

Feminism in the Transition House

BY PAULINE FUNSTON

L'auteure examine ici l'érosion des normes féministes envers le professionnalisme qui selon elle, coûte cher aux femmes battues en ramenant les maisons d'hébergement au niveau d'un autre service social, ce qui va à l'encontre du changement politique envisagé pour toutes les femmes.

A call back to our original practice of feminism in our transition houses.

There has been a great push toward methods of professionalism in our work in the transition houses and it will take every effort on all our parts to fight back and hold onto our practice of feminism. Feminist frontline workers saw our responsibility to the women who use our transition houses as being one of revolutionary practice for political change. Now our transition houses are being staffed by those who are able to get a degree in social services. Now we see “clients” and provide a “service,” a clear indication of the dilution of feminist principals and practice. The battered women who come to the transition houses now sees us as other rather than the same as they are.

Let's not forget that it was the battered women who saw the need for transition houses and went about creating and developing the politics of transition houses in partnership with crisis line workers. Our government must be pressured to take direction from us on what the standards should be. They have already been developed by feminists. The erosion of feminist standards towards professionalism is costing battered women their dignity, autonomy, and their right to participate in the feminist movement. If we accept government standards then we are reduced to becoming another social service which then individualizes the battered woman's experience and works against political change for her and all women.

Around the table

As a frontline worker I attended the National Conference on Domestic Violence in Portland Oregon. One workshop I attended was about feminism in the transition house. In attendance were other transition house workers, none of whom could claim, as I did, that they worked in a collective. They debated about what rules to set for their “clients” in their transition houses and whether or not these “clients” should be allowed to work in the transition houses once they left. I felt sickened to hear what

professionalization has done to these women's organizations and believed strongly that I would do what I could in order for that not to happen to us in Canada.

Daily, women gather around the kitchen table of the transition house to discuss what forces from outside are affecting them after leaving their abusive partner and how these forces collude with him in oppressing her. We talk about our lives as female children in a patriarchal system, finding out the effects were the same whatever countries we came from and whichever religion we might belong to.

We would then continue to discuss and debate other issues, forming ideas and analysis of what each one of us has in common—being born female and being raised in an environment where “father knows best.” Our fathers are head of the family, head of state, head of the country, religious leaders, corporate leaders, and in the end, our husbands.

Now the analysis deepens. We no longer believe that a man's attacks of a woman happened to her alone in the secrecy of their home. The extension of our oppression becomes clearer and we now recognize who is on the top and who is on the bottom and why attacking women keeps men in control and with all the power. We have been encouraged to pit ourselves against each other by those in power as any oppressed group is. Our isolation, we realize, is an effective weapon to sustain men's power and control.

Yet in the transition house women are learning how and why it is important for us to share with one another our herstories and to give each other a helping hand when we are struggling in our day-to-day survival. Through this learning, and mutual aid, we begin to see how much we can achieve as we work together. In the safety of women-only spaces, we can share with one another what we have experienced with an abusive partner and strategize on how to live safely and independently while we organize for political change.

Getting in charge of her life

Advocating for oneself is a foreign exercise to the woman who has been held hostage in a battering relation-

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ship. Those of us who work in transition houses know that by teaching these women how to create strategies and build alliances while confronting the system will advance their success at leading their own lives. As they negotiate their way through the system these will be their tools of power—the ones they will use after leaving the transition house, the ones they will use when they group with other women for political change. As frontline workers we know that it becomes easy to slip into “servicing” women by infantilizing them when we professionalize the work. To actively achieve her autonomy, a battered woman must be in the lead and see us, the frontline workers, as standing beside her. When we set up a hierarchy of power, by placing these women only in the hands of those with professional degrees, these women fall to the bottom of the ladder and we are reenacting the power dynamics they had to endure while living with their abuser. Our commitment to the autonomy of each woman who comes into our transition houses must be foremost in our theory and practice.

A call to action

It is important to realize that the battered woman who must establish a new life for herself and her children will have to use her time and energy to care for her children, find housing, take training, and look for employment. She must be encouraged and supported by us to participate in the women’s movement. The grouping of ex-residents for support, education, and action can lead to these women becoming a political force. They can come back to work in the transition houses, take part in political actions, and lobby the government for change. In feminist transition houses these women have found their voices through the collective sharing of power and in recognition of their equality. The mobilizing of ex-residents for political action can come about effectively when we nurture our relationships with them. The potential for political change is seen by the battered women in the short time she stays with us *if* we hold ourselves to feminist practice in the transition house.

Pauline Funston is a collective member at Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter. She is a transition house worker and an activism for over seven years. She has worked with many battered women over this period of time. She has travelled and lived in many parts of the world on her own for extended periods of time, most extensively in North Africa and Asia. She is of a working-class background, was raised in rural Ontario, and has spent the last four years concentrating on making women’s liberation happen.

NANCY C. FARQUHARSON

Flowers

I got flowers today. It wasn’t my birthday or any other special day.
We had our first argument last night,
And he said a lot of cruel things that really hurt
I know he’s sorry and didn’t mean the things he said
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today. It wasn’t our anniversary or any other special day.
Last night he threw me into a wall and started to choke me.
It seemed like a nightmare.
I couldn’t believe it was real.
I woke up this morning sore and bruised all over.
I know he must be sorry
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today and it wasn’t Mother’s Day or any other special day.
Last night he beat me up again.
And it was much worse than all the other times.
If I leave him, what will he do?
How will I take care of my kids? What about money
I’m afraid of him and scared to leave.
But I know he must be sorry
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today. Today was a special day.
It was the day of my funeral.
Last night, he finally killed me.
He beat me to death.
If only I had gathered
Enough courage and strength to leave him.
I would not have gotten flowers today.

Nancy C. Farquharson lives in Mississauga, Ontario.

THE HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS OF THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT

The pervasiveness of poverty and violence against women is in contradiction to the promise held out by the adoption in 1982 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The *Charter* directs Canadian and provincial governments to respect and promote women's equality rights, in particular our right to life, liberty and security of the person without discrimination. The Supreme Court of Canada has systematically ruled that government policy must effectively respect women's substantive equality rights and that constitutional equality rights require more than formal equality. Governments must take into consideration the context of women's lives and implement measures to ensure that their policies do not further entrench women's economic, social, cultural, civil and political disadvantage.

In 1985, the United Nations announced that the target date for achieving women's equality was the year 2000. In the last decade, the Canadian government has argued for respect for women's human rights on the international scene. The federal and provincial governments have publicly and officially proclaimed their commitment to women's equality and declared their intention to eliminate violence against women. Canada has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 1994, it voted in favour of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. In 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Canadian government committed itself to implementing the Beijing Platform for Action that set as goals gender equality, development and peace. In June 2000, at the special session of the United Nations General Assembly, our government committed to take Further Actions to implement the Beijing Platform for Action on issues such as health, violence against women, trafficking, globalization, human rights, political empowerment and education.

All these international agreements hold the promise of a more equal society, where women's basic security and dignity will be respected. They direct governments to take all necessary measures to ensure the promotion of women's human rights. However, current governmental policies sadly betray these international objectives and Canadian promises.

The federal government has a mandate to protect the public interest, respect and promote basic human rights, ensure women's equality rights, and manage society in the best interests of all, not just in the interests of the most powerful and wealthy. Poverty and violence against women are the most blatant signs of the systemic inequality that women experience. The nature of this poverty and violence depends upon the circumstances of women's lives and the specific forms of oppression women may face whether they be racism, homophobia, ableism or class discrimination. Meaningful change will require a commitment on the part of the federal government to confront the distinct manifestations of the oppression women experience in communities all across Canada.

Women across Canada demand that the federal government make fundamental changes to its public policy. Government must play an exemplary role in implementing, maintaining and living up to national and international standards that effectively guarantee the human rights of all women. Québec women support our sisters' demand for national standards. The women's movement in Canada recognizes Québec's right to define, control, and develop its own programs and policies with full federal compensation, where applicable. We call on the federal government to do likewise.

We call on the federal government to change its laws and policies in conformity with our demands as these are necessary steps to ensure an end to poverty and violence against women. In the context of a substantial budgetary surplus, the federal government must allocate all necessary resources to end poverty and violence against women. We will no longer tolerate the discriminatory policies of our governments.

Excerpted from "It's Time for Change: Demands to the Federal Government to End Poverty and Violence Against Women." Throughout this volume, we will present the 68 demands in their entirety.