SW 658: Women and Community Organizing  
Winter 2001

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Course Description: This course examines the concepts, histories, and practices of women building community. We will examine women’s experiences of and contributions to community change both in the U.S. and in international contexts. Students will learn about models, methods and skills of practice and the roles of women as constituents and organizers of diverse communities. This course moves women’s stories to the center of discussion. We will review dominant models of community organization and consider the presence or absence of women and gender therein. We will examine the social construction of gender; explore the struggles and successes of women’s community-based action in diverse cultural, political and historical contexts; and reflect on the lessons for practice learned from women’s experiences in community building. Forces that facilitate and limit women’s community participation will be addressed. We will draw from research and practice in the field to inform and critique theoretical perspectives and develop guidelines for action.

This course is geared to prepare participants for the increasingly important challenges of building local-global ties. Participants will use internet resources as one means for learning about and promoting women’s community organizing work. Students will be introduced to the “Women Building Community” website, developed in conjunction with the course, which reports on six case studies of women organizing community in Chile and the U.S. The course will include a workshop component where members practice the skills of organizing. As part of the course, class members will organize an event bringing women activists together to share their stories of community organization.

Course Content: Existing community organization theory and practice will be addressed, with particular attention given to critical feminist and cultural perspectives. Questions of meaning, power, history, context, and possibility will be central to the discussion. Some of the themes to be addressed in the course include: “community” as a complicated concept; the history of women and community organization; differences among women (class, race, sexual identity; citizenship, age, etc); feminist perspectives and critiques of feminism; women, poverty and grassroots organizing; women, the state and violence; gender, labor, and transnational organizing strategies; and the contradictions of development.

A primary component of the course is the development of skills for practice. The course will be participatory in nature. Members will learn and practice basic skills of group facilitation. As we build community in the classroom we will confront questions of power and difference and explore strategies for conflict resolution. We will explore models for empowering community-based practice and consider possibilities for both building alliances and respecting differences among women.
"One of the things that I simple will not do now is shut up. The women of my generation in Latin America have been taught that the man is always in charge and the woman is silent even in the face of injustice. Outside of the house, she couldn’t speak of this. Now I know that we have to speak out about the injustices publicly. If not, we are accomplices. I am going to denounce them publicly without fear. This is what I learned. This is the form the struggle takes.”

Maria del Rosario de Curruti, in Revolutionizing Motherhood

“A few years ago in New Haven, I tried to relate to feminism through a local women’s center (located in a Yale basement). I was politely informed that I should ‘organize’ with Black wimmin. In other words, get out. I wanted to start several projects that would include more third world wimmin, but I was told to talk to black wimmin about that. In short, white only.

Doris Davenport, “The Pathology of Racism: a Conversation with Third World Wimmin,” in This Bridge Called My Back

“They were like my mother and my relatives who had really shaped me. [It] was my mother and her sister sitting around the coffee table. That’s how I organize, sitting around tables like this, having coffee. And I like that. Somehow I felt that I had found a place, a family.”

Sandra Cole, Organizer, in Grassroots Warriors

“I’d ask myself what I’d have to change in us, because if we are not sure of what we want – see, things can change, because they actually have changed, you know – but if I don’t take responsibility for what I want, there won’t be any power, we won’t get any power, even if things do change.

Peasant Leader, rural Mexico in Women and Power

“I have a conviction about life. It is that change comes from the side of women.”

Pobladora, Santiago, Chile, in Una Historia Necesaria

“It was so important. It was really a beautiful thing, women coming together to work together. We started small and we learned everything. We learned we were capable, we could do this. We talked and laughed and it was so special. It was a road to a new life of learning. It was a beautiful experience, working and learning together, block by block, helping each other.

Marina, Villa Paula Jaraquemada, Chile
**Relationship to Social Work Themes:** This course has direct bearing on social work’s four curricular themes - multicultural and diversity issues; social change and social justice; promotion and prevention; and social science knowledge. Questions of cultural difference and diversity as they relate to gender and community organization are situated and examined in historical and political context. We consider not only differing meanings and experiences of social problems at the community level but also diverse possibilities for intervention informed by women’s grounded knowledge and practice. We take the patterned practices of inequality and injustice and the systems and institutions through which they are maintained as a central problematic in the course. We will assess case studies in terms of their “catalytic validity,” that is, their effectiveness in achieving objectives toward the goal of justice-oriented community change. Students will be introduced to a framework for "just practice" which brings questions of history, power, meaning, context and possibility to bear in understanding and acting on community concerns. We will explore examples of empowerment-based community building efforts and their effectiveness in promoting community well-being. We will review several case studies which utilize participatory approaches to community action geared toward promotion of health, literacy, gender equity, fair labor practices, and long-term cross-national partnerships. We explore the role of cultural anthropology and ethnographic modes of inquiry in informing and promoting critical community knowledge and practice. Finally, we will question the one-way flow of knowledge “from the West to the rest” which has characterized much of social science knowledge development and consider the possibility for participatory teaching and learning, both in the course content and in the educational process.

**Course Objectives:**

Upon completion of the course students will be able to:

1. Describe women’s historical contributions to the practice of community organization.
2. Compare and contrast models of community organization and assess their attention to women and gender.
3. Critically analyze existing models of community organization theory and practice from a feminist perspective.
4. Discuss challenges to feminism in the literature on women and community organization.
5. Use a framework for social justice-oriented social work practice that attends to questions of power, meaning, history, context and possibility to assess case examples of women’s community practice.
6. Compare and contrast key structures and processes of women’s community organizations and the gender- and power-related dynamics of different contexts for organizing.
7. Design several strategies for organizing women at the community level.
8. Develop an action plan for organizing a community-based event.
9. Utilize Internet resources as tools for community organization.
10. Identify critical value and ethical issues for women and men concerned with question of gender, power, and participation in the community organizing process.

Course Texts:


Books are available at Shaman Drum. A course pack of readings is available at Excel Copies.

Assignments:

1. **Commentaries on Weekly Readings:** Class members will write five brief commentaries on the assigned weekly readings over the course of the semester. Members decide which weeks’ readings they wish to address (between January 10 and March 14). The commentaries will provide a resource for class discussion. Individual commentaries should focus on the readings for a particular week and are to be turned in at the end of the class period when those readings are discussed. Commentaries account for 25% of the course grade.

2. **Lessons from History:** Drawing from assigned readings and supplemental sources, write an essay that addresses some aspect of women’s historic contributions to community organization. You may choose to focus on the life history of a particular activist, on the contributions of women during a key historical moment, on themes of practice in the history of women’s organizing, etc. The essay should be typed, double-spaced and no more than ten pages. Due February 21. 25% of grade.

3. **Small Group Organizing Portfolio:** Beginning in late January, class members will be working in organizing teams to plan an event related to women and community organization in conjunction with the course. Each team will keep a portfolio documenting their organizing activities, including: agenda and minutes of team meetings; plan and timeline; notes on activities carried out outside of the class meeting time; phone logs, notes from interviews, etc. The portfolio will be turned in at the end of the semester along with an assessment of the effort. Due April 11. 10% of grade.

4. **Documentation and Assessment of Organizing Effort:** Each team prepares a final report, documenting their organizing efforts and assessing the process and outcome. Each member of the team contributes a personal assessment of the process and his or
her role. The group also prepares a collective assessment of the process, lessons learned, and suggestions for strengthening both the process and outcome of the organizing effort. Due April 11. 20% of grade.

5. **Lessons for Practice:** Based on your understanding of course readings and discussion and on your experience in community organization, write an essay on the lessons for practice for women and community organization. The essay should be thought of as a teaching tool. What are some key lessons for practice that will promote effective community organization efforts by and for women? Use examples from research and practice to make your case. Cite your sources. Due April 18. 20% of grade.

**Schedule of Classes and Readings**

**Week One 1/10: Mapping the Terrain: Introduction and Overview**

**Week Two 1/17: Models and Issues: Classroom as Community**

**Week Three 1/24: Gender, Difference, and Organization**

**Week Four 1/31: Historical Contexts, Constraints and Possibilities**

**Week Five 2/7: Poverty, Activist Mothering, and Community Work**
Readings for Week Six: Townsend et al *Women and Power.*

**Week Six 2/14: Confronting Power**

**Week Seven 2/21: Gender, Justice, and Community Practice**

**Week Eight: Spring Break**
Week Nine 3/7: Research as Practice: Knowledge for Change (La Victoria Project)

Week Ten 3/14: Borders and Bridges: Build Alliances and Respect Differences
Readings for Week Eleven: Guzman Bouvard, “Revolutionizing Motherhood;” Reichert, “Women’s Rights are Human Rights.”

Week Eleven 3/21: Women, the State and Violence: Revolutionizing Motherhood

Week Twelve 3/28: Gender, Labor, and Transnational Organizing

Week Thirteen 4/4: Women and Grassroots Development: Limits of the Local

Week Fourteen 4/11: Organizing the Future: Spaces and Vision of Hope

Week Fifteen 4/18: Final meeting: Reflection and Celebration


