

## **Women's Research Centre: an Institute for Feminist Research**

### Introduction

Although there is no single vision of Feminist Research in the literature, there are two elements to it which distinguish it from mainstream academic research. It is first of all research which is grounded in women's experience, research which derives its problematics from the lives of women rather than from a theoretical perspective, and secondly research which is oriented to improving the situation of women in our society. The first element implies that Feminist research is primarily interdisciplinary, although there is also a major direction in this research which critiques current models of knowledge within disciplines and attempts to identify alternative orientations. The second element implies that feminist research involves a partnership between women working inside and outside of the university to improve women's situation.

Although the University of Alberta has a number of academics who have contributed to such research, especially within discipline boundaries, we have not participated in a major way to the development of what is now a very large body of literature. This is at least partly because the departmentalization of a university tends to work against interdisciplinary research, and partly because it is difficult to have enough women within most departments to create a critical mass of feminist scholars.

The University also includes academic women who attempt to bridge a gap between their own research and the work of women working elsewhere in the community (either in women's groups or government circles), but to date this has only been done on an ad hoc basis; there has not been the development of a centre for such women to come to know each other and develop and share their work in an on-going fashion.

We are here proposing that the University establish a Women's Research Centre which will begin to address these problems. As a research centre its primary focus will be on the development of knowledge and on methodologies which are appropriate for interdisciplinary and applied research. As a structure within a departmentalized university its secondary focus will be on the development of research models which will make it possible for academics well trained within the many disciplines of the university, from science through arts to the professions, to communicate with each other and to recognize ways in which their research can become complementary and interdisciplinary. Finally, as a structure which will intentionally cross university/community boundaries its third focus will be



on research models which can bring together theoretical and applied knowledge, which will make it possible for women working within and outside the university to communicate with each other as they address related issues and problems.

### The Structure of the Women's Research Centre

The Research Centre would require a structure which would enable it to include Feminist researchers working inside and outside of the university, and which would enable academics and students from the various sectors of the university to know that the centre was one place where they could locate their research. One of the University of Alberta centres of such research in the future will be the undergraduate women's studies programme in the Faculty of Arts; a second centre is the women currently working in WISEST (women from both on and off the campus); a third centre of women's work related to research is the Faculty of Extension Women's Programme and Resource Centre; and a fourth centre of such women the current co-ordinating committee on women's studies. Local structures outside the campus which are most actively engaged in research include the women's secretariat of the provincial government and women's action groups. In addition, the Women's Programme of Athabasca University (which collaborated within the University of Alberta in submission for a Women's Studie Chair), is a centre for feminist research at another local university. The structure should recognize all of these groups, but should also make it possible for women who are not active in any such organizations, whose only interest is in doing related research, to work actively within the centre.

The initial Centre membership therefore will consist of women who are active in the above organizations and other women with an interested in feminist research, whether in the academy or the community. This membership would, once a year, elect members to a board which would administer the institute.

A second type of membership would be the membership of those women who are currently active in feminist research and wish to locate their research in the institute. This would include only two categories, resident research scholars who are residents of the city or the province, and visiting research scholars who are visiting the area for a year or less. The first group would include academics, community researchers, researchers within government structures, students, and anyone considered active in feminist research who lived close enough to have regular contact with the centre. The second group would likely consist mostly of university visitors on sabbatical, but may well include women doing research in the community on some short-term basis.



These women would carry ordinary memberships, so they could participate in the annual meeting and election of the board, and research scholar memberships so they could participate in the daily research activity of the centre. Some of these members may be paid research assistants within the centre, either working for one project or for a number of projects.

The staffing of the centre would consist of a coordinator and secretarial/ clerical assistance. The co-ordinator's work would be to ensure that information flowed amongst members of the centre, that an annual meeting of members was called and a board elected, that a budget was in place and accounts were kept, and that research meetings and seminars were organized for the presentation of research and the development of further research. In the case of women working in the community, she would also facilitate the meeting of women and women's groups who had clear research problems with women who might be willing and able to do the required research.

Space requirements for such a centre would be offices for the coordinator and the secretarial assistance, offices for visiting researchers, and a reasonably large seminar and meeting room. These offices would need telephones, desks, chairs, and bookcases; the co-ordinator and secretaries office would require a filing cabinet, and the seminar room would require appropriate tables and chairs. The centre would also need one micro-computer for administrative work, one or more micro-computers with a mainframe connection for researchers, and a photocopying machine. Although some other resource material would be kept at the centre, in general centre members would use and support the resource centre of the Faculty of Extension Women's Programme and the Library system of the University of Alberta.

### Research Agenda

The research agenda will build primarily out of the interests of researchers rather than being determined by the institute. We would, however, anticipate a research agenda which will include the following elements:

a) The development of research which is clearly directed towards problems and issues identified as important by women working in the community such as violence against women and sexual abuse, economic realities faced by women, child-care provisions etc.



b) The development of critical feminist research which is largely within the academy; this may be within any of the disciplines or professions from English and Comparative Literature through the social and natural sciences to Law, Education, Engineering, Nursing and so on.

c) The development of interdisciplinary research which builds partly on the critical work within the academy and partly on the issues research which is largely generated outside the academy.

d) The development of research which helps women contextualize their on-going work within a local, national, and international historical process, such as work on the Alberta "Famous Five", work on Women in the Farm movement, and so on.

e) Theoretical and Methodological work which enables all of the above to be set into an explanatory structure (or structures).

#### Funding and Budget

The Women's Research Centre should not be an expensive body. The space described above would be essential, but we would expect it to not involve direct costs to the centre. The major costs would be personnel and the capital purchases required to establish the centre. Capital costs, as one-time only costs, would be about \$30,000. Personnel costs on a full-time basis should be between \$50,000 and \$60,000 per annum, and the centre should start with those positions on a part-time rather than full-time basis. An additional \$10,000 to \$20,000 would be needed for running the centre, but any other funding would be on a project basis only.

The centre should, through time, develop endowment funds which would ensure its continued financial support at a level of between \$80,000 and \$100,00. However, in the short term, we would attempt to locate funding from other sources outside the university to begin to staff the facility.

#### Conclusion