

SUMMARY

GENERATIONS: A Report on the Fall Membership Meeting of the Minnesota Women's Consortium, November 29, 2005

On November 29, 2005, four generations of women came together for the Minnesota Women's Consortium's Fall Membership "Generations" meeting to discuss generational differences within the women's movement. For two and a half hours a wonderful group of actresses, panelists, participants, and facilitator Cindy Reuther sparked an intense conversation about issues of power, sexuality, and understanding among feminists. While the issues were not "solved," we opened a dialogue and began developing strategies to enhance our shared work. This report summarizes the discussion and suggests next steps which we hope will be helpful to organizations and individuals.

Six talented actresses presented a series of funny and poignant vignettes to start the conversation. They focused on issues related to sharing power, celebrating women's sexuality, and increasing understanding among the generations.

SHARING POWER? The first vignette portrays a professional discussion between a 50-year-old and a 30-year-old in which the older woman offers the younger woman a 37-hour a week volunteer position. The older woman explains that this opportunity would look wonderful on a resume. However, the younger woman, who has her master's degree and has volunteered for a number of years at several different women's organizations, fears that she will never be able to find a decent-paying job. She asks, "*What is the career ladder for feminist leadership in Minnesota?*"

The second vignette depicts a conversation between a woman in her 70s and a younger woman. The older woman feels younger women disregard her wisdom and experience. The younger woman feels the older generations distrust her ability to be a successful leader in the women's movement: "*If you want to encourage real, vibrant new leadership from younger women, you are going to have to let some of your power go and trust that we will continue the fight.*"

After these vignettes, facilitator Cindy opened the floor to the audience and panelists to voice their thoughts about "**sharing the torch.**" Many comments mirrored the ideas in the vignettes. For example, one woman said, "*We (older women) grew up as volunteers. Younger women put a higher value on themselves than we did. They have different expectations, but we (older women) tend to see that as a lack of dedication.*" Panelist Kristi Shaw, from NOW, remarked that younger women also have different economic needs. She said older women seem to "*want younger women to build an airplane, but they won't let us into the physics class.*" Many older participants agreed, but expressed concern about transferring power because they feel the younger generation is not informed about the struggles that second wave feminists had to face.

CELEBRATING SEXUALITY? In the next vignette, a young woman is planning an event to celebrate women's sexuality and improved body image through art, performances and music. However, an older woman is uncomfortable with this, concerned that such an event might set back the work her generation has done to "*be seen as something other than sexual objects.*" The younger woman is frustrated that women's sexual freedom can only be discussed if it is from the perspective of reproductive choice.

One audience member asked why the focus on sexuality, "*when there are more important issues to be discussed.*" Another observed that sexuality is an important topic because so many people are uncomfortable discussing it – and after all, didn't older women fight for younger women to own their own bodies and have more choices? One woman said "*A young woman with piercings and tattoos – to me, that doesn't look like a leader.*" One participant demonstrated the "self-reflection" advocated by many by saying, "*At first I was horrified when my daughters started wearing bikinis – and then I thought, Hey! She should be able to walk down the street naked and be just fine, if she wants to.*"

GENERATIONAL UNDERSTANDING? The first vignette in this series portrayed the experience of a first generation immigrant compared to a second generation immigrant. The older woman is concerned that younger women are “*so American*” and less interested in her wisdom. She feels “*caught between understanding why these girls must do what they do, and trying to make them understand their community first.*” Similarly, the second-generation immigrant feels “*caught between being American and being ‘other’ in this country.*”

In the final vignette, three women express their concerns. The first woman, age 40, feels “*caught in the middle between the young activists and the older foremothers.*” Meetings are scheduled at times that are inconvenient because she is working full-time while caring for her children and parents. The second woman, in her 70s, fears that her organization will “*go under*” because she does not see younger women “*stepping up to the plate.*” Finally, a 17-year-old says she is active in the women’s movement but feels like the “*older women don’t listen to me because I’m too young to know anything – or else [they] want me to fit into [their] issues and strategies, and just be [their] little helper.*”

One participant said, “*The younger women are just as active as we were – but we have to get comfortable with the fact that they do things differently.*” A primary concern of many is how to increase the numbers of younger women active in our organizations. Younger women said they might not feel comfortable in existing women’s groups – “*maybe you need to come to other people’s turf*” – and that groups must do better at addressing classism, racism, and other “isms.”

In smaller break-out groups, participants brainstormed strategies to address these issues on a personal, organizational and movement-wide level.

Personal Strategies included taking charge and being forceful, not being afraid to take leadership within a group, and being willing to take risks and step outside of your comfort zone when dealing with someone you perceive as different. In terms of sexuality, participants urged everyone to start defining your own sexuality to understand where you are coming from, and then to create the possibility for dialogues on sexuality.

Organizational Strategies included changing the infrastructure or otherwise creating a power structure that has representatives from each generation, reflecting on how your organization relates to each generation, creating more forums for discussions of generational differences, avoiding assumptions about where others are coming from, normalizing discussions on sexuality, deciding on goals related to generational differences, teaching and learning the historical and present issues of most concern to women, and taking risks to be more open to all.

Movement-wide Strategies included finding an issue that is relevant to all generations and coming together on it, listening to each other (organizations and individuals) more, actively listening and respecting each other’s feminist work, acknowledging experiences that have been important to individuals, and focusing on a mission.

The Consortium will encourage continued discussion by making 2006 the “*Year of the Generations.*” We will feature monthly newsletter articles on related topics, and will combine your ideas into a “Generational Change Toolkit” for organizations. In particular, we welcome responses to these questions for possible inclusion in the January 25 *Capitol Bulletin* newsletter:

- How do you as an individual step outside of your boundaries to connect with women from different generations?
- How successfully do you think your organization reaches out to different generations? What strategies have you found successful in involving women of all ages?

Please send your responses to Erin@mnwomen.org or call Erin Parrish at 651/228-0338. Thank you to actresses Erin Moline, Nora Novic, Erin Parrish, Bharti Wahi, Bonnie Watkins, and Cecelia Watkins; to panelists Kathy Ahrens, Kristi Shaw, and Terry Vasquez; to all participants; and to the Otto Bremer Foundation for making funds available to support this special program.