

Nelson Women's Centre

The Nelson Women's Centre is an on-going project of the West Kootenay Women's Association, incorporated as a non-profit society August 1974. Currently, the membership is slightly over one hundred. The Centre exists as a vehicle of the Association to carry through its aims and objectives. The smooth and efficient operation of the Centre and its activities requires full-time supervision, co-ordination, training of non-salaried staff persons, and a vehicle for ongoing communication among all persons working at or through the Centre. Without a skeleton of full-time workers to provide this co-ordinating role, the Centre is unable to make the most efficient use of its members' talents and skills. Specific projects are being held back because energy must first go to the operation and maintenance of the Centre. We therefore recommend to this Caucus that support and recognition be given in the form of core funding for the on-going work and services provided by the Nelson Women's Centre.

THE WOMEN'S CENTRE AS A RESOURCE TO ISOLATED, NON-URBAN WOMEN

The activities and resources of the Nelson Women's Centre regularly serve women living within a forty mile radius of Nelson, and frequently serve women throughout the entire West Kootenays. More than Half the membership of the West Kootenay Women's Association live outside Nelson, on farms or in small, isolated communities, including:

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| Kootenay Bay | Bonnington | Lemon Creek |
| Argenta | South Slocan | Sproule Creek |
| Balfour | Thrums | Blewett |
| Kaslo | Castlegar | Taghum |
| Salmo | Passmore | Vallican |
| Ymir | Winlaw | Slocan |
| Perry Siding | Appledale | Johnson's Landing |

For women living in these communities, Nelson is the centre for service and commerce: government offices, medical services, shopping facilities etc. are all here. Women must travel long distances, often in bad weather and often with children, to avail themselves of these services. The needs of these women are two-fold: 1) a drop-in centre for their convenience and 2) access to information to assist them in understanding and working with the institutions and facilities they deal with.

ACTIVITIES OF THE WOMEN'S CENTRE

To illustrate the scope of the Nelson Women's Centre's (N.W.C.) work following is a list of activities that take place in and through the Centre:

1) Childbirth Classes

Held once a week, the aim of the childbirth classes is to provide prospective parents with information and techniques that facilitate their active participation in the birth experience. The classes teach the physiology of pregnancy and birth, techniques for natural childbirth, and sound nutrition, etc. In addition, prospective parents are made familiar with the medical institutions they will be dealing with through discussion of procedures and policies presently in practice.

The women who conduct the childbirth classes are actively working with these institutions to promote changes in maternity policy and service delivery which will allow the birth experience to be a healthier and happier one for both parents and children.

To date, many changes have taken place as a result of this and other work done in the area of health care:

- referrals from local doctors to the Natural Childbirth classes
- rooming-in at the hospital
- accepted attendance of fathers and/or other persons in the delivery room at births
- increased support for natural childbirth and breast feeding
- local V.D. testing
- breast self-examination clinic

2) Ovulation Method Birth Control Workshops

In response to the demand for safe, natural, effective birth control, the N.W.C. provides workshops on the Billings' Ovulation Method of Natural Birth Control, conducted by women trained to teach this method. The workshops take place regularly throughout the year at the Centre and elsewhere in the Kootenays, including Nakusp, Creston, Kaslo, Cranbrook. Because the medical facilities do not now offer information about this method, the Centre's workshops are essential for those women who need this information. In fact, some local practitioners have begun to refer their women patients to the N.W.C. when they seek knowledge of this kind of birth control. In addition, exposure to alternatives such as this is promoting a more honest appraisal within the medical institutions of some of the birth control methods commonly prescribed.

3) Resource Referral & Counselling

Counselling provided at the Centre includes the following: birth control, abortion, mental health, legal, divorce, family law, welfare, childcare, UIC, Human Rights, rape, employment—virtually any issue that women must face in this society. The goal of our counselling service is to provide women with three elements we believe necessary before a woman can begin to either solve her own problems, or help others. These three elements are:

- a) support, understanding and analysis in times of crisis
- b) a thorough knowledge of her rights, or lack of rights
- c) an understanding of the institutions which affect her, including the service delivery systems and the decision-making structures.

This kind of counselling provides women with the tools to better evaluate, work in and work with the institutions, and to encourage institutional changes on women's issues.

4) Women's Lending Library

The Centre's library contains books, periodicals, records, research materials, pamphlets, etc., which are of specific interest to women. Lending privileges are available automatically to all members and to any other women using the Centre. Most of the material contained in our library is unavailable elsewhere in the Kootenays. Many of the women who use the library are not residents of Nelson, but come from the surrounding rural communities where limited or no other library facilities exist; in Nelson, the fee charged by the Public Library is prohibitive. While we are working with local libraries to encourage them to provide these materials more freely, our library is very well used and drastically needed.

The existence of the library in the "drop-in" environment of the Centre promotes interaction around the books, etc., and thus promotes discussion of the women's issues raised by those materials. In addition, looking for library materials is often a woman's first step towards seeking counselling.

5) Women's Advocacy Programme (WAP)

The Women's Advocacy Programme was created as an ombudservice for local women who face discrimination in the community. It is a broad-based programme, whose approach is to mediate between women and the "offending" institution (medical, legal, educational, governmental, etc.) to promote resolution of the problems and raise community consciousness about women's issues. The ultimate aim is to influence our local institutions significantly enough to create concrete changes in their attitudes towards women in general.

6) Multi-Media Herstory Kit

Preliminary work has been done on learning research and interviewing skills, data compilation, and video production techniques for the Women's Herstory Kit. During the summer, the actual research and interviewing phase will commence with the aid of one of the summer student workers. Once completed, further work on the kit will be carried on until we are able to finish it and make it available to the community.

7) Drop-In Centre

The N.W.C. Drop-In provides the following services to women in Nelson or coming to Nelson, which they cannot find anywhere else:

- a warm, dry place to rest
- a place to change and feed their babies
- a place to take a break from carrying their children and/or parcels
- a place to get information about events happening in town
- a place to find out about specific services and facilities available in town
- a bulletin board
- a telephone
- washroom facilities
- free tea and coffee
- a toy box for their children
- free clothes
- feminist books and records
- good conversation, or
- peace and quiet
- a "woman-only" space.

8) Participation in the B.C. Federation of Women

The Nelson Women's Centre takes an active role in the British Columbia Federation of Women. Since its inception, representatives to the Federation have come from the Nelson Women's Centre for the West Kootenays region, as well as for subcommittee work. B.C.F.W. reps make contacts with women's groups throughout the West Kootenays to exchange information about B.C.F.W. decisions and carry West Kootenay concerns back to the B.C.F.W. for action. The communication engendered by this activity greatly reduces Kootenay women's sense of isolation from each other.