WITH WOMEN, FOR WOMEN:
A STUDY OF WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES AS WORKERS IN FEMINIST ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports on a study of the experiences of women who work, paid and unpaid, in three feminist organisations. The research aims to identify the issues that impact on this experience and to particularly consider issues of difference and inclusion in feminist organisations. The research also aims to examine what strategies women use through their participation in feminist organisations to influence their own work experience. The thesis explores the assertions of the literature that discusses traditional organisational life and the role of organisations in social movements. The feminist critiques of each of these fields and the alternatives proposed are examined to provide background and context.

This research employs a feminist qualitative methodology embedded within the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint. Data was primarily collected through semi structured interviews with twenty six women who worked with three different feminist organisations in Darwin, Northern Territory. The content of relevant organisational documentation was also analysed to enhance and provide context to the interview data.

The findings presented in this thesis identify a number of significant issues which impact on women’s experience as workers in feminist organisations. Issues about structure and process are resolved by each organisation through informed, purposeful action that is relevant to their unique history and context, including the relationship of each organisation with the external political environment. Organisational strategies for attracting women from diverse backgrounds are experienced as not particularly successful, despite a collective and individual commitment to inclusion. A number of reasons for this are suggested including the limitations imposed by the white western definition of terms like ‘activism’ and ‘exclusion’.

Close, friendship based relationships with other women workers are identified as the most significant single element that influences women’s experience in feminist organisations. These relationships are understood by these women as simultaneously a source of pleasure and of pain. Undertaking work that ‘makes a difference’ is also very important in the way women understand their experience.

The thesis concludes that while working in feminist organisations is hard, demanding and potentially exploitative, the experience of these women is that being part of a feminist organisation is preferable to any other work environment and allows them an opportunity to pursue the political goals of the women’s movement even at times when feminism as an ideology is under siege or in abeyance.
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