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Guidelines: What We Do At Meetings

National Organization for Women. Jacksonville Chapter

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WHAT WE DO AT MEETINGS

What we do at meetings changes some as time goes by. Also, some meetings must necessarily be devoted to business or projects. What follows is a description of the meetings which we hold regularly to get at the truth of our situation and decide how to change it.

We hold our meetings at members' homes. The woman whose house the meeting is at is the "woman of the week." That is, she gets the meeting going, sees that everybody stays on the topic, makes sure all business gets taken care of, and reminds us to make plans for the next meeting.

Only Women Can Come

Only women can come to our meetings. We feel that we women need to get together by ourselves and talk honestly. Most of us feel there are things we want to say about our situation that would be dangerous or embarrassing at this time to say in front of men, or that would require a lot of time to explain to men. Until we have the strength to say everything we need and want to say to men and not get clobbered for it, we must keep some things secret. We want to build good relationships among women, not only to win our struggle against male supremacy but for their own sake. It is impossible to build trust among women when there are men around.

Also, men tend to take over meetings. We think women know more about women than men do, and we can best analyze our situation and decide our course of action OURSELVES. We can, of course, ask men to join in special discussions or actions if WE decide WE want to. But we must have unity among ourselves FIRST.

★ Everything Is Confidential

WHAT WE HEAR AND SAY IN ALL MEETINGS IS CONFIDENTIAL! It if gets back to our men and/or bosses, we could get in trouble. We do not tell men anything that goes on at our meetings unless the group decides on something we want all to tell. That does not mean we can't talk with a man about some of the topics we discuss. We certainly do want to talk to him about doing half the housework! But we don't tell him the source of our comments. WE MUST NOT GIVE OUT ANY INFORMATION THAT CAN HARM OTHER WOMEN OR OUR MOVEMENT. That also means we don't criticize our group to men OR women, but air our criticisms in the group.

1. Keep a continuing journal of resolutions or agreements.

-11-

And even when we are talking to other women who are not in our group, we are careful not to identify who said what in any way, even though we might want to tell what we talked about. We also never talk to the news media about our group or our movement without first getting the o.k. of the group. Whether we say anything, and the gist of what we say, must be a group decision.

We Tell What Makes Us Happy or Sad

One of the groups uses the first half hour of the meeting for everybody to tell what made them happy or unhappy during the week. We found that our meetings usually began informally that way, anyway. So we decided if we went around the room, everybody would get to hear what everybody else had to say. From what makes us happy, we learn how we want things to be. From what makes us unhappy, we learn what we want to change. Sometimes someone tells something that we decide to take action on or that we will want to discuss in detail at another meeting.

X We All Answer the Question

The meeting centers, however, around a question that each woman can answer by giving her own experiences. Sometimes we decide on a question that has been used successfully in other groups, but most often we think up our own. The question often is a group of questions. They ask how we feel about something, not just what happened. One question that has been used a lot is:

Topic Which do/did you prefer, a boy, a girl, or no children? Why? How do/did you feel when someone else said which they wanted? Why?

The question includes everybody and asks how we feel about what we thought. We think our feelings are very important. Even when we plan an action or project, we need to know how everybody feels about what we're doing and how we're doing it. So then, too, we go around the room and everybody tells what they think and feel.

(Good questions often come from women who are in the middle of a problem. The danger in using these immediate experiences for questions is that the meeting can fall into advice giving. We assume that we need to do a whole lot more than give advice, so the group is responsible to see that the question gets phrased in such a way that everybody starts thinking about their own similar experiences and looks for the common root of the problem. We try to give the question for the next meeting at the end of the last one. That way, there is time to think about it and remember experiences that we might not think of in a short time. And it makes the meeting even better if we have an opportunity to discuss it with our friends.

We Speak From Our Own Experience

In answering the question we sit in a circle (of sorts) and go around the room. Each woman answers the question from her personal experiences, instead of what she read in a book somewhere, or what she heard somebody else say about it.

THIS IS HOW WE GET TO THE TRUTH. So many lies have been written and spoken about women that we look to ourselves to find out what is really true about us. We try to discover what we really think and feel in our group instead of what we know we're expected to think and feel. For example, Dr. Spock recently wrote in a leading woman's magazine that, "Biologically and temperamentally, I believe, women were made to be concerned first and foremost with child care, husband care, and home care." Rather than quoting Dr. Spock, or some other "expert," we talk about how WE think and feel, as women, about "child care, husband care, and home care."

WE WOMEN ARE THE EXPERTS ON WOMEN. Telling it like it is may be the most difficult action of our movement. It is an act of great courage and an act of faith in our sisters and in the success of our movement.

We Go Around the Room

We go around the room answering the question because it helps us keep to the point. Instead of discussing a number of things superficially, we are able to go deeply into and understand a specific issue. As each woman takes her turn in answering the question, she automatically brings the discussion back to the topic.

Also, we've found that every woman usually talks if the going around the room method is used. Women who are reluctant to talk in a group feel more responsibility to contribute their own experiences and don't resent the women who talk a lot as much, and talkative women don't resent other women for not contributing their experiences. Although this method puts a check on those women who talk too much if they have the opportunity to do so, we must recognize that each woman needs to "be herself." This method lessens the temptation to attack those who talk a lot by accusing them of dominating the meeting, and of attacking those who talk very little by accusing them of not contributing enough. We always strive to say relevant things. That sometimes does and sometimes doesn't take a lot of words. If we're not sure our experience is relevant, but think it might be, we tell it. Chances are it is.

It should be understood that no one has to talk. If it is her turn and a woman feels she has nothing to say to the topic being discussed, she may pass. Those who pass have the opportunity to speak after everyone else has spoken. They may have remembered something while other women are talking. Anybody who wants to add more which somebody else's experience has helped her recall also has a chance to speak again. This often happens to those who speak first.

It should also be understood that no woman is expected to tell EVERYTHING about her life. There are some things that each of us does not want to disclose to the group at this time. We do expect that each woman tell the truth about what she does talk about, however. We understand that the group cannot function as well without everyone participating. Our experiences can only become a part of the group analysis if we tell them.

There has been much discussion about whether or not to allow interruptions while a woman is speaking. The bad side of interrupting is that it is unpleasant to be trying to say something and have somebody horn in. In some cases the person trying to give her experiences forgets what she is trying to say. On the other hand, sometimes the person who interrupts has a very important point totally relevant to what is being said at the moment and which will be lost as the meeting continues. Each group does things differently, but everyone abides by the group's decision on how to handle this sticky problem.

Write comments on paper + hold till your turn.

We Make Decisions Democratically

Decisions about this and other things in our group are as democratic as we know how to make them. If we vote on something, those who are in the minority have a chance to reconsider their vote and decide whether or not to go along with the majority or whether to stop the group from doing what it has voted to do.

We Have Spirited Meetings Sometimes

Our meetings are often spirited as we women let ourselves go in search of some answers. Many of us are so used to seeing and being quiet and "nice" women that sometimes it can be a bit surprising when we get caught up in a meeting where the natural, noisy, robust, free side of ourselves comes out strongly. This part of us, which as women most of us have never been allowed to show, should not be put down. After awhile we begin to like it in ourselves and in other women as much as we like the gentle, tender side.

It can be frightening when the desperation, anger, and impatience that begins when we stop blaming ourselves and start seeing things as they really are comes through when we talk. When we finally see some hope after all these years, we sometimes are very intense. We feel like everything in our life depends on what we're doing in the group. We live in a world that is trying hard to be "cool," and we're not used to the expression of feelings that sometimes come out, especially in the presence of other women. We also tend to think that our feelings are personal, and group sharing of group feelings is a new experience.

We Try To Understand Our Differences

Arguing a point does not necessarily equal hostility if we realize that each person's comments must be heard with a clear mind and evaluated on its own merits. That is, no one is either right or wrong all the time. No matter how many times a woman has been right or wrong in past discussions, her observations and understanding THIS TIME is what matters.

We don't dismiss women who seem to have a different experience than the majority as being "an exception." We are not trying to agree that we all felt the same way or did the same thing in a given situation. Often two or more different actions or feelings are what we call "contradictions." What we mean is, two or more different experiences which seem to be opposite and unrelated to each other.

Topic

Contradictions are important because they divide women. At the root of each is the discovery that, with things the way they are, we're "damned if we do and damned if we don't." For example, at one meeting we answered a question dealing with how we felt about our mothers. Most of the group said they hated their mothers for not letting them date early, wear make-up, etc. One woman said she hated her mother because she had pushed her into wearing make-up and dating at a very young age. Instead of saying the woman who had had the opposite experience of everyone else in the group was "wrong" or was "an exception" that didn't count, we talked further and figured out that mothers on both sides of this contradiction (early dating vs. late dating) were only trying to do what they thought was best for their daughters. That is, they wanted their daughters to make a good marriage - they just had two different ways of going about it. As it turned out, their daughters hated them either way. The immediate result of this discussion was that many of us began to understand and therefore stop hating our mothers, thus cutting down one division among women.

Contradictions can be resolved in two ways: both sides are equally bad solutions, or one side is better than the other. In the case where one side is ultimately more desirable, we must decide which side is best for 1) the immediate situation, 2) the struggle we must wage, 3) the society we want to build. Concretely figuring this out will tell us where we want to go, how we want to get there, and what to do in the meantime. We must have unity among women to win.

Topic

As an example, let's say the group was talking about playing dumb with men. Some women play dumb a lot as a means of trying to get what they want, even though it doesn't always work. Others don't play dumb and don't suffer the humiliation, but often don't get what they want and even may get punished. So both ways are presently about equal and we're damned either way. However, one side is ultimately

better than the other. We women should not have to play dumb, and we don't want to in the new society we are working for. However, the group may decide that it is o.k. to play dumb for the time being because we don't have enough power yet to stop playing dumb. Or, it may decide that the time has come to take a GROUP stand against playing dumb. In order to change this bad situation, we must figure out why we have to play dumb so we will know what conditions have to be changed before we can stop.

It's Hard To Talk About Ourselves

Some of us find that it is hard to talk about ourselves in the group. When we talk about our problems as women, we are often accused of doing "therapy" in our group. The very word "therapy" is wrong because it assumes that there is something wrong with women and that there is a cure, or something a woman can do for herself to solve her problems. We women don't NEED therapy. We are messed over, not messed up. We need to change what causes our problems, not just adjust to those bad conditions. One of the first things that we discover in the group is that personal problems are really political problems. That is, there is no way out by ourselves. We need collective action for a collective solution.

This is not to deny that these sessions make us feel better about ourselves. When we hear other women have the same problems we say, "Wow! It's not my fault. There's nothing wrong with ME." The other is that we really begin to say what we really think and feel for the first time in our lives and to share those thoughts and feelings with other women. As the cartoon in LILITH puts it, "I'm changing. My mind is growing muscles." We are really looking at the world through our own eyes and on our own terms, instead of the ways that men have forced us to.

But there are other reasons, too, that we find it hard to talk about ourselves. We women know that it is "not nice" for us to talk too much. When we were teenagers, our mothers wisely warned us that we should ask the boys about THEIR interests because they wouldn't like it if we showed any ego. We are supposed to listen and not talk; women, like children, should be seen and not heard. We're told that it is trivial or small talk to talk about our problems as women. Or worse, we are called sick and told that "all you need is a good lay," or "what you need is a

good psychiatrist," depending on our social class.

So we spend our lives talking and thinking about other people. This has a good side, and we don't want to lose our concern for others, but we must also encourage caring about ourselves. In our group meetings talking about ourselves is necessary to figure out how and why we're "kept in our place" as women.

Some of us don't want to talk about ourselves at first because we think we are boring or don't want to repeat an experience that some one else has talked about. But we have learned that everybody's experience is important. Even repeating a similar experience is important because we must see that we all are in the same boat. It helps us to stop blaming ourselves for our so-called "failures." Also, there may be something in what one woman says, though it may seem the same to her, that will make clear or give an insight into something.

Some of us didn't want to talk about ourselves at meetings at first because we didn't want other women to know that we "couldn't handle" our personal situations. We had always wanted to be strong and independent women and didn't want other women to know that we couldn't make it alone. Now we understand that no woman can handle her situation, really, because she has no real power to make things turn out the way she wants them to. Being strong now means being able to see and speak the awful truth.

IS A WOMEN'S LIBERATION GROUP A THERAPY GROUP?

Sometimes people think that a Women's Liberation Group is a therapy group (or encounter group, as some call it), and I want to do a little explaining about this. Some of the things we do in the Group may make it look to the newcomer, for a short while, as if maybe we are a therapy group. And yet we aren't.

We in the Women's Liberation Movement are united in agreement that the almost universally present conditions of woman's life are causing unhappiness and suffering in the lives of individual women. We believe these conditions can be changed and must be changed. We believe that individual women everywhere are capable of living constructive and happy lives if their life conditions are changed. In order to understand more deeply what the conditions are which cause unhappiness to women, in order to see clearly just how this unhappiness affects the lives of individual women, and in order to develop constructive ideas about what a better life would be like, we need to listen to the experiences of individual women. The kinds of experiences we need to listen to and understand are those which have to do with each woman's feelings and thoughts about being a woman and about her life and problems and satisfactions as a woman.

Here in the group a woman can relax and tell her true feelings about her life as a woman. What she says will be kept private, and no one will repeat what she says to others. She will receive respectful attention when she talks about her life and problems as a woman, and she will not be criticized for what she feels.

Up to this point it may seem like a therapy group. But here is where the main difference between a Women's Liberation Group and a therapy group begins: our primary goal is not to help individual women find individual solutions for the problems each has in her daily life as a woman. We have the fundamental conviction that only a change in the life conditions of all women can help bring about a solution for the troubles of individual women.

At many meetings we have a "question of the night" which each woman present has a chance to say something about. For example, we might discuss the question "How do you feel about doing housework?" We would take turns, going around the room, each telling how she feels about doing housework. It could happen that some of the women present were having problems in their marriage or elsewhere that have to do with who should do the housework. If so, these

Topic

particular women might talk about their personal problem as it relates to housework, if they wanted to. We would listen with concentration, and there might be some back-and forth discussion with the troubled people in order to understand what they are saying as much as possible. Other women might chime in and tell about similar problems they had had. But--and this is the important point--we would not try to provide a woman with a personal solution for her problem. We would think deeply about her situation, and we would try to see if, in her situation, there are things that are in common with the situations of other women. We try again and again to see in the individual life story of the individual woman what there is in common with the life stories of other women. We believe that many of the factors which produce unhappiness in one woman's life can also be shown to be producing a similar unhappiness in the lives of other women.

It is not really fair, considering the purposes of the group, for a woman to come just once or twice and take up a lot of time telling about her personal troubles and then quit the group in disappointment because none of her personal troubles turned out to be cleared up yet! We do want to clear up as many as we can of the troubles of all women, but we must all work and study and think hard in these Women's Liberation Groups for some time before we can succeed. Therefore we ask that a woman who is considering taking part in the group should ask herself before she starts whether she feels she can dedicate herself to helping us in our deep aims of trying to understand the conditions of life for all women and trying to find ways to make the lives of women everywhere more happy, constructive and fulfilling.

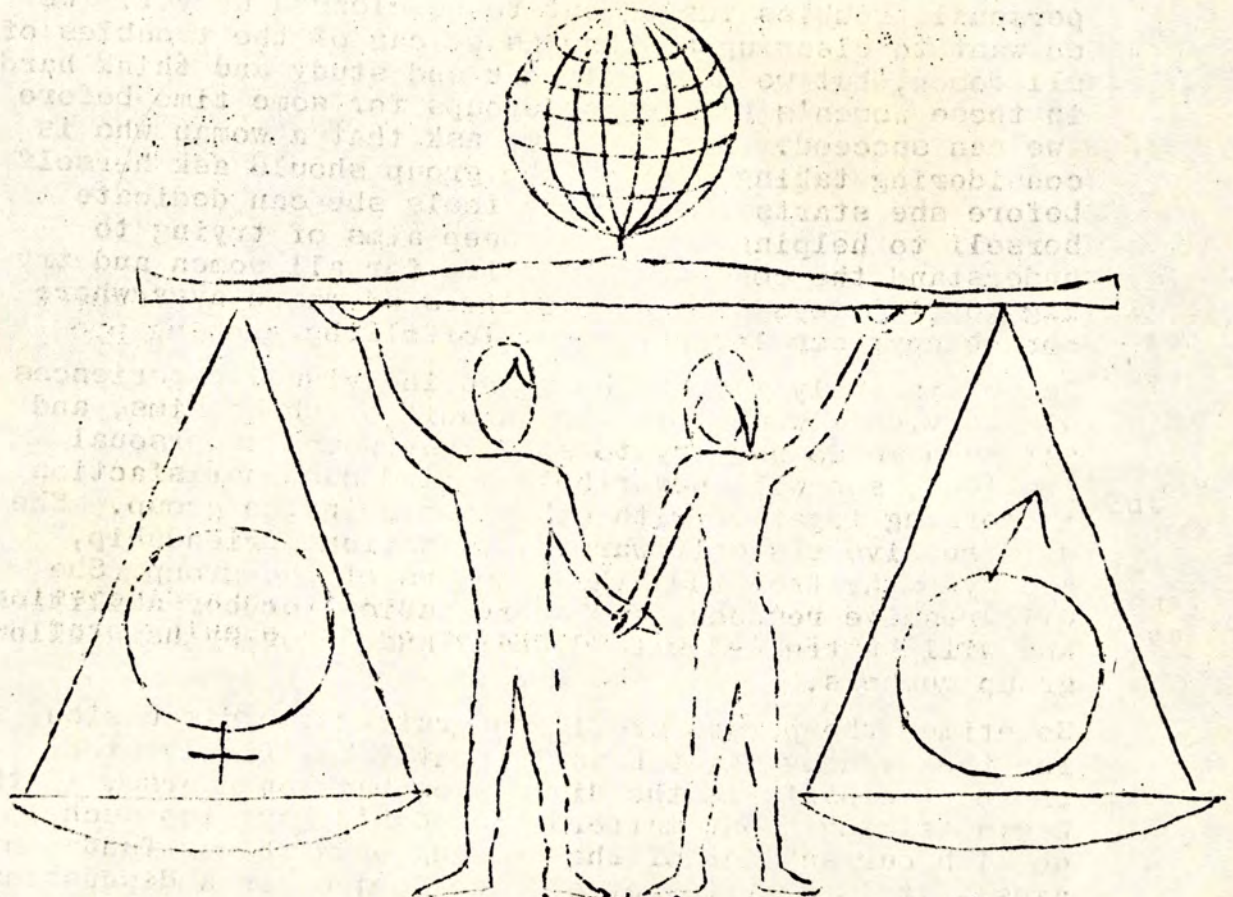
We do sincerely want to hear the individual experiences of individual women, in the pursuit of these aims, and although we do not try to solve any woman's personal problems, she will nevertheless find much satisfaction in working together with other women in the group. She will receive sisterly warmth, affection, friendship, and sympathy from the other members of the group. She will receive respect, and appreciation for her abilities, and will be treated with dignity and honor by her fellow group members.

Sometimes the person who is moderating the discussion for the evening might have to gently but firmly steer the participants in the discussion back on course, if they begin talking about matters that don't have too much to do with our subject of the evening or with our fundamental aims. It is easy to get off the subject in a discussion, and we agree to let our moderator of the evening prod us,

individually or as a group, back onto the main topic again if one or all of us wanders off. When the moderator does this she is not being unfriendly or showing disapproval, she is simply doing her job, and we take it in good spirit.

Although we are not a therapy group and do not try to solve personal problems of individual women, we want to study ways to make the conditions of all women better so that individual women should have fewer problems. In the long run, then, each of us can hope that the group will help to make a better life for her personally.

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① ~~Draw~~ Draw generalization from what was said. Conclusions Summaries