

# **The Manitoba Women's Movement: Opportunities and Challenges Under an NDP Government**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

“The Women’s Movement in Canada – Does it Exist?”

This was the title of a panel held in Winnipeg on November 4, 1975 that brought together feminist women to discuss the meaning and potential of the women’s movement.<sup>2</sup> Almost thirty years later the spot light is once again on the English Canadian women’s movement. In a recent edition of *Canadian Dimension*, three women who each have made contributions to the feminist project in their own way, pondered the current status of the women’s movement, agreeing that it made momentous contributions to promoting women’s liberation and enhancing the democratic project, yet also agreeing that in the last few years it has been in abeyance.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps not surprising given the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), one of Canada’s most important and successful feminist organizations, had to lay-off staff in 2002 becoming to some “less visible as it regroups” following cut-backs in government funding.<sup>4</sup> Judy Rebick, a former president of NAC and perhaps this country’s best known feminist activist, has also recently shared her thoughts on the state of the second wave women’s movement, especially on its inability to “uproot” patriarchy. Judy Rebick, however, views the current situation as an opportunity to rejuvenate, calling for the establishment of a national “Strategy for Change II” conference to provide a space for debate and discussion in a forum that brings together “...feminists from every walk of life, every part of the country, every community, every organization and every generation”.<sup>5</sup>

These reflections by activists are part of a wider concern over the state of the women’s movement in Canada articulated by feminist academics. In an exploration of women’s political activism, Janine Brodie analyses how economic restructuring has profoundly influenced changes in state structures and governing practices. By abandoning the tenets of the Keynesian welfare state, she argues that successive Canadian governments have, over the last two decades or so, supplanted notions of the social safety net in favour of programs, policies and practices wedded to the ideals of efficiency, cost containment and competitiveness. The outcomes of this restructuring have had stark consequences for women. Indeed, as Janine Brodie sees it, what has emerged is a politics of marginalization, “...revealing in stark relief the uncertain and contested

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to acknowledge and extend thanks to the University of Winnipeg New Scholars program and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative-Manitoba (CCPA-Manitoba) for financial assistance on other projects out of which came this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The panel was held at an open meeting of the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women. MACSW, *Action*, Vol. 3, No. 5, December 1975, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Myrna Wood, Dorothy E. Smith and Tammy Findlay, “Whatever Happened to the Women’s Movement?”, *Canadian Dimension*, Vol. 37, #5, September/October 2003, pp. 23-25.

<sup>4</sup> Samra Habib, “NAC NAC. Who’s There?”, *Herizons*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Spring 2003, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Judy Rebick, “We’ve Come Part Way, Baby”, *Rabble News*, March 15, 2004. Retrieved at: [www.rabble.ca](http://www.rabble.ca) The first Strategy for Change conference was held in 1972 out of which was founded the National Action Committee on the Status of Women.

political space we are now occupying”.<sup>6</sup> Caught up in the politics of marginalization, women’s groups have had their government funding decreased and programs of importance to women, such as income security or job training, have been curtailed or downloaded from the federal government to cash-strapped provinces. One such group was the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women (MACSW), a province-wide feminist group founded in the early 1970s to monitor the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

However, even though confronted with funding and other resource challenges, women continue to act politically, either by running for elected office, lobbying government for policy change or seeking redress through the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.<sup>7</sup> What is still unclear is the extent to which women are engaging in political activism. In Manitoba, we cannot fully appreciate the way in which women are organizing for social, political or economic change, given there has not been a systematic study of the women’s movement in the province since the work of Ustun Reinart published over 10 years ago.<sup>8</sup>

So what about the women’s movement in Manitoba? I argue that women’s organizing and activism in Manitoba continues to build on a rich history of women’s mobilization, notable of which was the staging of a Women’s Parliament at the Bijou Theatre in 1893 used as a political tool by suffragists at the time to win the right to vote.<sup>9</sup> Many years later in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, during an era some have called third wave feminism, and a few years after the MACSW ceased operations in 1999, women’s groups continue to make sure that a range of services and benefits are available to Manitoba women, while also ensuring that federal and provincial governments are made aware of women’s policy issues.

Given the demise of MACSW then, the key question becomes: What are women doing in Manitoba? Or put another way: How are they organizing, and what does the women’s movement look like? Other queries of equal importance include: What challenges does the

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<sup>6</sup>Janine Brodie, “Restructuring and the Politics of Marginalization”, in Manon Tremblay and Caroline Andrews, eds., *Women and Political Representation in Canada*, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>L. Pauline Rankin and Jill Vickers, “Locating Women’s Politics”, in *Ibid.*, pp. 341-367.

<sup>8</sup>Ustun Reinart, “Three Major Strands in the Women’s Movement in Manitoba, 1965-1985”, in Jim Silver and Jeremy Hull, eds., *The Political Economy of Manitoba*, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, University of Regina, 1990), pp. 151-167. For other treatments of women’s organizing in Manitoba, see Berenice B. Sisler, *Partnership of Equals: The Struggle for the Reform of Family Law in Manitoba*, (Watson and Dwyer Publishing, 1995) and M. Jean Graveline, Katherine A. Fitzpatrick and Barbara E. Mark, “Networking in Northern Manitoba”, in Jeri Dawn Wine and Janice L. Ristock, eds., *Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada*, (James Lorimer, 1991).

<sup>9</sup>Kym Bird, “Performing Politics: Propaganda, Parody and a Women’s Parliament”, *Theatre Research in Canada*, Vol. 13, No. 1&2, Spring/Fall, 1992, p. 3.

women's movement, and specifically women's groups, confront? How has government spending and program retrenchment, which were instituted in earnest in the early 1990s under Gary Filmon's Progressive Conservative government, affected women's mobilization and activism? How is the women's movement fairing with a New Democratic Party government in office since 1999? These questions frame the following analysis, to argue that although the women's movement is largely segmented or fragmented into various types of groups since the demise of the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of, a feminist/equality-seeking women's movement does exist in Manitoba, although it is in a challenging situation for a number of reasons, in part *because* of the presence of an NDP government.

To make this argument, this paper is organized as follows: Part I discusses key concepts and establishes the framework of analysis for context and argumentation purposes. Part II offers a brief history of the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women as a lead into an investigation of the current make-up of the women's movement. As case studies to highlight the political opportunity structure that has constrained or facilitated the women's movement in the province, two specific groups – the Manitoba Child Care Association and the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, both of which advocate for increased child care services - are analysed in Part III. The final section offers some thoughts on the future of women's activism in the province.

## **Part I – Concept Definition, Framework of Analysis and Methodology**

This study prefers to think about the women's movement based on Sidney Tarrow's perspective that social movement spring out of a "contentious politics" when ordinary people mobilize to challenge individuals or power structures. With that oppositional component in mind then, social movements are defined as "collective challenges based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities".<sup>10</sup>

Any social movement is comprised of an array of collectives, networks, groups and organizations, or social movement organizations (SMOs), typically expressing a certain set of ideas or ideology, in this study shaped by a particular feminist or gender critique of structures, institutions and processes – i.e., the socio-cultural context, family and household, the economy and politics. Yet, in her analysis of the women's movement in the Republic of Ireland, Linda Connolly argues that the study of the women's movement wrongly focuses on ideological schisms, suggesting instead that it is more appropriate to understand the women's movement as:

...a 'maze' – in terms of ideologies, organizations, and participants – which is in a constant state of organic evolution and is capable of transforming itself over time and place.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 2 and p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Connolly, "The Women's Movement in Ireland, 1970-1995", *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1996, p. 46.

Of course this thought is not entirely new. The complexity of the women's movement in Canada was discussed by Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail in 1988 when they argued that the "women's movement has a shifting, amoeba-like character..." that has always been "politically, ideologically and strategically diverse".<sup>12</sup>

Yet the analogy of a maze suits, since it speaks to the way in which women's groups, as conveyors of the feminist project, do not necessarily know where they are going to end up (Will the strategy or project be successful?), nor is it always clear who the participants will be (either in the movement or in the SMO). What is clear is that women's groups, as social movement organizations, are shaped by a particular political opportunity structure that can either facilitate or constrain their capacity and ability to pursue their agenda. According to Susan Phillips, the political opportunity structure can be disaggregated into three sub-dimensions: 1) the structural or institutional access points to policy-makers available to the group, 2) the stability of political alignments, and 3) the presence of allies and support networks.<sup>13</sup> In an effort to identify current challenges to the Manitoba women's movement, this framework is useful to discern the issues of contention taken up by women in Manitoba, the groups that have formed around those issues, the government officials and other elites they target or lobby for policy change, analysed within the socio-cultural and political economic context of the province.

A qualitative approach to methodology and data collection where appropriate then, to identify those groups and issues. Personal interviews with key informants took place during 2003. A careful reading of documentation (from women's groups and government) and archival material was also undertaken. Groups included in this study were selected because they advocated an overt feminist or a women's equality agenda, recognizing that there are arguably many networks, ad hoc committees or groups unknown to the author and therefore not captured in the analysis. Moreover, there are surely many women who express their feminism via the anti-globalization and anti-war movements.

Given the diversity of the women's movement, this study analysed differing types of SMOs or women's groups, ranging from grassroots/community-based groups (e.g., Brandon Women's Centre, Immigrant Women's Association, Mothers of Red Nations, New WAVES, Rainbow Resource Centre, Réseau action femme, UN Platform for Action Committee-Mb or UNPAC, and the University of Winnipeg's Womyn's Centre) to formal, institutionalized groups and organizations (e.g., Child Care Association of Manitoba, Congress of Black Women, Women's Legal Education and Action Fund/Manitoba, Provincial Council of Women, Manitoba Women's Institute, The Women's Health Clinic, and the United National Development Fund for Women, Manitoba or UNIFEM). Some of these organizations are also associated with national and international entities (Manitoba Women's Institute, Provincial Council of Women, UNIFEM, LEAF). See Appendix One for a complete list of interviewees.

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail, *Feminists Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Susan D. Phillips, "New Social Movements and Unequal Representation: The Challenge of Influencing Public Policy", in Alain-G. Gagnon and A. Brian Tanguay, eds., *Democracy with Justice*, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992), pp. 263-271.

Some of these groups were established in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, others during the second wave women's movement, while some have been created much more recently. The Manitoba Women's Institute was established in 1910 and the Provincial Council of Women has been in existence since 1949. Although these two organizations were established well before the rise of the feminist/women's movement, and by some accounts may not generally be included in definitions of the women's movement, they are considered to be part of this study, and the Manitoba women's movement, because they have taken-up issues typically-identified women's movement groups, such as women's health and poverty, and some times have worked with feminist organizations in coalitions (such as the Women's Health Clinic and MACSW).

Second wave organizations included in this study are the Black Women's Congress, Fort Garry's Women's Resource Centre, Immigrant Women's Association, The Women's Health Clinic, Rainbow Resource Centre, Réseau action femme, and Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, Manitoba. Others were established in the 1990s, such as: the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, Mothers of Red Nations (Morn), The Women's Centre (Brandon) and UNPAC. In 2002, Women's Action Against Violence and for Equal Status (New WAVES) was established, and in 2003 a Winnipeg chapter of UNIFEM was formed.

These groups and organizations have been slotted into four activity/purpose categories: identity-based, issue-oriented, service and safe space providers and equality advocates, recognizing that select activities of some of the groups could be located elsewhere in the typology.<sup>14</sup> See Appendix One for this categorization. This categorization is useful to analytically distinguish one category (and hence group) from another in order to get a good sense of what the group or organization is about, what ideas underpin its strategies, and what activities they are engaged in. For example, all of the groups and organizations interviewed argue, in their own particular way, that women's lives are different from men's and that something needs to be done in order to improve women's social, economic and cultural situation. Some groups articulate their goals and objectives framed around an equality discourse (LEAF, Manitoba Child Care Association, Manitoba Women's Institute, Provincial Council of Women, Réseau action femme,) while other groups articulate a much more pronounced feminist agenda (Child Care Coalition, Elizabeth Fry Society, New WAVES, Rainbow Resource Centre and University of Winnipeg Womyn's Centre). Still other groups, which include some of the aforementioned, also operate as feminist organizations - women-centered and participatory (New WAVES and the Women's Health Clinic), or consider their activities to be a "...concrete embodiment of feminism...supporting women to be full and autonomous human beings"<sup>15</sup> such as the Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre.

Put another way, some of the groups interviewed have organized to promote women's equality and to help women remedy their particular issues; other groups support that agenda, and

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<sup>14</sup> Joan Grace, *Women's Organizations in Manitoba*, (Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, 2004). *Forthcoming*.

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview with Sherri McConnell and Sabine Musik, Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre, May 2, 2003.

also seek systemic change either in societal or institutional practices, in recognition that women confront unique barriers in their quest for self-determination and economic independence. For the latter, interjecting women's experiences and voices can act as a catalyst for change, because as Debbie Blunderfield put it, "We know it is a very patriarchal, capitalist system".<sup>16</sup>

The women's movement in Manitoba, then, is not homogeneous, arguably part of its strength given the movement reflects the diverse experiences, needs and demands of women.<sup>17</sup> Mothers of Red Nations, however, preferred to think of their group as being part of the broader "people's movement" in Manitoba, rather than as entities that express a feminist agenda. According to Leslie Spillett of Morn, feminism does not fit culturally, nor does not fit historically. Rather, what aboriginal women need and have demanded, is the right and capacity to "...reclaim our own words, our own identification" due to being so "...damaged culturally by centuries of colonization...". Yet Morn does support gender analysis and vigorously supports all "people's liberation, no matter what".<sup>18</sup> This group is included in this study because of its importance to the socio-political and cultural make-up of the province. See Appendix Two for a brief overview of a select number of these women's organizations.

## **Part II - The Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women - A Brief History**

Ustun Reinart has argued that various strands of women's activism once comprised the women's movement in Manitoba, largely organized into three political camps: liberal, socialist and radical feminism.<sup>19</sup> Women who held any of these particular ideas, participated in groups such as the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women, or the more radical wing of the movement - the Winnipeg Women's Liberation Movement, the Socialist Women's Collective and the Winnipeg Lesbian Society, to name a few. In the very early days, MACSW appears to have operated based on the ideas and principles of, what Jill Vickers has called, "radical liberalism" similar to the ideas that underpinned the National Action Committee on the Status of Women during second wave women's movement in Canada when it was initially established.<sup>20</sup> Shaped by the dominant liberal-reformist political culture at the time, radical liberalism provided a framework for the women's movement based on: a commitment to the political process, a

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<sup>16</sup>Personal interview with Debbie Blunderfield, Elizabeth Fry Society, April 24, 2003.

<sup>17</sup>Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail, *Feminists Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup>Personal interview with Leslie Spillett, Speaker, Mothers of Red Nations, April 10, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Ustun Reinart, "Three Major Strands in the Women's Movement in Manitoba, 1965-1985".

<sup>20</sup> Jill Vickers, "The Intellectual origins of the Women's Movement in Canada", in Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, eds., *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), pp. 40-45. See also Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin and Christine Appelle, *Politics As If Women Mattered: A Political Analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 37.

belief in the efficacy of state action (especially working through the welfare state), a belief that change is possible, and that change can come about through dialogue with others.<sup>21</sup> A close reading of MACSW newsletters indicates that MACSW's objectives were underpinned by radical liberalism, and as it developed over the years, elements of a broader feminist critique were interjected into its ideological foundation(s) and strategies for change (e.g., young women's issues, lesbian and gay rights).

It may not be well known that the MACSW was actually established in 1967 (calling themselves the Manitoba Volunteer Committee) and later evolved into the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women in 1971 just after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women reported in 1970 and *before* the National Action Committee on the Status of Women was established in 1972. The principle of the original group was to act as a committee of women towards "raising people's consciousness of the current secondary status of women", to educate Manitobans about the recommendations of the RCSW, to receive and exchange information with other groups, and to work toward the implementation of the RCSW's recommendations.<sup>22</sup> As the first "action" committee formed in Canada at this time, the original collective had no financial resources, yet a wealth of experience in the women who comprised the group.<sup>23</sup> With later funding assistance initially from the Department of the Secretary of State and subsequently from Status of Women Canada, offices were eventually opened across the province in Brandon, Dauphin, Thompson and Winnipeg. MACSW also endeavoured to reach out to women outside of Winnipeg in rural and northern communities. They did so by holding occasional conferences, such as the Northern Women's Conference in 1973 and the Women in Rural and Northern Manitoba Conference in 1975, and by reporting of events and activities of rural women such as the Portage Farm Women's Organization in 1987 and the Manitoba Farm Women's Network in 1988. As well, a rural coordinator, located in the Brandon office, was designated to report on rural issues and activities from the late 1980s to early 1990s.

From available archival data, by 1979 membership stood at about 400 individuals. There was also by this time a well-established organizational structure consisting of an Executive Committee, elected at the Annual General Meeting, comprising a Chairperson, two Vice-Chairs, a Secretary, a Treasurer and representatives from five standing committees (finance, membership, communications, program and nominations, and up to ten members-at-large. As needed issue committees were also struck, which in 1970 included media monitoring, political action, labour and education.<sup>24</sup>

During the time period of its operation, from 1971 to about 1999, a newsletter was published to inform and co-ordinate the activities of members. Many issues were tackled by

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> MACSW, *Action*, Vol. 4, No. 1, March 1976, p. 1 and p. 3. Quoted in original source.

<sup>23</sup> Berenice B. Sisler, *A Partnership of Equals: The Struggle for the Reform of Family Law in Manitoba*, (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1995), p. 19 and p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> MACSW, Three Year Plan, 1979-1981, dated August, 1979. University of Brandon Archives.



MACSW ranging from child care, peace and disarmament, discriminatory aspects of the *Indian Act*, Native women's issues, women's reproductive choice and access to therapeutic abortions (especially when anti-choice forces restricted access in Dauphin and Brandon in the early 1990s), to equal pay, pension and family law reform, ending violence against women, free trade, city politics and women's poverty.<sup>25</sup> MACSW gave presentations to legislative committees, lobbied government officials and politicians both at the provincial and federal levels, held various political action campaigns, staged candidates debates during elections, held conferences (such as those noted above and the Women in Politics and Public Life conference in 1973, held workshops and symposiums and attended conferences organized by other groups (such as the 1981 Women and the Constitution conference held in Ottawa). MACSW eventually became the main spokesperson to the media on women's issues and co-ordinated the "Manitoba women's movement" response to the provincial government on issues of the day or on certain policy proposals.

MACSW also participated in ad hoc coalitions with other women's groups, one very good example of which was joining the Action Coalition on Family Law to formulate a response to the recommendations of the Manitoba Law Reform Commission in the mid-1970s.<sup>26</sup> In the mid-1980s, MACSW was also associated with a group organized to respond to the Meech Lake Accord, a constitutional amendment proposed by the federal government that, among other things, granted distinct society status to Quebec. Eventually, this ad hoc group, called the Westman Coalition for Equality Rights in the Meech Lake Accord, was formed in Brandon in April 1988 as a vehicle for rural women to demand that the Meech Lake Accord be amended to guarantee women's equality rights.<sup>27</sup> Later, the Westman Coalition lobbied for the inclusion of women's rights in the Charlottetown Accord. In the mid-1990s, MACSW work with the Manitoba Women's Social Policy Coalition to respond to the federal government's Social Security Review.

#### *After the Demise of the MACSW – The Current Face of the Women's Movement*

MACSW's funding was frozen in 1988 and core funding was cut in 1998 leaving the organization, like many others in the province and in other jurisdictions across Canada, at the verge of closing its doors - which it did in 1999. What did women's groups do afterward? Did the absence of a "central" multi-issue organization matter?

Women's activism and organizing did continue. First, some of the women who were members of MACSW went on to establish or join other groups or organizations. Paula Mallea, for example, an active member of the Westman Coalition for Equality Rights, is now with the

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<sup>25</sup>Personal interview with Liz Sarin, former member of MACSW, Dauphin, July 30, 2003; Personal interview with Jennifer Howard, former staff member of MACSW, Brandon, August 6, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> MACSW, *Action*, Vol. 4, No. 2, May-June 1976, p. 1. For an in-depth account of the Action Coalition on Family Law, see Berenice B. Sisler, *A Partnership of Equals*.

<sup>27</sup> MACSW, *Action*, Vol. 15, No. 6, June 1988, p. 17. "Westman" refers to Western Manitoba.

Brandon Women's Centre. Muriel Smith, a former Chair of the MACSW, went on to run for elected office in Manitoba in 1981 and 1986 (and later became the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, an MLA in the NDP government of Howard Pawley) and has since participated in groups such as the Provincial Council of Women, UNPAC and the Winnipeg Branch of the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Mary Scott and Liz Sarin, both members of MACSW at one time, have participated in other groups; Mary Scott with the Provincial Council of Women and both later became active in UNPAC and UNIFEM.

Second, the Manitoba women's movement transformed to adapt to prevailing political realities. The movement, for example, appears not to be as segregated into political camps as it once was, perhaps a reflection of organizing into single-issue and other types of groups discussed above. And, women's groups continue to function, adapting to reductions in government support and the emergence of a neo-liberal political policy context. Even though the funding structure was revamped at the federal level, some groups and organizations were successful in receiving funding from Status of Women Canada (SWC), or from other government sources. For example, the Child Care Coalition received funding from SWC to undertake an analysis of child care in Winnipeg (further elaborated below). New WAVES received funding from SWC to hire a staff person, and received monies from the Manitoba government to expand their "No Means No" campaign. And UNPAC received substantial funding from SWC to research and develop their Women and the Economy project (see Appendix Two for further elaboration).

Other groups rely on funding from other sources. The Women's Health Clinic has received monies from various government-funded projects of departments, such as Health Canada. The Manitoba Women's Institute, a unique case when it comes to funding, receives an annual grant from Manitoba Agriculture, through a yearly application process, and operates under the auspices of provincial legislation, *The Women's Institute Act* enacted in 1930.

However, as noted by many others, project funding does not facilitate the capacity of individual groups and organizations to carry on operating, and some of the smaller groups interviewed related that they do struggle given lack of appropriate funding. One particular case is the Immigrant Women's Association (IWAM). In March 2001, funding for IWAM's Counselling Unit was discontinued by the Manitoba Department of Family Services and transferred to a non-immigrant agency. Their Community-Based Language Training Programme was also transferred to a non-immigrant agency the following month and the lease on the premises they occupied was also eventually transferred. As of June 30, 2003, IWAM had no funds and no office space of its "own" (subsequently relocated at the University of Winnipeg).<sup>28</sup> According to the IWAM, this has left the organization unable to provide the holistic range of services and programs to immigrant women that it once did, such as language training, advocacy, conferences and culture-sensitive counselling.

Does it matter that there is no central women's organization? It matters in the sense that women's groups, in part due to proximity and because the city is a relatively small community, have developed informal networks and personal ties that support their work, such as sharing

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<sup>28</sup>Personal interview with Beatrice Watson, June 5, 2003, Immigrant Women's Association and Immigrant Women's Association of Manitoba, July 2001 Newsletter.

mailing lists to promote their issue or to organize activities and events – that otherwise may have been organized by MACSW. This is important because it renders the movement invisible, a concern since without the visible presence of women’s groups, which can only come with stable funding targeted to an entity that can mobilize a significant number of groups and organizations, a sustained feminist or equality agenda is threatened.

For others, the absence of MACSW has other consequences. A few interviewees relayed that since MACSW disbanded there is no longer a strong, nor unified feminist voice in the province to bring women together to challenge government policies or to educate women and the public about federal and provincial policy, or about the consequences of gendered social relations and power structures.

Liz Sarin, for example, a former member of MACSW in Dauphin, feels that there is something missing in Manitoba now that the MACSW no longer functions. Her concern is that since the closure of the Brandon, Dauphin and Thompson offices of MACSW, rural women now have far fewer venues to choose from to either facilitate mobilization or to meet to discuss issues of salience to them.<sup>29</sup> This is in comparison to women in Winnipeg who have a plethora of groups or institutionalized feminist/women’s organizations to join. This lack of attention and understanding of rural women’s issues and needs was echoed by Paula Mallea and Gladys Worthington at The Women’s Centre in Brandon.

Jennifer Howard, another former member of MACSW, reiterated Liz Sarin’s concerns, stating that no group or organization has developed to take the place of MACSW as the “community voice of women” with a presence across the province. Nor, she further related, is there a core women’s organization for the provincial government to identify as the “authority of women’s issues”.<sup>30</sup> Jennifer deGroot, of UNPAC echoes these sentiments. Jennifer found that during her research for the *Women and Economy* project when she held focus groups outside of Winnipeg, rural women were clearly looking for ways to have their voices heard. To an extent then, there is a urban-rural divide in the women’s movement that is evident but not irreparable, consistently challenging groups and organizations in Winnipeg to keep “in touch” with women and issues beyond the perimeter.

### **Part III – Assessing the Political Opportunity Structure**

As stated above, the political opportunity structure can either facilitate or frustrate the work and agenda of a social movement organization. Here, we look at the political opportunity structure in the policy sector of child care, highlighting the three dimensions as suggested by Susan Phillips – policy access, political alignments and allies. Initially, however, we turn to the issues of contention that have compelled Manitoba women to act.

*Why have women continued to organize?*

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<sup>29</sup> Personal interview with Liz Sarin, former member of MACSW, Dauphin, July 30, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview with Jennifer Howard, former member of MACSW, Brandon, August 6, 2003.

Just as they did in decades past, women continue to organize because they face many of the same challenges as they did during the second wave era. It has perhaps been even more important for women to organize in the last decade or so since conditions for some have become even more desperate, the disturbing persistence of the feminization of poverty being a case in point. Women's poverty is in part a consequence of a decade of program downsizing during the 1990s under Progressive Conservative governments in Manitoba and a neo-liberal policy agenda implemented by the federal Liberal government. In a well-documented study by Darren Lezuski, Jim Silver and Errol Black, the statistics tell it all. In 1996, two of every three – or 68.5 per cent – of single-parent households in Winnipeg's inner city, a majority headed by women, had incomes below the poverty line.<sup>31</sup> By 1999, it was reported that 19.9 per cent of Manitoba women aged 18 and over were considered poor,<sup>32</sup> and by 2001, Manitoba had the highest child poverty rate in Canada.<sup>33</sup> For aboriginal and visible minority women in Manitoba, poverty is even more acute. Aboriginal poverty rates, especially in Winnipeg's inner city, have consistently been high, with aboriginal child poverty twice that for all children. In fact, it was reported that in 1996, almost two-thirds of all aboriginal households in Winnipeg, or 64.7 per cent, had incomes below the poverty line, while in the same year, 31.8 per cent of minority women were impoverished.<sup>34</sup>

Economic security and independence have also been jeopardized relative to men's due in part to low-wage employment in the service sector.<sup>35</sup> A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba indicates that one in three workers fell into this category, with 36.5 per cent of women, as oppose to 25.8 per cent of men, earning a low wage.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, 46.2 per cent

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<sup>31</sup> Darren Lezuski, Jim Silver and Errol Black, "High and Rising: The Growth of Poverty in Winnipeg", in Jim Silver, ed., *Solutions that Work: Fighting Poverty in Winnipeg*, (Winnipeg & Halifax: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba and Fernwood Publishing, 2000), p. 39

<sup>32</sup>Lissa Donner, *Women, Income and Health in Manitoba: An Overview and Ideas for Action*, (Winnipeg: Women's Health Clinic, July 2000), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup>Campaign 2000, *Honouring our Promises: Meeting the Challenge to End Child and Family Poverty*, p.1. Retrieved on May 6, 2004 at: [www.campaign2000.ca](http://www.campaign2000.ca)

<sup>34</sup>Darren Lezuski, Jim Silver and Errol Black, "High and Rising: The Growth of Poverty in Winnipeg," in Jim Silver, ed., *Solutions that Work: Fighting Poverty in Winnipeg*, (Winnipeg & Halifax: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba and Fernwood Publishing, 2000), p. 39. Statistics for visible minority women taken from Lissa Donner, *Women, Income and Health in Manitoba*, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup>For an excellent analysis of women's experience in the economy, which contains specific discussion and data on Manitoba, see UN Platform for Action Committee, (Mb), *Women and the Economy: A Resource Book - Book One* and *A Resource Book - Book Two* and companion video *Banging the Door Down: Women and the Economy*, (Winnipeg: UN Platform for Action Committee, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Errol Black and Todd Scarth, "Rising Job Tide not Lifting Now-Wage Boats", Review of

of Manitoba's minimum wage earners are adults, with 59.2 per cent of those being women.<sup>37</sup> Further, many women still do not have access to much needed affordable child care to even enter into the paid labour market. According to the Child Care Coalition and the Manitoba Child Care Association, access to child care is fundamental to alleviating poverty while also promoting women's equality.<sup>38</sup> In Manitoba, however, there are licensed child care spaces for about one in ten children, this ratio being worse for some age groups and communities.<sup>39</sup>

On the health care front, women also do not have viable access to therapeutic abortions, under-service being particularly acute in Northern and rural locations.<sup>40</sup> Some have also been organizing to ensure that the health care system is sensitive to the needs of women, particularly after the curtailment of some services (hospital bed closures, shortened hospital stays), the introduction of user fees and a lack of medical professionals since the early 1990s.<sup>41</sup> Violence and abuse perpetrated against women also continues to be of utmost concern to women in the province given the way in which it impedes women's equality.<sup>42</sup> The Canadian Council on Social Development reported recently that in Canada, nearly one woman in three is victimized in her home, indicating further that immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse due to language barriers (in reporting and seeking help).<sup>43</sup> Aboriginal women, in comparison, experience the highest rates of abuse and violence, an issue made horribly evident when two aboriginal women were murdered by a former boyfriend in February 2000 after

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Economic and Social Trends in Manitoba, *CCPA Monitor*, Spring 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Just Income Coalition, *Minimum Wage Policy in Manitoba*, Brief Submitted to: The Premier and Caucus of the Government of Manitoba, April 26, 2004. Retrieved on May 5, 2004 at: [www.just-income.ca](http://www.just-income.ca) Data on the percentage of women who comprise the minimum wage work force taken from Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, *SPC Bulletin*, Winter 2004. Retrieved on May 6, 2004 at: [www.spcw.mb.ca](http://www.spcw.mb.ca)

<sup>38</sup> Personal interview with Pat Wege, Manitoba Child Care Association, March 10, 2003; personal interview with Cecile Cassista, Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, April 14, 2003; and Manitoba Child Care Association, *Annual Report 2001* and one-page leaflet.

<sup>39</sup> Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, *Blueprint for Action: A Five Year Plan for Manitoba Child Care Policy Redesign*, February 2001, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Molly McCracken, "Manitoba Women Have Access to Abortions... As Long as They Have Time or Money", Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-MB, *Fast Facts*, September 23, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Barbara J. Payne, Karen R. Grant, Cheryl Christian and David M. Gregory, "Blurring the Boundaries: Women's Caring Work and Manitoba Health Care Reform", Centres of Excellence for Women's Health, *Research Bulletin*, Volume 3, No. 1, Spring 2002, pp. 11-13.

<sup>42</sup> Personal interview with Sarah Amyot and Mandy Fraser, New WAVES, April 9, 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Canadian Council on Social Development, *Nowhere to Turn? Responding to Partner Violence Against Immigrant and Visible Minority Women*, Executive Summary, p. 2. Retrieved on May 14 2004 at [www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2004/nowhere](http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2004/nowhere)

repeated calls to Winnipeg's 9-1-1 emergency response unit were ignored.<sup>44</sup> The experience of women in the justice system is also of concern in Manitoba, especially when one considers that women are the fastest growing population in the prison system (world-wide) with aboriginal women accounting for a very high percentage of that population in the province.<sup>45</sup>

Women have also organized to ensure that Canada implements recommendations to promote women's equality outlined in international agreements, to understand the effects of globalization on women, and to draw attention to the struggles of women in other countries. UNPAC, for example, has been urging the provincial and federal governments to implement the *Platform for Action*, a document produced at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, which outline measures to advance women's equality. The Winnipeg branch of UNIFEM –the women's fund at the United Nations which provides funds and technical assistance to promote women's human rights - was established given the severe strife women are experiencing around the world, made particularly urgent given the war in Iraq and the anti-terrorism campaign being waged in Afghanistan.

#### *Child Care - Access Points to Policy-makers, Political Alignments and Allies*

In 1995, while in Opposition, the NDP released a policy document outlining its vision of Manitoba. This document, entitled *Building Manitoba Together*, mentioned the party's intent to promote women's equality, referring specifically to pay equity. This section of the document also related the party's commitment, if elected, to develop a comprehensive, publicly funded, non-profit child care system, albeit within the context of building capacity for Manitoba families.<sup>46</sup> In May 2000, just eight months after the election, the NDP channeled a much needed \$9.1 million into the child care budget.<sup>47</sup>

Following this budget decision, the government released what they called their child care

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<sup>44</sup> Doreen Leclair and Corinne McKeown, who were sisters, were murdered by McKeown's former boyfriend. Policy responded to the first and last calls only. Following the tragedy, an inquest was held to investigate the failure of the 911 system. On the issue of domestic violence see Jane E. Ursel, *Report on Domestic Violence Policies and Their Impact on Aboriginal People*, Submitted to: Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, (Winnipeg: RESOLVE Manitoba, February 21, 2001); and Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women, *Assessing Violence Against Women: A Statistical Profile*, 2002, p. 14. Retrieved on May 13, 2004 at: Manitoba Women's Directorate, [www.gov.mb.ca/wd](http://www.gov.mb.ca/wd)

<sup>45</sup> Personal interview with Debbie Blunderfield, Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba, April 24, 2003. Elizabeth Fry Society's objective or mission is to "...actively seek to reduce the number of women and girls that are involved in the criminal justice system" in two ways: direct service delivery and social advocacy.

<sup>46</sup> The Manitoba New Democratic Party, *Rebuilding Manitoba Together*, March 1995, 45 and 46.

<sup>47</sup> Manitoba Government, "9.1 million Increase in Funding for Manitoba's Child Care System," *News Release*, May 18, 2000.

vision paper in February 2001 prepared by the Child Day Care Regulatory Committee.<sup>48</sup> This Regulatory Committee, created in 1998 by the previous government, is made up of 24 representatives of the child care sector. The discussion paper envisioned a universal, accessible, affordable child care system built around six components: standards and quality care; funding; training and professionalism; governance; integrated service delivery; and public education. The vision paper was used to guide the NDP's public consultation, which elicited an enormous response<sup>49</sup>, eventually forming the basis of the government's five-year child care plan. The *Five-Year Plan for Child Care (Five-Year Plan)*, again developed by the Regulatory Committee, was released in April 2002 framed around three major elements: maintaining and improving quality; improving accessibility; and improving affordability.<sup>50</sup>

According to the Manitoba Child Care Association, since the initial cash outlay upon assuming office, the NDP has consistently increased funding over the years which has resulted in an concomitant increase in the number of spaces.<sup>51</sup> The NDP went on to increase funding again, in September 2003 (\$1.5 million in additional support for the creation of 788 new spaces), with a further \$4 million promised in the recent April 2004 budget.<sup>52</sup> The Manitoba Child Care Association also considers the *Five-Year Plan* as a positive, substantive response from the NDP. According to Pat Wege, the Executive Director of the Manitoba Child Care Association, the NDP has proven itself to be a government that, not only has provided policy access to child care advocates and listens to what they have to say, they have also proven themselves with clear policy outcomes. As Pat Wege sees it, "...they just get it", referring to the NDP's understanding that child care is an important as both a women's issue and an issue for parents, unlike the overall position of the previous government.<sup>53</sup> The Manitoba Child Care Association considers

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<sup>48</sup>Family Services and Housing, *A Vision for Child Care and Development in Manitoba*, February 2001. Available at: [www.gov.mb.ca/fs/programs/cfs/visionpaper.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/programs/cfs/visionpaper.html)

<sup>49</sup>The government received over 24,000 responses to the vision paper, which appears to have included signatures to a petition as well as letters from concerned groups and the attentive public. For a summary of the responses see Family Services and Housing, *Summary of the Public Response to A Vision for Child Care and Development in Manitoba*. Available at: <http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/programs/cfs/visionfindings.html>

<sup>50</sup>Child and Family Services, *Manitoba's Five-Year Plan for Child Care*, April 2002. Available at: <http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/programs/cfs/fiveyearplan.html>

<sup>51</sup>The Manitoba Child Care Association is the largest provincial child care association in Canada with 2,800 members. It is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1974. The group's mission is "To advocate for a quality system of child care, to advance early childhood education as a profession, and to provide services to [its] members." Manitoba Child Care Association, *Annual Report, 2001* and one-page leaflet.

<sup>52</sup> Manitoba Government, "\$1.5 Million in Support to Create Over 788 New Child Care Spaces", *News Release*, September 10, 2003. For budget information see [www.gov.mb.ca](http://www.gov.mb.ca)

<sup>53</sup>Personal interview, Pat Wege, Executive Director, Manitoba Child Care Association, March 10, 2003.

the province to be poised to implement a rather comprehensive child care system, the missing piece at this point to be the necessary federal funds to put the *Five-Year Plan* into reality. The recent \$900 million federal funding announcement, by way of the five-year multi-lateral agreement which builds on a September 2000 commitment to expand early childhood development programs,<sup>54</sup> certainly goes part of the way in stepping child care up to the plate, but according to Pat Wege, “Canada was still a long way from a true national day-care program”.<sup>55</sup>

The members of the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba agree with this sentiment.<sup>56</sup> However, although they generally applaud the NDP for placing further funding to child care, the Child Care Coalition takes a much more critical perspective based upon three major concerns.<sup>57</sup> First, there needs to be more money directed to child care, a concern they share with the Manitoba Child Care Association. Second, a comprehensive, integrated and co-ordinated system of child care must be the articulated policy goal. Third, any child care system must be democratically administered and publicly accountable.

They are more critical because even with the cash infusion, child care in Manitoba is in crisis a situation not unlike many other jurisdictions across Canada. According to a recent report written by one of the founding members of the Child Care Coalition, there is licensed child care spaces for about one in ten children under the age of 12. Overall, it is estimated that 175,000 children do not have access.<sup>58</sup> In part, it comes down to a matter of not enough funding. To ensure a quality, comprehensive system, such as that developed by some European countries, Manitoba would need to commit and spend \$266.4 million a year on child care instead of the 2002-2003 actual budget of \$67.1 million.<sup>59</sup> Severe under-funding has not only impeded the building of a viable child care infrastructure, it has contributed to a severe lack of access to

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<sup>54</sup>Human Resources Development Canada, “Supporting Canada’s Children and Families,” *News Release*, March 13, 2003. This new national program is outlined in the *Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care*.

<sup>55</sup>David O’Brien, “Day care gets \$33-M boost: New national program will help fund another 5,000 spaces in province,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 14, 2003, A3.

<sup>56</sup>The Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, established in 1994, is a coalition of approximately 40 groups and a number of individuals. The coalition’s mandate is to “...work toward a fully accessible, publicly-funded, non-profit system of comprehensive and high quality child care, with worthy wages and good working conditions for staff”. Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, *Annual Report, 2001*.

<sup>57</sup>Especially given that provincial funding for child care dropped 14 per cent, under the PC government, between 1989 and 1999. Susan Prentice, *A Decade of Decline: Regulated Child Care in Manitoba, 1989-1999* (Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, June 2000), Summary.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 3 and 1.

<sup>59</sup>Susan Prentice, “Childcare: Manitobans Should Curb Their Enthusiasm,” *Fast Facts* (Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, March 20, 2003), 2.



various communities across Manitoba. Since the vast majority of regulated spaces are located in Winnipeg, rural, northern, and aboriginal communities are consistently under-served,<sup>60</sup> as are special needs and the Franco-Manitoban communities. Between 1995 and 1998, 1 in 2 centres had to turn away a child with special needs due to lack of staffing, while Franco-Manitobans know well the lack of child care available in their first language.<sup>61</sup>

Under-funding has also contributed to high child care fees. Users of day care centres generally pay annual fees of \$7,280 for infant care (\$28 per day), \$4,888 for preschool day care (\$18.80 per day) and \$3,170 for school-age child care (\$9.60 per day for school-days, \$18.80 for in-service and summer).<sup>62</sup> And fee subsidies do not cover the entire cost of day care for those who qualify. Since 1993, any centre or home child care service can surcharge a subsidy fee parent of up to \$2.40 per day.<sup>63</sup>

The Child Care Coalition also advocates for the development of a comprehensive, integrated and co-ordinated system of child care. In their opinion, policy, program and institutional fragmentation has only served to increase the ills in child care service delivery on top of the problem of inaccessibility and high parental fees. In Manitoba, since early childhood education, child care and family support services are scattered across an array of government departments, "...there is little infrastructure to coordinate child care as a sector to enable policy development and analysis or service innovation" unlike the health or education sectors.<sup>64</sup> One serious concern in this regard is the NDP's attention and direction of funds to its Healthy Child Initiative which has streamlined funds to early childhood development programs and away from regulated child care.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Susan Prentice has related that only 20 per cent of last year's funds received from the federal government through early childhood development initiative, mentioned above, was actually spent on regulated child care.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, the Child Care Coalition's criticisms of the state of child care in Manitoba do not end with policy or program outcomes, or even funding commitments. They are also concerned about the way in which child care policy has been developed. To address a perceived lack of

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<sup>60</sup>Susan Prentice, *A Decade of Decline*, 14-17.

<sup>61</sup>Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, *Blueprint for Action: A Five Year Plan for Manitoba Child Care Policy Redesign* (Winnipeg: Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, February 2001), 7.

<sup>62</sup>Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, *Blueprint for Action*, 6.

<sup>63</sup>Susan Prentice, *A Decade of Decline*, 8.

<sup>64</sup>Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, *Blueprint for Action*, 6.

<sup>65</sup>The Healthy Child Initiative focuses on programs such as prenatal and early childhood nutrition programs, placing nurses in schools, adolescent pregnancy prevention and fetal alcohol syndrome. Manitoba Government, "Province Launches Healthy Child Initiative," *News Release*, March 28, 2000.

<sup>66</sup>Susan Prentice, "Childcare: Manitobans Should Curb their Enthusiasm," 1.

transparency and accountability, they advocate the creation of a Child Care Policy Redesign Advisory Group to replace the existing Child Day Care Regulatory Review Committee.<sup>67</sup> This proposal emanates from a concern that child care policy outcomes, such as the *Five-Year Plan*, while a good start, are still unresponsive to the community due to the deficiencies outlined above. Moreover, since the Regulatory Review Committee's membership, deliberations and policy development proposals are confidential and protected under Freedom of Information, the Child Care Coalition prefers this committee either be disbanded or opened up to public scrutiny so as to implement "democratic administration" which to their mind, is expected of an NDP government.<sup>68</sup>

What are the opportunities available to child care advocates? Regarding policy access, the Manitoba Child Care Association and the Child Care Coalition have had continuous access to the government officials, both at the ministerial level, and at the center of the provincial government, in the Premiers Office. In strong terms, all of these groups related that the NDP government is always willing to listen and dialogue on the issue of improving child care, quite unlike the previous Progressive Conservative government. At the bureaucratic level, The Child Day Care Regulatory Committee also provided policy access and potential participation in policy-making in the Department of Family Services. Given the confidentiality surrounding this committee, however, it is unclear the extent of their participation and why, or why not, they were effective.

For child care advocates, federalism is another potential macro-institutional access point. Indeed, in 2003, the Child Care Coalition undertook a one-year research project, funded by Status of Women Canada's Women's Program, to look at the direct and indirect social and economic impacts of licensed child care in Winnipeg called the *Childcare Research as a Tool for Development: A Social and Economic Impact Study of Childcare in Winnipeg*. This action research project is being undertaken under the guidance of an Advisory Council, comprised of representatives from the social and business communities, the Aboriginal community, as well as federal, provincial and city governments.

With regard to the political or policy environment in the province, both organizations had as part of the advocacy repertoire opinions polls that indicate that Canadians consistently support the development of a national child care policy.<sup>69</sup> When Canadians, and by inference

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<sup>67</sup>Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, *Blueprint for Action*, 15. This new advisory group would ensure that parents and users of child care services would hold at least one-quarter of seats, early childhood educators would occupy one-quarter and the remaining 50 per cent would be held by child care advocates from various communities (aboriginal, ethno-cultural, labour, anti-poverty and social justice groups). Representatives from the Ministry of Family Services and Housing, Education and Health Child Manitoba would also be included.

<sup>68</sup>Susan Prentice, *A Decade of Decline*, 23; Personal interview, Cecile Cassista, Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, April 14, 2003.

<sup>69</sup>See poll results, dated January 27, 2003, on the Childcare Resource and Research Unit web page (as reported by the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada) indicating that 90 per cent of Canadians say the either strongly agree or agree with the statement "Canada should have a

Manitobans, were opposed to the development of a national child care system, it generally had to do with social conservative oppositional forces that valorize the role of women and the extended family as the care giver – a position articulated by foes of publicly-funded child care such as REAL Women.<sup>70</sup> REAL Women of Canada, for example, was highly critical of Status of Women for providing funds to child care groups, specifically mentioning the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, stating that the money was used to cover the cost of “propaganda studies” that promote government funded child care as oppose to family-based, informal day care.

Further, child care advocates can also use as part of their lobbying strategy the argument that there are economic benefits to improving child care services, since access to child care can potentially facilitate women’s entrance into the labour market, and ease the double burden of women already in the labour force.<sup>71</sup> Child care then, can be packaged as meeting other policy priorities of the NDP government, while attending to the demands of the Manitoba labour movement – an ally of child care advocates and a political supporter of the government.

Would an the presence of an organization like MACSW provided more policy access, better policy advocacy, more effective lobbying and therefore, a different policy outcome? It is unlikely that a MACSW-like entity would have been able to influence the NDP any more than the Child Care Association and the Child Care Coalition has attempted to do, but frankly remains unknown at this point. The NDP is adamant in resisting funding and implementing a child care system that will substantively meet the needs of women, because of their stated objective of adhering to certain fiscal criteria (an express position of the NDP mentioned in the *Five- Year Plan*). This “stay the course” approach does not bode well for child care advocates, nor for any women’s group seeking government intervention and funding (for their organization or in the policy sector) in the province.

Why? Economic uncertainty seems to plague the province, at least that is the rhetoric. Granted, since the NDP assumed office, Manitoba’s overall economic performance has exceeded the national average, and since then, the unemployment rate has consistently been one of the lowest amongst the provinces. Yet, Manitoba economic fortunes are not secure. Since the last census, population growth was negligible, a worry for any government regarding the presence of a tax-paying, skilled work force.<sup>72</sup> Manitoba is also a have-not province that depends on federal

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national co-ordinated child care plan.” Available at: <http://www.childcarecanada.org/>

<sup>70</sup> REAL Women of Canada, “At the Status of Women, The Funding Tap Flows Unchecked”, *REALity*, Vol. 22, No. 5, September/October 2003. Retrieved on May 13, 2003 at: [www.realwomenca.com/newslettr/2003](http://www.realwomenca.com/newslettr/2003)

<sup>71</sup>In 1999, women comprised 54.6 per cent of the labour force in Manitoba; 38.3 per cent of employed women were unionized. See Manitoba Women’s Directorate, *Women in Manitoba: A Statistical Profile*, released November 13, 2002, 21 and 24

<sup>72</sup>Manitoba’s population grew by just +0.5 per cent according to data comparing figures from the 1996 and 2001 census. Jane Armstrong, “Canada is 30 million, but will that last?”, *The Globe and Mail*, March 13, 2002. Available at: <http://www.globeandmail.ca>

equalization and transfer payments (equalization payments were apparently lower than projected by the province and the health care funding transfer was reduced by \$104 million for 2004), typically accounting for 35 per cent of the province's revenue base.<sup>73</sup> It is also has a small, open economy heavily tied to the American market, vulnerable as well to downturns in prices of agriculture products, a situation that became severe in May 2003 and into 2004 following the BSE crisis and draught, along side a downturn in American tourism due to SARS and 9-11. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, growth in real GDP fell from 3.0 per cent in 2000 to 1.6 per cent in 2001, a consequence of the recession in the United States,<sup>74</sup> although Manitoba did perform better in 2002 (prior to the BSE Crisis) with a 3.1 per cent growth in GDP.<sup>75</sup>

However, an insight in the provincial government's "want to, but..." approach has more to do with the NDP's attempt to implement a policy and political program based on pragmatic idealism as the Premier and leader of the Manitoba NDP, Gary Doer has referred to it. To his mind, pragmatic idealism is a political agenda that works for Manitobans. It does so because it is a political agenda and direction that implements a set of concrete policies that directly affects peoples lives, such as ending so-called "hallway medicine", while at the same time giving Manitobans a political party to vote for rather than merely voting against a right-wing alternative.<sup>76</sup>

And pragmatic idealism certainly fits this government's balanced, cautious approach. On the one hand, the NDP has taken on some of the policy ideas and prescriptions that mirror a centre or slightly to the right political party, measures that includes implementing tax reductions and maintaining balanced budget legislation - and spending only so far - arguably due to the exigencies of the province's economic reality. On the other hand, there is a sense in which this government is reaching out to women, although as individual citizens, taxpayers or parents. For example, the NDP has been one of the few governments in Canada to fully restore the National Child Benefit for families on social assistance and university tuition fees were reduced by 10 per cent and frozen for three years. It should also be noted that the NDP have kept the Women's Directorate and the Manitoba Women's Advisory Council, potentially important institutional access points for women's groups, fully functioning unlike other jurisdictions such as Saskatchewan.

Yet, in many respects, pragmatic idealism mirrors the politics of the Third Way, which according to the work of Angela McRobbie, "...envisages a politics for women without feminism" one of the intents of which is to make the political party, here New Labour in Britain,

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<sup>73</sup> Government of Manitoba, "Budget 2004 Highlights", *News Release*, April 19, 2004.

<sup>74</sup>Paul Phillips, *State of the Manitoba Economy: Report, 2001-2002* (Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, 2002), p.1.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>76</sup>Helen Fallding and Paul Samyn, "Doer offers up recipe for NDP success," *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 24, 2001, A4.

more attractive to more women by distancing itself from the old battles lines of left versus right politics.<sup>77</sup> Whereas the Third Way is a politic that speaks to women in an attempt to capture the ordinary “floating woman voter”, in Manitoba pragmatic idealism is well suited to do just that, as well as capture and keep the floating or wavering Progressive Conservative voter in historically-held PC ridings in Winnipeg, as well as in a few in rural areas such as Gimli.<sup>78</sup>

However, as Angela McRobbie further argues, a political party’s successful distancing from feminism, or the women’s equality agenda in this case, is not so easily done. In the wake are those traditional Manitoba NDP voters who will be wholly dissatisfied with a watered-down social democratic agenda, perhaps leading some to view the NDP’s timid response as a “betrayal”. Yet, the NDP, either in Manitoba or at the federal level, has long been a party of muted social democracy, accepting the need for balanced budgets, tax reductions to individuals to stimulate the economy, as well as governments that “work” to ensure “better capitalism”.<sup>79</sup> These policy stances have been articulated before by the NDP so as to expand their appeal and hence electoral success. In the final analysis, however, the implications of the NDP government’s willingness to give procedural access, but no substantive policy responses are not good for women, since the NDP responds only to a point so as not to appear to be mismanaging the economy to the conservative voter and the Winnipeg-based business community.

#### **Part IV - Where to From Here? - The Future of the Manitoba Women’s Movement**

Should we accept the idea that the women’s movement, in its current form in Manitoba, can be effective as it is – that is, with a number of groups and organizations seeking specific claims in distinct groups, or should we be concerned, as Myrna Wood is, that the women’s movement has become too single-issue?<sup>80</sup> Do women need to advance their claims through one united voice? Or, is it more reasonable to accept that in a post-backlash, neo-liberal policy context, women may choose to express their feminism by way of their participation in certain events, groups or organizations, while not actually identifying themselves as “feminist”, or decide not to join a women’s equality or feminist group at all?<sup>81</sup>

The overall message in this paper is that it does matter. Although women’s activism and

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<sup>77</sup>Angela McRobbie, “Feminism and the Third Way,” *Feminist Review* 64, Spring 2000, 99.

<sup>78</sup>Dan Lett, “NDP’s support near record levels,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 13, 2003, A3.

<sup>79</sup>M. Janine Brodie and Jane Jenson, *Crisis, Challenge & Change: Party & Class in Canada* (Toronto: Methuen, 1980), 287, 289.

<sup>80</sup> Myrna Wood, *Canadian Dimension*, p. 23.

<sup>81</sup> This idea is inspired by the work of Glynis George, *The Rock Where We Stand: An Ethnography of Women’s Activism in Newfoundland*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 167.

the women's movement continues to function, a current and future concern is that the fragmentation of the movement will only serve to facilitate the NDP's cautious approach, allowing them to act in an ad hoc fashion. There is a strong argument to be made, then, for the reestablishment of a multi-issue women's organization to act as an urban-rural connector for women across the province and to foment a strong political presence.

And a strong presence is crucial. For women's groups in the province, lessons can be drawn from the analysis of the Manitoba Child Care Association and the Child Care Coalition regarding the political opportunity structure and policy context, albeit with modifications for differing policy sectors. First, federalism can either facilitate their work, or act as a blame avoidance tactic. That is, like the Child Care Coalition, monies are available at the federal level to undertake important and much needed studies. However, the provincial government can easily, and to the minds of many perhaps rightly, avoid responding to women's groups and blame the feds for not acting due to either a decrease in transfer payments or economic uncertainty. Second, depending on the issue, the political culture of Manitoba is tricky for women. Manitobans appear to be at once liberal, or moderate social democrats (i.e., open to the idea of some government intervention) yet also quite conservative. Regarding the issue of access to abortions for example, there is a sense in which conservative communities in many rural areas in the province have made the NDP hesitant to appear to be overly pro-choice, evidence of which is the government's refusal to pay for abortions at the privately-operated Morgentaler Clinic (recently renamed Jane's Clinic after the operation was purchased by a group of local women).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated that a viable women's movement does exist in Manitoba, even though the current political opportunity structure presents both opportunities and challenges to women's groups. The province struggles to meet funding and spending requirements, made all the more difficult given low growth in GDP, a suffering agricultural and tourism economy on top of a decrease in federal transfer payments.

One of the most significant challenges to women's groups, however, is the NDP's predilection to "stay the course", striving to constitute itself as a centre-left "liberal democratic" political party – perhaps more center than left - filling a gap in Manitoba's political party system due to an almost non-existent Liberal Party in Manitoba, while also responding to the demands of fiscal and social conservatives in the province. By all indications, the NDP will likely continue to govern as they have – policy development with women in mind, but not women's equality.

**Interviewees (by Category, Name and Group/Organization Affiliation)**

Identity-Based Advocates:

Marlene Cormier, Reseau action femmes  
Donna Huen, Rainbow Resource Centre  
Norma Walker, Congress of Black Women  
Beatrice Watson, Immigrant Women's Association of Manitoba  
Leslie Spillett, Mothers of Red Nations

Issue-Oriented Advocates:

Sarah Amyot, Women's Action Against Violence and for Equal Status (New WAVES)  
Madeline Boscoe, Women's Health Clinic  
Debbie Blunderfield, Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba  
Cecile Cassista, Child Care Coalition of Manitoba  
Jenniefer deGroot, UN Platform for Action Committee (Mb), (UNPAC-Mb)  
Jen Faulder, Anti-war and social justice activist (No War with Iraq Coalition)  
Mandy Fraser, Women's Action Against Violence and for Equal Status (New WAVES)  
Mary Scott, UN Platform for Action Committee (Mb), (UNPAC-Mb), United Nations Development Fund for Women, (UNIFEM, Winnipeg branch) and a former member of MACSW  
Muriel Smith, UNPAC-Mb, UNIFEM, Winnipeg and former President of MACSW  
Pat Wege, Manitoba Child Care Association

Service and Safe Space Providers/Advocates:

Marla Gilmour, The Women's Centre (Brandon)  
Paula Mallea, The Women's Centre (Brandon)  
Sherry McConnell, Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre  
Gina McKay, University of Winnipeg Womyn's Centre  
Punam Mehta, former Director, University of Winnipeg Womyn's Centre  
Sabina Musik, Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre  
Gladys Worthington, The Women's Centre (Brandon)

Equality Advocates:

Diane Hall, Manitoba Women's Institute (Gimli)  
Betty Hopkins, Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, Manitoba  
Jennifer Howard, former member of Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women (MACSW), Brandon  
Arlene Jones, Provincial Council of Women  
Liz Sarin, former member of Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women (MACSW), Dauphin

Other:

Kim Clare, Manitoba Women's Advisory Council (now former Chair)

### A Selection of Manitoba Women's Groups and Organizations

#### *Child Care Coalition*

The Child Care Coalition was formed in 1993 advocating for a “fully accessible, publicly-funded non-profit system of comprehensive and high quality childcare, with worthy wages and good working conditions for childcare staff”.<sup>82</sup> In 2003, the coalition has approximately 50 group memberships, drawn from the labour movement, the childcare community, women's groups, educators and researchers and other organizations active in the social justice movement in the province.

The coalition has compiled and published detailed reports on the state of child care in the province, releasing a *Blueprint for Action* in February 2001 and an action plan called *Vision Into Action: A Seven Step Manitoba Child Care Strategy*, in May 2001. Over the last year, the Coalition has been engaged in a one-year action project on child care in Winnipeg called *Childcare Research as a Tool for Development: A Social and Economic Impact Study of Childcare in Winnipeg*, funded by Status of Women Canada's Women Program, guided by an Advisory Council made up of representatives from the social community, the business sector, municipal, provincial and federal governments, labour, and the Aboriginal community.

#### *Manitoba Women's Institute (MWI)*

The MWI was established in Morris in 1910 and is associated with both an international and national body.<sup>83</sup> A rural women's organization, the motto of MWI is “For Home and Country” dedicated to women's personal development, family, agriculture and rural development.<sup>84</sup> MWI holds two meetings a year for its members, one in which representatives of MWI meet with ministers of the provincial government to relate their ideas and concerns. The organization receives a grant from Manitoba Agriculture, through a yearly application process, and operates under the auspices of provincial legislation, *The Women's Institute Act*, enacted in 1930. Membership stands at approximately 720, down from 1,500 in 1972.

The MWI has a long history of lobbying government for policy change and in educating its members and the public on social issues, notably in the sector of health care reform. MWI has also been involved in family law reform during the 1970's, and in the 1980's, they advocated for midwifery services. In the 1990's, along with other women's groups, they supported the establishment of the Transitional Council of the College of Midwifery. More currently, MWI has engaged in an education program on women's and child poverty and have studied the issue of rural child care.<sup>85</sup> Of course, farm issues have also been of deep concern to MWI which have included, among other issues, advocating for crop insurance adjustments and tax exemption for wages paid to domestic workers on farms.

#### *Mothers of Red Nations Women's Council of Manitoba, Inc. (Morn)*

Morn was officially established in 1999, “To promote, protect and support the spiritual, emotional, physical and mental well being of all Aboriginal women and children in Manitoba; and, to provide voice, representation and advocacy for Aboriginal women through spiritual, cultural, social, economic, political, educational, and recreational

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<sup>82</sup> Child Care Coalition of Manitoba, Pamphlet, February 2003.

<sup>83</sup> Which are respectively, The Federated Women's Institute of Canada established in 1919 and the Associated Country Women of the World, officially created in 1933.

<sup>84</sup> Personal interview with Diane Hall, President, Manitoba Women's Institute, July 22, 2003; and the organization's web site at: [www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/organization/wi](http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/organization/wi)

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



development.”<sup>86</sup> Although a Winnipeg-based group, Morn has contact with women in the North with a membership base of approximately 600 women. The group has a number of goals, two of which are: to “Promote awareness and understanding of Aboriginal women to counter the stereotypes in public and private institutions” and to “Unite Aboriginal women in Manitoba to work together to find effective solutions and remedies to the myriad and complex concerns and issues facing Aboriginal women and children.”<sup>87</sup>

Like the Congress of Black Women and the Immigrant Women’s Association of Manitoba,<sup>88</sup> Morn has a specific interest in revealing both sexist and racist attitudes and practices experienced by women in Manitoba, within a broader critique of how colonialism has subjugated Aboriginal peoples. Morn advocates for policy change on a number of fronts, one particular issue being the reformation of the education system and the concomitant establishment of an Aboriginal school division, necessary because the current system has failed to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and their families.

Morn is affiliated with the Native Women’s Association of Canada, the Metis Women’s Council of Canada and the Inuit women’s group, Uk Tu Teet. Morn’s coalition politics also extends to occasionally working with the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg and the Women’s Council of the Manitoba Chiefs. In April of this year, Morn, the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg and the Southern Chiefs held a forum of women’s issues. Topics discussed included identifying gaps in services, women’s access to services and certain policy concerns of Aboriginal women.

#### *New WAVES - Women’s Action Against Violence and for Equal Status (NW)*

The goal of NW’s is to “focus on young women and students as a source of new ideas and energy for facing old problems” designed to “revive the public debate about issues relating to violence against women and women’s rights”.<sup>89</sup> Established in September 2002, NW was initiated by the Canadian Federation of Students and the University of Winnipeg Women’s Centre. There is little group structure, preferring instead to keep their operation flexible and inviting to young women and young men who may otherwise be intimidated or hesitant to join a formal organization.

NW is keenly interested in reaching young Manitobans to stimulate their education and learning about violence against women and women’s rights and hopefully their consequent action in support of NW’s project to “...promote general public awareness, amongst both men and women, of feminism and feminist issues”.<sup>90</sup> To do so, NW has been developing a resource kit for distribution to high schools and post-secondary institutions, which would be accompanied by a presentation on the purpose and aim of NW’s. They have already held a public forum, on March 6, 2003, on the issue of violence against women and were invited by the Manitoba Women’s Advisory Council to take part in a Roundtable on violence prevention held in June 2003.

#### *Provincial Council of Women of Manitoba (PCWM)*

The PCWM was established in 1949 and like the WI, is part of a pyramid of Councils located at the international, national and local (Winnipeg) levels. The vision of PCWM is to be “A vibrant, pro-active, council of

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<sup>86</sup>Mothers of Red Nations Women’s Council of Manitoba, Inc., Pamphlet.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>The Congress of Black Women, created in 1981, is the provincial chapter of the Congress of Black Women of Canada is a non-profit organization “...planned and developed to enhance the consciousness, education and rights of and for Black Women in Manitoba”. Congress of Black Women of Manitoba, Leaflet. The Immigrant Women’s Association of Manitoba was established in 1983 to “...address the needs of immigrant women and their families and to facilitate the smooth integration of immigrant women into Canadian society.” Immigrant Women’s Association of Manitoba, *Challenges & Choices*, leaflet.

<sup>89</sup>New WAVES, *Campaign Proposal*.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., and Personal interview with Mandy Fraser and Sarah Amyot, New WAVES, April 9, 2003.

women, reflective of the diversity of society, influencing political decision-making and public attitudes”.<sup>91</sup> PCWM represents a constituency of about 40,000 women in Manitoba by way of federates (group and organization members of PCWM). The PCWM has regularized contact with the provincial government meeting with cabinet and opposition very two years and specific cabinet ministers on an on-going basis. The PCWM have advocated for policy change on a vast array of issues which have included over the years, employment and pay equity, new reproductive technology, poverty, prostitution, health, education and illiteracy, often presenting briefs to parliamentary and legislative committees. PCWM have also organized candidates debates for the 1999 provincial election and the 2003 city council election.<sup>92</sup> Recently, the PCWM became a member of the Just Income Coalition, an ad hoc collective addressing inadequate wage levels.<sup>93</sup> Although PCWM is an organization which advocates a women’s equality agenda, the current President, Arlene Jones, related that PCWM is feminist-oriented, explaining that even though the more conservative member groups may not consider themselves to be feminists, when the values and policy goals of feminism are discussed they support those values and goals.<sup>94</sup>

#### *UN Platform for Action Committee (UNPAC-Mb)*

UNPAC-Mb was formed in 1995 after the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China. The group, originally comprised of 30 women who attended the Beijing conference, advocate to the provincial and federal governments for the implementation of the *Platform for Action*, a document which was the product of the Beijing meeting and other United Nations agreements which outlines measures to advance women’s equality.<sup>95</sup> Critical themes of the *Platform for Action*, such as poverty, health and violence, became part of the annual work plan of UNPAC. As well, an Outreach group supported rural Manitoba community projects.<sup>96</sup>

UNPAC women knew the critical use of electronic communication. An internet workshop, called Alice in Cyberland, was held in 1999 attended by approximately 100 women who learned about e-powerment and just how the internet could be used for connecting and information sharing among women at any location in the province and many points beyond. Another workshop, funded by the Manitoba government, was held a few weeks later. As well, *Snippets*, UNPAC’s electronic newsletter up and running about three years ago, was initially received by 10 individuals and is now received by over 100 people, another important tool for women’s cyber-organizing.<sup>97</sup>

From 1996 to 1999, UNPAC held a yearly conference on a special theme. Past conferences were held on such topics as: “Girls Today, Women Tomorrow”, “Striving for Women’s Economic Equality and Independence” and “Beyond Beijing”. A more current endeavour, *The Women and the Economy* project, has been in the development process for some time and was launched in June 2003. This project, funded by SWC, was developed by UNPAC because “...women’s contributions to the economy have been ignored and diminished...”, and because “...women are in many ways excluded from economic decision-making, and that women’s exploitation in the economy is increasing due to globalization”.<sup>98</sup> The end product is multifaceted, with detailed data and analysis of women’s relationship to the economy available on UNPAC’s web page, as well as two volumes of printed material and a companion video entitled *Banging the Door Down: Women and the Economy*.

<sup>91</sup>Provincial Council of Women of Manitoba Inc., Pamphlet. The International Council of Women was founded in 1888; in 1893 the National Council of Women was established.

<sup>92</sup>The All-Candidates Mayoralty Forum was co-sponsored by the Council of Women of Winnipeg.

<sup>93</sup>The Women’s Health Clinic and UNPAC are also Just Income Coalition partners.

<sup>94</sup>Personal interview with Arlene Draffin Jones, Provincial Council of Women, April 1, 2003.

<sup>95</sup>Retrieved on July 16, 2003 at: [www.unpac.ca](http://www.unpac.ca)

<sup>96</sup>Mary Scott, *The Networking Organization: Working with Information Technology*, unpublished paper.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>UNPAC, *Annual Report 2001-2002*, retrieved on July 3, 2003 at: [www.unpac.ca](http://www.unpac.ca)

### *Women's Health Clinic*

The Women's Health Clinic has been at the forefront of advocating on behalf of women's health care needs. Established in 1981, it is a "...feminist, community-based health care centre offering a range of services to women from teens to elders"...underpinned by a set of principles which, in part, argue that a person's health status translates into a person's greater control over their life situation. The Women's Health Clinic is "...committed to facilitating the empowerment of women, individually and collectively...".<sup>99</sup>

The Women's Health Clinic provides a resource center to the community, offers a wide range of services and programs (often in partnership with other community organizations or the provincial government such as aids prevention project mounted through the AIDS Canada Action Program), conducts research (such as the Women, Poverty and Health project funded by Health Canada), offers counseling and social support and has also been engaged in a number of advocacy projects, such as lobbying the provincial government to improve women's access to abortion services (with the Coalition for Reproductive Choice).

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<sup>99</sup> Personal interview with Madeline Boscoe, Women's Health Clinic, March 3, 2003; information also retrieved on April 30, 2003 at: [www.womenshealthclinic.org](http://www.womenshealthclinic.org)