique, in my experience anyway (Jennifer, YWAS).*

*Working with the other women that work here, I guess is the thing I like best. And the thing I work hardest on, because without them, what is it? I think they're – beyond description really. They really care for the women and the kids that come here but also for each other. That is one of things I like best, watching workers grow and seeing them share that growth with the others...That's excellent (Stella, WCR).*

*If I can see my staff are, like, getting bogged down with stuff, 'ok, we're going to the pictures'. Or we're going to sit - or we're just going to have a cup of tea somewhere, like just chuck down the work here and let's be with each other and talk and get our heads back into it (Beth, YWAS).*

*The women I work with are women who want to work with other women and who value women and who stood up for women...I am happy to be in an organisation like that because, yes, I knew that was not only going to be a job, it was special with these women (Helena, WCR).*

Many, many more examples could be provided about this aspect of women's experiences. The respect for their fellow workers and for the women and children who used the services permeates many of these discussions. In spite of the many difficulties and flaws in the processes used, women consistently identified the nature of their relationships with other women as the overwhelming feature of their organisational experience. This sentiment is perhaps best described by Olivia in the following comment.

*I remember feeling thrilled every day; waking up and thinking, how lucky I am, I get to work with women for women and I get paid for it – that is wonderful! ... I suppose the excitement has worn off over the years, but I never, never, never lose the sense of how privileged I am to work with really smart, dedicated women, doing this work - work that makes a difference. And - I just love it (Olivia, RCS).*

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has further elucidated the particular aspects of working in feminist organisations that impact on women's experience. Despite organisational differences and discrepancies in their perceptions of each other, the women in this research have many more experiences and understandings in common than not. They pursued their dedication to creating a better world for women in similar ways, drawing on comparable supports and coping strategies to counter the external criticism and difficult nature of their work. The comments of the women here reveal a well-informed appreciation of issues of difference, identity and power but it appears women often find themselves in the position of having to pragmatically compromise these ideals for the sake of their own well being and the ongoing survival of the organisation. Their relationships with each other while at times the source of some disappointment and disenchantment, were nonetheless vitally influential and valuable in their overall experience.



## **Chapter Seven**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In this study I have explored the experiences of women who work in feminist organisations. The thesis has attempted to convey those experiences through the words and understandings of the women themselves. These experiences have on occasion confirmed the ideas presented in the literature and at other times have provided new insights or different understandings of how these women negotiate their working experiences in these feminist organisations. The purpose of this final chapter is to reflect on my interpretations of that experience and to explore the theoretical and practical applications of these interpretations. Initially this chapter will summarise the major issues identified in this thesis. The major conclusions will be discussed in relation to the aims of the research and in the context of how these understandings may contribute to the theoretical discussion of, and practical work in, feminist organisations. The chapter concludes with some suggestions for further areas of research that have been identified during the course of this study.

#### ***7.1 Thesis Summary***

This research is embedded in my own story of becoming and being a feminist woman. It reflects the importance that feminist organisations have played in my own biography and was at least partly motivated by my commitment to ensure that feminist organisations remain a feature of the Australian landscape of health and welfare services for women. At the time I commenced and conducted this study the ongoing survival of feminist organisations was not a surety and, despite recent changes in the political environment of the Northern Territory, the position of feminist controlled women-centred services in Australia remains somewhat precarious.

I began the research with three broad aims. Firstly I wanted to explore the experiences of women who worked, paid and unpaid, in feminist organisations. Secondly I wanted to particularly identify how these women understood and negotiated issues of difference and inclusion in the organisation. My third aim was to identify the strategies women used to impact on their own working experience.

In exploring the literature that contributed to this research I began with a feminist-informed, critical examination of the traditional organisational literature. This examination exposed the systematic and systemic disadvantage experienced by women and other people from marginalised groups in traditional bureaucratic organisations. In some critiques hierarchy was identified as a damaging feature, and the strategic possibilities of other structural forms were highlighted. However feminist organisations are more than just structures and processes, as some of the

organisational literature is inclined to suggest; they are also the vehicle through which some women committed to the feminist movement choose to publicly declare that commitment. The literature that analyses and describes social movements has been particularly informative in the understandings and interpretations included in this thesis, highlighting the diverse and complex nature of feminist organisations. The resource mobilisation theories of social movements were salient in highlighting the role social movement organisations play in mobilising tangible resources like information, expertise and monetary resources as well as less concrete resources like solidarity and commitment. The literature about new social movements has particularly highlighted concepts like collective identity, culture and emotion, which have proved useful in understanding the ways that these women have spoken about their experience.

Feminist standpoint theory, as described by Dorothy Smith (1974; 1987) has informed the process, the interpretation and the analysis in this research and thesis. Research informed by feminist standpoint theory values the uniqueness of women's lives, embraces subjective experience and considers the stories collected to provide contextualised, situated knowledges rather than one universal truth (Haraway, 1988). It is this 'everyday/ everynight' knowledge and experience (D. E. Smith, 1987) of the women who have participated in this research that provides insight into the impact and meaning feminist organisations have for the women who work in them. In particular this research has been informed by the possibilities of finding within the minutia of women's lived experience, different and useful ways to understand how women contribute to and participate in organisations and in their communities.

Twenty six women, who worked in three different feminist organisations in Darwin, Northern Territory, shared their stories through interviews. Organisational documents and reports were also considered to enhance, extend and to provide context to the women's stories. These stories are embedded in the history of feminism and feminist organisations in the Northern Territory. Chapter four of this thesis establishes the Northern Territory as a politically conservative, and at times socially hostile, environment for these women. Even so, this same chapter identified many examples of women over the last century contesting the restraints and constraints applied in such a context. While the retributions imposed on many of these women were often swift and considerable, they persisted in their attempts to challenge and provide alternatives to the male dominated milieu that had become the norm.

Chapter five of this thesis described each of the three participating organisations in a manner that highlighted their history, philosophy, structure, and processes for decision-making, conflict management and inclusion. As these descriptions identified, the organisations had quite different historical beginnings which had resulted in the development of different strategies, policies and

structures. One organisation, initiated to support women and children who had been raped, was managed by a collective that included the paid workers as well as women from the community who met the membership criteria and standards. Another organisation, a shelter for women and children escaping violence, was managed by a committee of women from different organisations and the general community who shared an interest in preventing violence against women and who were seen to have particular skills or experiences relevant to the management committee. This organisation employed a coordinator to direct the daily operation of the refuge and this position, combined with the role and authority of the management committee, served to establish some formal hierarchy in the organisation. However as the staff group had no other positions of formal authority, I have considered this organisation a combination of both collective and bureaucratic structures –a hybrid. The third organisation, which focused on the accommodation needs of young women, exhibited most of the features of a formal bureaucracy with a distinct hierarchy of authority, responsibility, and remuneration operating within both staff and management groups.

Despite these differences each organisation identified as a feminist organisation and all except one of the women described themselves as a feminist. The women's descriptions of the organisation in which they worked illustrated some commonality in their difficulties with conflict management and the inclusion of women from different backgrounds into the organisation's staff and especially management groups. These were, with some notable exceptions, white women's organisations.

Chapter six continued the description of women's experiences and sought to explain some of these issues through reference to the relevant literature. The way in which women understood feminist identity as a negotiable concept allowed each organisation to actively construct a collective identity that was fluid enough to respond pragmatically to external forces. The intense and sometimes ambivalent nature of women's relationships is a prominent feature of the women's descriptions of their experiences in these feminist organisations. The powerful emotions which result from these intense interactions are not always well understood by individual women or well managed by organisational processes. Similarly, issues about power, inclusion and difference raised many uncertainties and dilemmas for these women which appeared to have few easy solutions. While the women discussed a number of matters that could contribute to extreme stress in their work, the chapter concludes by acknowledging that these women often felt nurtured, safe and supported within these organisational confines and that, in all, these were very positive working experiences.

This chapter now turns to a consideration of the implications and suggestions that can be inferred from these discussions as they relate to the specific aims of this study

## ***7.2 Women's Experiences in Feminist Organisations***

The first aim of this research was to explore the experiences of women who worked in feminist organisations, paying particular attention to the aspects of organisational life that impacted on this experience. The literature had suggested such aspects could include organisational structure, decision-making processes, flexibility and a commitment to rewarding women appropriately for women's work. I was interested in the answers to questions like: What is it like to be a part of a feminist organisation? What aspects are different, if any, to other work experiences? If it is a positive experience, what makes it so? If these are not positive experiences, how do women understand and contend with such occurrences? The findings of chapters five and six provide many accounts of these experiences and from these, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

### ***7.2.1. Organisational Form as a Product of History and Context***

These women confirm the comments of Martin (1990) and Weeks (1994) that there is no one defining structural feature of a feminist organisation. Each of these organisations had adopted very different organisational structures and policies and had conferred different levels of importance to these elements. However, all the organisations described themselves in official documentation as a feminist organisation.

Far from being a defining feature of feminist organisations, the formal organisational structure was developed as a result of unique histories and contexts. For example, there were women in the collective who expressed some skepticism about the broad applicability of collectivism. However, this particular collective drew strength and potency from its own history which was closely tied to the decision to create a collective in an environment where, and at a time when, being part of a feminist collective was considered somewhat perilous and certainly revolutionary. It was to this history that many of the women were loyal and it was this history that they defended by maintaining the collective structure. This was a conscious decision on the part of current members of the collective.

Similarly the formal structure of Young Women's Accommodation Service reflected the organisation's connection to the YWCA, which for many of these women was the source of much pride and respect. This connection allowed these women to pursue their visions for girls and women in the Northern Territory as well as nationally and internationally. The existence of hierarchical structures established a foundation for these broad connections and did not deter the women from naming both the organisation, and often themselves, as feminist.

The Women and Children's Refuge had intentionally developed a hybrid structure as it sought to avoid the possibilities of tension and conflict that they believed could permeate a formal collective, though at the same time the structure aimed to retain some of the benefits of collegial working relationships among staff. Similarly, within the WCR management group, some women described the working practices as collective and consensual, but many recalled events where the authority of the management group in relation to the staff group was exercised. So though the hierarchy was limited, it was, at times, purposefully exercised in certain situations and contexts. Similarly no particular organisational form was linked clearly to a particular strand of feminist ideology. While some of the women who were part of the more hierarchical organisation defined themselves as more conservative, not all of them did, and a number of women in the YWAS considered their understanding of feminism to be more radical than that of their colleagues. The collective organisation was not dominated by women who considered their feminist analysis radical; on the contrary some of their comments indicated that they would seek out and encourage a focus on commonalities before rejecting a woman's less radical analysis. Again organisational form could not be considered to be a demonstration of a particular strand of feminism and most of these women were attracted to the issues about which the organisations were active and a general, woman-centred analysis rather than the specifics of a liberal or radical analysis. These findings would suggest that a focus on organisational form and structure in feminist organisational practice is not particularly useful. While the formal organisational structure may be one of the ways women demonstrate the feminist nature of the organisation, it need not be. These women, it seemed, sought a multitude of possibilities when it came to creating a useful, workable organisation and focusing only on structure and form does not necessarily contribute to a complete awareness of how these women understood the practical application of their feminist values.

### 7.2.2. Collective Inclinations

Despite the marked differences in formal organisational structure between these services, the women who worked within them demonstrated similar tendencies towards collectivism. Even women who were quite critical of collective organisations cited strategies such as consensual decision-making, rotating roles and sharing expertise and knowledge as features of the way they worked together. Many women suggested that though the organisational structure was an official entity that could be used if necessary; it neither described nor prescribed their relationships with each other. Hence the Board of Directors managing the YWAS and the Management Committee of the WCR described similar mechanisms of internal communication, intra – group decision-

making, delegation of tasks and commitment to fellow group members as the Coordinating Collective of the RCS. The staff groups of the YWAS and the WCR described interactions, group meetings and decision-making processes that had much in common with the work practices of the women at the Rape Counselling Service. This suggests that women in all-women environments do tend towards opportunities for collective, consensual organising at the micro level and it is these opportunities, rather than the formal structures, that are likely to directly influence women's organisational experience.

### 7.2.3 Participative, Transparent Decision-making

The comments of the women in this research did establish that participating in the decision-making of the organisation, as suggested by the literature, was an important feature of their organisational experience. Interestingly, and corroborating some of the comments above, this participation was not determined by the type of decision-making model formally used by the organisation. Consensus, consultation, bureaucratic and even authoritative models of decision-making were discernable in these organisations. The women who were participants and recipients of these different models were consistent in their expectations. They wanted to understand how the model actually worked. They wanted to know the pathways and avenues that allowed for their input and they wanted to feel confident that their input was given due consideration.

These women recognised that any model of decision-making could produce these positive features and any of the models could fail. The women who were part of the collective using consensus decision-making found that at times consensus could be less than transparent. Some women from the WCR and YWAS had at times experienced the models of consultation practised in their organisation as perfunctory and disempowering. A lack of understanding of how consensual decision-making worked excluded women from the processes of the collective as surely as the imposition of a tokenistic consultation model excluded women of the YWAS and the WCR. Being asked for an opinion, being listened to and being taken seriously, all contributed to a sense of engagement and participation and were features individual women claimed could be evident in all models. The women all spoke positively of decision-making processes that incorporated these features. Used transparently, with participation faithfully pursued, any model could facilitate women's genuine involvement in organisational processes.

This suggests that a particular model of decision-making was not as important for these women as was a commitment to making their participation possible and ensuring it was valued by the organisation. They identified real and significant conduits that allowed them full participation in

the decision-making apparatus of the organisation and were equally familiar with the barriers and obstacles to that involvement. These facilitative features and impediments could exist in all the models of decision-making used.

#### 7.2.4 Flexible Work Conditions

As the last chapter elucidates, an organisational understanding of the double burden carried by working women, and a commitment to easing this burden in practical ways, was significant in contributing to positive working experiences for these women. Organisations demonstrated this understanding and commitment by welcoming children in the workplace, allowing women flexibility in work hours and providing child care for out-of-hours meetings or additional activities. Women spoke positively of being able to negotiate less than full time hours and of being able to attend emergencies if they arose. Unlike the experiences of women in traditional organisations, at least as they are recorded in the literature, these women were confident that the affirmative conditions they enjoyed did not come at a cost to their career or health. They were not perceived as unreliable or punished with less interesting duties or significantly lower pay. Nor were they forced to endure the unrelenting obligations of negotiating child care, undertaking domestic labour, and working long non-negotiable hours at the expense of their own emotional and physical health. Women in decision-making roles in the organisations were well aware of the family responsibilities working women carried and considered these responsibilities in their decision-making processes.

All these experiences confirm the feminist analyses of women's work that suggest that it is the inherent hostility of traditional organisations and their incumbents to the reality of women's lives that is more influential on women's work environments and therefore their work choices than personal attributes such as ambition or ability. The practice in these three organisations also confirms that women do not have to work in particular types of organisational structures to enjoy the benefits of flexible work conditions, though clearly women-centred environments are more attuned to women's needs in this area than other working environments. All organisational structures can accommodate and provide this flexibility to women if they so choose.

#### 7.2.5 Work That Makes a Difference

One of the important experiences described by women in all three organisations was their participation in activities that were aimed at social change or that 'made a difference'. Sometimes this activity related to involvement in public events such as Reclaim the Night rallies or International Women's Day marches or speaking out in the media to challenge decisions or policies. On other occasions women described more subtle examples of action aimed at changing

policy, institutional practices or legislation. This included participation in committees and networks with the explicit goal of advocating for either the service or for the women who used the service. It could also include writing submissions, tendering for services or negotiating more inclusive processes in government decision-making bodies. The activities described here clearly established that these types of activism were fundamental to the practice of feminist services and integral to the reasons why women worked in these services. In addition the women involved in this research talked about their daily work practices as a form of activism. The ways in which they understood their relationships with the women who used the services, the ways in which they understood their negotiations with external organisations and services and the processes they used to make decisions about services and tasks were all described by some women as examples of feminist activism. This form of activism, in particular, illuminates a particularly valuable function of feminist services.

For example, this research took place in a climate of political conservatism that was, at times, explicitly hostile to the public claims and activities of feminist women. This hostility was acutely felt by these women to the extent that many of them were contemplating their withdrawal from public activism. However to suggest that such decisions indicate a decline in feminist activism or a lack of commitment to feminist values ignores the meaning these women instilled in their daily practice. Even if women are forced into positions of retreat from the more public forms of social change activity, understanding their daily work practices as a contribution to social change leads to a re-thinking of suggestions that feminism is in abeyance. Feminist organisations play an important role in providing a haven for feminist women to continue to contribute to the feminist cause without necessarily exposing themselves to virulent attacks. Within these safe spaces feminism appears as vigorous and lively as ever. Women use feminist analyses to understand their work, their home-life and their own needs. They debate issues and value woman-ness. When surrounded by a hostile environment, feminist women need such space to recoup their resources and rebuild their resilience. Far from using this type of 'culture building' and 'free havens' as an excuse for avoiding social change activity (Taylor & Rupp, 1993), these women identified that the processes and practices used to create such spaces *are* feminist activism. These are the ways in which feminist services can contribute to the ongoing existence of networks and resources that can be reactivated publicly when acceptance is more likely. They create and nourish an oppositional culture in ways that are progressive and challenging to traditional organisational practices and as such they sustain participation in movement activity by providing options and choices about what that activity might look like.



### 7.3 *Inclusion and Difference*

The second aim of this study was to investigate issues of inclusion and difference in feminist organisations and for women working in feminist organisations. I was particularly interested in questions about how individual women and organisations understood concepts of difference and how this understanding was translated into organisational policy and individual practice. Predictably, given the extent of the debate about these very issues in the Australian and international literature, the experiences and ideas described here by these women provide few concrete answers and raise even more questions.

From their comments I would conclude that these women were familiar with the theoretical debates and discussions that have permeated the feminist literature. They recognised their own homogeneity and the myriad of ways they could as a group exclude, through their sameness, women who experienced the world differently for whatever reason. The women were particularly aware of their whiteness, one commenting '*it's a whitefellas group really*' (Kara, WCR). The two indigenous women, and the few women whose backgrounds were other than white/Anglo, were acutely aware of the differences between their own life experiences and those of many of the other women in the organisation - particularly women who were part of management groups. These latter women were representative of the traditional women's movement – women who had historically initiated feminist services. Not all of them were apologetic about this. This somewhat more defiant approach was demonstrated by the women who were concerned about becoming '*immobilised by diversity*' (Barbara, RCS) or believed '*we can't be inclusive of everybody or we'll destroy ourselves in the trying*' (Stella, WCR).

Many of the women involved in this research believed the service provided through the organisation of which they were a part was respectful of difference and did respond appropriately to Indigenous women and women of non-English speaking backgrounds. As this research did not explore service delivery issues, it can make no assessment regarding these claims; however other women in all three of the services indicated that their work with women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds would be enhanced if Indigenous women or women from non-English speaking backgrounds were present in the organisation, particularly in the staff group. Women stated that they thought more Indigenous women or women from culturally diverse backgrounds might access the service or at least know about the service or if these women did use the service they might feel more welcome and more comfortable. Some of the women who participated in this research believed their own work with women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds would be improved if they could consult and discuss issues with a woman from a similar background or who had at least had similar experiences. For these

reasons many of the women in this research believed that inclusion was a worthwhile goal to continue pursuing.

But their ideas for how to pursue such a goal, with more successful outcomes than they had achieved to date, were limited. These women were familiar with strategies like targeting particular women for both employment and voluntary management service. But, they countered, this strategy potentially overworked and overburdened the few Indigenous women or women from culturally diverse backgrounds who indicated an interest in being involved in feminist services. The women were familiar with the strategies of positive discrimination where specific positions might be created for women from different backgrounds but were equally conscious of the implicit hazards of these approaches such as tokenism, isolation and patronization. One of these organisations had some success in achieving diversity amongst their staff group because the person responsible for the hiring of staff was an indigenous woman who was candid in her intention to seek diversity. This situation is similar to that described by Grahame (1998) where the all white organisation in which she was employed only began to change when a woman of colour was employed as Director and focused employment policies on 'hiring for diversity'. By the time Grahame was writing of her experience in this organisation, the cultural backgrounds of employees were significantly more diverse, and white, Anglo women were a minority in both staff and management groups. Certainly some of the literature suggests that such explicit strategies are required. As early as 1985, Suvendrini Perera identified that

What we want from the mainstream movement...is more than just goodwill – a willingness to let minority women define their own experience in its specificity, a responsiveness to different women's needs and priorities, and most important, a commitment to devote to these issues some careful thought and planning so that they have more to offer than good intentions and a haphazard willingness to accommodate minorities within their already defined boundaries (1985, p. 15).

Clearly the employment strategies of the YWAS intended to move beyond goodwill and make a firm and explicit commitment to placing women from diverse backgrounds and experiences within the organisation. But, as has been described in some detail, these strategies are localised and have not always been translated into more diversity in the power and authority positions of the broad organisation. As such these strategies could be seen to be as ineffective and as misleading as those described by Mike Savage (1992), where male dominated organisations began to move women into management positions but simultaneously moved the power and authority to instigate cultural change into other, more senior management positions. While there is no suggestion that the YWCA created such a situation intentionally, the outcome is similar and most women from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds remain in lower level,

relatively powerless positions. It is possible that the cultural diversity evident among the staff of the YWCA programs could diminish if the current Executive Director left that position.

There is some literature that suggests that the inclusion project, pursued in the manner these services have chosen, is inherently flawed. Seeking to include women from different backgrounds into feminist services as they are already established, is reinforcing the marginalised position of these women. The organisation is already established, the issue already defined, and the strategies for action already entrenched. Again Kamini Grahame's (1998) and Jo Reger's (2002) work offers some possible avenues for rethinking these dilemmas.

As was discussed in chapter six the women involved in this research demonstrated the capacity to create useful collective identities, even though differences rather than commonalities appeared more accentuated. As Reger (2002) has described, women already use this flexible approach to collective feminist identity to counter external pressures and hostility. It is equally possible to imagine the scenario where women move beyond the confines of the currently defined feminist services sector and forge coalitions or alliances with women (particularly women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds) who are involved in a myriad of other activities. For example more Indigenous women work in the education setting, or as Aboriginal Health workers. Many women from non-English speaking backgrounds have been attracted to issues around employment initiatives. Their daily work practices, like those of the women working in feminist services and as described by Grahame (1998), is activist work, action aimed at changing social practices to better meet the needs of marginalised and disadvantaged groups. By recognising the activism inherent in other sectors, alliances or coalitions focusing on specific issues may prove to be more successful in ensuring the women's movement is cognizant and proactive in issues of importance for women of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

This focus on "strategic alliances" (Scott, 1998; Spry, 1997) or "coalition approaches" (Ostrander, 1999; White, 1999) has been suggested, particularly by women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, as one way to move the project of inclusion forward. They suggest that "developing strategic alliances does not imply that alliances developed between groups for the purposes of specific political action will remain intact and stable for all time and for all circumstances" (Spry, 1997, p. 5). Instead, Aaronette White identified that such an approach could achieve short term but nonetheless meaningful occasions of collaborative exchange between previously separate groups.

Oppressed groups have subjugated knowledges and perspectives that are not reflected in the conceptual schemes of dominant groups. To uncover such perspectives, each group must be allowed to speak from its own partial, situated reality. ... [W]hen a coalition-focused approach to the framing process is adopted, a Black feminist frame can

transcend the master frames of the black civil rights and feminist social movements and serve as the nexus between both movements (1999, p. 95).

This possibility was not investigated in depth in this research however the issues and dilemmas identified by the women in this research suggest that current avenues of inclusion have done little to change the absence of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from feminist services. Exploring both the sites of activism for such women and the possibilities of strategic coalitions between these sites and feminist services could be a worthwhile future project.

#### **7.4 *Women's Relationships***

The final aim of this research was to explore the ways in which women influenced their own experience within organisations, challenging the notion that women were passive recipients of organisational policy and directives. Instead, this study proceeded from the position that women were active in identifying the positive factors of organisational life and innovative in harnessing these factors to facilitate the development of a nurturing positive environment.

Consistently, as the words and insights shared in chapter five and six demonstrate, these women spoke about their relationships with other women. They discussed the ways in which they fostered and tended these relationships; they spoke of specific ways they felt connected to other women and the ways they tried to develop and maintain these connections. Because these relationships were mostly positive and warm, they provided women with the motivation and inspiration for where and how they worked. The women afforded each other support and encouragement to pursue social action and engage in community debate, and gathered around each other to provide sanctuary if necessary. They did not always socialise after work but sometimes they did. They cared for each other's emotional well being and self esteem. While the specific actions were different for different women, the almost universal strategy used by these women to create a positive organisational experience for themselves was their attention to the intricacies of their relationships with each other.

It is through their relationships with the other women around them, that the women who were part of this research claimed they influenced and impacted on the nature and quality of their organisational experience. The development of strategies for understanding the nature of these relationships and promoting their significance while addressing their complexities remains then, a fundamental undertaking for feminist organisations.

### ***7.5 Possibilities for Future Research***

This research has highlighted at least four areas where future research with women in feminist organisations appears warranted and potentially useful.

Firstly it would be a worthwhile project to further explore an area alluded to by Kamini Grahame (1998). She suggests, and the comments of the women here, anecdotally at least, confirm that women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are not uninvolved in feminist social action nor are they necessarily uninterested or indifferent to the concerns and activities of feminist organisations. These women are, however, more likely to be involved in areas of social action that are ignored or invisible to mainstream feminist women as they fall outside the white, western understanding of feminist activism. Moves to seduce women from different backgrounds into feminist organisations that are predominantly white and westernised when they don't seek this inclusion themselves have been unsuccessful and are potentially disempowering. Research, which is informed by feminist standpoint theory (D. E. Smith, 1974) and begins from women's everyday understandings of social action, could usefully identify the sites of change considered to be most useful to Indigenous women and women from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Within these sites it may be possible to identify the possibilities of coalition building and the development of strategic alliances. Such avenues may be identified as fruitful networks for feminist services to pursue, though specific attention would need to be taken to ensure agendas and processes are developed democratically and participatively.

The second area of future study that could be anticipated by this research is a closer examination of the internal practices of feminist organisations. Perhaps through the strategies of action research the possibility and potential of women developing a different understanding of power and powerful women in feminist circles could be achieved. Closely linked to these explorations could be the examination of strategies aimed at alerting women to the possibility of conflict and disharmony and explicitly articulating the methods for dealing with such occurrences. Research with these foci could assist women's services in avoiding the heart wrenching and soul-destroying nature of intense internal organisational disputes. It could also provide some opportunities to progress an examination of the nature of women's relationships with each other.

Another area worthy of further exploration is the position of coordinators in women's services. This research has identified the integral nature of these positions and the subsequent heavy burdens carried by the women incumbents. In many ways it appears the successful functioning of the organisation and the positive nature of women's organisational experiences are at least partly dependent on the quality of the coordinator's work practices. The questions of 'how',

‘why’ and ‘what’ remain unanswered by this research and further exploration of this area could usefully identify strategies and supports important for the ongoing development of feminist organisations.

This research has located itself clearly within a specific geographic and historical context and established this as a particularly unsupportive environment in which these organisations operated. As briefly identified in the postscript to chapter four, this environment has undergone dramatic and welcome (at least to the women in this research) changes. It would be of particular interest to examine if this changed environment has impacted on the issues and concerns identified here. For example is the pursuit of public social action initiatives more rewarding? Are organisations less likely to compete with each other and more likely to co-exist in relative harmony now that the external environment poses less of a threat? Is it easier to attract and retain women and other resources to the organisation in an environment where the ideology and practices of the organisation are valued and respected? Research aimed at exploring these areas further has much to contribute to our understanding of feminist organisations and their relationship with the external socio-political environment.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This research has served to highlight the complex nature of feminist organisations and affirmed the tenacity and courage of the women who work in them. Feminist organisations are not the sites of blissful, uncomplicated 'sisterhood' that I at one time imagined. But nor are they the abode of the 'Feminist Nazis' where humour, optimism and hope are non-existent. These are sites of negotiation and complexity. Women who work in feminist organisations are particularly attuned to the messiness of the feminist agenda and make concerted attempts to address the intricacies and dilemmas of putting this agenda into practice. They are not always successful but their experiences have much to offer our ongoing search for better ways to work together in the spirit of harmony and friendship; with women, for women.

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## **Appendices**

### ***Appendix A: Preamble / Cover Story***

Dear -----,

As many of you know my name is Debra Miles, and I am a social worker currently undertaking research as part of my Ph.D. studies through James Cook University of North Queensland. I work as a lecturer in the social work discipline at the Northern Territory University. Over the next twelve months I will be undertaking the data collection component of my Ph.D. research and I am writing to ask if your organisation would be prepared and willing to be involved.

My research is about the experiences of women who work in women-centred or feminist organisations. This idea has grown from my own (mostly positive) experiences of working with and in women centred services over the last three to four years. In talking with other women who have also worked in these types of services, I have found my interest (as well as my respect and admiration) has been heightened by their perspectives, ideas, experiences and ways of working.

As you are probably aware much of the organisational literature around women's experiences in organisations suggests that women do not fare well. Women are often excluded from the opportunity to effect decision-making in organisations; their contribution is often undervalued; and they assume many additional responsibilities for their families that impact on their work.

I approach this research as a feminist, and certainly feminism has contributed to some of the critiques of women's experiences. Feminist practice would have us believe that women who are part of feminist organisations are more involved and more included. My research will explore if this is so. I hope to look at what it is like for women who work in feminist or women - centred organisations and how women experience this work. I am also interested in how women understand inclusion particularly for women of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds into the organisation. If many different women are included, how does the organisation deal with and manage the difference between women. I am also interested in what strategies women use to effect their own experience.

I would like to talk to as many women as I can who work in or are volunteers or are, in any way, involved in your organisation. I would also like to include any organisational documentation that you believe would be appropriate and relevant, such as newsletters, annual reports, or pamphlets, which describe your organisation. It is not my intention to seek any contact with service users. While I have approached you as a management committee first, I would like to invite individual women to participate personally. I would provide them with information about the research (such as is provided here), an

assurance that any information from the research will be treated as confidential and allow them to make their own voluntary decision about participating.

My plan at this stage is to use semi-structured interviews where I have some broad themes in mind but basically I encourage women to discuss their experiences as they choose. I imagine each interview would take about one and a half hours. I will also be providing all the participants with a written transcript of their interview and no information will be used or analysed without the women's permission.

I would of course be very happy to share with your organisation any results of my overall research though the individual responses and information about individual organisations will be maintained as confidential through the use of pseudonyms. It may be hard in a small town like Darwin to be completely anonymous however and I will talk with each of the women about this. I want to assure you that it is not my intention to examine service delivery issues - my interest is primarily in the things women who work in the organisation have to say about what that work feels like. I think the research has the potential to be useful to organisations seeking ways to develop inclusive and participatory ways of working.

I would be very happy to discuss this with the management group or a representative and will make contact in the near future. If you have any questions or concerns I can be contacted on 89466819

Thank you for considering this request and I look forward to talking to you soon.

Yours Sincerely  
Deb Miles

*Appendix B: Consent Form*

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**  
**James Cook University of North Queensland**

**School:** Social Work and Community Welfare

**Project:** The Experiences of Women in Feminist Organisations

**Chief Investigator:** Debra Miles

**Contact Details:** School of Social Sciences, NTU  
Ph. 89466819

**Description:**

The aim of this project is to explore the experiences of women who work in or volunteer in or are members of feminist organisations. This information will be gathered through interviews of about 1.5 - 2 hours in length. With your permission these interviews will be audiotaped though you may choose not to have your interview taped if you prefer. Participation in the interviews is entirely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time. The researcher will provide participants with a written transcript of their interview for their modification and approval prior to any analysis.

All data collected in this project will be kept strictly confidential. No identifying information will be used without permission. The raw data will be destroyed after being converted to disk. These disks will be securely stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's workplace.

**CONSENT**

The aims of this study have been clearly explained to me and I understand what is wanted of me. I know that taking part in this study is voluntary and I am aware that I can stop taking part in it at any time and may choose not to answer any questions. I understand the information I give will be kept confidential and that no names will be used to identify me with this study without permission.

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SIGNATURE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

Witnessed by researcher obtaining consent

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SIGNATURE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Appendix C: Preamble to Interviews***

Well as you know I am completing my Ph.D. through James Cook University and my topic is about women's experiences in feminist organisations. I am really interested in your experiences of working /volunteering at (*organisations name*). My intention with the research is to understand a bit more about feminist organisations from the point of view of the women who work in them. As you know I am active in some feminist organisations in Darwin and I wonder sometimes about the place of feminist organisations in the wider picture of health and welfare services. I think this research can help us deal with situations that arise particularly when funding bodies seem unsupportive. If you have any questions about the research or what I hope to do with any of the information please feel free to ask me at any time.

I really appreciate that you have agreed to do this interview with me, and I expect it will take about one and a half to two hours. I don't really have any specific questions but I do have a bit of a guide to some subject areas. Please feel free to stop at any time and if there are any areas that you would rather not talk about just let me know. Do you have any questions now?



## Appendix D: Interview Themes and Prompts

## Prompts for Interviews

This schedule is intended as a prompt and a guide only. Some areas will be relevant for some participants and others not.

## **Biographical details**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship Status: \_\_\_\_\_  
Position in organisation: \_\_\_\_\_ Children: \_\_\_\_\_  
Length of experience /involvement in this organisation: \_\_\_\_\_  
Other organisations involved in and length of time: \_\_\_\_\_  
Identification as feminist: \_\_\_\_\_  
Perception of feminist models of organisations: \_\_\_\_\_

## Theme One: Experiences of organisational life

The major aim of this research is to look at the experiences of women in the organisation. Can you tell me what it is like for you as a member of this organisation?

Prompts:

- What do you do? Do you like what you do? Do you enjoy coming to work?
- What things make this work in this place enjoyable?
- What is the most important thing that happens in this organisation?
- Who does it? What is the best thing about being a part of this organisation?
- How are decisions made? Do you think this is a good process? What is positive in this process? What costs are there in this process
- What part do you play in decision-making?
- How are tasks allocated?
- How are people paid?
- What impact do you think you have or could have on this organisation?
- What do you know about other people's roles?
- What do they know about yours?
- Are there things that could be done differently here?
- How could that happen?
- If something goes wrong, who is responsible?
- If a worker is not doing their job, who is responsible for rectifying that?
- If a member of the organisation is misusing their position how would that be rectified?
- Have you been involved in other organisations?
- What was that like for you?
- Which do you prefer? Why?
- Do you consider this a feminist organisation?

What is feminist about this organisation? What do you think are the difficulties in this organisation? How could these be overcome?

Can you give an example of a recent decision that you felt involved in?

Can you give an example of when something conflictual happened here and it was dealt with? How did you feel about that?

How does this organisation handle the demands of funding bodies and other external bodies?

Are there aspects of those demands that undermine what you think this organisation should be about?

## Theme Two: Experiences and observations of inclusiveness

This organisation wants to be inclusive to all women regardless of race, class, age, disability, sexual preference, or other personal characteristics. Can you tell me about your ideas of this organisation and inclusiveness?

Prompts: Have you felt included /excluded?  
 What does that feel like?  
 Can you give me an example of when you felt included / excluded?  
 Have you observed incidences that have left others included/excluded?  
 How did that happen?  
 How did the other react?  
 How did you feel?  
 Is it hard to include everyone here?  
 What are the issues?  
 What are the principals of inclusion that the organisation uses?  
 How does the organisation put them into practice/?  
 Can you give examples of times that this has worked/not worked?  
 Use scenarios of possible inclusion/exclusion.

EG:

Your organisation agrees to facilitate a collective group to organise the reclaim the night activities this year. Two women attend from the local student association. They have very firm views about the activities and want men and male adolescents to be banned. This is quite different from other RTN activities and many of the collective tell your organisation that they don't want to be involved. How would this organisation handle this situation?

## Theme Three: Strategies for Influencing experience in organisation

This research has the assumption that women generally do things in their workplace to make that work and that organisation a good or at least better place to be. Can you tell me about some of the things that you do here to create a place that is good for you to be?

Prompts; Interpersonal strategies  
 Personal goals  
 Broader strategies within organisation  
 Strategies external to organisation?  
 Examples of these strategies in action?  
 Strategies of resistance.