THE WOMENS PLACE

BACKGROUND:

For a history of the development of the Womens Place see the following reports, available in the Womens Place.

(1) " Womens place in the Co-op "

(2) "Report on the Womens Place "

(3) "Agreed definitions and directives for the operation of the Womens Place ".

At the time of setting up the Quay Co-op a primary aim was the creation of Women only space which could become a vital resource for women attempting to organise in Cork city. Two rooms were set aside and made habitable by Co-op workers.

Since then the achievements of the Womens Place can be categorised under three headings:

1. GROUPS USING THE SPACE

The Womens Place has provided meeting rooms and facilities for the following groups on an on-going basis.

Cork Womens Health Group

Cork Rape Crisis Service

Greenham Common Support Group

Lesbian Group

Lesbian Line Collective

U.C.C. Womens Group

Library Development Collective

2. ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN--EVENTS ORGANISED/PARTICIPATED IN

Seminar and demonstration on Pornography

Talk by Mary Daly as part of the 1st International Feminist Book Fair.

Reclaim the Night march

Public meeting on Contraception

Anti-Reagan demonstration

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Womens Health Talks

Post Referendum solidarity march

International Womens day demonstration

Lesbian and Gay Pride march

Munster Womens weekend conference

Joanne Hayes support demonstration

Production of Womens newsletter

Showing of films from Sheffield Film Co-op

Womens Fun Weekend

Setting up of Womens Library and Information Centre

3. SOCIAL DIMENSION

The Womens Place functions as a drop -in centre for women

(a) seeking information on feminist activities

(b) needing advice on welfare rights, the law, housing, health etc.

(c) looking for support in their personal lives

(d) wanting to relax, chat, in a comfortable atmosphere where children are welcome, not regarded as a nuisance

(e) seeking a means of expression for their feminist ideals and an opportunity to organise around these with others.

All of this represents a remarkable acheivement when we consider that only 8 hrs. work per week in the Womens Place is paid for. The rest of the necessary work has been undertaken by the co-ordinators and other committed women on a voluntary basis.

Having outlined the achievements of the Womens Place, some mention must be made of inherent problems and difficulties. Much of these centre on the functioning of the Womens Place Group.

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FUNCTION AND ROLE OF THE WOMENS PLACE GROUP

To date this group has been composed of women working to varying degrees in the Womens Place, who are not necessarily involved in the Quay Co-op. It has had a dual role:

(1) It is responsible for the administration of the 2 rooms and functions as the group to which the co-ordinator is responsible in terms of finance and the relationship between the Womens Place and the Quay Co-op.

(2) It functions as a Womens group, discussing and planning actions on issues from a feminist perspective.

It is fair to say that a specific analysis of the function and role of the Womens Place has never been completed. Given this the dual nature of the Womens Place group has led to conflicts. Those women who wish to devote their energies solely to womens issues (either through discussion or action) are continually frustrated by the amount of time and energy taken up with administration related to the Womens Place as a Co-op project. On the other hand the women who are members of the Co-op and attend the various Co-op meetings feel frustrated with the lack of support and interest within the Womens Place group for their work in this area.

PROGRAMME OF WORK

A specific programme of work / plan of action has never been designed to reflect the positive and clear policy statement of the Womens Place. This has at once led to flexability, confusion, and frustration Flexability, in that involvement can be sporadic and temporary. Confusion and frustration in that work can fall on one or two of the more interested women. Sometimes there may be no follow-through on a particular issue / action. There is also difficulty in planning anything long term or demanding of much time and energy.

2017.21.2.864C

There is a further problematic area in the relationship between the Quay Co-op and the Womens Place.

RELATIONSHIP WITH CO-OP AND INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN WORKERS

Viewed by the Co-op as a self-directing, self-determiningproject, it is seen by some of the women involved as a separate unit,related to the Co-op by situation only. This situation is further aggravated (or perhaps leads to) the fact that there is very little involvement of the Co-op women workers in the Womens Place.

DEFINITION OF WORK/SOCIAL SPACE

While the "drop-in" nature of the Womens Place is fundamental and vital it must be noted that it sometimes militates against the "working" output. Obviously people do not congregate for social purposes in the kitchen area of the cafe,in the Bookshop or in the administration office. While there is no clear definition between a working area/social area in the Womens Place work can be held up and it is difficult for workers to concentrate. Conversely,some women avoid visiting in case they interrupt a work session.

The following is a series of thoughts and ideas which may help to set a framework in which a vibrant and working Womens Place can assert itself.

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PROPOSAL

THE WOMENS PLACE GROUP

This group either as an action based group working on Womens issues, or a feminist discussion group (or both) does not need to be accomodated within the organisational structure of a workers co-operative. It can quite adequately function as an independant,autonomous group renting space within the Quay Co-op. Thus the relationship of the Womens Place Group to the Quay Co-op can be solely on this basis. This,ineffect would be similiar to the way in which the Lesbian group and Gay Collectiv function within the Co-op.

This would free the Womens Place Group to devote its energies to organise around womens issues. They would avail of the facilities in the Womens Place as before. The administration of the Womens Place would then be undertaken by those women who are interested in the operation of the Womens Place in the context of a workers co-op.

ADMINISTRATION GROUP

1. Would have a weekly business/ decision making meeting as other Co-op projects do,at a time which suits the women workers (probably during the day).
2.. The group would include the Co-ordinator and other committed Co-op women workers. Membership of the Co-op as a pre-requisite for membership of the administration group bears further discussion but all members should work an agreed number of hours in the Womens Place, as pertains in other projects.
3. Responsibilities of the group would include:
   (a) dealing with space applications for the Womens Place.
   (b) organising the finances of the Womens Place,deciding on expenditure,overheads contributions,fundraising etc.
   (c) working to ensure the representation and development of the Womens Place project within the overall Co-op.

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Contd.

A more detailed analysis of the responsibilities / role of this group can be worked out by the women involved if and when it is established.

THE CO-ORDINATOR

It seems essential that a full-time paid position of Womens Place co-ordinator should be established. The Co-ordinator should relate to and be supported in terms of work by the administration group. Funding for this post seems feasible through one of the schemes the Co-op are presently investigating.

A detailed job description outlining responsibilities, conditions of employment and contract of employment should be drawn up and may include some of the following:

Criteria

A Woman (obviously!)

Co-op membership

Trade Union membership

Specific skills ?

Conditions of employment

Hours per week

Duration of job

Entitlement to holiday/sick pay

Job Description

Attending weekly meetings of administration group

Attending any meetings of the Co-op which requiries representation from each project.

Collecting money for room hire.

Fundraising towards running costs of Womens Place.

Stimulating activity in Womens Place

etc etc

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DIVISION OF WORK / SOCIAL AREAS

An atmosphere conducive to work is essential in the Womens Place At the same time the "social dimension" of the Womens Place cannot be sacrificed. We can achieve both by defining one of the rooms as a working area and the other as a social area.

As the Library is already situated in the large front room it sems to make most sense to use that room as a work base. The desk shelving etc. can be moved in there. If storage space is set up properly this would not exclude the room from being used for Tai-chi or drama. Problems regarding heating in winter should be anticipated so we should consider the purchase of a bottle gas heater. Women seeking information or wanting to borrow books etc. can be dealt with in that room where hopefully the Co-ordinator or Library worker will be available most of the time.

The back room can then be set aside as a recreational area for workers and visitors. Coffee and tea may perhaps be made available.

Paula Keenan 1st March 1985

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