

HOW TO START A GROUP

by JUDITH BROWN,
Gainesville Women's Liberation

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WAYS OTHER WOMEN HAVE STARTED GROUPS:

1. Getting Your Friends Together.

One woman in a large city was given a women's liberation pamphlet. She decided that she would like to be in a group to talk over what she had read and do something about it. She lived in a crowded area and has several children; it was hard for her to get out for meetings. She had a few friends in the neighborhood, so she passed the same pamphlet around to them. After they had had a chance to read it, she invited them to her house for a meeting. She dared to tell her friends about her own experiences which were similar to those discussed in the pamphlet. The other women then felt more like talking about their own experiences.

In deciding which of our friends to invite to a meeting, we've learned several things. First, we are tempted to think to ourselves, "I'll invite so and so; her husband is a real rat and she Needs Liberating." That friend should be invited, but it is wrong to think that you yourself are more liberated than anyone else. Perhaps that friend dared to tell you more than others, and this is how you know about her husband. Or, perhaps you are not as aware as possible of the bad aspects of your own situation, and this is why you can think that you will "help" one other woman. One of the things we learn in groups is how much we can be helped by talking to other women: helped to understand, helped to dare.

Or, you might think, "I won't invite so and so; she's already got it made. She'll just think that I have problems." This attitude is also wrong. The woman who seems to have it made is fooling you, although she knows better. It will be good to have her in your group because she can tell you just what is wrong with a situation which seems good on the surface. She can help people to avoid the mistake of thinking that there is a good personal solution right at hand.

2. Calling A Caucus In A Male-Female Group You Belong To.

Most women belong to some groups which have both men and

¹ Prepared in collaboration with Kathie Sarachild, Carol Hanisch, and Carol Giardina during meetings in Gainesville, Florida to draft a Handbook of Consciousness-Raising in February/March of 1969.

women in them, such as church groups, at work, political groups, etc. In all of these groups women generally serve the men who take most of the credit. For meetings or parties of these groups, the women usually prepare the food and do the phoning. At the meeting itself, the men enjoy the food and run the meeting. If its a picnic or party your group is having, the women serve while the men talk or have recreation. If its a political party, women usually act as secretaries, keeping lists of members, typing up minutes, preparing booklets, etc. The men in political groups do most of the public speaking and give most of the orders.

Women in these groups always resent being the "second-class" members. But they rarely talk to each other about this. You should spot a problem which is particularly severe, and call a female caucus of your group about it. A caucus is a closed meeting of one part of a larger group. Democrat Senators sometimes meet in a caucus and exclude the Republican. In many groups now, black people separate from whites in order to plan programs and discuss ideas which specifically affect them. Many women are beginning to call caucuses in all kinds of groups. Because they are meeting on issues which deal with women, they exclude men. If they want to bring their issue back to the whole group, they do it as women. They do not bring something up about women before talking it over and making sure that there will be mutual support.

The all female caucus is occurring in many politically oriented groups. For example, women in "new left" and black power groups are finding out that their experiences in these groups are no different from the experiences of women in other kinds of groups. They still have to make the coffee, distribute ashtrays, clean up, type, do mailings, make phone calls; in other words, they do the dirty work while the men make the speeches and take the credit. These women are learning that where men are concerned, they're no better off than any other women.

When the caucus meets, the discussion can proceed along the lines we're going to explain in the section, "What to Do at Meetings." But you might want to choose a question which deals specifically with discrimination in that mixed group.

Since your problems with men are not limited to that particular group, you will probably want to keep meeting to discuss other things as well, because your particular group will never be completely satisfactory until you can deal with what those men do outside of it too.

3. Calling a Caucus in a Women's Group you Belong To, Or Getting That Group To Deal With Women's Liberation.

One woman in a Southern town belonged to a faculty wives group. She was unhappy because the only time she saw her friends

was with their husbands; she never got a chance to talk to her friends alone. Faculty people move a lot, and it's hard to make friends when they don't live in your neighborhood and you can't talk to them about woman things.

This woman had also read a pamphlet about the oppression of women. She got up in the faculty wives club and told about the pamphlet. She complained that women hardly ever talk to each other, and when they do, they often avoid certain topics. She gave examples of some of the unmentionable topics, several of which are listed as questions in the Appendix. Some of the women there agreed with her, and they decided to attend a meeting at her home about these questions.

4. Finding Feminists From Your Friends.

Another group started when several women who were friends first asked their friends to come. Their friends would say, "Well, I'm not too interested, but try so and so, she's a real feminist." They got a list of the feminist friends of their friends and called a meeting that way. They had a very successful start.

Some men are particularly good at spotting militant feminists, and also some men are more interested in women's political condition than other men and sometimes talk to women about this. Some people asked so-called "feminist" men who the "bitches" and feminists were that they knew. Through these men they got up a good list of women and started a fine group.

5. Placing Ads In Newspapers.

One woman moved away from her group to another town. She wanted to get into another group quickly, and didn't want to wait until she knew a lot of people. So, she placed a very good ad in a local newspaper and asked people to write her. She sent them literature and a few weeks later invited them to a meeting. Many women responded, and a group got started.

6. Special Work Meetings Of Women.

Sometimes political, church, or social groups will actually arrange for women to be alone together for the purpose of some work they are doing. This is true of secretarial pools, women's assembly lines in factories, auxiliary bake sales for church and political groups, and kitchens at parties. Those are good places to begin talking about women's liberation.

7. Distributing Literature.

Once your group gets started, it may stimulate other groups to form, or so many women may want to come to your group that

you'll have to form new ones. This happened with the group of women who protested at the Miss America Contest. They had listed their meeting time and place on the leaflet they were handing out. At their next regular meeting, about 75 women showed up.

PREPARING FOR THE FIRST MEETING:

1. Talking to Individuals.

Some women who have started groups have spent as many as two or three months in advance, just talking to their friends, or to people at work, or to people in groups they already belong to. We have found that there are several rules to follow which help this considerably:

Never talk to a woman in the presence of her man or her boss at work, or supervisor. None of us like to be put on the spot. Also, the men usually become very nervous and try to end the conversation by flirting or by taking it over themselves; some even use the tactic of being a more radical feminist than either woman. Talking in front of the boss is also a mistake, whether the boss is a man or a woman. If the boss is a man, he gets nervous for the same reasons the husband does, and in addition, he thinks that you might be planning to organize against him. If the boss is a woman and doesn't already understand about women's liberation, she might make it hard for you and the person you're talking to because she knows that the men on the job won't like it. We have found that even in demonstrations, when we are handing out leaflets, the husband will try to take the leaflet "for" his wife and then engage in an argument. If you can't talk to a woman by herself, it is probably better to wait.

2. Handing out Literature.

After you have talked to someone and she is interested, you should give her some of the literature which has been written recently about women's liberation. You will know which articles she'd probably like best. You can also suggest some books and draw her attention to movies or television programs which show clearly how women are oppressed by men. It is never absolutely necessary to hand out literature in advance, however. You may know that none of it is right for the woman you know. In that case one of the things your group will want to do is write something that appeals to other women like themselves.

If you think this Handbook is helpful, you should pass it out to people in advance of your meeting. There are several reasons for this. First, you probably don't want to be in the position of being the only person who knows how other groups suggest that meetings be run. It would be better if other women in your first meeting could take equal responsibility with you for carrying out the meeting. We think that because all women are experts on

women, that we can all evaluate literature like this Handbook and then be responsible for helping in the group to carry out our goals. You'll be saved a lot of hassles later if you begin with a group of women who understand what you're trying to do as well as you do. In fact, though you may start the group, you'll probably find that others will want to give ideas and will have excellent thoughts you didn't know. Sometimes we call ourselves the "conveners" of meetings since we don't try to run them, and can't anyway.

3. Meet in a Proper Place.

It is very important to hold your first meeting in a place where you will not be disturbed by husbands, boyfriends, children, or visitors. This is your meeting, and you have a right not to be interrupted.

If the meeting is at your house, take the time to explain to your man why you need to meet without him, and ask him to be considerate about not interrupting. If he goes out for the evening but comes in before your meeting ends, ask him not to come in and start socializing with people. He should take your meeting as seriously as you do.

Most meetings last a long time. Let people know in advance exactly when it starts and suggest that they might be there late. If someone has a problem with needing a babysitter, try to get people in your group to share a babysitter if this is necessary. In many towns where men are beginning to respect women more, the husbands will take care of the children.

4. Don't by Default Create All-Male Groups.

One problem we've run into when we call a caucus, or have a meeting of friends whose husbands also know each other, is that at first the men tend to get together during our meetings and talk about us. This is a bad thing because in some cases the men have actually thought of ways to increase our problems: for example, they might all agree: "well, I'm not going to babysit for any meeting I'm excluded from." They tend to forget, when there's no woman around to remind them, that we often babysit while they go to events from which we are excluded -- from poker games to fishing trips. When we go to talk to classes in schools and ask the men to leave, we usually bring along a man sympathetic to us. Either he, or a woman volunteer, talks to groups of men which have to stay together while the women meet. If it's a woman talking to an all-male group, it doesn't matter if they get on the subject of women: she'll stand up for her sex. But, if you rely on a friendly man, you should ask him to lead a discussion on something other than women: for example, how men are oppressed on their jobs.

THE FIRST MEETING:

1. What is the Best Question to Start With?

The first meeting ought to begin immediately with a discussion of a topic. If everybody has looked at the Handbook, they'll understand why we talk from personal experience, why we want everybody to talk, why we don't quote books, etc. If for some reason people haven't had a chance to read the Handbook, you should talk briefly, giving examples from your own experience, of why this method is good. For example, I was married for 2 1/2 years before I began to realize that lots of other married women resent the fact that they have to do all the housework. When I heard this in a group, I was surprised, even though I had read it lots of places before. When people understand why you are using that method, you can begin going around the room with a question.

Most people, after the first or several meetings, want to bring their friends. New members should be cordially welcomed. However, each new person should have the same advantages in her first meeting as you did. Thus, the person inviting someone else should talk to her friend, bring her whatever literature she thinks is appropriate, and make sure she's on the mailing list. Usually, we try to come with a new member to the first meeting and introduce her around.

You should keep an up to date mailing and phone list of all people who have ever attended a meeting so they can be contacted for meetings and also so you can send them literature from your group as you start writing. Some groups, on the weekly postcards, like to suggest current movies in town which are of special interest to women, or point out other meetings which affect women.

3. Building Sisterhood and Trust.

It is very rare for women to get together for the purposes of changing the lot of women. In some towns when new groups are forming, the press becomes quite interested. Virtually every group in the country has used this policy about the press as they got started: they don't want any publicity that is not discussed and planned for in the group. Therefore, the group usually doesn't advertise the fact that it is meeting until it has something specific to say to other women. There's little point in being reported on except to reach other women. We always try to prepare a written statement about our group, choose a spokesman who is the only person who will talk, and we talk only to women reporters because it creates jobs for women. We try to avoid unnecessary and unhelpful publicity.

Furthermore, while we know that all women share essentially the same experiences, sometimes one person has to speak her own pain, has to dare to speak her own pain, before we will tell about

ours. Often in our meetings we are finding that we are telling each other about feelings and experiences we've never discussed before, even with our men. In this first meeting you should begin to talk about a code for the group: what will you say about your meetings to people outside the group? How can a member be damaged if her man hears what she said?

We have arrived at two very important parts of a code which we think works very well.

1) to people outside your group, male or female, never tell somebody else's experience unless you can conceal all identities involved.

2) Most men are extremely nervous and curious about meetings. They try to get you to tell what happened. Also, at first, before we realize clearly that women are smarter and more interesting about women issues, we ~~find to~~ ^{and we} talk a lot to our men about meetings. So the rule we use for discussing our meetings with men is this: only tell the men the good things that other women said about their men, and then, don't identify either the man or the woman. If you tell your man that somebody else's man is a rat and doesn't do the dishes, your man will wonder why he has to. On the other hand, when he begins to realize that other men do nice things for their women, he'll know better how to be nice to you and he won't feel funny about it. However, if you identify the specific man who is doing those nice things for his wife, your man may end up kidding him and embarrassing him. For example, if your man doesn't happen to do the dishes half of the time, he'll ask the other man, "I hear you've taken up housekeeping." The other man may stop doing the dishes and both you and the other women are set back.

Since our first job is to talk with other women, we feel that this kind of code-building is essential. When we confront men, we want to do it as a group. We want to plan it as a group. And we want to feel free, within our group, to say as much as we can, as honestly as possible, without fear that it will get back to someone else.

HELPING SOMEONE ELSE START A GROUP:

When you've had experience with your own group and start talking about it to your friends in other cities or who might want to start a different group, they will usually beg you to help them get started. This is the way all of the existing groups started, and it's something to plan ahead for.

1. If You Can Help it, Never Go Alone to a New Group.

Men have created a number of untrue myths about feminists in order to prevent the formation of feminist groups and to keep

women in their places. There are ways we have found to combat these myths when they are still believed by women themselves. A feminist by herself will be described as "crazy" by men. Or, they'll say that she "wears tennis shoes" or some such nonsense. The main thing is that this is a movement of many women, not just one, and the best way to get that across is not to go alone.

If two women from an existing group help to start a new group, except where that idea is fairly popular, some men will always imply that something's going on between the two women. Of course, they are correctly seeing that something is going on: women are getting organized, and two are more powerful than one.

When you go to a new group, you will invariably be asked to explain about women's liberation. We have found that in this case, as in every other, speaking from personal experience is the surest way of making sense and conveying the spirit of our movement. Rather than giving a lecture on the "good word" you have developed in your group, you should try to talk around a topic such as the following:

How have my views, how has my life, changed since I became a conscious feminist? What is the effect of being in a group on me? If your group has already done some actions, don't overwhelm or intimidate others with "All we've done." Instead, explain how planning and participating in a specific action raised your own consciousness about the woman question.

A question that is almost always asked is: "What is the purpose of your group, your movement?" This question should always be answered, even though it is difficult to make the answer short. Our purpose could be summarized as analyze, act, reanalyze. That is, we want to find out what things are making women unhappy by analyzing our experience; then we want to act on these things to change them for the better. After we act we want to analyze our action and reanalyze the problem. Our goal is the happiness of women, and many of us suspect that this will require nothing short of revolution. We will do whatever is necessary to gain the happiness of women. Many times when this question of purpose is asked, the questioner really wants to know--because it's hard to believe--whether you really intend to go the whole distance in changing things. She may want to make sure you're not just going to work on the problems of some women, for example, just married women. It is your job to show how our movement is for all women, and that it will do everything and anything that all women want and need for their long range self-interest.

When you go to a new group you should bring with you appropriate papers, articles, perhaps a film to discuss, or bibliographies. If someone asks for a specific item, take her address and send it to her when you get home. Try to arrange to see the group again, and if it's in another town, leave your name

and address with everyone so they can get in touch with you if they're visiting your town. Invite them to your group.

The first meeting of a women's liberation group is probably the first collective action on the women's issue for most of the women who attend. It is a very significant action every time it occurs. It's the way every major social improvement in history has begun. You should never forget how difficult and exciting it was when you went to your first meetings, and you will show respect for the courage of these women when you recall your own experiences at the beginning. Were all the women in the world in such groups, just coming to such meetings, half the battle would already be won.

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APPENDIX

Some Questions For Consciousness-Raising

Below are some of the questions early women's liberation organizers used in consciousness-raising meetings. There are questions here from New York Radical Women, Gainesville (Florida) Women's Liberation, New York Radical Feminists, Berkeley (California) Women's Liberation, Redstockings (New York.)

How have you felt most oppressed as a woman, recently?

What do you think a women's liberation group (and the larger movement) can do for you?

Why did you come to an all-female group?

What do you most want this movement to accomplish?

Which do/did you prefer to have—a boy child, a girl, no children? Why?

Do/did you ever feel dumber than men? Why?

Do/did you ever feel you were supposed to be? Why?

Do/did you ever want your man to be smarter than you? Why or why not?

Did you ever wish you were a man? Why? Why not?

Have you ever thought you were pregnant when you didn't want to be?

Were you using birth control? Did you tell anybody? Why or why not?

What did you do? How did you feel?

What has it meant for women in the group to earn their own money?

What has it meant to your mother and her friends?

What does it mean for each person to have her own thing? Not to have her own thing?

Has it been possible for someone to earn her own money doing her own thing? If not, why not?

What is work—now and in the future?

Do women have to work to move towards independence?

1. Do you get your money from a man?

2. Do you give your money to a man?

3. Do you work for a man?

4. Does a man work for you?

1. Are you, or do you want to be, married (or its equivalent)?

a. If so, why?

b. If not, why not?

2. What are the advantages in your particular decision about this question? Why?

3. What are the liabilities? Why?

If you're married, why do you think you're married? If you're single, why do you think you are single?

Do you think you have a choice in being married or being single?

If you're single, how do you feel about married women? If you're married, how do you feel about single women? Why do you feel the way you do?

How do you feel about sex, commitment and fidelity? How have your feelings changed over a period of time? Why?

Do you feel that having sexual relations with a man changed your attitude toward him? In what ways? Did it change his toward you? Did you expect it to change yours or his? Did it ever make you feel more sense of urgency about marriage or less?

Have you ever wanted to carry on more than one sexual relationship at a time (to be unfaithful)? Why or why not? If you did, how did you feel?

Do you think women should receive some form of "payment" for having sexual relations with a man?

Have you ever felt "afraid" of sex? When and why? What were the things you were afraid of? Did you ever feel afraid not to have sex? When and why? In general, have you felt more afraid to have it than not to have it? If you haven't been afraid, why do you think you haven't been? Have you been afraid at times and not others?

Sex objects—do you feel like one? If so, how? Do you ever feel invisible?

Are you a nice girl? Are you a bad girl?

Have you ever felt that men have pressured you into having sexual relationships? Have you ever lied about orgasm?

Have you ever been raped? Why didn't you leave? Did you tell anyone? Why or why not? Did you ever want to be?

What would you most like to do in life and what has stopped you?

What do you most want this movement to accomplish?