

## In response to Status of Women Canada Evaluation Guideline Questions:

In the project report, **Participating for Change**, WETC provides the scope and accomplishments of this incredibly broad-based participatory action research project. It was originally a project to examine the relevance of the Women's Employment & Training Coalition within the context of the British Columbia government's "Women's Employment Strategy: Options for Initiatives" paper which had been circulating during the mid 1990's. Massive policy changes, both federally and provincially, quickly demonstrated that there was a more compelling focus on the impacts from the EI legislation and the devolution of training responsibilities to the provinces. These policy changes required a response from WETC who had 15 years of knowledge and advocacy on the underlying issues. Since the original plan had called for significant grassroots consultation, the change was primarily in the subject areas of federal and provincial training policies, and their impact on individuals and groups, particularly those most disadvantaged in the labour force. Due to the complexity of the issues, there was a need for education as well as advocacy. In the process, WETC researched and prepared background materials that might assist those consulted to determine if WETC was potentially a useful organization for moving forward on the issues. WETC collaborated with agencies like Mosaic, ISS, SUCCESS, YWCA to advocate for retaining community based training programs which assisted women on low income to access the training and eventually get into the workforce.

What were noteworthy obstacles and sources of resistance you encountered in carrying out the project ? How were these obstacles approached ?

Prior to starting, Status of Women Canada cut the budget to approximately one-third of what was requested. This lack of resources hindered our ability to carry out WETC=s much needed work in the community, particularly in the follow up phase of the project after the initial consultations, i.e. only quarter-time pay for coordination, very high committee volunteer hours and travel expenses, etc.

Governments were interested in collaborating but could not provide real financial resources, clear understanding of future directions and accountability for the long term benefit or detriment to women and women=s work.

There was a willingness on behalf of community agencies to work with WETC but they could not provide volunteer time and resources they themselves needed. WETC in the long term could not survive without resources and still provide ongoing lobbying in the area of women=s access to employment & training on behalf of the community groups, individuals and agencies.

The impact of the shift from Community-based training to fee-payer service in the NGO training sector reduced access to effective training, created havoc with long term planning, increased workloads and limited the capacity of those who might have joined with WETC and done advocacy on behalf of their clients.

WETC's steering committee decided to reduce expenses and time commitments and expand network of contributors by replacing face-to-face meetings with access to a website and list serv. We were successful in achieving most of this through purchasing a computer from Volnet (a non profit organization) and housed it at YWCA. There is still no staff to facilitate the communications in any way, or to develop and update e-lists.

### **Additional Impacts:**

Even though the project was extremely under-funded research, immigrant, refugee and poor women were informed about training and employment issues, and the participatory process fostered an understanding of what it means to respond and critique government policy in a democracy. Some participants began to understand that the policy making process is opaque, obscured, and difficult but extremely important and relevant to access. Others were thankful for the opportunity to share their analyses with a wider audience.

We were able to bring together women's organizations from outside the lower mainland to sit at the table with senior federal and provincial officials in HRDC, Status of Women, ITAC and Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology to present their experience and analysis of impacts of the policy changes relating to women's training and employment to the officials and also to each other. WETC was hoping that this forum's recommendations would be followed up by the federal and provincial officials who were present in the forum and continue to work with WETC and other provincial women representatives via WEAC. This was not followed through on either side.

We did achieve the reinstatement of the Women's Employment Advisory Committee (WEAC) in the face of its sudden termination, and expanded its membership to include provincial representatives. But lack of time, energy and money for this useful consultation process has left it lying fallow.

Lobbying efforts were undertaken while the consultations were going on, as the emergent issues required immediate action.

A letter was sent to the HRDC Minister documenting the concerns found during the research, with copies to provincial and federal ministers and officials. The letter was recently passed on to the Director of the Women's Bureau, HRDC, along with the full report, in hopes of achieving some more significant action on the subjects.

The concept and practice of gender-based analysis permeated the work, and hopefully developed skills along the way, outside government, in those individuals and groups with whom WETC was working.

Work to reinstate the Designated Group Policy under the LMDA resulted in a simple statement in the Agreement to respect "equity principles" in the implementation of programs. Tenacious efforts by WETC moved the federal/provincial LMDA steering committee to undertake to define what was meant by "equity principles" in the Agreement. While we were not satisfied, particularly with the delays and resistances experienced, it was certainly important that the discussions took place and a document was produced by the senior officials. (We have yet to see it.)

By disseminating our research results in a public forum, we facilitated engagement between organizations who may not have previously worked together: getting to know each other and sharing their work. It became clear that many grassroots training organizations did not feel comfortable engaging in advocacy work because it might jeopardise their funding. This confirmed WETC's findings that policy changes had eliminated any of the flexible potential for WETC "volunteers" to be sponsored by the organizations for which they worked, which had been the past practice for the Women's Employment and Training Coalition. The shift from community-based funded training programs to fee-for-service individually served has had a negative impact for all. If no one could take on the roles and responsibilities of advocacy for free, how was the work of WETC to continue?

The last 5 active volunteer members of WETC met, and recognized their inability to continue. It has been difficult to find the time in our busy schedules to complete the requirements of this project. The work undertaken and accomplished went far beyond the original commitment. I would like to honour the participation of the Advisory Committee for this project who have all worked in an extremely dedicated way in a very difficult environment: Marnie Marley, Jo Rekart and Marcia Braundy, Emily Mak and Ronnie Sun. Priti Shah, our "paid" worker, straddled the lines between WETC member and activist, and the worker who carried out the community-based participatory research project, and helped us to make sense of the results. The many additional hours of unpaid time she put in are a testament to her dedication to the people we consulted, and the advocacy work in which WETC has always been involved.

Please read the full report for other major achievements.

### What can be learned from our experience?

Our approach, educating at the same time as investigating the needs for advocacy, led to a much greater awareness of the role "citizenship" plays in a democracy, and what rights and responsibilities are involved. By lobbying as a part of the participatory action research, we provided role models and practical experience in this milieu for many not aware of the possibilities.

Our research results were triangulated and disseminated through two major forums with research participants, trainers and advocates, and government representatives. Comments and plans were discussed through a listserv. We also undertook many committee member debriefs. The final report was distributed widely to governments, NGOs and individuals in British Columbia, and more recently, to WITT's organizations across the country.

### What is required to continue the progress we have achieved?

WETC had characterized the final forum as a "make or break" event. It became clear that each group and individual was willing to make a small effort or contribution toward taking up the challenges created by the negative impacts of the policy and legislation. But no one, or more, persons or groups was able to come forward to undertake WETC's role as an activist advocacy organization. All

recognized and appreciated the role that WETC had been playing, and wanted to see it continue, but there, clearly, was not the energy in that room to make it happen.

It was a very sad moment. But for those of us on the Steering Committee who had been putting in uncountable volunteer hours, it was a message. We could rest, knowing we had given it our best try. There are still some things that could be done: preparing an email list of those attending and those contacted to attend; send out the practical commitments that were identified at the forum so that those who might do something would have it, etc. But it is clear that we had reached our limit of volunteer work and time. If energy is to be put into such things, people will have to be paid real money to do it. Years of analysis, making recommendations for the implementation of successful project-based training, lobbying for change, demanding the retention of the Designated Group Policy has resulted in policy and legislation which has done just the opposite. Gender-based analysis for governments has become just another method of offering lip service, and tying up the energy of dedicated activists.

There is an excellent set of recommendations listed on pages 22 & 23 of the report to respond to the issues identified throughout the report. WETC has no resources to implement these. But these recommendations have been before governments for a very long time. It is time they took their own responsibility to implement them.

With regard,  
Marcia Braundy  
Priti Shah  
WETC