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Aspiring for unity and equality:  
Dynamics of conflict and change in the 'by women for  
women' feminist service groups, Aotearoa/New Zealand  
(1970-1999)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the emergence and subsequent development of feminist activist service groups in Aotearoa/New Zealand feminist movements from the 1970s to the 1990s. It specifically considers, the Women's Centres, Women's Health Collectives, Women's Refuges and Rape Crisis groups. Feminism in the groups was closely linked to the internal processes of organising as a collective based on 'women's ways of working'. The groups merged a radical feminist political orientation with a service orientation as they developed services 'for women by women'. The study was based on a qualitative analysis of published and unpublished documents of activist service groups, and open-ended interviews with 65 women discussing their experiences of working in activist service groups.

Two distinct phases of change to the internal organisation of the groups between 1970 and 1999 have been identified and examined. In the first phase, (1970s - 1980s), radical feminist collective ways of working acquired the status of a taken for granted institutional norm among the groups. These groups organised as women-only collectives, utilised consensus decision-making, embodied ideals of non-hierarchy, and had aspirations of sisterhood between women. The second phase (from the late 1980s) was marked by modification of the radical feminist collective, as groups experienced internal and external pressures to adopt bureaucratic practices. Major pressures included the shift by the state to contract funding of the groups, the changing participation of paid and unpaid workers in the daily work of the groups, and the increasing formal differentiation between employers and employees. These changes were a major source of conflict and tension, as the groups modified their organisations to include differentiation of roles, specialisation of positions and formal hierarchy. At the same time groups sustained aspects of radical feminist collective organising.

Dealing with differences was a major site of tension and conflict in the activist service groups. Groups implemented various strategies to address differences between women in relation to race/ethnicity, sexuality and class. A major focus of the groups was the development of bicultural relations between Māori and non-Māori. Models of bicultural

relations in the predominantly Pākehā groups ranged from increasing Māori representation in the groups, to the formation of alliances between independent groups or alliances between ethnic-specific groups in the same organisation. These strategies were mostly framed in terms of a binary opposition between oppressed and oppressor, and along a single axis of oppression. Nevertheless, the groups' attempts to 'deal with differences' between women were important in challenging assumptions of gender-based commonality between all women.

In spite of these conflicts and associated changes, participants in the activist service groups attempted to maintain inclusive, non-hierarchical, empowering organisations 'for women by women'. In the 1990s, many of the feminist activist service groups continued to pursue democratic collective ways of working and to engage in a politics of difference in their organisations.

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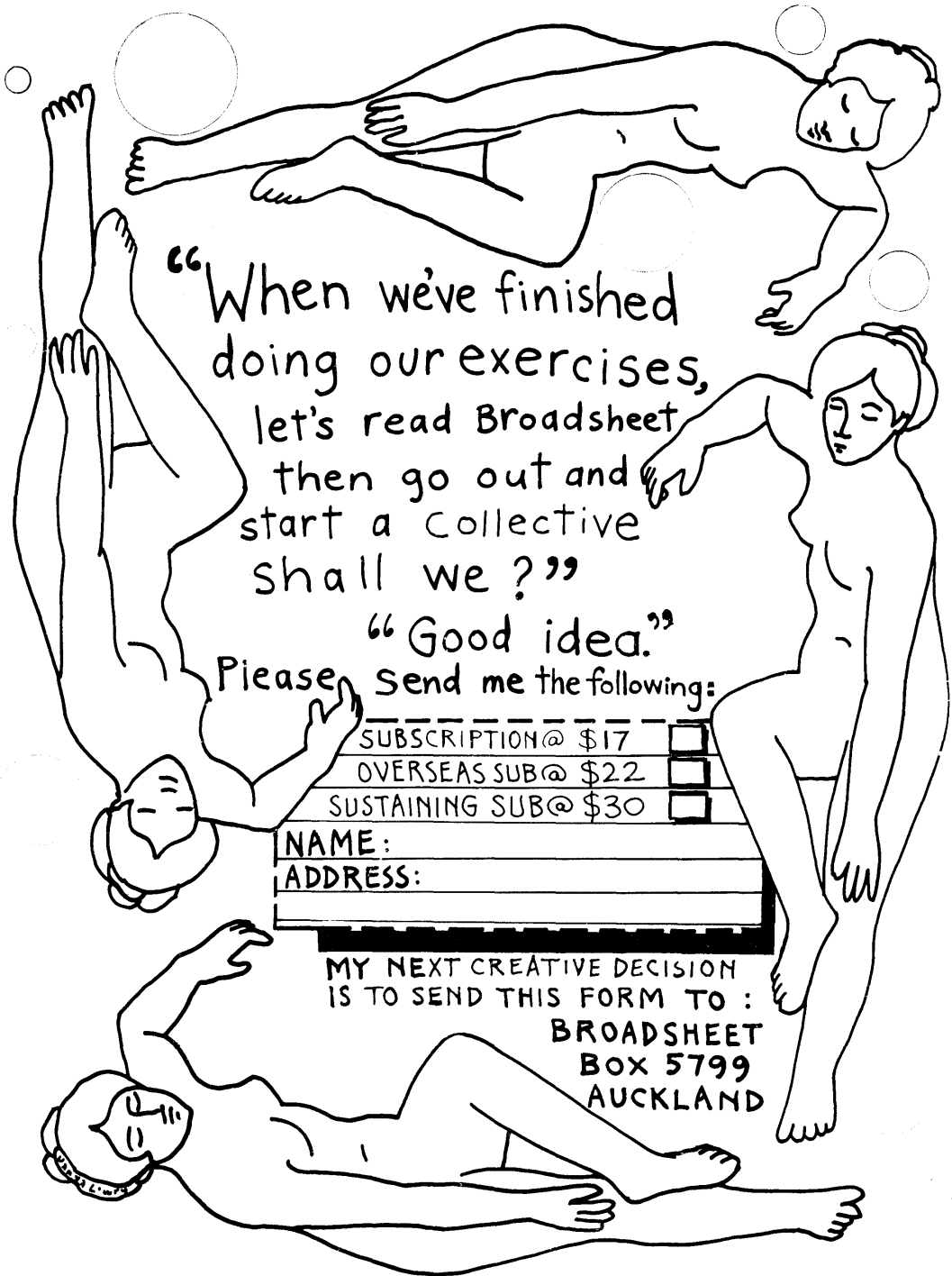
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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	Accident Compensation Corporation
AGM	Annual General Meeting
ALRANZ	Abortion Law Reform Association, New Zealand
CFA	Community Funding Agency
COGS	Community Organisations Grants Scheme
COW	Committee on Women
CR	Consciousness-raising
CSMC	Council for the Single Mother and her Child
DCW	Dunedin Collective for Woman
DSW	Department of Social Welfare
FVPCC	Family Violence Prevention Coordinating Committee
HROS	Human Resources and Operating Statistics
IWY	International Women's Year
JOS	Job Opportunities Scheme
KOPPS	Key Operating Policies, Procedures and Control Systems
NCIWR	National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges
NCRC	National Collective of Rape Crisis and Related Groups of Aotearoa
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NOUS	National Office Update Sheet (NCRC)
NOW	National Organisation for Women
NWSA	National Women's Studies Association (United States)
NZCFA	New Zealand Community Funding Agency
NZWLW	New Zealand Women's Learning Web
PEP	Project Employment Scheme
PIWP	Pacific Island Women's Project
SCSP	Student Community Service programme
SHE	Sisters for Homophile Equality
SISTERS	Sisters in Struggle to End Repressive Sexism
SOS	Sisters Overseas Service
SPUC	Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child
SROW	Society for Research on Women
TEP	Temporary Employment Programme
THAW	The Health Alternatives for Women
TRCC	Toronto Rape Crisis Collective
UWC	United Women's Convention
VOTP	Voluntary Organisations Training Programme
VOJCP	Voluntary Organisations Job Creation Programme
WEA	Workers Educational Association
WEL	Women's Electoral Lobby
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement
WL	Women's Liberation
WONAAC	Women's National Abortion Action Campaign
WRC	Women's Resource Centre
WSA	Women's Studies Association (New Zealand)
WWRC	Wellington Women's Resource Centre

Figure 1: *Broadsheet* subscription advert



Source: *Broadsheet*, April 1983, no 108, back cover:

