The Women's Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean: Political and ethical considerations

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Introduction

The Women's Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean was established in May 1996. The Centre brings together the teaching and research interests and expertise of women across disciplines to investigate issues and disseminate information of specific relevance and benefit to women.

The Centre creates a forum for research initiatives and consultancy work across a wide range of educational, social, historical, cultural, political and urban issues pertaining to women.

The objectives of the Centre are:

- to contribute to the understanding of problems in industry, the community and government pertaining to women - particularly in western Sydney;
- to undertake research and consultancy work on the needs, and for the benefit, of women;
- to contribute to the development and transmission of knowledge;
- to create a database of information relating to women's issues;
- to promote the interchange of information between women's organisations in western Sydney and nationally;
- to contribute towards policy decisions pertaining to women;
- to promote links with other university women's organisations;
- to promote links and the interchange of information with trade unions and industry.

This paper raises political and ethical issues related to the establishment of and ongoing operation of the Centre. Trends in higher education and local factors which require consideration and in achieving funding for the Centre will be outlined. Problems and successes faced by the Management Committee in its first year of operation will also be addressed and a brief description of current project being undertaken will be provided.

Background

The Women's Research Centre was born within the political and economic climate of radical restructuring in higher education advocated in the Federal Government's policy, (the Dawkins Report, 1988). This context of restructuring is crucial in understanding the Centre's creation and within a new era since it identifies the imperative to establish new political spaces.

The Women's Research Centre is the younger of the two newly created universities. The White Paper on Higher Education (Dawkins, 1988) advocated, inter alia, that higher education must be structured to eliminate the binary system of universities and colleges of advanced courses or integrated into existing courses and whether it should concentrate on undergraduate or graduate programs. In the event, all the options were taken. Particular programs developed to professional organisations and within the University. But the reality was that the University. The establishment of the University meant that considerable attention and effort were required in the area of research and in meeting with the range of universities, and for the benefit, of women.

The White Paper made it clear that universities were expected to invest significant proportions of research funding from the private sector and that they could no longer expect the Federal Government to fully finance the wholly higher education operation in Australia.

This history, then, sets the parameters within which research centres such as the Women's Research Centre were established and the changes in focus from teaching in research in former CALs; and the expectation that universities would attract funding from outside sources.

In response to pressure embodied in the White Paper, the University of Western Sydney established the Women's Research Centre, (established in January 1989, set up a number of programmes to encourage research activity. These included institutional and external research links, visiting fellowships and research centres. The Women's Research Centre is the youngest of the two newly created universities. The Centre for Industrial Research & Technology (established in 1998) is the third research centre. The Centre for Industrial Research & Technology (established directly as the Faculty of Science & Technology) and the Communication, Health and Information Research Centre (established as the Faculty of Health Studies) were established in 1989. Each Centre receives funding from NSW, and is not expected to become self-funding. In contrast to the other two Centres, and reflecting the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the Research Centre, the Women's Research Centre is not attached to a particular faculty. This situation constitutes one of the great strengths, but also one
Establishing a women's research centre

The impetus for the Women's Research Centre arose from the inaugural Australian Women's Studies Association conference held at the University of Sydney in 1978. A Women's Studies Research Group was formed at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean to formulate a proposal for a women's studies centre. The group was chaired by Gretchen Pointen of the Women's Research Unit, University of Sydney and other members included Judy Wall and Brian L. McInerney. Professor Jillian Maling, the Chief Executive Officer of the University of Western Sydney, Nepean lent formal support to the Centre's creation.

A significant feature of the research group, and of the current management team of the Centre, is the fact that it draws its membership from both economic and general staff. This knowledge of the fundamental co-incidence and centrality of women's issues to economic issues was a crucial element in their mandate to operate for the benefit of, and be accessible to, women staff regardless of their position within the organisation. This means that issues pertinent to general as well as academic women staff were, and continue to be, represented by the objectives of the centre in the form of research initiatives and the funding for research.

The Affirmative Action needs of academic women are well documented (Gale 1980; Cas et al 1983; Gale & L. O'Leary 1989; Allen, 1990), but those of general staff women are under-researched and comparatively under-represented within Federal Employment Opportunity debates and initiatives. The women working at the University of Western Sydney at that time were acutely aware of the overlap of interests between a women's research centre and the objective of enhancing the University's Employability Opportunity, and the benefits to be gained from focusing these interests within the institution.

During the proposal for the Women's Research Centre, the research group questioned the philosophy underlying the exclusion of women's research from the University's research agenda. The group embraced the concept of having a research centre that focused on research, policy and action for women. Women researchers, according to the group, should not be isolated in their research initiatives but should be involved in the establishment and implementation of a research agenda that meets the needs of the women's community.

The pursuit of the advancement of knowledge within women's studies, and researching the needs of social groups which have been persistently undervalued and under-represented in the economic system, has frequently led to research initiatives which were of interest in the development and potentialisation of the economic system. This is a common occurrence in the economic system, where the research is focused on the needs of social groups which are often under-represented by that system.

The Women's Research Group assessed that the Centre needed to be established as a research centre for women. The Centre needed to be a space where women's research could be conducted, where research was not constrained by the constraints of the economic system. The Centre needed to be a research centre where women's research could be conducted, where research was not constrained by the constraints of the economic system. The Centre needed to be a research centre where women's research could be conducted, where research was not constrained by the constraints of the economic system.
Oral History of Women Trade Unionists: The War Years

The outbreak of war in 1939 Australian women were called upon to move out of the home and into the factories and workshops to take over jobs vacated by men who went to war. Despite doing men's jobs, they were simply not protected by the same conditions and disciplinary measures. As a result, women were paid only between 54% and 96% of male wages.

Working conditions for women, who were also expected to support and care for their families, were often difficult and demanding. Under these conditions, women workers began to organise and demand better wages, working conditions and other work-related benefits, such as child-care. Organisation of, and agitation by, women workers appealed many women who became strong unionists, including delegates, organizers and paid officials.

The Women's Research Centre intends to undertake a research project on the oral history of women unionists during the Second World War: a time of extremely high employment for women. These trade unions would be approximately 75 to 80 years of age and unless their experiences are documented soon they will be lost. This facet of women's history has thus become invisible as much of women's history has become invisible.

Social Change in the Public and Private Sectors: Dual Perspectives on Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action

EOE and affirmative action programmes, backed by legislation, constitute a major avenue for improving women's position in paid employment. The over aim of EOE and affirmative action is to allow for the rapid transformation of the labour force of the public and private sectors into one in which education and training, which remains underdeveloped and undefined, and to policy-makers, researchers and agents of social change as a whole.

The Women, Employment and Trade Union Participation in Western Sydney Project

The headquarters for research and consultancy from the private sector is even more difficult. Not only is the research centre for the study of women's experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination, but it is also faced with ethical dilemmas in deciding whether to accept funding from certain organisations that oppose, or at the very least, do not support, the goals and objectives of the centre. We would not be prepared to accept funding from companies that manufacture products which are instrumental to women's and the nation's wellbeing. Examples include tobacco, alcohol and the arms industry. In obvious cases, however, it could be argued that sponsorship from certain companies or organisations in support of research and policy formulation may be necessary to ensure the success of the project. Women's issues may influence the issue of the consciousness of those companies about such issues. Nevertheless, we need to guard against the accusation that women's organisations have sold out to the interests of others.

The Centre has already been confronted with the dilemma of having to decide whether or not to accept funding from organisations which disagree with the views of speakers invited to the sponsored event. Accepting sponsorship, on occasion, leads directly to censorship of the Centre's report. The Centre has therefore been forced to make a decision to remain financially small in order to compromise the objective of representing and supporting women's needs and in preserving the NHHF. (SNH)

The Centre and employers to create the context and preconditions to enable women to compete equally with men in the paid workforce.