

WORKING IN A FEMINIST ORGANISATION: FEMINISM & CHANGE



Women's Health Goulburn North East is a feminist organisation.

Feminism means different things to different people. As feminist workers for WHGNE we have in common a desire to empower women, hear their stories and acknowledge their real, lived experiences. We see gender implicated in violence, exploitation and oppression, and recognise that women's power is also mitigated by their class, culture, (dis)ability, religion, sexuality and life experiences.

The 2009-2012 WHGNE Strategic Plan includes a priority to:

'Facilitate social inclusion and promote positive mental health for women in a changing environment'

To address this priority, a 'Rural Women and Change' research project is being undertaken in 2011, including a literature review and interviews with women in the Hume Region.

As a beginning point we asked ourselves - **'as feminists how do we understand 'change'?'** and reviewed Theories of Change.

Here are our conclusions:

All WHGNE's health promotion work involves 'change' of one sort or another. We work to build the capacity of direct service organisations to support women through times of change in their lives e.g. leaving a family violence situation or recovering from bushfires. We also advocate for positive systems change to improve gender equity and human rights.

After a number of discussions, we decided our feminist work to support women through times of change most clearly aligns with social change, strength's based, story-telling and community development understandings of change.

In our every day work this means:

- We address entrenched gender inequality by adding our power to women's voices
- We listen to women's stories and advocate with women for positive change in their lives
- We look for and build on people's strengths
- We educate direct service providers to reflect upon and improve their response to women.

Feminism & Change

"The Women Gathering workshop gave me the skills and especially the confidence to go back to the group and negotiate change"
(Women Gathering program participant¹ 2010)

To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the face of fate is strength undefeatable.
(Helen Keller)

The only constant is change
(Heraclitus, 500BC)

Theories of Change explored - Summary

Change can be understood as a linear, cyclic or dialectic processⁱ. The main theories of change we explored were: Biological Systemsⁱⁱ, Organisational Changeⁱⁱⁱ, Symbolic Interactionism^{iv}, Social Cognitive Learning^v, Asset Based Community Development^{vi}, Transtheoretical Model^{viii}, Feminist Social Change^{ix}, Strength-Based^x, Constructivist Story-telling^{xi}, Chaos/Complexity Theory^{xii}, Transformative Dialogue.^{xiii}

How bureaucracies tend to view 'change':

In Australia the dominant culture and paradigm is often described as patriarchal and economic rationalist in nature. This aligns most closely to a linear understanding of change that usually preferences scientifically generated knowledge and aims to convince people to change and behave differently to achieve better outcomes predetermined by 'experts'.

WHGNE's preferred theories of change are more closely aligned to the cyclical and dialectical understandings of change.

Therefore, 'working in a feminist organisation' involves:

- being prepared to be 'inconvenient voices' questioning the dominant paradigm,
- regularly articulating and arguing for feminist ways of working within funding and reporting documents,
- advocating for different ways of doing business that encourage listening and including different voices and points of view at the grass roots and at the decision making table,
- seeing women as holding the knowledge of their experiences, assisting in making visible the social factors shaping their experiences and using these accounts to influence policy,
- challenging injustice and 'power over' situations by emphasising self-determination, rights and respect (power with)
- remembering that meaningful and lasting change originates from local people and communities; and
- ongoing reflection and consciousness raising amongst women as workers and community members.

Next steps:

- ✓ We welcome your reflections on 'Feminism and Change'
- ✓ WHGNE will continue regular and active dialogue about our work through strength-based peer supervision sessions
- ✓ Complete 'Rural Women and Change' research project
- ✓ WHGNE will approach WHAV to consider a collective sharing of 'Working in a feminist organisation' knowledge between all women's health centres.

WHGNE preferred theories of change:

Feminist Social Change
Strength Based Approach
Storytelling Change Work
ABCD Community Development Model

More about 'change'

'social change is the constant creation, negotiation and re-creation of the social order'^{xiv}

'change is produced in and through conversation and discourse'^{xv}

'story-telling change work aims to strengthen marginalised and silenced voices by inviting the telling and recording of lived experiences'^{xvi}

'some change when they see the light, others when they feel the heat'^{xvii}

Useful References:

- ⁱ Women Gathering Journey report 2011 (to be published)
- ⁱⁱ Van der veen: accessed 18 March 2011
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lewin (1951) in Kritsonis (2004)
- ^{iv} Ferdig (2001)
- ^v Mead, M. in Van der veen
- ^{vi} Robbins in Kritsonis (2004)
- ^{vii} Bank of IDEAS (accessed March 2011)
- ^{viii} Prochaska & DiClemente in Kritsonis (2004)
- ^{ix} Sarachild (1978)
- ^x St. Luke's Bendigo
- ^{xi} Hosking (2004)
- ^{xii} Ferdig (2001)
- ^{xiii} Stacey in Ferdig (2001)
- ^{xiv} Van der veen (2011)
- ^{xv} Ford (2008)
- ^{xvi} Hosking (2004)
- ^{xvii} Caroline Schoeder

Full references: WHGNE Theories of Change: Summary is available upon request.