

**Women Organizing for Change:  
Transformational Organizing as a Strategy for Feminist  
Development**

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**Abstract**

The organizing strategies of women coming together to do development matter if women's long term strategic interests, rooted in the transformation of the structures of subordination which characterize relations between women and men, are to be met. Hierarchical ways of organizing hamper rather than help women because they prevent women from learning the most effective ways of transforming inequitable relations among themselves and within the organization and then translating that knowledge to the transformation of inequitable relations in the larger society. If we are going to be able to do development in ways that suit us, we need to first confront and overcome the processes of marginalization in our own organizations, in order to confront and overcome these same processes outside our organizations. Through relations of entrustment, we need to create a non-hierarchical, participative, interdependent social order

among us which fosters the sharing of the most important organizing strategy, the skill of political strategizing, so we can do development in ways that suit us.

In the spring of 1998 I went overseas as a participant in a CIDA project<sup>i</sup> and all of the difficulties of being a feminist doing development rapidly became apparent. Those things I had glossed over before I left: an inadequate budget, itself proxy for our limited importance within the project although it had been funded on the basis of our full and equal participation, colleagues who weren't comfortable calling themselves feminists, other colleagues who saw us merely as an addition necessary for funding but not inclusion, dogged our footsteps like ghosts. Our marginality within the initial proposal process and now the project itself was heightened and underlined by our experiences there: grudging acceptance by the overseas institution was mirrored by the Canadian institution's indifference. The principle which CIDA itself states as its second priority after basic human needs: "the full participation of women as equal partners in the sustainable development of their societies"<sup>ii</sup> was routinely ignored by both institutions, underlined by the paucity of the budget for our section and our own inequality as participants.

This had not been the intent of the project, that women be minor participants, our only role dutifully carrying out the small bits flung to us while the men ran the show and collected most of the goodies, but that looked to be the result. The whole situation was an organizational problem that defied the common solutions found in most organizational texts or in the popular press: that in order to succeed, women must act like men, that in order to get anything done, women must find a male mentor/protector and just work within the system, getting along to go along. Faced with having to work within rigidly hierarchical systems that rewarded obedience to men rather than feminist commitment to change, that were, at best, covertly hostile to feminist goals, it was a sobering introduction to what little I was actually going to be able to do.

What might have prevented this state of affairs, where we were marginalized both in terms of our lack of access to money and by our subordination as participants, conditions which were inextricably intertwined and mutually reinforcing? There is no cookbook for translating feminist development policy into the successful realization of feminist development projects, although there is a great deal of literature pointing out how difficult that transition is (Young, p. 367, 1997). However, there are

organizing strategies, political in intent, that can lead to better results.

These politically adept organizing strategies are best understood within the context of transformatory organizing, which focuses not only on meeting women's short term practical or material needs, but on meeting women's long term strategic interests: on transforming male-female relations from relations of domination and subordination to relations characterized by women's freedom and ability to shape the world in ways that suit them<sup>iii</sup>. In other words, the means and the ends are inextricably intertwined--transformational organizing strategies used by women doing development are the means through which male-female relations are transformed in the larger society. These are organizing strategies which are about advocacy embedded in the ways we get things done within the context of how we relate to each other. Hierarchical relations inside our organizations alongside rhetorical commitments to eliminating hierarchical relations between men and women outside are not merely inconsistent--the presence of the one guarantees the failure of the other.

So within this context of transformational organizing strategies as the means of achieving the ends of women's long term strategic interests, I want to focus on two areas that I think most need to be attended to if feminist development projects are to succeed--equal access to money, and

rough equality among the participants, or the intersections of money, sex and power. These are not uncommon problems within development projects; lack of money and the failure to address who has power and why, are characteristics of most development projects dealing with women<sup>iv</sup>. Without money and rough equality among the [sexually specific]<sup>v</sup> participants, what can you put into play, to use Foucault's definition of power? Ultimately, what can you accomplish?

In this chapter I want to look at the development project I was involved in from two, intersecting, perspectives, one focusing on power and money--the budget--what was and what might have been; and the other focusing on power and people, or on the organizing strategies we did use, and the organizing strategies we should have used. The budget we had to work with set the stage for how the project was to be conducted; our organizing strategies were the means through which the project was to be realized; neither were adequate for what we wanted to achieve.

### **Setting the Stage: The Budget**

This brings me to my first focus, the budget, its initial allocation, and who controls the ongoing allocation of the budget monies. Money is a proxy

for power; it's not only about who has computers, or how many visits overseas your section rates, or how long these visits are to be. The power of money can't be hidden by calling it resources, and then justified; it has a symbolic value as a carrier of power relations between the sexes that can't be overlooked. In Buchanan's evocative phrase, money as Frozen Desire<sup>vi</sup> reveals if women are equal participants or mere add ons to meet funding requirements that women's needs be addressed, as in our case, where our component dealing specifically with women was not funded equally to the others. The feminist development literature is quite pointed in its analysis that less than equal budgets may fulfill women's short term needs, but only ensuring that women have equal funding will meet the criteria for transforming male-female relations from inequality to equality (cf. Visvanathan et al 1997, Parpart 1995, Braidotti, et al 1994). Money talks, and only an equal place at the table will provide us with the means to re-define development in a way that suits us, will allow us to question, using Luce Irigaray's (1985, 1994; cf. Goux, 1994) evocative phrase, the reign of the masculine neutral, where men masquerade as the neutral human, and the bulk of development monies and advantages flow to them.

As in my project, if the budget for a three component development project, one component focusing on women, two components focusing on the

neutral male, is not divided equally, the message sent indicates that a few of women's short-term practical needs may be met, but a less than equal budget renders impossible the meeting of women's strategic interests. If the budget for the women's component is less than equal to the others, it indicates that women are a mere addition to the main business of development: meeting men's needs as if they were the neutral human, the human without a sex who is actually male. Either ensuring that women are integrated into the development project as a whole, as CIDA indicates in its own guidelines, or meeting the goal of transforming male-female relations, the goals of feminist development, requires a budget roughly equal to the others. Money is power, and anything less than rough equality, no matter how it is justified, consigns women to the margins of the development project, as it did in the project I was involved in.

Ensuring that the budget is allocated equally is a matter for the funding agency; by withholding funding they have the means to ensure this. However, it would be much more effective if the funding agency was involved in the initial stages of writing the budget, through establishing clear guidelines with examples: that all project personnel be paid the same when working overseas, that women's sections not rely on volunteer efforts where the others do not, that the number of visits to ascertain conditions be

roughly equal, et cetera. In the first example, this prevents job classifications from being used to obscure that men inhabit some jobs and women others: using only job classifications virtually ensures that women will be paid much less. In another development project with which I was involved, there were wide differences in terms of education and experience among the male participants. The decision was taken to pay everyone equally to foster solidarity, a practical and preventive solution to what the men decided could develop into a divisive situation. They felt that equal pay was the prerequisite for solidarity, commitment, and responsibility, a principle not followed in my most recent experience.

I need to stress, however, that actual involvement by the funding agency is necessary; merely pointing out a policy is like a principal telling the bully not to beat up the little kid in the schoolyard, and then walking away. An equal budget allocation doesn't just happen as the result of stated guidelines; it's the result of discussion, and ultimately, of rejection of the budget if it does not meet those guidelines. However, reallocating budget money after the budget has been accepted is too difficult when everyone has to continue to work together; budget equality as a principle needs to be stressed, adhered to, and monitored from the beginning, not after the fact

when the various sections are already committed to spending what they see as their money.

Both the initial budget allocation and then the ongoing budget allocation for the duration of the project are areas that need to be carefully attended to, not only in the sense of meeting these larger goals, whether integration or transformation--the ends--but also in terms of the means. If the ends are going to be achieved, the means have to be consistent. An egalitarian budget allocation system needs to be put in place; maintaining a pyramidal organizational structure in terms of allocating money will not lead to egalitarian relations among the various sections. In my recent experience, rather than the director of a three-sectioned project, one of which is devoted to women, having sole signing authority, organizing arrangements which would produce more egalitarian relations require that each of the section leaders allocate on an ongoing basis the budget for their particular section. Women participants at a breakfast or lunch meeting don't want to have patriarchal relations reinstated when the male director picks up the tab; it's too much like the husband paying the bill, and an awful echo of development projects in the 1960s, where the administrator, mimicking the wise and altruistic patriarch, ensures that the women of the family get the necessary pin money (cf. Young, 1993, p. 18).

These intricate relations between money, sex and power which work to create and recreate relations of domination and subordination between men and women, so apparent in the above scenario, need to be carefully attended to if they are to be subverted. Less than equal budget allocation and less than egalitarian methods of allocating the budget reinforce women's subordination to men. Ensuring that the women's section of the project is equally funded as well as allocates its own money are forms of subversion, creating the egalitarian organizing strategies necessary for transformation of male-female relations both inside the development group and outside in the larger world. Women can't do development in ways that suit them when they're making do, patching, resewing and cutting down when the project sections devoted to the neutral male are all out buying new suits: the party can't be experienced in the same way.

### **The Means to the End: Transformatory Organizing Strategies**

This brings me to the second focus of this chapter: the transformational organizing strategies we needed to employ if we were going to be able to do development in ways that suited us, rather than as marginalized participants within the development project. What we were to do on our arrival was to participate with our counterparts, the members of a

small women's program located within a post-secondary institution, in the clarification of our joint vision regarding the development of a short-term educational programme for older, unemployed women.

In preparation for this, we focused on what we needed to do, drawing up a roster of who was to do what, deciding on the contents of our lectures, preparing factual material for the meetings, et cetera. In other words, we focused on information. However, as concerned as we were about ensuring that our information was full and complete, we completely overlooked thinking about the process: about how we were going to go about achieving what we wanted. The clarification of our joint vision didn't sound nebulous, but without careful attention to how we were going to do this, it was. We failed to ask ourselves about the process, about how exactly we were going to clarify our joint vision with our counterparts, about how we were going to bring about the realization of this vision. Nor did we attend to our own organizing processes beforehand as we went about gathering information and preparing the factual material for our discussions. Lunch is not a substitute for analysis and political strategizing, and things just don't happen at meetings, even with agendas.

For us, our focus on efficiency, lists, and deciding who did what and when left out the most important part of the equation, the how. What we did

not practice before we left for our overseas meetings, the construction of a shared political strategy, we could not do when we arrived for our meetings. My experience there was like being in separate racquet ball courts: I could hear the other ball in play, but I had no way of returning it. We laid out our factual information, our counterparts laid out theirs, but we existed in separate rooms. There was no process which could unite us, bring us together in joint involvement to decide what the educational programme was to be, and how we were to go about realizing it. What we had prepared was essentially annotated agendas, and without the means to strategize together with our counterparts, the decisions which were made, were not made by us, together. We exchanged information, politely, but the joint effort eluded us, as did the larger goal of meeting women's long term strategic interests, interests which supersede women's short term practical needs. In the absence of our ability to come together to strategize politically, the pre-eminent organizing strategy, the joint project remained stuck at its most limited level. It wouldn't be a failure, but it wouldn't be a success, either.

What we needed to do, and didn't, was to develop our ability to strategize politically, both before we left, among ourselves, and while we were there, with our counterparts. Exchanging information is not joint action; particularly in development projects, we always need some way of

figuring out how to work together in order to get something done. We can't just leave it to chance, emails, and dinners together. As Helen Brown (1992) has stressed, working together is not the result of social spontaneity or inspired anarchism; it requires thoughtful attention to the process of organizing in order to get something done.

I want to examine that process of organizing, but for the purposes of analysis, I want to pull apart this process, although I ask you to keep in mind that the parts of process to which I am going to refer to separately are inextricably linked. Without the presence of any one of these parts, the whole process would stand a much less likely chance of success. Having stated that, I would like to focus, first, on the four step organizing process of Lewis and Barnsley (1992) as the basis for the development of a political strategy; then on the mindful teaching, learning and sharing of all organizing skills which Helen Brown (1992) and Kate Young (1993) explore as the basis for political strategizing; and finally on Luce Irigaray and entrustment, or the relationship between two women, the one who wants and the one who knows, neither of whom can accomplish separately what they can together, or the essence of political strategizing in the interests of feminist development.

I would like to sketch out very briefly the four steps in the development of politically adept organizing strategies to give you a sense of

the importance of the process, and how it might be used in a development project. This process, with its explicit focus on the involvement of all participants, is particularly suited to women who do not share the same language but who do share a task, as was the case in our project. We needed an organizing process which would bring us together and provide us with ways of expressing ourselves which didn't privilege the spoken word. Lewis and Barnsley provide methods of organizing that involve drawing or writing as a way of ensuring that everyone is heard as the organizing strategy takes form, invaluable when you neither speak the same language, nor share the same backgrounds. Most importantly, this process can provide a forum which, in the act of developing a strategy for getting something done, creates a space where we can perhaps feel freer to talk--or to draw--all the other issues which usually remain undeveloped and unsaid because of politeness and the avoidance of conflict.

The first step, or grounding the issue, allows women to understand the issue from the basis of their experience of it, and to literally draw that experience as a way of locating the issue in terms of their own understanding of it. Without fear of judgement or censure, we can ask what we think this issue is about, validating our own experiences of it, and providing a map which forms the basis of the next step, analysing the issue.

This second step involves, once again, a drawing, in this case a web chart which provides a space for women to lay out causes, and causes of causes. It's a form of public analysis which rectifies the urge for the simple, quick fix as it works to focus, consolidate and clarify the issue. In our case, we lacked the means to address what offering a short term educational programme might mean for either of us, just as we lacked a sense of the historical context. Lacking a process other than quick synopses, we really had no way of coming together to do shared policy analysis, no way of bringing to the surface different visions which were part of the process of acknowledgement, rather than incidences of potential conflict which were best hidden.

Their third step, the development of a political strategy, arises out of the shared assessments, analyses, and accommodations of different points of view which are the necessary preliminaries to joint action. This third step, however, is not just simply deciding on an action, but drawing out the pros and cons of a number of actions, deciding on possible responses by both allies and opposition, and deciding on how we might as a group respond, in the context of short term and long term goals. It's a political mapping that needs to be done, and like the earlier step with its emphasis on the complexity of the causes leading to a particular definition of an issue, it

emphasizes the inter-relationship of power and action. Their final step is devoted to laying out strategic responses to the possible outcomes of various actions, as well as a detailed evaluation of the strategic action chosen, which provides the basis for subsequent actions, et cetera. These are steps which would have been invaluable for us if we had used them because they serve two functions: the ostensible one of developing a strategy to get something done which is detailed and politically adroit, and one that is less ostensible, but equally important: the development of solidarity between and among the women charged to work together to carry out a particular development task. When women working together are separated by an ocean, a culture and a language, the development of solidarity is a crucial aspect of any project timeline.

Overlaying this four step organizing process in the pursuit of a political strategy is the skill-sharing which must accompany it. These are organizing skills which are not privileged one above the other, or assigned to a person or a position, but taught to others and learned from others, including the skill of leading and the skill of political strategizing. Just as the organizing process just described develops solidarity as it develops political analysis and strategizing, so does the process of skill sharing. The teaching to others and the learning from others of skills like: information sharing and

consciousness raising, policy analysis and the creation of shared scenarios, networking and the creation of interdependencies, decision making, consensus and responsibility building and leading, culminating in the sharing of the skill of political strategizing, is fundamental to the creation of a non-hierarchical social order. Brown's point is that if we do not learn how to strategize politically in egalitarian ways, if we do not figure out ways of getting things done which do not re-establish hierarchies, we are doomed to participate in the continuous recreation of hierarchical relations between men and women. Our reality has to match our rhetoric, in other words.

The last organizing process I want to examine is entrustment. The organizing process explained by Lewis and Barnsley depends on egalitarian participation in the service of political action; Young and Brown focus on non-hierarchical participation in the shared skill of political strategizing as organizational skill sharing; Irigaray talks about how sharing is actually accomplished by two women, which she refers to as *affidamento* or entrustment (1994; cf. Whitford, 1991, Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, 1990).

Entrustment is the relationship between two adult women, the one who wants and the one who knows, neither of whom can accomplish alone what they can together. If, for example, the skill of leading or political

strategizing is to be shared, the act involves the teaching by one woman and the learning by another. That involves entrustment, which is itself more than just an organizational act aimed at a common goal. It is itself a political strategy, in that it embodies what has been unrepresented, the relationship between two women who are not the same, who are not equal, who are different. Entrustment gives us a way of thinking about a relationship between two people which neither requires difference as lesser, nor demands the erasure of sameness, where one must become the other in order to be equal. In our present symbolic structures in which we think, we have no representation of women who are different, what Irigaray terms the representation of the mother-daughter relationship, a representation which Irigaray maintains does not require hierarchical terms but which can be represented as contiguous or side by side. In this form of relationship we do not have to be the same as the other, and erase ourselves, nor are we required to be different, and therefore lesser. We can be the different, next to the different, without hierarchy, the one who wants beside the one who knows, in pursuit of what can only be accomplished together. Entrustment is crucial to the creation of the non-hierarchical social order on which the ability to strategize politically to achieve shared goals depends.

Regarding the organizing processes we did use, and those we should have, we needed to be much more strategically, politically, minded than we were; advocacy without political acumen isn't going to succeed; neither is advocacy without rough equality between the participants. In addition, as my analysis indicates, the condition that needs to accompany this rough equality between participants dedicated to transformational change is entrustment. Irigaray's analysis deals directly with the competition and fear that afflicts so many women in an environment where it's much easier to go along with powerful men than to put one's trust in another woman--certainly characteristics of many development projects where women are already marginalized, like ours. But individual success is no substitute for collective advancement, and entrustment gives us a way to move towards our goal without abandoning or being abandoned by each other. Entrustment is not merging with the other, the fear of the less powerful towards the more powerful woman, nor is it mere situational pragmatism, tit for tat at its most blatant. Instead, entrustment recognizes that if women are to succeed they have to have some means through which both individually and collectively they can transform the relations which require their subordination.

We practice entrustment unknowingly; we need to make it more specific, to recognize it as the foundation for political strategizing which is always a form of organizing for change. Funding agencies are not outside this process; Hester Eisenstein (1995) has pointed out the absolute necessity of working with what she terms femocrats, women within the bureaucracies who need our help just as we need theirs if we are together to succeed, an analysis which meets the condition of entrustment. Women working in development projects need to take the establishment of these relations and the possibility of entrustment seriously, and make the point to work much more closely with these women (cf. Goertz), just as we needed to do more of in our own project.

This same process of entrustment as the basis for political strategizing/organizing needs to be brought into play with women partners in the overseas development projects, as the only way to overcome the fear and competition for scarce resources, the marginality that has been written into the projects. What I observed is what little success we did achieve was the result of the relationships we established with each other, the at first tentative sharing of experiences which always form the basis for trust, the awkward attempts to find common ground. These were always played out in the context of a nearly complete lack of access to resources, which

hampered our attempts, but it did underlie how powerful women's attempts to ponder together the sources of our oppressions and to find solutions to them, not necessarily the same solutions, but nonetheless to seek them together, can be. Needless to say, these tentative explorations of commonalities, the basis for entrustment and then political strategizing, were carried out when no men were present, which seemed a condition for subversive political activity.

This to me also indicates that the analysis of relative equality can not be confined to the group of development workers here, but must be extended to the partners overseas. Even if a women's section within a larger project is equally funded and autonomous, if it must work with a group of women who are not, who have been marginalized in the writing up of the project on their end, success will elude us. The examination of the power relations between men and women of the overseas partner needs to be brought to the forefront; presuming that a title is a clear indication of power in an organization dominated by men is not enough. A much more thorough analysis of resources available also needs to be made; as an example, do the other areas have access to computers, and the partner for the women's section have none? This constant examination of who has access of resources, who has power within the organization as these resources

indicate, and what that implies, are necessary if development projects are going to succeed, and at least in my experience, that entails working with a woman dominated group. At a minimum, entrustment as a basis for political strategizing rests on the opportunity for women to speak, and that's obviously enhanced where women do not feel that there is nothing to be gained and everything to be lost by politically strategizing with other women for change. If women at either side of the development process are in an environment where they are already so fearful and so marginalized that they cannot speak openly to each other, the development project cannot succeed. Organizing processes which specifically counteract the silence of oppression and specifically build women's solidarity in shared acts of political strategizing so we can get what we want done are what we need. Processes are about power; they can't be overlooked if we are to succeed as feminists doing development rather than just women dutifully carrying out projects aimed only at making the cage in which women exist a little prettier.

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<sup>i</sup> This is a five year project divided into three components, one of which is the joint creation by two post-secondary institutions, one overseas and one Canadian, of a women's entrepreneurship program.

<sup>ii</sup> See CIDA website: [http://w3.acdi-cida.gc.ca/cida\\_ind.nsf](http://w3.acdi-cida.gc.ca/cida_ind.nsf)

<sup>iii</sup> Kate Young points out that development has focused on "women's material condition rather than their their position relative to men" (p. 43, 1993); or "poverty rather than oppressive male-centred social structures" (p. 130). Transformatory organizing means that we need to focus on women's strategic interests, or the transformation of "the structures and processes which give rise to women's disadvantages" (p. 134).

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<sup>iv</sup> As Kate Young has pointed out, “At the project level women’s components are usually poorly financed and either limited to welfare areas of decision making, re-emphasizing women’s reproductive roles, or focus on forms of income earning which are marginal, unstable or poorly rewarded....Gender relations and the distribution of rewards and burdens of development are rarely if ever addressed” (p. 132-133, 1993).

<sup>v</sup> The dichotomy between sex and gender, biology and culture, misses the inextricable relationship between the two; I prefer to use the term “sexually specific subject”, of Elizabeth Grosz, following Luce Irigaray.

<sup>vi</sup> Frozen Desire is John Buchanan’s evocative term (1997).