

POLITICAL BASIS OF UNITY

L'R DES CENTRES DE FEMMES DU QUÉBEC

2003

PREAMBLE

Women's centres in Québec form a large network that reaches thousands of women. They welcome women from all walks of life. Firmly established in rural and urban communities, they are well versed in women's needs, problems and demands.

The centres are aware that the political, economic and social situation of women continues to pose a problem. In Québec, like everywhere else, only a small minority of women are present on the political scene. Worse still, huge numbers of women are among the poorest members of society. Their situation of exclusion and oppression is characterized, among other things, by:

- violence in all its forms and the aftermath of this violence;
- employment discrimination and inequity, manifested by the concentration of women in particular job sectors or in jobs that are insecure, underpaid and without fringe benefits;
- problems in access to childcare in terms of available places, hours of service and cost;
- single parenthood: often a passport to poverty and social exclusion;
- problems obtaining support payments;
- the sexist exploitation of women's bodies (pornography, prostitution, etc.);
- the over-medicalization of women;
- inequity in terms of the sharing of family responsibilities, including the care of children and intimates.

Women's poverty stems in part from the traditional female roles, including responsibility for children, and the fact that most women do not receive a decent income and own little or no property. Poverty undermines their physical and mental health. Furthermore, it is exacerbated by current government policies favouring reduced social spending over redistribution of wealth and permanent job creation. It is also due to the fact that women are absent, or their situation is not taken into account, when regional and local development policies are being drafted.

The extreme difficulty experienced by numerous women in participating in political and social life, and their economic insecurity, is sometimes aggravated by additional factors of systemic discrimination based on disability, sexual orientation or ethno-cultural background.

This form of discrimination is manifested by a range of negative attitudes, behaviours and practices targeting specific groups that, while sometimes unconscious, are very much present in the labour market, and in educational, financial and health and social services institutions. It creates barriers to the social, economic, political and cultural acceptance and integration of women with disabilities or from minority cultural groups, Native women and lesbians, whose needs and rights go unrecognized.

Isolation, loss of self-esteem, impoverishment and marginalization are the lot of many of the women who knock at centres' doors. This is why centres, while supporting women in their quest for autonomy, work with other women's and community groups to change laws, policies, institutions and attitudes.

This means that centres act on a number of fronts at once: to change laws that discriminate against women; to promote pay equity and freedom of choice concerning sexuality and reproduction; to denounce violence in all its forms; to facilitate women's access to positions of power; to promote equal relations between women and men; to remind the public of the social and economic role of the State to assure the well-being of Québec society and redistribute wealth; to develop resources to encourage and support women's socio-economic independence, etc.

The centres also support the demands of women of minority ethnic backgrounds and Aboriginal women. They stand in solidarity with women around the world who are struggling to end poverty and to win respect for their integrity and dignity.

Women's centres contribute to the definition of a new society that takes feminist values and aspirations into account. Their actions target individual attitudes as much as the political arena. In doing so, they challenge the sexist¹ ideology and patriarchal foundation (structures, institutions and social functioning) that perpetuate unequal relations between women and men.

¹ Sexist (patriarchal) ideology refers to a group of ideas and beliefs based on the notion that women are inferior and exist to serve men. Often, women also take on these ideas and beliefs, which are internalized through the process of socialization.

I. WOMEN'S CENTRES: THEIR APPROACH AND FEMINIST PROGRAM

Women's centres are local or sub-regional resources. They offer women in their community a place that feels like home, where they can find support during a time of transition; an alternative to isolation; and an education and action network. The centres' approach is comprehensive. Rather than focus their action on a particular problem, they address the status of women as a whole.

Open to diversity, centres aim to be accessible to all women in their community. However, some centres may choose, on a priority basis, but not exclusively, to work with women belonging to groups subjected to multiple forms of discrimination: disabled women, Aboriginal women, women in minority ethnic communities and lesbians.

The centres are set up and managed by and for women exclusively. Women who come to the centres are considered to be participants rather than users. The workers, both paid and unpaid, are women who are committed to working with and for other women to meet the goals of the feminist program. Women's centres are characterized by:

1.1 A FEMINIST APPROACH

By this, we mean:

- raising awareness of sexist stereotypes;
- pointing out the socio-political causes of individual problems, to relieve women's guilt;
- believing in the potential of each woman, valuing her knowledge and experience;
- demystifying the role of staff workers in order to develop egalitarian and equitable relationships between workers and participants;
- supporting women in a process to achieve greater autonomy that gives them more control over their lives; respecting their individual paths and choices;
- encouraging mutual aid, support and solidarity among women;
- searching for collective solutions to women's needs and interests;
- encouraging women to participate in democratic and social life.

1.2 A HOLISTIC AND DE-COMPARTMENTALIZED APPROACH TO WOMEN'S PROBLEMS

Centres refuse to treat women's lives as a thousand isolated problems. Their approach involves action on all aspects of women's lives, drawing on women's individual and collective understanding of their situation and past experiences.

1.3 A POPULAR EDUCATION APPROACH

Through their services, educational activities, collective action and participatory structure (via associative), centres encourage a process of critical thinking and learning that allows women to come to an individual and collective understanding of their situation. These processes give women the means to take more control over their daily lives and improve and transform the emotional, social, economic, political and cultural conditions in which they live. As a result, the centres enable women to see themselves as agents for change and active citizens who participate in the democratic and social life of their communities.

1.4 A STRUGGLE AGAINST PREJUDICE, WHETHER BASED ON SEX, ETHNIC BACKGROUND, SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR SOCIAL STATUS, ETC.

Through their practices, women's centres promote attitudes and behaviour to combat sexism, exclusion and discrimination.

1.5 BUILDING GENUINE SOLIDARITY BASED ON COMMON PROBLEMS OR COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOURS

Agents of solidarity, women's centres work with women's and other groups to improve and transform the living conditions of women and their communities.

2. THE MANDATES OF WOMEN'S CENTRES

The centres have set themselves three mandates: services, educational activities and collective action. Services and activities are offered free of charge or for a minimal cost.

2.1 SERVICES

Services may include individual and group assistance (listening and support, accompaniment, references, self-help groups), drop-in day care, an information centre, etc. They are meant to support women in their efforts to develop greater autonomy.

2.1.1 In the centres, women are fully fledged participants rather than consumers of services.

2.1.2 Individual assistance

The centres do not diagnose women, nor do they keep files or proffer therapy.

Troubled women arriving at the centres are greeted by women who listen and support them, provide references and accompaniment—and a guarantee of complete confidentiality. Individual support is offered when needed and not as part of a formal process of individual intervention. This means that :

- women are free to arrive without an appointment and maintain their anonymity when they feel the need to do so;
- it is not the job of the workers to assess the nature of the problem or problems of women who reveal their difficulties and anxieties. They are there to support women in expressing their experiences and affirming their needs and desires; they accompany them in searching for solutions to problems that women themselves have named.

Consequently, the individual assistance that centres provide does not require the opening of files² and the keeping of information on women.

In addition, while offering women individual support, workers also encourage them to participate in the centre's activities. Indeed, centres favour group intervention because they see it as the best way to

²Here we are referring to files containing: judgements and comments about the feelings, desires and problems expressed by a women; an assessment of her situation; a diagnosis of her state of mental or physical health; etc.

break down women's isolation and reinforce self-esteem and autonomy. By helping women participate in group activities, the centres enable them interact with other participants who have similar problems or who are in similar situations. Often this sharing generates solidarity that breeds the support and mutual aid women need to make personal changes and collectively improve their living conditions.

2.2 EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

By educational activities we mean: awareness raising, information and training activities on different topics; cultural intervention³; training through action; participation in centre life and decisions.

2.2.1 All educational activities emphasize the sharing and valuing of women's knowledge and experience. Participants are the actors of their own development. They use what they learn to make decisions and come up with individual and collective solutions to the barriers and problems facing them.

2.2.2 Educational activities allow women to express their needs and strengthen their self-esteem and capacity for self-affirmation with the overall aim of developing greater autonomy.

2.2.3 Educational activities are geared toward action, because through collective action women can address the socio-political, economic and cultural roots of injustice.

2.2.4 The centres are representative of women's situations, whether in terms of ethno-cultural background, social status or sexual orientation.

2.2.5 Centres commit to raising women's awareness of the political, social and economic factors influencing the status of women here and elsewhere in the world in order to forge bonds of solidarity based on common problems.

2.2.6 Activities are facilitated by women who share women's centres' feminist approach.

³Cultural intervention facilitates the consciousness-raising process through the use of cultural tools such as writing and publishing a newsletter, group creativity workshops, video production, participation in a choir, etc. These are all ways for women to make their voices heard. Through a collective articulation of their experience, women critically distance themselves from their situation, which allows them to see the possibility of change.

2.3. COLLECTIVE ACTION

By collective action, we mean any action strategy aimed at defending and promoting women's rights and interests in a perspective of social change. The actions organized and supported by centres may be local, regional, national or international in scope.

2.3.1 The centres see collective action as a means of achieving greater autonomy, on an individual and collective level.

2.3.2 Actions are diverse in nature and are born out of women's needs. Together, women decide on the goals, strategies and means.

2.3.3 The principles underpinning centres' actions are equity, legal equality for women and social justice.

2.3.4 Participation in collective action allows women to take an active role in their communities as citizens with questions and demands and who are concerned with building solidarity.

2.3.5 Through collective action, the centres play an active role in the social and political transformation required to defeat injustice and discrimination.

3. A PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURE

Women's centres are built on a democratic participatory structure. It fosters power sharing among participants, volunteer and paid workers. Together, they form a team committed to implementing the centre's feminist program.

Collective management is based on women's participation in the democratic process: general assembly, board of directors or collective, work or action committees, etc. These structures are flexible and accessible so that all women can easily become involved.

Centres look for new organizational and management models that reflect their feminist approach and educational program and incorporate more egalitarian practices.

- 3.1 Participants, volunteer and paid workers take part in the different decision-making structures of the centre: general assembly, board of directors or collective, work or action committees, etc., according to terms determined by each centre.
- 3.2 All paid workers, including women hired for projects, take part in decisions concerning their work and delegate at least one representative of their choice to the board or collective.
- 3.3 Centres define employees' conditions in an employment contract. This contract incorporates feminist demands concerning working conditions. Workers participate in drafting the employment contract. It specifies all working conditions, including hiring, job description, salary policy, evaluation and dismissal process, recourse to mediation in case of conflict, etc.

4. MEMBERSHIP IN L'R

The Regroupement provincial des centres de femmes, known as L'R, was founded in 1985. Centres set the following goals for their coalition:

- Develop and support the network of women's centres ;
- Assure the consistency and renewal of centres' practices based on the basis of unity ;
- Support the actions of groups, associations and coalitions fighting for autonomy, legal equality and equity for women, and promoting women's interests and social justice ;
- Develop coordinated action among women's centres ;
- Represent women's centres in fighting for their common demands.

4.1 These goals are still relevant and centres reaffirm the importance of having a dynamic and representative provincial coalition. In a time of regionalization, centres wish to continue acting together on a provincial level to further develop solidarity and work together for substantial changes in women's conditions. In this regard, L'R is an essential nucleus of support for the centres and of socio-political action.

4.2 As a consequence of the above, centres recognize the importance of active involvement in the provincial coalition, whether as members of regional steering committees (tables régionales), work groups, or the Coordinating Committee. Centres also participate in the annual general assembly of L'R and give their opinions on the coalition's direction and anticipated work plan.

4.3 The Coordinating Committee of L'R is charged with representing centres' needs, interests and opinions. To this end, it consults them about any issues deemed important and which involve centres' collaboration.

4.4 In the case of current events requiring a rapid response, however, the executive committee of L'R may adopt a position based on a feminist perspective and analysis. The executive committee and the coordinating committee must then consult the centres in order to draft a long-term action plan.

5. ADHESION TO THE BASIS OF UNITY

A basis of unity is simply all the principles that bring women's centres together. It is the mirror in which each centre sees its reflection ; at the same time it is the ideological basis of a movement in which the centre participates, acts in solidarity and mobilizes.

A basis of unity is dynamic. The manner in which it is used can evolve over time. Still, each centre commits to observing the principles in all of its activities.

5.1 Each member centre of L'R adheres in principle and practice to the goals of the Regroupement and its basis of unity. Consequently, the general by-laws of each centre must reflect the basis of unity.