

THE ROLE OF WETC

The Role of the Women's Employment and Training Coalition (WETC)

While it is clear that women have made important gains in the last fifteen years, it is equally clear that those gains have primarily benefited educated women from the middle class. Women who live in poverty, immigrant women, First Nations women and other women of colour, and women with disabilities still face significant barriers to training and employment.

There was general agreement among all of the people we interviewed, including representatives from both the federal and provincial governments that there continues to be a compelling need for advocacy in order to reduce or eliminate those barriers.

WETC's historic role in providing a framework for a broad coalition of organizations concerned with barriers to training and employment for women is as relevant as ever. The challenge for the organization is to find an effective way to continue in that role.

6.1 Background – the Herstory of WETC

WETC is a 15-year-old advocacy organization for women. The organization has evolved from a Lower Mainland ad hoc group serving a small sector of women's concerns to a provincial structure with new mechanisms in place that facilitate the inclusion of greater diversity in women's voices and experience.

No written history or evaluation of the organization exists, although the work of the organization has been documented in extensive minutes, briefs and conference reports. Of particular help was a paper written by Lucy Alderson in July 1994. It describes WETC's mandate and membership and begins with a brief outline of the context for WETC's inception. This document as well as interviews, minutes, briefs to policy makers, agendas, funding proposals and information sheets were used to prepare this herstory.

In 1985, a broad coalition of women's organizations in the Lower Mainland of BC created the Women's Employment and Training Coalition to "present issues and concerns about the training and employment of women" to Flora MacDonald, then Minister of Employment and Immigration. This was at a time when the Conservative federal government had begun to tie labour market training to its economic strategy (Witter, 1991). The Parliamentary Task Force on Employment Opportunities for the 1980s focussed ten out of its sixteen recommendations on education and training within a context of labour market demands (Selman, 1991, p. 284). This created great concern among many groups. Colleges and vocational institutes believed their role in training was being usurped; equity groups worried that programs would focus on critical market shortages and not on essential skills such as language training and adult basic education; and labour unions felt that efforts to target training based on

predictions of future need were doomed to failure in an ever- shifting economy. Butterwick (1993, p.iii).

Given these factors, women in many organizations were becoming more vocal about the inappropriate match between employment and training programs and the reality of women's lives. WETC advocated actively with both provincial and federal officials to create a training system to meet the real needs of women.

Initially WETC members came from the college system and from community-based training programs. Eventually participants were recruited through word of mouth and came from many sources to attend WETC meetings.

Membership included women's organizations (mainstream, immigrant and visible Minority organizations, first Nations employment and training organizations, disabled women's groups, and women's centres), college and university representatives, private trainers, women in trades and technology, union and government representatives. Initially, many members were able to attend WETC meetings as part of their jobs, but as work patterns changed, more and more members had to do WETC work on their own time and at their own expense. The result was a decrease in volunteer work hours but a growing demand to continue WETC work and its mandate.

In 1985 members of WETC took the initiative, on an ad hoc basis, to build a consultative dialogue with BC and Yukon regional representatives of the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC now HRDC). In 1989, these informal and ad hoc meetings were formalized into the Women's Employment and Advisory Council (WEAC), with regular quarterly meetings and its own terms of reference. For WETC, WEAC represented a direct line to policy and program development. For regional CEIC leadership, WEAC represented a useful opportunity to consult with a broad range of women's groups, and to hear feedback and recommendations as to the limitations of their programs.

During the first five years of WEAC's formal life, WETC members raised issues about women's trades and technical training, equity targets within program areas, and uneven implementation of programs throughout the region. At WEAC meetings, WETC members consistently pushed for access to educational opportunities through appropriate bridging programs for women. The meetings provided WETC members with a more in-depth rationale for the policies of CEIC/HRDC and information about new program developments which could then be passed along to member organizations. In addition, background information provided by federal representatives on HRDC programs have assisted women to advocate for the full intent of the program at the local level. For instance, training for women in trades and technology has had a broad implementation history in Canada. Discussions at WEAC and information-sharing through WETC and Women in Trades and Technology have assisted many organizations to provide a range of trades and technical training for women in BC, based on the National Standards developed by WITT National Network's Industrial Adjustment Services (IAS) Committee. (WETC, 1989 - 1994).

By 1994, members of WETC, which included college, community-based service providers and equity groups, realized that women's needs within training programs were being interpreted within a dominant policy framework that focussed on reducing spending, matching workers to the market and privatizing training programs. Programs for women were developed based upon a "thin understanding of women's needs, one which focussed on women's lack of training and job experience and ignored the structural inequalities of the labour market and women's different racial and class struggles."(Lucy Alderson).

Based on this understanding WETC members articulated the following goals during the process of setting up the B.C. Labour Force Development Board as they participated in the selection of equity representatives to that Board:

- To communicate and build networks with other interested groups and individuals on issues affecting women's employment and training regardless of physical disability, race, class, age, or sexual orientation.
- To create and support a BC Women's agenda on employment and training.
- To ensure women receive their fair share of federal and provincial training dollars.
- To monitor government proposals, policies, and programs and assess their impact on women.
- To develop strategies in response to public and private proposals, policies, and programs that affect women

Over the course of its history, WETC has been successful in its efforts to affect policy in a number of areas. Some of their accomplishments are listed in the table below:

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Policy/Issues lobbied</i>	<i>Impact</i>
<i>1985</i>	<i>Trades and Technology Training for women</i>	<i>Developed and promoted Exploratory and other trades/technical program within government and community-based organizations</i>
<i>1989</i>	<i>Language Instructions for Newcomers in Canada</i>	<i>Succeeded in making the eligibility criteria more flexible</i>
<i>1989</i>	<i>Project Based Training Programs</i>	<i>Resulted in changes to the eligibility criteria which increased availability of long-term training programs</i>
<i>On going</i>	<i>Designated Group Policy</i>	<i>Used and promoted DGP as gender lens for all new initiatives and policies</i>
<i>1993</i>	<i>National Training Standards</i>	<i>Worked to develop National Training standards with the National Women's Reference Group.</i>

1994	<i>British Columbia Labour Force Development Board</i>	<i>Led the way in establishing an equitable and fair process to select the representatives for all the designated groups on the BCLFDB</i>
1997	<i>Industrial Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC)</i>	<i>Organized a provincial campaign which resulted in legislation being passed to increase the representation of under-represented groups in designated trade's occupations within the mandate of ITAC</i>
1998	<i>Coalition for Principals of Equity Consultation</i>	<i>Established a process for a community consultation inclusive of equity groups and Lower Mainland HRCC's. Produced a "How to Manual" that promotes workable representation of community groups.</i>
1998/99	<i>LMDA</i>	<i>Lobbied for inclusion and definition of Equity Principles in LMDA</i>
1999	<i>WEAC</i>	<i>Successfully lobbied for the reinstatement of WEAC.</i>

By the mid 1990s, involvement in WETC had begun to diminish, and much of its energy was consumed by internal conflict. Women of colour and white women members went through a struggle over the principles of sharing equal voice and power. After some extremely difficult discussions and workshops some white members decided to leave WETC. Those who remained continued to work toward the development of a framework that honoured the principles of inclusiveness, and the commitment to share power and voice. The work on these issues continues to evolve.

As a result of these internal divisions, WETC's advocacy work lost some of its momentum, and that reality combined with the busyness of women's lives meant that a very few members had to take on the organizing and advocacy work of the organization in order to keep it alive. It was at this juncture, that the organization began this work of evaluation.

The women we interviewed who had been involved with WETC over the years gave a variety of reasons for their participation, their motivation to continue, and what they learned from their involvement in the organization. They also cited a number of accomplishments of WETC, both on a community and personal level. A list of their comments can be found in Appendix III. However here are a few of them, along with the points others made.

- *"Women were coming together and working on influencing the policies. Exciting times, energy around the issues. . ."*
 Gave opportunity to women to work with others who faced similar challenges and issues.
 Gained knowledge and experience to work with women from diverse background and perspectives.

- *“Through [my work] I got involved. We [staff] had concerns around eligibility criteria . . . we lobbied through WETC and got some results.”*
Organizations that had issues around training programs, for example rigid eligibility entrance criteria, or curriculum that was not inclusive, used the WETC forum to raise the issues and get local responses or solutions.
- *“It played a very significant role in my intellectual and person development.”*
WETC (and WEAC) provided a supportive atmosphere for women involved in work to learn and use advocacy skills. They have developed leadership skills, public speaking skills, and have learned to work in teams and to be change agents. They have also learned the mechanics of preparing briefs, gathering information and research, and networking, as well as learning to think in creative and innovative ways to create change. This has helped women to develop vast experience and a thorough knowledge of the political systems.
- *“As an immigrant woman I had no voice, I was seeking recognition for the struggles I was going through I could never have learnt about Canadian politics and the women’s struggles in any better or quicker way. This helped me to integrate in this society.*
It created opportunities for women who started from the grass roots to go on to work successfully at the community, provincial and national level.
- *“We helped people focus on specific issues and shifted the criteria for the funding which was provided.”*
It played a critical role in helping to educate the frontline staff in and out of government about policies and informed the policy makers about client concerns.

Many of the women who worked with WETC went on to work in other related areas. For example:

1. Three women were chosen from BC by CLOW to sit on CLMPC National Task Forces on Apprenticeship, Entry-Level Training and Social Assistance Recipients;
2. Two women were selected to participate on the National Women’s Reference Group on Labour Market Issues;
3. One woman was selected to participate on the national LINC policy Task Force;
4. One member went on to become the National Coordinator for WITT;
5. One member went on to become President of Community College;
6. One member was selected to represent education and community-based training on British Columbia Labour Force Development Board.

It appears that the work of evaluation and renewal has come at an opportune time for the organization. The dialogue with women and organizations that formed backbone of

our research has provided new opportunities for coalition-building and partnerships. If WETC can build on those opportunities, and resolve the technical issues around structure and communication, it should be able to continue as a dynamic and effective agent for change in the sphere of women's access to training and employment.

6.2 Restructuring the Organization

Since its inception in 1985, the work of WETC has been carried out through the device of monthly meetings and the work of a steering committee. All of the women and organizations involved in WETC have volunteered their time and expertise, and meeting space and administrative supports were provided by Douglas College. However as the pace of modern life became more hectic, the women involved in WETC found it more and more difficult to make time commitments to the work of WETC. As well, WETC, like other women's organizations found itself caught up in the struggle to find a balance in representation from visible minorities and other marginalized groups. There is an ongoing need for the women of WETC to find ways of maintaining connections with grassroots community organizations and to ensure their representation in the group. The organization must also find means of effective communication that can include women who have neither the time nor the means to attend monthly meetings.

6.3 Funding

Like so many social service organizations, WETC has relied solely on the volunteer commitment of women. And like those other organizations, it has seen a serious diminishing of that commitment. The reality of women's working lives has changed. Job insecurity, increasing workloads, and the reduction in real income, have all eroded their ability to participate in volunteer organizations like WETC. It is unlikely that such work can be maintained at the pace and quality of previous years without at least one paid coordinator.

6.4 Establishing priorities

Any organization with limited resources must make hard choices in establishing priorities, and WETC is no exception. The number of issues that affect women's working lives could otherwise overwhelm the organization and fragment efforts to effect change. Priorities must be established through a process of wide consultation among both its member groups and other community organizations, and action strategies should be implemented in coalition with other groups seeking the same outcomes.

See Participating for Change for recommendations.