

# LISTEN TO WOMEN IN LITERACY

Listen

to

women

In literacy

## The power of woman-positive literacy work

This is a book written and designed for intermediate adult literacy students. It contains material from:

The power of woman-positive literacy work  
Program-based action research

and

Women in literacy speak-  
The power of woman-positive literacy work

# Listen to women in literacy

The power of  
woman-positive  
literacy work

Tannis Atkinson

with Frances Ennis

and Betty-Ann Lloyd



**Fernwood Publishing**  
Halifax 1994



**CCLOW** Canadian Congress for  
Learning Opportunities for Women  
Toronto 1994

We dedicate this work to women who participate in adult literacy and basic education programs as workers and as students.

## **Canadian Cataloguing in Publication**

Atkinson, Tannis

Listen to women in literacy

Co-published by: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women

ISBN 1-895686-38-5 1. Literacy -- Canada. 2. Adult education of women -- Canada. 3. Elementary education of adults -- Canada. I. Ennis, Frances. II. Lloyd, Betty-Ann. III. Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women. IV. Title.

LC154.A85 1994 374'.012 C94-950045-3

Editing: Brenda Beagan, Halifax, NS

Layout and Production: Debbie Mathers, Halifax, NS

Cover Design: Blackbird Design, Toronto, ON

Printing by Hignell Printing Limited, Winnipeg, MB

We acknowledge and thank the National Literacy Secretariat and Human Resources Development for their financial contribution towards this project.

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the funder or of CCLOW.

copyright © 1994 by The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from - Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) 47 Main Street, Toronto, ON M4E 2V6 (416) 699-1909; (416) 699-2145 (fax)

**Toronto ALFA Centre:** We formed a women's group at ALFA © 1993, used with permission. **Aboriginal Women and the Workplace: Native Women Write Now** © 1993, used with permission. **Pine Grove Correctional Centre:** Resource booklets © 1993, used with permission. Women's Committee, Beat the Street Recipes for political action © 1993, used with permission. **Betty-Ann Lloyd with Tannis Atkinson and Frances Ennis;** The power of woman-positive literacy work ©1993, used with permission. **Diane Eastman,** Gender, culture, and personal experiences © 1993, used with permission. **Debbie Heagy,** Taking chances, making choices © 1993, used with permission. **Nicole Jessop,** Gaining confidence © 1993, used with permission. **Frances Ennis with**

permission. **Anne Moore**, Taking space for woman-positive literacy work © 1993, used with permission. **Action Read: Women: Where have we been? Where are we going?** © 1993, used with permission. **Karen Bergman-Illnik**. DIS/COVER, © 1993, used with permission. **LaVera Schiele**, I believe our lives are woven together © 1993, used with permission. **Marion Wells**, The politics of talking © 1993, used with permission. **Saint John Learning Exchange: Women getting together!** © 1993, used with permission. **Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney**, More than semantics © 1993, used with permission.

# Table of Contents

[What is this book about?](#)

[What did our programs do that was positive for women?](#)

[We sat at the kitchen table and helped each other  
Arviat, Northwest Territories](#)

[We decided to visit women in the community  
St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador](#)

[We enjoyed taking together  
Saint John, New Brunswick](#)

[We put together a sexual harassment policy  
Toronto, Ontario](#)

[We started a women's committee  
Toronto, Ontario](#)

[We talked about our lives and wrote our stories  
Guelph, Ontario](#)

[We rewrote a pamphlet on sexual abuse  
Brandon, Manitoba](#)

[We put together resource booklets to help other women  
Prince Albert, Saskatchewan](#)

[We thought about women in union-based literacy programs  
Regina and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan](#)

[We did some writing  
Fort McMurray, Alberta](#)

[We talked about making our classes more feminist  
Prince George, British Columbia](#)

[We talked about having a women's class and a men's class  
Duncan, British Columbia](#)

[What did we learn?](#)

Some things make literacy harder for women

Violence is a part of many women's lives

many women are Poor

Many women are isolated

Women are not treated equally

Literacy work is difficult

The best Programs Pay attention to women's lives

Literacy work is not valued

This work can be satisfying

Programs could be more positive for women

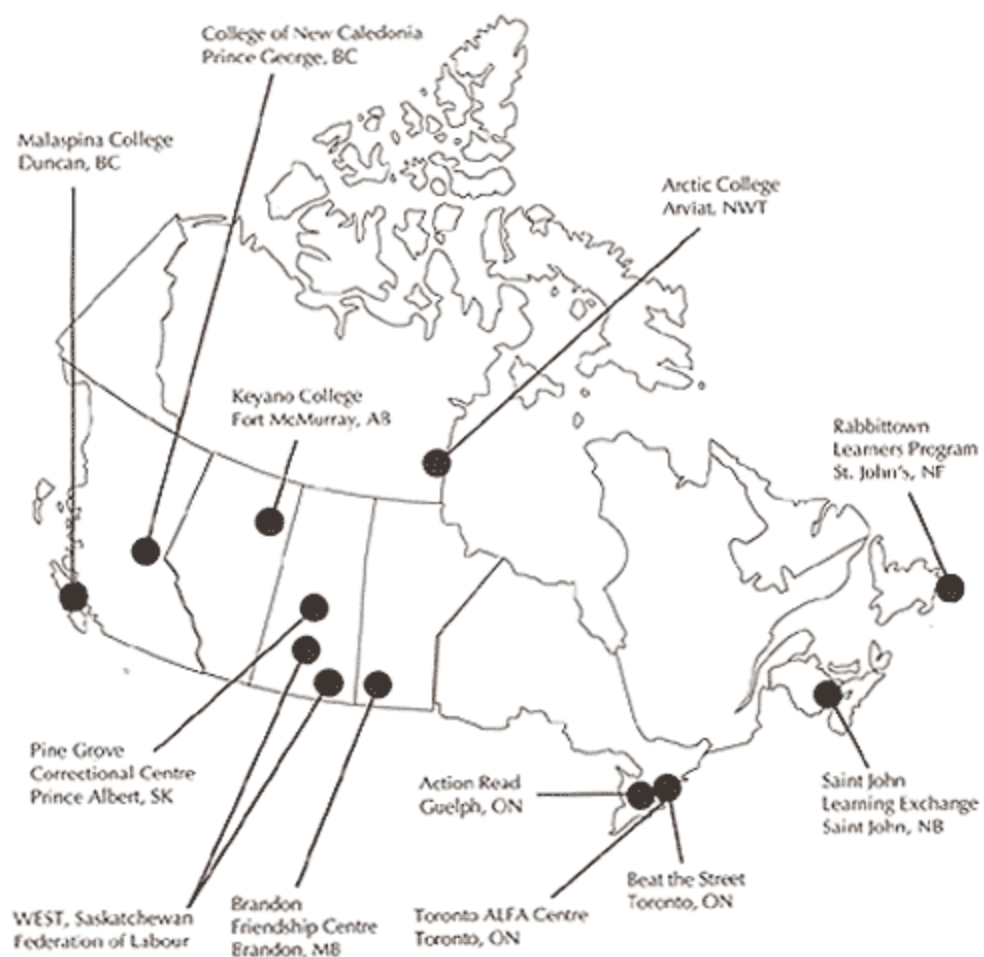
Some things keep women from coming to programs

There are problems inside programs

Why programs should do things that are positive for women

Some things that programs can do

Thank you!





# 1. What is this book about?

The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, or CCLOW, has been working for 15 years to improve women's experiences in education.

About four years ago some of the members got together to talk about doing some research. We decided to ask questions about women in literacy programs. Do the programs care about what happens to women? How do they show they care? What could be better?

Betty-Ann Lloyd visited four places in Canada and talked to women. They told her things that we have heard before: I can't go to class. I have to look after the kids. I don't want to go out alone at night. Welfare isn't enough to live on. Why aren't there more books about people like me?

In the end one thing seemed clear: If programs do literacy work in a way that is good for women, they will have to do it differently than they do it now.

CCLOW decided to do some more research based on what women in programs said. They wanted to find out what happened when some women in a program decided to do something they thought would be positive for women.

Twelve programs decided to take part in the research. The map on the opposite page shows where the programs are located. Some programs are in community colleges, some are in community centres, one is in a prison, and one is a program run by a union.

Most of the women involved in this research worked as staff in their programs. They thought about what woman-positive meant. They decided it meant something that was good for women. Each program decided what would be the best activity for them.

## How did we do the research?

Two women from each program became the researchers for the project. They worked with other women staff and students to do the, woman-positive activity. They talked about what they were doing and wrote about what they were learning.

All of the women got together three times. The first time was in November of 1991. This meeting prepared us to start the woman- positive activity that made sense in our program.



**The first time we met was in November of 1991.**

The first time we met was in November of 1991. The second time we met was in April of 1992. At this meeting we talked about what we had been doing, what difficulties we were having, and what we had learned so far.

The third time we met was in November of 1992. We talked about what we had learned. We compared our experiences. We came up with suggestions for other programs.

## What is in this book

This book starts with a section called, "What did our programs that was positive for women?" It includes a description of each of the twelve programs, where they are located, and what the women in the program did.

The next section is called, "What did we learn?" It is a summary of what we talked about at our third meeting. It describes some of the things that make literacy harder for women. It talks about how other programs could be more positive for women and why we think everyone should try to be woman-positive. It also includes questions that you might use to think about what you can do in your program.

Being a woman is not about "not being a man." Being a woman, working with other women, is not about men. It is not about hating men or leaving men out. It is about women.

Mary Snow, Saint John Learning Exchange

## How can you use this book?

This book can help people understand what we learned about women and literacy. We hope it will help you imagine how to make your literacy programs more positive for

women. Some programs may use it to start people talking about women in your program.

Some students who read this book before it was printed came up with ideas about how this book could be used in literacy programs. Here are some of their suggestions.

- You could read this book for information about the research.
- You could use this book to start discussions in groups and to get ideas for writing.
- You could use this book for examples of things women can do when they get together.
- You could use the book to let men know about the kinds of issues women think are important.

### How can I find out more?

This book is one of three books that describe the CLOW research. One book is called The power of woman-positive literacy work. It explains how we did the research and tells a lot more about what happened in each program. You could read it with your tutor if you want more information about a specific program.

Another book is called Women in literacy speak. It includes articles written by women about their experiences in this research. Some of the articles are written by workers, tutors, and learners.

You can get copies of these books from CLOW. The order form is on the last page in this book.

### A note about language

People who are learning in literacy programs are sometimes called students and sometimes called learners. We know that some people don't like to be called learners and some don't like to be called students. For this reasons we use both words in this book.

## Section 2:

What did our  
programs do  
that was positive  
for women?

We sat at the kitchen table and helped each other.



Arctic College  
P.O Box 8  
Arviat, NWT  
X0C 0E0

## Arviat, Northwest Territories

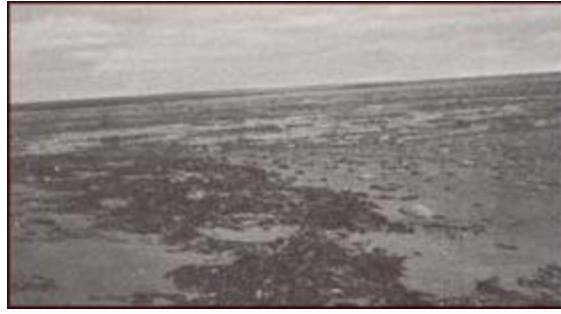
Arviat is a small community of 1,300 people on the west coast of Hudson Bay. It can only be reached by airplane or skidoo in the winter and by airplane or boat in the summer. Ninety percent of the population is Inuit. Inuktitut is the first language of most Inuit and is used in daily life.

People's life-styles in Arviat are a blend of traditional and modern ways. Many people depend on the land for their food and to continue traditional life and culture. People value skills such as fishing, hunting, and making clothing out of animal skins. Many people have skidoos and motorboats.



### Arctic College Arctic

College has a Community Learning Centre in Arviat. Programs at the learning centre are planned by an elected Community Education Council. There is a full-time adult basic education program as well as job entry programs and Inuktitut and English literacy. The staff includes nine women and two men.



**The Arviat shore line in summer.**

## We sat at the kitchen table and helped each other.

The night was bitterly cold. Karen Bergman-Illnik shivered and pushed at the door of the learning centre. Five women sat at or near the computers when Karen walked in. A tide of happiness swelled up in her.

Karen was the facilitator of the Women's Upgrading Program at Arctic College from 1989 to 1992. The program runs two nights a week from October to March each year. About half the time is spent on English and math. The rest of the time is spent on topics which the group chooses at regular planning times.

Karen was interested in how the women's program affected herself as facilitator, the women who participated as learners, the other staff at the Community Learning Centre, and the community.

On the first night the women gathered round the kitchen table with mugs of coffee and talked about what to do in the program. All the women had been in the program in past years and they flowed over with ideas and enthusiasm. In other years barely anyone spoke the first night. This time Karen had to ask the women to speak one at a time.

Someone suggested a baking project like last year and then taking the goodies on visits to elders. By the end of the night they had planned several other activities that would take the class out into the community.

Karen found that the research made her question what feminism meant to her and what woman-positive meant. It made her wonder why she felt so isolated. Karen began to feel that she did not fit in the community any more. She wanted to be somewhere that she fit.

Karen tried to sort through her experiences in this research by writing a short story. She wrote about a woman named Maxine who had trouble talking about her questions and doubts. Here is part of her story:

Yesterday Maxine talked to a neighbour about the research. Somehow they got around to feminism. How much should she say? She didn't want to appear too. . . too. . . something. Maxine offered what she hoped was a safe statement: "Karla started to kid me about being a feminist several years ago but I'm still not sure what she means."

The neighbour laughed and said she never thought of Maxine as a feminist. Maxine admitted she didn't know for a long time if she was or not. It wasn't until she heard Audrey McLaughlin say "a feminist is any woman who tells the truth about her life" that she decided she was one. The neighbour said she thought feminists were more militant than that, "you know, burned their bras and hated men."

We decided to visit women in the community.



Rabbittown  
Learners Program  
26 Graves St  
St. John's, NF  
A1B 3C5

## St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

St. John's is the capital of Newfoundland and Labrador. It is one of the oldest cities in North America. In the 1500s, Europeans crossed the Atlantic to fish off the Grand Banks. St. John's has been an important port since then. In recent years, life has been very hard in the province. In 1993 the Canadian government banned cod fishing because the number of cod was so low. Many people lost their jobs in the fish plants and on the boats. St. John's is the largest city in the province and has a population of 161,000 people.



## Rabbittown Learners Program

Rabbittown is one area in St. John's North. Almost half of the people who live in public housing in this area are single parents. In 1988 people got together to form the Rabbittown Community Association. They got space from the public housing corporation for a community centre. Then they organized recreational, social, and educational programs for all ages. One of the programs is the Rabbittown Learners Program.



Rabbittown tutors plan the survey.

## We decided to visit women in the community.

Six tutors sat having coffee. They worked at the Rabbittown Learners Program. They talked about how more and more people were coming to Rabbittown from all over St. John's. They wondered why fewer women were coming to the program. They wanted to find out why women were staying at home.

The tutors decided to visit every home in the community to ask women why they thought more women were staying at home. The tutors went door-to-door and talked to 77 women. Many women said that women have too many responsibilities with the children and all the work around the house. Lots of women said that violence kept women at home. Or that they had no support from their partner, their family, or the community. One woman said, "My husband does not want me to go anywhere, there's no trust."

The women in the community also said that there should be places where women can get together and meet each other. Many women believe that women are more independent



and in control of their lives than they used to be. The women said, "Women want a better life for themselves," "Women are tired of being controlled," and "Times have changed. . . Women see things in a different light."

The tutors found that the door-to-door visits were very difficult. Sometimes people would not answer their door but would peek out from behind a curtain. Many older women invited the tutors in for a cup of tea but were not interested in the survey. One tutor said, "When a man answers the door he will often say that the woman is not home, but we have a feeling she is."

Here is how the tutors described their experiences:

I think basically all of the women said the same thing. Each one was worried about money and childcare.

We kept hearing about violence, poverty, and loneliness. The despair of the young women is especially loud and clear. Some of them are in situations that make life seem hopeless. They either don't know they have choices or they don't want to leave the situation - we don't really know. Or do they really have choices?

I felt good at the beginning. When we went knocking on doors my feelings changed and I felt like an intruder because most people didn't want to talk to us.

The women's stories are mostly sad and it's hard not to be touched by them. Some women are trying to improve their lives but they come up against a lot of barriers.

We can't help but wonder what will happen to the children. Will they end up in the cycle of poverty and despair? Or, by having the know-how and strength, will they be able to have a better life?

**We enjoyed talking together.**



Saint John  
Learning Exchange  
P.O . Box 6278  
Station A  
Saint John, NB  
E2L 4R7

## Saint John, New Brunswick

Saint John is the largest city in New Brunswick. It has a population of 90,000 people. It is 80 kilometers south of Fredericton, the province's capital city. Saint John was the first city in Canada to be incorporated.

Saint John is on the Bay of Fundy, which has the highest tides in the world. It has been a port since the 1700s, when huge ships were built using trees from New Brunswick. In this century, Saint John has been important for exporting the wheat grown on the Canadian prairies.



## Saint John Learning Exchange

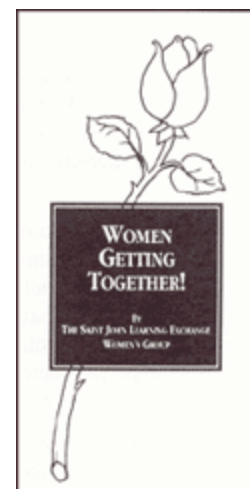
The Saint John Learning Exchange was started in 1984 in a downtown storefront. Twenty-two staff work with people of all ages who want to improve their literacy. The Learning Exchange has always believed that each learner is an individual, with particular strengths, life experiences, and needs. The staff make sure that learners feel welcomed, accepted, and supported.

## We enjoyed talking together.

Marion Wells waved good-bye to a woman who was on her way to pick up her children from school. The woman had been at the Learning Exchange most of the day.

Marion is the director of the Learning Exchange. She works hard to see that the program is a place where everyone is treated equally and with respect. She believed that the program responded to women's needs, but she wondered if they could do more.

Marion talked to Mary Snow, the counsellor, about starting a women's group. They decided to see if a few women were interested. Soon a group was meeting once a week. Here is how they describe the group in their book:



We talked about our children and our partners. We talked about our problems and listened to each other. We always felt good after one of our meetings.

Sometimes we would get laughing about things that had happened to us. We all had stories about ourselves and we had a good time remembering them.

The more we met, the more we talked about our feelings. We felt safe expressing our feelings in the group.

We all want to keep meeting. We feel we can be ourselves in this group. We feel proud of ourselves and less alone.

The group made Marion realize that it could be very simple to do something woman-positive. She was amazed at how valuable the group was for all the women, including herself. Here is what she wrote:

I had always thought that if I was going to do something that would assist women, it would have to be something that concretely moved towards solving violence, incest, or housing problems. I hadn't thought that woman-positive might mean something less political, less active and organized. I discovered that something extremely valuable and woman-positive was really very simple to do.

Mary, who had her first child during this time, also gained a lot. Here is what she said:

One person that I admire a lot more than I ever had because I look at her a lot differently now - is my own mother. When I see that she's been able to do all the things that she has done - raised a family of five children, run a household, and have a career as well it just amazes me. And she remains so strong and together most of the time. I've just really become more aware of what it means to be a woman.

we put together a sexual harassment policy.



Toronto ALFA  
Centre  
1900 Davenpotr  
Rd  
Toronto, ON  
M6N 1B7

## Toronto, Ontario

Toronto is the capital of Ontario and home to over three million people. It is the largest city in Canada. More than one-third of all immigrants to Canada choose Toronto as their home. The name comes from the Huron word which means "meeting place."



## Toronto ALFA Centre

The Toronto Adult Literacy For Action (ALFA) Centre was started in 1985. It is located in a community centre in the northwestern part of the city. Four staff train volunteer tutors to work with students one-to-one and in small groups. Almost half of the students are women and most of the tutors are women. About 60 students work one-to-one with a tutor and 18 people come to the groups. Only five women come to group tutoring.



Five women met once a week and wrote a book: One woman's struggle.

## We put together a sexual harassment policy.

A student came to talk to the staff at ALFA. She was upset about what happened to her one night after class. She was waiting for the bus and another student said things to her that made her feel very uncomfortable. She said, "If this guy continues, I'm going to stop coming."

The staff talked to other students about harassment. The men were upset. They said that if something bothers a woman, she should say so at the time. The women said that it is sometimes difficult for a woman to say anything because she is afraid. Some of the men said they did not know what was harassment and what was innocent teasing. Some men said that all men are under suspicion unless people know who is harassing women.

In early 1992, men and women started a committee to put together a sexual harassment policy. Here is what they wrote:

### What is Sexual Harassment?

If someone does these things to you, they are sexually harassing you:

- touches you when you don't want to be touched by them
- looks at you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable
- asks you out and keeps pushing after you have said, "No"
- talks sexual things to you and continues to talk that way after you have told them to stop
- forces you to give them your phone number
- comes around after you have said you are not interested
- draws attention to pictures that make you feel embarrassed
- tries to bargain with you for sex

### Sexual Harassment is not:

- friends hugging or touching
- flirting between friends

Respect is important. Sharing is important.

Sexual harassment is when there is no respect and the action is not shared.

Here is a policy for all students and tutors.

**We at ALFA do not tolerate sexual harassment.**

If you get harassment by anyone contact a staff or board person right away. Don't be afraid. Come forward. We will stand behind you.

If you harass someone at ALFA you will be called into a meeting with board members and staff members.

You will be expelled from ALFA. We will use our Sexual Harassment Policy to back us up. You will not have a second chance.

We started a women's committee.



Beat the Street  
85 Shuter St  
First floor Toronto,  
ON M5B 1B3

Toronto, Ontario

Across Canada more than 100,000 young people live on the streets. About 12,000 young people live on the streets of Toronto. Half of the city's homeless people are younger than 18. Most left their homes to get away from abuse and violence.

Life on the street is very rough. Young women on the street live with fear every day. They are not respected and are abused and exploited. They have few choices about how to make money. Many sell their bodies because their boyfriends threaten them.



## Beat the Street

Beat the Street was started by Frontier College in 1986. Two men who were from the streets set up the program for street people. Most students are from 16 to 24 years old and live on the streets of downtown. In 1992 only seven of the 58 students were women.



Tuesday night was women's night.

## We started a women's committee.

Some women at Beat the Street were tired of men grabbing at them and touching their breasts. They were tired of being called names.

Robin Silverman and Pat MacNeil work at the centre. They wanted to make Beat the Street a safer place for women. They needed to know what to do when women were assaulted and harassed.

Robin organized a meeting for women in June of 1991. Each woman talked about what had happened to her. They said that they were afraid to do anything in case they were attacked again. They decided to keep meeting and to try to put together a policy about

harassment. One night a week became women's night at Beat the Street.

The men in the program were angry. Some men were violent. Some stood outside on women's night and said things like, "Oh, you're going to have your women's bitch session tonight."

Gradually the program changed. A few men began to see why women needed time to be together and a safer place. The men who still wanted to call women names and treat women badly knew they could not do these things at the centre. Women began to feel that Beat the Street was a safer and friendlier place.

The women's committee met for a year and then put together a book called Recipes for Political Action. Here is one story from the book.

## Living on the Streets of Toronto

by Shelley

It is very hard living on the streets of Toronto  
because it is not like Halifax.  
More shit happens in Toronto.  
I had one guy come up to me to work on the street.  
But I said no to him  
because you can get AIDS by working on the street.  
And I get into fights on the streets.  
And people ask me what am I doing in a place like this  
but I tell them to leave me alone.  
They all tell me to go back home.  
I do not know Toronto yet.  
People give me money  
to buy some food and a place to stay  
Sometimes they ask me what is the money for  
and I tell them.  
And one guy gave me \$20  
for something to eat and a place to stay.  
And one guy was going to kill me  
if I did not work on the street  
and some of the students at Beat the Street help me  
with things like my math and English and places to stay.



we talked about our lives and wrote our stories.



Action Read  
Suite 206  
20 Fountain St  
Guelph, ON  
N1G 3P2

## Guelph, Ontario

Guelph is a city 100 kilometers west of Toronto. It has grown very quickly in the last decade, since the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture moved its offices there. About 88,000 people live in Guelph. Some commute to work in Toronto.

Guelph is surrounded by rich farm land. The downtown area is small and still includes many buildings from the 1870s and 1880s.



### Action Read

Action Read is the only community literacy program in Guelph. It was started in 1987 as part of the Centre for Employable Workers. In 1991 Action Read became an independent program. Half of the members of the board of directors and all committees are learners.

When Action Read became an independent program they moved into their own space. The new location was in a small storefront in the downtown area.



The women's group had very little space.

## We talked about our lives and wrote our stories.

Anne Moore looked at the woman with a baby in her arms. The woman was afraid that her baby would be taken away from her. The woman had nowhere to live. She wanted to come to the women's group at Action Read.

Anne felt tense. Already the women's group worked in a space that was too small. The other staff complained that the women's group interrupted them. There was no space for childcare. But Anne could not turn this woman away. She felt frustrated that funding for women's groups in literacy often does not include money for space or childcare.

Anne was hired to start a women's group at Action Read. She learned a lot about how difficult the work could be. She is a feminist who had worked in literacy for seven years. She wanted a chance to think about her work. She wanted to write about what she learned.

The women's group at Action Read eventually found space to meet in private. They found money and space for childcare. As time went on, the women in the group supported each other more and more. Anne noticed that women's ideas about the group changed.

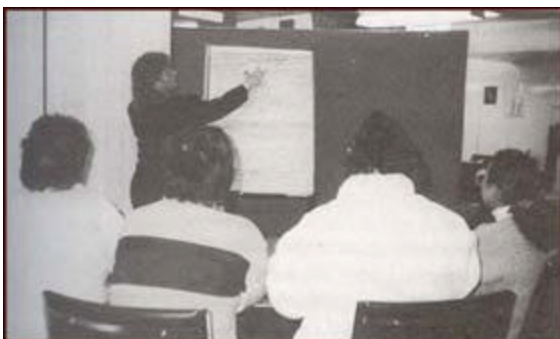
At first, some found it silly to only allow women in the group. For the first year we had to review this idea over and over. I think they felt guilty for having their own space and enjoying it. Gradually I saw them take pride in the fact that the group was women-only. The humour changed, they used to joke about chasing men away. Now our big joke is that men couldn't handle listening to what we talk about they might faint.

Anne began to see women in the group making changes in their lives. Two women became members of the board of directors. Many women do public speaking about Action Read.

Here is part of a story by Monique Beaulieu about the women's group. It was published in Women: Where have we been? Where are we going?

When I am in a mixed group I feel more fearful to speak up or get relaxed. Men have a way of making me feel inferior and I feel like I'm melting in my chair. There is not as much talk about ourselves when men are there. I'm not saying that there shouldn't be a mixed group. It's just that if I had a choice of both I'd join the women's group first. Sometimes there is too much competition in a mixed group.

We rewrote a pamphlet on sexual abuse.



Brandon  
Friendship Centre  
303-9th St  
Brandon, MB  
R7A 4A8

## Brandon, Manitoba

Brandon is a city of 40,000 people in southwestern Manitoba. It is 225 kilometers west of Winnipeg, the capital city. Brandon is known as The Wheat City and is the second largest city in the province. Most of the farmland in Manitoba is close to Brandon.



## Brandon Friendship Centre

The Brandon Friendship Centre is a bridge between two cultures. It works with Native, Métis, and non-Native people. The centre provides programs for Native people who are .

adjusting to city life. It helps to develop Native leadership, creates understanding among different cultures, and informs the community about Native issues.

The literacy program at the centre has two staff and 20 students. Students choose between group or one-to-one tutoring. They can attend part-time or full-time four days a week.



Diane told the board of the Friendship Centre what she learned.

## We rewrote a pamphlet on sexual abuse.

Diane Eastman thought about the women in her class. Almost everyone had asked to speak to her in private. They had told her about the abuse in their lives, now and when they were children.

Diane is the instructor in the literacy class at the Brandon Friendship Centre. Part of her job is to listen when students need to talk. She often helped them find counselling. But she felt she could not help these women as much as she wanted to. The women still needed Diane's help when their counsellors suggested they write about their feelings.

Diane started a women's group. She asked them what they wanted to write and talk about. They decided to focus on childhood sexual abuse. One woman had tried to join a group for adults who were molested as children. She could not read their flyer. The group decided to rewrite the information so more people would be able to read it. They started meeting one morning a week. Once they began their work, they decided to meet twice a week. Soon they were meeting every morning.

One student who we will call Theresa had never talked about the abuse in her life. Diane worked step-by-step with Theresa as they wrote her story down. They used the same steps that they always use for writing in class. When the story was finished, Theresa said that this was the first time she had been able to think about her experiences without being overwhelmed by her feelings. And her writing also improved.

Diane learned a great deal about how abuse affects women's learning.

All of the women said it was the main reason that they dropped out of school. They all said how hard they found it to concentrate in school after the abuse started in their lives. They also said that it continued to affect them to this day.

Some of the women who had not had any help dealing with the abuse found that many times they felt overwhelmed, frustrated, angry, hurt, alone, stupid, or useless. They did not realize that these feelings were normal for people who had survived childhood sexual abuse.

This experience helped Diane to realize that students' experiences might get in the way of their learning. She believes that literacy programs need to be flexible to allow students time to deal with all of their problems. If programs do not do that, they are ignoring the things which may make it difficult for students to concentrate and to learn.

**We put together resource booklets to help other women.**



Pine Grove  
Correctional  
Centre  
Box 3003  
Prince Albert, SK  
S6V 7J3

## **Prince Albert, Saskatchewan**

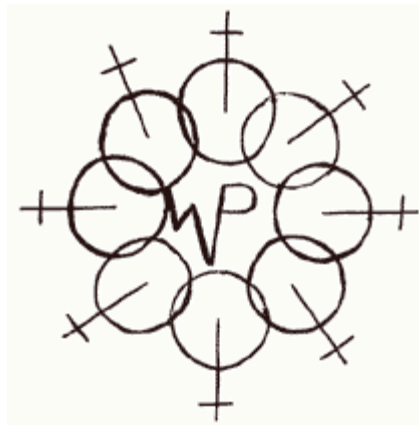
Prince Albert is the oldest city in Saskatchewan. It was founded in 1866 by Presbyterian missionaries. To the south are Saskatchewan's huge wheat fields, to the north are forests and mines. The pulp and paper mill is the largest employer in the city. Many people also work in the federal and provincial correctional centres. Prince Albert is home to 34,000 people.



## Pine Grove Correctional Centre

The Pine Grove Correctional Centre is the provincial prison for women. Most of the women are serving sentences of less than two years but there are some long-term prisoners. Most days there are 67 women in Pine Grove. Almost all of the inmates are Native and about twenty percent of the staff are Native.

The staffs at Pine Grove try to organize programs which will prepare women for when they get out of prison. The activities include a health program, an addictions program, and a Healing Circle for women dealing with sexual and physical abuse. There is also an upgrading program four days a week.



Two women, Emma and Jocelyn, drew this logo.  
It means women of all races joined together.

**We put together resource booklets to help other women.**

The classroom seemed very quiet. All the students in this classroom were women. Most of them were young adults and most of them were Native. This was not a typical classroom in a typical school. This classroom was in Pine Grove, Saskatchewan's prison for women. All the students were prisoners. LaVera Schiele was their teacher.

This was the first time that LaVera had worked in a prison. She learned a lot about herself. She realized that her life was very different from the lives of the prisoners. She is a white woman and she is free to come and go as she pleases. She tried to find ways to talk to the women about their lives. She learned that sharing her experiences and her feelings helped the women begin to trust her.

LaVera wanted to do something positive for the women in her class. She asked them what would help them when they leave Pine Grove. The women decided to do something that would help themselves and other women. They decided to write booklets that listed what help is available for women in different cities in Saskatchewan.

Here is what one woman wrote about why they put together the booklets:

**Jocelyn:**

In writing this resource book I have learned that I was never alone out in society. I came to a point where I had nowhere to go, no one to ask for help, no one to listen to, and too scared even to try. Now that I know of these places, I have the tendency to go out and help people, people who are in need of help.

I used to hear of these places but I was too shy or too proud to even think of going to them. I am an Indian woman who grew up in a white society. Today I look back and understand where I have gone wrong. In my heart and in my mind I was always seeking for someone or someplace. I was hurting so much I turned my life to the streets. There was alcohol, drugs, glamour, excitement and there was also a lot of people the same colour as me.

For eight years I lived the life of HELL. I had gone through a lot of bad experiences. I am very proud to be here today to tell you this. Without the help of Our Creator I don't think I'd be here today.

When the booklets were finished, lots of people and groups wanted to have copies. Some community schools helped to distribute them. Many people saw the need for the booklets.

We thought about women in union-based literacy programs.



Saskatchewan  
Federation of  
Labour  
103-2709 12th7 St  
Regina, SK S4T 1J3

## Regina and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

The two largest cities in Saskatchewan are Regina and Saskatoon. Regina is the capital city and has a population of 160,000. It is in a very dry part of the province. Every tree in the city has been planted since Regina was founded in 1882.

Saskatoon is home to 186,000 people. It is the largest city in the province. Its name comes from the Cree word for berries that grow along the rivers, Mis-sask-qua-too-min.



### Saskatchewan Federation of labour

In 1989 the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour decided they should do something about literacy for the members of the unions that they represent. They decided to set up literacy classes in workplaces and to train union members to teach each other. In 1990 thirteen union members were trained as course leaders. Soon classes were set up in six workplaces and 67 workers were taking classes. This program is called Workers' Education for Skills Training, or, WEST.





Women have important things to say.

## We thought about women in union-based literacy programs.

Debbie Heagy and Nicole Jessop looked around at the other people in the training course at WEST. There were three women and ten men in the room. They wondered why so few women were taking the training.

Nicole thought about her union. About eight out of every ten members were women. Almost all of the executive were men. She believed that most men could not really understand women's concerns and problems. She wondered if women have too many other responsibilities to become active in their union.

Debbie and Nicole talked to women about their experiences - what it was like to teach in their workplaces and what supports they needed. One woman said the training was very difficult for her because of her family responsibilities. Her co-workers teased her. They could not understand why she left her child with a baby-sitter to come to the training sessions.

Debbie and Nicole decided that a poster with a list of questions could help union members think about whether their program pays attention to women's lives. They made a poster starting with this statement: We found that union-based literacy programs can empower women workers when they pay attention to women's lives. Then they listed the questions:



Are there any programs where most of the workers are women?  
Where will women find time for literacy?  
Who will encourage her?  
Will she be respected by fellow workers?  
Is this for Native women too?  
Who will make supper?  
Who looks after the kids?  
Does she have a safe ride home after class?  
What if she doesn't speak English?  
What about the men?  
What if she gets more education than him?

What will happen if she changes?

Debbie and Nicole both learned a lot from this research. Some of what they learned was personal. Here is what Nicole said:

I learned how violence is a part of all of our programs. The more we talked to everyone else, the more we saw how our problems here are the same as everybody's across the country. Violence and abuse and harassment just kept coming up.

Here is how Debbie described what she learned:

I met many wonderful women from whom I have learned, among other things, that being a feminist means many things. It means being allowed to make choices - and then feeling comfortable with the choices we make. It means being accepted for who you are and what you believe in.

## We did some writing.



Keyano College  
8115 Franklin Ave  
Fort McMurray, AB  
T6H 2H7

## Fort McMurray, Alberta

Fort McMurray is the traditional home of Chipeweyan and Cree people in northeastern Alberta. In the 1800s a trading post was built by the North West Company. In the 1920s

oil was discovered and white people began moving into the area. In the 1960s the city tripled in size when two companies began refining oil from the Athabasca oil sands. The population of Fort McMurray is now about 35,000.

Most employers require their workers to have high school education. The highest paying jobs are in the two large oil companies. Most of the work at these companies is shift work and most women cannot get childcare for these shifts. Most Native women work in minimum-wage jobs.

## Keyano College

Keyano College offers workplace training programs and programs to help people get into the workforce. One program in 1992 helped Native women to finish high school. It was called Aboriginal Women and the Workplace. This 24-week program was funded by Canada Employment.



## We did some writing.

Twelve women sat around a table talking about their feelings, memories, and opinions. They described what they believe and what they know. Soon the room was quiet and the women concentrated on pens and paper as they wrote.



These women were part of a writing workshop that met three or four hours a week. They were students in the Aboriginal Women and the Workplace Program at Keyano College.

Nancy Steel, the instructor for the writing workshop, wanted women to understand more about the process of writing. She also wanted them to learn about writing as a way to explore their experiences.

Nancy thought a lot about how her work could be woman-positive. At first she thought that if a program is learner-centred it will be woman-positive. Now she is not so sure.

Before, I was concerned about seeing learners as individuals, not as men and women. But I began to see women as a specific group with specific learning needs and interests. I learned that women have viewpoints and positions that should be explored and are not too difficult or too emotional.

Nancy believes a group is woman-positive if it allows women to discover some freedom. A woman-positive literacy program is one where women control their learning and one that allows women to grow in all areas of their lives.

At the end of the program the college published the women's writing. Native Women Write Now is a record of the time the women spent together. The writings include humour, joy, pain, acceptance, and hope for the future. The women are proud of their writing. They became stronger from the support they experienced in this group. Here is one piece of writing from the class.

### Katie - Woman

I remember my first sight of the woman.  
I stood in the shadow of her doorway  
I watched her cut her granddaughter's hair-  
"Get away from there" she said to me  
"Don't stand and stare" she scolded.

What a hard woman, I thought in my child's mind.  
A mean old woman, my eyes saw.

The years passed.  
I heard small bits and pieces of her life:  
Trapper, hard working, respected, wise.

All these words were used to describe this woman.  
I grew up, met and married a trapper,  
raised four children.  
I saw some of the world through the eyes of this woman.

The hands are old and pained with arthritis,  
The hair is a steel grey.  
The words I use to describe this woman we respected:  
Wise, hardworking and trapper.

**by Alberta M.**

We talked about making our classes more feminist.



College of New  
Caledonia  
3330-22 Ave  
Prince George, BC  
V2N 1P8

## Prince George, British Columbia

Prince George is close to the middle of British Columbia. It is the second largest city on the mainland and has a population of almost 70,000. Prince George is on the Fraser and Nechako rivers. It began as a fur trading post in 1807. The town grew when the Grand Trunk Railway passed through. Since 1945 forestry has been the major industry in Prince George.



### College of New Caledonia

The College of New Caledonia has campuses in different towns in the interior of British Columbia. Almost one-third of the students at the Prince George campus are taking adult basic education. Some students are working at a basic level, others are working on finishing their high school, others are taking English as a Second Language.



**Mary Ann and Paula talked each week.**

## We talked about making our literacy classes more feminist.

Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney have known each other for a long time. They both have taught English as a Second Language, upgrading, and adult literacy for many years.

Paula and Mary Ann both call themselves feminists. They believe that women should be equal and that there are lots of reasons why women are not equal now. They believe that women cannot be equal until political changes happen and that people must work together for those changes.

This year Paula and Mary Ann decided to teach a class together. They started a weekly writing group for adults learning to read. They wanted to make this writing group positive for women. They wondered if being woman-positive was different from being feminist.

Paula and Mary Ann talked once a week about the writing group. They also wrote in a journal. Soon they realized that they needed to look at what they were doing. They began to wonder what made it so difficult for them to bring feminism into the classroom.

To Paula and Mary Ann, a woman-positive class was one where women were comfortable enough to say what they thought. But they did not always agree with what students thought. They were puzzled about how to include their own beliefs in a way that did not make women students feel that their ideas were wrong.

Paula and Mary Ann knew that they have a lot of power in the classroom because they are the teachers and the students look up to them. They did not want to use this power to tell students what to think. They knew that the best discussions in class happened among students. Paula and Mary Ann learned that the best thing they could do was to encourage students to discuss things.

Paula and Mary Ann have not stopped being feminists. They care very deeply about women's equality. They want to continue thinking about how feminist ideas can mean

something to students and how feminist ideas can include many different women's experiences.

we talked about having a women's class and a men's class.



Malaspina College  
22 Cowichan way  
RR#6  
Duncan, BC  
V9L 4T8

## Duncan, British Columbia

Duncan is a town of about 8,000 people on the east coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. It is in an area called the Cowichan/Chemainus Valleys which is home to about 60,000 people.



## Malaspina College

The Cowichan Campus of Malaspina College is in Duncan on land that belongs to the Cowichan First Nation (Band Council). There are about 300 full-time and part-time students in adult basic education. About half of them are women. These students are older and poorer than the other students at the college. There are more Native students, more single mothers, and more people with disabilities in adult basic education than in other parts of the college.



Vicki worked with Nicle at the third meeting.

## We talked about having a women's class and a men's class.

Kate Nonesuch and Vicki Noonan talked after class one day. They both teach adult basic education. They wanted to see how things would change if they had separate classes for men and women instead of classes divided by reading level.

Kate and Vicki asked the college for permission to try this new arrangement. A committee wanted them to write a proposal and include a way to evaluate the experience.

The next step was to talk to the students. About half were women and half were men. Kate and Vicki told them why they wanted to divide the classes. Here are their reasons:

- men and women students often have different interests and want to talk and write about different things
- men talk more in the class
- women have a hard time getting their views across
- men are often frustrated by a teacher trying to get them to be quiet long enough for the women to be comfortable to speak
- the teachers find it difficult to facilitate these discussions

One woman had been in another all-woman class. She said it had been a very good experience. She was the only woman who spoke. The rest of the time the men did all the talking. One man said he thought it would be good for men to be together to talk about their feelings. Another man spoke up again and again to say it was a stupid idea. He said that school was not a place to discuss feelings, that you come to do your work and that was all. There was no need to split the class up. A third man spoke once in an angry tone. He said he liked to look at girls, to talk to girls, to work with girls, and he did not want to be in a class with all guys.

Then the class voted on the idea. A few women did not vote because they were not going to be in the class the next year. The class voted nine to one against splitting the class. The plan was dropped.

Here is what Kate and Vicki thought about the experience:



We might say that our whole project turned out to be not woman-positive at all because we managed to put those women through an hour meeting where they got shouted at by two or three men and they felt so intimidated that they felt they couldn't express themselves and in the end didn't get what they needed.

## Section 3:

### What did we learn?

When we started this research, we wanted to find out what happens when programs do something positive for women. We wanted to find out from women themselves. We learned about women who are students in literacy and adult basic education programs. We also learned about women who work in these programs.

When we got together to talk about what happened, we learned that the same problems came up in all twelve of the programs. This made us realize that we have things in common as women even though we may be very different from one another. I learned that women all across Canada live the same kinds of lives. Even though we're different races, different ages, different classes, we all have a lot of common ground.

I learned that literacy is really, really important and it's also very difficult for women. A year ago I wouldn't have thought literacy was harder for a woman to achieve than a man.

(Debbie Heagy, WEST)

### Some things make literacy harder for women

Some of the things that make literacy harder for women are violence, poverty, isolation, and discrimination. In this research we learned what these problems mean for women. Women who work in literacy programs also learned that programs need to pay attention to women's lives. We learned that our work is not given much value.

In this section we describe the things that make literacy harder for women and the things that we learned about literacy programs. We list questions that will help you think about how your program is doing. You could write answers to these questions. You could also use this section to begin to talk to other people in your program about women and literacy.

Here is what two women said about violence:

At one time all three of the women that were in my class three out of three - had been abused. I just thought that was a strange coincidence. When I talked to the other women in the research project, I found out the high percentage of women that had been abused. It was amazing. It was unreal. I told the women in my class that women just like them in courses across the country are being abused. That was the biggest thing to my students: that they weren't the only ones, that they weren't alone.

(Nicole Jessop, WEST)

Right now I have a man in my class with whom I have been working for several months on reading and writing. I have a relationship with him. I like him. I give him lots of encouragement about the work he is doing. Last weekend his partner went to the hospital with a broken nose and other injuries after he beat her. How do I face him when he comes back?

(Kate Nonesuch, Malaspina College)

**.We learned that violence is  
a part of many women's lives**

All through the project we talked about violence. We talked about how violence keeps women from coming to programs and how it affects women's learning. Violence affects women students and staff who live with abuse in the past and in the present. Women staff also have to deal with men students who we know are violent.

What are some examples of violence against women?

---

---

What support does your program give to women who experience violence?

---

---

What else can your program do about violence against women?

---

---

## Here is what two women said about working with women who are poor:

There are masses of women out there living in poverty and masses of women raising families on their own. They can't manage on the welfare money they get. It's not every woman's world. There's no jobs out there. If a woman doesn't have her . grade 12, forget about it. There's not much she can go back to when she's got three kids.

(Eileen Gorman, Pine Grove Correctional Centre)

What can you do if a woman is home with three children and she's on social services, other than take the money out of your own pocket and pay for a baby-sitter and go and pick her up and bring her to the program and then bring her home after. What can you do?

(Cathy Short, Rabbittown Learners Program)

## .We learned that many women are poor

Women who are hungry, homeless, sick, or disabled live under terrible stress. There are very few supports for them. It may be easy to forget women who are poor. We may not see poor women because women who are hungry, homeless, or sick never come to classes or silently drop out of programs. We must not forget these women.

We also talked about how difficult it is to work with women who are poor. The most difficult part is that there is very little that we can do about the fact that they are homeless, hungry, poor, or sick.

Why are so many women poor?

---

---

What support does your program give to women who are poor?

---

---

What else could your program do to make sure that women who are poor are not left out?

---

---

Here is what one woman said about women being isolated:

Women feel isolated. They feel cut off from other women. And they see and observe men not feeling that way so much. The women learners say that at some social groupings where most of the couples don't know each other, the men have no trouble relating to each other but the women don't know how to talk to other women beyond a polite, "Hello, how are you?" That is one reason why the women's group is so popular, why the women want to come.

(Marion Wells, Saint John Learning Exchange)

## .We learned that many women are isolated

We learned that women across Canada are isolated. We may be isolated for many reasons and we remain isolated because we are afraid of how men will react when we reach out to other women.

We learned that women who work in literacy often feel isolated. The chance to work with another woman and to have time to talk about our work was very important for us. Many women felt they would like to continue to work this way if there was only time and money.

We also talked about how we would like to work more with women who work in transition homes and in groups that work against poverty. We need to support each other and learn from each other.

Why are women isolated from other women?

---

---

How does your program help women feel less isolated?

---

---

What more could your program do to help women who are isolated?

---

---

Here is what one woman said about discrimination in her program:

The women's group brought to light how women were being treated. Before, the program did not recognize that women were being mistreated. We were told, "If men call you a slut or a cunt, it doesn't mean anything, it's just how they talk." The women's group brought women together. And because we're together, we have safety in numbers, we can bring these issues out, and we have complained.

When the women's group first came together, some of the women were saying things that were a putdown of Black people and gay people. We talked a number of times about it and we had an agreement that if we are going to go around putting people down, or calling people names for being gay or Black, then we're doing the same thing to them that men do to us. That was the approach that we took in helping people to understand why it was wrong. We used the example of the names that we have been called for being women.

(Robin Silverman, Beat the Street)

## .We learned that women are not treated equally

When somebody is treated unfairly because of who they are, that is discrimination. People are protected from discrimination in the human rights code. Discrimination is very stressful. It can keep people from concentrating and learning. If a woman is evicted because she is pregnant, or Black, or on welfare, or a lesbian, that is discrimination. If a woman is called names by someone else in the literacy program, that is discrimination, too. She may not want to come to the program in case that person calls her names again.

Programs must do something about discrimination that happens to people at the program. A policy could help everyone. It should use clear language to describe discrimination and to say what people can do if somebody treats them badly. Policies work best when people know about them and when people get the training they need to make sure the policy is followed.

Why is it important to protect people from discrimination?

---

---

How does your program make sure that discrimination does not happen?

---

---

What more could your program do about discrimination?

---

---

## Literacy work is difficult

One of the most difficult things about this research was that we work in programs that have very limited amounts of time and money; Some women felt it was not right to take time away from all students to concentrate just on the women students. Some women wondered whether the things we learned about women-only groups could apply to men-only groups or to mixed groups. Some women wondered what would happen when the research was finished.

The staff is so busy with all the other things going on that we talked about putting the women's group on hold for a while. That really worries me. It means all this exciting stuff that we've been doing, this vision that we have, is going to go on hold because of the fact that we wouldn't have the staff to do it. That's heartbreaking.

(Amele Zewge, Toronto ALFA Centre)

Even though this work was difficult, we did learn some important things about the work that we do in adult literacy programs. We learned that the best programs pay attention to women's lives. And we learned that literacy work is not given very much value.

### **Here is what one woman said about paying attention to women's lives:**

One day a counsellor called me to say that a student in my class would not be coming in that day. This student was not ready to deal with math and reading. She had just spent two hours talking about being six years old and being sexually abused. It became clear to me that our programs must be flexible and allow students the time that is necessary for each one to deal with any and all problems. If a student suddenly is showing a lack of interest in school work, it does not necessarily mean she no longer cares about school. It could be that a personal issue is pushing to the forefront. The student must be allowed time away from academic work to deal with these issues.

(Diane Eastman, Brandon Friendship Centre)

## **.The best programs pay attention to women's lives**

We learned that literacy involves more than just reading and writing. We realized that students in literacy should be involved in making decisions about their learning and decisions about how the program is run. Students must have control over what happens. We also learned that sometimes learners need support in other areas of their lives before they can work on their reading and writing

Why is it important for programs to pay attention to the lives of learners?

---

---

How does your program involve learners in making decisions?

---

---

What more could your program do to make sure that it pays attention to the lives of learners?

---

---

**Here is what some women said  
about how literacy work is not valued:**

You know, this is not like another job where you can just teach the learners the times tables and go home and mark the homework and give them back a percentage. You can't just do that.

(Karen Bergman-Illnik, Arctic College)

The way I am, I always thought of the learners, I always wanted to put them first. But as time went on, it wasn't perfectly all right. Because if staff are not taken care of, how can staff do a good job with the learners?

The learners had problems but the tutors had ours, too. When we're going out there and our minds are not on what we're doing, we're not doing the same job. I felt that I needed to be taken care of sometimes. Some businesses are aware of . taking care of their employees and they know once the employees are happy everything else follows. (Cathy Short, Rabbittown Learners Program)

Listening to the struggles we all have when we try to put our beliefs into practice is encouraging and discouraging. Discouraging because once again I realize how hard it is to do and how much people in our society don't want women existing as equals. Encouraging because we're still pushing.

(Anonymous, from the evaluation of the second workshop)

## .Literacy work is not valued

We talked about how little support we get for our work in literacy. Many of us do not get support personally or professionally. Many of us do not look after ourselves very well and do not value our own work. Some women talked about how literacy work is like other work that women traditionally do as mothers, nurses, secretaries, and wives. This work involves taking care of other people.

We talked about the fact that literacy is not a priority for funding. If our work was valued, our programs would have funding all year. We would have enough space to do our jobs properly and enough : time to take training that we need. We would have time to plan our work and to evaluate how we are doing. We would have no trouble finding reading materials that were realistic and that paid attention to women's different experiences. Women would be able to come to the program. We would be able to offer childcare to the women in our programs.

What kinds of things show that literacy work is not valued?

---

---

What kinds of things could be done to show that literacy work is important?

---

---

## This work can be satisfying

Sometimes, it is difficult for us to do work that is positive for women. Our programs are already stretched to the limit and we wonder if we can start new activities. In some programs men and women, both students and staff, do not like the idea of paying special attention to women. Sometimes this work is difficult because of what is happening in women's lives.

We decided we want to let people know what makes this work worthwhile. At our last meeting we came up with a list of the things that made the good days good.



- Good days happened when women could be there because no one had been raped, no one had been the victim of other kinds of violence in their lives. When women had enough food and a place to sleep, we had good days.
- Good days happened when women momentarily forgot fear and were open to new ideas.
- Good days happened when there was good weather and women came to class feeling good about themselves. On those days, we had better reading and better discussions.
- Good days happened because we were able to truthfully talk about our lives, in our own way. We crafted our own community with our stories.
- Good days happened because we were talking around a kitchen table - telling our own stories in our own voices about our own lives. We were talking about "issues." We talked about condoms, chocolate cake, someone changing her life. We helped each other.
- Good days happened when the women in our activity understood what we were trying to do.
- Good days happened when the barriers between learners and instructors broke down and we all felt at home in the class.
- The good days were good because we had the childcare we needed, because other staff did not interrupt us, and because we had the space we needed to do our work.
- Good days happened when we had enough time to plan.
- Good days meant good literacy work was being done. Students came to class for themselves, to express themselves, to say something that was not an assignment. We could see that we were creating a good environment for women because of this project.
- When we had co-workers who could help with a crisis, we had good days.
- Good days happened when some of us began to think about what feminism meant to us. For some of us, this was especially true when the word "feminism" came up in class. For others, when the word "feminism" came up in class, it was not a good day!
- Good days happened because we were able to share food and to feel support from each other.
- Good days happened because we had time and energy to think about what was happening. We had a chance to see how we were changing and growing. And we got feedback that made us look at what we were doing. The good days were good because we had time to think and talk about our work. We knew that other women across Canada were doing the same kind of thinking and talking. Many of us realized, as the research continued, that we are-all dealing with the same shit and a lot of us are starting to make it public.

## Programs could be more positive for women

In this research we learned that many things stand between a woman and her education. Some of these are small things that can be fixed easily, like the time that classes start. Some of these are very powerful and much more difficult to change, like violence.

We learned that programs need to pay attention to women's needs and experiences. When programs do, they are positive for women. If they do not, programs are negative for women. Being woman-positive means doing things that make it possible for women to come to the program and to learn when they are there. Programs must provide a safe place for women to learn.

We learned that it is always possible for programs to do something about the things that stand between a woman and her education. Programs must deal with the difficult problems that are part of women's lives. These include violence, having no childcare, sexual harassment, prejudice, and hunger. These problems will not go away if we ignore them. In this section, we describe some of the questions that you can ask to make sure that women are able to participate in adult literacy programs.

Can you think of things that might keep women from coming to adult literacy programs?

---

---

How does your program make sure that women are able to come to the program?

---

---

What else could your program do?

---

---

## Some things keep women from coming to programs

- **How does violence affect women?**

Violence, and the threat of violence, keeps many women from getting an education. Many women are survivors of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. All forms of abuse are real for women in the past, present, and future. Good programs do not ignore the violence in women's lives. Good programs help women find supports in the community. Good programs understand that violence and abuse can keep women from concentrating and learning.

- **Who can women talk to?**

Women are often isolated. This isolation keeps them from coming to literacy programs. Programs can arrange for women to meet in small groups to talk about their lives and the changes they are going through. Program workers should listen when women say they need to talk.

- **Who will take care of the children?**

Women are responsible for children. Women can only come to programs if they have childcare. Childcare must be safe, easy to get to, and close to the program. The cost of childcare must not keep women from getting an education.

- **How will women get to the program?**

Programs must help women get to the program. Where there is a bus system, programs should give tickets or passes to women who need them. Where there is no bus system, or where it is not safe, programs must help women find other ways of getting to the program.

- **Can women afford it?**

We believe that women should not have to pay to get a basic education. More programs with training allowances should be open to women.

Can you think of things that might keep women from learning in adult literacy programs?

---

---

How does your program make sure that women are able to make the most of their time in the program?

---

---

What else could your program do?

---

---

## There are problems inside programs

- **What can a woman do if she is sexually harassed?**

When a woman is sexually harassed, she feels uncomfortable and may not know what to do. She may not feel safe in the program. This is not acceptable. Women have a right to safety at school. Women need to know that they will be taken seriously if they complain about sexual harassment. Men need to know that if they harass women they could be expelled.

People will know what to expect if programs have a policy about sexual harassment. The policy should be very clear. Everybody must be told about it.

- **What does the program do about prejudice and discrimination?**

Discrimination keeps people from learning. Programs should : never discriminate against particular people. Native women, women of colour, women with disabilities, and lesbians live with discrimination every day. Programs must make sure that everyone is treated with respect. They must take action when discrimination happens between people in the program.

People will know that they are welcome if programs have a policy against discrimination. The policy must be written in clear language and should be posted around the program. All new students, volunteers, and staff should be told about the policy.

- **Is there any private space?**

Women who have survived abuse need to talk about their experiences before they can concentrate and learn. Women who bring children with them need time on their own to learn. Programs must provide private space for learning. This may mean a separate space for women to meet.

## Why programs should do things that are positive for women

We would like other people to start woman-positive activities because we would like the world to be woman-positive and we know that we cannot do it alone!

When people do something new, then think about it and talk about it—they understand things in a new way. If more people start woman-positive activities and think about what happens, there will be more people who understand what women's lives are really like.

We believe that being woman-positive means paying attention to what women say they need. Sometimes the things that women need can be answered with very simple questions. For example:

- Is there childcare so that women who have children can come to the program?
- Do men do all the talking in class?
- Are learners involved in choosing topics for study?
- Are students expected to do homework between classes?
- If a woman is sexually harassed, what can she do?
- Does the program support people who are going through things that make it difficult for them to concentrate and learn?

We would like people to think about what woman-positive means in their program. We do not believe that being woman-positive means putting women together in one group. That is not enough. And it is sometimes not a useful thing to do. We believe being woman-positive is a process that happens over time. It is a process that starts when people listen to what women say they want and need.

How could your program make sure that it is positive for women?

---

---

Does your program use materials that are about women's lives?

---

---

---

How could your program involve learners in making decisions?

---

---

## Some things that programs can do

- **Start a woman-positive activity**

Programs should organize activities which support women's learning. A woman-positive activity does not have to be an activity only for women. We believe that being woman-positive means pay attention to what women want and need. What works in one program may not work in another. Be creative!

- **Make sure that learning materials are realistic**

Programs must look at the materials they use. Do the materials show people's lives as they really are? Do the materials include women? Do the materials respect differences between people? Do the materials help learners understand these differences?

Programs must ask learners about homework. For some women homework is impossible. Others have lots of time and like to do some learning at home.

## **Involve learners in decisions**

Programs should involve learners in decisions about their learning. Women and men do not have the same experiences. Everyone involved in adult literacy is responsible for including women.

## **Thank you!**

This book would not have been possible without the work of all the women in all of the programs which took part in this research project.

A special thank you to: Karen Bergman-Illnik, Arctic College  
Shirley Hickey and Cathy Short, Rabbittown Learners' Program  
Mary Snow and Marion Wells, Saint John Learning Exchange  
Christeen Gangadeen, Alex Jones, and Amele Zewge, Toronto ALFA Centre

Pat MacNeil and Robin Silverman, Beat the Street  
Monique Beaulieu, Lynda Lehman, and Anne Moore, Action Read  
Diane Eastman and Gail Lanoie, Brandon Friendship Centre .  
Eileen Gorman, Wanita Koczka, and LaVera Schiele, Pine Grove Correctional Centre

Debbie Heagy and Nicole Jessop, WEST Saskatchewan Federation of Labour

Jeanne MacIntyre and Nancy Steel, Keyano College  
Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney, College of New Caledonia  
Kate Nonesuch and Vicki Noonan, Malaspina College

Thank you to students at  
Brandon Friendship Centre, Brandon East End Literacy, Toronto Keyano College, Fort McMurray for field testing this book.

## **CCLOW Membership**

Membership Fees (GST included)

Low income/student/unemployed/underemployed/retired	\$ 10.70
Individual	\$ 30.70
Sustaining Member	\$250.70
Organization with an annual budget up to \$100,000	\$ 48.25
Organization with an annual budget \$100,000 to \$500,000	\$ 80.25

Organization with an annual budget over \$500,000	\$133.75
Associate Member (receives <u>Women's Education des femmes only</u> )	
Individual	\$ 18.19
Organization	\$ 32.10

A \$20.00 income tax receipt will be issued. :  
A \$240.00 income tax receipt will be issued.  
Additional donations will be receipted for income tax purposes.

-----  
Charitable number:  
0615-179-21-13

Enclosed, payable to CLOW, is my cheque for:

Membership	\$ _____
Additional Donation	\$ _____
TOTAL	\$ _____

Please return form and payment to CLOW  
47 Main Street, Toronto, Ontario, M4E 2V6 416-699-1909 (phone) 416-699-2145 (fax)

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Organization \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone (Home) \_\_\_\_\_ (Business) \_\_\_\_\_  
(Fax) \_\_\_\_\_  
Occupation \_\_\_\_\_  
Area of Interest \_\_\_\_\_

[ ] I do not give CLOW permission to trade or sell my name and address to other like-minded social action groups for the purpose of fundraising or as a means of networking.

- 
- **Women's Education des femmes**, a feminist connection to the world of learning and education, is published quarterly by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, a national organization that promotes feminist education and the empowerment of women. ISSN 0714-9786
  - **Telling Our Stories Our Way - A guide to good Canadian materials for women learning to read** features reviews of selected books and pamphlets of special interest to women learning to read. Materials reviewed include stories, personal accounts, biographies, poetry, information books on health, birth control, and different kinds of work. Students and literacy workers wrote the reviews. \$5.00 (members) and \$8.00 (non-members). Please add 7% GST and 10% mailing.



# Feminist Literacy Workers' Network

At the Literacy 2000 Conference in New Westminster, BC, October 1990, a group of women asked the support of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW) in forming a network for all women working in the field of literacy, whether they be students, workers, researchers, or volunteers. The main goals were to:

- create a feminist literacy workers' network .
- organize a national conference on feminism and literacy

The Feminist Literacy Workers' Network was born. A conference was held on May 15-17, 1992, at the University of British Columbia. During the discussions the objectives of FLWN were stated as:

- to be a national voice for women's literacy
- to coordinate with other groups to lobby for funding and improved access for women
- to raise awareness of feminist issues
- to promote feminist analysis
- to build a strong FLWN national network
- to provide on-going personal and professional support for FLWN members (including volunteers)
- to explore the possibility of forming a union
- to support women learners
- to promote feminist literacy research on topics such as: women's ways of knowing, feminism across cultures and classes, violence against women, language, and imagery.

If you would like to join FLWN, please send the following form to CLOW----  
47 Main Street, Toronto, Ontario, M4E 2V6  
416-699-1909 (phone) 416-699-2145 (fax)

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Organization\_\_\_\_\_

Address\_\_\_\_\_Postal Code\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone

(Home)\_\_\_\_\_ (Business)\_\_\_\_\_ (Fax)\_\_\_\_\_

Occupation\_\_\_\_\_

Area of Interest

\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] I would like a copy of the founding conference report, A chance to talk.  
For two years, 30 women from across Canada took part in a program-based action

research project that asked the question - What happens when some women in an adult literacy or basic education program decide to do something they define as woman-positive? Three books tell the stories of their experiences.

**The power of woman-positive literacy work - Program-based action research**

Betty-Ann Lloyd with Frances Ennis and Tannis Atkinson 8.5 x 11" - 256 pages - 70 photographs

This book provides the background for the research, details the research process, and describes each program, its community, and woman-positive activity. It contains a collaborative analysis and services, coalition building, and policy analysis and development.

**Women in literacy speak - The power of woman-positive literacy work ,**

Edited by Betty-Ann Lloyd with Frances Ennis and Tannis Atkinson 8.5 x 11 - 188 pages  
23 photographs

The women involved in this project documented their experience in many different ways. This book includes six materials written by students and staff, five reflective and analytic articles, two adaptations of interviews and journals, a policy paper, a story suitable for use as curriculum, and a summary of the research process, collaborative analysis, and recommendations.

**Listen to women in literacy - The power of woman-positive literacy work**

Tannis Atkinson with Frances Ennis and Betty-Ann Lloyd 8.5 x 11" - 100 pages - 26 photographs .

This book has been written and desired for use by intermediate and advanced students in adult literacy and basic education programs. It is based on material from the two other books.

---

All bookstore, library, academic, and course orders please contact  
**Fernwood Books** - Box 9409, Stn A, Halifax, N5 B3K 553  
902-422-3302 (phone) 902-422-3179 (fax)

# Listen to women in literacy

In 1992 women in twelve adult literacy programs across Canada spent a lot of time thinking, writing, and talking about women. We wanted to see what would happen when our programs did something that was positive for women.

We tried different things. Some of us started groups for women. Some of us did writing workshops with students. Some of us tried to make changes in the way we teach and in the way our programs think about women.

We learned a lot about women's lives - the lives of women staff and women students. We learned a lot about literacy programs and the government policies that fund them.

This book tells what each of us did that was positive for women. It tells what we learned.

We hope this book will help other people think about how their programs can pay attention to women's lives.

ISBN 1-895686-38-5



Fernwood Publishing



CCLOW  
Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women