

women's liberation workshop



What is the Workshop?

It is an explicitly radical, feminist organisation in London committed to building an active autonomous women's liberation movement. The Workshop is composed of the small groups which form the basis of the Women's Liberation Movement and the Workshop Office which was established to facilitate contact between the many groups, to act as an information and resource centre for the movement. We are the Workshop. There is no division. It does not exist outside of ourselves.

When was it established?

It began to emerge in 1968-69 at a time when there was increasing interest in, and development of ideas about the position of women. Originally there were three groups of women meeting in London which were unaware of each other's existence until a "Miss Selfridge" demonstration after which they began to meet regularly each month. This then set the pattern for development of the Workshop—there were to be two components: the small group and interaction between these groups. More local groups were springing up all the time and in late June 1970 came the chance of a first office behind Waterloo Station. Up until that time two women had been employed one day a week working at home to cope with the growing interest and numbers of groups. Since that time we have continued to attempt to relate our political perspective to our organisation. It is not easy!

WOMEN'S GROUPS:

Basically we organise in groups which are small enough to encourage full participation, are locally based and meet weekly.

The federation of small groups extends these principles and provides a political structure which incorporates many members but avoids a gap between members and policy.

THE OFFICE:

The groups decided to set up and pay to support an office which could form a focus for the various activities of the Workshop. Continually we have been trying out new ways of realising our aims so that we create a network rather than a pyramid and so challenge the usual hierarchy of power and knowledge. The office is now situated in a squatted house in Covent Garden. Emily squatted it on her own and was soon joined by eager helpers. Its main functions are to provide a means of communication and support for all the various groups.

DECISION-MAKING:

The Workshop is committed to the principle of a non-authoritarian democratic structure within groups and within the organisation of the workshop. A variety of these have been tried and modified as the Workshop has grown.

The present system involves four full-time workers who were selected by means of a lottery. Each woman will bring something different to the Workshop Office—if a woman wishes to be one of the workers, there should be no barrier such as having the "correct" political analysis and/or life-style. Qualifications are not asked for—this could well discourage a woman from feeling that she has something to contribute. Also they carry the implication that these skills, such as they are, cannot be learned or shared. This was also a consideration when deciding about the length of time a woman should work at the Workshop. It was unanimously agreed that the jobs should be annually rotated. In this way the women doing

the work would have long enough to get into it and enable other women to participate and learn from doing the work themselves. These decisions did raise the question of the whole concept of full-time work and many points remain unsorted out. It is hoped that individuals working for the Workshop can have time to themselves and that the work can be more shared out.

The four office workers are responsible to the office collective which is a group of women from the small groups which holds monthly open meetings to discuss and make decisions about office business. There has been discussion about whether only women representing the small groups should vote. At the moment, everyone present at the meeting votes.

To ensure that the decisions of the office collective are put into practice and that the full-time workers are not left without help or support there is the coven. The members are women who can offer to give a minimum amount of time to be at the Workshop office.

The length of membership of any particular coven depends on the nature of the job in hand but for any on-going work the membership changes every three months. The need for a coven to be convened on any issue is decided by the office collective and the coven is responsible to them.

That then is the structure of the Workshop office and twice a year a conference of the whole Workshop is held to discuss problems arising from structure and to discuss its progress and development, including that of the Office.

ACTIVITIES:

Newsletter: this is produced weekly by a collective using office equipment and contains news/ideas/articles sent in by groups and individuals.

Shrew is the bi-monthly (sometimes erratic) magazine of the Women's Liberation Workshop which, up to now, has been written and produced autonomously by a different local group on a rota basis. Incidentally the next issue (in June) is about women's centres.

Bookroom: recently opened and selling feminist literature but also a place to go and read when you haven't the money to buy. The sale of books raises most of the Workshop's money.

Coffee room: it is hoped that a coffee room will soon be ready and that this will remove some of the pressure on the office workers to be sociable. The balance between getting the basic shit work of the "central" office done and yet still having time to talk with women is a delicate one.

Many other groups use the house, including a rock group, a creche, the Women's Identity Campaign (use of Ms) and a women's film group.

The workshop is not a uniform organisation. We are trying to learn to live with all women and to value the differences between us believing them to be desirable. The work women do and the diversity of skills and imagination they bring to the work is very important and means that we broaden our political base rather than narrowing it. There are many problems with our structure. It rarely functions in as democratic way as we would hope and we try to remain alert to this and to make constructive changes. We would be more upset if we didn't encounter problems and difficulties—the important point is that we have a place to talk about them and we have an ongoing means of communication.