Upstream in the Mainstream

Strategies for

BY MEREDITH RALSTON

There is something very seductive about the old feminist slogan, "sisterhood is powerful." The word sisterhood suggests commonalties between women.

Eliminer la pauvreté et la violence au 21e siècle implique un énorme effort de coalition, un travail au-delà des frontières et des différences, un travail de l'intérieur comme de l'extérieur. L'auteure pense que quoique le terme "sororité," rejeté par les théoriciennes féministes qui ont écrit sur les politiques identitaires, reste toujours vivant dans les groupes actuels de femmes, elle les enjoint de repenser la "sororité" pour leurs organismes et de décider si c'est le terme qui convient pour appeler les femmes à la tribune de la politique.

Eradicating poverty and violence in the 21st century will require an enormous amount of coalition-building, working together across boundaries and differences, and working from within the system as well as from the outside. Feminist political strategies will have to be updated and we will have to work with very diverse groups of people in order to achieve our goal of a just and equal society for all. In the past, women's organizations based themselves loosely on the concept of sisterhood and this strategy made sense years ago when we were trying to form bonds and change society on the basis of our perceived similarities. It doesn't work so well today. I will argue in this paper that although sisterhood has been rejected theoretically by most feminists writing about identity politics, the concept lives on in actual women's groups and we need to rethink the concept of sisterhood for women's organizing. Is it powerful? Is it global? Is it the appropriate term to use to call women to the political table?

There is something very seductive about the old feminist slogan, "sisterhood is powerful." The word sisterhood suggests a deep, intimate bond and commonalties between women. Sisters have fun together, enjoy spending a lot of time with each other. They have differences of opinion but hopefully nothing that will drive a wedge between them. There is little, if any, conflict. This ideal does not reflect my experiences in any women's group I have been involved in—nor perhaps should it. Sisters don't usually work together, go to meetings together or interact in any political groups, which are notoriously and

rightfully, fraught with conflict. It is also not likely that many of us in the women's movement, or any political movement for that matter, will have relationships with colleagues or political allies based on the level of trust and intimacy of real sisters. And is that a desirable basis for coalition-building anyway? Perhaps it sets us up with unrealistic expectations for our interactions with groups and allows us to feel betrayed when things get conflictual. I'll argue that we need a different model of women's organizing, not based on sisterhood and intimacy, but on "engagement" not transcendence, as argued by third world feminist Chandra Mohanty (Philips 258-59), and by examining carefully the effects of internalized oppression on groups as argued by Lakey *et al*. To do this, I will examine a women's group formed in 1994 to prepare for the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women. I will look at the history, context and activities of the group, the problems within the group, and finally attempt, using Dean, Mohanty, Lakey and others, to analyze what was going on behind the sometimes hostile dynamics of the group.

History and context of the group

The name of our organization was the Nova Scotia-Beijing Women's Action Group and it was formed in 1994, prior to the Beijing Conference. The nine women organizers, myself among them, were made up of four white, two black, two aboriginal and a Latin American immigrant. We wanted to talk to the women of Nova Scotia from as broad a cross-section as possible about what they thought about the proposed "Platform for Action" and the ten critical areas of concern. We accomplished what we set out to do: we organized 27 discussion groups all across the province; we wrote a 196 page report that outlined a summary of the group's discussions on violence, health, education, economic self-reliance, poverty, human rights, and decision-making; and we produced two videos about the process. Two of us went to Beijing and contributed our findings to the discussions. This was not done easily, happily or without struggle and the process profoundly affected everyone in the group. We could not "transcend" our differences, though at times we certainly tried that as a strategy. We struggled at every meeting with different ideologies, different personalities, different agendas, different race, class, and sexual identi-

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ties, and a lot of suspicion between groups. That we managed to accomplish anything was a victory. In hindsight, my basic question is: how could it have been any other way, at that point in time, given geography and historical context, and the fact that we weren't then and aren't now sisters?

Nova Scotia has a sorry history of racism towards indigenous blacks and natives. The Marshall Inquiry confirmed what most people know: the judicial and police systems in Nova Scotia are racially biased. We are a "have-not" province in a wealthy country and we have a large number of people on some sort of government assistance. We have managed to maintain a rural population with only one main urban centre (though there have been calls to make Cape Breton Island a national park). Our economy is historically based on natural resources, such as fish, lumber, and coal, and these industries are rapidly dying. Our political system is patronage-driven and debt-ridden, and people distrust politicians. We tend to be conservative, and strongly community-oriented, and the communities themselves tend to be isolated and insular.

It was in this context that a diverse group of community activists and academics based in Halifax got together in the summer of 1994 to plan for the Beijing conference. From the beginning, doubt was expressed about the meaning and significance of a world conference at all and what it would mean for women on the ground in Nova Scotia. There was much discussion about the value of an international conference organized by an elite international organization and held half way around the world in China. These discussions never ended and were never resolved entirely. In the end, the core group of women that was still meeting believed that even on a symbolic level, the conferences were important and that our contribution as Nova Scotian women was particularly important. The suspicions about the motivations of the leaders of the group and the usefulness of the conference itself would continue to affect the group later on. The group was in conflict as to whether we should be emphasizing "the social transformation" (alternative feminist) concepts or to concentrate on particulars: day care, pay equity, and the United Nations.... We decided to try both, more or less" (Rubin 3).

We applied for money through the Women's Program and received a grant to organize meetings around the province. We hired two coordinators (one African-Nova

Scotian woman and one white woman), and we set about trying to reach out to women who had never been asked to participate in these kinds of discussions before. We were originally looking for fifteen discussion leaders: ten to hold regional meetings covering the province geographically and five "equity" facilitators to hold discussion groups with First Nations women, African-Nova Scotian women, immigrant women, lesbians, and disabled women. We quickly discovered that this would not be adequate. Because of the diversity of the province, we needed more specific and targeted groups: rural black women didn't want urban black women running the meetings or speaking for them; off-reserve and non-status native women felt they had different interests and were being discriminated against by status, on-reserve native women; rural Cape Breton women identified themselves as a special group; different immigrant women's groups didn't want to meet together; and we realized we had neglected to think about francophone, Acadian women at all.

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We tried very hard to ensure diversity amongst both the management group and the facilitators and I think we were feeling quite self-satisfied that we had accomplished this when we had our first facilitators meeting in February 1995. At the meeting, we found out that we had not satisfied anyone and there was a lot of overt conflict and hostility expressed. As one of our coordinators said, "there were many different agendas and different ideas as to where this bus was going!" (Rubin 3)

Problems

The first inkling the organizers had about problems was the overt suspicions that several members of the larger group had about the organizers themselves, even though the management committee was as diverse as the groups we wanted to reach. Some community activists were suspicious of the involvement of academics; some women didn't feel the project was explained in enough detail; some didn't understand why they should get involved at

all because they couldn't see what was in it for them and their communities; and there were suspicions about the money and who was going to Beijing. Some women had a problem working with the state in any capacity. The problem of co-optation would arise again and again in discussions. We would come to see this as a consequence of different ideologies and different comfort levels with working within the system versus working as outsiders.

One of the most telling complaints, however, had to do (on the surface anyway), with different styles of conducting a meeting. A few women commented that more time needed to be taken on process As one woman commented, "At first, it seemed to be too structured, uncaring.... It got better and then became relevant. Things got better when our concerns were voiced. Our voice was eventually heard. We should discuss process until a consensus is reached and this should be done at the beginning."

> ## Our "problems" were in fact the necessary process of true engagement, and of different responses to internalized oppression.

To this person, structure meant being uncaring. This was stunning to the organizers because, of course, in our minds we had done everything we could think of to make the meeting accessible and welcoming. To some of the participants, however, the organizers had chosen an alienating (read: male) method of introducing themselves and the project, and had not allowed enough time for getting to know one another. Said one participant: "To facilitate greater participation and cooperation for women coming together for the first time, allow plenty of time initially for women to meet and get to know each other." And to another woman, "socialization time should be built into the program throughout the schedule."

So, we regrouped and spent a lot of time on process and getting to know one another. No one on the management committee had anticipated this response. It was self-evident to us, but not to our facilitators, why this was a good project. We did not feel exploited by the government nor did we feel "male" in our approach to the groups. As another woman stated, "Leadership should be strong and gentle. Those putting on the workshop should be responsible for facilitating the agenda, but should also be kind, listen and then listen some more." It just never occurred to us that we might be seen as being unkind and uncaring for having a structured meeting. We tried to be much more sensitive in future meetings and activities to these differences.

Afterwards, I was reminded of the debates about men and women's conversation styles made popular by Deborah Tannen and Christina Hoff Sommers. Tannen argues that men and women have different (but equal) underlying motivations for conversation: women's being for affiliation and connection; men's for competition and competence. She is not critical of either, but says it is a response to gendered socialization patterns. Though the male way is more valued in this society, she argues that the different styles should be recognized and equally respected. Sommers is more dismissive of the feminist notion that women are "lateral," relational, more connected thinkers, and men are "vertical," analytical, and logical. Is this why, she asks, some feminists dismiss as male, traits such as efficiency, excellence, ambition and achievement? As she quite rightly points out, isn't this buying right into stereotypical, conservative ideology that women can't think? Doesn't this miss the point of much of feminist theory and activism?

In our case, we took it as a learning experience and the next time we met together as a group, we held a talking circle in the morning to air grievances and hear women's experiences of the project, and in the afternoon we had a strategic workshop designed to brainstorm about the issues and about what each of us could do to continue the energy of the group. This seemed to be an acceptable compromise between the "process people" and the "productivity people." In fact, the whole process was about learning about each other and adapting our disparate behaviours to suit the situation. Eventually, wrote one of our coordinators:

> we went through a process of getting to know one another, teaching and learning from each other and breaking down some of the barriers. At the most basic level, we could say that we made some progress toward really listening to others, and to respecting what they had to say. It was often challenging to stay open to one another when difficult issues popped up, but we all tried. (Rubin 5)

Analysis

What does this example say about the concept of sisterhood as a tool for organizing? In the end, we accomplished what we set out to do. And many of us became friends in the process. It is tempting for me, as a privileged white woman with a secure job, to say in hindsight that we could have accomplished the same things, much more quickly and less painfully without all the interruptions for process and healing along the way. As tempting as it is, I would be wrong. It is also tempting to suggest that the problems were just manifestations of differences in personality: between those who are "thinkers" and those who are "feelers"; between those who think "laterally" and those who think "vertically." I would argue that our "problems" were in fact the necessary process of true engagement, and of different responses to internalized oppression. Therefore, until these two "problems" are recognized and dealt with, sisterhood is a problematic

concept for organizing any group of people who have disparate interests, power and privilege.

The organizers of the group went into the project with the well-intentioned belief in "sisterhood." We wanted to examine the status of women in Nova Scotia by talking to women in the communities. We assumed a sisterhood that did not exist or we felt that our commonalties as women would enable us to transcend our differences at least for this project. Without a notion of sisterhood and solidarity, we might have been able to predict that we would have to overcome suspicion, different agendas, different ideas about process versus results, and consensus versus majority rule. We could have predicted hostility about allocation of money, and of our uncaring male styles. Instead, we felt betrayed and rather hurt when our facilitators weren't grateful for all the work we'd done and when they questioned our integrity. It was hard work and a struggle from beginning to end. And perhaps this is the point. At this historical moment, it should be hard work.

Chandra Mohanty suggests that women cannot transcend racism by sheer will or rationality. They must engage with others and struggle through it. She criticizes Robin Morgan's "sisterhood is global" concept as ahistorical and actually harmful to non-white, non-privileged women. Morgan argues that women have commonalties that transcend their differences: women's opposition to male power, the experience of rape, battery, labour and childbirth. Mohanty claims these commonalties are myths because the contexts are different and therefore the possibilities of struggles against power are different:

> universal sisterhood is predicated on the erasure of the history and effects of contemporary imperialism. Robin Morgan seems to situate all women (including herself) outside contemporary world history, leading to what I see as her ultimate suggestions that transcendence rather than engagement is the model for future social change. (Mohanty qtd. in Philips 258-59)

Mohanty argues that this has dangerous implications for women who are not white, middle-class, or with some other privilege. She states,

> Morgan implicitly erases from her account the possibility that women might have acted, that they were anything but pure victims. For Morgan, history is a male construction; what women need is herstory, separate and outside of his/story. (261)

Because Morgan's strategy is transcendence, the result is that "all conflicts among and within women are flattened" (262). According to Mohanty, universal sisterhood, defined by Morgan as the transcendence of the male world, "ends up being a middle-class, psychologized notion which effectively erases material and ideological power

difference within and among groups of women, especially between First and Third world women" (263).

In terms of the necessity for engagement, this example bears her out. The white and more privileged women needed to hear the black and poorer women's voices, and struggle with the accusations of racism and classism directed at them. They needed to take responsibility for any perception of racism, inadvertent or not, that was being reported. The black and poor women needed to be heard and needed a supportive environment in order to do this. This required them to educate us again and again and for us to listen again and again. Both groups end up feeling frustrated. As one black woman stated, "I'm tired of educating white women. Why don't they educate themselves?" White women felt they were educating themselves, both by reading black women's history and by participating in these meetings, but that their efforts were not being recognized. A Native woman claimed that Native peoples have to see white people sharing the power and this might take years of effort by an individual: "you [a white person] have to prove yourself to us over and over again." This was problematic for everyone: it illustrated white people's power to choose or not choose to do this; and bred resentment about the non-recognition of the work white women were doing. The above statement makes the dilemma or double bind obvious. The white women wanted to be allies and help black women with racism, but they could easily walk away. Some of the black women wanted allies but resented what they saw as the optional nature of white women's involvement.

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What to do? I agree with Mohanty's critique of Morgan's essentialist argument and the need for engagement, without agreeing entirely with Mohanty. Mohanty suggests that accepting the "sisterhood is global" premise means assuming that the

> sameness of the experience is what ties woman (individual) to women (group), regardless of class, race, nation and sexualities... [this] notion of experience is anchored firmly in the notion of the individual self, a determined and specifiable constituent of European modernity. However, this notion of the individual needs to be self-consciously historicized if as feminists we wish to go beyond the limited bourgeois ideology of individualism, especially as we attempt to understand what cross-cultural sisterhood might be made to mean. (262-263)

It is the later point that needs further debate since she

is still assuming some model of sisterhood for what is essentially political organizing. Though the unity of women can't be assumed and we must work towards it in struggle, and in historical context, there are issues and systemic level problems that women share: less access to resources, problematic access to healthcare and education; limited funding and scarce resources for women's groups; reproductive rights; and, violence against women. Coalitions are a necessary part of any political struggle, and differences and struggle should mean work, not retreating into our separate corners with an us against them mentality. If we had a less intimate, personalized model for organizing perhaps we could do this with fewer expectations of each other and without the feelings of betrayal common to many women's groups.

Marginalized groups also suffer from internalized oppression and though I don't have the space to develop the arguments here, Lakey *et al.* make a convincing case that this is one of the most self-destructive problems a group can have. Social change requires flexibility and the ability to experiment. Internalized oppression results in self-righteousness:

> self-righteousness destroys that [needed] flexibility and justifies failed strategies. If the government is not responding to our demands, it just shows how oppressive and unjust it is (and how right we are). If allies don't come to our side to fight with us, it just shows what wimps and elitists they are (and how right we are). If our membership is not growing among the desired constituency, if just shows how misled and ignorant they are (and how right we are). (148-49)

Internalized oppression is a real problem for many social action groups and it must be acknowledged and addressed. Conflict is an inevitable part of any group, but it can be alleviated when problems are recognized and not allowed to fester. According to Lakey *et al.*, we can affirm the achievements of the group, acknowledge how far we've come, define attainable goals, build trust, establish ground rules, listen well, challenge gossip and triangulation, work hard and play hard and make feedback a regular practice (172). This is necessarily hard work and though it is easier dealing with people you like and with whom you have a personal relationship, it is not always possible or desirable to treat everyone in political groups, as if you do. Sisterhood is an undesirable model for political organizing because it sets up unrealistic expectations about the relations between people in the group, masks important differences between people, feeds resentment about those differences, and contributes to the hierarchy of oppression created by an unequal society.

I'll end with words from Bernice Johnson Reagan, an African-American activist. If I'm ever involved in another group, I'll recommend that our first activity together be reading her entire speech, about the hard work involved building coalitions:

> Some people ... rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home! They're looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple which does not happen in a coalition... It's not safe. It's not nurturing. It's a coalition. (Reagan qtd. in Philips 245)

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