

# **“A part of living feminism”: Intergenerational Feminism in a Working Class Area**

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**In recent years young women’s feminist activism has often been ignored or criticised for not conforming to older women’s expectations regarding the style and content of their praxis. Similarly, the political struggles of working class women have often been overlooked due to the sometimes hidden nature of their resistance to oppression and marginalisation. This article presents a case study of young, working class women who are active in their community on the south western outskirts of Sydney, through an exploration of the group’s processes of collective identity. The Young Women Who Are Parents Programme is based in a women’s health centre, and provides a unique program of structured, intergenerational support for the young women as they are trained to become advocates for other young women who are parents in the area. The fact that this inclusive model of feminist praxis exists and is thriving in one of the more disadvantaged areas of Sydney suggests that the women’s movement as a whole is capable of learning lessons about being more inclusive. Further, the fact that feminist organisations such as this one are actively engaging young women in feminist processes of collective identity may prove to have a significant impact on any future wave of feminist activism in Australia.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This article presents the case study of a group of contemporary young feminists at work in the community. The Young Women Who Are Parents Programme (YWWAP Programme) is based in a women’s health centre in Campbelltown on the south-western outskirts of Sydney. In this article I explore a range of issues for these young feminist community activists, and the older feminists who work with them. In particular I explore the model of structured support that the program provides and focus the discussion on the question of feminist identity through the different pathways to feminism encountered by young women in the YWWAP Programme.

The data that inform this article have been drawn from a range of

sources. I engaged in participant observation with the YWWAPP over a twelve-month period during 2001 and into early 2002. I spent one day a week in Campbelltown, where I attended Network meetings and engaged more informally with the young women in the program. Over the course of the year I participated with both staff and young women in the program through such activities as working with the women to produce an orientation booklet for new members, conducting program evaluation and running a workshop on "gender issues" as a part of the Opportunities and Choices training course. During the study I kept extensive field notes that were analysed along with organisational documents. Through participant observation I also identified key informants who were invited to participate in in-depth interviews towards the end of the research process. This article draws on my fieldwork observations and interviews with three key members of the Network; Suszy, Kerry, and Kirsty, along with three key staff members; Jane Lowe (Coordinator of the Young Women Who are Parents Programme), Maggie Kyle (Senior Manager, Advocacy, Research and Training Unit) and Robyn Brookes (Director of the Centre for Women's Health). I have used the interviewees' own words wherever possible, to highlight their thoughtfulness and reflexivity.

Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin (1995) argue that the women's movement "exists in a dynamic and reciprocal relation with its organizations", whereby the movement supplies the broad purpose and agenda while drawing from the organisations "a set of practices, political and material resources, and a supportive context within which activists can carry on their lives while struggling for change". Given that the women's movement is a "multifaceted mobilization" rather than a unified coherent actor, we can recognise that it has taken "different forms at different times, in different areas" (1995, 7). In a time of relative abeyance (a useful term developed by Rupp and Taylor 1987) of feminist activity in Australia, such as the present, the fact that a movement organisation such as the Centre for Women's Health is producing "institutionalised resources for future mobilizations" (1995, 7) is particularly important. The fact that feminist community organisations are actively engaging young women in processes of collective identity formation may prove to have a significant impact on any future wave of feminist activism in Australia.

## FEMINIST ORGANISING IN THE COMMUNITY

The Young Women Who Are Parents Programme is comprised of the Young Women Who Are Parents Network (YWWAPN) and the Opportunities and Choices training courses, and it is a requirement that new members of the program complete the first unit of training, Opportunities and Choices One, before joining the Network. The program is available to young women (aged 25 years and under) with children, who live in Campbelltown in the Macarthur region on the outskirts of Sydney.<sup>2</sup> Young women hear about the YW-

WAP Programme through word-of-mouth and advertising in local media.

The level of disadvantage and marginalisation that the members of the Network experience makes the fact of their participation an achievement in itself. For Jane, this achievement has not come about without considerable effort. She has learnt to put “lots of energy” into engaging young women who are initially distrustful:

Given that this is the only program like this I would have thought, “Wow, young women would just *want* to come!” But they don’t. They need to develop a trusting connection and a belief that this is more than a trick of telling them how to be better parents.

In some cases it can “take up to six months for them to even step foot in the centre.”

The Network and the Opportunities and Choices training sessions are held on separate mornings for two to three hours. Transport assistance and free, on-site childcare are provided for all participants. During 2001, twelve young women participated in the Opportunities and Choices course, and between three and five regular members attended Network meetings during the first half of the year. This number grew to eight to ten regular members following the “graduation” of an Opportunities and Choices cohort. Campbelltown is a highly ethnically diverse area, and the young women in the program reflected this diversity. During 2001, participants in the Opportunities and Choices Training program included young women from Maori, South African, Lebanese and Anglo-Australian backgrounds. Although cultural diversity was not the focus of this study, it was notable that there were no young Aboriginal women participating in the program despite a significant Aboriginal population in the Campbelltown area. This point is taken up later in this article.

The YWWAPN had its beginnings in the early 1990s as a support group for young women with children that operated from a youth centre in Campbelltown. In 1994, the Young Women with Kids Action Group was formed to address some of the issues the group faced, particularly those of discrimination, access and equity. In 1995, the Action Group moved to the Centre for Women’s Health where it was developed into the YWWAP Programme. The name of the program was chosen by the young women who participated in the program’s earlier days as, through their processes of collective identity, they came to reject the often derogatory or patronising label “young mums” and sought to reclaim their identity as capable women.

The Centre for Women’s Health is run by the Benevolent Society, Australia’s oldest charity. Unlike many other more conservative charities, the Benevolent Society has always focused on social change as a guiding principle and goal. Their philosophy regarding women’s health is informed by a holistic approach, and the Centre for Women’s Health takes this approach a step further by incorporating an explicitly feminist philosophy into the services it provides to women in the Campbelltown/Macarthur region. Alongside

the YWWAP Programme, the Centre also has a Domestic Violence Team and a Mid to Older Women's Health Team, and provides a range of other services including an Aboriginal community worker, counselling, natural therapies, facilitated support groups (including one for deaf and hearing impaired women), information services, a drumming group, art workshops and resident advocacy and leadership training. In 2000 the centre became the first women's health centre in Australia to achieve accreditation status under the Quality Improvement Council National Standards.<sup>3</sup> Although independent of state institutions, the YWWAP Programme has to some extent been restricted in their direction and focus according to their source of funding. For example, their funding during 2001 was through the Young Women and Tobacco Project of the New South Wales Health Department, thus requiring of the Network a focus on women and tobacco that it would not otherwise be taking.

The feminist philosophy that underpins the work of the Centre has meant that, from the outset, the YWWAP Programme has wanted to do more than provide a support service for young mothers. It has been an important goal for every worker in the program since its inception to move away from a "welfare" model of working with young women that understands this group as a "social problem," and the young women themselves as needing "help". The philosophy of the Network is to "support young women to build the skills, knowledge and confidence to become a voice for young women to challenge negative beliefs and ideas about young mothers" (YWWAPN 2001,3). This philosophy is a significant component of the Network's ongoing processes of identity construction, and combats the potentially hidden nature of these young women's resistance to their disadvantage and marginalisation. Helen Masterman-Smith and Drew Cottle (2000) argue that this type of politics "from below" (2000,1) is important to working class women in Campbelltown, as they practice a "politics of personal and class resistance and survival" that suggests that they "are not simply victims" (2000,2). Masterman-Smith (1999) also suggests that women in Campbelltown are forced into relationships of dependency with both the state and with male partners that further obscures their activism which is "immersed in ongoing, though hidden, political struggles to obtain a degree of reciprocity from those relationships" (1999,523). It is their resistance to this sense of predetermined hopelessness and helplessness that shapes the activist focus of the young women in the Network.

## DEALING WITH DISADVANTAGE

The issues that the Network focuses on are mostly local, material and immediate, and reflect the often harsh realities of life in Campbelltown. As a result of what Masterman-Smith (1999) calls "the great decentralisation experiment" (1999, 522), new working class suburbs such as Campbelltown sprang up on the outskirts of cities like Sydney due to relatively cheap housing and

living costs (Masterman-Smith and Cottle 2000,1). Masterman-Smith and Cottle (2000) paint a bleak picture of life in the area:

On any evening of the week from a Minto backyard, it is possible to pick out the police helicopter from its beaming spotlights as it does the housing commission rounds. In Airds, the Reiby Juvenile Justice [detention] Centre, with its high barbed wire fencing, sits directly opposite the public high school in the middle of the suburb so that it is impossible to leave or enter by one of only two access roads without passing it (2000,1-2).

The majority of young women in the YWWAPN live in public housing estates and their awareness of themselves as poor and additionally disadvantaged because of where they live is significant to their identities as working class and as feminists.

For network member Suszy who, as a public housing resident, fears for her safety and her children's safety due to the high level of violence in her area, issues such as housing and poverty add an almost intolerable level of tension to her family life. During my time with the Network, Suszy and her partner (the father of her two children), who have been in a relationship for over five years, decided to live separately for a time to improve their financial situation. Suszy's partner had started working which meant that, had they stayed living together, their household income would have decreased unless they had chosen to "rort", or lie to the Centrelink about their relationship status. While they were living separately, Suszy suffered a knee injury and needed to use crutches for mobility while on the public hospital waiting list for surgery. Because she was living alone she also had the primary caring responsibility for her pre-school aged child and baby. After a few months this situation became untenable, and Suszy's partner quit his job and moved home. Given circumstances like these, it is little wonder that Suszy perceives the public housing and welfare systems to be a trap rather than a support for young mothers like her.

Situations such as this mean that the Network has chosen to focus on goals that are local, realistic and attainable, and this highlights the importance of facilitation for the program. Kerry feels that having Jane available to work with the network is "*hugely* important" and Kirsty also feels that having a facilitator means that the network is more realistic in its goals and chooses "more successful" strategies. Importantly, however, Kirsty also feel that "Jane basically runs the program *from* us," and that the Network still controls the overall direction of their activism despite their location in the Centre and the presence of a paid coordinator. In other words, the young women are aware that they require additional support in order to develop as activists, but such support is not experienced by them as disempowering. For Suszy, being supported by the Centre is important for the women's political futures: "You don't want a young woman to get to the stage where she's got all this excitement and she goes out and she falls flat on her face and then she never says anything again." As Maggie points out, this facilitation and support occurs

“within a feminist framework” that is essential to the Network’s collective identity formation. But this belief in feminist social and political change is tempered by an awareness that creating change is a difficult, long-term process. As Robyn says, it would be “terrible” for the young women in the program “if [they] went out to create change in the world and thought it was easy”.

Of great significance to these blossoming activists is the fact that the program treats them as more than just “young mums,” and instead fosters processes that focus on their identities as *women*. As Suszy has experienced it:

One of the most fundamental concepts of the program is that the Network is not solely about being a young mother ... It’s an avenue for them to step outside their daily role, to focus on other things, to look outward at the impact they’re going to have on society and the world as *young women*, not just as young parents.

The uniqueness of the program, and the structure that Suszy feels is so important, comes in part from the Opportunities and Choices Training, which I discuss in the next section.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHOICES TRAINING: COLLECTIVITY, CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING, AND COMMUNITY

The Opportunities and Choices training is an essential part of the Network’s production of a collective identity. The training, which is independent of the formal education system, recognises that young women who are parents, and who are socially isolated, marginalised and poor, are unlikely to possess the skills that they need to be effective advocates for other young women with children. As director of the centre, Robyn noticed a “real tension between what was expected of the action group to do autonomously” and “the fact that they would, in actual fact, still be quite dependent on others”. The model of training was developed from “wide-scale consultations with many young women in the Macarthur region as well as with local service providers” (Atkins 2000, 7) with the aim of allowing the young women in the Network to develop the knowledge and skills to enable them to engage in advocacy and activism. The aim is that young women who are parents will be able to work for the changes that are important to them in the present, *and* go on to be community leaders and activists throughout their lives.

The course consists of weekly classes held over nine weeks, culminating in the development of a community education project or resource. Past projects have included information stalls, an early intervention kit distributed to local services, educational workshops at local high schools on being a young woman who is a parent, and an information pack about post-natal depression that was distributed to playgroups in the Campbelltown area. In 200, Opportunities and Choices One included topics such as self-esteem,

body image, legal issues, advocacy, gender issues, discrimination, media, groupwork, employment and healthy relationships. These topics are consistent with what Judith Ettinger (1991) has suggested are a useful focus in helping young women who are parents develop better life skills. However, the course content is often confrontational and difficult, as some topics touch on painful issues in the women's personal lives. For example, Maggie points out that once the session on healthy relationships takes place, "then regularly there are women identifying as being in unsafe and abusive relationships". The feminist philosophy and framework that underpin the training, however, means that women who identify issues such as domestic violence in their own lives are supported in the decisions that they make and the personal autonomy they reclaim.

Significantly, the course offers the young women their first experience of collectivity and belonging to a group outside their families. Given their previous isolation, particularly since the births of their children, this is a powerful experience in much the same way as the early consciousness-raising groups were for women in the 1970s. This process of recognising their own experiences in the lives of other young women is a vital part of the group's development of a collective identity and, as Suszy points out, this turns the women's attention outward, to the structural and social barriers that continue to marginalise them:

When you're a young parent—well any parent—you are so consumed with the role of what you're trying to do at the time that you get really inward focused ... You stop thinking about what's happening on a larger scale or at issues that may not personally affect you but still warrant your attention because they affect other women. So I think it [the training] just allows members to have more of an outward look and just to think about things in a different way.

This sense of collectivity and "politicising the personal" that the course engenders is very exciting for the participants and, for many of them, is a starting point for overcoming the personal disempowerment and marginalisation they have experienced. As Kerry explains:

I think that because we were so beaten down by it there were days when I just didn't want to go out of the house—I was sick of it! It didn't matter what I did, I wasn't doing it right ... It didn't matter what I did or what I said I was trash. So to be able to express how we've been feeling, it's become very obvious to us that we've all been treated the same in some way and [now we're] finding ways to try and overcome that.

The fact that the YWWAP Programme is located in the young women's own community is also significant. British sociologist Fiona Williams (1993) argues that for many women "community" has a particular significance because:

It is the point at which women's private business becomes translated into public issues—from dependent into claimant; from unpaid to

paid worker; from personal into political (1993, 33).

Williams goes on to argue that collective organising among women in their communities turns what can be seen as women's "place" into women's "space . . . in which women can begin to determine and redefine some of its conditions" (1993, 33). Yet the processes that the young women in the Network are engaging in, and the awareness of gender inequities they are gaining in the Opportunities and Choices training, sometimes make living in their communities more challenging.

Workers at the Centre for Women's Health recognise that the often extreme levels of material and social disadvantage that these young women experience can make a commitment to working for change in other women's lives even more difficult. As Robyn explains:

I'm aware that they find it challenging balancing their commitment with all the rest of their lives . . . The challenge of fitting the life that they might lead when they live in a community where everybody doesn't think the same way as them . . . I mean the women have to actually live in their world unless they're actually all going to leave their local community.

Robyn acknowledges that this means there "is a tension there for the program in actually being aware of context". Certainly, there is an awareness that, without support, the women would not be able to manage either the changes in their world-view, or the goal of working towards broader, feminist social change that is fundamental to the Network.

It is possible, however, to argue that it is the young women's experiences of "[c]onfinement, marginalisation and exclusion" in and from their communities that "create the bonds that turn place into space" (Williams 1993, 38). As argued above, the YWWAP Programme offers most of the women who join it their first experience of collectivity. It is in this collectivity that many of the young women in the Network find their "space" and develop their confidence as activists. As long-term Network member Suszy has observed:

I've seen it happen with a lot of different women. They are very nervous, very tentative when they first come and then there's this huge explosion of excitement, "Other people are interested in what I have to say! We all kind of think the same thing!" It's really instantaneous.

Suszy also sees that it is the bond of their emerging collectivity that allows these young women to claim their "space". As she says, "I think it's just a binding together. When you're in a group with individuals who all feel the same way you draw power from each other".

## A DIFFERENT PATH TO FEMINISM

By the time the young women in the YWWAP Programme have completed Opportunities and Choices One and joined the Network they have been intro-



duced to a range of feminist perspectives. However, they may not necessarily identify themselves as feminists or recognise that they are expressing what would generally be understood as a feminist point of view. Nevertheless, through a subtle process that is *intentionally* feminist without being *explicitly* feminist, the training has given them a new lens through which they may view the world but which never insists that the young women have to adopt a particular political perspective themselves. It is clear, however, that upon joining the Network the women are actively participating in feminist processes of collective identity formation and that they see their role as being politically active in their communities in order to achieve social change for other young women who are parents.

The decision to refrain from making feminism a more explicit part of the program is one that has been carefully considered and adopted for several reasons. Firstly, the popular backlash against the women's movement has generated some unpleasant and erroneous images of feminists, particularly in the mainstream media. For young, working-class women growing up in areas like Campbelltown, these negative images may be the only prior knowledge they have of feminism or the women's movement. In relation to the practice of feminist social work, Lena Dominelli and Eileen McLeod (1989) note that adopting an explicitly feminist stance with a group who are only familiar with the media stereotypes of feminism can be alienating, and can make young women in particular "feel rejected as inferior" (1989, 60). For Robyn, whether or not the young women in the program ever claim a feminist identity for themselves is an irrelevant question, and one that she feels strongly should never be used to exclude any woman:

Maybe that's the difference around the feminism at the centre. It is a philosophical basis but it isn't that we expect everyone to join us in that feminist view of the world . . . I don't think a lot of young women would stay, and quite understandably, if we overtly suggested that they had to be feminists in a particular theoretical form.

Maggie argues that avoiding an explicitly feminist stance also gives the young women in the program the opportunity to find their own voices:

It's not effective, and I think in fact it's unsound, to work using education that is not based on women's *own* descriptions and their *own* language about their experiences and where they're up to. To me that is one of the ultimate tenets of feminist practice. To use language that impedes or interferes with how a participant may describe their experience isn't alright.

In other words, whilst the young women in the program are supported and encouraged to develop a feminist consciousness, this is their own and not necessarily the same as that of the older feminists who are working with them.

There is also an enormous sensitivity among the workers at the centre about the disturbing, and often distressing, effects that developing a feminist consciousness can have on the young women in the program. This experience is one that is common to many women, as Maggie explains:

It's profoundly disturbing I think when any of us start to realise how oppressed women are. Profoundly disturbing. It shakes the way you look at the world and the way you see the world. And once you do that there is absolutely no going back. And I think it's the same for these women; it questions their relationships, how they've been treated and the future they've pictured for themselves or had painted for them. It's huge.

Kerry is one young woman who experienced these personal challenges of "coming to feminism":

It was a really traumatic time in my life. I was searching for who am I outside of being my partner's girlfriend and my child's mother. I didn't even realise I was supposed to be someone outside of these other roles. That's when I started learning and reading about what was happening in the world with women and the roles that women play in men's lives. This radar came up and I felt really naked and exposed and really aware of what was going on around me – it was really scary.

These challenges are reminiscent of the second wave feminist strategy of making the personal political, and one outcome for many of the young women in the program is the need to make changes in their personal lives. As Jane sees it:

Once they get here the biggest struggles are that they actually start challenging the status quo in their lives and that's hard . . . They actually start to get a sense and understand better why they're where they're at, why their lives are where they're at, and they get really angry about that, really gobsmacked by it.

From Jane's point of view, however, this politicising process happens almost automatically once the young women start to feel a sense of collectivity with the other group members:

. . . it's like it's a natural progression. From coming with their own experience, believing that it's just in their life that this is happening, to actually meeting other young women and talking through and sharing and normalising their experiences—something happens in that and they kind of go, "This isn't right! I don't want other young women to go through this and we need to do something!" . . . It's hard to pinpoint why it happens but it just does.

Suszy also reflects this point of view from her own experience:

. . . even though in Opportunities and Choices they don't actually teach feminism as such, and they don't actually discuss "OK this is what feminist philosophy is," [we] are given boosted self-esteem and self-awareness and educated around things like legal issues and education and opportunities . . . It just allows [us] to say, "Hang on a second! I deserve more than this, why haven't I been offered these opportunities before? And why are things so different for women than for men?"

For Robyn, this experience is common to most women who come to feminism through a non-academic pathway, both in the 1970s and now:

I would make the assumption that if you actually examined your

world-view and the things that affect you, you would come to certain conclusions. It's not that you come to the conclusions because you get taught about feminism but because you make the same journey that got us to feminism in the first place.

The importance of the Opportunities and Choices training in these processes is clear. While "shaking up" the young women's view of the world, the YWWAP Programme is simultaneously giving them the skills and confidence to begin to work for change. As Maggie explains:

The most vital thing about how we support young women . . . is that it is not just about stripping away and exposing people to this sort of brilliant flash of "Yes, this is how the world is!" At the same time the program is all about building up skills and resources to do something about it, both within their own lives and as a group.

At some point during this process of consciousness-raising, usually once the young women have joined the Network, the centre's philosophy stops being what Suszy calls "behind the scenes feminism," and the young women themselves become aware that what they are beginning to think, feel and do fits under a feminist banner. However, this knowledge is tempered by the common, negative stereotypes about feminism that they are so familiar with. As Suszy says:

I've realised that I am a feminist and that I hadn't realised it before. I actually think it's really sad that I didn't know that. It's sad to me that the community in general doesn't understand what it is and that we're all so focussed on [the myth that] feminism means you've got a shaved head and you burn your bra.

Kerry's new knowledge about herself and the world is also tainted by a sense of confusion about why so many people in the community reject feminism:

When people say you're a feminist they can mean it in such horrible ways. Like we're some really weird thing. I'm not saying *they're* weird, I'm just saying I can't understand why they're not saying what we're saying. It's out there every day and they're just so blind to it.

Social psychologists Donna Henderson-King and Abigail Stewart (1994) argue that a woman's refusal to identify as a feminist "does not necessarily mean she holds traditional attitudes about gender roles and gender relations, or that she is unaware of sexism" (1994, 507). The case study presented here suggests that whether or not a young woman ever identifies as being a feminist may not be a relevant question at all for the contemporary Australian women's movement. While most of the young women in the YWWAPN do eventually describe themselves as feminists, even before they take up this identity they are engaging in feminist processes of collective identity formation. Jasmina Brankovich argues that insisting that a woman must "self-identify as a feminist" in order to be considered a part of the women's movement erases the important processes of negotiation that occur between "feminist and other identities" in women's lives (1999, 1).

## SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS GENERATIONS

It is significant that the young feminist community activists in the YWWAP Programme work in an environment of structured support from older women. All the older women who work with the young women who are parents consider themselves to be feminists, and foster feminist processes of collective identity among the newer activists. For both groups of women, sustaining this relationship requires an awareness of boundaries, to do with power, ownership and responsibility, that is communicated honestly. Maggie points out that the difficulty for the older women who work with the program is that “they have to hand over a lot of power for it to work” and acknowledges that “at times that’s been very difficult.” Nevertheless, the fact that everyone involved is aware of these boundaries ensures that the groups do not become enmeshed in an intergenerational power struggle. While these boundaries are inevitably limiting for the young women in the program, they also provide the freedom for them to take their first steps as activists without assuming all the personal risk that can come with social movement action.

The fact that the program is based in a women’s health centre also gives the participants a strong sense that what they are doing is a part of the broader women’s movement. Kerry explains:

Being a part of a centre that’s, like, really up with all those things and believe in those things—and it’s their role to try and create more equality or to help women try and create more equality in their lives, or make them more aware of it—has been unbelievable . . . Before I was not even aware of something like this that’s completely *for* women, *about* women and has such a strong belief in doing something for women . . . It’s made me more passionate, to be around other women.

Suszy feels that being based in a women’s health centre also means that the young women in the program are given the opportunity to see older women in powerful and professional roles that they may not have observed before. This contact with a range of different women who can be positive role models in the young women’s lives provides them with the new experience of finding other women supportive rather than competitive. Suszy also recognises this:

In a lot of the young women’s cases it’s the first time any of them have been in a supporting environment full of intelligent, supportive women who are willing to listen to what they say, and willing to support them on action to follow through on what it is that they want . . . It shows you that there are different avenues and I don’t think that a lot of young women are shown that, especially young women who, for whatever reason, leave school very early on.

Comments such as this again suggest the significance of the cross-class dynamic that operates within the centre. Many of the young women in the program have a heightened awareness of issues to do with social class that

has been developed through primarily negative experiences such as being patronised by, or even invisible to, more middle class women. The program provides an alternative social experience as the workers in the centre themselves come from a range of class backgrounds and offer the young women a range of role models in line with the notion of developing “opportunities and choices”. The importance of education in women’s lives (which is what Suszy means when she refers to women’s “intelligence”) is stressed as a realistic aspiration for the young women, despite the time and resource constraints involved with being parents.

Robyn also feels that these intergenerational and inter-class connections are important, but that the benefits flow both ways. As an example, the women in the YWWAP Programme are able to show reciprocity to older women through the establishment of an information technology (IT) learning centre in the Centre for Women’s Health:

I don’t think it’s feminist to be only interested in your bit of the world. With the IT learning centre, the young women see it as something they can give the centre, can give to the other women. One of the reasons they’re involved in the IT centre is because it gives them a pathway to give something back. The young women are going to run the business plan and make sure it’s accessible to everybody else.

This inter-generational reciprocity again highlights the importance of the program being based in a women’s health centre, because, as Robyn sees it:

If they were in a youth centre it would be quite different—it would be about youth. In the centre it’s about being connected to women. Even if they had a centre all of their own it wouldn’t be the same.

The manner in which the Centre for Women’s Health manages inter-generational relations between women suggests a model for other areas of the women’s movement also wishing to take a more constructive account of difference. The YWWAP Programme, and its base in a women’s health centre, allows for a multivocality that is still unified by an overarching feminist philosophy that, in itself, allows for what Maggie calls “many amazing frames of philosophy and politics”. Maggie feels that the centre is:

a part of living feminism if you like. Like the feminism that’s here is from so many different sorts of women . . . I think there’s a lot that’s from the ‘70s feminist women’s health centres, but I think there’s also stuff here that’s from other places and other cultures and other belief systems and other ways of seeing the world . . . It’s layered.

Robyn also feels that the model of feminist activism practised in the centre represents a feminist “evolution”:

There’s a part of the women’s movement that is still a part of the 1970s and a part that has grown and changed. And this is a part of that evolution. In the early days the movement was not very inclusive. Lots of groups of women were not a part of the movement and not from choice.

The fact that this inclusive mode of feminist praxis exists and is thriving in

one of the more disadvantaged areas of Sydney suggests that the movement as a whole is capable of learning lessons about being more inclusive.

But while the YWWAP Programme has successfully included women of a range of ages and from a range of class backgrounds, they also recognise that they could be more inclusive across other axes of oppression. Maggie comments:

we are challenged too by how we can include the full spectrum of different young women who are parents in the area—different cultural groups, different ages within that category of young women who are parents. I think in the last year it's done really well, it's done so much around working with women from different cultural backgrounds and offering a safe place where it isn't just Anglo women who come here. But I think that will go on being something that we really want to look at and get better at somehow.

During 2001 there were no Aboriginal women in the YWWAP Programme, despite the fact that a number of other programs in the Centre are accessed by Aboriginal women in line with their percentage in the community. Maggie cannot explain why young Aboriginal women avoid the YWWAP Programme and, while this is a situation they would like to change, she sees that this will continue to be a challenge as it has been in the past. There is some hope that the Aboriginal women's space (a dedicated room in the Centre) that opened in the centre in 2001 will increase young Aboriginal women's access to the YWWAP Programme. However there is also recognition that moving the program out of the Centre and into Aboriginal communities might be more appropriate. Maggie asks:

Is it something that we can do within this program? Or is it something we should be doing by supporting Aboriginal women's groups themselves? Is it something that's useful to mainstream or not to mainstream? I don't know. I think it needs to be a combination and I think it needs to be done with Aboriginal women.

The fact that the centre is asking these questions indicates an awareness that, as argued by many Aboriginal women over the past thirty years (see for example Huggins 1998, Moreton-Robinson 2000a, 2000b), Aboriginal women do not necessarily want to "join" the white women's movement. Again this suggests an ability to recognise a range of differences among women within an overarching feminist philosophy.

The women in the YWWAP Programme, and the older women who work with them, strongly believe that their program is a part of the broader women's movement, even though that movement has changed over time. Suszy sees the situation in this way:

What's happening today, and what's happening in the Network, may not be as in your face as the women's movement *was*, but I think that . . . the basic core beliefs are still there—allowing women positive space where they can be who they are, strive to achieve their goals, and gain awareness of the fact that things are not always as pretty-in-pink as people say they are. And to have the strength and

the confidence and the support to be able to do something about those issues, and to have a voice and to make a difference where they see fit.

Certainly, the level of structured support that women in the YW-WAP Programme receive, allows for their experience of activism to feel and in fact to *be* successful. For Suszy it has been:

. . . amazing to watch new young women grow and turn into these people who want to do something for the community and want to make a difference for themselves and for their kids in the future.

It seems likely that many of the young women who have participated in the YWWAP Programme and have gone on to become active in their communities, will grow and develop as activists. Perhaps they will have opportunities in the future to use the skills they have learnt in the Network to be active in other areas that concern them. They will not always be “young women who are parents”, but as Jane points out, the skills, knowledge and resources that they have gained with the network are things they will “never not have again”. One thing the young women in the program learn is that success is not always easy to measure. As Kirsty says:

To be honest I don’t particularly know how to find out if we’re being successful. I suppose it’s a feeling you get inside yourself—if you’re a success in yourself then you’ve done something I suppose.

For feminist activists who often feel that their struggles are endless and overwhelming, this model has a great deal to offer.

## NOTES

1. Collective identity here should be understood in the Meluccian sense, as a tool for understanding *processes* that produce a set of reflexively constructed and negotiated definitions regarding the “field of opportunities and constraints offered to collective action” (Melucci 1985, 1995, 1996). In this way it can be understood as the lens that allows scholars to recognise movement continuity and to identify struggles that occur in culture and everyday life (Melucci 1995, 24), rather than as the creation of a fixed individual or movement identity.
2. The Macarthur region includes the Campbelltown, Camden and Wollondilly local government areas (LGAs). Campbelltown itself is a diverse area, comprising the public housing estates of Airds and Claymore, other working class suburbs such as Minto and Bradbury, the newly developed commercial estates of Glen Alpine and Denham Court along with Australia’s “first gated community” at Macquarie Links (Masterman-Smith and Cottle 2000, 1). Despite these new developments, however, Campbelltown remains a disadvantaged area with a climbing unemployment rate and one of the lowest school retention rates in NSW (Brookes and Kyle undated, 1).
3. For further information on the accreditation process see <http://www.qms.org.au/html>

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