

analysis

# York's Women's Centre undervalued

by Jessica Rudolph

**A**ll across Canadian campuses, women's centres are under siege.

At Carleton University, the Women's Centre has had its budget cut by 40 per cent during the past five years and the Centre has been vandalized three times since classes began in September. Its coordinator, who makes less than \$10,000 a year in a 50-hour-a-week job, has had pornography sent to her home.

At Ryerson the Women's Centre has had its space taken away and has been allocated a new extremely small office in the Students' Union.

At the University of Toronto, during last year's referendum on funding for the school's Women's Centre, the campus was plastered with posters proclaiming "feminists and dykes — fund yourselves." Comments Michelle Robidoux, of the Ontario Federation of Students, "The attacks on funding for women's centres are part of a pattern. Look at UofT last year, for example, and at the whole question of services receiving funding or space. It's been a

big issue.

"The African and Caribbean Students Association has had its space confiscated at UofT, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance has met the same fate, the Women's Centre at Ryerson has lost its space . . . this is indicative of a rightward shift of student councils. Instead of fighting for space and funding for all student associations providing services, they attack easy targets."

Hostility towards women's centres is fueled in part by misunderstanding. Many people do not know what a women's centre is or what it does.

York's Women's Centre opened in 1975 and was the first of its kind in Canada. Its library provides books, magazines, and other resources concerning issues related to women. The centre organizes lectures and film series on a regular basis and also acts as a referral service for women who have experienced sexual violence or gender, race, or class related harassment. As well, the centre provides a support network within a comfortable environment. In the past, the Women's Centre has organized events such as speak-

ers from the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics, discussions on battered women, and seminars on women's writing at York. Furthermore, the Centre is actively involved with various groups on campus representing women's rights.

These include the York Pro-Choice Network, with whom the Centre is organizing Pro-Choice day at York on October 11 and a national day of action in support of abortion rights on October 14 at Queen's Park.

A common misconception is the idea that the Women's Centre discriminates against men. On the contrary, men have access to the Centre and make use of it. The library, the office area, the literature — all of the resources are available to men, and they are welcome to sit in on meetings. The only restriction applies in the sitting area. The Centre asks that men not congregate there without permission. This request stems from the Centre's concern for women who seek counselling in crisis, having experienced sexual harassment or physical abuse. It is felt that in these situations it is crucial for women to have a place

and an atmosphere where they feel safe.

To provide such services, however, requires a fair amount of funding and the Women's Centre suffers a chronic shortage. It would like to expand its resource base by adding to its library, but money isn't available for books. A forum in the residences on sexual harassment and date rape is being planned for the coming year but the intensity and scope of the project is contingent upon available funds. Furthermore, the Centre's telephone provides a necessary link with women at York, but at \$50 a month, it seriously cuts into the Centre's budget.

The Women's Centre's budget difficulties stem from its funding arrangements. According to women at the Centre, it only receives minimal funding from the CYSF (Council of the York Student Federation), supplemented by voluntary donations from colleges, off-campus women's organizations, and on-campus sources such as the Graduate Students Association and the Dean's Office.

The reason CYSF funding is limited is that the Centre falls

under the Equality Commission. Brian Archdekin, in charge of this portfolio, only receives \$1,500 with which to fund all groups under his mandate. He explains that his job is primarily that of an advisor, and because of the limited funds at his disposal he can only provide funding to a very small extent.

However, because the Women's Centre has been pigeon-holed under this portfolio it is excluded from applying for additional funding as a club. As a result clubs, which are funded on a per project basis, have access to a very large pool of money to which the Women's Centre is denied. Archdekin maintains the Women's Centre's funding is not inadequate because it receives an operating grant in excess of \$3,000. Sources at the Women's Centre, however, claim that they have never received such a grant, nor have they ever heard of such a thing. As such, the Women's Centre is upset that CYSF funds, derived from student tuition fees, are not being distributed fairly.

The misunderstanding between the Women's Centre and the CYSF is not new. In the summer of 1987 the CYSF commissioned an investigation of the Women's Centre that continues to be a source of contention. According to Robert Castle, who conducted the report, the Women's Centre was uncooperative.

According to the Women's Centre, it was not informed of the investigation, and members point to the fact that it was conducted during the summer when the Centre is officially closed. The report made a number of assertions the Women's Centre found offensive. The report states, "Certainly those women I interviewed were the first people to suggest that the Centre could be closed entirely."

The Women's Centre pointed out that no formal survey had been conducted, and the attitude of women "interviewed" could hardly represent York students when the majority of them were on summer break. Furthermore, passages such as "the Centre must learn once and for all that it is not a vacuum which merely sucks money from CYSF" provoked lengthy treatment in the Centre's rebuttal: "Apart from an extremely poor use of metaphor, the language betrays a personal sense of resentment and crudeness on the part of the researcher. This kind of language is unacceptable and unnecessary in a report which presumes to be unbiased. Moreover, nobody 'sucks' money from CYSF; all student organizations go through a formal application for funds and receive them if the student government sees fit."

Further antagonism has resulted from reactions to the Women's Centre's collective form of decision making. Decisions are made on the basis of consensus among members of the Centre's executive. The CYSF, which has chiefly experienced traditional, hierarchical power structures in other campus groups, is used to having a permanent voting member on the boards of organizations it funds. No decision has yet been reached that satisfies the Women's Centre's concern for its autonomy and CYSF's desire for representation. This does not mean to imply that relations between the two are only characterized by hostility. The two groups are working together to bridge their differences, and further meetings between the CYSF and the Women's Centre are planned for the near future.

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