

York prof Briskin documents Canadian women's movement

Linda Briskin speaks to *Excal* about her new book

By CATHI GRAHAM

Linda Briskin teaches Women's Studies in the Social Science Division at York University. She has co-edited *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement*, co-written *The Day the Fairies Went on Strike (for children)*, co-produced a video-documentary on the women's movement in Ontario, *Rising Up Strong*, and has most recently co-written *Feminist Organizing for Change*. The new publication focuses on the organizational process of making change within the Canadian women's movement.

Excalibur's Cathi Graham recently talked to Briskin about her new book.

EXCAL: Why did you write a book about the women's movement in Canada?

BRISKIN: Although there has been extensive writing in the last decade on women's issues, like rape and equal pay, there is almost no popular or scholarly writing on the women's movement, as a movement. As a movement, it is quite invisible. The public doesn't know very much about it. For that reason, it's been really important for women to document their experiences to make visible that which is invisible. This is the first book on the Canadian women's movement and we hope it begins to document the history of one of the most successful social movements in Canada.

EXCAL: The title of your book, of which you are one of three authors, is *Feminist Organizing for Change*. What does 'organizing for change' mean, in terms of the book?

BRISKIN: Feminism, by definition, is about making change in our society. There really is this tremendous resistance in our society towards change, and fear of it. A very powerful ideology that resists change, individualism, focuses on changing attitudes rather than changing structures. For women to be able to make change, we have to challenge those ideas about change. We have to say, "We have a right to make change." Changing attitudes aren't enough. We have to change the sexual division of labour, we have to change the distribution of wealth. We really can change the world collectively.

The kind of very pervasive notion in our society is that you're responsible for your own life. If you don't change it, it's your fault; you didn't try hard enough. That is very problematic for women in particular because, in fact, there are many structural limitations on women's ability to change their own lives. One poor woman, with four children and no child support payments, isn't going to be able to pull herself up by the bootstraps — it doesn't work that way. The ideology works against that poor woman because she knows what's expected of her. If she isn't able to do it, she just feels guilty. The truth is that there's no way she could do that; it's just structurally not possible. We need to find ways to work together and to make change. For women, collective organizing — be it in institutional settings or community settings — is really necessary. And it's very empowering for women who work together to make change.

EXCAL: You stress the importance of both institutional settings and com-

munity settings. Would you distinguish them for us?

BRISKIN: The grass-roots movements create a sort of foundation for that institutional element. Over the past 20 years, grass-roots groups have created the basis for institutions to take up issues of women. It might be pressure by women for grass-roots groups in the community or women students in universities that lead to women's studies programmes. The institution responds to that pressure and then starts to build into its own structure an ongoing response to women. Around the elections, for example, it isn't necessarily grass-roots groups that are organizing, but they have raised many of the critical women's issues. Often a group that is more institutionally focused will take them into an electoral forum.

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However, in these elections, given the seriousness of the issues (free trade, childcare, reproductive rights, and violence against women), grass-roots feminists are a lot more self-conscious about the need to make issues public during the election.

Our society looks at change and politics as very much rooted in the electoral process, and is somewhat threatened by popular movements. Popular movements are made quite invisible or marginalized. They have to fight for legitimacy. There are political reasons why the women's movement is made invisible and marginalized. It is a political threat to have millions of women organizing in this way, outside of mainstream structures.

EXCAL: In your book it is mentioned that change is best accepted by the public when it comes from government. How does the Canadian women's movement use that knowledge to bring about more change?

BRISKIN: There are many different routes, but we won't get to the government without a mass movement. Even when the government makes change — in response to organizing by women — we need to assess the gains cautiously. Consider the Federal affirmative action bill (actually called Employment Equity), which came down about a year-and-a-half ago. Right, okay — so we got federal legislation on equity but it's a wretched terrible bill which does very, very little for women, very, very little in terms of making change. So it's not just legislation we need; it's often particular kinds of legislation, the kinds that government will be resistant to. The most effective strategy for women is to build a mass organization of women with a very loud, very collective voice.

We need to have a collective power that stands outside and monitors the government as well as looking for ways to get right in. Electing

women, for example, can be a useful strategy. We do need a stronger voice in Parliament; we do need more women; we need women who will speak for women. But Margaret Thatcher is a woman and I'm not saying she does good for women. We have to be careful about a biological analysis that assumes that just because you're a woman, you will be more progressive on women's issues. We need to recognize that politicians — even progressives — get inserted into a very complicated system of government, and are easily co-opted and compromised. Look at Chaviva Hosek, the Provincial Housing Minister, once head of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. Why is she not being more effective on housing issues? One of the issues is always, "Where is her constituency? Who has the power to pressure the government? Housing groups? Community groups? Developers? Women's groups?"

EXCAL: Certainly the mass media plays a large role in making change. How is the movement represented or misrepresented by the media?

BRISKIN: Feminism is often misrepresented. Feminism is one of the dirty words in our society, like communism and homosexuality. People have a lot of misinformation about feminism. I think it's really important to talk publicly about feminism. On the other hand, it's certainly the case that what I say about feminism often get misrepresented. That's a struggle. Often times, women's groups have resisted engaging with the media because they're concerned about that misrepresentation. It's not just the individual misrepresenting; it often reflects a political misunderstanding of feminism. We're faced with a dilemma: we need to be heard, we need to talk more about the movement, we need to struggle to inform people about feminism. Feminism is not about hating men, it is not about bra burning, feminists are not crazy loons. It is a very large grass-roots and social movement in which millions of Canadian women are involved, so we do need better access to the media.

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EXCAL: In *Feminist Organizing for Change* there is a strong Canadian message and a focus on Canadian experience. It seems that women's issues pertain across the world. Why such fierce nationality?

BRISKIN: I think Canadians and Canadian feminists tend not to legitimize their own experience enough. Sometimes we operate almost as a colonized people — either in reference to Britain, or to the United States. When Canadian feminists want to read about the women's movement. There's been a tendency to assume that our experience is the same as the American or British experience. Perhaps more irritating

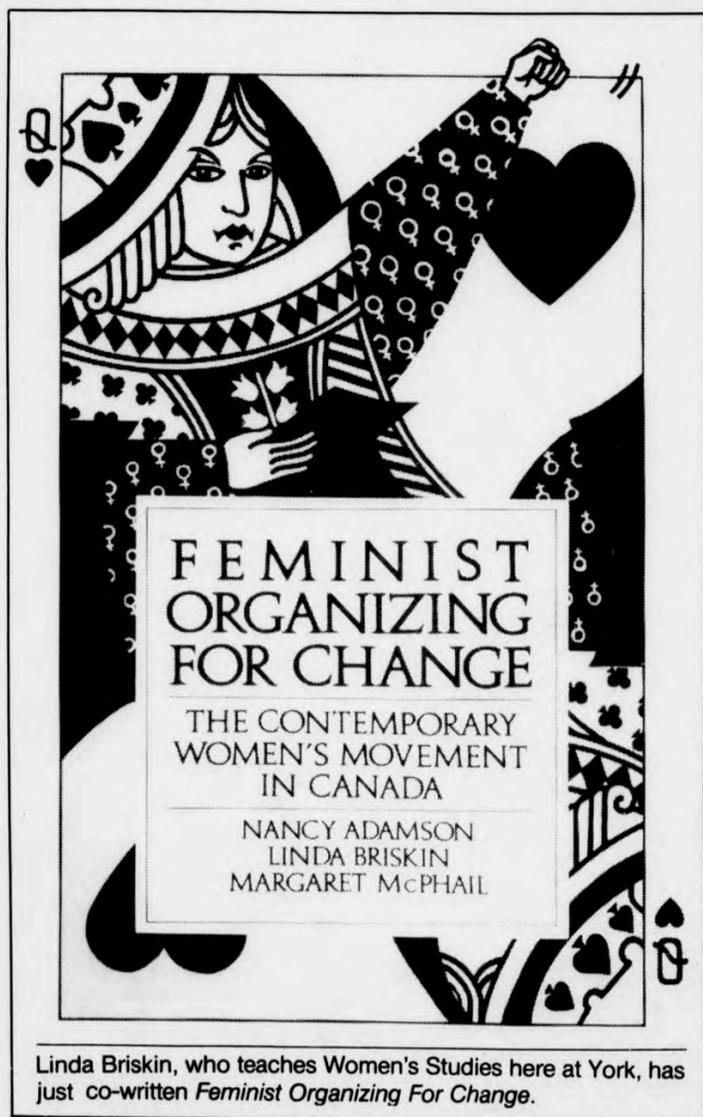
is the tendency for American and British feminists to assume that there is nothing unique about Canadian feminism or Canadian organization, that we don't have a history that is separately important. It's important for us to begin to focus on and distinguish Canadian experience from other experience. Although there is so little written about the Canadian movement, we really try to focus on Canadian sources and stories in this book.

EXCAL: What about the history of York University? Seeing as you did some of your research here while working as a faculty member, you must have a good idea of how York rates in terms of making change for the women's movement in Canada. How are we doing?

BRISKIN: I think York has an extremely good and expanding women's studies programme and it's one of the most elaborate programmes in Canada. We're in the process of establishing a graduate programme which will offer the first Canadian PhD in women's studies. York also established the first university Sexual Harassment Centre in the country, so it's been a leader on that question. There are also very good resources at York University. This doesn't mean there are no problems for women at York. For example, sexual harassment continues to be an issue for students. There definitely need to be more education in that area. As well, research shows that female students are still making career choices that are very stereotypical. Women tend to do their degrees in the arts, in liberal arts, in sociology, and psychology and they don't lead to very good paying jobs. This notion that, "Well, I'll work for a few years, have my children, and maybe return to work," is an option that no longer exists for most women. Women need to start making career choices in a new way and I think that the university needs to develop ways to encourage women to consider career alternatives — certainly ones that pay better — and to help women recognize that their commitment to the work force is very long-term. The average woman, in fact, spends between 25 and 45 years in the work force today.

EXCAL: What effects do you expect your book to generate? Will it be a stepping stone for more books of this kind?

BRISKIN: It's an interesting question. All kinds of feminists say to us, "You didn't tell the whole story," or "You didn't tell the right story," or "There's another piece you left out." What I say to them is, to tell the whole story is going to take 20 books. We hope that this book will provide the basis for other feminists to start writing more about the women's movement in Canada. There are many stories to be told, many histories to be documented. In fact, there are many points of view in the women's movement. It is incumbent upon many more feminists to be writing, clarifying, describing, analysing, persuading, about these different points of view. So I am really hoping that those who don't agree with us will be mad enough to say, "Well, we'd better write something to disagree," and those who agree with us will really want to expand and build on the perspective that we've developed, the stories that we've told.



Linda Briskin, who teaches Women's Studies here at York, has just co-written *Feminist Organizing For Change*.