



WOMEN'S HOUSE

- THE FACTS -



Womens House

1973 — November — A group of women met to discuss the feasibility of designing research into the needs of women in Brisbane and fulfilling the objective of operating a multi-purpose centre for women.

These women were drawn together with a common purpose. This common purpose is succinctly outlined in two of the aims of the group:

- 1) **TO WORK FOR THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN:**
- 2) **TO EXPOSE AND COMBAT THE LIMITATION OF CULTURALLY DEFINED ATTITUDES AND ROLES AT ALL LEVELS, PARTICULARLY WHERE THEY ARE OPPRESSIVE TO WOMEN. THIS AIM INCLUDES A REVALUING OF FEMALE TRAITS AS POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES WHICH WOMEN CAN USE CREATIVELY IN THEIR DEVELOPMENT AS AUTONOMOUS PEOPLE.**

This group took the name **THE WOMENS COMMUNITY AID ASSOCIATION** to incorporate the concept of women as a community within the larger community.

The principle aim of the project was to provide a viable alternative for women. The rationale for this aim was based on both the personal experience of women in the group: as welfare professionals; as consumers of welfare and profession legal and medical services; and as feminists committed to an ongoing analysis of the oppression of women in this society.

1974 — Advertisements offering information and support to women were placed in daily newspapers. The response was overwhelming. Women wrote to us from all over the state asking for information and advice on a wide range of issues.

July 1974 — \$4,000 received from the Social Welfare Commission to employ a Research and Planning Officer for six months to research areas of need and to submit projects for possible funding.

The Association rented premises at 18 Cairns St., Red Hill and commenced operating an Information and Support service for women.

Research was carried out in the areas of housing; the law; health; supporting mothers; battered wives; employment; as well as into the existing services available to women.

1975 — The Department of Social Security approved Womens House as part of the pilot scheme of Community Information Centres and funding for rent and establishment were received.

A Rape Crisis Centre commenced operating in April after months of planning to provide an alternative source for women who either do not/ or have not reported to the police and for women who need support in reporting the offence and enduring the experience of a rape trial. (THE RAPE CRISIS CENTRE HAS NEVER RECEIVED FUNDING).

In May 1975 SHELTA commenced operation offering temporary accommodation for women with children escaping from intolerable domestic situations. The response was so overwhelming that had funding not been received it would have closed.

June 1975 — Federal Government Funding was granted to operate a womens Shelta and a Womens Health Centre.

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CRITICISMS SUCH AS THE FOLLOWING HAVE BEEN MADE:

- A bunch of extremely militant, anti-male extremists.*
- The centre is being used to promote radical, left-wing views.*
- The centre is run on identical lines to one in Sydney where a female doctor and nurse are on abortion charges.*
- The centre is not a counselling or medical health centre but a camp for radicals.*
- Women can get the same service through orthodox medicine.*
- Political propaganda is forced on women who come there.*
- Money has been misspent.*

UNDERLYING THESE IMPRESSIONS OF A RADICAL MINORITY WHO FORCE THEIR OPINIONS ON OTHERS ARE THE FOLLOWING FACTS:

- * Approximately three and one half thousand (3,500) enquiries and visits have been significant enough to have been recorded at Womens House since January 1st.
- * Over half of these enquiries and visits were explicitly health care related.
- * One quarter were requests for community resources and information specific to women.
- * 159 women visited the centre as a result of rape experiences.
- * One fifth have been requests for emergency accommodation.
- * 230 women and children have been accommodated at Shelta since January.
- * The average stay of women in Shelta is 4-6 weeks.
- * Total woman hours worked at Womens House and Shelta in the last 6 months were 26,845.

Monetary value of hours worked = \$107.380
Wages allowed under Govt. grants = \$45.000

- * Cost per one Shelta unit (one woman and three children) per week is \$80. This provides temporary accommodation/food/counselling etc. [one source estimates that it costs \$50-60 per week for one child in a state institution.]

FUNDING RECEIVED: [period 1.7.75 to 30.6.76]

- * Department of Social Security - Community Information Centre grant - includes establishment costs, rent, part-time wage for a co-ordinator for six months: \$7.000
 - * International Womens Year Establishment Grant. \$2.000
 - * Hospitals and Health Services Commission - Shelta Grant. \$70.000
 - * Hospitals and Health Services Commission - Health Grant. \$110.000
- [the above two grants include capital costs and running costs.]



INFORMATION & SUPPORT

- * **The Information and Support concept is basic to Womens House. The Womens Community Aid Association is founded on the principle that women cannot be independent, self-determining persons without access to information and the support to carry through decisions made on the basis of information gained. 2,000 years of oppression has made women dependent people.**

- * **Women in crisis situations attest to this statement: – it is rare to find a woman with a 'specific' problem. For example, a woman with children who has been deserted has to take a number of actions to maintain herself and her children. She has to find accommodation (if she does not have access to the home); to get benefits she has to file for maintenance; if she wishes to take a job she will have to find one and on finding one will have to arrange child care for the children; add to these material considerations the fact that she has to make a huge psychological adjustment to being a single parent; to her sexual needs and her isolation and need for social contacts.**

Very often she is so overwhelmed by the situation that she does not know where to begin. She is therefore vulnerable to well meaning friends or relatives who 'take over' and 'help her'. This kind of help does little to give her confidence in her ability to cope with the demands of being a single parent. Community based groups such as Womens House provide particularly for the woman who has no network of friends or relatives to support her in a crisis as well as the woman who does NOT want to be helped but wants information about what she has to do in a way which acknowledges her as a valid human being, an individual human being, in fact = a person.

- * **An information service is a contact point where a woman can start to find out what actions and decisions she must make; sort out a priority of needs and set about using the existing services in an effective, efficient manner.**
- * **An information service is anonymous in that information can be given by use of the telephone – a good proportion of the phone to us are from women and men requesting information and advice on matters which they could not discuss formally either because of fear, embarrassment or shame or because the problem does not seem important enough to make a formal approach to a doctor, social worker or lawyer etc.**

Over 700 phone calls which were for information only, have been recorded in the past six months. We have experienced difficulty with recording calls with the situation where the demands of a multi-purpose centre often take precedence over manual recording of statistics. The range of information requested has been across the spectrum: legal; medical; social; welfare; employment; housing; sexual; violence; marital; child care; rape; in fact anything you might think of.

The information and support service also provides a resource centre with wide documentation of services and facilities available for women. A woman is thus able to utilise it according to her particular needs - she can go through the information and pick out that which is relevant for her - that is she can choose her own information.

The value of the service is that it is a two way process. Women seek and gain information from us. We seek and gain information from women on both their needs and their evaluation of how our service and existing services serve those needs.

RAPE

- * Rape is the ultimate act of sexual oppression in this society.
- * Rape is an area of prime importance to a feminist organisation.
- * The Rape Crisis Centre has operated in a voluntary capacity since April 1975.

In the six months since January 1st this year — 159 women — have visited Womens House for information and support as a result of having been raped either recently or in the past.

As well as visits to Womens House — 57 women — contacted us by phone at Womens House to talk about their experiences.

Because we use our home phones as emergency numbers about 96 women contacted us at home - [it is difficult to remember to keep statistics of phone calls received at all hours of the night.]

The Rape Crisis Centre has performed an educative function by maintaining media comment on rape and speaking publicly to a diverse range of public groups in Brisbane and country centres.

At a legislative level, the Australian Women Against Rape group (AWAR) has taken up the issue of the position of rape victims in the legal system. This is an issue which is being discussed internationally as many countries come to terms with the need to bring the legal requirements surrounding rape into line with the changing society.

The Rape Crisis centre has never sought to compete with the police. Our philosophy in all areas of Womens House is to allow the individual woman to choose. But we believe that she should make her choice on the basis of information about ALL the alternatives available to her. Choice made on this basis allows the woman some measure of dignity and control. It is CHOICE not involvement by default.



SHELTA

The usual image of a 'homeless' person is the skid-row, vagrant image. This image *does not* include women with children. Women with children rarely take to the streets to sleep in parks. In the main they persist in situations which are intolerable for them and their children simply to have a *house* to stay in. They *can not* move out of this *situation until or unless* they have somewhere to go. Yet they are often called *masochistic* or *irresponsible* for remaining or going back to the situation.

The plight of women residing in intolerable, very often physically violent domestic situations is the prime reason for Shelta's existence. It is set up to provide emergency accommodation for women and children escaping intolerable domestic situations.

The philosophy of Shelta and all radical feminist refuges is to provide an environment where women can be given the information they need to take independent action for themselves and their children and the support, both material and psychological, to carry through decisions made on the basis of such information. This process is crucial if the woman is to survive the stress and demands of becoming houseless and a single parent with sanity and self-respect.

Some relevant statistics for a sample group of 100 women at Shelta:

Source of referral: Government Departments - 38%
Voluntary agencies - 22%
Other (media, friends etc.) - 28%
Unaccounted - 22%

Destination when leaving Shelta: Housing Commission house - 3%
Returned to husband/de facto - 6%
Renting other accommodation - 70%
Interstate (other refuges etc.) - 4%
Other (Hospital, live-in job etc) - 17%

Options available when seeking refuge: Family - 2%
None - 98%

Battering experienced by women: Physical - 24%
Mental - 6%
Both - 40%
Neither - 30%

Rape - (not husband or defacto) - 5%

Forced intercourse (rape by husband or defacto) - 23%

Average length of stay at Shelta 4-6 weeks. This compares with average stay in other hostels of 6 months. The prime reason for this is the fact that liaison has been built up with real estate agents so that they will accept women with children as tenants. This priority resulted from the very disheartening situation shown by our original research into the availability of low rental housing for women with children.



The Womens Community Aid Association operates in many areas other than those receiving funds.

- * We have developed a Womens Library which has a large collection of source material on women. This source material is utilised widely by school students; tertiary students etc., for projects and assignments on issues relating to women such as battering; rape; employment etc.

- * The Womens Media Group meets regularly and runs elementary and advanced workshops on all facets of media - both technical and on air/camera skills. This group provides women with the opportunity to gain confidence with technical equipment and the practical application of media techniques.

We have thus produced a collection of both audio and visual tapes on all aspects of the work undertaken at Womens House.

- * Groups also meet around a diverse range of issues such as:

A High School Feminist Group.

The Womens International League of Peace & Freedom.

Abortion [It must be stressed that despite desires and hints to the contrary - we DO NOT, repeat DO NOT perform abortions at Womens House.]

- * A Speakers Bureau operates to provide speakers when requested by groups in the metropolitan as well as country areas.

- * For the past two years the Department of Social Work at the University of Queensland has used Womens House as a placement for the training of students. This supervised placement has proved valuable both for the students involved as well as for Womens House.



The grenades are under the sink.

FUNDING

After 12 months of funding the multi-purpose centre at Womens House is well established.

- * Its continued existence cannot be argued against solely on political grounds.
- * No woman who has ever used the services provided has been subjected to political propaganda against her will.
- * She may have been confronted with the reality of her situation and with herself and she may not yet have come back because of the challenge of such confrontation.
- * The value of Womens House is based in this element of confrontation which is to ask ourselves as women to make decisions and carry them through without depending on other people.
- * We know from this 12 months experience that some women go away from Womens House and do not return for 3, 4 maybe 8 months but when they come back it is because they have decided to try to be independent and cope.
- * We know from this 12 months experience the gains we, as women, have made in our ability to maintain this complex organisation and more importantly we know where we have utilised energy for no purpose.

A lot of energy goes into the activities of Womens House. This energy is innovative, creative and impatient. This impatience is tempered by the huge demands of the day to day services we provide. For the small capital outlay that Womens House represents - it is sound investment in utilising the energies of energetic, zealous, committed political women who intend to maintain the gains of the past two and one half years and continue to bring about social change for women. A service and a centre for women is our right.

Because of the flexible structure and innovative approach of Womens House and the women involved in it, it is a valuable component in the welfare services *per se*. As well as being used by women themselves it is used by welfare professionals and clinicians as a referral source for women who they label - extreme, 'end of the line' 'hard' cases - women for whom they have no answers.

Where do women come from? How do they hear about Womens House? Remember we do not have our phone number in the book.

46% of women hear from the community base, that is, by word of mouth from other women who have been here or who know someone who has.

43% read about us or see or hear us via media. [Some women have kept media information for as much as 9 months in case they need to phone]

11% are referred by professionals. [These figures apply to general inquiries only and not to Shelta]

propaganda..

We will not accept the argument that this Womens House can be maintained on a voluntary basis for the following reasons:

- * This concept of 'voluntarism' denies the value of the contribution of women to society. Women have been shunted into a charity role for centuries.
- * It also denies the right of women to economic independence in the field of work they choose.

It would cost the Government \$1,000,000 a year to run a place like this.

Senator visiting Womens House.

'When a woman arrives and finds a roomful of women who have all been through exactly what she's been through, she realizes that she isn't the only woman in the world whose husband beats her, and that perhaps she isn't as unlovable, as inadequate, as culpable as she has come to believe.'

London: Battered Wives.

'Doctors are trained to treat us as patients, not people: they give us reassurance rather than the information we need.'

Boston Womens Health Collective.



Any points which are not covered in this brief outline may be clarified by phoning 229-5922. This booklet was prepared by Womens House, 106 Little Roma St.

