

The New Women's Movement Initiative

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Introduction

The New Women's Movement initiative focused the energy, experience and insight of more than fifty women leaders on critical questions facing the US women's movement. Over the course of two and a half years, from December 2003 to March 2006, the New Women's Movement (NWM) convened five times.¹ The purpose of these meetings and retreats was to address long-standing divisions within the women's movement and to build the relationships, trust and analysis necessary to revitalize US feminism.

This report summarizes the major accomplishments and outcomes of the New Women's Movement initiative.

The NWM was initiated by Barbara Phillips, then of the Ford Foundation; Katherine Acey, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice; Sara Gould, Ms. Foundation for Women; Faye Wattleton, Center for the Advancement of Women; and Kalpana Krishnamurthy, then of the Third Wave Foundation. The women who were invited to participate in this extended series of conversations are leaders of national and regional organizations that advocate, educate and organize around the full range of issues that impact women. Participants also included women from philanthropic organizations that fund women's issues and scholars whose research and analysis focus on women's issues. The gatherings included a broad diversity of participants, with an especially strong presence of women of color, as well as cross-generational representation of women who became active in the women's movement at various points over the past several decades.

The NWM process was guided by a Planning Committee comprised of Katherine Acey, Kiran Ahuja, Sara Gould, C. Nicole Mason, Monique Mehta, Wilma Montanez, Barbara Phillips, Crystal Plati, and Faye Wattleton. Each gathering was prepared for and facilitated by MaryKay Penn.

The framework for the New Women's Movement discussions focused participants' attention on:

1. Analysis, Vision and Values
2. Separations
3. Trigger Issues
4. Movement Building

Given the complex histories and dynamics among participants, many of the discussions in the first few meetings of the NWM initiative focused on substantive differences of orientation and perspective. Long standing divisions and deep legacies of distrust threatened to undermine the process before it had accomplished its goals. Nonetheless, participants in the process persevered and achieved a groundbreaking set of outcomes that, if built upon, have the potential to bring new energy, new vision, and new strategies to feminist organizing and advocacy.

Outcome #1: The NWM initiative built new relationships of trust among feminist leaders.

It is not an exaggeration to say that many of the women who convened in the first NWM meeting were deeply distrustful of each other and didn't even necessarily agree that they were participants in the same movement. Long-standing divisions within the women's movement, many of which track along racial lines, kept leaders and organizations wary of each other and reluctant to collaborate. Sharp differences existed over issues of how agendas are set and whose interests are represented, where power resides and how it is wielded, and which organizations and initiatives are well resourced while others languish.

While these differences were certainly not resolved by the NWM initiative, the extended, collective experience of participating in the process created sufficient common ground to begin to address some of them in a constructive way. Building relations among leaders and organizations that had previously had little or no interaction was a frequent theme in the evaluations, in response to a question about the most important results of the process. These relations created new possibilities for partnership and collaboration between organizations, as well as creating a new framework for developing a common vision and broadly shared strategies.

Outcome #2: The NWM initiative created the space for feminist leaders to reach common acknowledgement of the stagnation of the women's movement and of the need to participate intentionally in its revitalization.

The NWM was convened, in large part, out of concern that the feminist project, while not completely stalled, does not have the kind of political traction it needs if it is to effectively influence public policy and improve the lives of women. Though many, if not most, women leaders had come to that conclusion individually, it is an altogether different thing to name and acknowledge a problem collectively, and, what is more important, to agree to take collective steps to address it.

A 2003 survey and report, *Progress and Perils: New Agenda for Women*, produced by the Center for the Advancement of Women, was an important impetus for The New Women's Movement. Among other findings, the study showed that:

- A majority of women believed in the need for a strong women's movement
- Women identified their top-priority issues as reducing domestic violence and sexual assault, equal pay for equal work, childcare and better women's health care. Keeping abortion legal was far down the list.
- Support for abortion rights declined from 2001 to 2003, and less than a third of women believed that abortion should generally be available to those who want it.
- There were significant differences along racial lines with African American and Hispanic women reporting greater belief in the need for a strong women's movement than non-minority women; stronger support for affirmative action; greater concern about sexual harassment in the workplace; and stronger preference for marriages characterized by shared responsibility.
- Substantial proportions of women reported that they voted for a candidate because of their support for women's rights.

In the context of the NWM, the significance of the report was to focus attention on the disjuncture between the issues pursued by the women's movement and the issues US women identified as their highest priorities, coexisting with a strong reservoir of support among women for feminism.

There are no doubt differences of emphasis among NWM participants as to whether the evident weaknesses of the women's movement are due primarily to the movement being out of touch with the concerns of its potential base, to problems of political vision, strategy and tactics, to lack of sufficient resources, to the general sluggishness of social change movements, or to the dominance of conservatism in the political life of the nation.

Whatever the source of the problem, however, the NWM provided participants with the space to acknowledge that the women's movement is not mobilizing broad new constituencies or maximizing its potential as a social change agent.

More importantly, participants assumed collective responsibility for the problem by committing to collective action aimed at revitalizing the women's movement.

Outcome #3: The NWM initiative reached substantive consensus on vision & analysis: Social Justice Feminism

Over the course of 2 ½ years, the NWM initiative returned repeatedly to a deepening discussion of Analysis, Vision and Values. As participants struggled to determine what outlook could provide grounding for a revitalized movement, the theme of social justice surfaced over and over again. By the close of the final retreat, participants had reached consensus that the New Women's Movement should be based upon and promote principles of social justice feminism.

Reaching this consensus entailed considerable debate and controversy. At issue was whether the women's movement should aspire to be a women's rights movement or a social justice feminist movement. Those who advocated for women's rights feminism voiced two main concerns. First, that a social justice framework would fail to center on the specific issues and barriers that face women; and second, that presumed social justice allies were often unreliable or completely absent when called upon to support a feminist agenda.

Those who advocated for social justice feminism voiced three concerns. First, that the women's rights frame has traditionally neglected the issues, experiences and initiatives of women of color and low-income women. Second, that women's rights feminism isolates women's issues outside of their proper context on a broader social justice agenda. And third, that the women's rights frame limits our focus to legal rights, failing to take into account the dynamics of power and privilege that continue to shape women's lives even once legal rights to equality have been won.

In the course of clarifying these distinct points of view, NWM participants considered how a social justice feminist framework would apply to issues of economic justice, reproductive rights, domestic violence, immigration and sexuality. It should also be noted that the discussions about social justice feminism built, in part, on the reproductive justice framework developed by organizations that are members of the SisterSong network.

Although the conversations about social justice feminist approaches to various issues were not exhaustive, several common themes did emerge. First, in terms of issues and constituency, social justice feminism centers those who are especially marginalized and vulnerable. Second, in terms of analysis and strategy, social justice feminism consistently promotes an approach to women's issues that integrates race, class, sexuality, nationality, citizenship, age, ability and other markers of social inequity. Third, social justice feminism recognizes and challenges the operation of power and privilege, both in the broader society and within the women's movement itself. Fourth, while pursuing an agenda that centers on the status and well being of women, social justice feminism actively challenges racism, heterosexist bias, and class privilege. Fifth, social justice feminism is intentional about ensuring that those most affected by policies and practices are at the decision-making table. Sixth, the social justice feminism movement conceives of itself as an integral part of a broader social justice movement and consistently seeks out alliances with organizations and networks beyond the women's movement. Seventh, social justice feminism recognizes that important, often groundbreaking work in developing women's leadership and addressing women's issues is being done by organizations that do not self-identify as feminist, and seeks dialogue and alliance with such organizations. Eighth, social justice feminism recognizes that the struggle for gender justice and women's human rights is global, and seeks dialogue and alliance with women's organizations worldwide.

In addressing the expressed concerns about the failure of various sectors of the progressive movement to actively support women's issues, NWM participants also reached consensus on the need to infuse feminist principles and values in the broader social justice movement. While this latter theme was not as fully explored, it was captured in shorthand, i.e., the need to advance both a women's movement based on social justice feminism and a feminist social justice movement.

Outcome #4: The NWM initiative made progress in addressing the separations that have bedeviled the movement for decades. (generational change & table six)

The NWM considered four areas of division or separation that have been the basis of significant disagreement or disunity among feminists: race, class, sexuality and age. Many, though by no means all, of these divisions were addressed in the discussions related to social justice feminism. But there were two conversations related to separations that were especially noteworthy and forward looking.

First, although the issue of racial divisions would seem to have been chewed over endlessly within the women's movement, there were still surprises – and room for growth – in store for participants in the NWM. In an exercise designed to consider “what would winning look like,” participants worked in groups determined by race/ethnicity. Each of the groups reported back on some of the critical social, economic and cultural issues that would need to be resolved for women of that racial/ethnic group to be able to claim a victory. But white participants did not address the question from a vantage point that rested on their identity as white women. Rather, this group – dubbed “Table Six” – came up with generalities about what success might look like for the women's movement, reproducing along the way the “invisibility of whiteness,” and failing to address either the impact of white privilege or the dynamics of class difference among white women. This outcome served as a reminder, once again, that how race operates in the

broader society and within the women's movement tends to be a matter of continual awareness for women of color, while for white women it is a matter of which they need to be frequently reminded. As a result of this discussion, Table Six convened a facilitated session in which participants struggled with a range of issues related to the role of white women in the women's movement. Among problems addressed were: whether feminist issues are formulated and prioritized in ways that reinforce or undermine white privilege; whether organizations that claim to speak for or reach out to "women in general" are multi-racial and multi-ethnic at all levels; how to develop strategies that speak to – rather than avoid – white women's stake in fighting racism; whether white feminists recognize the racial impact of funding inequities and how they can advocate for resources for groups working in communities of color, rather than for the "outreach" strategies of predominately white organizations.

Second, the discussions about divisions based on age within the women's movement brought up important issues of generational transition. Though these conversations were difficult, with participants expressing resentment, defensiveness, and frustration, the NWM initiative provided a critical arena for a collective, probably overdue look at a transition that, objectively, is already underway. While younger leaders expressed some frustration with the seeming reluctance of second wavers to either share power or gracefully move on, older veteran leaders spoke to their desire to continue to contribute to the women's movement in some way and expressed anxieties about their financial insecurities after a lifetime of activism. Though these issues were certainly not resolved within the context of the NWM meetings, the discussions did provoke some of the older leaders to place generational transition on their organizations' agendas. Further, the discussions underscored the need for more systematic and intentional processes of leadership development within the women's movement, as well as attention to developing creative ways to tap the experience of older activists.

Outcome #5: The NWM initiative placed movement and institution building squarely on the agenda, including building the resources needed to create and sustain a revitalized women's movement.

Though the women convened by the NWM initiative represented many different segments of the women's movement, and took many different approaches to advocacy for women's rights, human rights and social justice, all were unified in the view that, in order to gain momentum and achieve a stronger national presence, the women's movement requires new vision, strategies that engage broader constituencies, stronger organizations and institutions, greater collaboration and partnership among organizations, and renewable leadership. In that sense, the NWM was successful at raising the sights of participants above the level of the concerns and needs of their own organizations to reflect on what it would take to re-energize the women's movement as a whole. Participants engaged in important discussions about what it takes to build inclusive, diverse, collaborative organizations and how to hold leaders accountable to that task.

Though the NWM initiative did not reach consensus on a specific set of strategies aimed at revitalizing the women's movement – a goal for the next stage of our work – participants did agree on the importance of widening the circle of leaders engaged in this conversation. While the women who gathered are each leaders of women's political activism, scholarship or philanthropy, the group represents only a small subset of those who have significant

contributions to make on these issues. NWM participants repeatedly expressed the need to share the group's deliberations with women at the local, statewide, regional and national levels and to encourage their feedback and contributions to the conversation. In particular, one aspect of movement building that is on the immediate agenda is to engage with others in building the framework of social justice feminism.

NWM participants also focused on the issue of building resources to build the movement. All recognized that organizations and initiatives focused on the issues that have the most impact on women are perpetually under-funded. Many struggle just to survive, unable to give their full attention to the critical work of mobilizing, organizing and educating women on the issues. The NWM initiative demonstrated a readiness on the part of women leaders to tackle old issues in new ways and to bring imagination, renewed energy and a collaborative spirit to today's political challenges. Participants agreed on the need to think big and think long-range, and to put a price tag on the task of creating and sustaining a powerful movement based on the vision and principles of social justice feminism. The NWM initiative represents a new beginning, a forward-looking realignment within the women's movement. To support and sustain this momentum, participants look forward to partnering with the philanthropic community to trigger significantly expanded resources dedicated to building a movement capable of placing the well being of women central to the nation's agenda.

Conclusion

The New Women's Movement initiative had the committed participation of dozens of women who have made, and continue to make, major contributions to the mission of building a better world for women and girls. Over the course of two and a half years, they dedicated their efforts to re-energizing the women's movement – identifying challenges that stand in the way and developing strategies to broaden the reach and maximize the impact of feminist social justice values. While this summation identifies major areas of consensus, and the most significant outcomes of the process, it is by no means a comprehensive statement of what was accomplished. The New Women's Movement initiative developed new, positive relations among a diverse group of women leaders; produced a new framework for organizing and analysis; and cleared new ground to build the kinds of transformative alliances capable of positioning social justice feminism as an influential current in the nation's political life. The achievements of this process, if built upon with intention, perseverance and adequate resources, have the potential to transform the movements for social justice and women's human rights.

ⁱ NWM meetings included two day-long sessions at the Ford Foundation in New York City (December 12, 2003 and May 17, 2004) and three 2 ½-day retreats (November 18-20, 2004 at Chicago's Wyndham Hotel, and May 9-11, 2005 and March 22-24, 2006 at the Harrison Conference Center, Lake Bluff, IL.)