

Change needed in the female role

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Working towards the general aim of changing the status of women in this area, the Nelson Women's Centre has gone about the business of affecting specific changes in society.

The centre's basic working assumption is that women are oppressed economically, politically and socially, among other ways, and people need to get used to the fact that women are equal citizens.

The Nelson Centre is a member group of the British Columbia Federation of Women.

Dianne Luthmers, regional representative for the BCFW, explained some of the centre's objectives.

"There are certain things we need to know about in terms of our bodies, our laws, medicine, and other areas. The way the law is now, we can't find out much of this information. We must know our present options and create new options."

"We often find there is a discrepancy between what is law and what is custom. For example, women don't need their husbands permission for sterilization. There is also no law saying wives must take their husbands last name. These are examples of assumptions by institutions to keep women from deciding what they want."

The centre has been instrumental in changing certain medical practices in Nelson. Due in great measure to the centre's invention, the Selkirk Health Unit is now equipped with a venereal disease examination lab. It had been found cultures taken in Nelson and sent to Vancouver for analysis had been dying in transit.

Hospital attitudes have also been changing, again due in

large part to the Women's Centre influence. It is no longer unusual for the father to be present at the birth of his child, nor is it unheard of for the mother to have her baby with her immediately after birth under certain circumstances.

Discussion groups, an assertiveness training course, prenatal classes, referral work and nutritional advice are among the many activities the centre has initiated.

Some members of the women's centre print the newspaper Images, although the publication is not directly connected with the Centre.

"We've had many experiences in common with other women," said Bonnie Baker, centre staff person currently working under a grant provided by the Secretary of State's summer student program.

"As a result," she continued, "the centre functions as a supportive place, as well as doing referral and reference work."

Advocacy is the current goal of the centre, as an important way of dealing with the

problems and institutions women come up against.

In dealing with questions of why women have been forced to form groups of this kind, Luthmers explains, "Our culture is all pervasive. It's difficult to step outside and look at your attitudes unless you are the one being oppressed."

When women get rid of the roles and expectations which have been placed on them by fathers, husbands, boyfriends and other men, Baker believes there can be an angry reaction which isn't necessarily unhealthy.

Baker continued, "Men benefit from the roles they are put in; they are consistent with success in society. For women, the roles are consistent with dependency, subservience and failure."

As examples, Luthmers noted the case of welfare mothers, who are told to value motherhood, and yet find nothing concrete in society telling them it is valuable.

"Women are not conditioned to fight," said Baker. "they are supposed to be passive and serviceful. They are taught not to be independent, decision makers or providers."

According to Baker and Luthmers, the real power often doesn't lie in the hands of those who are doing the oppressing. They feel men are often carrying out the societal oppression which is so prevalent today.

They feel although individuals perpetuate this cultural economic oppression, it's just another block to keep people from realizing where the real power lies.

"It helps our economy to have a number of people who are unemployed and can move in and out of the work force," said Baker.

The women believe the power being wielded by those benefitting from the oppression of women prevents everyone in society from discovering their common bonds.

To evaluate the Nelson area in terms of the centre's objectives, Baker said. "You must examine what jobs women do hold, and what wages they are being paid" They have found women are not getting equal wages, nor are they holding the same jobs as men.

School principalship was cited as an example of a job women could perform as well as men, but to date no women occupy this position.

Luthmers came down extremely hard on pornography. "It exploits women by encouraging alienation from sexuality, leading to social acceptance of women as objects."

"There has been a change in women's consciousness in this area, as well as all over," said Luthmers. "Institutions in town are starting to become more aware of problems." She cited

hospitals as