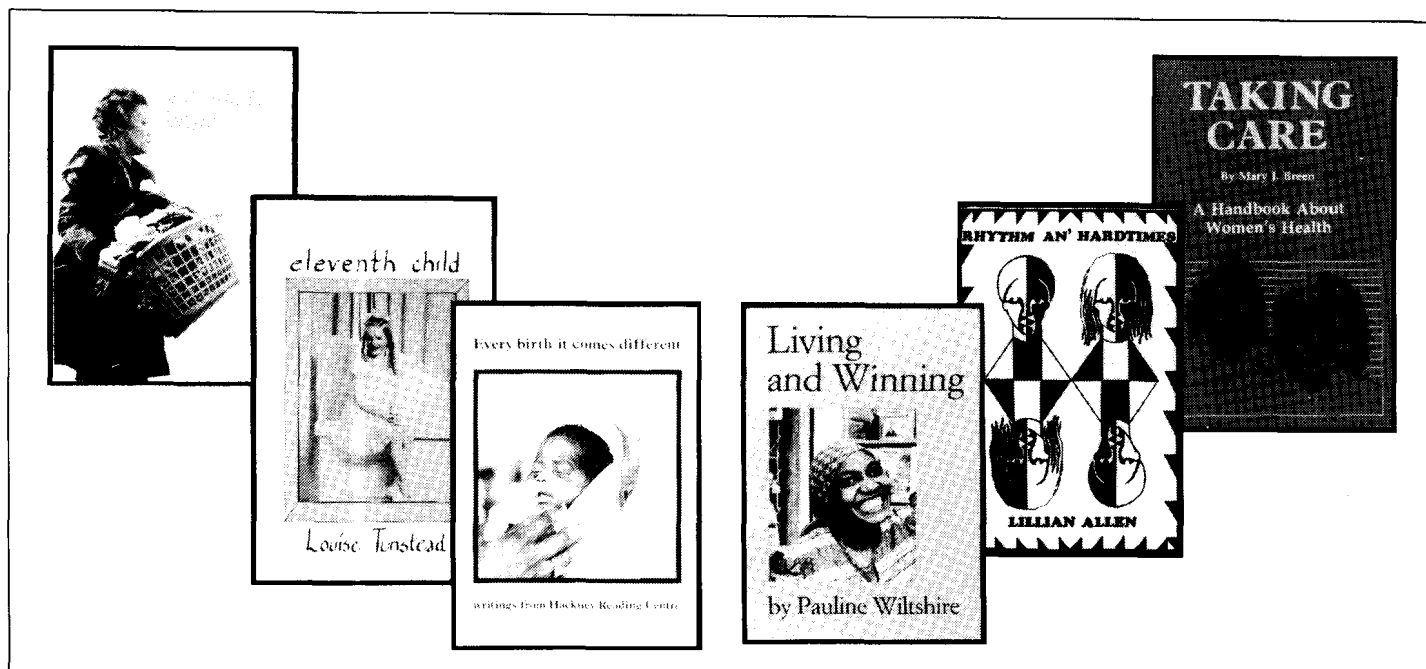


# Reading Our Own Stories

## *Literacy Materials for Women*



The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for women (CLOW) is currently undertaking a project to develop an annotated resource guide to Canadian literacy materials for women. It will involve the identification and collection of high quality literacy materials for women — materials which are non-sexist and which respond to and reflect the varied aspirations, interests, and learning needs of adult women literacy students.

**Our first step...** As a first step, CLOW sent out a questionnaire to women's groups, literacy groups, literacy practitioners, and others involved in women's literacy education. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect information about, and examples of, recommended literacy materials for women. Replies have been received at the CLOW office and information is now being entered on computer in preparation for production of the resource guide.

**What we are discovering...** Initially, when we launched this project, we were uncertain what we would find. There was little information available about Canadian literacy materials, and even less about literacy materials for women. We knew, from an earlier CLOW study, *Women and Adult Basic Education in*

*Canada: An exploratory study* (1984), that there was a dearth of literacy materials available for women in this country. This was quickly confirmed by a number of the replies we received: "We were certainly aware as we visited literacy programs that there is a great void of good relevant materials for adults and in particular for women" (Literacy co-ordinator, St. John's).

But, at CLOW we had heard that adult learners in a few community literacy programs were beginning to write and publish their own materials. We wanted to learn more about these and other new initiatives, and to share this information with others.

Response to our questionnaire was overwhelmingly positive, with most of the three hundred respondents writing in support of the project. Although many respondents could not recommend any literacy materials for women, most indicated that they needed women's literacy materials in their program. They were hopefully enthusiastic about the project: "The best materials are home grown. Maybe your survey will help encourage more home grown efforts" (literacy co-ordinator, North Bay); "I hope you uncover vast hordes of easy to read materials" (Literacy re-

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searcher, Halifax); "I am extremely interested in your project — there is a tremendous need for this sort of resource. Having just begun a literacy project focussing on women, I feel as if I am working in a vacuum" (literacy worker, Kingston).

As we had expected, we received replies from practitioners in community literacy programs, from workers in women's up-grading groups, and from staff in community colleges and boards of education. Many expressed a strong concern about the lack of good Canadian literacy materials for women, and talked about discovering some excellent women's literacy materials from England, and some from Australia as well. Many referred us to the new materials about women's life experiences being published by learners at East End Literacy Press in Toronto, and to other materials written by adult women learners, many of which are unpublished or published in local newsletters. These and other materials will be documented in our resource guide.

We also received a surprising number of replies from other groups and individuals. Here are just a few examples.

*We heard from several of the Elizabeth Fry Societies about the need for women's literacy materials for women in prison and women who are returning from prison to the community. The Elizabeth Fry Society also urged federal government employees responsible for adult education and literacy training programs in our federal prisons to contact us. This project served to raise their consciousness and to encourage them to ask questions about women's experience of the prison education system, including the supposed gender "neutrality" of learning materials used in the prisons.*

*Some health organizations, such as an immigrant women's health center and an association concerned with anorexia nervosa, sent us samples of their materials and expressed concern about the need to have easy-to-read materials on women's health issues. At the same time, we received a set of guidelines for writing easy-to-read women's health materials which appeared in a recent issue of Health-sharing, and a copy of a new, easy-to-read handbook on women's health.*

*DAWN, the disabled women's network, wrote to confirm that reading and writing difficulties are experienced by many disabled women and to emphasize the need for programs and materials to be accessible to disabled women.*

*From native and Inuit groups, we learned about the importance of developing materials for native women in their own language, materials which respect and reflect their own culture. From one native program in northern Ontario, we received a paper which explores the implications of teaching methodology for native adult learners. From an Inuit adult education group in the North West Territories, we received an English translation of the scripts for a short, easy-to-read play about taking action on spousal assault.*

A vocational training co-ordinator reminded us about the technical skills that women want to learn: "I have found that materials that show simply and easily how to do something (repair an electrical plug, boost a car) are a very popular learning resource for women."

**Our next step...** CLOW is organizing a volunteer working group of women literacy practitioners and women with experience in plain writing from across the country to review and evaluate recommended materials for inclusion in the resource guide. We anticipate that as we assess the materials, the literacy practitioners involved in the working group will work to find a way of involving interested women learners from their programs.

The working group will also be addressing some of the questions raised by the respondents, identifying gaps in the kinds of literacy materials available for women in Canada, and developing guidelines for assessing literacy materials for women. An important task of the group will be to look to the future — to explore the possibility of developing women's literacy materials and curriculum.

**Looking forward...** As we work with the findings of the survey, I am struck by the fact that there is the potential within our Canadian literacy and women's movements to create not only examples of women's literacy materials, but also to explore the larger questions about whether and how we develop literacy curriculum for adult women learners.

- Is there a need for feminist curriculum at the literacy level? Who should be involved in developing it?
- How can we support literacy projects to involve adult women learners in developing their own materials and their own curriculum?
- What are the guidelines for assessing and developing feminist literacy materials?
- How do we respond to the argument that literacy instruction is gender "neutral"?
- Is there a need for a network of feminist literacy practitioners?
- Is there a need for a network of women literacy learners?

As I have reviewed the respondents' comments and pursued feminist readings on the theme of literacy, I have been impressed by the fact that a number of feminist literacy educators and feminist theorists are challenging us to think about women's literacy materials not so much in terms of women's needs, but in terms of women's strengths and their resistance to the class, race, and gender oppression they experience. There are many unanswered questions and there is much to be done, but it is clear that we need to give adult women learners an opportunity to express their own voices, to share and develop their own culture, and to participate in Canadian society.

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A copy of the CLOW resource guide to Canadian literacy materials for women will be distributed free of charge by CLOW to all those who sent in information to the project, and on a cost-recovery basis to others. It is anticipated that the resource guide will be ready for publication early in 1989. Readers who have materials to recommend or are otherwise interested in the project should write to: Gladys Watson, CLOW, 47 Main Street, Toronto, Ontario M4E 2V6; or telephone (416) 699-1909.

*Gladys Watson is an activist in literacy and adult education for women. As a librarian and researcher working from a feminist perspective, she is interested in materials and resource centers for women literacy learners and practitioners. Currently, Gladys is on staff with the Canadian Congress of Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW).*