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Researching the Intersection of Local and Academic Knowledge on Gender: Academics Working With Community-Based Women's Organizations

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Abstract: Recognizing the key role women's organizations contribute to adult learning, this roundtable discussion will explore issues and opportunities that grow out of partnerships between academic researchers and community-based organizations. Participants are invited to share their experiences of researching in such a collaborative environment.

Collaboration and partnership are key words for proposal writers in Canada, whether their starting place is universities or community-based organizations, though the university researcher is often the lead on the project. We identified the issues in partnering for research from our recent experience of completing a State of the Field Review for Gender and Adult Learning, and from our government funded research projects.

Community based women's organizations are central in creating knowledge by women and for women (Butterwick & Selman, 2003; Lord & Martell, 2004). A recurring concern is that, without the collaboration of an academic partner, much of this exciting grassroots activity remains obscured, since community based organizations have limited access to research funding. Women's organizations in Canada over recent years have faced severe reductions in core funding and rely more heavily on project-based grants (Manicom, et al., 2005), and even this is disappearing. When it can be accessed, project funding requires participation in a contorted funding mechanism (project proposal, project implementation, project report) which creates disjunctures in the organization's overall workflow and curtails opportunities for longer term reflection and analysis, and documentation of accumulated institutional knowledge. The primary access to funded research opportunities for reflection and analysis are with university partners.

From our research and community experience, we have observed that there is tremendous potential to increase collaborative research and community-led knowledge generation in the area of gender and learning. While it seems easy to justify why this gender-based work is important, the more complex issue of *how* remains evasive. Classic works on participatory feminist research (Maguire, 1987) continue to inspire the development of methodologies that consciously deal with bias, voice and the knowledge construction process. However, much of the research that is reported still does not capture or recount the lived messiness of collaborative work, or deal with the contested undercurrents of power and knowledge and suppressed hierarchies within research teams, particularly around issues of gender (Guijt & Shah, 1998). A wide spectrum of feminist, participatory, and interdisciplinary approaches (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007) provide exciting opportunities for creating new knowledge, yet run the risk of luring researchers into adopting approaches that may not best suited for the complex social and historical context in which they are working. In addition, the academic credibility of research results can still be questioned when feminists employ alternative methodologies designed to confront issues of power and exclusion (Strega, 2005).

A key issue here is the inequitable distribution of research funds, though supposedly allocated equally, actually privilege university based researchers. Consequently, the dissemination through refereed fora, the *sine qua none* of academe, is the norm. Challenging

these formal and informal funding policy decisions becomes then a focal point for feminist researchers. Another issue is the naming of research agendas and whose priorities are honored in the research development process. While the literature is relatively quiet on this matter, anecdotal reports are that university-community collaborations are fraught with issues of power, knowledge and discourse.

The questions guiding the roundtable discussion include:

1. Distribution of skills and abilities: What does community participation really mean?
2. Resources & Time: Who has paid time to set the agenda and access resources?
3. Authenticity: What does it mean to be a university-based researcher writing about working in community? Is voice a rhetorical device?

The intent of this roundtable is to share experiences in collaborative feminist research and to explore alternate and possible configurations of academic/local research that honor the commitments of both partners.

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