



Women-Centred CED

Redefining CED in Canada

Editorial

BY MELANIE CONN

The last 20 years have witnessed a serious erosion of the policy focus on women's issues in Canada. There has been an influx of women into the workforce and from there, due to low wage and benefit structures, into working poverty.

Yet at the same time, there has been an influx of women – extremely diverse in age, ethnicity, and geography – into community-based action. In both rural and urban settings, women are re-asserting values of creativity, inclusiveness, and sustainability in economic decision-making.

Women involved in community economic development (CED) are altering the face of communities in Canada – redefining, in effect, CED and social economy. This special edition of *Making Waves* magazine examines and celebrates the emergence of *women-centred CED*.

We say *women-centred CED* rather than *community of interest* for two reasons. First, the connotation of self-interest implied by the latter term is confusing and distracting. Still worse, it has been used to discount our focus. Although *women-centred CED* starts from women's lives (and employs *gender analysis* to distinguish between the experience of men and women), its outcomes impact their children, their spouses, and their broader communities. Second, the focus on women has a unique meaning and should be differentiated from other communities with a specific focus.

Why Women?

The challenge of this special edition is to answer the question, "Why focus on women and CED?" and to engage practitioners and policy-makers in the work, its implications, and the actions that should be taken to support it.

The concept of *women-centred CED* is not commonly understood. The key feature of *women-centred CED* programs and projects is that they are based on participants identifying

themselves not by their geographic location, their income, or some other attribute – but *as women*.

This has several implications. First, it means that CED activities are conceived and implemented within an analysis of the social, economic, cultural, and political factors affecting women's lives. For example:

- Women's unpaid work in the home and the community is not recognized as "productive" in conventional economic calculations and allocations.
- Women are more likely than men to be living in poverty.
- Women are paid less than men for work of equal value.
- Women are more likely than men to be underemployed.
- Women lack access to credit, training, child care, and affordable housing.



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For all that, women are claiming and exercising ever greater authority in the economic, cultural, and political life of our communities.

Throughout this special edition you will learn about the deeper and different forms of discrimination and inequity experienced by immigrant women, aboriginal women, women with different abilities, senior women, and others. It is within this

Photo: Petey Sinclair, a cashier at Neechi Foods Co-op Ltd., Winnipeg, MB. Photo courtesy of Assiniboine Credit Union.

analysis of economics, sexism, and racism that CED is identified as a way to confront and reverse the systemic marginalization of women. In fact, this analysis increases CED's strategic importance and accounts for women's commitment to it. Turn to "8 Things To Know about Women and the Economy" (p. 8) for facts and figures that are key to understanding the importance of women-centred initiatives.

A second, practical implication of rooting CED in an analysis of women's situation in society is the prominence it gives to fundamental daily needs, so often overlooked when strategies focus on capital formation, return on investment, market expansion, and the like.



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Over the past 35 years, the world-wide women's movement has learned how to develop organizations and projects that foster women's participation. They provide such on-site supports as childcare, bus tickets, and lunches, clothes for job interviews, economic literacy, and basic computer skills. This "pre-pre-development" activity is integral to women-centred CED. At the same time, programs recognize participants' knowledge and abilities and factor them into the next stage of project development. In "Women at the Centre" (see p. 10), Doreen Parsons and Barbara Parker show how the Women's Economic Equality Society has been creating the tools and programs that rural women in Nova Scotia need to address systemic barriers and move forward with their lives.

Many women-centred projects come from outside the CED sector – a community kitchen/garden project started by a women's centre or an immigrant women's childcare group, for example. The congruence of their principles and practice with

those of CED is significant, however: the commitment to holistic objectives, to inclusivity, and to participation; the development and sharing of collective assets in formal or informal co-operatives; and the use of a grassroots rather than a top-down approach to organizing.

Sistering: A Woman's Place is approaching its 25th year working amongst Toronto's homeless, ill, and abused women and has outlived many other CED projects and organizations. In "Self-Employment or Income Supplementation?" (p. 40) Susan Clancy and Angela Robertson examine two employment-focussed projects that Sistering has undertaken. They ask some tough questions. How realistic is it to expect women whose lives have been severely complicated by poverty, ill-health, mental illness, and addiction to achieve economic independence? If the goal is much more modest (i.e., supplementary income) can the initiative still be termed "CED"? How can the sustainability of the organization be responsibly linked to the activities of women involved in income supplementation? Sistering's long experience as a flexible and respectful resource for women leads them to a powerful articulation of how women-centred CED can work for the women they know.

In an article concerning social enterprise in the United States (see p. 52), Kalyn Culler and Cindy Arnold present three examples of how women-centred CED "walks the talk" in a flexible manufacturing network, in the garment industry, and in childcare. Each enterprise structures its work such that 1) low-income women employees are able to advance in leadership; 2) the company remains a viable competitor; and 3) women are able to attend to their multiple responsibilities as wage earners, caregivers, and community members.

Many women's organizations are defined by a specific cultural, ethnic, or lifestyle perspective. Their CED work is based on solidarity within this perspective and focusses on confronting barriers to employment or participation grounded in racism or discrimination. Their experience enriches our knowledge about women's contribution to the community and needs to be integrated more effectively with that of the CED sector as a whole.

What would urban CED programming look like if it were rooted in the needs, capacities, and aspirations of young women? "Young Women Work" (p. 25) is a project that interviewed 50 young women (the majority Aboriginal) in Winnipeg's urban core. From them, Molly McCracken learned about the practical supports that need to be built into the network of community-based organizations these women already access. Safe and welcoming learning environments, childcare for young mothers, transferable technical skills – such services, if based on a strong social safety net, would make it possible for young women to take charge of their future, rather than drift into it.

The *Centre d'Éducation et d'Action des Femmes* (CÉAF) figures amongst the first women's centres in Québec and its interest in

Photo (left to right): Barbara Desmarais, Rose Mason, Louise Champagne, Nicole Chartrand, Ferne Chartrand – some of the worker-owners of Neechi Foods Co-Op. Photo courtesy of Assiniboine Credit Union.

local economic revitalization was ahead of its time in the 1980s. Julie Raby explains how CEAF has engaged the women of south-central Montreal in a sustained effort to turn their endangered neighbourhood into “A Good Place to Live” (see p. 15). *Taillissimo* is the latest project of this “grandmother” organization. Already a prize-winner in a provincial entrepreneurship contest, it’s a plus-size clothing boutique that will provide employment for local women, access to quality used clothing, and a storefront for the products of local artisans. The goals and planning process coincide perfectly with those of women-centred CED.

Challenges for Practitioners

Globalization is having increasingly serious repercussions on Canada’s communities. The weakening of the social safety net and the reduction or elimination of funding to advocacy and support organizations has made people more isolated and dependent on individualistic strategies. The women’s movement has been muted, its ability to mobilize reduced. For women living in poverty there are fewer options than ever for taking control of the future for themselves and for their families.

Women-centred CED can be a particularly effective means to provide direction and support for new and effective action. But to realize its full potential, practitioners face three great challenges, some of which relate to practice, others to policy and lobbying.

First there is the issue of “capacity-building,” often described as essential to CED. But a central premise of women-centred CED is that women already have considerable capacity: to network, provide mutual support, initiate, innovate, share resources, and pool information. The most effective practitioners know how to build on these strengths, nurture participation, and appreciate unique contributions.

There is ample evidence of this “asset-based” approach to CED in the pages that follow. The story of the PARO Centre for Women’s Enterprise testifies to the creativity and effectiveness of peer-driven programs even in rural parts of the country (see p. 20). The article by Janet Murray and Mary Ferguson (see p. 30) explains a new way of thinking about the supportive role that organizations have to play in women’s efforts to engage in the economy and in society. The Sustainable Livelihood model encompasses every aspect of a woman’s life (human, social, personal, physical, and financial), giving full recognition to such matters as increasing self-confidence, balancing family and work, and strengthening social networks.

“Enterprising Women” (p. 35) utilizes the Sustainability Livelihood model from the moment women indicate their interest in participating in the savings-matching project. Melanie Buffel describes how self-confidence and community bloom as women move towards their personal goals in the individual development account project she manages in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. In fact, while 85% of participants are expected to reach their

financial goal, its importance to them has been surpassed by the information, support, and connections that the project has provided. Buffel also addresses the challenge for practitioners working with an anti-poverty strategy that focusses on individual problem-solving. Asset development is a tool that can only succeed when other policy supports are in place.

Second, practitioners have yet to get governments fully on-side. There is a terrible irony in much CED work. While practitioners strive to reduce poverty and dependence on social assistance, income clawback policies in many parts of the country make it almost impossible to transition from social assistance to economic independence. Women involved in self-employment, microcredit, or co-operative development programs face a difficult choice: either work without income to maintain health, childcare, and other benefits, or devise ways to circumvent social benefit policies in order to finance an enterprise.



The key feature of women-centred CED programs & projects is that they are based on participants identifying themselves not by their geographic location, their income, or some other attribute – but as women.

Solidarity across the sector and with the other sectors must become a priority if the long-standing campaign to reform clawback policies is to succeed. “Charting the Territory” (p. 62) presents a strategy for government and organizational policy reform that, by actively encouraging women-centred CED, will work to the benefit of Canada’s communities.

Denyse Côté (see “Women and Social Economy,” p. 58) clarifies the Québec definition of social economy and its complex relationship with government. She argues forcefully that the provincial government short-circuited a very effective and cost-

Photo: World March of Women in the Year 2000 in Outaouais, QC. Photo courtesy of Denyse Côté.



efficient devolution of powers to women's centres by moving from a gender perspective to a gender-neutral policy. Her research makes a strong case for the importance of focussing on social infrastructure as the foundation for gains in economic outcomes, the essence of women-centred CED.

Third, there is the issue of finance. Short-term, project-based funding has seriously weakened the capacity of many communities across the country to undertake CED. Time and energy are instead absorbed in the perennial creation of "new" projects. The dilemma particularly applies to women-centred CED as a result of the withdrawal of funding for women's centres in most provinces and territories.

Core funding is key to the development and sustainability of CED organizations. In "A Win-Win Proposition" (p. 44), Debra Campbell describes how the Canadian Women's Foundation has learned to work in collaboration with both other funders and applicants to support the CED initiatives of women's organizations. The Foundation's innovative efforts to create a learning community among grantees is also bearing fruit, as the articles concerning PARO and the Sustainable Livelihoods model illustrate.

In "What Value Social Enterprise?" (p. 48), Janice Abbott describes another financing strategy in her story about Atira's adoption of the social enterprise model to supplement declining government revenue. A nonprofit manager of transition houses and programs, Atira entered Vancouver's highly complex and competitive property management sector, structuring its subsidiary to help meet the employment and training needs of its transition house clients and local residents. Although the success of Atira's Property Management, Inc. has a lot to do with good luck as well as hard work, the centrality of the parent's social mission keeping Atira's social mission front and centre has never been in question. While government funding is and will remain essential to the strength of the community sector, social enterprise is making an increasingly significant contribution.

There could be no better time for practitioners, community activists, and government departments with mandates in social or economic, community development, or women's issues to be introduced to the principles and practice of women-centred CED.

I welcome you to dig into this special issue about women-centred CED to learn more about the current scope and depth of the practice, and the challenges that lie before us.



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