The authors draw upon their earlier research examining how feminists have negotiated identity and learning in international contexts or multisector environments. Feminism in Community focuses on feminist challenges to lead, learn, and participate in nonprofit organizations, as well as their efforts to enact feminist pedagogy through arts processes, Internet fora, and critical community engagement. The authors bring a focused energy to the topic of women and adult learning, integrating insights of pedagogy and theory-informed practice in the fields of social movement learning, transformative learning, and community development. The social determinants of health, spirituality, research partnerships, and policy engagement are among the contexts in which such learning occurs. In drawing attention to the identity and practice of the adult educator teaching and learning with women in the community, the authors respond to gender mainstreaming processes that have obscured women as a discernible category in many areas of practice.
Feminism in Community
Volume 16

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Feminism in Community

Adult Education for Transformation

Leona M. English and Catherine J. Irving
St. Francis Xavier University, Canada

SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI
ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
FEMINISM IN COMMUNITY: ADULT EDUCATION FOR TRANSFORMATION

Feminism in Community: Adult Education for Transformation is an essential addition to an already significant book series, International Issues in Adult Education. In putting feminism at its heart, it not only fills a deep gap in much work on community and adult education, it ignites new ways of dis/covering transformative practices. The authors have built on their critical engagement with feminism, community and social action to develop a new call for the creation of change, doing ‘community’ differently and raising global issues about transformation. This book is a must read for all of us concerned with putting gender at the heart of these debates and seeking not only to develop new perspectives, but to go beyond this and move ideas into actions. Sue Jackson, Birkbeck University of London

Calm and fire; resistance and defiance; creativity and hope; dialogue and listening; the concrete and the virtual; spirit and embodiment; critique and empowerment. These are but a few ideas that come together in this pivotal, internationally focused compilation by Leona English and Catherine Irving on feminist adult education and learning. It is a stellar addition to the field and a must read. Darlene E. Clover, University of Victoria, Canada

Leona English and Catherine Irving’s book on feminist adult education and learning emulates a partnership discourse; it is about women and for women, and supports women’s voices and leadership in academia and beyond in formal, nonformal and informal settings. The authors identify critical issues of women’s struggles to move beyond safe and supportive spaces to a more critically engaged pedagogy. By naming diverse forms of resistance and subversive strategies for change, they lead women into emancipatory and freeing positions for exercising power. This insightful text urges citizens to engage in reimagining an alternative and sustainable future. Dzintra Ilisko, Daugavpils University, Latvia

This is a skillfully and passionately written book that amplifies feminist (adult) educators’ contributions to the description and explanation of women’s oppression, and their strategies for women’s empowerment and liberation; strategies that are rooted in learning within groups and communities, and learning towards group and collective transformation. It calls for naming, learning and action. Olutoyin Mejimti, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

All adult educators who work with women as learners should read and savor this book. It is about igniting the fire of learning, or examining how the lives of women so ignited have changed the world through their spoken and unspoken feminist efforts.
It draws on the multiple dimensions of their teaching and learning—the cognitive, the affective, the creative, and the embodied and sacred domains—whereby they learn not only to critique systems of power but to create and make change in the world. This is a landmark text on women as learners and change agents in the 21st century world. Libby Tisdell, Penn State University, USA

This book is unique in reminding us that if we forget our social justice roots then progress is undermined. This is one of those rare and exciting books that really helps its readers to think differently about the need for continued engagement with feminist and adult learning, and I highly recommend it. Lyn Tett, University of Edinburgh, Scotland
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequently Used Abbreviations</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Feminist Organizations: Leading and Learning</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Adult Health Learning: For Women, with Women</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Arts and Adult Education</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Network Feminism and Social Movement Learning</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Religion, Women, and Adult Education</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Researching for and with the Community of Women</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Critical Feminist Pedagogy</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Social Transformative Learning and Women</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10: Power, Resistance and Informal Learning</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11: The Nexus of Policy, Practice, and Payment</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12: Adult Education and the Community: Making the Feminist Connections</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Authors</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Index</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name Index</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge our colleagues in adult education who share our passion for feminist research and who are truly committed to transforming the world in ways that are imaginative and creative. We thank Shauna Butterwick, Paula Cameron, Erin Careless, Maureen Coady, Darlene Clover, Patti Gouthro, Dzintra Ilisko, Sue Jackson, Nanci Lee, Olutoyin Mejiuni, Angela Miles, Carole Roy, Nancy Taber, Lyn Tett, Libby Tisdell, and others too numerous to mention for their insightful writing and collegiality, which have made this work on feminist transformation possible. We hope that we have engaged with their ideas and writing it in a way that is fruitful and faithful to their intended meaning.

In a special way, we acknowledge the feminist contributions to transformation shown by our late colleague Susan Eaton. We admire very much the way she lived out her commitment to a transformed world for women.

We are grateful for the editing work of Wendy Kraglund-Gauthier and Ashley Pettipas in the preparation of the manuscript, and we acknowledge the Coady International Institute and St. Francis Xavier University for their support of this project.
### Frequently Used Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAWORD</td>
<td>African Association of Women for Research and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHL</td>
<td>Adult health learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APC</td>
<td>Association for Progressive Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWID</td>
<td>Association of Women in Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAL</td>
<td>Coalition of African Lesbians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CREA</td>
<td>Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (India)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAWN</td>
<td>Development Alternatives for a New Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMNET</td>
<td>African Women’s Development and Communication Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAD</td>
<td>Gender and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross domestic product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICTs</td>
<td>Information communication technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGOs</td>
<td>International nongovernmental organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDGs</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAC</td>
<td>National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Canada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Nongovernmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBOS</td>
<td>Our Bodies, Ourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OISE</td>
<td>Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participatory action research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PB</td>
<td>Participatory budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLAR</td>
<td>Prior learning assessment and recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDOH</td>
<td>Social determinants of health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEWA</td>
<td>Self-Employed Women’s Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Science, technology, engineering, and math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Women</td>
<td>United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAW</td>
<td>violence against women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WALL</td>
<td>Work and Lifelong Learning Research Network at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCTU</td>
<td>Women’s Christian Temperance Union</td>
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</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All summations have a beginning, all effect has a story, all kindness begins with the sown seed. Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of light is the crossroads of – indolence, or action. Be ignited, or be gone. (Mary Oliver, 2005, p. 59)

In the spirit of Mary Oliver’s words, this book is about igniting: igniting learning, igniting hearts, and igniting citizens to learning and action. Our particular focus is on adult education for and by feminists in the community; and in writing this book, we want to share the flame many feminists have for creating change and the world we want.

Over the past 10 years or more, we have been engaged in critical scholarship on gender, feminism, and social action, with a particular focus on the nonprofit and grassroots spheres. In this book, we draw from those writings and studies in which we collected and analysed data and wrote about feminist adult educators. Our focus then, as now, is on how feminists have negotiated identity and learning in international contexts or multisector environments; struggled to lead, learn, and participate in nonprofit organizations; and enacted a feminist pedagogy through arts processes, Internet fora, and in the community. Though our varied research projects had different emphases, they were united in their focus on facilitating, negotiating, and strengthening women’s lifelong learning for change. For us, they had a particular strength in highlighting the complexities of identity and practice of the feminist adult educator, and we would like to explore some of that complexity in this book.

Other themes that emerged in this research were the tensions inherent in discussions of identity formation and flux, spirituality and religion, resistance and participatory democracy, informal and nonformal learning, social media networking, indigenous knowing and worldviews from the Global South. These themes are explored in various chapters throughout this text. The themes, while diverse, are tied to recurring interwoven issues and contexts. We will make a deliberate effort not to simplify or conflate the issues but rather we will engage them in the level of complexity that is appropriate to them. Writing some years ago, feminist theorist Patti Lather (1996) decried the addiction to accessibility and clarity, a move that she saw as having a politics of its own; it dumbed down serious and complicated ideas and robbed them of their robustness. We think Patti Lather had a point.

This book grew out of our observation that there is an increasing gap in the literature on women and learning, especially from a critical, political and engaged
perspective. These issues still matter, and a book with a deliberative focus on women, gender, and learning is a way to fill this void. As authors and feminists, we were formed in second wave feminism with its stress on equality and structural change, and later informed by the third wave’s integration of poststructuralism and diversity. And, as adult educators, we were both influenced by a number of writers and books in our own field: Women’s Ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) as well as the specifically adult learning-focused book by Elizabeth Hayes, Daniele Flannery, Annie Brooks, Elizabeth Tisdell, and Jane Hugo, entitled Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning (2000). This latter book has been helpful over the years for those of us who teach in adult education in terms of its reference for pedagogical strategies and approaches for women and learning as well as its representation of both significant authors and issues relevant to women doing formative teaching and learning in higher education. Additionally, there is Jeannie Allen, Diane Dean, and Susan Bracken’s (2008) examination of the experience of female students in higher education. Here in this book we continue those conversations, applying lenses of social science theories as heuristic devices to better understand how adult learning occurs, what the contextual factors are, and how power and resistance are implicated in the adult learning process. We bring a decidedly critical and theoretical perspective to explore issues of race, class, and gender in an international context.

Some of the work published in the past few decades on feminist adult education in the community has been formative and has influenced the creation of this text. In 1996, South Africans Shirley Walters and Linzi Manicom edited the collection Gender in Popular Education: Methods for Empowerment, which brings to the fore many feminist-informed methodologies for doing popular education in community contexts around the world. Recurring themes and analyses—gender and race, globalization, and development practice—were updated and reframed in their 2012 edition (Manicom & Walters). Contributing authors in that 2012 collection explore popular education practice in diverse spaces such as theatre, prisons and online, and integrate current thinking on colonialism and political repression. Also, Angela Miles’ (2013) edited collection, Women in a Globalizing World, provides solid sociological analyses of many complex development issues for women, and like Manicom and Walters, highlights the diversity of the spaces claimed by women to promote learning and action. While Allen et al. (2008) are strong on educational processes and institutions, Miles’ (2013) authors put considerable emphasis on women’s engagement with community development. Similarly, the various articles in Nancy Taber’s (2015) special issue of the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, have a strong emphasis on feminism and the community. What these publications have in common is a continued interest in how women’s ideas and practices are intricately connected and how they work toward collective change.

Feminist theorizing has also contributed greatly to our understanding of women’s learning and activism within the larger international development sphere, and the role of public policy. Two major events—the International Women’s Year
in 1975 and the subsequent Decade for Women culminating in the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya—enabled feminist theorists, researchers, and practitioners from the Global South to play a role in policy discussions. The 1970s–1980s were significant decades when activists were raising awareness about the implications of ignoring women’s lives or making assumptions about women’s contributions to economies and societies. Women in Development (WID) became the catchphrase to ensure women were not forgotten in policy decisions and program plans. Different camps debated on the best ways for integrating women’s participation in the development discourse, and critics contended that the prevalent top-down approaches being offered did little to change the system that was inherently discriminatory. The term Gender and Development (GAD) describes the next stage of the process to increase women’s involvement. Key contributions of GAD were its focus on (a) research to gather details about women’s participation, and (b) gender training activities at varying levels, from international agencies to grassroots organizations. The implementation of training, research, and programs to integrate women into development helped build women’s organizations to increase learning and participation activities to connect the grassroots with international policies.

Organizations such as Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN) arose, and today continue to represent women from many countries to identify how development initiatives addressed or ignored women’s work and lives (Sen & Grown, 1987; Sen & Durano, 2014). Their critical work shatters the old myth that feminism is nothing more than an agenda of Western countries. Researchers at the University of Sussex and its Institute for Development Studies in England have written extensively on gender and international development through a decidedly feminist lens. Their theoretical contributions are helpful for adult educators who are bridging local and international issues in development practice and community learning. For example, the work of Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead’s *Feminisms in Development* (2007), as well as their *Gender Myths and Feminist Fables* (2008), address contradictions and challenges in development (see also Cornwall & Edwards, 2014). The various conversations in these collections inform our discussion of education, pedagogy, and learning in settings as varied as community, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and higher education and the state.

These examples of feminist writing aside, the early 21st century has been challenging for those pursuing a continued interest in women and adult education across the spectrum. Sociologist Margrit Eichler, Patrizia Albanese, Susan Ferguson, Nicky Hyndman, Lichun Willa Liu, and Ann Matthews (2010) point out that adult education has not had a strong emphasis on women and learning, and we certainly have noted the waning of women’s voices and concerns. Eichler (2005) herself sought to correct the androcentric bias of the field by examining women’s housework as a site of informal learning. Concerned by the fact that corporate concerns are guiding adult education, she countered with her own studies on the value of learning housework and called for even more attention to the everyday nature of women’s
learning. Eichler’s (2005) particular concern with housework came from her sociological observation that housework undergirds and indeed makes the market economy possible.

Our book is somewhere between the approaches examining educational processes and those highlighting community engagement. We bring a focused energy to the topic of women and adult learning within the community and, though we build on work of theorists in feminist community development, we make an explicit attempt to integrate the insights of pedagogy and theory-informed practice. Drawing on local and global examples, we are interested in exploring the adult learning and teaching theories and practices that make development possible. We continue these popular education conversations and bring a strong adult education focus built on theory, practice, activism, and community, highlighting teaching practices and contexts where adult educators themselves learn informally and nonformally. Current issues such as social media, the insights of poststructuralism and postcolonialism, and work on organizational structures and processes are also given attention.

Most of all, we want to draw attention to the identity and practice of the adult educator teaching and learning with women as a distinct category and group. A particular concern is the focused attention to gender mainstreaming in the past 20 years or so that obscures women as a discernable category in many arenas of practice. We are not alone in making this observation. Jenevieve Mannell (2012) pointed out that after Beijing World Conference in 1995, there was a deliberate effort to mainstream women’s issues (and not separate them out), which often led to the inclusion of women becoming little more than a technical task—one more box on a checklist to be filled in to show that one was diverse and inclusive. Rosalind Eyben (2014) describes the continued tension between “working within existing paradigms or changing them” (p. 160), which sounds a lot like the criticisms of a few decades ago done to make issues identified as “gendered” fit into the existing system, rather than addressing the inherent inequalities.

This mainstreaming, though well-reasoned normalizing process, sometimes resulted in the undermining of the hard work of studying the persistence of gender disparities and of developing strategies to effect change. This normalizing process has also obscured the distinct contributions of feminist educators and practitioners. In adult education, we have similarly subsumed the category of women’s learning and the goals of feminist pedagogy into depoliticized good teaching. There has been a glut of books and studies on interdisciplinary approaches such critical and cultural studies and global studies, which presume inclusion of women. We are neither post-women’s learning nor post-feminist learning, as there is much to be done and we are definitely not post or past the issues. Uncritical inclusivity runs the risk of papering over differences rather than addressing them.

Such misconceptions, additionally, create challenges for working on the ground to overcome oppression. Joyce Green (2007) notes the arguments of those writers who dismiss feminism as representing the worldviews of colonizers. Green’s collection demonstrates, in contrast, examples of how Aboriginal feminism brings together
key ideas of feminism and anti-colonialism to deepen awareness of the intersection of race and sex oppression that Aboriginal women face. Opportunities for alliance building with other social justice advocates have been key in achieving changes to discriminatory laws.

When one looks at continued violence against women (VAW) or women’s underrepresentation in politics and institutional leadership, and the indications that they are slipping further in these contexts, it is clear that mainstreaming and interdisciplinarity are not always the best options. Terms such as feminism, community, and women need to retain their political and deliberative place alongside other additions and approaches. And, it seems obvious women have to reclaim terms that have been confined to the personal realm and which have lost agency and purpose. Margaret Ledwith (2011) pointed out that concepts such as empowerment have become synonymous with “self-esteem at a personal level” (p. 13), and the more politically charged meaning has become lost. That is unfortunate and all too obvious in the explosion of self-help and me-first thinking.

The use of the term gender itself has contributed to the problem. Global agencies such as the UN and the World Bank have deliberately embraced the term gender (not women) so as to make explicit links between men and women in the struggle to address domestic violence, hunger, reproductive rights, and economic rights. These are legitimate causes, and the rationale is indeed clear, yet its use presents a dilemma. We hold with the Association of Women in Development (AWID), a global feminist organization, which uses the term “women” in its name, as it is a specifically feminist organization. When we use the term gender and more particularly gender relations, we do so as a category of sociological analysis that points to how we are gendered or socialized into roles, and sometimes how this limits our agency and societal expectations. This is further complicated with increasing attention to those who are transgendered or who are pushing for greater understanding of sexual identity beyond the binaries of female or male.

The urgency of referring to feminism and women is underscored by developments at the UN level, which we explore further in Chapter 11. As Nellie Stromquist (2013) has keenly observed, while UNESCO’s fifth international adult education conference, CONFINTEA V in Hamburg in 1997, had gender as a central notion, CONFINTEA VI in Belém, Brazil in 2009 shifted considerably its language and priorities away from women. Indeed, the sixth conference managed to drop deliberate and separate references to women and empowerment. Of the seven lines of recommendations resulting from Belém, gender is not mentioned directly but has a minor role to play in one of the recommendations, namely “participation, inclusion and equity” (p. 32). If even UNESCO is de-emphasising gender—its synonym for women’s issues—we know that the time is time is right for putting women and feminism back on the table in INGOs and community-based spaces where women’s education and learning are directly affected and involved.

Despite the global issues for women, and the progress that is both debatable and hoped for, it is also apparent that the term feminism, though quite established,
problematic for some younger women. Professor Susan Bracken (2008) sees this often in teaching young women in adult education programs. Unlike Women’s Studies students, whom she also teaches, women in adult education classes are sometimes loathe to see feminism as relevant to their context or their situations. Women’s advances in the 20th century aside, the term feminism is still plagued by stereotypes of divisiveness and radical action that make some wary. There is a range of feminist perspectives, that respond to time and location, running the gamut from advocating for pay equity right along to radical forms agitating for fundamental societal shifts, yet all hold a political intent of change.

A contributing factor to the backlash against feminism and to a certain reticence in using the term is the mistaken belief that women have already attained equality. Western media is preoccupied with portraying women through self-focused practices such as yoga, relaxation, and self-reflexivity (sans the critical) and as having reached the top rung of corporations. Our Western popular press is so besieged with discussions of women attaining Fortune 500 status while struggling to balance work and family life that one can be forgiven for thinking that it is 1950 and not the 21st century. The danger of such thinking, of course, is that it is “nostalgia without memory” (p. 30) to use anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) phrase for one of the cultural dimensions of globalization. We forget that we are global citizens and that our struggles are not over; indeed, we can also forget that there was a struggle and that it was hard fought. Western privileging of the “self” hides the collective intent of feminism to rout out discrimination in its many forms, whether or not we, as individuals, experience them a daily basis.

In her brief primer, Feminism is for Everybody, bell hooks (2000) notes that ever since she became a feminist she had wanted to write a little book that would explain clearly what feminism is and why it matters, why it still matters. She calls for more continuing feminist education for the survival of the movement. This rings true for people in other movements who connect the slippage of education to the decline of their movement. It is no wonder that we are seeing the return of feminist battles from the 1950s–1980s that were confronted and won. Gendered stereotypes that were once thought to have been debunked are re-emerging in many spheres ranging from children’s toys to popular psychology. Gina Ribbon calls the practice of characterizing certain abilities to female or male brains as “neo-phrenology” that impose gender stereotypes rather than explore the elasticity of human thought and behaviour (cited in Healy, 2014).

In many ways, feminist conversations—in the West, at least—have turned inward and not outward. When Stephanie Coontz (2011) published her retrospective on Betty Friedan’s (1963) The Feminine Mystique, she noted that women readers of the now-famous book, often seen as a touchstone in the Western feminist movement, saw it as a liberating force in their lives, pushing them to self-fulfillment and awakening. Some 50 years later, Coontz is critical in her commentary, arguing that Friedan’s version of feminism was less radical and more personal than it has been purported to be. Coontz’s critique of the focus on the self-echoes Barbara
Ehrenreich’s (2009) dismissal of the *Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking* and how it has done a hatchet job on efforts to achieve equality, which particularly affects women and distracts them from real action. Women, like everyone, are caught up in individualism, a lack of systemic challenge, and a focus on “what I can do for me.”

A more recent example of such “me-first, positive thinking” for women is Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg’s (2013) *Lean In*, which contains the message that career women can make it if only they work hard enough—the emphasis is on the liberal goal of encouraging women to think and act differently to increase their participation in the existing system. Sandberg’s feminism is what bell hooks (2013) calls “faux feminism”—a narrow focus on women’s self-defeating behaviour that overlooks the decades of feminist theorizing connecting gender, race and class. High achieving women including Sandberg also reflect bell hooks’ (2000) earlier description of “power feminists” (p. 45)—the realm of white, wealthy, professional women who perpetuate an inherently hegemonic, patriarchal system, and who identify more with white men of privilege than with oppressed peoples. Katha Pollitt (2013) has also expressed disappointment with this book and its neoliberal agenda of individualism and corporatism.

In both the West and Global South, creeping neoliberalism has had profound implications on public services and on the survival of women’s organizations. Whereas in the 1970s there was considerable growth of feminist organizations, today we have cutbacks and shifts in funding priorities that have challenged the sustainability of women’s organizations. Gita Sen, a key figure in the analysis of WID and GAD in the 1980s, recently reflected on the changes over the past 3 decades and the implications for feminist organizing today. She and co-author Marina Durano (2014) have charted the erosion of the “social contract” through such factors as the domination of market economic ideology, religious fundamentalism and environmental degradation. They call for a reinvigoration of human rights to be at the centre of the development debate. Similarly, Linda Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (2015) study of feminist activists highlights the effects of the present dominance of neoliberalism on theory and practice and the need for feminists to renew solidarity across cultural, national and economic lines.

In thinking about feminism and adult education today, we wondered how a truly intersectoral analysis that prioritizes feminist learning concerns might work and how we can include more than white women in this discussion, rather than avoiding the “other others” (Ahmed, 2002) which refers to the many groups of difference that are precluded from many North American discussions of feminism. Apart from some more critical race studies that bring in an intersectoral analysis (Smith, 2010) and some publications focused on women and learning, there has been an absence of a more complicated reading of women in this place and time. There is also a need for a stronger international discussion about women and women’s issues. In response, our book is about these learning tensions, national and local, and international, and how they are worked out globally.
As we think of the global questions around education and learning for women, we must think of the places where most of this learning occurs, especially for women. The questions for adult educators here are drawn from the foundational work of Griff Foley (1999) who used them as a tool for understanding the dimensions of radical adult education. Though Foley was not writing specifically about women, some of his questions are useful in guiding our examination of learning and teaching for and by women, in contexts such as community based organizations, nonprofits, higher education, the home, the public sphere—indeed, in any place that learning occurs. He asks:

What forms do education and learning take? What are the crucial features of the political and economic context? How do these shape education and learning? What are the micro-politics of the situation, the places in which adults live and work? What are the ideological and discursive practices and struggles, of social movement actors and their opponents? To what extent do these practices and struggles facilitate or hinder emancipatory learning and action? What does all this mean for political education? What interventions are possible and helpful? (Foley, p. 10)

Foley’s (1999) questions keep us focused on learning, the core element of effective development, even if it has not always been recognized. We also must look at the importance of sustained learning in social movements—successful social action does not mean the learning can stop. Classic adult education and development initiatives such as the Antigonish Movement highlight the primary role of continuous education and learning. In writing about the Movement, economists Santo Dodaro and Leonard Pluta (2012) emphasise that from the early days in the 1930s, study clubs were the local mobilizer for reading and discussing ideas and became a cornerstone of planning for action through member-owned forms of organizing. Adult education was always at the centre of the Movement’s “Big Picture” or plan for development. They note that problems arose when, as economic organizations formed as a result of the study club activities, a sustained interest in education began to wane. When the co-operative movement neglected ongoing educational efforts, people began to lose a connection to the underlying philosophies of co-operative principles providing a people’s alternative to corporate power. This disconnection, in turn, weakened the commitment to this alternative economic form, and contributed to the failure of the co-operatives that had been created. When citizens do not see co-operatives as distinct from other economic models, nor see their own roles and responsibilities in the life of the co-operative, the sole focus is reduced to the bottom line, with other priorities and players lost in the shuffle. This dynamic plays itself out again and again in various realms, including feminism. Progress is undermined when our social justice roots are forgotten or ignored. As adult educators involved in many of these issues, we want to keep learning front and centre.

Much of women’s learning is done collectively and often informally. As bell hooks (2000) recalls that feminist consciousness grew through women learning in
INTRODUCTION

groups before there were formal women’s studies programs. The growth of feminist research and study in the academic context provided theory and analysis that furthered women’s understanding of conditions they already knew and experienced at very personal levels—experiences which they came to understand to be felt by women on a larger scale. Notably, hooks emphasises the importance of continuing feminist education for the survival of the movement. This rings true to people in other movements who can identify the slipping of education to the decline of their movement, as is the case with trade unions or with the co-operative movement as noted above. Such education must span all sectors of society including the community level, and must take on a variety of forms including expression through popular performance such as music. hooks is adamant that education was and is an integral part of sustaining feminism: “Most people have no understanding of the myriad ways feminism has positively changed all our lives. Sharing feminist thought and practice sustains feminist movement. Feminist knowledge is for everybody” (p. 24).

The issues are clear and the need for continued engagement with feminist and adult learning is equally clear. Following this introduction, in Chapter 2 we focus directly on leading and learning in feminist organizations in the community, the primary location or context for adult education. In these organizations, the links among and between feminism, learning, and the community are being negotiated constantly. Though they are often glossed over in related discussions of development and community empowerment, we see them as integral to discussions of feminists and learning. In Chapter 3, the community is addressed as a site of informal and nonformal learning about the social, cultural and economic determinants of health. We invite readers in Chapter 4 into a conversation about how to use the arts and creativity to foster learning about crucial issues. In Chapter 5, we concentrate on social movement learning as a way for feminists to work with other social movements to effect change, including the ways ICTs are used for learning and activism. In Chapter 6 we highlight the complexity of change in light of religious and spiritual difference and dialogue. In Chapter 7 we examine the ways in which feminists in the community negotiate and learn from community research partnerships that contribute to new knowledge and insight. Chapter 8 contains an overview of feminist pedagogy, and in Chapter 9 we explore fundamental social transformation. In Chapter 10, we delve into the all-important issue of power and resistance in informal learning, and Chapter 11 we review international policies and practices on feminism and adult education. The book closes with Chapter 12, which contains our critical appraisal of the foregoing conversations as well as insights for practice and research.

All through this book, our critical commitment is to the educator who works in the community to foster adult learning and activism and to negotiate creative ways of leading and working in organizations for change. We have drawn on our own experiences and past work in weaving the different strands of experience, theory, and issues. As we developed the book, we came to see that some issues such as the place of the body in women’s learning might have deserved their own chapter. The body is a particularly feminist focus of inquiry through the physicality of emotion,
health, embodied learning, and artistic expression and in the tension of physical or virtual presence online; yet, because of space constraints, we decided to weave this discussion throughout the existing chapters.

A final note about style. We chose to privilege women’s names and identities in our text. Following the insights of Valerie-Lee Chapman (2003) and Susan Tescione (1998), as much as possible we refer to female (and many male) writers by their full names, which standard social science styles such as APA do not. This text politicizes further the place of women in society and serves as a resistance to a predominantly male-by-default worldview by making visible the many female writers and contributors to our thinking.
The Red Thread Women’s Development Organization was formed in Guyana in the mid-1980s by seven activists in response to the country’s political situation. Nurturing women to become politically engaged was, in their minds, a way to oppose factionalism and repression. Initially, the group of women worked in the community, providing basic education to women in craft design and production (hence the name Red Thread). Slowly they became more engaged in dialogue about the many issues at play within feminist organizations. For them, the traditional use of crafts such as embroidery provided a practical income generation dimension, but it also created a space for collective learning and analysis of their lives. Over time, Red Thread became more intersectoral by emphasizing the necessity of working across divisive lines of race and class, maintaining a delightful subversiveness as evidenced by their politically suggestive name. Learning and action form the core of their work. In chronicling The Red Thread story, Kimberly Nettles (2007) observes:

The embroidery itself, formerly a craft of middle-class ladies, was redefined in this context as a revolutionary art form. It was used as a vehicle to teach the community women about the economics of production – specifically in terms of assessing the value of their labor. … [Red Thread] created a space where women could talk and learn about each other’s lives. (pp. 72–73)

In Nettles’ (2007) view, the Red Thread collective was part of the founders’ vision and a practice to embody a struggle to recreate the country and to re-envision its future. The members became researchers, publishers, educators, and entrepreneurs. They were all engaged in naming and resisting their oppressors—a resistance movement challenging the overarching class and gender divides in the political struggle of Guyana. The Red Thread organization created a very politicized place, both literally and figuratively, in which women could gather to create and sell craftwork, as well as to mobilize politically. And, like many organizations, there were a variety of groupings of women within Red Thread, including the resource women who were the founders and the community women who joined them. Their products were both sources of income generation through the selling of their crafts and deliberate statements of empowerment by their very existence. The significance of Red Thread and other feminist movement organizations to create an expansive view to promote women’s well-being, advancement, and safety is no surprise to most readers. Similarly, Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon’s (2012) review of the
importance of 4 decades of movements shows that they are the single-most effective factor (not governments, economic prosperity, documents, or INGOs) influencing change, especially with regard to VAW.

CENTRES OF LEARNING

Feminist organizations such as the Red Thread, through purpose and necessity, have always been centres of learning. The suffragists of feminism’s first wave raised women’s awareness of democratic participation. Consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s supported women to start with their lived experiences to uncover the causes of the inequalities they faced. Beyond the topics discussed in these collectives, the organizational forms that emerged became increasingly more politically oriented. Feminists reinvented the organizational structures and practices that they saw as inherently patriarchal and hierarchal, the very antithesis of feminist collectivist action. Collective frames working towards consensus became essential to living out feminist principles in organizational form. Yet, it is not always clear how leaders emerged in these organizations or how they were sustained in their positions. The forms of leadership were as varied as the organizational structure.

What Are These Organizations—What Do They Look Like?

Feminist nonprofit or civil society organizations share much in common with all community-based organizations in that they have a list of tasks or a mandate that is specific to each entity. Irish community development researcher Andrew O’Regan (as cited in Donnelly-Cox, Donoghue, & Hayes, 2001) names these common organizational tasks as:

• Delivering services, often in partnership with the state
• Identifying and addressing new social needs
• Maintaining and changing the values system in society
• Mediating between the individual and the state
• Providing a forum for the social construction of the individual. (p. 197)

O’Regan notes in the original work that these five tasks are interrelated functions as most organizations and leaders wear multiple hats and perform many tasks on a daily basis. All of these five functions may or may not be present in one group, as each organization, given its mandate and constituency, emphasises different aspects or roles. Depending upon its size and scope, an organization may be able to work at multiple tasks with multiple partners, or may be preoccupied with the delivery of services and lack the capacity to expand beyond that. Yet, as we will explore further in Chapter 11, there is a push and pull from the grassroots through to political and bureaucratic levels. It is noteworthy that adult education of members and the community is a hidden value in each of these named tasks. To supplement O’Regan’s list, feminist organizations have additional roles, the first of which is related to their
Feminist organizations are engaged in a constant process of formal, nonformal, or informal learning, either through deliberate teaching of classes or through the active engagement of women in learning politics and policies. Their learning and teaching agenda, implied or articulated, may include the learning that occurs when doing the jobs of an organization, whether it be managing personnel issues, bookkeeping, communicating, negotiating difference, budgeting, or fundraising.

At the community level, feminist organizations range from women’s resource or drop-in centres, anti-violence agencies, transition houses for victims of violence, to agencies providing women-specific health, counseling, or training services (see English, 2011). Often, these organizations are intersectoral and they address disability, immigration, poverty, and race, since the reality is that most socio-political-cultural issues are multifaceted. The people in these agencies observe the common causes of the myriad symptoms they deal with on a daily basis. An awareness of the interconnected sources and products of oppression often leads organizations to take a similarly intersectoral approach to match their services to the issues. We follow Kimberle Crenshaw (1991, 2010), Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (2001), and many others in acknowledging the convergence of multiple issues in feminist work. Women in grassroots centres themselves have long recognized and dealt with these multiple issues and partners, especially with the need for education around key concerns.

As a particular kind of community organization, feminist NGOs pay special attention to the external inequalities women encounter—violence, poverty, literacy, childcare—sometimes to the detriment of internal relationships and to their members’ learning and organizing, which admittedly are thorny, but vitally important, issues. A tension thwarting the more inner/reflexive process has been the wariness to reveal inside weaknesses when faced with perpetual concerns over funding and anti-feminist backlash policies or activities (English, 2005a). Women’s organizations, as a result, often struggle alone with their organizational challenges.

Of course, not every feminist organization operates in the same way since each is situated differently and has its own mandate. Yeheskel Hasenfeld and Benjamin Gidron (2005), for instance, observe that third-sector or community organizations are typically viewed from one of three vantage points, and theoretical and research traditions. They may be seen as one of “civil society,” “social movement,” and “nonprofit sector” organizations. In this context civil society is rather narrowly defined to represent the voluntary sector. The authors add that such distinctions are often not clear cut in reality, and offer a description of hybridity that reflects the actual work of those dealing with inequality. The first focus, civil society, is on autonomous volunteer-run associations characterized by citizen participation and horizontal network relations (e.g., social clubs, mutual aid associations). The second refers to social movement organizations such as Greenpeace or AWID, which use political strategies and actions. The third, nonprofit sector organizations, are formally organized and granted charitable status. According to Hasenfeld and Gidron, this isolation of research traditions and the clear-cut distinctions that can be made among
them escapes the fact that there are indeed many hybrid organizations that reflect the evolution of social action, such as protest groups forming organizations, or charities that engage in research to engage in policy change. Many feminist organizations, especially those that are locally based and established to meet myriad community needs, are hybrid organizations that include all three traditions. The advantage of applying Hasenfeld’s and Gidron’s multiple lenses to feminist organizations is that they help to articulate their unique nature as both addressing needs and having a social movement agenda. In embodying a philosophy and politics of feminism, feminist organizations are forced to move beyond nonprofit goals of care and service and toward social transformation. This cross-sector understanding captures the multiple purposes of feminist nonprofits.

*Who Leads a Circle?*

To lead a feminist organization, to manage the dual tensions inherent in dealing with the state and in building an organizational structure that reflects feminist values, is a contradiction, especially in Western culture where traditional hierarchical ways of leading are the norm. Organizations such as Red Thread in Guyana are meant to be collective and to work as an organic unit. The paradox is rooted in the constant tension that exists between collectivist and bureaucratic aspects of leadership, a theory that was well developed by Joyce Rothschild-Whitt in her classic 1979 article on women’s and feminist organizations that were negotiating the tensions from ideals of the original organizations in the 1960s and 1970s. One of her insights is that an organization often morphs from a free flow event into a more structured entity by the very fact of maturing, strengthening, and growing. This bureaucratization happens with an increase in members and the need to be more structured in order to lobby agencies and governments, organize for action, and collaborate with other organizations. It would be difficult to apply for a government grant, in Canada at least, without indicating an executive director, assistant director, and treasurer, and showing a strong framework and slate of officials.

Yet, dynamic and charismatic leadership is often the driving force behind successful feminist organizations. Running a nonprofit organization like a women’s centre or shelter draws upon incredible fortitude and political savvy of the individuals involved, not only in terms of managerial skills but also in terms of negotiating with the various external partners and with the internal members, not to mention the broader advocacy and policy work required to overcome gender discrimination in its many forms. Alejandra Scampini (2003), for instance, notes that feminist and education issues were prominent at CONFINTEA V largely because of coordinated efforts of women’s organizations at that conference. Similarly, feminist issues receive attention at various levels of government because of coordinated action. The creativity and agility required to work in a neoliberal climate of perpetual scarcity and ever-increasing bureaucracies involves intense but often unrecognized learning on the part of many feminists. If leaders of feminist organizations say they are open
to change and to ideas, they actually need to model this in the workplace by exploring ideas and working collectively to frame and reframe them.

The promotion of circles, egalitarian governance structures, and consensus decision making bears witness to feminist commitments to voice and to experimentation with structure. However, these strategies can create their own issues, especially if they do not align with how the organization is really operating. The discourse of “horizontalism” (p. 13), as discussed by Gerbaudo (2012), is reflective of the language of consensus and flat decision making to which many feminist organizations aspire. Yet, by virtue of size, complexity, and funding mechanisms, many organizations have difficulty in practising in ways other than hierarchy. In some cases, there is a false perception that all members are equal and have equal say in all matters, large and small. There is a point at which feminist leaders need to be honest about circles and structure and operate in concert with our reality. This honesty and malleability neither diminishes authenticity nor the future of the feminist movement.

Skills That Need to be Learned in an Organization

Feminist organizations, especially those that are nonprofit, may be viewed in the public as bleeding hearts adverse to profits, inherently weak, and less efficient than their competitive counterparts in the for-profit world. Or, if they serve a publicly-funded role of providing services, they may be seen as a misuse or waste of taxpayers’ money, labelled as “special interest” groups with the attendant insinuations that they do not serve the public good and are creating duplicate programs available more economically elsewhere. Even researchers have tended to look less at nonprofit organizations as they are usually outside the for-profit realm and are less likely to attract research funds. Yet, in any of these feminist organizations, the same leadership, education, and managerial skills need to be learned and practised to make them viable. In fact, the history of feminist organizations shows they can be very effective, incredibly well run on shoestring budgets, leading changes that later become commonplace or taken for granted. Grassroots training, office and financial management, policy work, public education, and advocacy are all skills that, for the most part, were learned hands-on at these many community sites of social change. Although we can quibble that training is not a valid adult education function, Holst (2002) has shown that skills training is a time-honoured tradition in social movements. Adult educators have a proud history of training members in activist skills and practices—indeed, it is a strength of our field.

Some of these activism skills evolved through more formal programs or activities that attracted women’s participation, where the seeds of collective organizing were planted. The classic adult education examples include the largely female Chautauqua in New York State, which started as a training centre for Sunday school teachers in the late 1800s and became an important alternative education program for women who could not afford the more traditional route of attending college. Simultaneously a school and organization, Chautauqua became the central starting
point for subsequent temperance and violence prevention programs (Kilde, 1999). Notable among the attendees were suffragette Susan B. Anthony and Jane Addams, founder of the Chicago settlement community for immigrants, Hull House (Addams, 1910/1912). Chautauqua served as an inviting place for women as it allowed them to speak to men and women and to cross traditional boundaries of separate sphere thinking. An incubator for women’s causes and concerns over its extensive history, Chautauqua continues today, though in a more traditional liberal arts mode.

For feminists, much of their skill development in nonprofits involves organizational management, political organizing, community development, governance, and communication, some of the same skills that Chautauqua helped to build with women. Although skills training is largely defined as employment training, nonprofit work at the community level can be seen as requiring no skills or no particular educational preparation. Yet, there are many acquired skills that can be learned, including governance procedures and policies that are integral to organizational life. Effective organizational leaders in the for-profit or nonprofit worlds learn these skills through experience, though the learning process is often not visible. Over time, organizations naturally become more structured and institutionalized, in part because funders demand it of them and in part because they need to get things done, making it essential to have executive directors, boards, bylaws, minutes, accounts and audits, not to mention tax returns, bank accounts, and standardized operations and procedures.

Yet, the tools and rules come with cautions. Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us that using the master’s tools is not enough to change how things are. “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable” (pp. 110–111). Lorde speaks of tokenism, of adding on different perspectives in order to check off the required boxes, and she cautions that tokenism does not tear down the walls but it might just replicate the models of oppressions and cause more problems. Simply replacing men with women in positions of authority, for instance, will not alone remove discrimination. A more meaningful dialectic, as Lorde says, is needed. That said, it is still important to know what tools are used by the masters, to learn their skills and abilities, but also to keep pushing the boundaries, finding other tools, in order to dismantle patriarchy.

While feminist organizations operating in a multi-stakeholder environment are compelled to take on bureaucratic requirements, they need to do so with critical awareness. Feminist leadership programs that draw uncritically on the tricks of the trade of the mainstream business schools and overlook the strength of finding different ways to lead, manage, and collaborate will not achieve the change desired in any substantive way. Patti O’Neill (O’Neill & Eyben, 2013), who has worked as a gender advisor in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has come up with her own twist on Lorde’s “master’s tools” when she considers the work of feminists within bureaucracy working for transformation: “I think you can use the master’s tools to renovate the master’s house” (p. 89, emphasis hers). She warns that it is not an easy process and the tools must be handled deftly,
requiring ongoing reflective practice regarding the trade-offs or compromises that may be made along the way. O’Neill works with her networks to develop the language they need to speak to the economists, or those in trade or security. Yet, the nagging question remains: are renovations enough and will they result in sustained, long term change?

To their credit, feminists have often resisted adopting organizational forms that reproduced the patriarchal structures they were up against—a resistance that has spawned a wide range of experiments in alternative ways of collective action. These struggles and experiments have, for the most part, been played out at the grassroots level, as the concept of formal leadership training remained primarily the realm of training for the corporate sector. Yet, recently the idea of feminist leadership training has come to the fore. CREA, a women’s human rights organization in India, became concerned that the burgeoning of “feminist leadership” programs did not attend adequately to the history, theorizing, and lessons of feminist organizing.

Srilatha Batiwala (2011), who is affiliated with CREA, conducted a comprehensive survey of what is meant by the term feminist leadership and how it has evolved internationally in recent decades. Batiwala’s findings are insightful. She concludes that feminist leadership is not the style promoted in the corporate sector that is more accurately described as “feminine leadership” that reinforce gender stereotypes. The image and exemplar that immediately comes to mind is of a boss whose shoulder you can cry on. In an effort to find a place for women in the boardroom, supposedly inherent female traits of collaboration and nurturance help to promote a perceived kinder managerial approach. The flipside of the caring feminine leader is the stereotype popular in the management discourse of the “queen bee”—female managers who bully their (usually female) subordinates or who are accused of such behaviour if they do not live up to the expectations of the caring stereotype (Drexler, 2013). In any case, the model of making women fit in masculinist-defined organizational structures leaves the climate ripe to perpetuate gendered perceptions that undermine women’s expertise and authority. This argument echoes the concerns of Hasenfeld and Gidron (2005) about viewing third sector organizations from only one lens. Feminist organizations have a unique ideology and politics that demand a particular, hybrid approach to leadership, organization, and research; one lens simply will not do.

Organizational Learning within the Movement

A feminist organization is often the most visible sign of a movement; it is formed when the movement becomes more institutionalized over time. Usually, there is a natural progression from idea to structure, and can be found with most ideas like peace, which has spawned such organizations as Peace Brigades International; anti-nuclear protests and environmental awareness that arose thanks to writers such as Rachel Carson’s (1962) Silent Spring, that evolved into organizations like Greenpeace, the World Wide Fund for Nature and Friends of the Earth; and the
women’s movement became organizations like DAWN and AWID. In some cases, the institutionalisation is quasi-government or funded by governments. Some organizations, such as Greenpeace for example, exist outside nation state support, cautious as they are to avoid the strings that inevitably come with such alliances.

In this complex funding climate, especially in social democratic contexts, as we will discuss below, it is no wonder that it can be difficult to articulate what women should learn to be effective leaders, how this learning might occur, and who might participate in the intricate process of creating new visions of leadership that more accurately support the social justice goals of feminist organizations. Srilatha Batliwala (2011) reminds us that feminist leadership is inherently tied to the values and practices of the feminist movement, and that it ought to push back against neoliberal frames of so-called inclusion based on reinforcing sexist gender roles. This is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach to leadership development. Those interested in promoting feminist leadership through education must understand the ways in which their practice is informed by feminist theory and the history of the women’s movement. The skills to be learned relate more to deepening analysis and reflexivity than to the confidence-bolstering coaching strategies and self-help guides popularized by management gurus that populate the shelves of bookstores.

Batliwala (2011) notes the issue of leadership has always been discussed and debated at the grassroots, though these analyses have been underrepresented in mainstream academic literature. Evidence of this evolution, where it exists, resides in the reports, minutes, and other documentation from women’s organizations, which are now held in various archives or the personal papers of lifelong feminist organizers. Batliwala traces some variances in emphasis or process between Western feminist organizations and those of the South, but most share a developing understanding and critique of power.

Given the focus on power, the central forum for learning for feminists in community-based organizations has been through active hands-on engagement in organizing and activism. This informal learning can happen in the everyday and can be influenced in a variety of ways for women, including in an embodied way—learning through the body and actions on and through the body. As Tracey Ollis (2012) details in her work, an embodied pedagogy can work through the activist’s body and, by extension, through any feminist body. It can also happen through emotions and relationships, which are very important for women and learning. Important here are the facilitators and barriers to this learning. These barriers may be constituted of resistances that arise—the resistances, tensions, and everyday disruptions that constitute human interaction, and these resistances may arise as nodules or points of power. To every capillary of power, there is a resistance (Foucault, 1980).

Indeed, the key to the success of many feminist organizations, such as Red Thread in Guyana, is the broader learning, awareness raising, and critiquing made possible among the community women. Their learning is hard to quantify—or, to use the language of adult education and training, prior learning assessment and recognition.
FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS

(PLAR)—and is often recognized only after years of reflection, consolidation, and integration.

The focus is on how women in organizations learn to do more reflexive work—the work of integration—to understand the gaps between values and practice. This is especially important, as it has been identified for a long time the subversive dynamics or “deep structures,” particularly in purportedly non-hierarchical settings, is where hidden power resides. This is where the important drivers of transparency and internal accountability are critical (Batiwala, 2011), and where women in these organizations need to learn how to identify destructive dynamics. That said, there are practical skills too that need to be learned, but they need to be learned in a way that reinforce, not undermine, feminist values (Batiwala). Women taking on leadership roles is a potentially transformative action, “enabling deep-seated changes in the self that have resulted not only in a sense of self-awareness, empowerment and liberation, but in new ways of acting for change in the external world” (Batiwala, p. 59).

Learning in the feminist movement and in organizations occurs formally, informally, and nonformally (Coombs, 1973) and as Michael Newman (2008) has pointed out, learning of any kind is an innate part of life. For feminists, some of this learning occurs in courses and programs they complete before they join or work with an organization. In an organization, they can learn nonformally by attending short courses and workshops, engaging in informal learning through everyday interactions and being on boards, being involved in meetings, watching how the media treats women’s issues, and networking in person and on social media sites. For instance, a local nonprofit organization may be networked with others in the nation or internationally for the exchange of ideas and strategies.

New movements or activities in which feminists have participated, such as the Occupy Movement (see Rebick, 2013), draw new members who may only participate for that one time; Ollis (2012) calls these circumstantial members and uses the term lifelong to refer to those who continue in activism over the long haul—both groups of members are engaged in social transformation activity and learning. The Indigenous movement for rights and self-determination in Canada contains both types of activists as seen in their Idle No More campaign that emerged in 2013, that has included marches, flash mobs, and protests to draw attention to such issues as land rights, housing, poverty, and education challenges on First Nations reserves (Nanibush, 2013). This campaign was marked by peaceful witnessing and ceremony as ways to speak truth to power and to reclaim rights and responsibilities, including women’s place and leadership prior to European contact. The public protests created an opportunity to build alliances with other movements (Coates, 2015)—both those groups who shared concerns, such as the environment, and those who wanted to show support for Aboriginal rights. Circumstantial members, drawn into the immediacy of First Nations’ plight, were fortified by contact and learning from those who have long experience in cognate movements such as feminist and environmental movements. Expertise among members of different movements is often shared online, in person, and through media. Facebook, Twitter, and various social media supported, engaged.
and furthered this movement, attracting young people into this “aboriginal concern” for housing, adequate living conditions, and safety.

Idle No More began as a response to changes in legislation brought forward by the Canadian government, but evolved to become attached to a wide range of concerns such as Indigenous land claims and resource extraction. It is a movement with a strong female leadership presence, even if that presence is not always obvious to the public; the Idle No More (2012) website has recognized the four women who initiated the protests that grew to become this ongoing campaign. Idle No More was not a singular action. Leaders have emerged who are now working to strengthen education and learning about First Nations’ issues and how to agitate for change. Much like the citizenship schools and other training done within the American civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, with the help of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, there is an initiative to have teach-ins and “summer sovereignty schools” to help strengthen the knowledge of their core activists. The Idle No More website also provides a space for other action groups, such as those demanding action to address violence against indigenous women.

Media portrayals of actions such as Idle No More can sometimes have a tendency to celebrate the large scale activism and learning that women engage in and to diminish the everyday heroism of women whose activism within a variety of organizations has been sustained over time. As we often see, once the media spotlight dims, it may be assumed that the activism has also dimmed. This hides the reality that sustained activism involves long stretches of quiet, behind-the-scenes organizing. For example, Canadian and Australian scholar Elizabeth Burge (2011) has profiled the lives of 27 women activists in Atlantic Canada, telling their stories and highlighting the ups and downs of their campaigns for change. One of the observations to be made on these profiles is that the women learned much over a lifetime of facilitating change and mounting resistance, often working quietly and persistently, often through faith-based, craft, and otherwise “benign” organizations that nurtured very political goals. This is in contradistinction to the resistance that comes to mind for most international activism which is usually very visible, very public, and very loud in terms of protest. The women in Burge’s (2011) study were engaged in long term change projects and were less likely to be involved in heroic change; we might term this a post-heroic and post-activist position (see Fletcher, 2003). They went about their work in low profile ways by building consensus and through nurturing community, rather than seeking the limelight or staging mass protests. They exercised this form of leadership in their towns, small groups, and organizations; furthermore, the activism is collaborative and in some cases, not related to an actual organization. Yet, it is sustained over time. Burge (2011) profiled promoters of French Acadian rights, leaders within political parties, and champions of trade unions. The learning and the activism has been adapted to the scale, intensity of the local environment. Their learning has partly been about patience, collaboration, and the long haul.
From Movements to Institutions

Organizations that build around one issue often grow in other directions or become ensconced in other movements, forming bridges and alliances with partners, for example, the environmental movement, animal rights, human rights, and literacy. This occurs for a variety of reasons, including the insights of new members, the availability of funding for these cognate issues, and the ways in which the media shape public perceptions and concerns. For instance, violence against women has become one of the major issues in women’s organizations, even in places where crime is diminishing, in part because we live in a fear or “risk society” (Beck, 1986). Yet, the risks faced by the most marginalized populations, such as Aboriginal women, do not garner sustained mainstream attention or support. What politicians and mainstream media highlight as threats to our security, cynics would charge, reflect political self-interest more than concern for the voiceless and collective wellbeing.

Women’s learning and activism have become deepened, tied to, and supported by women’s resource centres. They were often formed as safe havens for women to converse, learn, and collectively challenge oppression. These now-institutional spaces, still perceptively tied to second wave feminism, face the challenges that feminism itself faces: of being misunderstood or overlooked. Sociologist Sylvia Walby (2011) claims the perceived waning of the term feminism is partly a consequence of feminists and their organizations participating in the broader civil society sector in which the explicit terminology of feminism may be subsumed within other social causes. Taking an explicitly political stand, which these resource centers do, is challenging in socio-economic environments where funding is scarce and priorities are placed on “getting along” through partnerships and collaborations with donors and other stakeholders. There is a renewed need to increase engagement, awareness, and participation in the face of the shrinking, contested civic space through privatization, downsizing, and offloading of state roles to the voluntary sector.

As centres that once were activist hubs become established service delivery agencies, we might ask: How and where are the critical spaces recreated and maintained? What does this mean for women’s learning and activism? What do collective learning spaces look like? What are the collaborative processes to design such spaces, both formal and informal? Even funders who may potentially support citizen-engaged learning for social change demand demonstrated impact and effectiveness that can be hard to capture beyond individual learning goals (Mayo & Rooke, 2006). They want these institutions to work and be accountable.

Feminist citizen learning in these resource centres, as in all feminist spaces, involves the ways people come together in the learning to claim and open up spaces for participation and to change power relations. A related challenge is the capacity of activist organizations to document and preserve their work and collective
knowledge (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010). Women’s centres have historically played a key role in this important documentation work, a role that is a challenge to maintain. Community educators know that a focus on action, and a collective history of activism, that involves co-learning and co-knowledge is needed: “if local people are engaged in using their own knowledge then they can develop a capacity for self-determination” (Tett, 2010, p. 51), as well as claim the political space for conversation and activism.

One question is whether these spaces can also exist in the same robust and vibrant way online, in chatrooms, forums, or online activist sites like GuerrillaGirlsBroadband (see http://www.ggbb.org/), which fights sexism and racism in the art world. This is an offshoot of the Guerrilla Girls who, since the 1980s, have used street performance, graffiti and posters to ridicule museums and galleries who ignore women’s contributions to the arts. The evidence of this group shows that a great deal of organization can happen in a wired world to combat these issues, as we will explore further in Chapter 5.

Arguably, a movement would die out without attachment to an organization that has a focused understanding and mandate for change, and the capacity to see it through. Witness the rapid rise and fade of the Occupy Movement, which for a short time captured widespread media attention as protestors drew attention to the most privileged 1% of the population (Young, 2012) Occupiers’ reluctance to formalize as an organization or to align themselves with political parties stands in sharp contrast with the Tea Party in the US, which emerged as a conservative protest group in 2009 and has grown to work with and influence the Republican Party They remain vigilant in their scrutiny of Republican politicians who drift left of their brand of social and fiscal conservatism (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). This relationship of an idea to a party is, of course, often problematic, but the Tea Party has gathered momentum, gained adherents and continued to thrive with its linkage to the Republicans, as their most viable option to influence public policy.

ISSUES IN THE MESHWORK

Susan Bracken (2011), in her insightful ethnographic inquiry of women’s organizations, reports on one of the key skills needed to work in these organizations: program planning. Her study, in which she logged more than 400 hours, led her to conclude that what we need are fewer prescriptive lists of how to lead and plan, and more “specific strategies or pitfalls associated with everyday power and negotiation practices” (p. 135). Bracken’s data show that the interactions are complex and necessarily disorderly, as they involve the negotiation and strategic planning that must occur for decisions to be made and for the unfolding process of feminist processes to occur, that is, “an evolving process that takes on the challenge of negotiating power and interests as both a feminist growth process and a feminist goal- or outcome-driven process” (p. 136). Bracken is interested in the everyday ways that this planning occurs, how it involves exercises of power, and how the
participants negotiate the inherent challenges. This daily negotiation of interests, beliefs and practices, she notes is preferable to an interpretation that sees women’s organizations as places of strife and turmoil where nobody gets along.

Funding

One attribute that feminist and community-based organizations in much of the world, and certainly in social democratic states, have in common is their interdependence on government or public funding—either through direct support or through contracted provision of social services. Government regulates organizations through laws governing how they may form and operate, taxation (such as charitable status) and defines the scope of what organizations are allowed to do. “By means of coercion and incentives, government cultivates, constrains, regulates, directs, and supports the entire range of institutions and associations that comprise social life” (Rosenblum & Lesch, 2011, p. 286). As strong as they might be on their own, they rightly call on the government support to fulfill a wide spectrum of services and activities to society in tandem with government responsibility and collaboration with community. The neoliberal turn to divesting the state from support of groups such as women is clearly problematic. As Kalpana Wilson (2008) points out, “Within the neoliberal discourse of development, the agency and empowerment of poor women has been increasingly conceptualized in terms of the withdrawal of the state from social provision” (p. 86). This neoliberal approach has led to increasing expectations of women’s organizations and NGOs to fill the gap, again framed in terminology that made this sound empowering, “freed to exercise their agency” (p. 86). The offloading of social services to women’s organizations, in fact, reinforce gender stereotypes since women are expected to step in and care for their communities.

One of the challenges in receiving public dollars is the restrictions that often accompany the funding. The perceived hands-off approach that neoliberal governments tout may mask increasingly strict regulatory frameworks dictating what organizations can or cannot do—those acts of coercion and incentives noted above. Whereas the state may see social service as a value, it is less likely, certainly in Canada and the United States, to want to see these funds used for activist training or protest, which in reality are important for open democratic engagement. Organizations may find themselves having to be careful in the language they use to describe their work. Yet, feminist organizations have a definite role in sparking and enhancing activist leaders who are needed to help strengthen and continue the feminist project: In the words of Penny Waterhouse and Matthew Scott (2013), “The role of the dissenting activist, of whatever form or style, has now become critical for our collective health and wellbeing” (p. 3). The challenge is that in the context of activist organizations that become service delivery agencies, the collective learning that was once so central to their formation runs the risk of being lost. The ongoing reflection, renewal, and critique required to maintain an effective activist role locally and beyond needs to be nurtured.
CHAPTER 2

The precarious nature of funding for women’s organizations causes grave problems and appears often to erode the solidarity and mission of feminism. Public funds, if available at all, can vanish with a change in government priorities. Securing private, corporate, or foundation funds result in a never-ending treadmill of fundraising, budget decisions, short contracts, layoffs, and board conflicts over spending. All the training in the world cannot sort out governance when there is no money to govern with, even if there is a commitment to implement employment to work programs, educate about violence prevention, or provide support to those with literacy challenges. In many places, funding to women’s programs has been diverted to issues that affect women but not necessarily only women. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Sachs, 2005), for instance, have drawn attention to the need for maternal child health, which is an issue that affects women, but it also diverts funds from women’s political activity which might address the root causes of threats to maternal and child health (Batliwala, 2012). The MDG goal calling for girls’ primary education leaves educational access at higher levels on the back burner for governments, and consequently for those seeking funding to support such initiatives. The so-called problem of women’s issues purportedly is being addressed, but scratching beneath the surface reveals this is not actually the case.

Part of the conflict in the allocation and use of funding is caused by the constant erosion of the nonprofit organization’s mandate or initial mission to be political and to do advocacy. When the whole organization, in order to get funding, is doing service work, then it is hard to continue with the multiple other issues and concerns about the movement. One cannot possibly change the government or civil society while writing funding applications to run programs such as computer training. This is further complicated by the need to establish partnerships to solicit funding for programs. Furthermore, nonprofit organizations are more likely to make strategic partnerships when their funding is threatened, that is, move to partnerships with those who can have success with funders and not necessarily those who have shared vision and values, such as other likeminded organizations in the community. The situation also provides challenges for organizational capacity to respond to emergencies or to take advantage of openings when international attention to a problem arises. One only has to think of the situation in India where a woman is raped every 22 minutes yet it was one high profile gang rape that launched street protests and opened up public discussion (Ayed, 2013), to realize the role of mass mobilization and international pressure on such egregious situations. The organizations on the ground must have the ability to respond. Advocacy partnerships and national partnerships, not to mention international ones, are important if issues such as women’s safety and equality are to remain on the table once the media attention fades.

Internal Governance and Learning

Another topic in feminism is the debate over what actually works in these nonprofit feminist organizations and how the usual model can indeed support the prevailing
philosophy, be it neoliberal, liberal, radical, postmodern, or environmental (Calas & Smircich, 2006). It takes a lot of time to sort out structures, and it takes sustained energy and attention from leaders to help facilitate the discernment around learning from experience. This echoes Batiwala’s (2011) concern noted earlier about the failure of too many training programs to learn from the past. At the heart of the issue is the ability (i.e., time and energy) to name one’s dilemmas, positions, and goals, a luxury that organizations engaged in advocacy or politics may or may not have. Part of the issue is, as Bernedette Muthien (2006) asserts, that the whole movement needs a focus on the internal life of the organization as a place not just to win battles, but also to nurture a creative and politically alive space that allows women to explore, challenge, and nurture political ideas. How to create this space in an organization that needs to appear acceptable to funders, meaning worthy of funding, is a challenge. Funders may not want to pay for ongoing staff development and learning, and organizations may not want to admit they need this development if they are seeking contracts for projects. The tension between egalitarian organizations and efficient ones is very hard to establish, and without funding it is hard to take the time to focus on learning how to strengthen the organization, negotiate competing priorities, or engage in activism. A culture in which members are constantly putting out fires and struggling to survive does not allow much space to look at how the organization is or should be evolving.

Supporting voice in a place that needs funds is at all times difficult. Supporting the learning that nurtures voice is next to impossible to fund when there is a focus on negativity. This is doubly troubling when the feminist organization itself is focused on the people who “need help”—those who are impoverished, illiterate, living in crisis. Not only are the leaders in the organization not able to focus on their own internal structures, they are constantly forced into service provision, at the expense of education.

A prevalent question is how to negotiate the tension in women’s groups in the nonprofit sector between old and new. We witness the old diehards who founded the local nonprofits and then the insurgence of younger women who want a say. Often, their voice will not be heard because the founders who have been around for a while have decided, often for good reasons, what is going to happen and when. Founders Syndrome has been studied in business organizations (Block & Rosenberg, 2002), and has also been identified in the feminist realm (English & Peters, 2011); it is very much an issue in all places. English and Peters complicated the survey-like work of Block and Rosenberg, who named the problem but did little to break it down and analyse it. While founders might be a problem, the issue is not as clear cut as getting rid of the older or founding members, many of whom are needed to actually do the work that a more employment-challenged, underemployed youth group cannot do (English & Peters). Simultaneously, founders are expected to both be a leader and let others take the lead. In English and Peters’ study, founders reported that they struggle with the tension between allowing new people in and accomplishing important organizational tasks. Nor are younger founders immune to this take-charge imperative.
CHAPTER 2

The ideal collective organization rarely exists. More often we have a hybrid mixture of forms in which governance is shared, and is, at times, hierarchical. The ideal is impractical and worse yet, unfundable, as many feminist organizations have come to acknowledge. In addition, these organizations are intended to be lifelong learning organizations that support the goals of feminism and encourage learning about feminism, its history, its intents, the way in which it has evolved, and its relevance. As Batliwala (2011) sums it up, feminist leadership is about advancing social change and is not an end in itself; leaders are not created just to be leaders of any generic institution. They are to engage in social actions to overcome gender discrimination. Feminist leaders, with their experiences and analysis, are in key positions to effect changes that other forms of leaders do not (see Batliwala, 2011, p. 13).

Working Inside or Outside the System

At a certain point, a feminist has to make a choice about whether to achieve policy and political change from inside or from outside the system. Those who work within large organizations (e.g., donors, government, INGOs) may call themselves femocrats in reference to their positioning within a bureaucratic structure (Manuh, Anyidoho, & Pobee-Hayford, 2013). In many cases, they have experience in a grassroots organization or in the nonprofit sector, so they would likely be familiar with the working of these smaller organizations. Whereas the community-based organizers can indeed work with, network with, and identify allies on the inside, it is the femocrat who helps them, who is sympathetic to the cause, and who knows the ways and means of achieving change. Femocrats, for their part, may be seeking legitimacy and possibly meaning-making by directly contributing to work on the ground. A femocrat can be a valuable ally in identifying shorter routes to funding, other allies in the system, and resource people. Although the discourses and operational procedures within large bureaucratic structure may be hard to navigate, an insider can make that happen.

Takyiwa Manuh et al. (2013) observe that a disjuncture can occur when a femocrat tries to mainstream gender ideas and feminist notions within a bureaucracy. If the technocrats do not have a strong grounding in “potentially transformative discourses and strategies” (p. 45) that are common to civil society, then there can be conflict and the ideas and processes may never be fully understood or followed in the organizations. Manuh et al. are clear that the knowledge alone is not sufficient; one has to understand and imbibe the ideology and accompanying politics. Feminist ideas and human rights may be approved in principle but neglected in action as a result. When the state is involved, misunderstandings and lack of analysis can become more pronounced in that government departments and ministers may have competing notions and priorities for promoting women’s empowerment. In a federal Department of Labour, for instance, a notion of women’s empowerment might be oriented to jobs, training, and microfinance to support entrepreneurship.
In a provincial Department of Community Services, aid to women might consist of providing immediate band-aid solutions to managing household finances. The frequent lack of connection between departments causes misunderstandings and may result in a less than cohesive approach. Of course, the political climate of the government will affect all decisions in a bureaucracy.

Policy Work

One of the key roles for an NGO—especially one that operates at the global level—is to work toward policy development and to contribute to international dialogues on rights, actions, and capacities. Often, organizations including the UN agencies, state aid agencies, and INGOs have internal gender experts who do training, policy analysis, and organizational change work specifically focused on gender (Prügl, 2013). This is important work, as we recognize the role of these large agencies in global policy development. In describing some of the training manuals that gender experts have developed, Elisabeth Prügl notes that in institutionalizing or normalizing gender expertise the possibility exists that they lose some criticality and ability to challenge systems of oppression. That said, gender policy experts serve a valuable role in dedicating time to the integration of gender agenda, including an increase in attention to women and peace at the United Nations. Through major conferences such as the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, they have been able to demand inclusion in global justice. Yet, for every advance, feminist goals appear to be thwarted elsewhere, as we discuss further in Chapter 11. As well, women continue to be under represented at the UN. Yet, those feminists who work within these INGOs as gender experts, members, and leaders still push the feminist policy agenda forward.

Future of the Movement

Given the challenges of feminist organizations and movements, the question of long-term viability remains. We look around and ask, “Whither a women’s movement?” The challenges come from many quarters: the ongoing anti-feminist backlash that invokes a culture of self-censorship to deflect criticism, the blending of women’s issues into diversity studies, the use of ambiguous or often meaningless terms such as inclusion, or the further dissolution of feminism due to in-fighting and the alliance with more high profile and fundable issues such as the environment or health promotion. The discourse of collectivity and integrative feminisms that Angela Miles (1996) wrote about two decades ago has yet to be realized. Rather, we have the further bifurcation of women into discrete alliances with marginal issues that once again become tacked on as afterthoughts to other agendas.

Nonetheless, there are some feminist organizations that have been able to work across sectors and to continue to focus on and foster feminism. SEWA (Self-Employed Women’s Association) has remained unapologetically feminist and
focused on their all-female membership’s priorities. This Indian organization started off in 1972 as a trade union to organize informal and home-based workers. It has grown to be multifaceted in order to meet the needs of women in India that are denied them in regular society. SEWA provides alternative co-operative banking and other services to support economic independence, healthcare, education, and training programs, as well as advocating for women’s rights (Bhatt, 2006). The organization represents women who are self-employed and yet who form 93% of the workforce. SEWA was a labour movement that became a broad-based organization to sustain to rights of women workers and to provide tangible support of them, and is now widely celebrated in development circles for its multisectoral approach in promoting women’s rights and security, that is, of embedding learning and activism in its everyday activities. Founder Ela Bhatt notes that they are constantly learning as they handle new problems identified by their membership.

It must be acknowledged, however, that SEWA is a large organization with a vast membership that can be mobilized when the need warrants. Small-scale organizations, on the other hand, are seen to be obsolete in a world where communities are called upon to provide their own local supports to care for their residents. The promotion of caring communities, as seen in the United Kingdom with David Cameron’s attention to the Big Society (Scott, 2011), supports the notion that citizens will take care of each other if the government gets out of the way. For feminist organizations, this is especially insidious as women are perpetually stereotyped as the caring, nurturing volunteers who hold communities together. As services are withdrawn, more demands are made of women’s generosity. “Why fund women’s centres when women will do the work out of kindness?” is the assumption behind such rhetoric, which allows the government to walk away with a clear conscience, taking community resources and money with it, in effect divesting itself of responsibility while maintaining power and control (Kelly & Caputo, 2011). As a result, community members find themselves carrying more responsibilities with little say in the decision making process.

Alongside autonomous feminist nonprofit organizations, there often are feminist spaces within larger organizations. For instance, within the labour movement, women form groups and attend courses where they can explore ideas and work together to address gender discrimination in the workplace and within their own unions. They also try to support each other in terms of leadership within the organization, using the feminist cocoon as an incubator before they move to claim leadership spaces in the larger organization. In describing the Prairie School for Union Women, Canadian Cindy Hanson (2015) shows how women have carved out a place in the labour movement for themselves, not only a learning space but also as an organizing space. Spaces like these are vital to ongoing women’s activism in fields where mainstream exclusion persists. Similarly, United States-based EMILY’s List was created to mobilize funding to pro-choice female Democratic candidates as a way to connect them with the feminist machinery for election (Sawer, 1999). The organization has expanded to promote a range of social issues on health care and rights.
DISCUSSION

In some ways, engaging in issues that affect women, even those that integrate areas of difference such as disability, may indeed reinforce difference and cause further division. It may also perpetuate very dated stereotypes of the caring and relational women. By railing against the stereotypes laid before us—the nurturing, caring collaborative co-worker—are we saying that we do not want environments in which these ways of human interaction are not valued? Margrit Eichler (2005) has noted women do the bulk of the care work, and for many, their learning is closely intertwined with this reality. We perhaps need to look less at difference and more at our everyday practices. As feminists and researchers, we will want to avoid portraits that lead themselves to simplistic portrayals of women in feminist organizations as feminine and friendly or, worse yet, catty and confrontational. Avoiding such bifurcations is important as they split us and our organizational and governance work into categories of male and bureaucratic or female and collectivist. Indeed more significant is looking at the specific ways in which women are affected by their difference: how does disability affect women? How does immigration policy affect women? How are women’s daily lives affected? How do feminist organizations learn from and respond to these challenges?