

Hello Everybody

My Name is Wendy Meek and I work at Hobart Women's Health Centre (HWHC) and The Hobart Women's Shelter: two identified feminist organisations in Hobart. I became interested in the topic of organisations and change through my experience working within different feminist organisations for approximately 10 years. When I started at HWHC I walked down the driveway with two service auditors who would spend the next 4 days with the service. The purpose of this audit was to produce a service review with recommendations for improvement. Feminist organisations in Tasmania need to consider government processes of accountability and 'fee for service' funding agreements. We need to take control of our own destiny within the new demands. It is important that we take the time to re-group and really understand what and who we stand for.

When I talk about 'accountable on our terms' who exactly am I talking about? My interest is feminist organisations in Tasmania and Australia but will focus on Tasmania for purpose of this discussion. I have spent, be it a small amount of time with some organisations to try to get an understanding of who we are as 'feminist organisations' and as a collective feminist voice in Tasmania.

Feminist theories have evolved and will continue to evolve. It was common for women to identify strongly with one of the three early feminisms: Liberal, Radical or Socialist. Later Postmodern, Eco and Global or Third Wave Feminism was added to name a few. Liberal Feminism is mainly concerned with justice and equality and focuses on the elimination of overt disadvantage. This feminism focuses on women's rights and freedoms. Radical Feminism argues that Liberal Feminism will never really address the oppression of women due the fact that liberal feminists work within the current social and political structures which by their very nature are inherently oppressive. Radical Feminism argues that patriarchal society structures are characterised by male power, dominance, and competition and therefore women will only have access to the same privileges as men when these structures are dismantled and new structures created. Socialist Feminism connected to a Marxist analysis of capitalism believes that women's inequality is directly connected to the economic structures of capitalism and that while capitalism remains strong the oppression of women will continue. Post Modern Feminism explores the theories of difference and sees Liberal, Social and Radical Feminism discriminating towards women who did not, or cannot subscribe. Postmodern feminism is opposed to any universal position of 'women' and is directly connected to understanding through language. Global feminism or Third Wave Feminism has further developed the theory of the importance of difference and has researched this through using experiences of women from different cultural backgrounds and situations. This feminism encourages women to listen to other

women's experiences and learn from diverse stories using this knowledge to challenge patriarchal societies.

Kravets and Jones (1991) list characteristics and principals which feature prominently in feminist organisations.

**(Powerpoint)**

- A flat non- hierarchical authority structure
- Cooperative/collective basis for decision making
- Personal and humanistic relationships between service user and service workers
- Staff include volunteers, semi professionals and professional women with service users encouraged to become part of the service
- Accountability is primarily attributed to women who use and are part of the service
- Men are mostly excluded from the staff, the management groups and from using the service – women control the service at all levels
- Services are usually involved in activities that contribute to broad social change such as community education, media watch, contributing to the development of policy and legislation as well as direct service delivery
- In addition to direct services, work includes public education, changing policies and working for broad social change in law and legislation (Kravets and Jones in Miles 2002, p 2).

When I say feminist organisation for the purpose of this discussion I am talking about an organisation run by women for women that sits in a political understanding that women have less access to services, wealth, public voice and positive health outcomes. We believe that women are strong and vibrant parts of our community with many skills and knowledge to participate at all levels of society, public and private. We fight for women's access to choice and we work together to create change using a broad social change focus working both with clients and other political institutions.

**(Powerpoint)**

Governments are currently putting pressures on the community sector that are unprecedented. The Office of the Community Sector has initiated new service standards to apply to community organisations. We now must tick boxes, and cross T's in line with a format dictated by them. We now deal with the 'Community Sector Quality and Safety Team'. We are required to report to them

every 6 months. Are they asking the right questions? Are we ticking the right boxes? Do these new compliance standards really reflect the work that we do and are our values and is our expertise in the sector considered and respected in this process? Do the government really know what they are purchasing? Or are they asking us to have correct fire procedure and spills kit in order to receive further funding. What does a feminist fire evacuation policy look like anyway?

I went to a forum run by the Salvation Army last year called 'The Mission or The Money', at that forum a speaker from government addressed the audience using the exact line, 'community organisations delivering government services'. This comment immediately made me jump up and say, 'Wait on a minute, since when have the services that feminist delivered been government services'. Here we have a problem. Why do governments believe that we are replicating services that they could do, if only they had the time?

Lin Hatfield the CEO of Uniting Care Australia talked at the conference about the importance of 'Being before doing', she discussed understanding your history; who your heroes are and what you stand for. She explained that all of this stands to be lost as we let governments control the money coming to us based on their perceived need and our perceived compliance. Remember we are the ones that have been doing this work for a very long time, not governments.

As a feminist I must say it was a surprise to me to be at a faith based forum barracking for the speakers with enthusiasm. But these people had a very good point. Lin was supported by Captain Jason Davis from the Salvation Army. He stated it was important to move away from fearing governments and start challenging the myth that faith equals amateur. Jason challenged the Governments understanding of the community sector and suggested that we take the responsibility of being experts in our field. Lin talked about the reporting requirements required by governments and how ridiculous they had become, she used an example of the aged care services they provide on a national basis and said that there were approximately 1300-1400 reports required per year. John Cleary, Australian religious reporter also spoke at the forum and spoke vehemently about the need for the community sector to speak up and lobby governments, he suggested going directly to governments and not to get caught in bureaucracy. Look for partnerships to create a greater force and stand up for what you believe. John talked passionately about the faith based community sector being at risk of losing their innovation in the current demands from funding bodies. Is this sounding familiar to anyone working in feminist organisations in Australia? Are we taking money from governments that maybe we shouldn't be? Money being offered on Governments perceived need or election promises that do not reflect the direction of our services. Are we putting in applications for funding, receiving half the funds to do the same project but doing it anyway? Do we

take this money because we are afraid of what will happen if we don't? We must not work from a place of fear in this environment. These big faith based organisations seem to be doing some of the work that I think could influence our position and offers ideas for feminist organisations in the future. What can we learn from their experiences? All of these speakers talked about the importance of understanding who we are and what skills we have to offer.

**(Power points used here)**

**What feminism means to you?**

**What are we doing well?**

Late last year I conducted two forums, one in Hobart and one in Launceston with organisations founded on feminist principals. In Hobart attending organisations were S.H.E Support, Help and Empowerment, Hobart Women's Shelter, Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) and Hobart Women's Health Centre. In Launceston, Magnolia Place, Yemaya, Laurel House, and Karinya Young Women's Refuge attended. First I asked what feminism meant to them. Some of the key words that came up were: Bravery, women's power, respectful listening, inclusion, solidarity, and women as experts in their own health. You can see here, all the influences from different feminisms that I mentioned earlier. I then asked. What are we doing well? **(Powerpoint)** There appears to be three main themes: The first, providing quality services to women, thinking about how we deliver our services and reflecting on our practices to ensure organisational improvement in this area. The second was more organisational, being resilient, surviving tough environments and sticking up for ourselves: my hope for the future is that in this area we will again feel like we are thriving, leading, and delivering. The last area identified was having a feminist voice, using community education and speaking out politically about important issues.

These are three areas that reflect the very nature of feminist service, and these areas are the ones potentially at risk if we become consumed by government recommendations and accreditation processes. I am not saying that I am not interested in organisation improvement, because I am. I am interested in using the skills and knowledge that we have, our leaders and our theories and the philosophies to guide these processes. I understand that it is important that we not only do this work but we clearly articulate this to governments 'on our terms'. At the moment our voice has become silent in so many ways.

I then asked the groups, what makes us different? **(Powerpoint)** This is where we started to hear words like leadership, flexibility, understanding of political context and power, creativity, and offering alternatives to mainstream services. This point of the forums was where the groups were

more enthusiastic, more passionate and more vibrant. I would argue that this supports my very point in that if we are going to continue to offer vibrant and creative initiatives for women and children in the community in order to do this well we need to do this work 'on our terms', using our skills and knowledge and our understandings that are unique. It is therefore important for us as feminists to bring this knowledge to governments and not be silenced.

In order to do this work it is important that we can articulate why we deliver the services in a unique and professional way. So I asked; why do we do it well? **(Powerpoint)** At first this seemed like a harder question and maybe this reflects that some of this work has not been done for a while as we 'survived' in the recent years. Feminism brings an understanding to our work, we have clear frameworks and a history of thinking about the impact of the work that we do. At the basis of everything that we do we strive to respect women's choices, listen and understand women as experts in their own lives and we have a clear theoretical framework in which to sit our practice in. We provide flexible services that directly connect with the women and children who we work with. We must value this, understand the importance of this and most importantly talk to governments about this.

So, one of the current requirements of community service organisations is to form partnerships. I think everyone can see the benefits in creating good partnerships and for feminist organisations it fits very nicely into our frameworks of practice. TASCROSS recently put out a partnerships kit as a guide to community service organisations. In that kit they list some keys to successful partnerships. **(powerpoint)**. I would say to governments if you want us to do this, and in theory we agree, you need to fund the time and resources it takes. We cannot do this off the side of our desks as we continue to provide 6 monthly reports to the office of the community sector, we cannot form valuable partnerships while we are trying to do more for less, while we are fighting for everything else we need to do. We are ready to form these partnerships but governments must provide us with resources and funding to do it.

### **(Powerpoint)**

The Independent Women's Organisations of Tasmania (IWOT) was formed in 1996, interestingly in a time when the community sector was faced with potential changes in the nature of their service funding. It was set up by a group of women who saw the need for a peak body that clearly represented the interests of feminist and women's organisations in Tasmania. In 2003 a review of IWOT was conducted because although it was still seen as important there were thoughts that maybe a check was needed to refocus and confer with current members about the future direction.

The aims of IWOT were:

- To maintain a feminist philosophical framework and models of practice
- To maintain the integrity and service delivery of each member organisation
- To strengthen women's services as a lobby group
- To create an opportunity to pool resources with allied organisations
- To develop models of best practice including policy and practice

IWOT was committed to the principals of current feminist thought, beliefs, values and principals

**(Powerpoint)**

- IWOT is committed to promoting the principals of social justice, empowerment, self determination, equity, equality, and the right of women and children to realise their full potential.
- IWOT will ensure that services to women and children are delivered in a safe, confidential, and respectful way, embracing openness and accepting of the beliefs of all the service users.
- IWOT strives to deliver services that are culturally appropriate, equitable, affordable, embrace diversity and are proactive.
- IWOT services will work towards structural changes through policy, legislation and education.

When I wrote these aims and philosophies while preparing for this paper I asked myself if they are in my opinion still relevant. Yes. The review conducted by Rachel Cuthbert in 2003 showed an overwhelming support for the need of such an organisation. IWOT was seen as having a lot of potential; however at the time there was a concern that it lacked leadership and resources. It was seen as important to offer governments an alternative perspective. It was also identified at this point that it was becoming more and more difficult for women working in these services to be able to dedicate their time to these peak bodies. When asked whether IWOT should continue or not there was overwhelming support but the feeling that funding needed to be sought so IWOT could have the attention it deserved (Cuthbert, R, 2003, IWOT discussion paper, TASSCOSS, Policy Office).

So what has changed since 2003? Government pressures on these organisations have continued to grow, some of these organisations have been defunded, and IWOT is no longer meeting. Funding structures are changing again and governments are still 'buying' our services at a bargain price. This is not going in the right direction for us in so many ways. Governments are pushing us to have strong networks and partnerships at the same time as pressuring us to deliver services for such a price that we do not have the time or energy to do anything else. Our voices are getting quieter as we get busier meeting needs driven by government dollars. Is there still a need for the work of peak

bodies like IWOT in our sector? Yes, but we have to make governments pay for this service too, we have to sell this to them as beneficial to the work that we do and the efficiency in which we do it.

**(Powerpoint)**

When I talked to the women who attended the forums, there was some hesitation about IWOT due to difficulties faced in the past. I want to argue that it was not IWOT that failed in the past, but a lack of support to such an essential part of our organisations that represents who we are and how we work that made this almost impossible to achieve. I would argue that all of the aims and philosophies that IWOT stand for are relevant and it is now more important than at any time that we stand up for these parts of our services and ask governments to pay for the partnerships and the networks they are asking us to form. This is important work but it costs money.

So in conclusion we need to clearly articulate to governments the resources we need to do the work that they are asking us to do. We need to take some risks and organisations need to show leadership and support to each other as we navigate these changes together with governments. Feminist services are essential services in our communities and we need to draw on our knowledge and strengths to educate governments of our true value.

## Reference List

**Cuthbert**, Rachel, 2003, Tasmanian Council of Social Services, Tasmania, Australia.

**Miles**, Debra, 2004, With Women For Women: A study of Women's Experiences As Workers In Feminist organisations, Doctorate Thesis, James Cook University.

**Salvation Army**, 125<sup>th</sup> Celebrations Hobart Tasmania, 2009, The Mission or The Money: Faith Based Organisations in the Era of Competitive Tendering, [www.salvationarmy.org.au/imagine09](http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/imagine09)

**TasCOSS**, 2010, Partnerships for Community Services