THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

SUPPORT GROUPS FOR RURAL WOMEN

DECREASING INVISIBILITY AND ISOLATION

BY

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"At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial--and any question about sex is that--one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncracies of the speaker." Virginia Woolf (1929)

As a prelude, it is important to state that an opinion is expressed in this paper, an opinion which guided the selection of the material for inclusion, and exclusion. It is an opinion which the author wishes to share openly, rather than to pretend to have no opinion on the issue. This author is a feminist, and this necessarily is reflected througout the practicum report.

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Through personal and professional experience many of us in the social work profession are becoming increasingly aware of, and increasingly alarmed at, the cultural conditioning which serves to debilitate women from taking as active a role as they can in shaping their own lives. Research findings and descriptive literature have documented the systematic discrimination against women in our society. All major sociopolitical establishments have been exposed, including: the church (Daly, 1978); government and health care (Mendelsohn, 1981; Chesler, 1972; Turner and Emery, 1983); educational systems (HERizons, August 1983; Bardwick and Douvan, 1971); and the media (Haskell, 1974; Komisar, 1971). In short, women have been excluded from full participation in society.

Norman and Mancuso (1980) list three ways in which women are victimized by institutional sexism. First is the denial of equal access to the opportunity structure of the society (i.e.,work). The stigmatization of women by the definition of them as inferior to men, and the use of that stigma as an explanation and rationalization for the denial of equal access to society's opportunities is another practice. Women's oppression is then reinforced by the sense of helplessness created by this stigma, which translates into behaviour which suggests lack of confidence, ability, or capacity to affect changes in themselves, or in the systems that victimize them.

It is abundantly clear that women are an oppressed group in our society, and that this oppression often leads to

feelings of isolation and powerlessness. Based on an awareness

of the bias inherent in traditional systems when dealing with

women, this practicum represents an attempt to provide an

analysis, and develop practice that allows for healthful

alternatives for social work with women, particularly rural

women. It represents an attempt to accept the special

responsibility of being a woman, in a "women's profession"

(Humpreys, 1980), and to conceptualize the needs of rural women

in ways that deal with both women as individuals struggling

with personal problems, and women as a social group pressured

and pigeon-holed by social structures and institutions.

Although little or no literature is available which

directly speaks to social work group practice with rural women,

several areas were targeted as important to the development of

this piece of practice: 1) an understanding of women's economic

and political position in rural life; 2) consideration of

women's personal power in rural life, in society, and in

traditional practice; and 3) discussion of groups for women

within the mutual aid tradition. A chapter is devoted to each

area.

WOMEN AND RURAL LIFE

Since the rural experience is known to produce its own

lifestyle and preferences, planning interventions with rural

women must be done with awareness of the characteristics unique

to rural life, and how these impact on women. An important consideration therefore pertains to the differences in the lifestyles and concerns of rural and urban women. Rather than attempting to analyze whether rural life is better or worse than the urban experience for women, suffice it to say that there are differences , the impact and placement of value as positive or negative is dependent on individual perception.

An initial clarification of the term "rural" is in order. Rural is a word of several meanings and therefore open to many interpretations and misinterpretations, particularly in a province where over fifty percent of the population is in one urban center. Rural women can refer to third world women, farm women, single-resource community women, or small town women. In Manitoba, rural generally refers to any woman not residing in Winnipeg. For the purposes of this paper the term rural woman will be used in its broadest sense, to include women outside the major cities of Winnipeg and Brandon. Although the specific issues of farm women and single-resource community women will be acknowledged, it is the general population group of non-urban women which is referred to.

Considering the paucity of information regarding rural women, it seems safe to assume that an overall characteristic of this group is that of invisibility. Invisibility refers not only to their lack of visibility as subjects of writers' attention, but also as recipients of available resources and

opportunities. This invisibility pervades in areas of economic, political and personal power. (The reader is asked to bear in mind that these theoretical divisions were created for study--life itself does not easily categorize, nor should the artificial splits between these factors be considered as reality.)

While the relative invisibility of rural women, compared to their urban counterparts, is said to be decreasing with the spread of women's organizations intent on being heard (Threatt, 1979), a look at the relevant facts in these three areas should prove to illuminate women's position in rural life.

Economic Power

Three out of five poor adults in Canada are women. According to the report "Women and Poverty" (1979), being a poor woman is directly connected to the assumption, and reality, that women will take on the bulk of the responsibility for raising the children and maintaining the home, while men provide the financial security. This results in improper training for paid jobs, and denial of access to better positions with advancement opportunities. When the male partner fails to materialize, leaves or dies, women are suddenly expected to find ways to support themselves and their families, opening the door to poverty and destitution (O'Connell, 1983).

The relationship between women's work inside (unpaid) and outside (paid) the home, is a vicious circle. One reason women are put in charge of domestic work is because their husbands have access to higher paid and more responsible jobs. When women also get paid jobs, their work outside the home is usually treated as secondary, with no lessening of the the home workload. Studies carried out in Vancouver and Halifax found that men increase their housework and child care contributions by an average of one hour per week when their wives get jobs outside the home (Meissner and Humphreys, 1975; Clark and Harvey, 1976). A 10 year survey of Canadian attitudes towards women supports these findings (Women's Bureau, 1984). When a crisis occurs with the family the woman inevitably must bend her work schedule to deal with it. As a result,

> women take the jobs that allow them to fulfill their household responsibilities. Such jobs are often part-time or after normal working hours. In addition, women may also take jobs that are mechanical since the exhaustion of two jobs makes it difficult to perform work which requires creative thinking and continuous concentration (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1978, p. 143).

When women take these inferior, lower paying, dead end jobs, the sex segregation of the work/home labour force is reinforced.

This segregation of women into lower paying jobs is reflected in the well known statistic concerning women and work. That is, Canadian women earn on an average of 64 percent of men's salaries (Free Press, 1985). In TABLE 1, data

relating to the incomes of men and women in Portage La Prarie and the RM of Portage, the target area of this practicum is presented. The information is taken from the 1981 census material available through the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics.

Insert TABLE 1 About Here

The disparity in average income is clearly evident for both rural and urban Manitoban women. Earning 50-51 percent of men's salaries places Manitoba women at a greater economic disadvantage than the overall Canadian statistics indicate.

Not only is women's access to the resources available through paid employment limited, the characterization of work as being done "inside" and "outside" the home has been seen as ignoring women's vital role in production (Eichler, 1980). By assuming production is unique to the position "outside" the home, to the paid labourer, women's contributions in the home, on the farm, in the family business, and in the community become invisible.

Although the issue of economic security is one of critical importance to urban and rural women alike, there are a few characteristics of rural life which seem to magnify the problem.

TABLE 1

AVERAGE INCOME FOR MEN AND WOMEN IN THREE GEOGRAPHIC AREAS IN MANITOBA

	RM of Portage	Portage	Winnipeg
Men	13,040	14,599	16,612
Women	6,588 (50%)	7,499 (51%)	8,254 (50%)

Lower Socioeconomic Status

The lower socioeconomic status of rural areas (Ginsberg,
1976; Murray and Kupinsky, 1982; Collier, 1984), as indicated
in TABLE 1, when considered in light of the major economic
recession of the 1980's, has created an atmosphere of economic
instability in rural areas. Farms and small businesses are
going bancrupt, main industries are shutting down, and women in
droves are seeking employment to help shore up the family
finances. A study of 60 rural women, sponsored by the Manitoba
Action Committee on the Status of Women, hereby referred to as
MACSW (Potter and Dustan, 1983) indicates only 18.3 percent of
the women studied were full-time home-makers. The remainder
(81.7 %) were employed full-time or part-time in the family
business or in the community. Although this figure is much
higher than the 51 percent stated by the Manitoba Department of
Labour (1981), it does reflect the core concern of rural
women--that of economic survival for themselves and their
families.

Considered in the light of economic necessity, what does
employment outside the home mean to rural women?

Time Constraints

The "average" Canadian housewife, employed outside the
home does an average of 30 to 35 hours per week of housework
(Advisory Council, 1978), combined with 20 to 40 hours of paid
work in the labour force. A farm woman may average 47 hours

per week, of work on the farm, between May and November and 33.8 hours per week between December and April (Saskatchewan Labour, 1981).

These figures add up to the major complaint of rural women uncovered in the Ontario Study on Rural Women (McGhee, 1984), namely time constraints and heavy work loads. This concern is reflected in the findings of the MACSW study on leisure hours. Sixty percent of women in the sample identified between 6 and 15 hours of leisure time per week; 17% had less than 5 hours (Potter and Dustan, 1983). (A simple calculation will put this figure into perspective: 168 [number of hours in a week] - 40 [regular work week] - 70 [sleep and meals] = 58 hours of leisure time.)

Along with no pay for the majority of work they do, 50 percent of mens' salaries when they do work, time constraints and the resulting lack of leisure time, a few other factors must be considered when examining the economic position of rural women.

Space and Services

Open space is one of the attractions of rural areas, but it is a source of difficulty as well. The quality and availability of public services in rural communities is affected by space. Delivery of services within the rural community is generally more expensive than in urban areas, both because of the lower socioeconomic status of rural communities,

meaning less local contribution to federal and provincial services, and because of lesser concentration of clients in a given space, meaning less feasibility of fixed service locations (Ellenbogen, 1974; Osgood, 1977; Collier, 1984).

For women who must or want to work, the lack of child care in rural areas is a major problem. Today, very few extended families live nearby, and if they do, they are probably in the work force themselves. For some single parents, the presence or absence of child care means the difference between working and welfare (McGhee, 1984).

Lack of affordable and accessible child care not only curtails women's necessary involvement in the paid labour force, and decreases leisure time, it may also limit involvement in training opportunities necessary for advancement. In the Ontario study previously cited (McGhee, 1984), women noted that many job training and retraining courses are offered in urban centers, a long distance from home. Unless a woman can prove she is a main contributor to the family income (difficult when she often gets no or little pay for much work), she is ineligiible for allowance to cover child care expenses. Who then will cover these costs, aas well as transportation and possible accomodation expenses while training in the city? The answer to this question may determine who will be able to take advantage of educational opportunities.

Rural women face numerous obstacles which impede attainment of financial security: family obligations, reinforced by lack of child care; long distances to training centers and places of employment aggravated by Canada's winter climate and lack of public transportation; and government regulations regarding pay for farm wives and homemaker pensions which further reinforce the invisibility of rural women' work.

Unfortunately the list goes on. A final obstacle to be mentioned is one which is more elusive, and more difficult to measure in terms of impact on women's financial security. The issue is one of attitudes and beliefs.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Taking into consideration that there may be a wide span of difference in any given population, rural residents have consistently been shown to hold more traditional values and be more resistant to new views than urban residents (Ford, 1978).

Keller and Murray (1982) list four commonly identified rural values: an emphasis on hard work and mastery of the physical environment; an emphasis on the importance of family and community ties; an orientation toward traditional moral standards and conformity to group norms; and fatalism which accompanies strong ties to the soil and a keen awareness of natural phenomenon. Farley (1982) adds: autonomy and individualism; respect for privacy; and mistrust of strangers.

In an examination of recent Gallup Opinion Index Data,

Larson (1978) found strong support among rural people for such positions as: increasing the difficulty of getting a divorce; opposition to premarital sex; restricting the availability of contraceptives to teenagers; and prohibiting the sale of pornographic literature. There was less strong opposition for limiting the sale of alcoholic beverages. Larson also found that greater portions of rural people rate themselves as "very religious", report that they attend church regularly and indicate a faith in the value of religion for dealing with modern problems. He found that rural people are more likely, in general, to endorse statements expressing a "conservative" political philosophy as well.

It is not difficult to extend this analysis to include a strong belief in the concept of women's place in the home. In fact, it is a historical traditional in agrarian societies, that wives and children are legally under the direction, protection and control of the landowner. Any wife or child who attempted to escape from this rule, was ordered back to the master. Modern rural societies have mellowed somewhat, but the legacy remains. Wives and childern often do not have independent means of support; the rural church provides ideological support by preaching the virtues of the dependent status of women; and community services dealing with these issues are practically non-existent (Collier, 1984). The conservatism of rural attitudes often makes it difficult for a woman to seek and hold employment, particularly in

non-traditional, higher paying jobs. In conclusion, it can be
stated unequivocably that rural women have obvious additional
barriers to achieving economic independence.

Political Power
_____

> To one degree or another, women have tended to defer to
> the political judgement of men. In this country and
> elsewhere, sex roles have been so defined that politics is
> primarily the business of men (Constantini and Craik,
> 1972, p.222).

This deference to the political prowess of men is paralell
to the situation of women in the economic sphere. Both
contribute to the invisibility of women in rural life. When
rural women were surveyed regarding the question of women's
parity to men in community decision making, 65 percent
responded that women had much less parity than men. A further
27 percent responded with a little less parity. Only eight
percent of the women felt they had equal parity in community
decision making (Potter and Dustan, 1983).

This lack of decision making power in the community is
evident despite the high degree of community involvement of
rural women. Britton (1984) reports on a study of farm women
in Prince Edward Island done by Leona McIsaac. McIsaac found
an average per woman of 10.5 hours per month in community work,
and an average of two group memberships.

Historically, women have long been involved in community
activities, but it appears their participation has generally

been limited to secondary roles, a pattern also appearing in
partisan political involvement (Brodie and Vickers, 1982).
Communities and families have placed a great number of
expectations on rural women. Many small communities offer a
large number of associations equal to those available in larger
centers, but the volunteer workers who develop these groups are
few in numbers, thus the burden is heavier for each individual
(Manitoba Department of Labour, 1983). Joyce Harrison, a rural
MACSW member, sums up the situation succinctly:

> Rural women are too busy with church work, community work,
> fowl suppers, bake sales, rummage sales, canvassing for
> the Red Cross, Cancer Fund, Heart Fund, and all the other
> funds. Women don't have the time to take part, or don't
> see the need to take part in what is happening outside the
> community (MACSW, January, 1983).

The CRDC (Canadian Rural Development Council) (1979) report on
rural women, acknowledges women's invisibility in community
decision making, and adds that the communities themselves are
being shortchanged to the extent that women are uninvolved in
the development process. The report comments that "it is
thought to be in the best interests of the community and
undoubtably of benefit to individual women that concrete steps
be taken to identify, improve and utilize their (women's)
talents in this process (p.28)". Unfortunately, it appears,
few rural communities have taken action to right this
situation.

When the issue of political invisibility is discussed, the
tendency has been to ignore environmental and societal

constraints, family/job obligations, the lack of leisure time

taxed by too many community expectations, and the travel

related problems of distance, weather, and fuel prices, and to

focus instead on the individual woman. A summary of an early

rural women's conference illustrates this concept:

> Several reasons were offered to explain this lack of
> involvement: apathy; laziness; lack of awareness that
> problems exist; lack of appropriate analysis to explain
> problems and suggest effective strategies to deal with
> them. Women are not motivated to act in their own best
> interests. They may be uninformed, defensive, and feel
> threatened. Also, women who step outside the traditional
> role face social disapproval within their communities, and
> most try to avoid inviting such disapproval (Women's
> Program, 1975, p. 4).

Women themselves, in discussing their potential

involvement in farm organizations, reveal individual

orientations. In the Ontario study (McGhee, 1984), 56 percent

of the women stated they were hesitant to accept office or

attend male-dominated meetings until they had acquired more

agricultural knowledge. A lack of self confidence, especially

a fear of being ridiculed, and thus letting their husbands

down, held them back.

The Research, Action and Education Centre (1982) provides

insight into this point in question:

> The onus is always on the individual, not on an analysis
> of why women are not presently in leadership roles, why
> they lack the necessary skills and confidence, not on the
> role that men must play in freeing women for active
> involvement. None of the organizations in which men are
> predominantly active put any real emphasis on structural
> accomodations to facilitate the involvement of women (day
> care, car pools, kitchen meetings, etc.) (p. 14).

In discussing rural women's political invisibility, it
must be pointed out that this is paralell to the lack of
political power of women in general. Women are neither
socialized for political competition, nor encouraged to
participate in political activities. We lack political role
models and the opportunities to develop the necessary
leadership skills. Consequently, we are less confident of our
political capabilities (Bokemeir and Tait, 1980). This lack of
political efficacy should be considered in light of the fact
that women only gained suffrage some 68 years ago (1917
federally, and 1917 in Manitoba), a campaign that took sightly
more than half a century (Brodie and Vickers, 1982).

As confident as individual women may become, institutional
sexism provides barriers at all levels of political
involvement, which have kept women from political power.
Brodie and Vickers (1982) provide an interesting assessment of
Canadian women in politics, delineating these sexist
structures, but also promoting the fact that women are getting
through. The 1984 federal election saw more women involved in
the lobbying process, more women than ever elected to
parliament, as well as a separate debate for women's issues.

Although rural women are not highly represented at municipal, provincial or federal levels, they seem to be moving towards political action. Pat Cooper (1979), an urban MACSW member, describes the process as follows:

> More and more voluntary organizations are making commitments to influence public policy. Women are using their organizations first to educate the membership about the community and, ssecondly, to actively lobby decision makers on gaps in service to their community.
> More and more women want to be where the action is, they want to influence and help shape the forces of change. Women as volunteers are telling themselves they have a responsibility to be advocates and speak out affirmatively, even militantly, on issues that affect their membership (p. 124).

Rural women, at this time, continue to have a higher degree of political invisibility that their urban sisters, but hope can be invested in rural women' herstoric commitment to community involvement and their emerging sensitivity to and willingness to be involved in more political action on their own behalf. Remember, rural Manitoban women already have at least one role model--Nellie McClung was a rural woman.

Having outlined the significant factors which contribute to women's economic and political invisibility, Chapter 2 will deal with women's lack of personal power, evidenced by our high rates of depression and contact with helping professionals.

WOMEN'S PERSONAL POWER

The personal power of women, or lack of it, can be understood as a political issue. The limiting of economic and political power is directly connected to the lessening of personal power. These limitations often translate into behaviour which is interpreted as lack of ability, capacity or confidence to effect change in women's personal lives or in the systems that oppress them (Norman and Mancuso, 1980).

Certain elements of rural life combine with an overall pattern of societal stereotyping to produce an environment which serves to decrease women's potential for personal power, and increase women's potential to seek out mental health services. This is not to say that rural women do seek out servics more often, as fewer social services are available (Collier, 1984), and rural attitudes of self-sufficiency make seeking outside help more difficult (Farley, 1982), only to point out potential hazards to rural women's mental health. Sexist bias within the traditional helping system can serve to maintain this imbalance. This chapter will attempt to delineate these factors.

Rural Factors

Several aspects of rural life, including those which promote economic and political invisibility, impede women's attainment of personal power. These include isolation,

heightened rural stress, and the occurrence of battering.

Isolation

Haussman and Halseth (1983) are two of the few authors to
address the mental health needs of rural women. They view
depression in rural women as a problem of epidemic proportions.
although urban women are far from immune. They link depression
to low income, lack of social and educational opportunities,
inadequate resources in childcare, transportation difficulties,
traditional family role demands regardless of a woman's
employment, and isolation. Evans and Cooperstock (1983)
confirm this analysis in their study of the psychosocial
problems facing rural women in primary resource communities.
Although women in primary resource communities, colloquially
called "boom towns", face more severe isolation from other
communities and from extended family, compounded by a high
turnover of friends, they have many problems in common with
rural women in small town Canada. Evans and Cooperstock cite
evidence regarding the prescribing of minor tranquilizers and
anti-depressants to women as exceptionally high, a problem also
noted in Ireland's (1983) study of farm women. Isolation is of
primary importance, with the following factors contributing:
difficult climate; poor or non-existent public transportation
within the community; lack of child care facilities; lack of
appropriate public places to meet other women during the day or

evening; and the emotional isolation of living in a male

oriented culture.

Geographical isolation is indeed a critical component in a

discussion of rural women's power. Space has been seen to

create additional hazards to a woman attempting to increase her

economic power through employment or training. Political power

is limited by lack of information and personal isolation.

Space, despite popular belief to the contrary, may not be more

beneficial to personal well being either. Evidence presented

by Webb and Colette (1977), indicates that isolation, resulting

in greater boredom and familiarity, contributes to a higher

usage of stress-alleviating drugs. They found the per capita

use of drugs to be inversely related to community population

size in New Zealand, where socioeconomic status is not related

to population size.

Isolation can affect both the traditional rural woman and

the "not so traditional" women in other less obvious ways.

Keller and Murray (1982) use an example of a woman's situation

to illustrate the difficulties which may occur when urban and

rural belief systems meet.

Consider for example a tradition-oriented, rural farm wife
(woman) who is frequently exposed to modern feminist
views. While the urban woman may have multiple
opportunities to explore the meaning of such views in her
life, the rural woman may have no such opportunities, and
the information may become a source of confusion and
distress (p. 9).

Tanya Lester (1984) reports on the issue of "coming-out", as

discussed at the recent rural women's conference in Minnedosa.

> The "closet feminist" term was used by many of the women
> throughout the weekend. It seems if a feminist
> "comes-out" in rural Manitoba, she stands a good chance of
> being isolated and stereotyped. Some of the negative
> qualities associated with people's perceptions of a
> feminist were identified as: man-hating, family hating,
> unreasonable, extremist, bitchy, and humourless (p.16).

Isolation must therefore be acknowledged as a primary

contributor to rural women's lack of personal power. Isolation

not only contributes to psychosocial distress in general ways,

it combines with other factors related to stress and battering

to compound the difficulty of achieving personal empowerment.

Rural Stress and Battering

The lack of economic, political and personal power of

rural women is often discussed in terms of stress. Stress was

a major topic at the hearings for the Ontario study on rural

women (McGhee,1984), with 45 percent of submissions dealing

with this subject.

Stress is expressed physically as fatigue, irritability,

insomnia, marital conflict, digestive upsets, depression,

headaches, anger, frustration, hostility, and indecision

(Ireland, 1983). Stress may also be expressed in terms of

violence against women, a major concern of rural women.

Wife battering is a fact of life, with some studies

suggesting it occurs in one out of every ten Canadian families.

It crosses all ages, races, and income levels and is believed

to be as common in rural areas as it is in urban centers

(Martin, 1976). Although the incidence of battering may be the

similar in rural and urban settings, rural women may face more

difficult conditions in attempting to resolve the situation.

Along with fewer helping services, rural attitudes, geographic

isolation and the open communication system, heighten the

stresses inherent in resolution of a battered woman's dilemma.

Women who are battered suffer physical and/or

psychological harm from their husband or lover. If they seek

help outside the family, and find that none is forthcoming,

their suffering is exacerbated. There is a taboo against

calling the police or taking a husband to court. The battered

woman is often blamed for her husband's behaviour. In

interviewing Ontario farm women, McGhee (1984) stated that at

three out of 24 locations, older women blamed wives for

creating their own problems. She reports, "they held the

traditional view that others should not get involved in a

family matter. They subscribed to the belief that women were

expected to obey their husbands and follow a path of self

denial (p. 34)". A victim's reluctance to seek help may also

stem from an economic dependence on the husband and her own

inablility to provide for the children. In rural areas,

geographic isolation exacerbates the problem. Inclement

weather, poor transportation, lack of services, and a lack of

anonymity also make it very difficult for battered women to

seek help and find alternatives to living with continued

violence (Claerhout, Elder and Janes, 1982). Shelters for

battered women are beginning to appear in some of the larger

centers, but in many rural areas they are non-existent. The

personal interdependence and lack of privacy in rural areas

creates problems with the placement of shelters. In urban

areas the locations of shelters or transition houses are not

generally known, an important factor in giving women the safety

of knowing that their husbands can not follow them. In rural

areas, the difficulty of keeping the location private increases

due to the open communication system (Johnson, 1979).

As pressing as the issues of violence towards women are to

some, rural communities do not seem to provide much support for

rural women in a time of crisis. A short article in Network, a

Saskatchewan women's paper (1983), provides enlightening

examples of women who feel they have nowhere to turn:

> For the mother who hides the continual occurrance of
> incest in the family unit. Where does she obtain the
> counselling and medical help needed? How does she
> effectively prevent a reccurrance of this aggression by
> the male figure?
> The single woman who suffers sexual harassment on the job.
> Can she take the risk of losing the job should she
> publically proclaim the insult and hurt she suffers?
> The woman who is battered has refuge in a city at least
> one hundred miles away. If she can find a way to get
> there, then what?
> Then there is the grandmother who shudders at the display
> of "hate literature" in the grocery store. She knows how
> many people are disturbed by this downgrading of the
> quality of life that young people should expect. Her
> expression of opinion, is it taken seriously? (p. 12)

Prior to moving on to further discussion regarding what

can be done to help generate power in women's lives, it is

necessary to review the overall pattern of societal

stereotyping, which combines with these elements of rural life

to further decrease women's personal power. Lack of power in

women's lives can be explored in relation to our position in

the physical and mental health systems, as many women, finding

themselves powerless to help themselves, turn to helping

professionals. With this in mind, women's status as clients of

the mental health system, how this status is influenced by

traditional sex roles, and the resulting loss of personal

power, will be explored.

Social Roles and Mental Health

When faced with the statistics on women as users of mental

and physical health services one comes face to face with at

least one situation in which women make up the majority.

Greenspan (1983) stated that in the United States, women

comprise two-thirds of the adult population seeking help at

agencies and hospitals, and 84 percent of all psychotherapy

patients. Dr. Patricia Kaufert's Canadian study on women as

patients, still underway, confirms women's status in Canada as

majority users of these services. Gove and Tudor (1973)

studied both treated and untreated populations in Western

societies and found that women have higher rates of mild

psychiatric disorder than men.

Once one disregards the theory of women's biological

inferiority as an explanation and rationalization for women's high utilization of help, several factors linked to traditional sex role expectations appear to contribute to this phenomenon.

Depression is a symptom which is exibited by women at two to five times the male rate (Scarf, 1979). It is one of the main reasons women go for help (Fransella and Frost, 1977), including rural women (Haussman and Halseth, 1983). Due to its prevalence as a "female disorder", many researchers have attempted to understand the impact of social roles on mental health through the study of depression.

Sex role theorists, (Bardwick and Douvan, 1971; Lipman-Bluman, 1984) with a focus on the socialization process which creates and/or reinforces gender differences, have forwarded three main differences between men and women that may contribute to higher rates of depression (and/or help seeking). These include: the basis on which self esteem and relationships with others are formed; the ways that males and females are supposed to show agression; and their differing sense of control over their environment.

Self-Esteem and Relationships

Women are socialized to be more dependent on others for the development of a positive self concept. From around the age of two, when children are no longer perceived as infants but as children, boys experience more prohibitions for a wider range of behaviour than do girls. In addition, and of special

importance, dependent behaviour, normal to all young children, is permitted for girls and prohibited for boys. This combination results in girls not being encouraged to give up old techniques for relating to adults. They therefore tend to use others to define their identitiy, to manipulate the physical world and to supply their emotional needs (Bardwick, 1971). It is a natural extension that the core of the feminine role consists of pleasing others and being liked by others. One result of this, according to Bardwick and Douvan (1971), is that personal qualities such as independence, aggression, and competitiveness, which might threaten heterosexual relationships, are given up.

Not only are women considered incomplete without a husband and children, they have been assigned almost exclusive responsibility for the emotional well-being of the family (Berlin, 1976; Norman and Mancuso, 1980). Scarf (1979) proposed that women receive ferocious training in a direction that leads women away from thinking "what do I want" and toward "what do they want or need of me". Lilly Walker, quoted in Kadota (1984), sees this as the major hurdle for rural women in self-improvement, particularly in advanced education. This other-directedness pushes women towards a few powerfully important relationships, creating a situation where "to fail in the relationship is to fail in everything". Scarf (1979) sees relationship breakdown as the most common cause of depression in women.

The structure of the traditional marital relationship, as in the early agrarian days, in which husbands are assumed to be superior to and dominant over wives, also serves to limit women's personal power. Norman (1980) explored some of the ways in which this structure is perpetuated today.

Aggression

According to sex role norms, the overt expression of anger is less appropriate for women than for men. Women are taught to control aggressive feelings (Bardwick, 1971; Bloch, 1973; Chesler, 1972). Women are more likely to introject, rather than externalize anger or conflict in the form of self-criticism. This process characterizes depressive reactions (Rosenfield, 1980). The limited ability to express anger is closely connected to the importance of interpersonal relationships. Gilligan (1982) proposed that women's desire for connectedness, and men's push for separateness, allows men to aggress against others while prohibiting women from doing the same. Paula Caplan (1981) noted that when women's aggression is external, it is largely directed toward people whose return anger will not be catastrophic to self-esteem, that is, other women.

While men rely on reasoned argument or aggression to get their way, women frequently have to rely on less direct methods for fear of loss of relationship. These tactics may include showing emotion, bargains, hints, rewards and coercion. This

practice catches women in a double bind.

> Although feminine strategies often work, their use can seriously damage a woman's self esteem and diminish the respect she gets from others. But if she adopts the more effective techniques used mostly by men, she may be called pushy or aggressive (Johnson and Goodchilds, 1976, p. 68).

This leaves women few options, other than silence, the internalization of conflict, and the resulting illness.

Control Over Environment

The power difference between men and women, or the fact of women's limited control over many of the rules of the game (political power) and the economic resources needed for survival, contributes substantially to women's status as consumers of health services. The learned helplessness model developed by Seligman (1975), as applied to depression, is concerned with power, in the sense of control over one's environment. This model proposes that helplessness is the salient characteristic of depression, and that it results from learning that one's actions do not produce predictable responses. Although Seligman does not allude to women in his analysis, Radoff (1975) suggests that "women are both more suceptible (i.e. have experienced more training in learned helplessness) and more exposed to current situations of helplessness (i.e. where they have little control over what happens to them) (p. 263)". When combined with the belief in fatalism already prevalent in rural areas, rural women's

potential for learned helplessness increases.

While the preceding analysis has focused on depression, strong acceptance of traditional femininity has consistently been related to high anxiety and low self-acceptance (Norman, 1980). Given that rural people are known for their belief in traditional roles for women, it follows that this may be linked to low self-acceptance and high anxiety as noted by Kadota (1984) and Haussman and Halseth (1982).

Biased Traditional Helping System

Apart from biology and sex role differentiation as responses to the obviously complex question of why women are more often patients of the system, there is one other area worthy of exploration--the inherent sexist bias in the traditional helping system.

No one can deny the presence of widely shared conceptions of what are defined as appropriate masculine and feminine characteristics and behaviours. One of the consequences of having different views of what is appropriate behaviour for each gender is that people then use different standards of judgement when they evaluate identical behaviours in women compared to men (Garvin and Reed, 1983). The findings of Broverman, Clarkson and Frank (1970) support this statement. Professionals were found to hold different standards of adult mental health, with the definition of general mental health

coinciding with the masculine stereotype. That is, the description given by clinicians of a "healthy woman" did not coincide with the description of a "healthy adult". Women were seen to differ from healthy adults (men) by being more submissive, less independent, less adventurous, more easily influenced, less aggressive, less competitive, more excitable in minor crises, having their feelings more easily hurt, being more conceited about their appearance, less objective, and disliking math and science. This constellation of feminine attributes goes beyond mere stereotyping, it becomes a powerful negative assessment. Studies have indicated that these attitudes affect the perception of people's problems and their treatment (Kinsel, 1974).

Phyllis Chesler (1972) contends that women tend to be diagnosed, that is, called "depressed" or "disturbed" or "crazy" or "mad", with sinister readiness. She maintains that this ready diagnosis is a means of punishing women who do not adjust to and accept their traditional female roles. Szasz (1961) also documented the ways in which women who attempt to excercise options other than those available within their traditional roles are stigmatized as mentally ill. Cynthia Epstein (1970) found that women who take an active stand on their own behalf, run the risk of ostracism and of a diagnostic label of "personality disorder".

Beyond the potential of being labelled "crazier" more quickly, women's emotional symptoms are often seen as divorced

from any current social, historical or economic context, in
traditional therapy. A key component of the traditional
system is the view that the private, personal realm of the
individual is one polarity and the public, social realm is the
other. Locating all causality within the individual can come
dangerously close to "blaming the victim" (see Ryan, 1971).
Ignoring the social factors insures the continuation of the
status quo, which rests on the subordination of women's needs.
Weissman (1971) provides ample support for the folly of
ignoring social context when looking at people's behaviour:

> ...if subjects under quite innocuous and noncoercive
> conditions can be made to kill other subjects and under
> other types of social conditions will positively refuse to
> do so (Milgram, 1965); if subjects can react to a state of
> physiological fear by becoming euphoric, because somebody
> else around is euphoric, or angry, because somebody else
> is angry (Schachter and Singer, 1962); if students become
> intelligent because teachers expect them to be intelligent
> (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968) and rats run mazes better
> because experimenters are told the rats are bright
> (Rosenthal and Fode, 1961), then it is obvious that a
> study of human behaviour requires, first and formost, a
> study of the social contexts within which people move, of
> the expectations about how they will behave, and of the
> authority that tells them who they are and what they are
> supposed to do (p. 217). (emphasis mine)

When one considers the social context of rural (and urban)
women's lives, it is hardly suprising that women in a
male-dominated culture may develop symptoms of powerlessness
such as depression. To remove the social context, is to set
women up for self-condemning internalization, considered by
Greenspan (1983) to be a major aspect of the psychosocial

oppression of women.

The complaints laid at the door of traditional psychotherapy have been summarized in four catagories by the American Psychological Association Task Force on Sex Bias and Sex Role Stereotyping in Psychotherapeutic Practice (1974): fostering traditional sex roles; bias in expectations and devaluation of women; sexist use of psychoanalytic concepts; and responding to women as sex objects, including seduction of women clients.

It is clear that in traditional psychotherapy the subjugation of women has been accepted, interpreted and in fact reinforced by therapists. Any manifestation of discontent by women is interpreted as psychopathology. The therapeutic goal has been to move women toward a greater acceptance of their presumed inferior status (Russel, 1979). Helen Levine (1982) presented an excellent summary of the issues, and also a good rationale to begin the discussion of an alternative for better work with women, namely groups within the mutual aid tradition.

> By and large, women have found that helpers stress
> adjustment rather than change; individual, not collective
> or political solutions; personal pathology; weakness
> rather than strength; the psyche unrelated to economic and
> social hazards in women's lives; and the authority of male
> experts, male management and male decision-makers in and
> beyond the home....the goal of ensuring that women remain
> in their place, serving others and sacrificing their own
> separate, adult, human rights has often been found lurking
> underneath the subtle and sophisticated surface of
> therapy, counselling and treatment (p. 77).

This understanding of the relationships between women,

mental health, the systems in which we live and work, and the

need for alternative models, formed the underlying

philosophical base of the practicum.   In the next chapter the

potential of one social work intervention in working with women

will be explored.

MUTUAL AID GROUPS AND RURAL WOMEN

One of the most positive aspects of rural life has been, and continues to be, the existence of well developed natural helping systems. Davenports (1982), in their study of social networks, stated that natural helping systems are more prevalent, if not more important in rural areas. One reason is because of limited professional services. Although there is some indication of deterioration of these helping networks (Murray and Kupinsky, 1982), they remain a major influence in family life.

Collier (1984) views the rural cooperative movements as a clue to effective social work in rural areas:

> The important principle in the cooperative movement among farmers is that, in exchange for getting help, each member must give help as well. No obligation extends beyond the terms established by the cooperative. Personal integrity is maintained. The individual, with others who produce the same product and face the same conditions, can beat problems that, alone would be unsolvable. Yet no charity is involved. Even activities like barnraisings and harvest "bees" are seen as help giving in a time of need or disaster, not as a matter of helping the weak or the lazy. It is fully expected that the receiver return the help under similar circumstances. Help offered in the community is given by peers and community members, not by outside experts and foreigners (p. 102).

Given the historical precedent of mutual aid in rural areas, consideration of mutual aid groups as a tool to engage rural women in a process of empowerment is in order.

Mutual Aid Groups

Mutual aid, or self-help groups, emerged in the 1930's,

when two groups, with particularly stigmatized

conditions--mental retardation and alcoholism, began to create,

independently of each other, ways for the stigmatized to serve

each other as an alternative to professional bureaucracies

(Steinman and Traustein, 1976).

Since their inception, various definitions and catagories

of mutual aid have been proposed by professionals studying

them. Katz and Bender (1976a) provide a broad definition which

seems to capture the essence of the range possible:

> Self-help groups are voluntary, small group structures for
> mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose.
> They are usually formed by peers who have come together
> for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need,
> overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem,
> and bringing about desired social and/or personal change.
> The initiators and members of such groups perceive that
> their needs are not, or cannot be, met by or through
> existing social institutions. Self-help groups emphasize
> face-to-face social interactions and the assumption of
> personal responsibility by members. They often provide
> material assistance, as well as emotional support; they
> are frequently cause oriented and promulgate an ideology
> or values through which members may attain an enhanced
> sense of personal identity (p. 9).

Historically, mutual aid groups have played a large part

in social and cultural change (Katz and Bender, 1976b), with

the founders often beyond or in disagreement with the

conventional theories of the time (Lieberman, Boreman, Leonard,

and Bond, 1979). Steinman and Traustein (1976) hypothesize

that the mutual aid movement gained credibility and strength as

an alternative to professional hierarchy and bureaucracy and to

stigmatizing labels and stereotypes. Their study of self-help

organizations identified a major goal as "redefinition of problems" through personal solutions and/or political action.

In the achievement of this goal, Reissman (1976) attributes the greatest degree of success to two factors: the fact that such groups are empowering; and the aprofessional dimension.

Empowerment refers to the issue of members feeling and using their own strengths, their own power, to have control over their own lives, individually and collectively. Both the "helper-therapy" and "consumer intensivity" concepts are important aspects of empowerment. The "helper-therapy" principle, involves the notion that the benefits which ususally accrue to the professional helper, including less dependency, ability to view the problem more objectively, and altruism or social usefulness, can be experienced by all members as actual and potential helpers. The concept of "consumer intensivity", refers to the consumers (clients) as being primary in helping themselves and each other, rather than depending on the experts (Reissman, 1976).

The aprofessional dimension, or anti-system bias, serves as a counter balance to some of the intrinsic limitations of the professional Knowledge-based, systematic, distanced approach and some of the extrinsic difficulties related to the way the professional functions in our society. A few of the Key differences between traditional therapy and mutual aid are listed in TABLE 2, adapted from Reissman (1976, p. 44).

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Reissman (1976) asserted that the elements of the aprofessional dimension in combination with empowerment, are the main reason why mutual aid can be useful to a broad range of populations.

In summary, it is important to note that mutual aid seems to work, by a personal/political process of empowerment, without professionalism and bureaucracy, in small face-to-face groups which result in normalizing problems and supporting people to cope more effectively. The next section will explore the potential use of mutual aid groups in social work with women clients.

Groups For Women

The concept of mutual aid in groups is not a new one when applied to women, rural or urban. As a matter of fact, Levy (1976) observed that with the exception of Alcoholics Anonymous, all groups he studied were exclusively or predominantly female.

So, here again women outnumber men. Perhaps mutual aid groups are a beneficial therapeutic forum for women to dominate, particularly groups in which women can help women on personal and political fronts to deal with the "stigmatized"

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL THERAPY AND MUTUAL AID GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

Traditional Therapy *	Mutual Aid Groups
Professional, expert therapy	Non-professional group parity
Therapist is presumed normal, does not identify with patient	Peers are similarly afflicted; identify with each other
Therapist is not a role model; does not set personal examples	Peers are role models; must set examples for each other
Therapist is non-critical; non-judgemental; neutral; listens	Peers are active, judgemental, supportive; critical; talk
Patients unilaterally divulge to therapist; disclosures are secret	Peers divulge to each other; disclosures are shared
Patients expect only to receive support	Peers must also give support
Concerned about symptom substitution if underlying causes are not removed	Urges appropriate behaviour; not concerned about symptom substitution
Therapist-patient relationship has little direct community impact **	Peers' intersocial involvement has considerable impact
Everyday problems subordinated to long range cure	Primary emphasis on day-to-day victories
Extracurricular contact and social-ization with therapist discouraged	Continuing support and socialization available
Patient cannot achieve parity with therapist	Members may themselves may be active therapists (helpers)

    * Traditional therapy refers to those forms of therapy which do not consider information regarding status of women in society.
    ** This does not necessarily hold true entirely in rural areas if therapist resides in community.

position of being female in a male-dominated culture. Mutual

aid groups by their very structure, serve to eliminate one of

the most detrimental aspects of traditional therapy for women,

namely the power differential between therapist and client.

The concept of a power differential is built into the very

nature of the therapeutic situation. Clients typically visit

therapists when they are having problems, problems they can not

cope with themselves. They see themselves as lacking power

over their own or others actions or they would not be there.

The therapist on the other hand, simply because s/he is in a

position of providing help and of having services that another

needs and desires, is in a position of power (Gannon, 1982).

This power differential not only serves to enhance a

woman's feelings of powerlessness (Chesler, 1972), but also may

lead her to use the techniques already available to her, to

gain power. These techniques, sometimes referred to as

"micro-manipulation" (Lipman-Blumen, 1984), may actually

contribute to lowered self-esteem, depression and the

ineffectual problem-solving activities that frequently motivate

women to seek therapy (Gannon, 1982; Johnson and Goodchilds,

1976).

Using mutual aid to counteract the unhealthy power

imbalance inherent in traditional therapy can begin the helping

process leading to women' empowerment. Mutual aid groups have

other features which make them helpful to women.

When taking a sociological approach, one which group work

readily lends itself to, women are seen to exist as an

oppressed group, with one major characteristic (other than

their majority in numbers) which sets them apart from other

oppressed groups--women live side by side with the oppressor.

Women and men are bound together in a much larger sex-gender

system through sexuality, marriage and procreation, which

increases the difficulty of living apart. Segregation is not

even a choice for the sexes as it is for racial, political,

religious, or other social groups locked into power

relationships. Many women, particularly those who live with

men, are essentially segregated from other non-kin women, and

are prevented from recognizing the sources of their

powerlessness, a recognition other groups have learned in the

ghetto (Lipman-Blumen, 1984; Goode, 1980). This segregation,

heightened by rural factors related to isolation, results in

few opportunities for women to share their common plight, to

validate each other, and to free up ideas and anger to work on

their own behalf. On their OWN behalf is the operative word,

as women, particularly rural women have long been organized to

act on behalf of others. In fact, it was in fighting on behalf

of others, for integration of Blacks and peace in Vietnam, that

the women's movement caught its second wind (Mackie, 1983).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an early suffragist, recognized

self-sacrifice as detrimental to the fight for women's rights.

She is quoted as telling a reporter to "put it down in capital

letters: SELF-DEVELOPMENT IS A HIGHER DUTY THAN

SELF-SACRIFICE. The thing which most retards and militates

against women's self-development is self-sacrifice" (Gilligan,

1982, p. 129). Gilligan (1982), in her analysis of womens'

rights and womens' judgement, concurs with Stanton:

> The notion that virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice
> has complicated the course of women's development by
> putting the moral issue of goodness against the adult
> question of responsibility and choice. In addition, the
> ethic of self-sacrifice is directly in conflict with the
> concept of rights that has, in this past century,
> supported women's claim to a fair share of social justice
> (p. 132).

Mutual aid groups, while eliminating the power

differential, and decreasing women's isolation from each other,

can serve to empower women to act on their own behalf--both

politically and personally. This goal can best be achieved in

all-woman groups. Before an accusation of reverse

discrimination is laid, the factors which contribute to this

conclusion will be delineated.

The Case For All-Woman Groups

It is a reality in our society that men have more power

than women. Power, usually analyzed macrosocially, can also be

analyzed in everyday interaction, as what people do in specific

interactions expresses and reflects historical and

sociostructural forces beyond the boundaries of their encounter

(Fishman, 1978).

Studies in speech habits, have shown that in both verbal

(Kramer, Thorne and Henley, 1978) and non-verbal (Henley, 1977)
communication, the patterns between men and women resemble
those between other dominants and subordinates. Thorne (1979),
when studying group interaction and communication patterns
found that men talked more, took more turns at talking, and
initiated 96 percent of all interruptions, and in that way
controlled the topic of conversation. When women interrupted
to try to regain the floor, they were ignored. Fishman (1978),
observing similar interaction patterns between men and women in
marital relationships, drew the following conclusions:

> The failure of the women's attempts at interaction is not
> due to anything inherent in their talk, but to the failure
> of the men to respond, to do interactional work. The
> success of the men's remarks is due to the woman doing
> interaction work in response to attempts by the men.
> Thus, the definition of what is appropriate or
> inappropriate conversation becomes a man's choice. What
> part of the world the interactants orient to, construct
> and maintain the reality of, is his choice, not hers. Yet
> the women labor the hardest in making interactions go (p.
> 404).

Beyond men controlling language patterns and topics of
conversation, as a reflection of male dominance, women need an
atmosphere which allows them to develop the meaningful
relationships with other women society ordinarily denies
(Gottleib, Burden, McCormick and McCarthy, 1983). According to
some researchers, increased geographic mobility, shifts in the
definition of sex roles, and other social changes have led to
increased loneliness, social isolation and friendship
deprivation among women (Weiss, 1976; Richardson, 1984).

Carlock and Martin (1977) note that due to the dominance of the pairing theme in mixed groups (men and women), women do not develop feelings of closeness for other women. Walker (1981) adds that in mixed groups, women spend more time comparing themselves with one another and competing for the approval and attention of male participants, reinforcing traditional stereotypes. Walker later commented that "one of the most positive outcomes of women's groups is the rediscovery of the pleasures and fulfillment of interpersonal relations with other women (p. 242)".

Having dealt with, in general terms, the need for all-woman groups, within the mutual aid tradition, to combat women's powerlessness, a more specific analysis of women's groups will be approached through the literature on consciousness-raising (hereafter referred to as CR), or feminist groups.

CR: A Political Process and a Therapy Tool

Consciousness-raising involves a change in women's awareness of and interpretation of their problems. It involves the examination of individual experience, and listening to the personal experience of other women, so that our collective experience, rather than what we are told to be, begins to replace erroneous social beliefs (Mander and Rush, 1974). It involves a reinterpretation of what women formerly felt to be personal inadequacies as being consequences of the social

structure (Bond and Reibstein, 1979), therefore serving to deprivatize the condition of women's lives. It involves pooling the collective experience of women in small face-to-face groups, in order to analyze the strucures of our oppression and the best ways to fight them (Jeffreys, 1977). It involves the assumption that women have the strength to forge changes in their lives, especially together with other women, and a new "vision of the possible" emerges from that solidarity (Levine, 1983). Finally, given the above, the assumption follows that women do not necessarily need "therapists" to do "therapy" (Mander and Rush, 1974).

From this description, several central characteristics can be delineated: the emphasis on sociopolitical context; the experiential nature of the group process; and the elimination of hierarchy.

Sociopolitical Context

A primary characteristic of CR or feminist groups is the emphasis on the social and political factors which relate to women's individual situations. This is in direct opposition to the stance of traditional therapy modes, as previously noted. Although care has been taken to emphasize these factors throughout this paper, Gottleib, Burden et al (1983) offer an excellent summary. The factors which must be considered include: the stereotyped socialization of all women which leads to self doubts about competencies and judgement;

society's devaluation of women's work both inside and outside

the home; social policies which do not provide supports that

are effective; and sexual exploitation and condoned violence

resulting in physical abuse and sexual assault.

Given the way women have been socialized, and our present

status and role in society, the unveiling of the sociopolitical

context helps women to recognize that social changes are

necessary for significant improvement to occur in our lives.

This enables women to begin to differentiate between what can

be individually controlled and what requires political action.

This process sometimes involves significant changes in women's

attitudes and understandings about the world, and about women's

ability to make those changes. Based on this understanding,

the group process helps foster realistic changes, both

personally and politically. It is an active stance,

emphasizing change rather than adjustment (Levine, 1983;

Gilbert, 1980).

Experiential Nature

The experiential nature of the group experience helps to

positively redefine the negative stereotype of emotionality.

The "pro-woman" line states that women's greatest strength lies

in our ability to be in touch with our feelings (Greenspan,

1983; Miller, 1976), and our understanding of the human need

for connectedness (Gilligan, 1982), or relationality (Nadeau,

1982).

To ensure political analysis is based on personal experience, women are asked to speak personally and honestly in their groups and asked to respect norms of confidentiality and nonjudgemental acceptance (Wyckoff, 1980). There is a validation of women's life experience, as we feel it, as we react to it. According to Levine (1983), this validation is a significant experience for most women because it implies respect, dignity, and trust, rare commodities in a patriarchial system.

The valuing of women's "relationality" can provide a connection between individual and social responsibility. In a CR group, women are empowered by being valued for who they are, rather than what they are not. Thus, nurturing and connectedness are seen as valuable, rather than downplayed. Building women's strengths into the public domain can provide an ethical and political direction that moves mutual aid into social responsibiliy (Nadeau, 1982).

CR brings women together with other women, decreasing isolation. A strong network of women friends is seen as crucial in helping women fully enjoy life and reduce dependence on men. The emphasis on mutual aid, the commonality of experience and the deprivatization of problems puts an end to the isolation of women from each other (Levine, 1982; Gottleib, Burden et al, 1983). Nadeau(1982), when discussing mutual aid in resource-based communities, stated that the success and appeal of these groups is largely due to the contact and

support they offer to women experiencing considerable physical and emotional isolation.

Non-hierarchical Structure

CR groups emphasize peer equality and the elimination of hierarchical therapist-client relationships (Walker,1981). In her study of CR groups, Home (1981) found that while groups varied in duration, in norms and structure, and in their socio-political emphasis, almost all groups avoided having a permanent leader. Gottlieb, Burden et al (1983) add that the leadership training provided by the participative style aids women in developing confidence and skills as leaders, perhaps in other groups. The difference between authoritarian and democratic leadership was explored in a classic study by Lippitt (White and Lippitt, 1960). The study showed that where there is participative leadership, behaviour is more cooperative and constructive, with more interaction, friendliness, individuality, creativeness, higher group cohesion, and lower drop out rates than in an autocratic group. These are qualities which are desired in group interaction between women.

CR as Therapy

Although the original intent of CR was political, with the purpose being to study ways to make conditions of all women better rather than to problem solve for one woman (Zweik,

1971), the literature indicates that CR is also therapeutic.
In this section factors relating to the therapeutic potential
of CR groups will be discussed.

The first consideration is the client population. Studies
have shown that the same population that attended CR groups is
also reported most likely to seek out formal institutions for
help. This population consists of white, liberal, educated,
middle-class women, for the most part (Lieberman and Bond,
1976; Home, 1980). Reasons for joining CR groups include help
seeking, as well as interest in women's issues and political
activism, although the former motivation was only stated by
half the participants of CR compared to all those in
psychotherapy groups (Lieberman and Bond, 1979).

CR has been studied by many theorists, and has been shown
to be effective in personal change or growth. Cherniss (1972)
found that after only a few months women seemed to undergo a
number of changes in attitude and behaviour, moving into the
direction of independence, autonomy, activity, mobility,
self-esteem, and self-acceptance. Micossi (1970) found an
increase in self-awareness and a rise in self-esteem. Newton
and Walton (1971) reported five major changes in the
individuals involved: the women experienced an altered world
view in which they perceived "women as a group with definitive
characteristics(p. 33)", and society as divided in two major
groups, males and females; identity changes occurred,
including different (more positive) feelings about body image;

changes in reference groups (to feminist) and interpersonal relationships (to more egalitarian); changes in job/career orientation towards seeking less hierarchical arrangements; and group members felt "an enhanced sense of self-acceptance and worth, and a lessening of guilt and self-doubt" (p. 38).

Recent journal articles discuss the use of CR, or feminist principles, as successful with many different populations of women. Adolph (1983) described the use of an all-woman CR group as part of the treatment for women patients with a range of psychiatric disorders, and concluded that the group had been an enormously helpful component of treatment. Hartman (1983) utilized the self-help group model combined with feminist philosophy to help women in abusive relationships. Haussman and Halseth (1983) use a feminist approach in rural areas to successfully decrease depression in women. Robertson (1980) recommends support groups for treatment of post partum depression. The "women's issue" of the journal Social Work, in November of 1976, gave reviews of support groups for women students (Killeen and Jacobs), mothers (Witkin), and housewives (Redfern et al). Fodor's (1974) exploration of group treatment for phobic symptoms, and Mildred Caplan's (1978) group for women coping with the stress of moving both have strong feminist overtones.

A Model For Change: Alice Home's Work

Home (1981) goes one step further in discussing

effectiveness of CR groups. She attempts to delineate the
factors which influence the amount and type of change in CR
groups. Her model included factors outside the group
(readiness for change of the woman, and reactions to change by
significant others) which interact with factors in the group,
to produce the amount and type of change. Depending on what
type of change is desired, personal or sociopolitical,
behavioural or attitudinal, factors inside the group can be
adjusted. For example, personal attitudinal changes in
self-esteen and self-acceptance are facilitated by group
conditions emphasizing support and nonjudgemental acceptance,
and by a group composition characterized by similarity of group
members. Support is less useful for those seeking behavioural
changes, than is the challenge to change, and reinforcement for
changes made from those within and outside the group.

When the model is applied to groups seeking sociopolitical
changes, the group influence system assumes central importance.
Of key importance are the presence of group values exposing
society's role in members' problems, the definition of the
group as an influential reference group, and the presence of
group goals focused on sociopolitical change. Both negative
and positive reactions of those outside the group can
contribute to attitudinal change.

Home suggests that groups seeking a change in
participation of members in social action should encourage
norms of more social action involvement and commitment to the

group, and they should try to engage in social action as a group. Using structured themes in meetings is helpful, and such groups should attempt to recruit members with diversified rather than similar backgrounds, including some already involved in social action.

Home cautions workers about aiming for sociopolitical goals, as her study suggested that groups tend to remain at a personal level unless specific steps are taken to ensure that group conditions, goals, and composition are designed to facilitate sociopolitical change. However little documentation is available in this tenative, exciting area for exploration.

Turning to the social work literature on groups, Maier (1981) has identified three models which are relevant to this practicum. The salient characteristics of each of these models are outined in TABLE 3.

Insert TABLE 3 About Here

The model most congruent with feminist group practice as outlined in this paper is Model C. Feminist group practice and Model C value the interpersonal experience of the worker and the client, with flexibility in terms of closeness and/or distance in the relationship. Workers are not seen as experts because of their role alone, as in Model A, but rather are

TABLE 3

MAIER'S THREE MODELS OF GROUP INTERVENTION

C H A R A C T E R I S T I C S	Distance between worker and client	Different roles for for agency/client demands	Interpersonal experience of worker and client
	Authoritative worker	Partial Distance role to role	Flexible closeness and distance
	Worker as Expert	Contractual Agreements	Based on competence
	Client equal to child in relation-ship to adult	Role of worker as is presented	Workers are participating in groups
	Intervention as individual rehab, no social change	Intervention as group facilitation	Intervention as interactors
UNIT OF WORK	Linear: cause/ effect	Linear or contex-tual (focus on interactions between individuals)	Non-linear, context-ual (end of blaming)
CONNEC-TION	Psychoanalytic, Behaviour Mod	Social Work	Jane Addams self-help
TOOLS	Personal Distance with transference catharsis, inter-pretation, insight	Group Facilitation Tool Chest for Intervention	Systems thinking Interpersonal encounter, mutual aid, identification

considered in light of their competence. Workers participate

in the group, and intervene as interactors with members.

Contextual factors, considered important to feminists and in

Model C, reduce the potential of linear cause-effect thinking

and blaming. They both relate more closely to the mutual aid

tradition, utilizing interpersonal encounter rather than

impersonal distance, interpretation and insight. Reviewing

social work groups within this framework reinforces the

connection between the proposed intervention format and social

work practice in general.

Having summarized the key factors related to group work with

women, one final piece of information must be considered--that

of developmental stage awareness. As the task undertaken in

this practicum was one of group development, an understanding

of the stages distinguished in the group work literature is of

some significance.

Group Stages

Walker (1981) reviews the observations of researchers on

the progression of development in women's groups, using the

framework delineated by Schutz (1967). Three stages were

identified: inclusion; control; and affection.

The initial "inclusion" stage involves trust building

which is generally based on sharing information about one's

self (testimonials) and discovering commonalities. As members

take risks and self-disclose, they become more aware of their

feelings and more in touch with themselves. Two of the

positive outcomes are the discovery of the normalcy of their

discontent and the identification with female "leaders" as

effective role models (Walker, 1981). Kirsh (1974) reviewing

stages in CR groups called this stage "opening up". Feinberg

(1980) elaborated this stage, in self help groups, by

discussing the role of the leaders, who at this point have the

task of promoting a sense of security and purpose, while

advocating that the group belongs to the members.

The second stage, "control", is marked by frustration,

disappointment and anger. Members become aware of feelings

they previously ignored and withheld. The new insights elicit

anger, which may be expressed towards oneself, towards others

inside or outside the group, or towards society (Walker, 1981).

Several authors have noted that women's groups appear to be

more conducive to the expressing and sharing of angry feelings;

participants are not uncomfortable with or threatened by tears

or verbal outbursts (Kirsh, 1974; Wolman, 1976). However, for

some women the expression of anger is a frightening experience;

for some groups this anger produces a period of group

regression and depression which may result in an extremely high

rate of attrition (Walker, 1981). Kirsh (1974) defined this

stage more positively as "sharing", which emphasizes the

expanding of the focus from the individual to the group. She

added that hopefully the frustration and anger of this stage is

channeled into personal and social change. Hagan (1983)

discussed reasons why conflict and control are likely to be

especially difficult areas of all-woman groups, including

women's socialization and interpersonal orientation as central

factors. She also provided interesting and useful strategies

for facilitation of conflict management before and after the

conflict arises. Other authors (Aries, 1977; Carlock and

Martin, 1977) have found that women in all-woman groups tend

not to deal with competition and aggression issues.

The third stage, "affection", occurs if members

successfully work through the conflicts and issues of the

second stage. Members experience an intense feeling of

closeness and intimacy. Members no longer hold back, but talk

freely and intimately about themselves (Walker, 1981).

Feinberg (1980), in describing her group for mastectomy

patients, found that the "affection" stage was characterized by

open expression of fears and anxieties, which provided a

tension release that helped to unblock communication among

members. This stage combines two stages of Kirsh's (1974) CR

group model, termed analyzing and abstracting. Analyzing was

defined as the group's attempt to combine feelings with

objective analysis, which directs the members to investigate

the role of women in society. Abstracting, the final stage of

her model, is when the group participants examine institutions

and determine how they can work together to change society. In

general terms, the "affection" stage can be characterized as

when members begin to strive for significant changes in their

lives, and some resolve to work together to change society

(Walker, 1981).

When outlining group stages, it is important to realize
that different groups may go through the stages in differing
amounts of time. Also, it is unclear in the literature,
whether all groups go through all stages. The controversy
discussed regarding the "control" stage with all-woman groups,
can easily be extended to the whole issue of stages. Little
research has been done to determine whether women's groups do
follow this pattern, leaving another interesting area open for
study in the future.

Summary and Conclusions

Rural women have been ignored as a group in need of
special consideration in terms of service delivery. They have
also been made invisible economically, politically, and
personally. The rural factors contributing to their
invisibility include lower socioeconomic status; time
constraints; space and lack of services, including day care;
conservative attitudes and beliefs; isolation; stress and
battering. These elements, when combined with the sexism
inherent in our socialization, social structures, and
traditional helping systems, produce a group of women with many
needs and few outlets to meet those needs. The structure of
mutual aid groups, when intermixed with feminist strategies
designed to increase power in women's lives, serve to begin the
process of including women in personal and political

decision-making. The inclusion of women combats invisibility
and isolation, considered to be the greatest foes of rural
women.

Having outlined the rationale for viewing rural women as a
group in need of attention and aid, and presented a framework
for intervention, the following chapters will document an
attempt to put this theory into practice. First, the
characteristics of the rural community of Portage La Prarie,
the target area for this practicum, will be described. This
will be followed by a chapter on group formation, process and
content. Finally, an evaluation of the group within an
analysis of the structure and purpose of four other women's
support groups in rural Manitoba will be presented.

PORTAGE WOMEN'S GROUP

Beginning at the Beginning

Having lived in the community of Portage La Prarie for over

three years, without connection to women who shared concerns

about women's place in the world, I experienced a sense of

isolation. This isolation often led to self-depreciation,

stemming from the experience of being a lone woman struggling

to assert herself in the midst of a predominantly male-oriented

society. Having previously experienced the connection to

like-minded women, the loss was keenly felt. I had often

thought a women's group in Portage would be a way to begin to

meet my needs, but lacked the time, energy and connections to

make it happen. Attending infrequent "weekends for rural

women", I became cognizant of the fact that other rural women

had similar experiences and the women who were in local groups

felt more connected and more energized. As a professional

social worker, I knew what effect support groups could have on

people's sense of mental well being. It was with these

thoughts in mind, that the idea of organizing a group for women

in Portage took root. The key question in my mind was that of

membership. How does a woman go about finding other women to

join a group, when she has not made connections to women in the

community in three years--particularly in Portage, with only

two members belonging to the Manitoba Action Committee on the

Status of Women (MACSW)? This figure was significant in that

other groups in rural Manitoba had been started when a staff

person from the Committee had put members in touch with each other.

A group in Portage La Prarie has been formed. It has not been an easy task. The body of this practicum report will incorporate a discussion of: group formation; the key themes recurring in group process and content; and a comparison of the Portage group with other rural women's groups.

Prior to engaging in the description and analysis of the Portage Women's Group, some thought must be given to the community in which this group was developed

The City of Portage La Prarie

Portage La Prarie is a city of 13,086 persons--6,285 men and 6,800 women (Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, 1981). It is located in an area of Manitoba whose primary economic base is related, either directly or indirectly, to agriculture. The city is surrounded by large grain and vegetable farms, with the largest employing industries being related to farming (e.g. McCains, Campbell's Soup). Other employment available is primarily in the "human service industry" (e.g. Manitoba School for the Retarded, Agassiz Center for Youth, and social agencies servicing Central Region: Children's Aid Society; Community Mental Health; agriculture; public health; social allowance; probation; Human Resource Opportunities; etc.). Portage also provides the usual municipal services, including a 131 bed hospital, 3 medical clinics (one female doctor), seven law firms (three female lawyers), RCMP detachment (two female

officers), city welfare, two homes for the elderly, two high

school and five elementary schools (but no post-secondary

institutions), two day cares, a library, etc. Other service

industries (e.g. hairdressing, hotels and retail stores) offer

many of the regional employment opportunities for women.

Services available in this community are affected by the fact

that Winnipeg is less than 100 Kilometers away. The city

council often makes decisions not to develop services or

programs based on their availability in Winnipeg (e.g. swimming

pool and other sports complexes). This is a serious deficit

for people with no means of transport. Access to these

services is restricted to some, due to the lack of public

transportation available.

The 1981 statistics from the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics

on income, highlight the disparity that poor employment

possibilities create for women. TABLE 4 is a summary of the

available data for Portage and the RM of Portage in comparison

with the city of Winnipeg.

Insert TABLE 4 About Here

It is clear from this information that women in Portage, the RM

of Portage, and Winnipeg all suffer from economic inequality.

As noted before it is also apparent that the lower

TABLE 4

ECONOMIC DATA OF THREE GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, 1981 Census Data

	RM of Portage	Portage	Winnipeg
INCOME > 2000			
Males	10%	6%	7%
Females	24%	17%	16%
INCOME < 15000			
Males	42%	42%	50%
Females	8%	10%	13%
AVERAGE FAMILY INCOME	$21,981	$23,517	$26,669
INCIDENCE OF LOW INCOME	12.3%	9.6%	14.5%
RENT PER MONTH	$208	$311	$321
% OF POPULATION (15+) IN WORK FORCE			
Males	87%	76%	79%
Females	51%	55%	57%
% EMPLOYED OF THOSE IN WORK FORCE			
Males	95% (83%) *	94% (72%) *	95% (75%) *
Females	92% (47%) *	90% (50%) *	94% (54%) *
% UNEMPLOYED OF THOSE IN WORK FORCE			
Males	4% (17%) *	6% (28%) *	5% (25%) *
Females	8% (53%) *	10% (50%) *	6% (46%) *

* Numbers in brackets represent calculations of employed and unemployed persons, based on the total population rather than just the total number in the work force. This was tabulated to speculate how many persons, particularly women, are really working for wages and counted as such, versus women working for free (e.g. home work, farm work, mother work).

socioeconomic status of rural communities further conrtibutes

to Portage women's economic invisibility. Economic

invisibility refers to women's lack of economic power. We do

not have access to economic power, are not seen as having

economic independence, and therefore experience economic

invisibility.

There are many community service clubs and organizations

represented, in addition to most religious denominations being

established here. Unfortunately, in this large collection of

women's groups, within the service clubs and churches (some 25

in all), there were no groups with the intention of meeting the

needs of women. They are all focused on the needs of

others--the church, the family, the community. Fortunately,

within the last two years, a shelter for battered women has

been established in Portage. It is attempting to deal with

this major problem identified earlier as related to women's

emotional and physical isolation in rural areas. However,

there were no other women-helping-women services. No women's

resource center, rape crisis line, women's health services, or

support groups exist for those women experiencing life stress

best dealt with by alternative services.

Having provided a brief overview of the salient

characteristic of the community of Portage La Prarie, it is

time to return to the discussion of the formation of the

Portage Women's Group.

Group Formation

Group formation is a term used to describe not only the initial attempts to recruit members, but also the process of clarification of purpose and direction of the group. It includes an analysis of the difficulties experienced in trying to draw women together into a group essentially intended for self-care, considering women's socialization pattern and community pressure towards self-sacrifice (Gilligan, 1982).

Pregroup

In November of 1984, four women and myself met for supper to discuss the formation of a support group for women in Portage. Two staff members from MACSW, and three prospective members, including myself, reviewed several issues in preparation for starting the group.

Much discussion occurred over the whole issue of what was wanted in a support group. Did we want a feminist support group, and in that case to recruit known feminists, or a women's support group, one that would be open to all women in Portage and area whatever their affiliation or beliefs? This discussion, to a large degree, hinged on the fact that the three prospective members meeting were feminists. Was the group to support us in our needs, or to provide outreach and education to women in Portage? The answer to this question, while not obvious at the time, depended on who the other members were, and what their philosophy was. As none of us at

the meeting could readily identify other feminists in the community, a decision was made to recruit whoever wanted to join a women's group and proceed from that point. The first recruitment effort was to be a women's film night and from that point we were to make further decisions about membership.

The other main point raised was my role, and whether academic interest in the process was in conflict with the potential of personal gain from a support group. Could I be part of initiating a group as a professional worker, while at the same time expecting to get my needs for support and validation met? This issue, I believe is crucial in that the whole idea of "professionalism" often includes the ignoring of personal needs, and women's role is often to meet the needs of others while negating our own needs. One of the personal goals of this practicum was clarified for me at this time. I wanted to explore the potential of escaping these dichotomies, of finding a way in which my needs for support and connection as a woman could be met while creating a forum for other rural women to meet their needs. I did not want to be caught again in the trap of self-sacrifice which is inherent in both roles of social worker and woman (Adams, 1971). The extent to which this goal is achievable, is in part the extent to which feminism and social work can be seen as compatible.

Recruitment of Women
_____

As previously mentioned, by the end of the organizational

meeting, we had decided to focus on recruitment of women

regardless of their affiliation to feminism. We had also

decided that a women's film night would be a good way to bring

women out. Unfortunately, this did not seem to be the case.

Three of us ordered films, got equipment, advertized by posting

flyers, news notices and by word-of-mouth. The three of us

showed up , enjoyed the films, and discussed what happened.

Why did no other women show up? We speculated--it was early

December, too close to Christmas; there was not enough

advertising; we lacked affiliation to a "reputable"

organization; it was a bad night (Tuesday); and there was not

enough information on the flyer. We also despaired that there

may be no other women interested, but decided to wait until the

New Year and try again.

Regrouping in the new year, another member and I

strategized about how to connect with women in the community

who were interested. MACSW staff were consulted regarding

strategies that had been successful with other groups.

Strategy 1, the film night had been unsuccessful in recruiting

women. Our second strategy was to publicize the upcoming

Dauphin weekend for women, and to attend ourselves and connect

with women from Portage attending, to recruit for the group.

This had limited success. Seven women from Portage attended,

five more than ever before, but none joined the group.

Strategy 3 was to send a letter to other women's groups in the

community, including church and service clubs. We sent out 18

letters, and posted a few in the community. We received no direct response from any of the groups, but two women who saw the letter posted at the play "The Fighting Days", expressed interest. The fourth, and most successful strategy, was personal contact. I contacted all the women I had met who I felt may be interested and invited them to attend a meeting. Meanwhile, the MACSW staff person contacted me with the names of 3 women she felt may be interested. During this time, I met with a female colleague, who had been instrumental in setting up the Women's Shelter, to discuss the group and problems of recruitment, and solicited her support in passing the word. She suggested that perhaps some form of task orientation would provide a focus to gather women. As she was hoping to organize the hosting of "Side Effects", a Toronto based play on women and pharmaceuticals, we decided to collaborate on hosting a meeting to discuss both the play and the group.

On January 30, 1985 the meeting was held. Four women and myself attended. By the end of the meeting, it was clear that the two projects needed to develop separately, rather than as one. Women wanted a support group, not a working group to start with, although they were interested in the play. A meeting date was set for the evening of Febuary 19 to talk about the support group. This date left time for further recruitment at the Dauphin weekend, and for the other women's groups to respond to the letter.

By the time the meeting date arrived, a list of 12

interested women had been drawn up, anticipating a group size

of 6 to 12 members.

Clarification of Purpose and Structure

As the essence of women's support groups is that of

collective rather than professional direction (Walker, 1981),

at the initial meetings members themselves would set the

direction for the development of the group. The direction

would depend on the needs of the women in the group.

The intent of the first meeting was twofold. One purpose

was for the women to get to know a little about each other.

The other was to encourge discussion of the goals and structure

of the group. In relation to the latter, the MACSW video

"Conversations With the Crystal City Women's Group" was

utilized. Five out of a possible twelve, myself included,

attended. One of the initial organizers withdrew from the

group at this time, as she was moving to Winnipeg, leaving four

of us to watch the video and discuss having a group. Several

commonalities between our lives and that of the women in the

video were discovered: the difficulties of making connections

in a small town; all the women gathered were "imports" to the

community, like the Crystal City women; and the problem of

having many commitments to do for others, with little time or

energy for self. The last commonality has been found to be

prevalent with rural women in the literature (Britton, 1984;

MACSW, January, 1983).

A main topic was the goals of the group: personal support

or community involvement. A suggestion was made that a direct

connection to MACSW, with its political affiliations, could

bring out women who wanted action. The flipside was that it

could scare away women looking for connection. We settled on

an inital focus of support and validation, with no direct

action, at least until all the women were comfortable moving in

that direction.

A question raised by this meeting crucial to the

involvement of women in self-care is "how do women decide they

need a support group". One of the women, at the beginning of

the meeting expressed no need for a support group as she had

friends. By the end of the meeting she said she would be back,

because "maybe I need support after all". She continued to

attend meetings, and was most vocal in expressing her gratitude

for a place to express her feelings and opinions without fear

of being judged. Because "support" is such as nebulous term,

if women have no experience with a women's group intending on

serving this function, they have limited understanding of what

it could provide for them. This could be one of the factors

which contributes to women's hesitancy to commit themselves to

be involved...they do not understand what it means. An

important task to be taken on is the clarification of what

"support" groups do, and ways to express that intention so that

women can make informed choices about whether they wish to be

involved. The evaluation chapter, following the discussion of

the development of this group, and the video "Making

Connections", will hopefully shed some light on this issue.

By the end of the first meeting a few points were settled.

We would meet weekly on Wednesday evenings. The group would

remain open to new women, as the number attending so far was

viewed as too small. Support would be an initial goal,

focusing on our experiences, beliefs, and perceptions in an

open, non-judgemental way. It would be positive to have a

variety of women of different ages and different stages of

awareness. Issues left to be dealt with were: format of

meetings; my role; and further clarification of group goals.

We discussed recruitment options. Word of mouth was seen as

most effective, in light of limited returns with other methods.

Another option was to post a letter or poster in the

community, particularly in the health club and Dr. Taylor's

office (the only woman doctor in town). I followed up on this

suggestion; the other women were to spread the word.

The second meeting was a variation of the first. Only

four women were present; two from the first and two new women.

Initially the issues of stucture and goals were raised. The

women did not want structure, they wanted an open-ended group

in which to discuss whatever was concerning them. They wanted

to air their views in a supportive environment. A major

commonality again was the issue of being "imports" and how to

adjust in the community. Other topics included:

relationships; self-care; violence against women; working with

native people; unemployment and the resulting loss of self worth; and the possibility of a women's resource center in Portage.

So, it seemed. despite only a few women attending, a group was being established. So far the expectaions and expressed needs were for a non-structured collection of women, to gather, and to share thoughts and ideas in an informal way. The expressed purpose was to encourage, support, and validate women for their experrience and ideas. This was to be done without expectations for mandatory attendance or overt structure. No commitments for attendance were considered necessary, and in fact were seen as adding stress to a group of over-stressed women. Rather than attempting to impose a structure or purpose single-handedly, as the group was supposed to be self-directive, I restrained my task-orientated nature, and enjoyed the contact with other women.

The formation of the group could be said to have been accomplished, and consideration of common themes in order, but a few words need to be said about the chronological movement of the group. The third and fourth meetings were much along the vein decided at the outset, informal discussions amongst supportive women. Rather than leading to issue specificity and direction in an active way, a more "therapy-oriented" milieu was being established, through one member's crisis state and need for emotional nurturance. This created pressure for self-revelation, rather than an issue focus which would be more

instrumental in producing heightened personal awareness and
political change (Home, 1981). Membership continued to be
problematic, with a fairly constant changeover, without
replacements. We seemed like a collection of women, rather
than a group. This stage of development could be seen as
"inclusion" (Walker, 1981).

The fifth week brought increased frustration. A member
phoned just prior to the meeting to drop out, as the group was
not meeting her needs. Her decision offered me an opportunity
to raise the issue of direction at the meeting--individual
problem-solving or discussion and action on issues. While most
members agreed we should examine our purpose, other reactions
were evident on issues of leadership and membership. One fear
expressed was that we would lose the supportive environment
which had been established, as well as the flexibility
necessary to meet the women's needs. Most members felt the
group offered much they did not want to lose.

It is difficult to relate this point in time to the stages
of group development previously outlined. Is this an issue of
the "control" stage, as it was characterized by some
disagreements about direction, and a turnover of membership?
Or is it the continuance of the "inclusion" stage as much
exploratory information was still being shared? It was
certainly not characterized by open conflict, or expression of
anger, nor were we in the third stage of "affection".
Regardless, we were certainly at a turning point.

The sixth and seventh meetings were set aside as planning
meetings. What direction to take, how to achieve it, and how
to increase our numbers (we had dropped to 5 regular members)
were essential questions. A decision was made to make a major
shift from the initially stated format, from unstructured
gatherings for discussion at a personal level, to a focus on
issues with some structure in place regarding topic and
expectation of group members. A six week period was planned,
with five weeks of presentations and the sixth week to review
where to go from there, with a pot luck and open discussion
time. This change in direction brought new opportunities for
self-education, leadership exposure, and new membership,
without sacrificing support and connection.

Meetings eight through twelve followed the same basic
format: "News and Blues", which was a time for each woman to
bring the group up to date on her life; a presentation of a
selected issue; and coffee and discussion of the issue. Four
presentations were made: feminism and rural life; sexism and
the school system; PMS (premenstrual syndrome); and stress and
relaxation. One session was open discussion as the presenter
was not available. We took turns hosting in our homes,
presenting, or supplying snacks; one women per job, so no woman
was over burdened. Agreements were made about confidentiality
and one-cigarette-at-a-time, to respect the lungs of the
non-smokers. Session thirteen was a pot luck and review, with
an introduction of the MACSW staff member, to maintain contact

with the group. In session fourteen, the women in the group
were given the opportunity to respond to my writings on the
group to ensure that my writings reflected the group's reality
as well as my own. Their comments have been incorporated.
They were also asked to evaluate the group at this time. The
final session I attended was a group farewell for me, as I was
moving and would not be continuing contact with the group. The
women have continued to meet, and plan to meet less frequently
throughout the summer, and resume in the fall with a greater
emphasis on action in the community.

     While membership was not static, a core group of eight
women was formed. The group can therefore be described in
terms of the characteristics of its membership. Marital
status, parental status or motherwork, a word used by Helen
Levine (1982), type of employment, level of education, and
import or local status will be considered.

     Five women were living with male partners--three were
married and two were not. Three women were single: one
recently seperated, one divorced, and one never married. Four
of the women did not have children, four did (one with
preschoolers, two with school age children, and one with adult
children and grandchildren). The age span was fifty
years--twenty-three to seventy-three, although most fell
between twenty-five and thirty-five. The majority of the women
had professional work experience or training: two social
workers (one student); three teachers (two were unemployed);

one vocational rehabilitation counsellor; an oceanographer working as a store clerk; and a hairdresser. No farm women were group members, although one woman lived in an isolated rural location. Four of the women had university degrees, the other four have had some training beyond high school. All the women were imports to the community, ranging from recently arrived to twelve years. Five of the eight women had been in Portage over three years.

At first glance, one might see this group as atypical of rural women in general, and question the validity of using the Portage Women's Group to inform about the dynamics of a rural women's group. They appear to be better educated than average, and are all imports to the community.

Three factors may be delineated to speak to this issue. First, many of the women are migrants from small town Canada, so in fact, are rural women, although not from the community of Portage. Many women are on the move, due to marriage, career and other commitments. Although having an import status can be stressful, it is no longer unusual. Secondly, all persona are products of their environment to a certain degree. While this group may not conform to the expectations of what rural women "may" or "should" be like, they are influenced by the rural environment in which they live. Their levels of education and import status may make these women more aware of the conditions which oppress women in rural life, and therefore readier to engage in communication with others about it. The third factor

has to do with the concept of "typical" or "atypical"
characteristics of rural women. The characteristics of the
Portage group may be atypical of women you would expect to find
in a rural area, but this is suprisingly not so. Many rural
women are educated, so work in local schools, hospitals, social
service agencies, and serve many other important functions in
the community. In fact, the image of rural women, particularly
farm women, is an issue of major concern to rural women
(Sigurdson, Harrop and Lipkin, 1980). When the Portage group
is compared with four other groups in Chapter 5, common
characteristics of members include type of work and import
status. A further discussion of these characteristics will be
contained in the section on group comparison.

Throughout this changing panorama of direction and
membership, several themes reappeared. The next section will
be devoted to a discussion of these.

Common Themes

When looking for common themes by which to describe the
Portage Women's Group, a dichotomy comes to mind, that of
process and content. While these two elements both occurred
simultaneously, labelling them is one way to make sense out of
what was happening. Keeping this in mind, it is possible to
outline certain issues particular to each. Process will refer
to how people behaved in the group; what agreements were made
about behaviour; and what happened if they were not lived up
to. My role in the process will also be commented on. Content

will describe the issues of importance in these women's lives.

Process Themes

When delineating process themes it is necessary first to reiterate the process goals proposed at the outset of this practicum. These goals were summarized in three statements. The group functions proposed were: to provide an accepting, non-judgemental atmosphere where women felt free to talk about themselves, their lives and their concerns; to provide support for each woman in the group; and as much as possible, to work towards a process in which each woman would contribute and receive in a meaningful way, and feel an equal and important part of the group. The goals were gleaned from literature on feminist group and individual therapy (Levine, 1883; David, 1980; Gottleib, Burden et al, 1983; Hill, 1984; Innes; Women's Self Help Collective, 1984). The intention was to help facilitate a process of equality among members, women-helping-women rather than the expert-patient model. It is this process of working towards freedom and equality of all members, myself included, that will be outlined.

ACCEPTING, NON-JUDGEMENTAL ATMOSPHERE

When women gather together to discuss issues, to dream dreams, and to talk about the everyday realities of living in our world, it is an inherently healing process (Mander and Rush, 1974). Women find that they are not so unusual, they are not so crazy, as they had been led or had led themselves to

believe. Rural women are strongly affected by the overwhelming
conservative, male-dominated milieu, and often are convinced
that they are personally "a little crazy" if they do not accept
the status quo. "What is wrong with me, if I am not happy
being Mrs. John Doe?" An atmosphere of openness and
acceptance, of sharing our lives as women, allows for women to
begin to heal themselves, to believe in themselves and in the
strength of women (Levine, 1982). Often, things we had learned
to think of as personal peculiarities began to look amazingly
like women's collective psyche. In the Portage Women's Group,
this recognition of the commonalities in women' experience was
aided by the heterogeneous mix in membership previously
described. Despite the differences, life experience was
clearly similar.

To facilitate this process of open discussion and sharing
among women, it is important to acknowledge the longstanding
tradition of criticizing and silencing women, of treating them
as invisible and of little importance. Women's contributions
and strengths must be acknowledged; we can do that for each
other in our groups.

One facet of this issue, raised by a group member, is the
constant need to explain ourselves and our views in the general
public. Out socially, none of the group members felt we could
express our opinions, particularly feelings about women's
position in the world, without having to explain, to
rationalize and to defend ourselves or our views. This was

pinpointed as one of the most popular methods of silencing, to make it difficult for a woman to express herself for fear of ridicule by others. Considering women's socialization, with her basis of self-esteem built on the opinions of others (Bardwick, 1971; Scarf, 1979), it is a very effective method. In the group, women felt they did not have to explain themselves, they were understood. We were not judged and criticized, but rather we were accepted and supported.

From the outset, and throughout the entire evolution of the Portage Women's Group, the women present were willing and able to contribute of themselves and their lives to the group. Many subjects were discussed, and many experiences shared, from those resulting in victimization to those creating empowerment. Self-disclosure was adopted as a norm. My use of self-disclosure was not only necessary as part of the group process, but was useful in the beginning stages to provide a model for the ways and means of being heard by the group. This use of self disclosure can be seen as both a function of my status as a group member, and the role I played as group initiator.

The initial meetings were punctuated by women's tales of their lives, shared commonalities, and at times problem-solving or networking with women bouncing ideas off each other. The literature on group stages indicates that this is very common in all groups, including all-woman groups (Walker, 1981). Although a decision was made to switch to "political" issues,

all the women very strongly felt they did not want to give up

the non-judgemental atmosphere, or the exchange of personal

experiences. This provides support for Nadeau's (1982)

findings in resource-based communities, namely that the primary

appeal of support groups is the support and contact that they

offer to women experiencing isolation. While negotiating for

consensus on the focus of the group in the future, most of the

initial resistance to the change, on the part of one member in

particular, was her unwillingness to give up what she had long

sought--the freedom to speak about whatever was of concern to

her without fear of criticism. Once raised, this concern was

found to be common to others in the group. Consensus was

achieved by building in time for sharing of personal

experiences, and limiting the recruitment of members to

personal contacts to encourage close connection. In our group,

as in other "feminist" groups, the personal was used to

underline the political; the political to deprivatize the

personal (Levine, 1982).

Some women in the group came from life experiences in

which they had rarely trusted, groups in which they had never

shared openly. They were happily suprised with an atmosphere

that allowed for this. An example of the level of distrust was

evident in the necessity for a thirty minute clarification of

what kind of discussion was to be held after a woman made her

presentation. The final consensus was that "women could

disagree, but not judge". The fear of criticism is deeply

rooted in the psyche of women (Gilligan,1982), which is closely

related to the basis of our self-esteem as previously noted.

Anticipating that opening up the meetings to "whoever",

immediately, might bring out women who would "judge" rather

than merely disagree, the women decided to invite women who

they felt were at least sympathetic to our concerns. The

knowledge that our views were not widely accepted in the

community also contributed to the potential for criticism and

even hostility. Our understanding of the conservatism of rural

community beliefs is well documented (Larson, 1978; Collier,

1984).

The consensus regarding recruitment of members also

stemmed from the fact that few women were truly comfortable

making presentations to the "community at large", but could

cope with a small group of interested women. Despite our

efforts to reduce the stress inherent in presenting issues to a

group, the presence of new women at different topic meetings

was seen by some of the women as tension producing. In a

discussion of this issue two factors were stated as important

to the level of stress created. The first was the nature of

the topic. If the topic was of a more personal nature, for

example the discussion of lesbianism within the topic of

feminism, it was felt that the new members to that meeting may

have been uncomfortable engaging in the discussion. Regular

members also made a point of reintroducing the confidentiality

agreement at these times, and a decision was made to raise the

confidentiality issue whenever new women were present. The

second factor had to do with the level of awareness of the new

members. If it was evident that the new member shared a

"feminist" view of the world, most members felt there was

little tension produced. In one case, a woman came to meetings

who seemed very negative about women in general. Although she

quickly learned that her attitude was not generally supported

in the group, her presence was anxiety producing initially. As

she modified her negativity, realizing to some degree the

factors which contributed to her "trashing" of other women,

e.g. frustration with women who did not take action on their

own behalf in abusive relationships, she became accepted as a

member of the group.

Confidentiality was agreed upon in the early stages of

group development. A breach of confidence in a small community

could mean a severe disruption of the viability of the group,

as news circulates very quickly in the existing open

communication system (Johnson, 1979; Farley, 1982). Having the

knowledge that those attending are not going to repeat anything

outside the group is necessary for openess among the women.

While confidentiality itself was never a problem, the threat of

loss of confidence was. As the group members chose to meet in

each others' homes, rather than in a school or church basement,

there were often other family members to contend with. While

we all did our best to remove spouses and children when

hosting, a couple of times spouses did seem to be "hanging

around" or wandering in and out. These actions served not only
to disrupt the flow of conversation at the time, but were
interpreted by at least one member as a breach of confidence.
Were the women able to say with absolute certainty that their
spouses were not going to repeat the information they heard,
even in a joking way, to others? This issue was one of several
raised at the review.

The norm of non-judgemental acceptance established in this
group did allow for a sharing of ideas and experience, uncommon
to many of the women involved, but it also contributed to the
difficulty of raising and/or resolving conflicts within the
group. Having sponsored an atmosphere devoid of criticism, it
was difficult to bring up issues of disagreement without
appearing to breach the norm. This concern was raised by
myself and several others privately and in the review. This
difficulty can be seen to reflect both the "inclusion" stage of
development (Walker, 1981), and the degree to which each
woman's herstory prepared her for dealing with conflict or
criticism. It can also be seen to support some authors'
contention that all-woman groups tend not to deal with
competition and aggression (Aries, 1977; Carlock and Martin,
1977).

SUPPORT

The previous discussion on acceptance and non-judgemental
atmosphere lays the foundation for support; support in fact

leads out of such an atmosphere. If we are not judging each other, we are accepting one another. In accepting one another we are supporting one another.

Support is a complex combination of factors. It allows for a break in the barrier of individual responsibility, and allows the possibility of collective care, or mutual support. A woman need not be alone in her situation; she can have the comfort of other women who may have directly or indirectly lived an experience similar to hers. Women need support to live in our mysogynist society. Women need to be heard, to be hugged, to be healed. Women can do this for each other.

The primary reason women expressed for joining this group, was because they lacked support in their lives. It was not that they were friendless. They needed support in their lives for who they were, what they thought, and what they wanted to do. We had been forced into silence because we could find no one who shared our vision of the world. Levine (1983) stated this is a very common experience to all women. As each woman in the group, over a period of time, raised issues about her life, commonalities were discovered. We began to realize that we were not alone, we were not crazy, and if no one else valued our contributions, at least this group did.

Support is an enabler. It allows for change, for growth, for healing (Caplan, 1974). The support of the group enhanced self confidence and energized women to make changes in their lives. The support of the group enabled one woman to

terminate, and now survive the loss of, an emotionally abusive relationship. While the other changes in women's lives throughout the course of this group were not as direct, change did occur. One woman quit a long uninspiring job. Another started back to work part-time, after being at home for close to five years with her children. Two women moved back to Winnipeg, one moved from Winnipeg to Portage, with the group being her first contact for women friends. One woman began a women's group on the reserve where she works, rather than travel to Portage. To speak of the reality of our lives, the pain and the joy, enhanced day to day life. Looking back on my three lonely years in Portage prior to the establishment of the group, I wish I would have had the time and energy to begin the group development process earlier. A further discussion of changes will be provided in the analysis of content, and in the chapter on evaluation.

EQUALITY OF MEMBERS

Although the goal of equality of members is a fine "motherhood" statement, it is easier said than done. Women came to the group with differing backgrounds and patterns of relating in groups, expecting different things. The difficulty in negotiation of equality among members was compounded by the fact that most women have had very little experience of equality in their own lives. We have experienced only how to be dominated, or to dominate.

Equality, or lack of it, was a political issue acknowledged from the first meeting. The pattern of inequality in personal interaction among the women, identified by Fishman (1978) as an expression of social structural forces beyond the actual encounter, was identifiable from the third meeting on. Several attempts were made to equalize the members. The major area of concern was domination of "air space", by one or two more vocal women, to the exclusion of one or two less vocal women. This domination consisted of speaking often, speaking for long periods of time, interrupting others, and going off topic on long personal tangents. These same behaviours have been identified as characteristically male (Henley, 1977; Thorn, 1979; Fishman, 1978).

Until the sixth and seventh meetings, in which the group was revamped with agreements made about specific issues, and a format laid out for topics, it was difficult to intervene. Membership, up until this point was constantly changing, and the establishment of an atmosphere of non-judgemental acceptance took precedence. The women were not at a very high level of comfort with confronting each other, as is characteristic of the "inclusion" stage (Walker, 1981). As I wished to cement my position as member, and the groups' decision to be leaderless, I did not jump into the leadership position and take charge of the situation. Feinberg (1980) includes this activity of turning the group over to the group members as a necessary component of the leader's role in mutual

aid groups in the first stage.

The issue of equal "air time" was further complicated by the obviousness of the "dominant" women's need to speak. One was going through an exceptionally stressful time: the termination of an emotionally abusive relationship; a recent miscarriage; loss of her job; and a complicated house transaction. The other woman, a woman of color, had experienced continuous discrimination in the labor market in spite of excellent qualifications. Both women had been chronically silenced for too long. The opportunity to speak was treasured, and they took full advantage of a captive audience of concerned and caring women.

It is to the credit of the other members, that the more vocal women were responded to with support and acceptance of their need. As time passed, the continued domination spurred the need for renegotiation of the function of the group. Was it therapy-oriented for women with personal issues, or was it an arena for discussion of larger issues with room for personal expression? The latter was determined by the group to be the case at the reorganization meetings. This reorganization allowed for a new opportunity to intervene in the process of achieving equality among members. Although the problem of domination of discussion was not immediately resolved, over the next four "issue" meetings, a process of group facilitation was beginning to develop. Two agreements were made: no interrrupting when another woman is speaking; and each woman

has a responsibility to input on her own behalf, but to be
conscious of the value of the others' input.

When finding ways to create a balance in the group, to
have each woman feel equal in the group and an important part
of it, silencing of women reared its ugly head. In attempting
to allow air apace for all women present, one of the more vocal
women felt she was being silenced. She had been silenced all
of her life, and now, here in the "non-judgemental" group she
was being "judged" as having spoken too much. A re-examination
of the double-edged sword of silencing reveals the other side
of her reality. In her effort to be heard, she was effectively
silencing other women. By filling up most of the available air
space, by interrupting, and in effect demanding that her issues
were more important than those of other women, she was negating
the value of shared experience, and condemning the other women
to the fate she had long experienced, that of silencing.

While much energy was taken up attempting to equalize "air
time" by limiting vocal women, the other issue of encouraging
more silent women to speak was not as prevalent. One woman in
particular was often silent. While women often attempted to
encourage dialogue, she was not prepared to readily disclose.
She was not pressed for involvement, the genral consensus being
that it would come in time. Her lack of communication was
raised outside the regular meetings on a couple of occasions as
was attributed to a series of recent traumatic expereinces.
She did begin to disclose more of these experiences in the

later meetings, and also formed relationships with two of the women in the group, who she called on for support outside of the meetings.

Equality, in this case, does not mean every woman speaks the same amount of time, or the same number of times, although this is one interpretation that can be facilitated through the use of "rounds" (Women's Self Help Network, 1984). Rounds is the process of going around the circle and having each woman take her turn to speak on the issue or subject.

Equality does mean equal opportunity to speak, and equal opportunity to be heard. Equal to my/your need in consideration of your/my needs. The clarification of this issue, while involving an element of struggle, captures the paradox inherent in the overall struggle for equality of women. We must strive to achieve individual equality while always in consideration of the needs of others. This is particularly tricky, as we live with our oppressors and must often be considerate of their needs while also struggling to free ourselves from the ties that bind us in our unequal position (Lipman-Blumen, 1984). At times we are needier, at times stronger, individually and collectively. The group must be flexible enough to allow for individual need, but secure enough to be generally responsive to all. Finding a balance is the key.

The issue of equality of members was also reflected in the agreement made regarding group decision making. Sharing a

concern that all members be involved in the decisions made by
the group, an agreement was made to only take action as a group
if all of the women agreed to it. Again, the issue of trust
was in the forefront. Reassurances were needed that each woman
was considered equal and important to the group, and
necessarily the consensus of the entire group became a
prerequisite for the group to take a stand in the community, or
to change the group direction. A further agreement was made
that if the group of women meeting achieved consensus without
other members present, a woman at the meeting would contact the
missing member(s) to solicit her opinion. While this practice
has not been necessary to date, the concern expressed and acted
upon can be construed to be an indication of the importance of
equality to the group, and a reflection of the mistrust
inherent in the lack of equality in women's lives.

One final indicator of the process of negotiated equality
of members is the agreement made about cigarette smoking. As
we had members who were confirmed smokers, and those who
suffered from cigarette smoke inhalation, a compromise was
agreed to, which all members monitored. The agreement was that
only one cigarette at a time could be smoked, so the smokers
would take turns, and the non-smokers would not suffer smoke
inhalation. While this was difficult for smokers to adjust to
at first, being accustomed to smoking at will, all did very
well at observing the rule and reminding new members and those
smokers that forgot.

It is important to note that the theme of equality of members is distinctive to feminist groups. In traditional community groups, e.g. The United Church Women (UCW), and the Women's Institute (WI), the establishment of a hierarchical structure negates equality, and therefore little energy is invested in the process of ensuring equality of members. As equality is not common in the lives of women, the process of working towards equality of members may be time consuming, but also may contribute to our personal healing and our collective understanding of what equality means.

Equality of members can not be addressed without a discussion of the issue of leadership, and my role in the group. Was I to end up as the group-appointed or self-appointed leader because of my status of initiator of the group, or because of my dual role as member and student/studier? Very early in the process of planning for this group intervention, a conscious decision was made to limit my role in the group to initiator and when necessary, facilitator. There was no intention on my part to be a leader, feeling this would detract from the goal of equality of members.

Several steps were taken to limit my power in the group. An initial precautionary step was to begin by shared responsibility. Two close women friends who had expressed an interest in a support group for themselves were involved at the outset. One moved to Winnipeg and was unable to continue her

commitment, but the other was involved in the entire process from recruitment to reorganization and continued in the group when I left. Once the leadership responsibilities were shared with another, the process of shared leadership had begun. Once begun, spreading responsibility further became natural.

Another initial decision was to purposely leave the direction of the group up to the members. Initially the three of us shared our conceptions of what the group might be like, but the direction was established based on consensus of the women involved in the group. The direction was not always what I would have chosen, but as the self-appointed non-leader, I allowed the women to struggle with group identity issues, rather than lead them. The waiting was not always easy, the pacing often slower than anticipated, but the group was self-directive. Meeting time was set aside, on a regular basis, to review the direction and process, and to make alterations as necessary.

To say that I did not assume direct leadership is not to say that I was inactive or without influence. Along with my interventions, and lack of the same, in the area of equality, I served several other functions. Activity in recruiting members on an ongoing basis , and my involvement in interaction and self-disclosure are three tasks already addressed. Interventions in the process itself, and the timing of them, along with provision of resources, from ideas to materials, were two other crucial functions.

Intervention in the group process was taken on when group

confusion was sensed. Confusion was usually communicated by a

drop in membership; the need for conversation about the group

outside of the group meetings, particularly between another

member and myself; drastic change in patterns of communication;

and mostly through an intuitive sense of ease or struggle

inherent in a particular situation or pattern. The process of

identification of confusion, and decision-making leading to my

eventual intervention, can best be described through excerpts

adapted from my journal writings done throughout this

practicum. This particular example deals with group direction,

and the early struggle to decide on group focus.

Meeting 4: Only four women attended. It seemed like
therapy, with two dyads created, rather than a group
discussion. Is this an indicator more direction is
needed?
I talked with M. during the week. She was concerned about
group direction also. Is it personal therapy, or
self-education, or what?
Meeting 5: A member phoned to quit the group as it was
not meeting her needs. This call reinforced M. and my
feelings. M. was on holidays, so it was left to me to
raise the issue of group direction. I raised the
possibility of dissatisfaction with the group, and got a
mixed reaction, including a comment that I may be taking
on too much responsibility for the group. A long
discussion of what members liked about the group came from
my complaint, as well as some resistance to the idea of
change. Based on my intervention, all the women made a
commitment to think about direction and process, and come
back in two weeks (when M. returned from holidays) to
discuss these issues.
Meeting 6: All members reached a consensus about group
direction. Each woman was heard out, hesitation and
resistance to change discussed. A commitment to preserve
personal support within the framework of "political"
issues was adopted by all. A further meeting was arranged
to clarify issues prior to opening up the group to new
members.

Meeting 7: A format for determining "needs" and "haves"
was suggested and adopted. This presented an opportunity
to offer myself and my services to the group as a member.
Along with this list, meetings were to have an issue focus
and a job rotation for presenting, hosting and providing
food was created, to be review at the end of the first
rotation. Responsibility was now shared in the group. I
offered to write up the agreements made and issues raised
for use at the review and did so (see Appendix 1).

These notes indicate that in this process a good sense of

timing was necessary. The women in the group were divided

about direction and a method had to be introduced to deal with

both the resistance to change by some members and the need for

change by others. My intervention had to be at a point when

the problem was visible to other members, but not so large that

many members would be lost. My facilitation of the planning

meetings, provision of the format for assessment of needs,

along with actions to ensure equal opportunity for each women

to state her case contributed to the resolution. Confusion had

set in, members were leaving, M. and I were both concerned

about direction and communication patterns had shifted. In

summary, these factors and my intuitive powers indicated the

presence of struggle. Change was necessary, and I, as a

skilled worker, knowledgeable about feminist group process, was

in the best position to facilitate the process. If one was to

examine this intervention within the framework provided by

Maier (1981), again it would be obvious that I was operating

from the Model C perspective in social work

intervention,referred to in TABLE 3 on page 49.

In order to further analyze my role in the group, it is

necessary to move to discussion of content, as much of my
intervention was of a content nature. That is, I contributed
ideas, information and resources as required or requested by
the group, along with self-disclosure of personal concerns and
experience as a group member.

Content Themes

Content refers to the issues of importance in the lives of
the women in the group, and by natural extension, to the issues
of rural women in general.

While the process of ending the silencing of women is
inherently healing, hearing the needs of women and finding some
way to respond to those needs is also part of healing, and
necessarily therefore part of the support group function.
Objectives for content were proposed at the outset of this
practicum. The group was to provide a forum for women in
Portage La Prarie and area to begin to discuss issues of
concern to them; to decrease the physical and emotional
isolation inherent in rural life for women; to help women in
Portage become aware of how they are affected by the pressures
of society; and to support each other in individual action, and
hopefully over time to organize for change within the
community, or in support of other community action. Objectives
for content were established based on the same literature cited
for process goals.

FORUM FOR DISCUSSION

Women need to be able to speak about their lives openly
and honestly without fear of rejection. Many issues which
affect women's lives are not generally discussed with family,
male partners, or even other women friends. The group provided
a forum in which any issue of concern could be raised, and in
fact some issues and experiences discussed had never been made
"public" before. This can be taken as a sign of freedom to
divulge the personal/political realities of these women's
lives. A partial list of issues and questions raised in
general conversation, prior to the reorganization for
facilitation of a focussed discussion of issues, provides
further insight into this statement. The list would include:
the difficulty of making connections in a small town; women's
tendency to always do for others with little time for
self-care; coping with culture shock in the urban/rural
transition; usefulness and how we try to live up to others
ideals; discrimination (racial and sex) in the job market,
particularly in rural areas with limited employment
possibilities; tracking cycles of depression; escaping abusive
relationships; craziness--how do we know if we are and can we
trust those who label us; responsibility and why women are
always so responsible; sexuality and orgasm--why don't men take
more responsibility for our pleasure; relationships and how to
be more equal; violence against women--is the fear of it as
great a control as the act; and sexist language--how do I stop

using "girls" for women.

The listing of "what I can give" and "what I need" at the seventh meeting brought to light other areas of concern. These included: women's spirituality and traditional organized religion; sexuality and body image; relaxation and stress management; children--yes or no; PMS; women-helping-women--we have to educate ourselves on the issues to help other women; birth control and women's body cycles; how to deal with the medical system to get quality care; non-sexist child-rearing at home and at school; women and nuclear power; why are women considered so weak when we are so strong; overcoming sex bias in the workplace, or at least how to live with it; how to find a balance between traditional expectations and feminism when you have to live with both; women and mental health--professionl help, is it helpful; lesbianism; how to achieve equality in interpersonal relationships; community mobilization; and sex role stereotyping in the school system.

As most members felt a certain level of anxiety about making presentations, we agreed that each woman could select the topic of her choice for at least the first presentation. Four women presented on four issues. Along with my presentation on feminism, the topics of the first issue sessions included: sexism in the school system; PMS; and stress and relaxation.

The session on feminism dealt with myths about feminists, and translating feminism into day-to-day life. A video made by

MACSW on "Feminism and Its Place in Rural Communities" was

utilized along with handouts on feminism. "Sexism in the

School System" delved into the differences between men and

women and how these were culturally rather than biologically

based. The member presenting detailed how the system

reinforces stereotypes using a paper she had written at

University, as well as material I provided on the psychology of

women and the education issue of HERizons. PMS was presented

through the use of a self-help manual from the Women's Health

Clinic, and a video of Marjorie Salki's report on PMS I was

able to pick up in Winnipeg. Diagnosis and treatment of PMS

were discussed, along with an interesting conversation about

"what would PMS be like if women were valued, could it be an

energizing and creative time, rather than an 'illness'?".

Another member presented on "Stress and Relaxation", adapting a

method she had used with groups before. We discussed how we

felt physically when we were stressed, followed by involvement

in a guided relaxation fantasy. All but one member found the

exercise relaxing and energizing. For that member the imagery

was of things of which she was afraid, e.g. water. For the

most part, the group felt so energized that the possibility of

including an "energizer" at the beginning of each meeting was

raised to be considered at the review.

While some issues were dealt with by topics, others have

become part of the ongoing process. These include use of

sexist language, and the strength and commonality of women's

experience.

It is easy to see that there are many things on the minds of the rural women in the group. Many topics are left unexplored at this time, but a sharing process had begun. This sharing contributes to the achievement of the second goal, that of decreasing isolation.

DECREASING ISOLATION

Isolation has been described previously as one of the major components of rural women's lives (Haussman and Halseth, 1983; Evans and Cooperstock, 1983). The deprivatization of woman's lives, inherent in the support group process, decreases isolation for women. Women learn that they are not alone, that in sharing their lives their burdens are lessened, their joy increased (Levine, 1983; Jeffreys, 1977; Mander and Rush, 1974).

Many comments throughout the duration of my involvement with these women indicated the truth about the isolation in their lives. Although a diverse group, all the women in the group shared at least one common characteristic, they were imports into the community. When a woman moves and leaves her family and friends behind, a void is left that needs to be filled. Mildred Caplan's (1978) article on women and the stress of moving highlights issues in this area. Personal experience of myself and other women in the group attests to the fact that it is not easy breaking into the community of

Portage, and often seemed impossible to develop meaningful

relationships. Although the circumstances of their lives

differed enormously, many of the women expressed a serious

deficit in the area of personal connections in the community.

One woman, a resident for 8 years, began the group questioning

her need for support as she had friendships and belonged to

other groups. By her second meeting she knew what she had come

for, a place to speak the truth and be understood and accepted.

She had lacked support, but had filled her life with activity

and "almost" did not miss it. Another woman, emeshed in an

emotionally abusive relationship, recently cut off from her

ties in Winnipeg, was isolated several miles outside of

Portage. She had met a few people at work, but had few friends

and no place to deal with the emmense pain and sadness in her

life. Moving two months previously from Winnipeg, from a close

circle of women friends, another woman found our group quickly.

She recognized the sense of community available to her there.

Moving often with the military, a fourth woman commented that

for the duration of her child-bearing years, she had been

out-of-touch. She had had no opportunities for intellectual

stimulation or connection, now she did. Personally, I

empathize with the despair created when feelings of isolation

prevail, because as a rural woman I had had the same

experience, and found the group to relieve many of the worst

effects of emotional isolation.

The rural world is a man's world. Women have few

opportunities to get together for self-care. Many are isolated

by geography, some because of lack of work outside the home.

The majority are emotionally isolated with few opportunities to

meet and interact with women in a meaningful way. Most

opportunities involve other commitments, like baking for

community service groups, or supervising children's activities,

or competing in sports. Unlike the city, there is no place for

women to gather; no womens' resource centre or clinic or club

(Evans and Cooperstock, 1983). Women must create their own

opportunities for connection, and a support group is one of

them.

AWARENESS OF SOCIETAL PRESSURES

Putting into practice the objectives of helping women

become aware of how they are affected by the pressures of

society requires knowledge of the issues. These issues have

been documented in the review of literature preceeding, and the

extensive bibliography following.

Each woman came to the group with a wealth of information

about her life experience with societal pressures. Some came

with awareness of the unique position of women as a group in

our androcentric, or male-oriented, society, some did not.

Many women suffered the burden of guilt for many things they

could not change. Half of the women shared the difficulties of

trying to negotiate relationships with male partners, with a

wide range of sucess. Lack of childcare was problematic for at

least one woman, lack of stimulation outside the home another.
Limited employment opportunities affected five women, with two
losing jobs and three getting new jobs over the duration of the
group. Shortage of money affected at least two women on a
regular basis. Time constraints and resulting lack of energy
affected most. Unavailability of educational resources was a
main concern for at least two women. As a group we have had
first hand experience with many stressful events common to
women: rape; battering (as "wives" and as children); death of a
parent; apprehension of children; alcoholic spouse; admission
to mental hospital; addiction to prescription drugs; divorce;
marriage; birthing; post-partum depression; miscarriage;
menopause; unemployment; underemployment; sexual harrasment;
poor body image; and moving. All the women have experienced
depression and poverty at one time in their lives.

What is the purpose of knowing women's experiences with
societal pressures on a personal level? The feminist premise
is that we are all experts on being women if we can get in
touch with our experiential knowledge. Through this process we
can build up a new body of knowledge based on our deepest
firsthand experience of ourselves. Feminism seeks to bring out
the validity of our experience as women so that our experience
begins to replace erroneous social mythology (Levine, 1983;
Mander and Rush, 1974).

There is a power in the strength it takes to survive the
struggles known to everywoman. This power is diffused when

women believe that they are alone in their experience in the world, and therefore bad experiences are necessarily their fault. They come to beleive that they are "different", maybe even "crazy" (Chesler, 1972). When women come together to talk about their lives, we learn that women have strengths-the strength to survive, to relate, and to create anew.

The feeling of enhanced personal power, combined with the self-education provided through discussion of the issues does not eliminate societal pressures. The awareness created can be a springboard for both personal and political action.

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL ACTION

The quest for action comes in learning to understand women's position. Action comes in many forms, from self-education on issues, to public education, to political lobbying, to changes in our personal lives to facilitate our growth as persons. Often the experience of accepting the reality of womens' oppression stirs a need to do something, no matter how small, to alter our lives and/or our community (Women's Self Help Network, 1984).

At this level of personal action, first and foremost is the commitment the women all made to regular weekly attendance of the support group meetings. Out of twenty women who attended at least one meeting, a core group of eight women was formed. These women came prepared each week to share of their lives with each other. (Of the eight, seven attended almost all

of the meetings, there was one exception. One woman attended sporadically, but was accepted by the others as a group member. Her infrequent attendance was not interpreted as lack ofcommitment to the group, but rather as over commitment in other areas in her life.) Each week a woman acted as presenter, host or food provider. They have arranged their usually busy lives to be involved in a process that stimulates intellectual and emotional growth.

Other action on a personal level has meant changes in personal relationships, from termination in the case of the woman in the abusive relationship, to negotiation of more equality in others.

Employment status, a big issue in our group, was altered. Through networking within the group, one woman found suitable employment. Another woman acted on her need to work outside the home, and secured part-time employment enabling her to motherwork as well as use her skills in paid employment. Four women have had to deal with the issue of pending or existing unemployment, and how that affects our sense of usefulness. Realizing her overwhelming feelings of overwork, another woman left her job to take time for herself.

While individual and political action may be considered different in some ways, they often overlap. Individual memberships to the Action Committee have been taken out by some members, giving them a direct connection to an organization committed to action on behalf of women. This can therefore be

considered political, although personal. A link was made to

Bev Peters, from the Action Committee when she attended our pot

luck. She will continue to provide materials, ideas, or

support requested by the group in their future endeavors.

The action the women have taken on behalf of themselves

has begun to spread out into the community. One goal of the

group was to become informed of the issues, to enable them to

take action with and on behalf of other women. Each woman has

taken responsiblity for inviting new women to the group, for an

issue meeting of interest to them or to join us. It is

probable that in the future the meetings will be advertised,

once all the women are comfortable with the idea and a larger,

more common meeting space is found. The group was involved in

hosting "Side Effects", a play on women and pharmaceutivcals

through billeting of the cast, selling of tickets, and various

duties on the night of the play. The cast led a discussion on

the issue after the play, and it is hoped that further action

in the community was inspired by this. One hundred and eighty

persons, mostly women, attended and sixteen women signed up for

a committee to promote other educational issues regarding women

in the fall. It can be said to have been a resounding success.

Some of the women have become involved in the larger

network of rural women through attendance at "weekends for

rural women" in Dauphin, and in Crystal City. These weekends

serve to let women know there are other pockets of concerned

and active women. They are a time of sharing ideas, planning

for change, and renewal of energy. The women in Portage hope
to host such a weekend in the future.

Taking action on behalf of oneself, to become more
politically aware, is a stepping stone to being involved in a
process of action on behalf of other women. It is believed
that this process is underway. Five months of weekly meetings
has set the stage for women to make connections to each other,
for personal learning and growth, and will over time lead to a
sharing of this learning with other women, and action on behalf
of everywoman.

The Portage Women's Group began as an idea in the minds
of a couple of rural woman who understood their own need for
support and nurturance by and with other women. We decided we
needed it, and there must be others in the community like us.
Wanting and having it were two different things. Beginning at
the beginning, with a few false starts, women were found to
share both the idea and the work of forming a group. The
process has begun, and with some struggles along the way, this
collection of women with diverse backgrounds, ages and stages,
are becoming a support network for themselves and other women.

The proposed goals of the intervention have been achieved
for the most part. While the delineation of common themes in
both process and content provides a description of the group,
and may serve as an evaluation of the work of this practicum,
further insights about support groups for rural women were
sought. Answering the question of how this group compared with

other support groups for rural women appeared to be one viable

method of evaluation, and an excellent opportunity to aid in

the work of the Action Committee in rural Manitoba. The final

chapter addresses the issues of evaluation and explores three

additional sources of information by which to evaluate this

practicum. These sources include: a personal evaluation of

whether my goals where met; evaluations done by the women in

the Portage group; and an analysis of interviews with four

other support groups in rural Manitoba.

EVALUATION

The evaluation component of this practicum posed particular problems. One problem was related to the feminist perspective, and the resulting lack of existing formats and tools for evaluation. The second concerned the participatory nature of my involvement in the group experience.

Having developed a theoretical and practical outlook for work with rural women, which included the identification of the sexist bias inherent in traditional therapy, it would be difficult to ultilize traditional methods of measurement to determine the effectiveness of this practicum intervention. Traditional therapy has been concerned with helping individuals make adjustments to fit existing cultural values and social roles. Measures developed out of traditional practice have been primarily concerned with identifying or describing cultural demands and assessing therapeutic success in terms of adjustment to stable, shared behaviour patterns or personality traits. These measures, like traditional therapy, are biased against women. Klein (1976) reviewed traditional measures and outlined how many of them have an inherently sexist bias. She included: symptom removal, which may indicate adjustment rather than growth; self-esteem and role performance concepts and measures which are biased against women; and the quality of interpersonal relationships, which are often enhanced at the expense of women.

Having participated as a member of the group, evaluation
took on an additional dimension. Rather than being able to
assume objectivity, as is often the case in traditional forms
of evaluation, evaluation became a subjective as well as an
objective process. This was in keeping with the feminist
perspective of the practicum. It is part of feminist research
to incorporate and acknowledge the writer's experience and
interpretation as valuable in itself, as well as in relation to
that of others (Roberts, 1981).

In response to these concerns about evaluation, three
separate evaluative processes were put into place to assess
this practicum. The measures selected were not those with
sexist bias, and were selected in consideration of the
experiential nature of the group.

The first evaluation tool utilized was self-recording on
the group process and content from the formation stages of the
group to the termination of this practicum, which was not the
termination of the group. This journal was utilized to
illuminate the common themes outlined in the previous chapter.
As the recording was often of a subjective nature, reflecting
my vision of the group, at the fourteenth meeting, the chapter
on the group was shared with the women in the group, and they
were asked to make alterations, additions or deletions. This
process was undertaken to ensure that the summary reflected an
accurate portrayal of the group rather than my impressions
alone. Their comments are incorporated into that chapter. The

practice of sharing information with the "client" is an

integral component of feminist practice (Emberly, 1984). Along

with journal keeping to attend to content and process goals,

the self-evaluation component includes a review of my personal

goals in this practicum, to be discussed in this chapter.

The second evaluative process involved an evaluation of

the group by the members themselves, based on a question

designed to stimulate thinking on this subject. The question

is stated later in this chapter. The evaluation was completed

by each member individually. Responses were then summarized,

with liberal use of quotations from the women's statements,

again to safeguard against only reiterating my own ideas. A

component of group evaluation was the discussion of my writings

on the group, so their individually written comments on the

group may, in part, reflect knowledge of my written analysis.

Accessing the information available through all those

participating in the group does provide a method of evaluation,

in that we have some understanding of what was meaningful to a

small group of rural women. However, in order to expand this

understanding, and to have a broader frame of reference from

which to study the phenomenon of support groups for rural

women, a further evaluative process was undertaken. The third

method was to involve other groups for rural women in a

comparative analysis. This analysis provided a framework to

understand more fully what support groups are, who belonges to

them, and why. It also provided a third way to evaluate the

effectiveness of this practicum, in that the Portage group can

be understood in relation to other similar groups for rural

women in Manitoba.

This chapter focuses on these three evaluative components,

with sections on personal goals, the group review, and the

comparison with other groups.

Personal Goals

Having explored the level of success in achieving the

goals related to process and content in the previous chapter,

discussion of my personal goals in this practicum is in order.

In this case as well, objectives were proposed prior to

beginning this practicum. The proposed goals were: to extend

my theoretical knowledge of group work, mutual aid, issues for

rural women, and feminism, and their interrelationships, by a

review of the literature both in the social work field and

outside it; to attempt to integrate practice skills and

feminist beliefs in working with rural women in groups; to

enhance my capabilities in group work, particularly as a

non-directive leader; to have access to a support group myself;

and to work with the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of

Women (MACSW) to aid them in achieving their goals in rural

Manitoba.

Theoretical Knowledge

Doing an extensive review of social work and feminist

literature heightened my awareness of the herstory of the field

of social work in relation to women. Although social work

theory and practice is not without its biases against women,

for example, its treatment of women on welfare (Eichler, 1983),

there have been some attempts made to increase professional

awareness of woman as an oppressed group. As social work has

long been known as a supporter of the "underdog", the marriage

of feminism and social work can be a natural one. This

relationship is not without difficulties, when one considers

the studies undertaken on the status of women in social work

(Cummings, 1980, 1981; Jeffreys and Weibe, 1982). Thus, while

social work has values compatible with feminism, the fact that

we exist in a patriarchy has shaped our profession

substantially.

Another interesting connection is the one between the

herstory of mutual aid and that of feminism. Both began in

response to injustices in the system directed at the population

in need; both were considered anti-system and revolutionary by

nature. It is evident that mutual aid and feminism have both

become integral parts of a large body of social work literature

and practice.

Mutual aid, feminism, and social work all share common

herstory, that of aiding oppressed groups. While the social

work profession may have suffered from the backlash of Freudian

psychology by becoming too individually oriented, it has

retained a great deal of potential to aid in both personal and

political change. But, this potential can only be realized
when we begin to incorporate Knowledge as seen through women's
eyes.

When one considers rural women as the target group for
intervention, and support groups as the tool of practice, the
theoretical blending of mutual aid, feminism and social work
takes a practical form. Rural women, suffering from isolation
and invisibility, but certainly self-determined, need to be
afforded the respect and support of other "like-minded" women.
This support, a combination of mutual aid group
characteristics, feminist ideology and social work skills,
serves to enhance their individual and collective ability to be
self-determining, responsive and responsible members of their
community.

Finding the common ground between feminism and social work
practice has reKindled my connection to the social work
profession, and my commitment to aid in the struggle for
women's equal place in the world, including the field of social
work. When I began this process I felt a split between my role
as a social worker and my belief in feminism. Only once
engaged in actual practice was that split healed. I can be a
feminist and a social worker too. It is a great relief. This
healing through practice is the focus of the next section.

Practice Skills and Feminist Beliefs

Having been both a social worker and a feminist for close

to ten years I often encountered a split between my personal

belief system and the system in which I worked. This was most

evident in my recent work as a protection worker for the

Children's Aid Society in Morden. When I left that position I

was unsure if I could work in the field again. I felt I was

constantly undermining my feminist beliefs to respond to a very

conservative community--where in many ways women and children

were treated as chattel, to be used or abused at a man's will.

As part of my personal healing I elected to work with

women. Several avenues were open to me. I could have chosen

an established group, but few non-traditional groupd for women

exist in Portage, other than a support group for battered women

at the women's shelter. I could have worked with this "special

needs" group, or another targeted special needs group, e.g.

single mothers, "depressed" women, "drug-dependent" women, or

incarcerated women at the Portage Women's Correctional

Institute. I elected to set up a seperate group, one which had

no set "client" population other than rural women who lived

under the day-to-day societal pressures, described in the

literature review, as common to rural women.

In making this choice, several factors were considered.

The primary concern was the lack of any group, service, or

location for women without the "special needs" label, to begin

to meet their needs. While existing social services in rural

areas are beginning to identify and plan for women with special

needs, women as a general population group are ignored.

While working with a special needs group may have been more productive in an analysis of support groups as a therapy tool, my personal goals of access to a support group and aiding the work of MACSW would have suffered. The negotiation of a non-hierarchical relationship with the group would have been made more complex, as the rest of the group would have a common problem, e.g. depression, from which I would be excluded. I would have been the group "therapist", with a group of "clients", rather than a woman, with a group of women. The goal of combining the personal and the professional in terms of getting my needs met while meeting the needs of others would have been made more difficult. It is much easier to sacrifice one's own needs in the face of women who are definitely more needier, particularly when, to some degree, they are depending on you to meet those needs. Having chosen to establish a seperate group for rural women without "special needs", I elected to emphasize my need for support and healing, rather than always being the "healer". It was with this group of women that i would try to heal the split between feminism and the real world of social work practice.

Several key principles of feminism, as translated into feminist therapy made a solid base from which to do social work with women. The first principle was one of healing the split between the personal and the political. Not only was I engaged personally as a woman in need of support, but politically as an agent of change in development of an ongoing support group to

decrease the isolation and invisibility of rural women. The
women were involved in personal growth, and an increasing
political awareness of women's position in society. Social
work's herstory with oppressed groups gave much added insight
into the need for support to enhance abilities to change our
environment.

An exploration of values and attitudes by the helper, a
feminist therapy tradition, was enhanced by the theoretical
demands of practicum work. The willingness of the group to
explore issues provided an additional forum for a continuous
appraisal of my values and attitudes about women, rural women
in particular. The comparison with other groups allowed me to
extend my understanding of rural women, and of the value of
support and connection in our daily lives.

Modelling by the helper, common to both social work and
feminist therapy, worked very much to my benefit in enhancing
my ability to be honest and open about the realities of my
life, while providing a model for the other women to do the
same. The collective sharing of life experience served to
deprivatize my personal pain and to emphasize the commonalities
within us all.

Two other feminist beliefs were integrated in this piece
of practice--enhancement of personal power and encouragement of
self-nurturance. Giving of myself to produce an environment in
which women could be empowered, in which they could learn
self-nurturance, allowed for enhancement of my personal power

and a keen sense of my own need for self-nurturance. Too often

we seek power by overpowering others, and nurture others while

giving up accountability for our selves. The "professional"

status of social workers often contributes to the misuse of

power, while the demands of the job desensitize us to our own

needs. The combinatioon can be catastrophic, and is well

documented in the social work literature on burn-out (Cherniss,

1980; Daley, 1979). We need to maintain our personal power, and

our self-nurturance to enable others to achieve the same. To

do otherwise is self-defeating. I intend to be proactive in

continuing to have my needs met.

The final feminist belief, evident throughout this

practicum is one of viewing the client/helper relationship as

egalitarian. Although by strict definition there was no

client/helper relationship evident in my interaction with this

group, the issue of non-directive leadership falls within the

realm of this discussion. This is the focus of the next

section.

Non-directive Leadership

As the issue has been reviewed in the previous chapter,

suffice it to say that as long as professional helpers see

themselves as experts on the subject of what women need, much

effort will be wasted. If those seeking help are not

encouraged to be equal in their responsibility for success in

resolution of their difficulties, if environmental factors

continue to be ignored, and if helpers refuse to share
information and skills openly with their clients, the
hierarchical privatization of practice will continue to
contribute to women's oppression. The use of non-directive
leadership in groups provides an alternative for intervention
which can enhance the growth of the client and helper alike.
This non-hierarchical relationship can be established in
individual counselling as well, as documented in the feminist
therapy literature (Gannon, 1982; Emberley, 1984).

Access to a Support Group

It is within the realm of this discussion that the
question of whether personal needs can be met while doing
professional practice can be addressed. My opinion is that it
is in fact possible, in situations like these--where the client
group is not expressing unusually high level of neediness, for
example suicidal tendencies or other life threatening
situations, to combine personal needs and work. While the
Portage Women's Group did not meet my needs in the same way as
a group composed of "established" feminists would have, certain
benefits did accrue to me. The accrual of benefits to the
worker is common, as expressed in the "helper-therapy"
principle of Reissman (1976), although it is not common
practice to acknowledge it.

First was the connection to other women in Portage.
Personal relationships have solidified both with women in the

group, and with other women I met while organizing the group. This certainly went a long way in decreasing my personal sense of isolation.

Although all the women were not confirmed feminists, a forum was created to discuss issues and experiences where none existed before. My subjective experience of being a lone feminist in a predominantly male-oriented culture was lessened. At least three others considered themselves feminists, and all the others were interested in the issues and wanted to discuss feminism. My presentation on feminism provided an opportunity to review my life, feminism is a big part of my personal philosophy and day-to-day living experience. It also was a chance to share this with other women struggling to make the personal/political connection.

At times I did feel a Keen sense of responsibility for the group, and this seemed like one of the biggest barriers to achieving my personal goals and the equality of members. I worried about the number of members, direction, underlying conflicts, as well as the personal satisfaction of other members. Although problematic at times, a new definition of equality emerged. Perhaps this sense of responsibility for others is built into our social work training as it is in our training to be women. If that is the case, it is little wonder that social workers are predominantly women (except for those in positions of power and decision-making).

Healing the split between the personal and the

professional has meant encouraging the growth of other members

to assume care taking and care giving responsibilities in the

group. This process is underway. As is generally the case

with newly formed groups, shared responsibility was not readily

available at the outset, and will mature after my time with the

group. Hopefully, what has been started will provide present

and future members with support, validation, and a forum for

action.

Work With MACSW

The main goals of the Manitoba Action Committee on the

Status of Women (MACSW) are to improve attitudes, raise issues,

and remove inequalities affecting women today. Within this

umbrella statement, several aspects of my work in this

practicum can be seen as contributing directly to the

achievement of this goal.

The development of the women's group in Portage has

resulted in an expansion of the Action network. Several

members have taken out memberships in MACSW. This responds to

MACSW's need for more rural membership to become a truly

provincial organization. As well, the existence of a group in

Portage will aid MACSW staff in their plans to have an Action

Sub-committee, such as what exists with Parklands and Birdtail

women, in Portage within the next year.

The second piece of work valuable to the efforts of MACSW

is the video project, "Making Connections", which will be used

in their work to create an awareness of the needs of rural

women and to assist other groups forming in developing an

understanding of what support groups are all about. A service

was also provided to the groups partaking in the project,

assisting them in reviewing their groups, and strengthening

their confidence in their ability to accept the challenge of

acting on behalf of rural women for change.

My involvement in this practicum has heightened my

awareness and sense of responsibility to take a more proactive

stance on behalf of myself and other women. It was with this

in mind I committed myself to a year term on the Provincial

Executive of the MACSW. I look forward to at least a further

year of active involvement with MACSW, which may not have been

possibile had I not undertaken this practicum.

In summary, I feel that my personal as well as educational

objectives have been achieved. As the process moved more

slowly than anticipated, I often wondered if the work would

ever be completed. It has been a learning experience, a

healing experience, and an empowering experience. I hope to

continue in the work for women's equality, and expect the

Portage women will continue with their commitment to the group.

The future is unknown, but the struggle to achieve what has

been accomplished so far has been personally, professionally,

and politically worthwhile to me. The next section will

utilize the evaluation material provided by the group members

to summarize their views about the Portage Women's Group.

Group Review

The evaluation of the group by the women participating was part of an ongoing group process. Time had been taken to review the group direction and process three previous times. The final evaluation was part of the general review process, with the exception being that the women wrote down their feelings rather than verbally communicating them.

As I have taken the opportunity to address my concerns about the group throughout this paper in my own terms, it is only fair that the other group members have a similar opportunity. While their comments on my writings have been incorporated into that section, their evaluative statements will appear, for the most part as stated. My function was to provide the question to stimulate thought, and to add their comments to this written report within a framework to make them more easily understandable. While I have attempted to capture the essence of the women's statements by use of liberal quotations, I consider it important that their complete statements be available for those wishing to access the unedited information. The statements in their entirety are available in Appendix 2.

The question posed was:

Helping establish this group and developing connections to
other women in Portage and area has been a very meaningful
experience for me. I have learned that I am not alone in
my ideas or feelings, and having women to share with me is
very important. I hope the group has been, and will
continue to be good for you.

Thinking back over our time together so far, please share
with me your ideas about what you have liked best about
the group? What did you dislike? With your consent, this
material will be used in my written report on "Support
Groups for Rural Women:Decreasing Isolation and
Invisibility".

Several concerns were reiterated throughout the women's

evaluations. These will be illustrated with quotes from their

statements.

Most of the women felt a sense of acceptance in the group.

"The women in the group accepted me, I feel an outsider

(immigrant) very easily. I felt comfortable." "The group

gives one a sense that there are others to get close to in the

community. People one can talk with and share similar

beliefs." Two other women in listing their "likes", added

"atmosphere of trust" and "open, supportive atmosphere". One

woman complained of lack of acceptance. "I felt uncomfortable

with the group due to the fact that my work is professional and

was not seen that way. I did not like being compared to a

cocktail waitress. Being a new member, I may have felt better

about the group if I had known some of the people prior to

joining it."

"Sharing of ideas, feelings, hopes, aspirations,

frustrations, was the important criterion that made this group

different from other women's groups in Portage I have known.

There was an absense of the 'status quo', who you were in the

social stratification of the town was not important, but what

you shared of yourself to the group was." This sharing process

was valued by other group members as well. "I enjoyed the

relaxed feeling when women shared their feelings around getting

together and feelings about being isolated, and trust seemed to

build very quickly." Another woman appreciated the "contact

with like-minded women--ability to express ideas and

frustrations and be understood without a lot of explanation or

justification that I often find when explaining feminist

ideas". Along with this sharing was an expectation of

confidentiality. The benefits of the confidentiality

agreement were commented on by one member. She liked the

"anonymity in the aspect of being able to express openly, yet

through confidentiality not to be held responsible" (in the

larger community).

It is important to note at this juncture the conflicting

perceptions of group members. One woman felt the presence of

stratification barriers regarding her work being compared to a

cocktail waitress, while another remarked on the absense of the

"status quo". Perhaps the makeup of the group, which was

primarily of "professional" women resulted in alienation of

this woman who was not. While we all agreed that diversity in

the women's backgrounds would add to the group, perhaps there

existed a lack of understanding of the concerns of
"non-professional" women. On the other hand, the woman who
spoke of the lack of "status quo", while having suffered
discrimination on the basis of color, did fall into the
"professional" catagory. She felt acceptance, in spite of the
"color" barrier which had contributed to exclusion in the past.

Although these two perceptions of stratification barriers
on the surface appear to be opposites, they in fact only
reinforce the need to accept each woman's experience as true.
In the same group two women, in fact each woman can and will
interpret what happens in light of her herstory. Barriers
regarding color did not appear to exist; barriers regarding
type of employment could easily have existed with the
predominance of "professional" women. This discussion serves
to remind us that many forms of elitism exist. In attempting
to bring women from different backgrounds together it is
important to be aware of the differences, and be open to
exploration of the hidden biases that serve to reinforce
barriers between women.

The joy in contact with "like-minded" women was repeated
by several members. "As a woman who comes from a large urban
area, where I knew many feminists and friends, I was happy to
contact the members of the group. I am not really lacking
support in my life because, I get it from other sources
including the person I live with. But I do crave contact with
women who share similar experiences and similar beliefs. This

group has provided that. It has introduced me to possibilities

in this 'small town' I never would have believed possible. It

has made life in a 'small town' as fulfilling and happy as a

large urban center." Another woman praised "the interaction

with feminist women" which "brought into focus a life in which

I was nauseous from the roller coaster ride". While this woman

described the women as feminists, another woman viewed the

situation differently. "I was first under the impression that

I would be meeting with a group of feminists. But as I became

aware, many of the people in this group have not really come to

grips with calling themselves feminists. Of course they are

still expressing the same basic needs of all women, feminists

included."

Again a major perceptual difference can be pinpointed.

One woman saw the group as feminist, the other did not. I

concurred with the latter, as later indicated in the section on

comparison with other groups. This serves as another example

of herstory influencing our interpretation of the present. The

woman who defined the group as feminist, was only recently,

through the group made aware of feminism, and does not consider

herself a feminist. The other woman and myself have been

active members of the women's movement for several years and

call ourselves feminists. As our group was made up of a

combination of women who were committed feminists, and those at

beginning levels of awareness, differences in perception are to

be expected. Here again vigilance must be maintained to create

an arena where all women can connect, rather than raising new
barriers based on "how feminist" a woman is.

The self-education, or "intellectual stimulation"
component was highly valued by all of the women. One women
described this as "provision of interesting, relevant
information" and "an opportunity for growth in self-education".
Another woman wrote of the effect of the self-educative process
on her level of awareness. "The group has been a positive
thing in my life. I find now I am more aware of the small
everyday things that are said or done to women, in a derogatory
sense. There have always been choices I felt women should
have, but I couldn't always put it into words. More and more
often these days I find myself also educating other women,
telling them they are equal to everybody else and they do have
choices."

As well as the liberty to state what each woman liked
about the group, dislikes were also solicited.

The major contentious point appeared to be the issue of
equality of members, particularly equal "air time", as
discussed earlier in Chapter 4. "I felt some people dominated
some sessions and I think this should have been dealt with in
the beginning and not allowed to continue". "I feel that at
every meeting one person seemed to monopolize the
conversation". "Having to vie for talk time is probably the
only negative aspect, but it isn't really a big issue to me. I
just talk louder." Another viewpoint on this issue was also

articulated as a dislike. One woman expressed displeasure with the "guilt about the amount of air time I took and the demands I placed on the group in terms of support". She also lodged another complaint which fell under the catagory of equalitiy of members. "One cigarette at a time was not ever considered to be as important by those non-smokers as the smokers--I mean for me it took a lot of give because of the addiction--at times I resented it".

One woman listed as her grievances the "too long evenings" and "weekly was too often". She clarified this objection. "But this could have been my own moods and feelings at that time in my life." An additional element which she did not care for had to do with content. "Another thing that changed the group for me was when teaching became the topic of a lot of the conversations because feeling acutely conscious of being a highly qualified and experienced teacher unable to find a job in the city (Portage), I experienced feelings of envy, frustration and anger, which again, had to do with me, not with anyone in the group."

One final consideration raised as problematic was the "lack of direction". In clarifying this comment she adds, "this is becoming less of a problem as the group evolves. I am feeling much better about the group moving in a positive direction, however we can still be easily distracted but that is not necessarily a problem, but rather indicative of flexibility."

Some of the women took the evaluation process as a suitable occasion to direct their attention to the future. "I am interested in sharing reading experiences as well as other information with women but I think that there is a lot of room for expansion in our group. We all must figure out what needs we have to be fulfilled and work together to help each other in our aims and needs." "I especially enjoyed having special week-end workshops and hope this group can be host to a weekend for women within this coming year". "The group has made me more open and I want now to do something constructive. It has been time for action since time began. Through the group I am ready for action, not just empty words. I will continue to be involved and do enjoy it tremendously."

In summary it is important to note the presence of a high degree of approval of the group by the members. The women enjoyed the acceptance, the sharing of information and experiences, the contact with "like-minded" women, and the opportunity for self-education. Most of the negative comments raised by the women had to do with the often struggle-laden issue of equality of members. This comes as no suprise as it was raised several times in the group. The point about content, and the one woman who felt ahe was not validated in her profession were new information. Perhaps these two women have given the reasons for their frequent absenses, and lack of input at the meetings. It is unfortunate they did not experience enough comfort in the group to raise their concerns

with the other members. Perhaps awareness of this information
coud have resolved the difficulties. Hopefully, this will
happen in future meetings. Several women in the group
expressed hope and expectation for the continuation of the
group, and of the expansion of the group functions to include
public education and action. All in all, the experience seems
to have provided an additional dimension to these rural
women's lives. Like this author, they had suffered from
invisibility and isolation, and are now happy to have found a
group of "like-minded" women to join in the struggle for
personal and collective equality for women.

Having given "air time" to the women in the group, to
express their evaluative statements, it is appropriate to move
on to the third evaluative component, the comparison with other
groups

Comparison With Other Groups
_____

To evaluate the support group established in Portage La
Prarie a frame of reference was necessary. As none of the
literature reviewed provided a format or a base line from which
to determine its relative success, one had to be created.
Rather than doing an in-depth study of the individual growth of
the members, which would be difficult in light of the sexist
bias inherent in the majority of the available tools (Klein,
1982), a comparison of the Portage group with other established
support groups for rural women in Manitoba was undertaken. The

project was designed to meet other objectives apart from the
creation of a reference group for comparison of the Portage
Women's Group. One such objective was to edit a video for the
MACSW library to be utilized to help create an awareness of the
needs of rural women, and to aid in informing other beginning
groups about options and opportunities. A serendipitous
objective was to allow the women to engage in a review process
of their groups, which would hopefully increase their
collective awareness and strengthen their group.

Methods

In attempting to fulfill all three objectives, contacts
were made through a MACSW staff person to four rural women's
support groups. All four: Miniota Women's Group; Minnedosa
and Area Committee on Wife Abuse; Birdtail Women For Action;
and Parklands Status of Women agreed to participate in the
discussion. Three groups agreed to be videotaped; Miniota did
not and their wishes were respected.

An informal, but structured interview was held with all
four groups, following a format outlined for this purpose (see
Appendix 3). The format was designed to collect certain
information, yet be general enough to stimulate discussion in
areas of concern to the women. Areas targeted for discussion
included: herstory; membership; structure; function; and
ideology. A written report of each interview was distributed

to each group participating (see Appendix 4) with an invitation

for them to correct details or perceptions and respond on how

they felt about the process as a group.   Their comments are

summarized after the discussion of results.

   Results

   For ease in distribution of the material it was collated

into a series of tables.   The groups have been placed along a

continuum in order to compare each of them to all of the

others.   There was no intention of attributing value to one

group over the other; all of the groups are designed with its

members in mind, and are of equal importance to the members

involved.   Some variables required further explanation, so each

table will be accompanied by a written description of what is

meant, and when feasible what factors were used to determine

the groups' status.   The Portage group analysis will appear

along with the other four groups in the tables.   The

information for Portage was gleaned in the same targeted areas

as the other four, although my own membership in the group

allowed the information to be communicated without the use of

the designed format.   Although the information appears in

tables, with additional explanations, is best understood in

conjunction with the viewing of the edited video "Making

Connections", available through the MACSW, Brandon office.

Those readers more interested in a descriptive summary of each

group, and who find the interpretation of the data difficult to understand should refer to Appendix 4 for further information.

Herstory

Herstory, in essence, attempts to recall the formation of the group, how it started, and how long it has been operating. All five groups owe their existence to a certain degree, to the efforts of MACSW staff. Parklands was established when two MACSW staff gathered all local Action members together; for the first year MACSW supported the group with resources. Birdtail also began in a similar way, through contact with MACSW staff to a local member, and from her outward. Minnedosa got its start at a weekend for women sponsored by MACSW. Portage and Miniota both got support and impetus from MACSW staff at the outset, with at least one initial meeting being attended by MACSW staff. All groups were initiated by efforts of members of the MACSW. Some connection to MACSW, in fact, was a prerequisite to involvement in the project, as all groups were contacted by MACSW through an existing member. The comparative level of existing MACSW connection is discussed later.

The general characteristics of the groups are compared in TABLE 5.

Insert TABLE 5 About Here

TABLE 5

COMPARISON OF FIVE RURAL WOMEN'S GROUPS

GENERAL INFORMATION

	PORTAGE	MINIOTA	BIRDTAIL	MINNEDOSA	PARKLANDS
Herstory	5 Months	3 Years	3+ Years	3+1 Years	4+ Years
Membership	8	5	15	25	15
Frequency	4 x month 12 hours	1 x month 3 hours	2 x month 6 hours	2 x month 6 hours	1 x month 5 hours
Function	Support	Support	Action	Service	Support

One point of clarification is necessary regarding the herstory

of the Minnedosa group. They have been formally organized

around the issue of wife abuse for one year, but they have been

meeting informally for three years, hence the 3+1 notation.

Beyond the general information chart, the other tables are

based on a comparative continuum with the groups being ordered

from least to most in each catagory.

Membership

The variable of membership involves three components:

number of members (TABLE:5); heterogenity; and recruitment of

members.

Membership heterogenity, or diversity, refers to

demographic variables such as marital status and age, rather

than differences in ideology which are refered to later in this

discusion. Diversity is an important variable, as some

literature suggests that diversity of members influences both

personal and political goal attainment. Homogeneous groups

tend towards more personal support, diversity is more

important in persuing interests outside the group. (Home,

1981; Hartford, 1971). Comparative diversity is illustrated in

TABLE 6.

Insert TABLE 6 About Here

Several factors were compared in the area of heterogenity:

marital status; motherwork; type of work; age; import/local

status; and an overall diversity score. A more precise

catagorization scheme is outlined for this variable in Appendix

5. Diversity of marital status would indicate members who were

single (divorced, never married, widowed), in common-law

partnerships, or married. All groups, except the Portage

women, were fairly homogeneous, with most of the women being

married. Motherwork, a word used by Helen Levine (1982),

describes the work of motherhood. Diversity in motherwork

would mean the inclusion of those women with children, and

those without. Most women in four of the five groups, had

children, some had grandchildren. Again Portage was the most

diversified. In fact more than half of the members did not

have children or grandchildren. Heterogenity in type of work

is a reflection of four catagories of work apart from

motherwork: professional; farm; other paid work; and home

work. Birdtail women showed little variance, with all members

being teachers or ex-teachers. Four of the five Miniota women

were farmers. Portage, Parklands, and Minnedosa all have a mix

of occupations. All groups have at least 10 years difference

TABLE 6

COMPARISON OF FIVE RURAL WOMEN'S GROUPS

MEMBERSHIP DIVERSITY

	Least Diversity			Most Diversity	
	1	2	3	4	5
Marital Status	Birdtail	Miniota	Parklands	Minnedosa	Portage
Motherwork	Miniota	Birdtail	Parklands	Minnedosa	Portage
Type of work	Birdtail	Miniota	Portage	Parklands	Minnedosa
Age	Birdtail	Miniota	Portage	Minnedosa	Parklands
Import /Local	Birdtail	Miniota	Portage	Minnedosa	Parklands
Overall	Birdtail	Miniota	Portage	Parklands	Minnedosa

between the youngest and the oldest members. In Parklands,
Portage, and Minnedosa three generations are represented. All
groups were made up of women who were "imports" to the
community, or who have left the community for some time and
have returned. Few "local" women, or those born, raised, and
remaining, are members of these support groups. This
commonality was a topic of discussion in all groups. It was
raised in the Portage group after hearing the women in the
video "Conversation with the Crystal City Women's Group"
discuss their "import" status. Women in Minnedosa postulated
that it must be harder to break tradition when you would have
to alter relationships with close family and long time friends.
Another rationale was there was less motivation to seek out a
support group, if you had a strong social network in place.
Both statements have advocates in support network literature
(Caplan, 1974; Ell, 1984). Overall, Minnedosa, with by far the
largest membership, is the most diverse. Birdtail was the
least diverse, and Portage is in the middle, although it is the
most heterogeneous in terms of marital status and motherwork.

The final issue of membership, for which no accompanying
table appears, concerns methods of recruitment. All groups are
open to new women at all times; all have methods of outreach
to other women, particularly women perceived to be
"like-minded". "Like-minded" refers to the sharing of a common
ideological base, usually feminism. All groups gained new
members predominantly through word-of-mouth. Minnedosa, due to

their service orientation, recruited through use of pamphlets
and community education events on wife abuse. Newspaper
reporting is utilized by both Birdtail and Minnedosa women to
share information on the group's activities and to recruit
women. Dauphin, as well as the two previous groups, advertise
their meetings in the local paper; some women came to
individual issue sessions, but few stayed on as members.
Community outreach through public education, connections to
other women's groups and political action may help to bring the
group to the attention of other women (and men), but it does
not guarantee an increase in membership. In fact it may
produce the opposite effect, as the Birdtail and Miniota women
have found (see Appendix 4 for more details). Having a service
purpose, which directly impacts on women's lives, was,
according to the Minnedosa women, the best way to bring women
together--give them something to do for others. While this may
be the case, success in recruitment of members is not the only
measure of a successful women's group. Much of the question of
numbers depends on group function, the next variable to be
explored.

Function

Function refers to the priorities which the groups have expressed as important to them. Six possible functions are delineated in Table 7, with each group being placed on a continuum indicating relative importance of that function, in comparison with the other four groups. Since all functions are possible for each group, and different groups focus on the different issues to varying degrees, the least-most scale indicates the degree that each group focuses on each function. It can be taken both as an indicator of intensity of focus in an area, as well as a quantitative assessment of how many areas of focus the group has, or overall diversity.

Insert TABLE 7 About Here

Support, the primary concern of Miniota and Portage groups is considered a priority for all the groups interviewed. Although support is recorded as of least concern to Minnedosa, this is an indicator of other more demanding priorities rather than a lack of support in the group. Self and public education refer to an issue-orientation, usually with films and speakers to spur discussion on relevant issues. Common themes included: pornography, with Not a Love Story"; media monitoring, with

TABLE 7

COMPARISON OF FIVE RURAL WOMEN'S GROUPS

FUNCTIONS

Function	Least Focal		Mid-Point		Most Focal
Support	Minnedosa	Birdtail	Parklands	Portage	Miniota
Self-Education	Miniota	Minnedosa	Birdtail	Portage	Parklands
Public Education	Portage	Miniota	Birdtail	Parklands	Minnedosa
Outreach	Miniota	Portage	Birdtail	Minnedosa	Parklands
Political Action	Portage	Miniota	Minnedosa	Parklands	Birdtail
Services	Miniota	Portage	Birdtail	Parklands	Minnedosa
Diversity Score	Miniota	Portage	Birdtail	Minnedosa	Parklands

"Killing Me Softly"; violence against women; and the abortion
issue. Outreach is basically the function of connecting to
other women--for recruitment or to cooperate on issues of
mutual concern. Political action can span anything from an
individual woman approaching the local merchant about the
pornography on his shelves (Miniota), to a lobby of Howard
Pawley on the needs of rural women (Parklands). Services to
women is best reflected by Minnedosa's organization to help
battered women, which emerged out of their informal collective
to answer the need. Provision of services has become their
main function, and this often takes up more energy that is
replaced by self-care. Other groups provide services to women,
by opening up their groups, by hosting "Side Effects", and by
making referrals to services for women through contact with
group members. Portage was active in these forms of service
delivery to other women in the community.

The summary diversity score is a reflection of which group
is most active in more of the areas open to them as a women's
group. Parklands, the most diversified, is active in all six
areas. The Parklands women attempt, and appear quite
successful, in combining support for their members while
engaging in public education, political action, and outreach.
Minnedosa is also quite diversified, including the functions of
service to women, public education, outreach, and support. The
main area of difference is the scope of their interest;
Parklands are concerned about all issues affecting women, while

Minnedosa focuses on wife abuse. Miniota and Portage are the
least diversified. This lack of diversity must be considered
in light of the fact that four of the six functions are
other-focused; two areas are self-care. Self-care groups like
Miniota and Portage are therefore seen as less diversified than
the others.

When the relative size of the two least diversified groups
is taken in account (5 for Miniota; 8 for Portage), the
literature indicating a relationship between size and function
receives further support. Briefly, larger groups are more
productive for certain problem-solving functions, while smaller
groups provide better individual involvement and satisfaction
(Hartford, 1971; Home, 1981). These two functions have been
referred to in social work group literature, the former as
"socio" groups and the latter as "psyche" groups (Jennings,
1950). Jennings uses these concepts mainly to refer to
complementary dimensions of group life, since most groups,
including those in this comparison, will demonstrate both
attributes.

In general, groups which are the largest, and possibly the
most stable, e.g. Parklands and Minnedosa, are more outward
looking or "socio", while the smaller groups, e.g. Miniota and
Portage, are more "psyche" oriented. Group size can therefore
have an impact, to some degree, on how effective a group is in
meeting its specified objectives. It is also possible to
speculate that group function is the reason for the group's

larger size, in that more women may be attracted to a group
which offers social solutions to the issues of isolation and
invisibility, as well as personal support. This is the
contention of the Minnedosa women, the largest and most "socio"
group.

One final targeted area in terms of function was whether
the function changed over time. Minnedosa changed from
informal support to formal services in the last year.
Parklands, Miniota, and Birdtail women have all moved from a
strong commitment to public education and a hope to "change the
world", to more self-education, support and outreach to
"like-minded" women. This change has been stimulated in all
three groups by a hostile or indifferent response from the
community, and resulting dissolutionment with how effective
they could be as change agents in their communities. They are
all still involved in public education and action to some
degree, but particularly in Miniota, it is of a more
"subversive" nature. (Although subversive may seem like a
strong word, it is the one chosen by the Miniota women to
express this concept). Portage, in its five short month
herstory has moved from a single function of support to include
self-education, and some outreach and action. The group is
attempting to outline "socio" goals, while in the process of
establishing relationships to meet "psyche" needs.

It is clear that the functions of rural women's support
groups are not static, they change in relation to the needs of

the members, and the availability of additional energy for

action in the community. Burnout can be considered one of the

risks of involvement in an action-oriented group, if enough

support is not built in, as is true of any service-oriented

work (Maslach, 1982).

Structure

The structure variable attempts to delineate those issues

which describe the groups in relation to leadership and

direction. None of the five groups had a set leader, as is

true of most feminist groups (Walker, 1981). The Birdtail

women have a job on their list named chair that is rotated

every six months. Other examples of task division include: a

steering committee in Minnedosa; a rotating job list in

Portage; task division as required in Dauphin; and no set

structure in the Miniota group. TABLE 8 outlines all of the

structure variables considered.

Insert TABLE 8 About Here

Agenda setting merely refers to this--does the group set

an agenda in advance? If so, how far in advance? Birdtail,

Minnedosa and Parklands may set their agenda up to a year in

advance; Portage six weeks; and Miniota has no pre-set agenda.

TABLE 8

COMPARISON OF FIVE RURAL WOMEN'S GROUPS

STRUCTURE

	Least Focal		Mid-Point		Most Focal
Structure					
Task Division	Minnedosa	Birdtail	Parklands	Portage	Miniota
Agenda Setting	Miniota	Portage	Parklands	Minnedosa	Birdtail
Meeting Place Formality	Portage	Miniota	Parklands	Minnedosa	Birdtail
Political Personal Dichotomy	Miniota	Portage	Parklands	Minnedosa	Birdtail
Overall	Miniota	Portage	Parklands	Minnedosa	Birdtail

A set agenda does not preclude flexibility, as all groups were
open to change to allow for new possibilities, such as this
interview requested for the video production. Meeting place
formality refers to the distinction between the formality of a
school, or other civic building , and the informality of
meeting in each other's homes. Portage, one end of the
continuum, meets only in people's homes to date. Birdtail, at
the other end, meets almost entirely in the Pink School.
Political/personal dichotomy refers to the often complicated
juggling which goes on to balance personal support for members
with activity or action on behalf of others. Parklands, at the
mid-point, has a fairly equitable balance, with supper before
the meeting to meet personal contact needs before the
"business" meeting. Birdtail, the most structured, has a
split, once a month for business and once a month for support.
Miniota does not meet for business on a regular basis; they
have the least structured group overall as their main function
is to provide personal support. Birdtail women are the most
structured, with a six-position rotating job roster, agenda set
up to a year in advance, and meetings at the school. Portage
falls somewhere in between, with a three-position rotating
roster, up to six week advance agenda, and meetings held in
homes.

The variable of structure also appears tied to function,
with the more "psyche" groups being the least structured and
the "socio" groups being more structured. While this

relationship may hold true in general terms, Parklands seems to

be somewhat of an exception. They have quite a flexible

structure, although not as unstructured as Miniota, and they

have a very definite "socio" function. Perhaps, in this case,

the flexibility in structure is related to the overall

diversity in function--Parklands builds in both personal and

political functions with a high degree of integration. Perhaps

their success in achieving this balance is directly tied to

their decision to limit their structure.

Ideology

Most of the women in all of the groups shared a common

ideology, that of feminism. Given this commonality, an attempt

was made to delineate factors which would serve to cement this

ideological base. All of the components considered, were

raised by the women in the groups as important in their

understanding of, and involvement in, feminism. These factors

are compared in TABLE 9.

Insert TABLE 9 About Here

As stated in the herstory section, all groups were

initially begun with varying degrees of connection to the

Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women (MACSW) staff

TABLE 9

COMPARISON OF FIVE RURAL WOMEN'S GROUP

IDEOLOGY

	Least Strong		Midpoint		Most Strong
Ideology					
MACSW Connection	Miniota	Portage	Minnedosa	Birdtail	Parklands
Outward Feminist	Portage	Miniota	Minnedosa	Birdtail	Parklands
Inward Feminist	Portage	Miniota	Minnedosa	Birdtail	Parklands
Support/ Husbands	Miniota	Portage	Parklands	Birdtail	Minnedosa
Support/ Community	Miniota	Portage	Birdtail	Parklands	Minnedosa

or members.   The level of connection has not appeared to have

changed significantly over time.   Parklands and Birdtail women

are considered sub-committees of MACSW, with a position on the

MACSW Provincial Executive reserved for each group.   Many of

the women in the Minnedosa group are MACSW members, and they

have recieved some funding and resources from MACSW.   The

connection of MACSW to the Portage group will probably increase

over time, if and when the women become more action oriented.

Miniota has an elected member on the MACSW executive, but the

group itself does not consider themselves to be linked to

MACSW.

    "Outward feminist" refers to whether the group calls

themselves feminist as a group in the community at large, while

"inward feminist" refers to whether the individual women

consider themselves feminist, and to what degree.   Support of

husbands and community is often directly connected to how

publically feminist the group is collectively and individually,

and also how long the group has been functioning "out of the

closet".   Most women seem to think that husbands and the

community get used to the idea in time; the barriers to

feminism are slowly eroded as realities erase myths.   While

husbands and communities vary in how much or how little support

they offer to the women involved (see Appendix 4 for more

details), the reality is that any lack of support is not

sufficient to keep these women from being involved.   This may

not be true for all women who wish to be involved.   The

Minnedosa group in in a unique situation, not only because of
their credibility as a service organization for battered women,
but because of the family interconnections in the group. They
make up a "community within a community", which provides a
supportive feminist environment unavailable to the other
groups. They consider themselves to be "an oasis of feminism
in the desert of rural conservatism".

It is fair to say, in concluding the results section, that
Portage does fit in with the established women's groups in
rural Manitoba. All the groups interviewed have in common the
diversity of membership, structure, function and ideology
designed to meet the needs of the women in the groups, and the
communities of which they are part. While Portage is the
youngest of the groups, its heterogenity of membership, level
of organization, developing function and ideology are well
within the range of possibilities provided in this analysis of
support groups for rural women in Manitoba.

Responses From Groups

One final piece of information must be shared before
concluding this chapter, namely the feedback received from the
groups in response to the effect of the interview process
itself. It was hoped that the interview would provide a useful
tool for the women to begin to look at their groups,
herstorically and functionally. In fact, this appears to have

been the case. All four groups responded by card, letter, or in person, indicating that the process had been a useful one and a learning experience. Miniota women stated "we also amazed ourselves. We all felt 'hey, we're a great group, aren't we?' It seems to me that the process of explaining ourselves has made us a stronger group." Parklands women responded, "feeling now that we are at a stage where we need to take a look at ourselves, what we have done and where we are going, this summary will be helpful to us in doing this. It was a good process to sit down and talk about ourselves and an extra bonus to have someone from the outside so ably put down on paper what we were saying. We want to thank you for including us in your study. We enjoyed it and look forward to seeing the video." The Minnedosa group responded with corrections and a brief comment on the accuracy of my account of their group. Verbally, a member of the Birdtail group replied that the experience had been a worthwhile one for her group.

It appears that the objectives of the evaluative process have been met. An evaluative process was utilized to provide a reference group for the Portage Women's Group, the video "Making Connections" has been completed and will be used by MACSW, and the groups involved considered it a productive experience and my recordings accurate. The various components of the evaluation process, namely personal goals, the group review, and the comparative analysis, provide a richness to the

concept of evaluation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In concluding this practicum report it is necessary to first return to the question the practicum was designed to explore, and then attempt to answer it. Can support groups be utilized as a viable method to decrease the isolation and invisibility inherent in the lives of rural women? When one considers this question a dichotomy comes to mind, that of personal isolation and invisibility, or social/political isolation and invisibility. Both are known to be problematic for rural women, and both need to be addressed simultaneously.

All planned groups deal with personal isolation to some extent, since their central characteristic is the inclusion of individuals in a group experience. What appears unique to the support group, within the feminist perspective, is the counteracting of the social isolation which has kept women from valuing each other and understanding their common experience. While the degree of isolation may be different for different women, common to most women is lack of connection and explicit discussion with other women about the commonalities of their experience in a sexist society. Common to most women is that they receive and incorporate, all their lives, societal messages which devalue women in each others' eyes. In support groups women not only learn, often for the first time, that other women share their circumstances, but they learn to

respect and value other women for their intelligence, support, skills, and leadership. Women enter groups often believing not only that they are singularly alone, but that in our society, men hold the power, are to be looked to for problem solving and approval, and that women assume roles of lesser importance or are competitors for men. In the group, they not only meet women facing similar problems who also need to develop resources within themselves, but they come to know and trust other women. In support groups, women learn to help each other feel less alone. They realize that their isolation from and distrust of other women is largely a societal mandate that has kept them from seeing womens' competencies as equal to those of men. The end of our isolation has double value as women benefit from women's interdependence and take pride in our accomplishments.

Along with isolation, invisibility is a major component in the lives of rural women. While support groups have little direct impact on economic invisibility, other than providing an arena for self-education, networking of employment possibilities and validation of women's domestic work, political and personal invisibility is affected.

Support groups can be seen as a tool for gaining political power. Increased knowledge, provided through discussion and analysis of the issues, provides a basis for increased political power. Support groups provide an arena for increased political awareness, and for this awareness to be transmitted

to the community through public education, outreach, and
political action. Although the Portage group has done little
outward political action, other groups like Parklands and
Birdtail have.

Personal power is directly affected in support groups.
Support groups provide an opportunity to enable women to
empower themselves, to heal themselves without turning to a
system which is riddled with sexist attitudes undermining our
capabilities. Personal power is enhanced with an understanding
of the societal influences which impact on our lives, and with
the connection to other women who are collectively and
individually struggling to gain visibility--to be who they want
to be.

Throughout this practicum it has become clear that
personal power must be enhanced to free women to claim
political power. Although women meeting in small groups may be
seen at times to only be providing company, or personal
support, to socially isolated and invisible women, these groups
do seem to grow into strong actors for women's empowerment,
personally and politically. Portage group was designed with
this in mind, the progression from the personal to the
political and back again. The two are not mutually exclusive,
but rather two parts of the same whole.

Much time and energy has been spent, in our society, to
fashion chains to restrain women from collectively and
individually claiming their fair share of economic, political

and personal power. Bringing rural women together, to join our
urban sisters, to end our isolation, can only result in
strengthening our voice, and in eventually breaking down these
historical traditions. Women will reclaim their rights, and
support groups are one way to begin the process of empowerment.
Social work can utilize its knowledge of oppressed peoples and
of group work, and its tradition of combining the personal and
the political, to aid women on their journey to empowerment.
We face many barriers, but their is joy in the struggle.

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APPENDIX 1

ISSUES FROM ORGANIZATIONAL MEETINGS

1. We will move to self and semi-public education as one group function, but want to maintain support as well.

    **semi-public means inviting women friends who may be interested in the group or the issue. It does not mean posting or advertising.

2. We will work on a rotational basis. A woman only has to take responsibility for one job: host; topic; food.

    **host supplies coffee, meeting place and makes intial rule statements: 1 cigarette at a time and confidentiality.

    **topic can be presented in any manor the presenter chooses including: film/video; speaker; handouts prior to meeting

    **food is not necessary, but nice.

3. Unless all members agree on taking action on an issue, the group will not act. If member(s) are not at the meeting, someone at the meeting will make contact with them. Who, will be decided before the meeting closes.

4. Established structure of meetings

    Time: 7pm to 10pm approximately

    7-7:30 News and Blues

    7:30-9:30 Presentation of Issue and Discussion.

    **Presenter presents information and viewpoint but does not have to defend. People have a right to disagree but not to

judge. If a woman feels judged, she should raise it; if others
feel a woman is being judged they should raise it.

9:30-10 Wrap Up

5. Established structure for 4 weeks with the fifth week a
review of this structure and these issues, and to decide where
to go from here. Also addition of new members to the rotation
if necessary.

6. Who picks the issue? The first issue is up to the
presenter. The next will be discussed at the review.

7. Do we need a discussion facilitator?

8. What about general discussion/support or social time? Does
it need to be built in?

9. Recording? Do we need it? If so, who will do it and what
will they record?

10. We want to remain flexible. If it isn't working, talk
about it and alter it. Nothing is written in stone.

11. Whoever invites the guest-woman takes responsibility for
introduction and initiation to group before the meeting.

APPENDIX 2

THE GROUPS'S RESPONSE VERBATIM

The women in the group accepted me. I feel an outsider
(immigrant) very easily. I felt comfortable and that sharing
of ideas, feelings, hopes, aspirations, frustration was the
important criterion that made this group different from other
women's groups in Portage I have known. There was an absense of
"status quo", who you were in the social stratification of the
town was not important, but what you shared of yourself to the
group was. What I did not like were: (1) too long evenings
(2) weekly was too often. But this could have been my own
moods and feelings at that time in my life. Another thing that
changed the group for me was when teaching became the topic of
a lot of the conversations because feeling acutely conscious of
being a highly qualified and experienced teacher unable to find
a job I experienced feelings of envy, frustration and anger,
which again, had to do with me, not with anyone or the group.

As a woman who comes from a large urban area, where I knew
many feminists and friends, I was happy to contact the members
of this group. I was first under the impression that I would be
meeting with a group of feminists. But as I became more aware,
many of the people in the group have not really come to grips
with calling themselves feminists. Of course they are still

expressing the same basic needs and concerns of all women,
feminists included. The group gives one a sense that there are
others to get close to in the community. People one can talk
with and share similar beliefs. Close contact and friendships
are a real part of everyone's life, at least a "real" need.
(Even if everyone doesn't seem to find them). I am not really
lacking support in my life because I get it from various other
sources including the person I live with. But I do crave
contact with women who share similar experiences and similar
beliefs. This group has provided that. It has introduced me
to possibilities in this "small town" I never would have
believed possible. It has made life in a "small town" as
fulfilling and happy as a large urban center. I am interested
in sharing reading experiences as well as other information
with women but I think that there is a lot of room for
expansion of our group. (Personal development through
heightened awareness.) We all must figure out what needs we
have to be fulfilled and work together to help each other in
our aims and needs.

I enjoyed the relaxed feeling when women shared their
feelings around getting together and feelings about being
isolated and trust seemed to build very quickly. I felt some
people dominated some sessions and I think this should have
been dealt with in the beginning and not allowed to continue.
I especially enjoyed having special week-end workships and hope

this group can be host to a week-end for women within this

coming year.

Likes: atmosphere of trust; anonymity in the aspect of

being able to express openly, yet through confidentiality not

be held responsible; non-judgemental (atmosphere);

support-emotional; nurturance; intellectual stimulation;

aquity--the interaction with feminist women brought focus into

a life in which I was nauseous from the roller coaster ride.

Dislikes: guilt about the amount of air time I took and the

demands I placed on the group in terms of support; 1 cigarette

at a time was not ever considered to be as important by those

non-smokers as the smokers--I mean for me it took a lot of give

because of the addiction--at times I resented it.

Likes: open, supportive atmosphere; contact with

like-minded women--ability to express ideas and frustrations

and be understood without a lot of justification that I often

find with explaining feminist ideas; appreciation of humor;

provision of interesting, relevent information; opportunity for

growth in self-education. Dislikes: lack of direction--this

is becoming less of a problem as the group evolves. I am

feeling much better about the group moving in a positive

direction, however we can still be easily distracted but that

is not necessarily a problem, but rather indicative of

flexibility.

The group has been a positive thing in my life. I find
now I am more aware of the small everyday things that are said
and done to women, in a derogatory sense. There have always
been choices I felt women should have, but couldn't always
put it into words. More and more often these days I find
myself also educating other women, telling them that they are
equal to everybody else and they do have choices. The group
has made me more open and I want now to do something
constructive. It has been time for action since time began.
Through the group I am ready for action, not just empty words.
I will continue to be involved and I do enjoy it tremendously.
Having to vie for talk time is probably the only negative
aspect, but it isn't really a big issue to me. I just talk
louder.

I felt uncomfortable with the group due to the fact my
work is professional too and was not seen that way. I did not
like being compared to a cocktail waitress. I feel that at
every meeting one person seemed to monopolize the conversation.
The presentations were good. Being a new member I may have
felt better about it if I had known some of the people prior to
joining.

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW FORMAT FOR GROUP COMPARISON

HERSTORY   How long have you been meeting as a group?

                How did the group get started?

                How influential was MACSW?

MEMBERSHIP   How many members do you have?

                Is your group open to new members?

                Who are your members?

                Marital status?
                Motherwork?
                Age range?
                Type of work?
                Import/local?

FUNCTION   What is the main function of your group?

                What other functions do you have?

                Has it changed over time?

STRUCTURE   How is the issue of leadership dealt with?

                Do you have a method of assigning jobs?

                What is the format of your meetings?

                Where do you meet?

IDEOLOGY   Do you consider your group to be feminist?

                Do you as individuals consider yourselves to be

                feminist?

What is your current connection to MACSW?

How supportive are your partners to your

involvement?

Is the community supportive to this group?

APPENDIX 4

SUMMARIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH FOUR WOMEN'S GROUPS

MINIOTA WOMEN'S GROUP

Interview Date: April 9, 1985

The Miniota Women's Group is a support group of 5 women who meet monthly in each other's homes. This interview took place in Maureen's home with all five women present. It was not videotaped.

Formation and Developmental Process

The women have been meeting for approximately three years. It all started when two women were in contact with Bev from the Action Committee and she suggested that they may want to start a group in their own community. After the idea was planted, the women decided to try it and got in touch with the other women they felt might be interested. They had a meeting at a third woman's house. Several women came, Bev was invited to be part of the discussion and brought a couple of short films. A group was started.

When they began recruiting for the group they had some difficulty finding a way to present it to the public. They did not call it a support group because that raised the issue of

confidentiality--"you can't say anything about yourself without people gossiping". They avoided the term "feminist" knowing the backlash that it would produce. They started with an issue, sexism in the media, with the idea of forming a support group when women came out. Although the response was not immediate, the group did not develop overnight, a support group did evolve.

Having been aware of the women's group in Birtle being labelled "elitist", a decision was made to organize an open community meeting. They stressed over and over that the group was open to all women. Between fifteen and twenty women came, and the film "Killing Me Softly" was shown. It was held in a church basement. "Going public" proved to have some negative consequences. Some women who seemed intent on opposition, negating any possibility of sexist bias. As well, going public may have opened the door to labelling and isolation from the community in general. Another meeting was held to discuss the group itself, and the concerns of the women in the community. Lists were made of these issues. The three organizing women had decided that they did not want a president or a set structure, but rather desired input of everyone's ideas as equal. This posed a problem for women who wanted "someone to tell us what to do". Although the women in attendance raised many issues, few came back. The difficulties in recruitment of members is discussed later.

In the first and second years, efforts were made to

involve more women, and to raise awareness about women's

issues. Women took on dofferent issues, and different women

came for specific topics. One women did a session on women and

aging, and several older women attended. She reported that

this gave her a weird feeling--"what can I tell them about

aging", but the discussion following was fruitful. One issue,

pornography, presented through "Not a Love Story", seemed to

drive women away. Some women felt the group was "just causing

trouble, when there was no trouble in the community." An

unfounded complaint as pornography is available in the local

store. Some issues, like abortion and wife abuse have been

left alone so far, fearing further community back lash.

   In the third year, to date, the women, for many reasons,

including a negative reaction from the community, have turned

to private meetings in each other's homes. A friend or

interested woman may be invited. Issues are discussed and

action taken individually or collectively. Action has included

letters to stores about pornography--"bouquets" for having it

under the counter, and "beefs" for having it on the shelf; and

lobbying the the school to implement a family life education

program. The main function of the group is support of each

other, the end the isolation they each felt without connection.

They may consider "going public" in the future, with some more

films, but for now they are enjoying the feeling of mutual

support--"something just for us".

Structure

This is a very unstructured group. No hierarchy is present. No particular format is used. When they did do community meetings, one or two women would co-facilitate the discussion, but no structure is necessary now.

Membership

The group is open in that new members are welcome, but closed in that no special efforts are made to advertise their meetings.

The five women are homogeneous is that they are all married and with their spouses. All have had children, four have at least one at home, two have young children. Four of the five are farm women, two have home businesses, one works as a nurse. Only one of the five comes from the area, four are "imports". They all consider themselves feminists in that they recognize the need for equality for women in society and in their relationships. The group is heterogeneous in terms of age and areas of interest.

When discussing recruitment of members, the issue of why women do not join was raised. Several possibilities were discussed: opposition of spouses; the label of feminist as "one of those women", "men-haters" and "women with problems"; and the fear of facing issues and of being forced into changes in their own lives. This hesitancy and labelling was in spite

of the women's belief that "we were so nice, we didn't say anything rude or radical".

Function
_____

The primary function of the group, as previously mentioned, is support and validation for their ideas, beliefs and themselves as people. This is important in light of the gap between community attitudes and those held by this group of "feminist women". Consistent pressure from the community for traditional behaviour and beliefs can leave a woman questioning "who am I or what do I believe? Am I crazy?" If no one supports changes in attitudes than "why am I not happy being Mrs. John Smith?"

Other functions include self-education, with the group often the only vehicle for mental stimulation, and public education with the hope to create some small change in the community. This hope for small change is called "subversive action" as the group is no longer public.

The functions have changed over timme, in that the pressure to "entice" other women to join is less, so public education has been put on the "back burner" compared to support and validation.

The function off the Miniota Women's Group differs from other more traditional women's groups in that this group acts as "self-care" rather than "other-care." This group functions in order to change the system, rather than to adjust. The structure is different than that found in most traditional

groups, with no hierarchy evident. The content of the meeting
is drastically different. One woman posed the question
regarding traditional women's groups--"what do they talk
about?" She answered it herself, "jellied salad vs green salad
for a whole hour". She added, "I always go home from this
women's group thinking", while at UCW, "I never learned a
thing". Even if an interesting issue is brought up "nobody
will talk about it". "The women listen politely, then have
dainties and small chitchat." This pattern was recognized by
two of the women from the group who were invited to speak on
the status of women at a meeting last winter. They commented
on the difficulty of getting them to discuss anything. There
was "no real connection with other women, we never found out
their views". This is in direct contrast to the Miniota group
where discussion is open and often intense, and the women feel
a strong sense of connection to each other.

A few other points regarding traditional women's groups
were raised. The large demands made for donation of time and
food, and the highly structured, ritualized nature, with
business consuming the meeting, left some important needs
unmet.

Group Ideology

While not officially connected to MACSW, the women all
consider themselves feminists, and the group has a feminist
perspective, dealing with issues concerning the equality of
women. Equality is both political and personal for these

women, who concern themselves with their relationships, their

worth as contributors to the family and society, as well as

community issues like family life in the schools.

Belonging to the group has caused change, or at least some

"waves" in all of these women's lives. Husbands, while not

forbidding their wives to go, and some even supporting their

involvement, receive pressure from the community and their

peers. This may translate at home into teasing, and serves to

keep the men quiet about the whereabouts of their spouses when

they are meeting. Often the jibes are not directly related to

the group itself, but rather to the profile each woman has.

"If you work, it is a failing of your husband", "if you speak

out, your husband must be henpecked." A major threat to

husbands is the simple fact that the group is an important, but

seperate involvement, which does not include men. This threat

becomes magnified when he has to "sit" his children for her to

go out. This is considered to be "shirking your duty". "Men

are allowed to spend the day in the pub, or the coffee shop,

taking about business", but women, because "it doesn't put

bread on the table don't have the right to get together". "If

it is for the community benifit, yes, but otherwise no."

An issue close to the women's heart is one of

invisibility, or being "just a housewife". Recognitiion is

particularly difficult on the farm because it doesn't matter

how hard a woman works, or what she owns, it is still his

farm". Often they hear women saying, "I'm a full partner, so

what difference does it make", but these women know that it is

hard to be a full partner if "you get no recognition for your

work, and your name in not on the deed". A story was told

about a young working woman who came in to buy groceries. She

got the groceries and when she was at the check out, her

husband came in and signed the check. This is only one

incident of many, in which women have no access to money, even

if they work for wages, and certainly no access to credit.

Rural women lack of involvement in politics was also an

issue, with the women having considered encouraging a woman to

run. One woman in the group was, at one time, privately

approached by another woman to go on council. But as soon as

the council "men" heard this, they rushed out and appointed

someone else, expressing the opinion that "anyone (read man) is

better than a woman". What support is there for rural women in

politics? "We are overworked. We have no energy left over for

politics. If we did no one supports it--not our communities

and often not our families."

These women, strong and vocal, obviously suffer from

community ostracism, partly from their "import" status and

partly from their connection to feminism. This is directly

linked to the traditional belief system evident in rural

communities. Perhaps this serves to limit the number of women

involved more than any other factors, but these women persevere

in their support of each other, and as "subversive" change

agents in their community. If nothing else, this perseverance

serves as a tribute to the strength of rural women.

PARKLANDS STATUS OF WOMEN

Interview Date: May 7, 1985

The Parklands Status of Women is primarily a support
group, with education and action components. It consists of a
membership of fifteen women, eight regulars who meet once a
month for supper and a meeting. The major center accessed is
Dauphin. They have been meeting for over 4 years. This
interview was videoed for the production of "Making
Connections". The camera was operated by two women from the
group: Francis and Linda.

Formation

The Action committee was instrumental in starting this
group. "Without them we might have not made it". They
solicited members, by connecting with Action members in the
area, and contributed energy and resources: speakers; films;
and funds.

They first met with a task in mind--a women's conference
in Dauphin. Having successfully accomplished the conference,
they stayed on as a group to continue to vie for change and
provide self and public education. Now, four years later, they
have become a voice for rural women--having been asked to
prepare a present briefs on the status of rural women; and a

solid network of support and care for each other (which the women see as a priority).

Structure

Parklands Status of Women is a fairly unstructured group, with no assigned leadership. When tasks require doing, the group just splits them up, depending on who wants to do what. They recognize that there are some pros and cons to being unstructured, but choose not to haave a hierarchical structure.

Once a month the women meet. Someone takes responsibility for the topic, which has been decided on up to a year in advance, for the coffee and for starting the phoning tree. They have a self-nurturance time built in with supper and conversation prior to the meeting. The second half of the evening, the presentation of issues, is held at a school and is advertised in the local paper. Some "business" may be done at the meeting, ususally mail from MACSW or other women's organizations. This split, with supper and issues, ensures personal and political time for this group.

Membership

The group can be viewed as an open group as their meetings are advertised in the local paper, despite the fact that few members are recruited in his way. Most recruitment is done through word-of-mouth. Women in the group are free to invite other women who may be interested. Helen, a MACSW member, seems to have been a major activist in this area, as many of

the women were connected through her.

The Parklands women represent a wide age range--25 to 70 years, are almost all married, with children (and grandchildren) and most participate in paid employment--outside and inside the home. As common in other groups, most are imports to the community--from other countries as well as other parts of Canada. One member referred to themselves as "mainly middle class" when speaking of their "above average" levels of education. Above average meaning some post-secondary training.

Recruitment of new members is an ongoing issue for this group. They have no set number as the top limit, "maybe five hundred". They know there must be other women who could benefit from the group as they have, but they do not know how to reach them. While revolutionizing the whole Parklands area has receded in importance, the group is very committed to reaching out to those women who would join if they "knew" about the group. Knowing about the group means not only that it exists, but what it is about--understanding who and what the Parklands Status of Women is about.

The women are not involved in other women's groups, but are involved in community activities: United Church board; union; and hospital auxiliary, to name a few. One woman gave a description of how she determined if the group was traditional or feminist--"if they call women 'girls', they are not a feminist group".

Function

The women feel support and validation are the key
functions. They see the group as necessary for survival in a
conservative community. Self-education is important,
developing a network of information on services and issues for
work and play. The Parklands women have taken self-education
very seriously, and have learned about many services and issues
of interest to women through presentations at their meetings.
Some include: RCMP; hospital; Alcohol Foundaion; Human Rights
Commission; Media Watch and "Killing Me Softly" on advertising;
Bonnie Diamond and "Not a Love Story" on pornography; incest;
Talking to Kids About Sex; What Your Mother Never Told You
About Sex; and women and religion.

Pollitical lobbying is becoming a regular function since
they effectively lobbied Howard Pawley with concerns of rural
women, and have been asked to continue this work. Outreach to
other women is important, but the viability of educating the
Parklands area has been recognized as massive, with large scale
change unlikely. The women have hosted two conferences on
women's issues, and have joined with other groups for other
conferences. They recently, with the Women's Institute brought
in the play "Side Effects".

When speaking of change in function over time, the group
felt the support function was critical from the start and will
always be number one. Community education has been replaced,

to a large degree, by outreach to interested women and
self-education. In terms of political lobbying, one women
responded that "if we had been told three years ago that we
would be lobbying the Premier, we wouldn't have believed it".

Ideology

This is a feminist group, directly connected to MACSW,
although certainly independent. The women all consider
themselves feminists, with some having been for a number of
years prio to joining the group. In many ways being a feminist
does not correspond with the community at large. They find
some negative response at times in the community, but mostly
indifference.

On the home fromt, we find husbands who are supportivve
enough that the women are actively concerned feminists. "It is
okay to go out to meetings etc., as long as the house work is
done" is the response of one husband. When issues inspire
angry feelings or a need for immediate action, some of the
women find it hard when their partners do not "jump on the
bandwagon" too. This lack of response of men in general, can
be considered as part and parcel of the different struggles
inherent in life for men and women, but it is hard to deal with
on the interpersonal level at home.

Major issues for the group include: pro-choice;
pornography, and the community monitoring of such; outreach to
native women, farm women, and other women in the area;
connection to other rural women's groups, particulatrly the WI;
and the rural-urban question, particularly the urban focus of
most women's organizations.

In general, it must be said that the Parklands women have
come a long way. They have covered many topics: developed

strong feminist relationships; maintained a non-hierarchical

structure; and are now getting government requests for their

opinion on issues facing rural women. It is about time rural

women were heard. Breaking through the barriers of

invisibility and isolation, Parklands Status of Women is

beginning this process. They are an inspiration, and a role

model, for other rural groups just starting out.

MINNEDOSA AND AREA COMMITTEE ON WIFE ABUSE

Interview Date: April 22, 1985

The Minnedosa group consists of approximately 25 members.
Eighteen women were available for the interview. The group of
women participating in the interview were from both the
Committee and the MACSW, as well as one or two non-affiliated
women who were involved in a non-formal way. All of them are
connected through the mutual support provided through the
connection to like-minded women. The interview was taped for
the video production "Making Connections". Judy Springer and
Bev Peters provided the camera work.

Formation

The women have been meeting in an organized way around the
issue of wife abuse for approximately one year, but have been
informally connected for close to three years.

The wife abuse group started when a group of women got
together at the "weekend for women" at Minnedosa, put on by
MACSW. The major impetus was provided at the Sunday seminar on
wife abuse, sponsored by the Manitoba Committee on Wife
Abuse (MCWA). The women recognized the need to take action in
their area and organized this group to take on wife
abuse--service to battered women and community education.

Structure

The group has an executive steering committee with shared responsibility for leadership, and a permanent secretary. The steering committee does the major part of the organizing work, and usually consists of 8 to 10 members.

The group has two distinct kinds of meetings--business and informal. Business meetings are run like formal meetings, with reports etc., and informal gatherings are held, for women to get together for friendship and sharing. At times it seems that the business takes up most of the time, as the task undertaken is large and the work is never done, but they use the informal gatherings to have fun and reenergize the group.

Membership

With a group this size, there is bound to be diversity. The group has some members who are MACSW members, and some who just belong to the Wife Abuse Committee. Some are officially neither, but concerned about women's issues. All are welcome.

Diversity is evident in ages and stages of awareness, educational backgrounds and interests, as well as level of commitment they can offer. They are not all feminists, but they all consider themselves to be non-traditional women to some extent. Most are married and have children. Some are farmers, some are professionals (teachers and nurses) and some

work at other jobs along with their "home work".

Recruitment has not been a problem. Women become active because of their interest in the issue of wife abuse. Having a specific purpose may make it easier to recruit members. Their extensive community education program has made them credible and visible in the community, so more women are easily recruited if interested in women's issues in general, or in wife abuse specifically.

Function

The primary stated function is to provide information and services in the area of wife abuse. The group has also dealt with child abuse and pornography in a public education forum. This function is catagorized as one of public education and service provision.

There is a strong consensus among the women that their meetings also serve a very personal function of support and connection. Sometimes the work with this project is time consuming and draining, thus time for play and reenergizing must be built in to forestall burnout. Although the women are aware of this need, often times "missionary zeal" detracts from self-care.

The functions can be said to have changed over time. The major change was the formalization of the Wife Abuse Committee a year ago, out of an unstructured collection of women, family

and friends. While in the past community service was not a
major function, today it is. Hopefully this desire to provide
this necessary service to women in their area will not result
in them forgetting themselves. Women who are not "battered"
have needs too.

.   The issue of self vs other care seems to be seen
differently by different members, ranging from "visionary" zeal
and self-sacrifice, to concern for nurturance of self (and
family) as priorities before service. Some members indicated a
strong desire for connection to other women and
self-development as reasons for their involvement.

While the Minnedosa group is in fact a community service
group it does not fit the mold of traditional women's service
groups or auxiliaries. The issue(s) they concern themselves
with are women's issues. They make up a link in the growing
"women helping women" chain, providing self-care as well as
care for other women.

Ideology

As a group, they seem to hold a feminist ideology. As
members, they may not proclaim this openly. Despite the
support of their "community within a community", the larger
community represents the conservative ethic common in rural
areas. They are unofficially connected to MACSW as some
members belong, and the group was based on inspiration from the

MACSW weekend. While concerned about women's issues in
general, and wife abuse specifically, other issues are of
importance: pornography; child abuse; women's health care;
non-sexist education; the isolation of rural women which
complicates the delivery of services; and developing equitable
relationships with their spouses.

This is a group of women, an "oasis in the desert of
conservatism" in rural Manitoba, who not only believe that
women need support, but who, without government aid, have set
up, in the period of one year, a network of aid to battered
women. They take their job very seriously, but they are not
without fun and humor. They are personally and politically
aware, and work to share their energy and consciousness with
other women and the community at large. They serve as a role
model to other communities of women who wish to organize to
provide services to women in their area.

BIRDTAIL WOMEN FOR ACTION

Interview Date: May 6, 1985

Birdtail Women For Action is a support and action group
out of Birtle, Manitoba. It has a membership of 15 women, who
meet twice monthly. It is considered a sub-group of the MACSW
with annual funding and a position on the MACSW Provincial
Executive. It has a monthly newsletter received by over thirty
women. The interview was taped for the video "Making
Connections"; Joyce on camera.

Formation

This group has been meeting for approximately three years.
It began when Bev and Carol from MACSW got together with a
group of women invited by an action member from Birtle, to
discuss the possibility of forming a group in Birtle. The
women gathered and discussed how angry they were about women's
position in Birtle...they wanted action. They wanted to
revolutionize Birtle and the world. B. invited those women who
she felt may be interested. This resulted in some women not
being invited. From the start, the label of "elitist" was
attached to the group because of this. They have tried hard to
combat this by advertising their meetings on a regular basis in
the local paper, but once the feelings of rejection were rooted

in some women, it was "blown out of proportion".

Structure

For the first seven to eight months they met once a month
and each contributed one dollar to cover the newsletter costs.
After a short while it seemed that one woman was taking on all
the work. This was not what the other women had in mind, so
they met to reorganize. They decided to meet twice a month,
once for business/action and issues and once for support and
friendship. They also developed a job list, which rotates
every six months. Jobs include: chair; treasurer; program
convenor; social; secretary; and news reporter.

Although this list may not be strictly adhered to, it does
provide for sharing responsibility and tasks. They set their
adgenda up to four months in advance. Annual "working"
meetings are held at the beginning of the new year to take
action on business left on hold, for example letter writing,
and to brainstorm for new ideas for issues and projects for the
new year.

Membership

For the most part the Birdtail Women are a homogeneous
group. All are married; all except one woman has children.
Most are teachers or ex-teachers, and most work outside the

home. They range in age between 25 and 35 years. Most of the women are imports to the community or have left and returned. All but two of the women live in town.

Recruitment is done mostly through word-of-mouth. All meetings are advertised, and while this may bring out women for specific issue discussion, it does not seem to provide a method for ongoing recruitment. They have an open door policy, as indicated by their use of the local paper.

The women are not members of other women's groups, but many are active in other community groups or organizations, including: the hospital board; the hospital auxiliary; town council; Status of Women in Education; and the Home Economics Association. All are MACSW members.

Function

Support was the reason most women joined the group, to have a safe place to vent anger and get connected to other "like-minded" women. Self-education is a main function, and judging from their name they are action oriented as well. Rather than just being angry about women's position, they are trying to do something about it. They have initiated several community education programs. One of the first was "Not A Love Story", and it was not all that well received, with a seemingly accepting attitude of the community members in attendance about pornography. Other issues have included: violence against

women; a film about Japanese women; media monitoring, with

"Killing Me Softly"; abortion; farm women; and a car care

clinic. They have found public education to be frustrating in

the last little while, choosing to concentrate on more support

and validation for themselves and other interested women. In

March they put together "Action", the MACSW monthly newsletter,

hosted an executive meeting of MACSW, and did a session on

media monitoring. A number of women expressed dissatisfaction

with being overworked and hope to spend more time on self-care

in the future. Having been recently approached to take on

service to battered women in the area, they are going to have

some hard choices to make about group priorities. Along with

public education, they letter write, "beefs and bouquets" to

the paper and other deserving individuals. They have

unsuccessfully lobbyed to get a non-sexist nursery school

policy in place. This effort was most difficult, as many of

their friends and neighbours were on the other side. It was

well publicized in the local paper and resulted in a major

community uproar. The women wonder whether the fact of being

identified as feminists added to or perhaps even generated the

level of resistance to the proposal.

This group has several functions, and it has varied over

time. The great changes they had hoped for in the beginning

have not come to pass. They are somewhat dissolutioned about

what change is possible, but satisfied with the personal

support and connection available to themselves as individuals.

They are turning to less community education and more personal
education. Action and support remain main functions.

Ideology

The women all consider themselves feminists and their
group to be a feminist group. They are known in the community
as a feminist group.

Being feminist has had some impact on the women's personal
relationships, particularly at the outset, when a lot of anger
was being expressed. Women went home keyed up, headachy and
angry and "took it out on their husbands". Most consider their
husbands to be supportive in their personal relationships, but
it may be a different story in the community for some. The
community reaction has been negative to a large degree, but the
women feel they do have a lot of support within the community,
even from women who are not group members. This helps them to
keep going. They have been cooperating with other women's
groups, particularly the WI, and this has contributed to more
acceptance in the community. They know they are becoming
"legitimate" as they were asked to donate a trophy for the high
school awards night.

The Birdtail Women For Action are as what the name
indicates, a high profile support and action group, acting and
reacting to sexism in the community while providing each other
with nurturance and support to accomplish personal and

political change.

APPENDIX 5

NUMERICAL ASSIGNMENTS IN TABLE 5

In attempting to put some order to the information
gleaned in the informal interviews conducted with the women's
groups, tables were constructed to show the groups in relation
to each other on a number of variables. For the membership
diversity variable a continuum was created, numbered one to
five, from the least to most diverse. Various elements were
considered in assigning numerical values to these elements.
The following is an attempt to concretize the process used with
each component of the variable.

Marital Status

Five alternatives existed for each woman: married with
spouse; common law-partnership; remarried; never married; and
divorced. A rating of one, or least diversity would indicate
the presence of only one alternative, e.g. Birdtail women are
all married with their spouses. A rating of five would
indicate the most diversity, e.g. in the Portage group all five
possibilities are present.

Motherwork

The most basic division is those women with children, and
those without. Other distinctions were made: preschoolers;
school-aged children; grown children; single parent; and no
children. While these options were available for

consideration, the data collection process made it difficult to
be precise. The numbering is based on recollection rather than
figures. Portage, at five, had four women with no children;
and four with; one with preschoolers, two with school aged
children; and one with grown children. Miniota women all had
children, and all were school aged. Of the Parklands women, at
the mid-point, most had children, two had no children, one had
grandchildren.

Type of work

Four types of work were catagorized: professional (usually
through university training, e.g. teachers); farmers;
hoome-workers; and other paid employment, e.g. hairdresser.
The Birdtail group, at one, with the least diversity, were all
teachers or ex-teachers. Portage, at the mid-point, had a
split--five professional and three in other paid employment,
although three women were unemployed professionals so could be
considered home-workers. Parklands, the most diverse, had all
five represented.

Age

Age diversity can be catagorized into five age spans:
20-25; 26-35; 36-45; 46-55, and over 55. Although specific
ages were not asked in the interviewing process, "guestimates"
were made.   Birdtail women all ranged in the second catagory
(26-35). Portage women spanned all age catagories, but most
were in the 20-35 age range--only one woman was over 55.
Parklands have equitable representation at all age levels,

giving them the highest diversity score.

Import/Local Status

Nor only can you be import or local, you can be a recent import or residing in the community for over 2 years. You can be an import from Canada or elsewhere, or a local who has left and returned to the community. Birdtail women are all imports, who have been in the community over two years, from Canada. They are the least diversified. Parklands is made up of all these combinations, but imports do make up almost the entire group as is the case with all these groups.

Overall Diversity

This score was obtained by assigning a point value to each numerical value and tabulating a score. For example, Birdtail scored six points--one point each for the least diversity in marital status, type of work, age and import/local status, and two for motherwork. Minnedosa scored the highest (21 points), four for all except type of work, in which they scored a five.

Along with this appendix, more clarity can be achieved in understanding the relevance of this information by viewing the video "Making Connections" and referring to the descriptive summary of each group in Appendix 4.