

# Networks

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road to home. Increased sensitivity will be required to help women and men to recognize the issues and to build a wider sense of involvement with others affected.

Extending that recognition beyond one's immediate experience is another phase of the educational challenge. The hairpin curve on the road in the next county is beyond one's experience and thus often beyond one's concern. Networks provide a special advantage here. By exchanging information developed through special expertise, networks can help to demonstrate the validity and interrelationships of different women's issues.

Moving women beyond a generalized sense of involvement to activism on behalf of issues is an important second stage. Having acknowledged their connection with the issues, groups and individuals must be moved from the sidelines into the action. The study of issues has been the heritage of women and many of their organizations. But willingness to act on women's issues has historically been restricted to a small committed minority — and usually to homogenous groups with strong shared interest in a specific issue.

To create and activate a diverse network requires a practical political sensitivity. Self-interest is the best initial motivator. Beginning with issues of the widest appeal and greatest timeliness is important in beginning an advocacy network. Encouraging people to begin through their own issue priorities makes more sense than imposing a broad agenda as a loyalty test for participation. And focusing on a target that can be achieved is critical. Few are willing to commit to a lifetime of martyrdom. People need to see some payoff from their efforts. The greatest encouragement to activism comes with showing that efforts bring results. A successful network will not lose sight of long-range goals, but it will target short-range objectives that can mark progress toward a goal.

Networks help to communicate effectively the urgency of action. They exploit their linkages to coordinate timely calls to action. Focusing on people's special capacities to contribute becomes an important means to urge their participation. Participants like to know that their contributions are necessary parts of the whole. A successful network attends to those realities, thus nurturing the commitment to activism over the long haul.

The third and culminating goal of the advocacy network is to sustain a linkage that fosters collaboration in effective action. Groups and individuals must be convinced to reach across traditional boundaries to broaden the power base and to focus efforts on shared goals. Networks must stress the habits of states-women — less organizational chauvinism and concern about particular identity, more commitment to the responsibility each bears to all.

The effective advocacy network must be inclusive. It must reach out and involve those who have not been included in the action agenda for women whether traditional or nontraditional. To build collaboration, a network should begin with issues that have a broad common base with acceptance and thus the maximum capacity for impact. But network connexions also will enhance efforts on issues shared by a smaller portion of its members.

Sustaining collaboration over the long haul will require recognition of the interrelationship of women's issues and a commitment to reciprocity. As people and groups monitor and address their particular priorities, they must respond to calls for action across the broad agenda. Willingness to support one another's issues is critical to maintaining the connections and achieving the results that sustain and build a network.

Objective evaluation of its effectiveness may be the vital test of a network. It must assess honestly the results of its action on behalf of women's issues. Time-honored strategies must produce results or be dropped and replaced by those that will. Objectives must be redefined in light of changing circumstances. The more diverse a network, the likelier it will contain the resources for creative evaluation and redefinition. The more segments of society that are represented, the more keys there will be to gain access and movement, the more strategies that have been tested and tried.

Since 1977, International Women's Year networks have been formalized in more than twenty states. Most are connected to the National Women's Conference Committee, the volunteer group of four hundred and seventy appointed to oversee implementation of the National Plan of Action.

The most effective of those networks link organizations and individuals to share information and planning on behalf of principles in the plan. By monitoring activity in legislatures and state agencies, they provide timely action alerts. By including a broad spectrum of expertise, they provide significant background for education and outreach. And through coordinated planning, they identify priority areas for action and define the means to effect changes. Their collaboration eliminates duplication of efforts and focuses limited resources more effectively.

## That four-letter word

"I am not cute," mutters the girl in the fuzzy pink sweater, trying to give a serious report in a high school history class.

"I am not cute," seethes Great-aunt Martha, fending off the boy scout escorting her across the street.

"I'm not cute when I'm angry," Debbie screeches at her boy friend, leaving him confused.

Cute — contrary to popular opinion, the word is not always complimentary. "Now, now, how can anyone object to being called 'cute'?" ask all of those exciting, refreshing, sophisticated and original people. Cute can indeed be a put-down, a barb that pops off tongues in a seemingly innocent manner with the residual sting of a nasty left hook.

Not only does cute put you in a category with puppies, teddy bears and fuzzy bedroom slippers, it also implies a lack of dignity and that the person needn't be taken seriously. Try to imagine a "cute" person discovering the theory of relativity or writing the Declaration of Independence. Most people can't. No matter how deep or exact a "cute" person's thoughts or actions are, she may be doomed to eternal adorableness, unless she hides under a hat or dark glasses during a debate.

Cute is a label that is easy to apply and frustratingly difficult to unstick. Great-aunt Martha would be flattered if you called her heart-shaped bathmat cute, but she probably wouldn't be very pleased if you told her she was cute.

Keep 'cute' on your list of words best not applied to people. If you happen to think of someone as cute, tell her she's wonderful instead. It just might make her day.

— Elaine M. Russo  
from Seventeen magazine

Model networks have devised means for involving a wide range of organizational members and for accommodating their diverse platforms and bylaws restrictions. Commitment to the entire Plan of Action is not required for participation, which is closed only to those working actively against stated plan goals. The networks have extended beyond organizations to involve service providers and unaffiliated grassroots advocates for women's issues.

The 1977 National Women's Conference served as an extraordinary catalyst for bringing women and their issues into the political process. The twenty-five issues defined in the Plan of Action have since served as rallying points bringing together thousands of women in organizations, coalitions, and networks focusing on those separate issues.

The separate issues have been further defined, and through working on them, more women have developed leadership skills, and they have won wider social recognition of their needs. The issues affecting older women, battered women, minority women, displaced homemakers, and rural women all have served since 1977 as rallying points bringing together groups of women to address a particular need.

But, having strongly and surely identified those separate needs, it is important to draw together once more. Women must affirm the inextricable linkage of their special needs and, recognizing the commonality, they need to link the issues and themselves together to work on broader fronts to achieve common goals.

The task for the next year would be overwhelming if women could focus unencumbered on the ERA. But the fact is they can't. At the same time women struggle to establish a constitutional foothold from which to move forward, they are accosted on every side by attacks against the footholds so far achieved. Those threats cannot be ignored. Constitutional amendments restricting reproductive freedom and affirmative action; the "Family Protection Act;" cuts in every conceivable program for women, children and the poor — the list of threats goes on and on.

And in some ways the biggest threat — the one for which the women's movement is under-prepared — is a shift in the action from federal to state level. Women's organizations on the national level have begun to establish a track record for collaborating behind critical pieces of legislation, as they have in this past year, particularly on the ERA.

Women are learning to use hard-pressed organizational resources in complementary ways, to avoid duplication, errors of timing, cancellation of one another's efforts. But these organizations have yet to learn on a national basis how to use the full range of their complimentary resources — financial, membership, staff — in a way that effectively targets crisis issues while planning long-term strategies for action and outreach.

That is the goal of the National Women's Conference Committee in collaborative work that is beginning now. Establishing National Plan of Action Task Forces is the first step in preparation for a nationwide public event on July 4 to focus on women's issues. In 1983, the Second National Women's Conference, held simultaneously at four regional sites, will train grassroots leaders in building effective advocacy networks.

Why is that course particularly critical now? Because the right wing is far ahead in grassroots linkages. And because some of the toughest action ahead will be in state legislatures, city councils, and county boards. With the complexion of Congress and the administration, the best to be expected nationally for the next few years is rearward action. The few support resources for women's issues within the federal government are gone. That means new legislative gains will have to be made in the states and will have to be mobilized through women's efforts.

Block-grant funding will further shift the action scene to local government. When local politicians begin divvying up the shrinking pots for social services, will women have in every county an advocacy network ready to act? The right wing has. Eager cadres are ready to lobby to make federal money talk locally in terms of far-right biases.

No organization alone can counter that force. But working together on the local level, organizational leaders can extend their own energies through others — extending to those who will never belong to their organizations the vision and effectiveness on issues the organizations believe in.

Women leaders must consider the ongoing viability of the women's movement. They need to assure that today's leaders are not tomorrow's burnouts but continuing contributors to a movement that has fully come of age. The women's movement cannot succeed with a few thousand women. It must reach out to vast sectors of the population as yet untouched. There is a great untapped resource of citizens who have accepted the need to address women's issues, but have assumed that change would happen without their own involvement. Women now active need to show those citizens why they are needed, what needs to be done, and how they can do it.

The women's movement has been accused of being over idealistic — of having principles on the side of the angels, but little that is practical to offer. But the movement has been brought resoundingly to earth. Women know the earth-bound daily needs of women in America. They know the earth-bound political realities to be faced. And they must assure that the women's movement sustains its energies for the long haul.

The promise now and in the future lies in strong and functional advocacy networks for women's issues. Working together, women can again empower their issues. Reaching beyond the boundaries of their present affiliations, women must convince an apathetic majority that women's issues are vital human issues and that addressing them is in the pragmatic best interest of communities, states, and nation. To be effective, that truth must be asserted in many voices, from many organizations and backgrounds, in a coordinated chorus of affirmation.

Asleep amidst the proliferation of women's groups and networks is the potential to make the difference. Women must awaken that potential, multiply it through linkages, conserve it through cooperation, and direct it toward recognized goals. Only then will the real aim of the National Women's Conference be approached: the full participation of women in national life.

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