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CHALLENGES OF SUCCESS: STAGES OF GROWTH IN FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS

STEPHANIE RIGER

Creating organizations that serve and advocate for women has been an outstanding achievement of the feminist movement in the United States during the past two decades. Battered women's shelters, women's studies programs, health clinics, law firms, bookstores, theaters, art galleries, publishers, and many other feminist organizations have enriched women's lives and furthered the process of social change. Having been involved in several of these groups as a participant, researcher, and consultant, I have noticed that organizations with very different purposes, united only loosely by feminist ideology, confront similar issues as they grow. Some of these issues arise in any small organization as it becomes larger and more complex; others are common to social movement organizations that use a collectivist structure. But particular problems emerge when feminist values encounter the demands of life in a growing organization. This article explores the challenges and choices that feminist organizations face as they grow.

Feminism is not a unitary set of beliefs but instead encompasses a range of ideologies.¹ Nonetheless, two concerns are central to most variants of feminism as it developed in the United States in the 1960s: (1) opposition to the domination of men over women and (2) a belief that women share a status as members of a subordinate group. Many of the women who started feminist organizations during this time believed that hierarchy in organizations created a system of dominance of superiors over subordinates that mirrored the dominance of men over women. In their view the impersonal, rule-bound nature of bureaucratic interactions isolated individuals from one another, dehumanizing them and making them dependent on the organization.² A discussion of how to structure a rape crisis center exemplifies these claims:

One of the goals we are working toward is an end to domination and control in relationships between people. Rape is an extreme example of this: but most of us learn to follow a similar pattern in our personal and work relationships. . . . Most traditional organizational structures are hierarchies of some kind, and as such produce competitive and domineering work relationships. In addition, such structures do not usually foster skills and leadership qualities in each person who participates in the organization, nor do they enable us to find ways of supporting those with less privilege—such as free time or financial resources—to be able to participate fully.³

Ending women's subordination called for social arrangements that validated individual women's feelings and experiences, embodied an ideal of "sisterhood" among women, and provided equal power and opportunity. Many feminist organizations that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s tried to manifest this vision as microcosms of a new social order. By eliminating or minimizing dominant-subordinate relationships, feminist organizations sought to enhance the development of women's skills and facilitate cooperation. The organizations, accordingly, strove to embody the values of participation and humanism, although many mixed egalitarian with hierarchical practices.

While these organizations were evolving, however, other feminists were criticizing the egalitarian model. For example, Jo Freeman's classic 1973 essay "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" argued that collectivist structures might mask rather than eliminate hierarchies.⁴ Distinguishing between power as effectiveness and power as domination, Nancy Hartsock claimed that the women's movement erred in its condemnation of leadership by confusing those who wanted to achieve with those who wanted to control others.⁵ Similarly, members of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union argued that what was needed was not an absence of leadership but, rather, mechanisms for keeping leadership accountable.⁶ Finally, combining egalitarian social relationships and participatory democracy, on the one hand, and individual freedom and development, on the other, created a paradox when individuals' needs conflicted with those of the group.⁷ One participant in the battered women's movement voiced this dilemma in the guilt she felt about her desire for individual recognition despite her commitment to a collectivist movement.⁸

As hundreds of women devote untold hours of effort to feminist organizations, the appropriate way to manifest feminist ideals in organizational contexts is still being contested. This debate is now complicated by the fact that a number of these organizations have grown from small, informal collectives to large, well-established institutions. What happened when feminist beliefs and practices faced the demands of organizational growth? I looked for answers to this question in published descriptions, case studies, and surveys of feminist organizations; in research

on alternative and mainstream organizations; and in my own research and observations.

My purpose is not to describe the history of particular feminist organizations but, rather, to identify the general logic of their development. In doing so, I make two assumptions. First, decisions made by an organization's members, rather than predetermined factors, determine the pattern of growth of an organization. Certain issues predictably arise as an organization increases in the size of its membership, but the outcomes lie in the interaction between the challenges of development and the choices made by members of organizations. For example, although this article focuses on the dynamics of growth, those in an organization could choose to keep it small. Second, this model is not meant to be universal but, rather, applies to feminist organizations that espoused an egalitarian ideology and developed in the United States during the last two decades. The historical and political context has a powerful shaping effect on a social movement and its organizations.⁹ Feminist organizations in other times and places often developed differently than those in the contemporary United States. Battered women's shelters in West Germany, for example, maintained a radical agenda, consistent with the autonomy of German feminism, in contrast to the interpenetration of liberal and radical policies in the U.S. shelter movement.¹⁰

In this discussion, an organization is considered feminist if it has a feminist ideology, values, or goals, or if it emerged from the women's movement of the last two decades in the United States.¹¹ Thus, the spectrum of organizations considered here include both nonprofit and profit-making enterprises; those that are freestanding as well as those that are institutionally embedded; and those that provide a service or create a product as well as advocating social change. Important factors differentiate these types of organizations. Nonetheless, this discussion seeks to locate common issues and choices that emerge in egalitarian feminist organizations as membership grows.

STAGES IN ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE CYCLES

Not all organizations increase in size. Those that do also change in qualitative ways as they expand, proceeding through a series of distinct developmental stages from simple to more complex structures.¹² These stages occur in a predictable order; resolution of the problems inherent in one stage facilitates successful negotiation of the next.¹³ Success can propel an organization through these stages. At the same time, the ensuing transi-

tions produce stress. Development can involve dramatic and discontinuous changes in an organization's policies and procedures, and members can disagree about the appropriate direction of growth.

Stage models of the life cycle of organizations generally begin with the newly formed organization struggling for survival and proceed to the mature organization fighting stagnation and decline. I find the model proposed by Robert E. Quinn and Kim Cameron most useful, because it differentiates an initial stage of creation from a second stage in which collectivity prevails.¹⁴ This permits close examination of the dynamics of the collectivity stage, a particularly important one for feminists because of its fit with egalitarian values. I modify this model to take into account the nature of feminist values.

The first stage in this model encompasses the birth of the organization, and the second stage contains high cohesion and commitment. In the third stage, the organization institutionalizes its policies and procedures, and it expands and decentralizes in the fourth stage. The transition from the collectivity of stage two to the formalization of stage three is the most difficult transition for any organization because it involves the most dramatic change in policies and practices.¹⁵ Feminist organizations are especially likely to have difficulty because formalization contradicts some feminists' desire for participatory democracy and for recognition of women's individuality; therefore, I consider the transition to formalization in detail. Little information exists on the dynamics of feminist organizations in the fourth stage; consequently, my examination of this stage is brief. Because conflict can occur at any stage of organizational development, I consider it separately and focus on its organizational sources.¹⁶

STAGES OF GROWTH IN FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS

The Creation Stage. Innovation and creativity mark the birth of an organization.¹⁷ The reminiscences of the manager of a feminist bookstore capture the spirit of participants at its inception: "Women were glowing. . . . There was a lot of excitement, a lot of hope and a belief that we were going to make a change, our lives were going to change."¹⁸ The process of creation begins before the organization is actually established, when founders identify a problem and imagine various solutions.¹⁹ Communication among members in a newly emerging organization is frequent, informal, and face-to-face; working hours are long.

The creation of an organization demands enormous amounts of effort, time, and sometimes even physical labor.²⁰ A group of volunteers in

Texas spent hundreds of hours planning a battered women's shelter.²¹ A physician at a women's health center told me that she was on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week in the center's early days. When members of a feminist group in Minnesota decided to open an art galley, they had to renovate a dirty and neglected building, which they did by hand to preserve the architectural details.²² Women in Dayton held "cleaning, painting, and floor-waxing parties" to prepare a two-story frame house as a women's center.²³ Although organizational demands are great, this period is exciting because the flexibility of a new and growing system permits people to grow and develop as well.²⁴ As women in the battered women's movement found, "no one had ever done this work before and everything had to be mastered at once, often during long work weeks of seventy hours."²⁵ Developing new skills and achieving new goals can reward members for long hours of hard work.

The founders of an organization usually "behave like missionaries searching for an audience to convert," selling their ideas in part to reinforce their own beliefs.²⁶ Those who start social movement organizations, like those who start businesses, are often risk takers who like to maintain personal control. They typically disdain managerial activities.²⁷ They may institute little or no formal structure at this stage and use their personal influence when making decisions. The lack of formal mechanisms for decision making may mean that influence is not distributed equitably among members, contradicting feminist egalitarian values.

The effort and excitement of founding an organization can mask underlying differences in members' ideologies or motivations. For example, some participants in the battered women's movement are committed to reforming the existing social system, while others seek radical transformation; some women have been battered themselves, while to others, violence is unfamiliar; some see male domination as the cause of violence in society, while others look to family pathology. The demands of creating a shelter for battered women leave little time to develop an ideological consensus. Instead, philosophy is "hammered out in between emergency phone calls or meetings with local bureaucrats offering a few thousand dollars so that a shelter might open."²⁸ The process of deciding how to expend scarce resources often uncovers differences in beliefs and values that are difficult to reconcile.

Fledgling organizations typically have to acquire resources (such as money or members), obtain legitimacy, and create a niche for the organization's product or services in order to survive.²⁹ Acquiring resources and obtaining legitimacy may be interdependent, because feminist orga-

nizations often have to prove their credibility in order to receive funds or other resources. For example, women's studies programs within universities must persuade faculty colleagues or administrators that women's studies is a legitimate academic enterprise in order to obtain funding; women's health clinics must demonstrate their professionalism in order to attract patients; women's bookstores must document their financial solvency in order to obtain a lease for store space. The need to demonstrate legitimacy may push a feminist organization in conventional directions in order to make it acceptable to other institutions and to people who can provide resources such as money or office space.

At the same time, the strength of commitment that motivates people to put time, money, and effort into the organization may lead them to adopt extreme goals or tactics. The scarcity of money in a fledgling organization is likely to mean that participants are those most strongly committed to its values and mission. Few material incentives exist, so members are rewarded by furthering the cause.³⁰ In her study of the movement to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, for example, Jane J. Mansbridge identifies a tendency toward ideological purity: "Mobilizing volunteers often requires an exaggerated, black or white vision of events to justify spending time and money on the cause."³¹ The self-selection of activists, their sacrifices for the cause, and their frequent exposure to like-minded others propels them toward an oversimplified and unreflective stance. This may push an organization in an extreme direction, producing resistance when compromises have to be made in order to establish the organization's credibility. From its inception, tension is likely to exist between the oppositional stance of a feminist organization and its survival needs.

Accordingly, I suggest that a critical choice facing members of a newly formed feminist organization is how far to deviate from mainstream principles and practices. If an organization is too different, it may not be able to obtain enough resources to survive. Furthermore, when roles and tasks are innovative and perhaps unclear, uncertainty produces anxiety and confusion. On the other hand, if the organization is not sufficiently different, participants who are motivated by a commitment to feminism may drop out. Feminist organizations have to maintain a delicate balance between these opposing forces in order to survive.

The Collectivity Stage. It is difficult to specify precisely when one organizational stage ends and the next begins. One indicator of transition is that a concern for producing results supplants worries about survival. The success of the budding enterprise exhilarates members, producing

high group morale and cohesion and individual satisfaction (as well as exhaustion). Some members feel a "sense of family" in this stage.³² A desire to form connections and share experiences with like-minded, supportive women has motivated participants in a wide variety of women's organizations.³³ Yet bell hooks points out that many women of color whose sense of community is already strong are frustrated by the attention given to social support when they would prefer to place priority on political activity.³⁴

The collectivity stage is typified by a relatively informal structure in which jobs and authority are often shared among group members. Such a structure facilitates maximum participation of members and sharing of decision-making power—dynamics valued by many feminists. Yet collectivist structures also have costs. Mansbridge summarizes the drawbacks of collectivist functioning as "time, emotion, and inequality": participatory decision making is time consuming, interaction can be emotionally intense, and power may be distributed unequally.³⁵ Differences in status, articulateness, ability to persuade, or sheer persistence enable one person's views to prevail over another's. When the organizational decision-making structure is ambiguous, an informal hierarchy of influence develops in the absence of a formal one. Because this informal hierarchy is not a part of the formal organizational structure, there may be no way to hold it accountable; in Freeman's cautionary term, a "tyranny of structurelessness" may prevail.³⁶

In a study of alternative service organizations of the 1970s, Joyce Rothschild-Whitt identified several conditions that facilitate participatory-democratic organizations.³⁷ Limits to size is one of these conditions, along with a transitory orientation to the organization, economic marginality, and oppositional services and values. Elsewhere I have suggested that certain conditions permit a feminist organization to maintain a collectivist structure: equal distribution of skills and knowledge among participants; dependence on members rather than outside sources for funding; the development of procedures which permit efficient responses to external demands; an emphasis on participation rather than efficiency; the development of close personal ties among members; and dispersion of sources of power (e.g., friendship networks and expertise).³⁸ Organizations that lack these features are more likely to disintegrate or to move toward hierarchical forms of control; those that retain or develop these characteristics are more likely to maintain themselves as collectivities. For example, a battered women's shelter was able to maintain a counterbureaucratic organizational structure over time because of the

homogeneity of its members; its staff consisted of former shelter residents rather than professional social workers. New staff recruited on the basis of similarity in beliefs got along well with existing staff, facilitating the consensual decision-making process. The drawback of doing such recruiting, however, was a lack of diversity among staff.³⁹

A dilemma for feminist organizations is whether to encourage growth with its attendant pressures toward bureaucracy or to restrict growth in order to maintain a collectivist structure. Although a growing organization experiences pressures toward increasing hierarchy, there are other ways to resolve these pressures. Contrary to Robert Michels's "iron law of oligarchy," which proposes that organizations invariably divide into a "minority of directors and a majority of directed,"⁴⁰ this tendency is not inevitable. For example, a group too large to function collectively can subdivide into several smaller groups.⁴¹ Other alternatives are possible, such as spinning off small, autonomous units from a larger organization or delegating routine decisions while deciding critical policy issues by the entire group in a modified collectivist arrangement.⁴² The adoption of hierarchy is a choice made by organizational members, not an inevitability.

Kathy E. Ferguson advocates small, face-to-face collectives as the appropriate structure for all organizations.⁴³ Yet small size can be problematic for a feminist organization. Limits to growth can force an organization to exclude women who want to participate, a process that seems to violate the spirit of feminism. Should a rape crisis center, for example, restrict the size of its staff in order to maintain a collectivist structure if by doing so it will not be able to answer all of the calls for help that it receives from rape victims? Feminists' dislike of hierarchical relationships and the desire to recognize the needs of individual members may conflict with the need for efficiency, stability, and predictability. Although a collectivist structure and productivity are not always mutually exclusive, they can be antagonistic in a large organization. A focus within the organization on participation and expressiveness can impede the efficiency that is often needed for instrumental action. This dilemma emerges in different forms, for example, as a conflict between the needs of an individual compared with the needs of the organization as a whole or as a choice between participation and productivity. As members of one group asked themselves, "Shall we evaluate our process tonight or get out a mailing?"⁴⁴ Differences among members in beliefs or values may crystallize when the group has to give priority to a particular goal or activity.

In commenting on Ferguson's position, Patricia Yancey Martin asks: "If, as Perrow argues, bureaucratic organizations really *are* the most effi-

cient type of organizational form (other things being equal), does pursuit of more humane, democratic, responsive, non-dominating organizations require their total rejection?"⁴⁵ Perhaps collectivist forms best serve some organizational purposes while structures that are larger and more differentiated enable other goals to be reached most easily. To some extent, the question of whether to expand turns on the relative importance of the organization as an end in itself or as a means to an end. A feminist group whose primary aim is to foster growth and development of its members might most effectively remain small and egalitarian, and one that aspires to provide a service for others might function best with some hierarchical features. Moreover, different forms can coexist within the same organization for different functions. The subcommittees in one statewide battered women's coalition were exemplars of egalitarian functioning even though the board of the coalition was too large and unwieldy to reach decisions by consensus.⁴⁶

The Formalization Stage. As with previous shifts to a new stage, the transition to formalization may be a gradual, uneven process. Success during the "collectivity" stage sets in motion multiple forces that press toward institutionalization of the organization's policies and practices and the development of a hierarchy of authority. Among those forces are an increase in the size of the staff, turnover in staff, and the need to obtain funding from sources outside the organization. Each of these conditions generates pressures that move the organization toward the development of positions with specialized functions, a hierarchy of titles, and more formal and impersonal communication procedures.⁴⁷

Feminist organizations that create a product or provide a service are likely to find themselves overloaded by demand, especially if they are addressing a hitherto unmet need, such as sheltering battered women or counseling rape victims. A women's health clinic found that its small volunteer staff was unable to meet the overwhelming demand for its services in a timely fashion: "Appointments for pregnancy tests and other services often had to be scheduled at least a week after a woman's request for services."⁴⁸ Ironically, the inaccessibility of mainstream healthcare was a factor that prompted the founding of the clinic. As many other feminist organizations did when faced with a similar situation, they added more workers.

An increase in staff may have unanticipated consequences for the organization. New employees, hired after the excitement of creating the organization has faded, may not have the same sense of mission that the original members had; they see their employment as a job rather than a

cause. Although long-time participants recognize the need for new workers, they still may resent the fact that these people were not around when employment by the organization called for sacrifice. Also, the larger number of participants permits division into factions. As a result, office politics may flourish and destroy even the illusion of unity.⁴⁹

The greatest change associated with growth, however, is the press toward formalization of procedures and policies that accompanies an increase in the number of members. When the number of staff increases, face-to-face communication becomes too time consuming, and more formal and impersonal means are used, such as memos, written guidelines, or voice mail. The schedules of large numbers of staff are likely to conflict, making it difficult to arrange meetings; and the heavy demand for services prohibits taking the time needed for consensual decision making, encouraging stratification of authority. The specialization of job functions that often accompanies organizational expansion usually is more efficient, reducing the need for every person to master every task, and it allows members to focus on their areas of interest and to develop sophisticated skills. However, specialization also may prevent everyone from having an overview of the whole organization, thus encouraging central coordination and control.⁵⁰

Increased numbers of staff members make it difficult to manage an organization by means of personal influence. Rather, the need for efficient operating systems in order to coordinate the activities of large numbers of people requires institutionalized decision-making procedures.⁵¹ Goal setting and formally adopted plans and policies typify the tendency toward formalization of operations. In these ways, the organization becomes less dependent on the personal qualities or charisma of its leaders.

The pattern of development that has occurred in many rape crisis centers exemplifies this process of change. Many of these centers, begun in the 1960s as collectives, first developed standing committees in order to enable members to pursue specialized interests. Steering committees were created as nonhierarchical vehicles for coordination and control. As the centers became more formalized, they added boards of directors to their governance structure. Most centers came to resemble traditional bureaucratic organizations in form.⁵²

The centralization of authority in the position of leader that occurs as part of the formalization process can create tensions in feminist organizations. Judy Remington argues that the women's movement accepts powerful women only in a kind of maternal role, as nurturers, rather than as leaders strong in other ways.⁵³ Indeed, the role of mother has been pro-

posed as a model of feminist leadership.⁵⁴ Members' desire for nurturance from female leaders may not be unique to feminist groups. Studies comparing female and male leaders find only a few differences between them, but people perceive and react to female vs. male leaders very differently.⁵⁵ Teresa Bernardez hypothesizes that a female leader unwittingly arouses expectations that she will be the perfect mother who provides selflessness, total acceptance, self-abnegation, lack of aggression and criticism, and nurturance.⁵⁶ When she does not live up to this ideal, irrational and intense anger and criticism may befall her. Furthermore, female leaders are not seen as legitimate holders of positions of authority in our society.⁵⁷ Accordingly, they may be caught between members' unrealistically high expectations of what leaders can provide and a paradoxical lack of belief in the legitimacy of their position.

Centralization of authority and formalization of procedures may reduce the opportunity for some members to exert influence. Founders who are used to controlling their organizations may find a more rule-bound, less subjective style of management anathema. They may be unwilling to step aside because of a proprietary interest in the organization. The reluctance of founders to institutionalize leadership by establishing procedures and policies that do not require their personal judgment has been labeled the "founder's trap."⁵⁸ Ironically, just as the organization attracts more clients or external funding, the founder's personal style of management may become inappropriate because of the expansion in organizational size. Especially when they have taken risks or made sacrifices to get the organization off the ground, founders may resent their sudden obsolescence and resist change. A critical challenge in this situation is to loosen the founder's control of the organization. In some cases, this means that the founders will depart; Suzanne Staggenborg identifies a long list of social movement founders, feminist and otherwise, who chose to leave or were rejected from organizations that they had begun.⁵⁹

Founders may leave an organization when the process of formalization diminishes their influence. Many reasons prompt others to leave. Long-term participants become frustrated and bored by the time-consuming nature of participatory processes. Yet participation requires that an organization respond to a newcomer's concern with more than the assurance that her suggestions have already been tried or the discussion held many times. When hierarchy emerges, those with a strong commitment to collectivist process may depart. Some find distasteful the accommodations that may be necessary to obtain funding. As time passes, the work to be done and the processes by which to do it may become routine, providing

workers little opportunity for new learning and decreasing their job satisfaction.⁶⁰ In addition, if professionalization of the organization requires advanced credentials of members, those without such credentials may be unwilling to accept low-status positions, and leave.

Others may leave simply because of their own developmental needs. An organization and its founding members age simultaneously. Many contemporary feminist organizations were started in the 1970s by women who were then in their twenties. These women are now reaching their forties and fifties. Some long-time participants may be entering a stage in their own lives when the organization is less central to them. Those with competing commitments may be unwilling or unable to devote long hours and enormous amounts of energy as they once did.

High turnover can necessitate the development of formal mechanisms so that new members can be incorporated quickly. Written job descriptions, employee handbooks, and orientation and training procedures integrate new members more easily into an organization. Although these practices clarify job expectations, they also can reduce the opportunity for individual variability in the execution of a job. In this way, turnover moves an organization toward institutionalization.

One advantage of turnover is that it provides the opportunity to move beyond the homogeneity of membership typical of organizations in their early stages. Turnover also revived the political agenda of a feminist health clinic when a woman with political experience and commitment was hired as director.⁶¹ Nonetheless, the departure of valued members can be painful, especially if the exit of women of color, lesbians, or working-class women leaves the organization open to charges, even if unwarranted, of racism, heterosexism, or elitism. Turnover may be difficult also if newer members do not have the same commitment to feminism as those who joined earlier, making them less willing to sacrifice for the organization.

The values of newcomers to the organization may conflict with those of long-term members. In a parallel fashion, those outside the organization may not agree with or understand a feminist organization's emphasis on participation and shared power and may press the organization to become more bureaucratic and formalized. The need to obtain some resources from outside exacerbates this pressure. A rape crisis center, for example, may find that it needs donations and grants from local community members and government sources to sustain itself. To get these funds, it must adopt conventional bureaucratic practices in order to convince outsiders that it is both successful at its mission and fiscally respon-

sible. Traditional forms demonstrate the legitimacy of an organization to external institutions.⁶² Outside institutions that control access to resources can require elements of bureaucracy in a feminist organization.⁶³ One battered women's shelter adopted two bureaucratic features—extensive recordkeeping and detailed job descriptions—to satisfy its funding sources.⁶⁴ Such procedures, while necessary to attract funding, tend to have the effect of specializing job functions and formalizing an organization's operations.

Obtaining funds may lead to salary discrepancies among staff or the distinction between salaried staff and volunteers, generating differentiation of interests because salaried and volunteer staff experience different risks and advantages. Salaried staff are more vulnerable to the outcome of decisions, because volunteers may leave if unhappy while salaried staff depend on the organization for an income. Salaried staff typically have more information about the organization than volunteers, in part because they spend more time there, allowing them to know more and thus exert more influence on decisions.⁶⁵

The need for money from outside sources can shape not only the structure but also the goals of an organization. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argue that social movements that become institutionalized lose their advocacy thrust because concern for organizational maintenance replaces the focus on social protest.⁶⁶ For example, the available funds for direct services, but not for community education or patient advocacy, meant that funding priorities became organizational priorities at a women's health clinic. Because few funders give money for oppositional programs, the need for outside funding can influence an organization to avoid a controversial stance. Some members of a feminist health clinic hesitated to oppose a government bill restricting abortions because such a public stance might jeopardize their funding.⁶⁷ As one feminist stated: "Who controls the women's organizations in town? It's largely men. We still get our funding through being good girls."⁶⁸ But the impact of outside funding may not always be conservatizing. In Los Angeles, state funding enabled the creation of two Black rape crisis centers, expanding racial and ethnic diversity in the antirape movement.⁶⁹

Formalization in an organization can clarify responsibilities and relationships, yet formalization is not without drawbacks. Feminist groups may resist the pressures on a growing organization to develop hierarchy because they abhor the inequality inherent in bureaucracy. Although not all feminists claim that a collective structure is mandatory in a feminist organization, most agree that hierarchy should be minimal and broad

participation should prevail. This conviction leads to tension when organizations become more differentiated. Suzanne Staggenborg compared the more formalized Chicago chapter of the National Organization for Women with the relatively more informal, decentralized Chicago's Women's Liberation Union and found that NOW survived and the CWLU died, because NOW's structure permitted it to solve problems of organizational maintenance and internal dissent. NOW experienced problems of formalization, however. As fewer people could participate in decision making, fewer projects were adopted, and more attention was devoted to organizational maintenance.⁷⁰

Most growing organizations experience "the tension between innovation and institutionalization, and the transition from personal to impersonal and from collective to instrumental points of view."⁷¹ Bureaucracy, with its specification of job functions, can eliminate idiosyncratic job performance in order to permit the coordination of the work of many people.⁷² The need for predictability, however, can come at a cost to the individuals involved. "The uniformity, the routinization, and the fragmentation of behavior run counter not only to the factor of individual difference but to the needs of people for self-determination, spontaneity, accomplishment, and the expression of individual skills and talents."⁷³ In bureaucratic organizations, an informal social system meets people's social and emotional needs, resolving some of the frustration caused by the repression of individuality. Feminist organizations have tried to minimize this frustration by incorporating the recognition of individual needs into the formal practices of the organization; yet inevitably individual needs will conflict with organizational demands.

Kathy Ferguson contends that an organization that becomes bureaucratic ceases to be truly feminist. In her opinion, appeals to the greater efficiency of bureaucracy overlook factors that dehumanize and disempower people. But the need to compete with other organizations for scarce resources such as volunteers or foundation funds (or customers or students) means that inefficiency can cause an organization's demise.⁷⁴ Ferguson contrasts bureaucracy, which sees people as objects to be manipulated, with egalitarian structures, which permit individual autonomy and self-development.⁷⁵ But implying that bureaucracy is masculine and dominating, while collectivity is feminine and humanizing, stereotypes not only gender but also organizational structures. This dichotomy glosses over the multidimensionality of both types of structural arrangements and the advantages and disadvantages of each. It leaves no room to consider "the oppressive, unresponsive elements in collective practices or the

democratic impulses in hierarchical practices."⁷⁶ Indeed, the accountability permitted by bureaucracy can provide a check on abuses of power that may not be possible in a nonbureaucratic organization. Bureaucracy also can enable the organization to have an impact beyond the range of particular individuals.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, Ferguson's powerful description of the pernicious effects of bureaucracy cautions against extreme specialization and hierarchy. Hence, one challenge facing feminist organizations is to adopt the minimal degree of hierarchy that is necessary to achieve particular goals. The press for a more differentiated structure in feminist organizations may stem from a desire for greater clarity about the division of labor rather than a need for many levels of authority.

The formalization of policies and procedures in a feminist organization may result in an organizational structure that no longer resembles the founders' conceptions. This process is not unique to feminist organizations. Labeled the "paradox of success," those things that make an organization innovative and desirable are the very things that may have to change to insure its long-run success.⁷⁸ Ironically, although formalizing procedures reduces uncertainty and lends stability to an organization, formalization removes the flexibility that permitted innovation to occur in the first place. An organization ought to undergo periodic self-scrutiny to ensure that the features that made it innovative are not lost. In doing so, it is important to remember that the emphasis on rationality in the descriptions of formal organizations may belie how things actually work. As John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan state:

Prevailing theories assume that the coordination and control of activity are the critical dimensions on which formal organizations have succeeded in the modern world. . . . But much of the empirical research on organizations casts doubt on this assumption. . . . Structural elements are only loosely linked to each other and to activities, rules are often violated, decisions are often unimplemented, or if implemented have uncertain consequences, technologies are of problematic efficiency, and evaluation and inspection systems are subverted or rendered so vague as to provide little coordination.⁷⁹

They suggest that some elements of organizational structure are adopted primarily to give legitimacy to the organization, having symbolic significance rather than being functional in other ways.

Feminist organizations must balance a quest for effective functioning with an emphasis on feminist goals and values. Vision and direction may fade while the organization gains efficiency from professional management. Because some feminists believe that bureaucratic-hierarchical organizations inevitably oppress workers, they may see the formalization of a feminist organization as a moral failure. In contrast, others view bureaucratic structures as benefiting feminist organizations by facilitating the ac-

complishment of certain goals and insuring fairness and accountability. "How power is actually used, and for what purposes, may be more important than its hierarchical or collectivist arrangements."⁸⁰ The challenge to feminist organizations is to adhere to an alternative vision even while adopting some bureaucratic forms.

Elaboration of Structure. The fourth stage of organizational development, elaboration of structure, is characterized by expansion, delegation, and coordination as well as renewal and generativity.⁸¹ Typical of this stage is a large, multiunit organization, having a central headquarters and decentralized divisions.⁸² When organizations reach the fourth stage, they typically need to decentralize and give more authority to those lower in the hierarchy. For example, a women's health center that I consulted with in a large midwestern city opened a second facility because of high demand. The second facility needed a degree of autonomy rather than centralized control of its operations in order to function effectively.

Decentralization offers the opportunity for the subunits of the organization to return to the participatory practices of earlier stages, and it permits the flexibility that an organization needs in order to respond to pressures to change. Decentralization runs the risk, however, of competition and conflict among the subparts of the organization. Personal ties among members, and among leaders, form cross-group linkages that can hold the large organization together. A common ideology is particularly important as a unifying force. The many hours spent in fractious discussions at national or regional meetings and conferences can be seen positively as attempts to communicate and solidify that common ideology.⁸³

State coalitions of battered women's shelters have some features of elaborated structures. These coalitions, which often receive and distribute funds for their shelter members, typically are governed by delegates representing individual shelters. A coalition can be politically active in ways that individual shelters cannot be because of the heavy demands on them for services or fundraising. In this case, large size of the organization (albeit through confederation) permits political activity that is difficult to accomplish in a smaller organization. Claire Reinelt labels as an "inside-outside" strategy the aim of many battered women's coalitions to build a political movement while struggling with mainstream institutions. Feminists in a Texas coalition developed a feeling of collective power as they successfully engaged state agencies. Rather than co-opting the shelters as earlier feminists feared, the contact with mainstream institutions enabled this coalition to influence government funding agencies and change laws. This changed the attitude of feminists; "No longer was the state con-

ceived as a unified agent of patriarchy. Instead the state came to be viewed as a terrain of political activism."⁸⁴

Formalization initiated during the previous stage of development enables expansion to occur. At the same time, it reduces the organization's ability to innovate. A stultifying emphasis on rules and procedures can result in organizational decline.⁸⁵ Flexibility and adaptation to societal changes are critical if the organization is to renew itself. For feminist organizations, flexibility includes the recognition of the diversity of beliefs and needs among women for different generations and life situations. Those growing up in the 1990s are likely to have different needs and interests than those who came to feminism in earlier times. Large, well-established membership organizations must recognize generational differences if they are to attract young participants. Accepting that feminist agendas will differ as generations change—or as membership expands to include women different from the original founders—is critical. Decentralization can permit the flexibility needed for change and thus facilitate that process of renewal.

CONFLICT IN FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS

Movement through each of the stages outlined above can generate painful conflict in feminist organizations. The principle of "sisterhood"—unity among women—occupied a central place in the feminist ideology of the 1960s. Indeed, one of the memorable slogans of that time was that "sisterhood is powerful." The adherence to an ideal, perhaps sentimentalized vision of sisterhood was often interpreted to mean that conflict among women was antithetical to feminism. Yet those of us who grew up with sisters as siblings know that competition and conflict are inherent in the sisterly relationship. Like real sisters, feminists disagree about substantive matters; feel envy, jealousy, and resentment toward each other; and compete with each other.⁸⁶ The echoes in contemporary relationships of unresolved familial conflicts among mothers, daughters, and sisters can make disagreements among women painful and threatening.⁸⁷

Conflict within feminist groups differs from that within other organizations in part because of the importance of the feminist group to its members: "That involvement may represent the single social structure in women's lives where, at least ideologically if not functionally, the status of women is likely to be treated as greater than second class."⁸⁸ Conflict also threatens the sense of community that motivates many women to join feminist organizations. The social and psychological importance of the

feminist organization to its members heightens the danger of ostracism that some fear accompanies disagreement. For example, Jane Mansbridge describes the nervousness she felt because of fear of rejection in presenting a position that deviated from the "party line" in a pro-ERA group.⁸⁹ In her case, the fears were unwarranted. In other situations, however, such fears have been grounded in reality. A feminist historian became the target of public attacks not only on her position but also on her motives and scholarly integrity when she testified in court against another feminist historian in defense of a corporation charged with sex discrimination.⁹⁰ Those on both sides of the feminist debate about pornography have been publicly accused of antifeminism.⁹¹ It is not the existence of disagreement among feminists that is of concern here but, rather, the attempts "in the classic manner of sectarians . . . to read one another out of the feminist movement."⁹²

Unresolved interpersonal conflicts may hinder effective organizational functioning and make development more difficult. When differences in a group become so extensive that it is impossible to retain an illusion of unity and group harmony, then conflict may surface with a vengeance. For example, although they were angered by a member's tardiness and arrogance, staff at a women's health center rejected a suggestion that they confront her with criticisms, opting instead to take the woman out for a pizza dinner to show support for her. Some time later, however, the member was ousted from the collective.⁹³

Some conflicts among women are grounded in individual differences in personality, beliefs, abilities, or ambitions. As material rewards become more available within organizations, conflict and competition can increase. The emphasis on cooperation in feminist philosophy may have been a product of feminists' marginality rather than their beliefs or values. "It is not so much poverty that creates the breeding ground for competition as it is the possibility of wealth."⁹⁴

Conflicts stemming from differences that are delineated by group identity pose particularly difficult problems for feminist organizations that hope to forge bonds among women. Feminists' beliefs in social equality do not automatically exempt them from deeply ingrained attitudes of the dominant culture. As early as 1970, the Black feminist lawyer Florynce Kennedy rejected what she called the "sisterhood mystique" because it masked the fact that some women oppress other women.⁹⁵ Tensions between Black and white women have deep roots in U.S. history. As bell hooks points out, "historically many black women experienced white women as the white supremacist group who most directly exercised

power over them, often in a manner far more brutal and dehumanizing than that of racist white men."⁹⁶ Differences in social class divide women also. Working-class women have been baffled by some middle-class feminists' rejection of "professionalism" as a means to social equality; to them, professional skills are a way to escape dead-end, dehumanizing jobs. The feminist goal of empowerment also affronts many working-class women (and others) who do not see themselves as passive and dependent.⁹⁷

There is a fundamental paradox in the idea of empowering others: The institutional structure that puts some people in the position to empower undermines the act of empowerment.

Virtually all empowerment efforts involve a grant of power by a favored group to others in the organization. Unless the favored group changes the very circumstances that have given it power in the first place, the grant of power is always partial. Unfortunately, the limited nature of the grant works to undercut the effectiveness of the group that has been empowered. This ineffectiveness, in turn, discourages the original power holders from working to expand the grant.⁹⁸

For example, at one battered women's shelter the staff's power to decide whether residents might remain in the shelter illuminated the contradiction between an ideology of equality and actual practice. Staff determined that recognition by residents of the psychological dynamics of the battering cycle (which they defined as "empowerment") should be the priority, and they encouraged residents to discuss their experiences and feelings in order to understand this process. Yet the economic needs of many residents were more urgent to them than psychological development. "The staff aren't realistic enough about your situation," one resident complained. "I am a woman with four kids and I'm basically out on the street. They come in here all dressed up and smelling of perfume and ask me, 'how are you feeling today?'"⁹⁹ "Empowerment" is an ambiguous term. It can refer to an increase in an individual's sense of self and capacity for assertion or to an increase in her formal participation in decision making. At times, feminists endorse the latter in theory but the former in practice.

Differences in roles among organization members may also produce conflict. For example, the fiscal responsibility assumed by a board of directors might cause them to hesitate in committing funds to a risky project, but the staff members' daily exposure to women's needs might make that same project seem mandatory to them. A dispute in a Texas battered women's shelter between those who managed and obtained funds and those who provided services was resolved by firing the service providers, a painful irony for they had founded the shelter.¹⁰⁰ The interests of differ-

ent constituencies (or "stakeholders") within an organization inevitably will clash, in some cases reflecting inequalities in the larger society. The creation of mechanisms or decision-rules for mediating these conflicts furthers the process of formalization.

Another source of conflict within feminist organizations is their adoption of multiple, broad, and ambitious goals that deny the scarcity of resources available. I have seen some feminist organizations experience chronic turmoil because members are reluctant to set priorities among goals. Taking on the mission to achieve multiple purposes while having the ability to meet only a few can generate resentment and hostility among those who feel ignored or betrayed by the organization. Setting priorities among goals can force painful choices on an organization. Not making explicit decisions about which goals to emphasize, however, can leave an organization's members in a continuing state of dissatisfaction and distrust.

To women for whom confrontation is a new, unpracticed way of acting, expressing differences can feel "raw and searing."¹⁰¹ Cultural differences in communication styles also contribute to the difficulty of dealing with conflict. In bell hooks's college classes, white women students interpreted loud confrontations among Black women as anger and hostility, but the Black women defined the same behavior as playful teasing.¹⁰² The disappointment of finding differences among women when the desire for solidarity, both emotional and political, is so strong exacerbates the pain of conflict in feminist organizations. Public conflict among feminists also buoys those who deride feminist beliefs and practices and thus harms the credibility of the feminist movement as a whole.

The idea that women should operate only in a cooperative mode denies reality and clouds the process of conflict management. Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life. Therefore, "Its presence should not surprise us. It is the absence of ways of negotiating competing demands that we should worry about."¹⁰³ Jean Baker Miller suggests that women should reclaim conflict but reject models based on domination and subordination, basing our actions instead on the way that women have tried, in families and other relationships, to handle conflict in a manner that fosters everyone's development.¹⁰⁴ Conflict resolution techniques have been developed that permit opposing parties to articulate their differences and seek common ground.¹⁰⁵ Feminists at the Seneca Falls Women's Peace Encampment, torn about whether to display the American flag, set up a committee made up of "five women in strong opposition, five women in determined support, and five easygoing intermediate me-

diators." After seven hours of deliberation, they decided to include the American flag in a panoply of flags, many of them handmade by camp residents.¹⁰⁶ Yet some differences may be irreconcilable or not amenable to collaborative solutions. Developing, in Miller's words, an "etiquette of conflict," which permits differences to be negotiated while retaining connections among women, is a formidable task facing women's organizations today.

CONCLUSION

Feminist ideals of the 1960s inspired the creation of women's movement organizations. Many of these organizations began with a preference for collective structures and a desire for unity among women. The experience of the last two decades has tested those values against the realities of organizational growth and has deepened our understanding of organizational dynamics.

Hierarchy in organizations creates inequalities in relationships, but inequality also exists within collective structures, and hierarchy has some advantages. Egalitarian structures with a humanistic emphasis permit participation and individuality, but they fail to foster efficiency and predictability. This tension makes it necessary at times to choose between productivity and equality or to develop strategies, such as limiting the size of the organization, to enable egalitarian arrangements. Both bureaucratic and collectivist structures are multidimensional, each with advantages and disadvantages. Instead of asking whether certain organizational structures are "more" or "less" feminist, the critical question is whether they are useful for reaching particular goals.

The press toward bureaucracy that accompanies growth suggests that feminist organizations will become similar in form to mainstream organizations if they expand. However, alternatives to expansion, such as dividing into small groups, can preserve egalitarian relations, and feminism's democratic ideology mitigates against extreme centralization of control. A feminist organization can adopt some bureaucratic features without becoming a bureaucratic behemoth.

As a consultant, I have often heard members blame organizational problems on other individuals' deficient motives, abilities, or commitment to feminism. Yet organizational growing pains, not personal deficits, generate many of the tensions in feminist organizations. Individual differences are highly visible whereas the shaping power of organizational arrangements is less transparent. Psychologists label as the "fundamen-

tal attribution error" the tendency of people to attribute other people's behavior to intrapsychic factors while considering situational factors to be the cause of their own actions.¹⁰⁷ Recognition that tensions can stem from systemic factors rather than members' lack of commitment to feminism reduces the guilt and blame that confound the already difficult process of conflict management. Moving from individualistic to organizational explanations permits consideration of solutions other than simply ousting people from the organization.

The assumption in American culture that bigger is better leads to the equation of growth with success. Nonetheless, growth may lead feminist organizations in directions that are antithetical to some of the beliefs and values that originally inspired their creation. Tension exists between organizational survival and growth, on the one hand, and some aspects of feminist ideology, on the other. Yet survival and perhaps growth may be necessary to achieve feminist goals. Feminist organizations have played a critical role in bringing both women and women's issues to the public agenda. Moreover, organizational memories are conduits for the wisdom gained from feminism's history. To condemn organizations as nonfeminist because they adopt bureaucratic features is to deny some of the realities of life in a growing organization. To adopt bureaucracy without recognizing its tension with feminist values, however, is to reduce the potential of our organizations to act as vehicles for social change. The transformative power of feminism is mediated in part through feminist organizations. Understanding the choices that face feminist organizations as they grow will better enable us to create strategies that address both organizational needs and feminist values.

NOTES

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