

Creating Space for Women-Only Places

Debra Miles

Centre for Women's Studies, James Cook University, North Queensland, AUSTRALIA

Abstract

For over forty years feminist women in Australia and other parts of the world have come together in women-only social service organisations to support, empower, and advocate for women who are disadvantaged and oppressed by partners, families, other mainstream organisations and wider social structures. Women working in such organisations have attempted to model alternative ways of structuring and managing such organisations; and of providing social welfare services. They have pursued these alternative goals by exploring different ways of working with each other and with the women who use the services. The impact of these explicitly women-only social services on the welfare sector and the women's movement in Australia has been significant. Such organisations have effectively modeled alternative structures, leadership styles and service delivery models; and they have forced mainstream human services to take women and women's concerns seriously. However the gains made by and for women in past decades are fragile and forever in danger of erosion. In the last 15 years many of the unique features and much of the robust vitality of the Australian women's movement (as exemplified through the existence of a feminist services sector) have been either abolished or enfeebled. The consequences and impact of gender neutral policy development on funding levels and socio-political support for organisations providing women-only services is significant.

In this context the significance of women-only spaces as places where women's health and well-being can be holistically addressed is challenged, devalued and dismissed. This paper argues that women-only spaces provide supported opportunities for women to escape cycles of poverty and disadvantage while simultaneously fostering empowerment and activism. The paper draws on the experiences of an Australian organisation North Queensland Combined Women's Services Inc. (The Women's Centre) which operates in a sociopolitical climate where bureaucrats are hesitant to name a specific commitment to women in case this is interpreted as a lack of commitment to men. 'Sameness' has replaced concepts of 'equity' and feminist analyses of women's disadvantage are silenced. The Women's Centre strives to preserve and nurture feminist values and to create women-only spaces that challenge violence against women in a holistic way. An exploration of tensions and contradictions experienced by the Women's Centre within this increasingly hostile political, social and economic climate will contribute to the discussion surrounding the future use and value of women-only spaces.