

Women-Only Space Facilitating Empowerment

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Abstract

Feminist analyses of women's position have identified the gendered dichotomy between public and private spaces and places, where men have occupied the public, valued space and women have been restricted to the 'home' - private spaces where caring and domestic work occurs but which are invisible and devalued. The inequities related to women's limited access to certain environments and spaces have been well documented. One of the outcomes of the Women's Movement of the 20th century was to expose these inequities and to create safe spaces for women in more public spheres which included women-only spaces as part of women-centred social services. These spaces (and in many cases the women-centered services that have sanctioned them) are increasingly threatened by gender neutral social policies and fragmented service funding.

This paper will describe the broader significance of women-only spaces as places where women's health and well-being can be holistically addressed. It is argued that women-only spaces provide opportunities for women to escape cycles of poverty and disadvantage. They are also places which can foster and enhance women's empowerment and activism. The paper draws on the experiences of an Australian organisation North Queensland Combined Women's Services Inc. (The Women's Centre) which operates in a hostile sociopolitical climate where bureaucrats are hesitant to name a specific commitment to women in case this is interpreted as a lack of commitment to men. 'Sameness' has replaced concepts of 'equity' and feminist analyses of women's disadvantage are silenced. An exploration of tensions and contradictions experienced by the Women's Centre within an increasingly hostile political, social, environmental and economic climate will contribute to the discussion surrounding the future use of women-only spaces and their contribution to women's development.

Key Words: women, feminism, empowerment, women-only space

Introduction

Globally, women and children are grossly over-represented amongst the world's poorest and most vulnerable peoples. Women and children are uniquely vulnerable to the poverty, violence and deprivation that results from climate change and environmental degradation (UNEP). Development is often experienced by women as violent, exploitative and destructive and the resultant urban environments in particular, are harsh ecologies for many women (Leonen 2007). Accompanying hostile physical environments is the dismantling of safe space as unaccountable governments place pressure and restrictions on the physical and emotional use of space.

While acknowledging the gendered nature of global disadvantage it is equally as important to recognise the fundamental role that women play in modifying and shaping their own environments as sustainable and balanced. Social change and sustainable development rely on the participation and empowerment of women worldwide and it is to these ends that international, national and local women's services contribute (UN Women Watch 2009). Strategies such as reducing the feminisation of poverty, ending violence against women and empowering women to make a contribution to their local governance structures are features of women's services across the world (UNIFEM 2008). For the purposes of this paper 'women's services' are understood as those diverse and multifaceted entities that work with and for women and their children to address violence, homelessness, poverty, or other forms of exclusion and oppression (Miles 2010).

Across the world women's services have ventured into areas others have avoided; they have effectively modeled alternative governance structures, alternative leadership styles and different models of service delivery; and they have forced mainstream organisations to take women and women's concerns seriously. In many cases they have achieved these outcomes by creating spaces and places where women cannot not only seek refuge, find safety and access resources but also learn skills, contribute their knowledge and experience, participate in activism, and support and nurture each other (Miles 2010). An important aspect of these spaces was that they were for women only; places where men were not present physically or emotionally allowing women the opportunities to develop unique responses to global and local concerns.

The Relevance of Women-only Space

This paper explores the relevance and challenges for women-only spaces by analyzing the experience of North Queensland Combine Women's Services (colloquially called 'The Women's Centre').

The Women's Centre works with vulnerable women and their children many of whom are homeless or are in situations which make them extremely vulnerable to homelessness. A common theme through the lives of homeless women connects their experiences of physical and sexual violence, both as a precursor to homelessness and resulting from it (Whitzman 2006), compounded by the multiple disadvantages of poverty, racism and sexism (Klodawsky 2006). This social disadvantage is not invisible to the Australian Government. For example in August 2011 a Member of the Australian Parliament, the Honorable Kate Ellis, rightly commented that "...the harm caused by violence against women extends beyond the immediate pain and...leads to homelessness, mental ill health, impoverishment or joblessness" (Ellis 2011).

Despite this rhetoric, the systems which supposedly support services that support women fail to acknowledge the complexities that confront women and their children and as a result demand helping styles and support services that are "hyper-professionalized and standardized, resting primarily on a secularized view of an isolated and individualized self" (Coates & Besthorn 2010, p.2). Alternative strategies and approaches which involve a process of engagement with the whole being—both women themselves and the world around them, are devalued, diminished and most importantly unfunded (Coates & Besthorn 2010, p. 3). It is proposed here that the funneling of federal government policy initiatives and attached funds through to large state governments departments and on to small non-government agencies creates a situation of dualistic attrition, whereby the spirit of policy becomes blurred and non government organisations become trapped in a bureaucratic process of having to constantly prove they are equipped to make a difference according to the measurement criteria established by government. Notably absent in the discourse is an acknowledgement of the structural disadvantages (Martin 1990) with which women collide in their everyday lives, or any concerted attempts to eradicate layers of oppression and discrimination which constrain women's capacity for full citizenship (Weeks 1994).

Historically men have positioned themselves in the doubly powerful realms of the public and private arenas (Caine 1998), whereby their rights to exercise power and participate as citizens have been unquestioned. The emergence of feminism, particularly during the 20th century, gave voice to women in western countries who exposed structural inequalities in the form of women's unequal access to social, political and economic rights resulting in women's limited participation in society. A gathering crescendo of women across the western world critiqued the existing arrangements which imbued men with authority both publically and privately. Significant attention focused on the subordinate position of women in the home, highlighting the ways in which women were constrained and controlled, challenging the myth of safety, sanctuary and privacy within the home. The domestic space was named as a dangerous space, a site where systematic violence was perpetrated against women and children (Caine 1998). As research and knowledge expanded, the nature and prevalence of domestic violence was well documented, and became a platform from which women agitated for an end to violence and discrimination.

So what is different today in the 21st century? It could be argued that very little has changed. Women continue to experience oppression and violence; men have tenaciously gripped their perceived superior status and resisted challenges to their authority. Women as citizens are marginalised, and acts of domestic and sexual violence against women and children proliferate (Guggisberg & Fisher 2010).

Within this social climate, a space solely for women seems a prerequisite when considering women's needs and issues, many of which are linked to their experiences of violence and degradation (Weeks 1994). Services which grew from this political analysis presented an alternative model embedded in feminist theoretical frameworks and practices which acknowledged oppression and worked with women using consciousness - raising and women-centred social justice principles. Feminist services in particular have pioneered collective and collaborative helping strategies which seek to make visible the patriarchal structures which lead to women's powerlessness, and engage in dialogue about social structures that condone and support the control of women as well as promote societal change (Coates & Besthorn 2010).

In advancing the rights of women, an emphasis on the political status of women has resulted in a firm commitment to developing services in which women can experience an "ethics of encounter" (Conradson 2003). Within such an environment, women have created structures and

processes which aim to restore rights of access and inclusion (McFadden 2007), by facilitating connectedness between women and responding to the products of women's oppression. Considering the capacity of patriarchy to exclude women under the guise of "normal" hegemonic relationships, women's space is, in essence, an ideological framework for resistance.

As McFadden (2007) argues, the concept of space is embedded within a political framework which incorporates a sense of ownership from which an agenda is projected. Space can be perceived as a highly politicized construct, defying the notion of neutrality. "Spaces" become the arena in which struggles for rights are articulated and legitimized. From this perspective, women-only spaces have been constructed to respond to women's needs, in opposition to the ways in which women have been defined and excluded from, or benevolently invited, albeit with restrictions, into men's institutionalized bases of power "shaped by utilitarian, hierarchical, and materialist worldviews" (Coates & Besthorn 2010, p. 3).

To instigate wholeness and health we need to reclaim the spaces, attributes, and capacities that have been denigrated, cut from, or repressed in our lives. To achieve this we need to seek contexts and practices that ask us to examine holistically what we identify with, what we know, how we have come to this knowledge, and how we can expand our awareness. (Lichtblau 2010, p 10).

In an era prematurely declared to be "post-feminist" by former Australian Prime Minister John Howard (Summers 2003), maintaining a women-only space cannot be guaranteed, as our recent experience signifies. McKenzie (cited in Weeks 1994) argues that this "post-feminist" stance proposes to deny the on-going oppression of women and represents a challenge to the continuation of "free-standing, autonomous women's services" (p xi). Today these services struggle, and are frequently required to justify their existence, expending significant energy to maintain women-only spaces, compounded by increasingly bureaucratized funding requirements and processes. Future planning, service development and visionary opportunities often stall as services become progressively more marginalised.

The Townsville Women's Centre

The Women's Centre was established in 1984 and has been providing services to the women of Townsville for 27 years. We are a non government /charitable organisation, fully funded by government. We have three distinct programmes, including sexual assault support, a specialist homelessness service and a women's health program, all of which have been fully integrated to provide an holistic service for women. We are a highly visible and accessible service in the community, firmly embedded into the infrastructure of the Townsville welfare service sector. The Women's Centre operates as a hub of women services providing daily non appointment based counselling and support, on-going counseling and health promotion, groups and activities. We engage in activism and host specific women-centred events for the local community such as Sexual Violence Awareness Month, the Candlelight Ceremony (commemorative occasion acknowledging women and children's lives lost to domestic violence) and International Women's Day.

Women who come into a women-only space do so for a wide variety of reasons, however, it could be argued that safety and acceptance are central to their needs. A women's service, run by women for women, creates a rare opportunity for women to engage in conversations about the reality of their lives, without being silenced by men. Feminism describes the conditions of women's oppression and advocates for the exposure of these factors through developing social policy and social action to address women's disadvantage including the critical issue of violence against women. Feminist theory and practice have evolved through women sharing their experiences, critiquing the notion of random individualised acts of violence, and portraying violence as a consequence of patriarchy. Feminist practice is therefore embedded within the lived experiences of women (Weeks 1994) and their subsequent structural disadvantages.

In particular we achieve these goals within a particular space. The women's centre operates from a suburban house; women are welcomed and their access is not dependant on an appointment with a formal service – they can “drop-in”. Women and their children use the comfortable lounge space, the kitchen and most importantly the garden and outside areas. The therapeutic value of the outdoor space cannot be underestimated. Research validates our intuitive sense that outdoor environments contribute to physical and emotional healing (Carmen 2006). Within this environment work with women is a “collaborative, transformative process by

which balance is restored as we become increasingly aware of our wholeness and interconnection with all life” (Coates & Besthorn 2010, p. 3). The environmental qualities of a women-only space have included careful consideration of the aesthetics and functionality of usage in terms of how this could impact upon women’s well being, and whether women perceive or experience stigma as they enter the space. Verbal and non verbal messages and mannerisms of workers impart welcome and positive regard towards women from diverse backgrounds thus demonstrating social inclusion as a core and fundamental principle for engagement.

The use of women-only space in this way is particularly important for the most marginalized of the Australian and our local community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women make up 28% of the women engaging in the informal and no appointment service at The Women’s Centre. There is recognition in Australian society that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are a significantly marginalized group with disproportionately high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people unemployed, in poor health and experiencing high levels of family violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women choose to access our centre specifically because it’s a women’s space – a place to be, to connect, to share, to spend time in a safe environment with other women.

The strength of this practice is evidenced by an Aboriginal woman’s story (Tourne 2011) of violence, drugs/alcohol abuse and survival. Allison described the importance of “somewhere to go” that was safe and “someone to talk to” as well as her need to connect with other women. Most significantly her needs have been for safety and acceptance throughout the ten years she has accessed the Women’s Centre.

Having successfully strived to dismantle the barriers that prevent diverse groups of women accessing the service we find ourselves in 2011 in a position where funding pre-requisites require us to close the drop-in service and discourage women from using the space except as clients of specific and formalised service. Our current drop in space and how women use this space is incongruent with bureaucratic funding priorities and as such expendable.

As mentioned previously one of the considerable achievements of feminist women’s services was the role they play in persuading government and others to specifically consider the experiences of women. More recently however women specific experiences have been subsumed

in the category of gender – any focus on the experience of women is immediately challenged as ignoring the experience of men (Summers 2003). Feminism as an ideology is replaced by ‘gender sensitivity’. Anna Marie Smith in (Stewart et.al. 2010, p.2) argues that gender-sensitive planning and policy-making “...has been achieved at the cost of diluting feminist principles and the eclipse of feminist mobilization”. Alongside this shift to gender – neutral language and a gendered perspective exists the devaluing of women-only space by government and bureaucrats. Women-only space is not just compromised but is being eliminated. For example our recent experience of negotiating new larger premises to meet the needs of women who sue the service and who work in the service resulted in considerable persuasion exerted by government bureaucrats to co-locate with another service that worked with violent men. This was a serious threat to the integrity of a women-only space due to the presence of men. Again, the rationale and fundamental philosophy which informs feminist women’s services had to be justified.

Political and Economic Tensions

The issues confronting services like ours reflect a national agenda and echo Anne Summers’ (2003) assertion that “women’s equality is no longer on the agenda” in Australia. For example the national health plan policy for men was ratified a full year before the women’s health policy received endorsement. For women’s health services this has meant a series of short term service agreements since the 1st July 2009. When services are operating under short term funding agreements, uncertainty increases anxiety, particularly due to an inability to plan one’s own future. Creative options and resourceful future planning are curtailed as services await the next promised date for decision, only to again be put on hold. Services were left powerless with no direction for two and half years and even now, when decisions have been made, there is still no funding security or clear future direction. Disrespect for women-specific services is evident in this type of behaviour, and in the recent past, contemptuous suggestions that services should desist in programs such as aromatherapy and belly dancing have occurred, in the context of drawing similarities between women-specific services and cottage industries. Such uninformed comments reflect the dismissive attitudes and ignorance described by Weeks (1994), as the role of women’s services becomes progressively less valued.

In 2008 the Australian government began to focus on homelessness like never before. We saw the development of the Green Paper flowing from consultations all over Australia resulting in the release of the report “The Road Home - A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness” (FaHCSIA 2008). This report has contextualized funding negotiations with each state, with the Queensland Department of Communities developing the policy document “Opening Doors: Queensland’s Strategy for Reducing Homelessness” (2011). . Alongside the strategies in relation to homelessness, the national plan to reduce violence against women and their children was developed in 2010, informing the release of “For Our Sons and Daughters” as the Queensland strategy to reduce domestic and family violence. One of the things we know about homelessness is that domestic and family violence is a significant contributing factor for women and children in Australia. As cited by Edwards (2010) domestic violence is the single most prevalent factor for people accessing specialist homelessness services with women and children comprising almost thirty percent of those seeking shelter.

These reports contain ambitious goals such as halving homelessness in Australia and accommodating all rough sleepers by 2020 (FACHSIA 2008). However as services struggle to re-align with these goals and the subsequent new strategies, homeless women become invisible as they are less likely to be “rough sleepers” and are therefore hidden from public view (Whitzman, 2006). This invisibility reflects women’s exclusion more generally as a consequence of gendered disadvantage. This analysis echoes Weeks (1994) who points out the inherent gender neutrality of some policy, which fails to address women specific needs or issues. Caine (1998) proposes that the underlying assumption that the citizen is male influences sociopolitical systems and academic thinking, thus ignoring the experiences of women. In contrast Zuffrey and Kerr (2004) advocate for an approach which challenges the implementation of policy into a “one size [or gender] fits all” practice framework, arguing that generic service provision as determined by funding bodies is likely to be experienced as inflexible and disempowering.

Whilst the Australian federal government has articulated the need for women’s alliances, the state government has funneled its resources into simplistic issue - based generic service delivery models. This has become the bureaucratic/ departmental response to the federal government’s imperative to measure outcomes, to decrease homelessness & violence against women and to

improve the health of the most vulnerable as well as the nation as a whole. Despite the desirability of the goals, the inherent limitations of the restrictive implementation policies forces non-government organisations like The Women's Centre to become an output orientated service, measured by hours of service provision. As Wagner (2003) argues, funding arrangements which are negotiated on "outputs," negate issues which are embedded within structural disadvantage, resulting in a diluted understanding of the manner in which social issues lock people into a spiral of disadvantage. Instead, they tend to be perceived as individualistic problems. Services which advocate for socio-political change as a fundamental aspect of their philosophy encounter an increasing level of disinterest and apathy. The ability to engage in dialogue that represents holistic service delivery becomes significantly limited. Keeping women's space and subsequently women's issues on the agenda is therefore seriously jeopardised.

Integral to many of the issues confronted by women's services in Queensland over the last three years has been the lack of commitment to the concept of women-only space, including a failure to acknowledge how the physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual aspects of women's space enhances a sense of well being and empowerment. Consistent with the policy rhetoric across many areas, bureaucrats are hesitant to name a specific commitment to women in case this is interpreted as a lack of commitment to men. 'Sameness' has replaced concepts of 'equity' as feminist analyses of women's disadvantage are silenced. As all women's services are aware, the numbers of women and children among Australia's needy and desperate continue to grow almost unabated. Women-specific services continue to be at the forefront of meeting this need, but struggle daily to avoid being absorbed into large faceless organisations and maintain the inherent integrity of women-only space.

While the work to maintain women-only space remains the focus, it is less likely empowerment and growth leading to sustainability will be facilitated for both the organisation and women using the space. The parallel struggle to meet women's most basic needs will continue and women's voices will not be heard. If as Dr. Betty McLellan (2010) contends women are not voiceless but are among the "deliberately silenced" (p.1) in our society then it is even more important to move on from the struggle for space and survival to a political platform with language and frameworks embedded in feminism.

Women cannot wait until the ongoing struggle to maintain women-only space ceases, to address and be active leaders in global and local issues such as climate change. Health promotion practice within the Women's Centre has the potential to become a grass root political platform that places women's health and well-being at the centre of the discourse, not as a peripheral gender based discussion. This is particularly relevant to the issues of climate change and the impacts on women's health considering the lack of sex disaggregated data (Stewart et.al 2010) that informs what is happening to women, as well as an absence of women in decision-making roles addressing climate change. This is a reminder that barriers to equality and participation still exist.

The Women's Centre is an environment conducive to the development of grass roots projects that enhance women's economic situation as well as develop sustainable options for women. Such projects can be inclusive of women's traditional roles in the family and community expanding through to women being involved as citizens in their own rights contributing as equal members of society. Women engaging and participating is reliant on providing diverse options that are inclusive and respectful to women and acknowledge structural disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that women-only spaces are integral in the provision of holistic services to the most disadvantaged women from a framework which espouses and delivers feminist responses to women's oppression in the 21st century. Women-only space is considered as a multi-layered concept, where attention to the dynamics of the physical, social, political and economic environments occurs in every day interactions with women, and informs the space and place women's issues deserve on the political agenda. The systematic erosion of women's issues within the socio-political agenda, where a feminist analysis is replaced by gender neutrality and mainstreaming, has contributed to a failure to fund services adequately, resulting in the attrition of resources to some of the most vulnerable groups. Women's services are caught in an ethical and economic dilemma; compliance with funding demands disables services but to refuse funding results in the service's demise. The current political environment does not allow women's spaces to be resourced in order to respond in a holistic manner to women, or to facilitate their empowerment.

While governments acknowledge that women struggle to exercise their rights and participate fully as citizens, the strategies linked to this acknowledgment such as the federally formed alliances are unlikely to significantly alter the oppression and disadvantage women experience. Funding which is funneled into issue-based programmatic responses, inextricably tied to output based service delivery, becomes inflexible and has the ever present threat of withdrawal unless outputs are attained. Maintaining a feminist analysis high on the political agenda is just as crucial today as in the past if the rhetoric and the structural inequalities that marginalise women are to be changed.

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