

## WOMEN PLAN TORONTO (1985 - 2000) AND TORONTO WOMEN'S CITY ALLIANCE (2004 - AND STRUGGLING ON): EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS

*Regula Modlich* \*

If any level of politics is relevant and accessible to women, it is politics at the local level. The over 30 years of experiences of Women Plan Toronto and its successor, Toronto Women's City Alliance, are summarized and analyzed below. Past experiences, their successes and limitations need to be known and understood to guide women's future efforts.

### Context

The 70's and 80's were heady times for activists and feminists. Inspired by the anti-Vietnam War movement, the gains of the left and key books like *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir and *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, the second wave of feminism was born. In Canada, a Royal Commission on the Status of Women had released its findings in a report in 1970. There was general openness to acknowledging the findings about women's lives and realities. Government funding became available to help rectify and empower women. Women started to turn their inward-looking "consciousness raising" outward, and realized that their built environments were man-made. The misfit between transportation, housing design, city planning, public services, employment and women's roles and economic status, came to light, as did the violence against women in both private and public spheres.

In Toronto, a group called "Women In/And Planning" (WIAP) formed and held a ground-breaking conference in 1982 on the disconnect between urban planning practices and the needs of women. Underlying this disconnect were the unpaid care-giving and domestic roles assigned to women, which were little understood or addressed by urban planning. As women wanted or were forced to move into paid employment, these double duties caused even more stress which, in turn, was used as an excuse for discrimination in pay, promotion and benefits.

It was an article about Women Plan London (WPL) in *Women & Environments* - a magazine started by women at the 1976 UN Habitat conference - that made Women Plan Toronto (WPT) ring like a good idea. WPL, at the time, had official status in the London County Council (LCC) until Margaret Thatcher abolished both the LCC and WPL. WPL had given official recognition to the concerns of women and proposed a wide range of measures to address them.

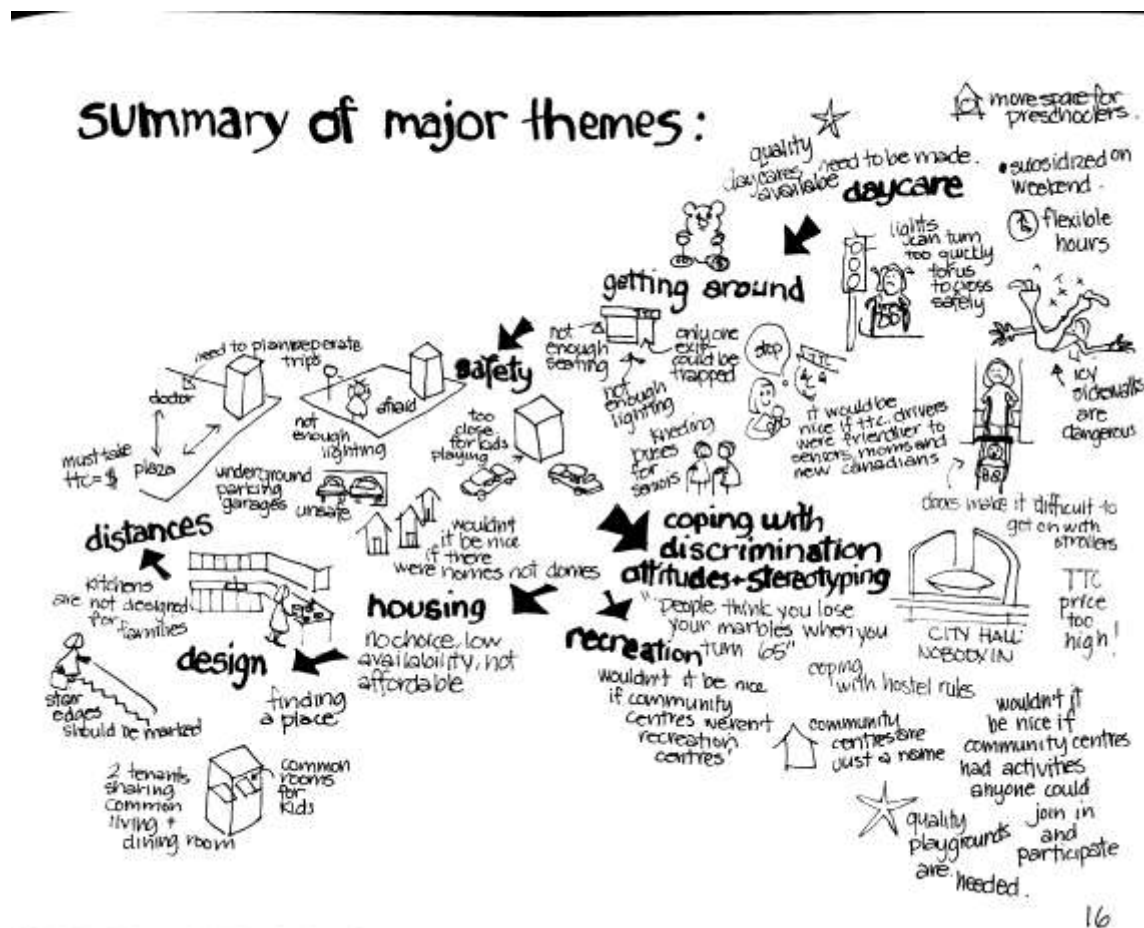
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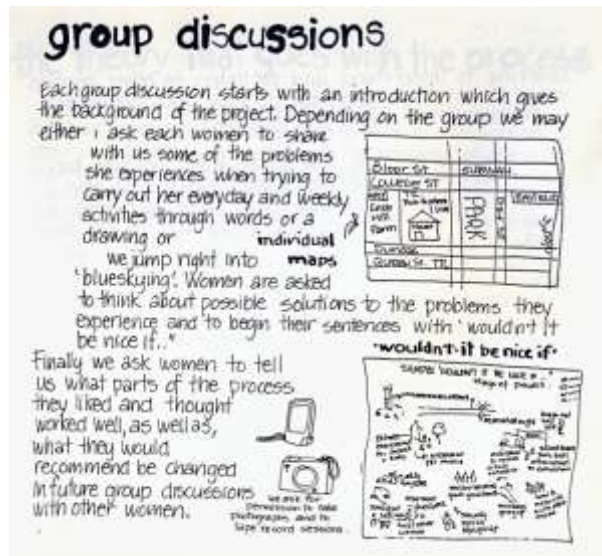
## Women Plan Toronto - activities, processes and achievements

With the guidance and a grant from the Status of Women (a federal government agency), mentoring by dian marino, professor in adult education at York University, the assets of WIAP, a desk in the City of Toronto's east satellite planning office, and the youthful energy and artistic talent of Birgit Sterner, Reggie (Regula) Modlich, full-time parent, urban planner and WIAP member, initiated the grass-roots oriented participatory research project, WPT, in 1985. Its aim was to document how women coped in Toronto.

WPT conducted 25 participatory research workshops (2c). In the sessions, women first mapped their everyday life experiences in Toronto; they then marked these experiences as good or bad. After they shared their drawings with each other, the workshops concluded with "wouldn't it be nice if" ideas which would address their problems and hardships. During the "evaluation of" and "suggestions on" the workshop process, a recent immigrant to Canada responded as follows: *"I do like to be asked about what we are looking for. Who would ever ask us any other time in our life? It is difficult to get into that frame of mind to be able to speak freely. And after this I have to go back into that other world again and I have to go back and forget about all I have dreamed today,"*



Summary of Women's Issues, Shared Experiences and Dreams, p. 16



A large group of people, including a person in a wheelchair, are seated around a large, curved, U-shaped table in a conference room. A banner on the table reads "we all are men plan toronto" with a rainbow graphic. The room has a high ceiling and a large window.

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WPT, both in its research and activist phase, operated with a relatively fluid volunteer steering committee. All decisions were by consensus. Whenever grants or funds permitted the hiring of a part-time coordinator, she was responsible and accountable to the steering committee. At times “circles” or sub committees took charge of special projects or activity areas; they in turn reported back to the steering committee. Women were encouraged to speak up on behalf of WPT based on their own experiences and understanding rather than present a pre-approved steering committee or “official WPT” line.

### *Urban Planning*

Based on the women’s experiences in *Shared Experiences and Dreams*, a feminist critique of urban planning practices in Ontario was printed in Plan Canada, the Canadian professional planning journal. Later, WPT produced a “Our Communities - Lets Plan” kit, which offered women a tool to raise their concerns through the urban planning process.

WPT intervened in the consultation process for the 1991 Toronto Official Plan by making presentations - many of them pioneer efforts - on the following planning areas:

- *Transportation*: WPT emphasized women’s transit dependence, their problems with design, routes, schedules and fare structures due to their fragmented time and travel patterns and their lower incomes, so typical to the care-giving role. They also raised their constraints as pedestrians both when walking alone or accompanying dependents.
- *Parks and Open Spaces*: safety, visibility, benches for accompanying mothers or elderly, facilities and activities for girls and for the great diversity of women in Toronto were major points.
- *Housing*: supply, cost, design of affordable quality of housing, as well as locating housing near jobs, services and transportation loomed high.
- *Social Service Delivery*: for women - who are still carrying the major care- giving burden in society - planning for appropriately-located and affordable public services for the care of children, the elderly and health care are as important as planning for schools, yet they are still not part of the planning process.
- *Industrial Areas*: their accessibility and location were of concern.

After all our input into the consultation process, nothing was reflected in the Draft Official Plan. WPT had to threaten an appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), which rules on planning disputes, to have its input recognized. As a compromise, the City offered to and did include the clause “to have regard for the needs of women and children and other groups with special needs” into 5 policy areas of the Plan.

Later on, we challenged a high-density proposal next to the still-forested suburban Scarborough Town Centre. Our intervention exposed an illegal density bonus, led to the resignation of one of the OMB chairs, stalled the project and, to this day, has kept the unique patch of forest in the town centre.

In the 1990’s, the short-lived NDP (social democratic) government in Ontario proposed to change the Planning Act. WPT met with the Review Commission and urged that social services become part of the planning process. This request was integrated into the new Planning Act.

A team of WPT planners and architects, headed by Heather Taylor, undertook an ambitious and innovative Residentially-Based Telework project, supported by a grant from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. In 1997-1998, the team researched the demand, potential locations and designs for a pilot project to assist women to work from home. While it was never built, the City greatly relaxed its restrictions on home occupations.

One of the last WPT projects aimed to provide input into the first Official Plan for the amalgamated City. (In 1998 the Provincial Government forced the amalgamation of the City of Toronto with 5 of its older suburban municipalities.) While the workshop, organized by WPT, was well attended by about 40 women, including ex-mayor Barbara Hall, an actual submission never materialized and the new Official Plan failed to mention, let alone address women's needs.

### *Safety*

WPT supported Birgit Sterner in her research and preparation of the W.I.S.E. (Women in Safe Environments) report for METRAC (Metro Action Committee on Public Violence against Women and Children). It provided the background for the Safety Audit which METRAC pioneered.<sup>1</sup> Safety Audits provided women with a powerful tool to identify, evaluate and remedy environments that make them feel unsafe. WPT participated in developing, testing and applying Safety Audits in several locations, including Toronto's huge flagship park, High Park. The input helped shape the scheduled major improvements and redesign of the park.

WPT also participated in the development of the initial Safe City Report with then councillor, later mayor, Barbara Hall. The Safe City Report was one of the first such documents anywhere. WPT supported the setting up the Safe City Committee to implement the report. It was the first (and last) City Committee to have both councillor and citizen members and be co-chaired by a councillor and citizen. City Council adopted a policy to: "*promote a City where all people can safely use public spaces, day or night, without fear of violence, and where people, including women and children and persons with special needs, are safe from violence*". Carolyn Whitzman, a WPT activist, was its first coordinator. As such, she conducted workshops with city departments, such as Planning, Building, Parks and Recreation, to enable them to address women's safety in their work and reports. Together with Gerda Wekerle, she co-authored the book *Safe Cities, Guidelines for Planning, Design and Management* (1995, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold).

### *Housing*

With a grant from the Ministry of Housing, a WPT team prepared an impressive pamphlet and hands-on workshops around women's interest in urban intensification. Abby Bushby, a young lawyer, was particularly brave, venturing into the conservative suburban "905 belt" and challenging and "debunking" head-on many of their traditional ideas. WPT led a campaign to legalize secondary apartments in houses and helped win legalization of several such apartments before the OMB. WITCH (Women in Toronto Creating Housing) supported by WPT, was a short lived attempt to get directly involved in a housing project. Unfortunately, the enormity of

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<sup>1</sup> See Connie Guberman's article in this issue.

the not-for-profit housing process exhausted the group. Later, architects Shirley Roll and Heather Taylor tried again to start a co-operative housing project directly through WPT, but instead, ended up sponsoring and participating in a City Home (Toronto) second stage shelter, “SisterShare,” with a WPT activist on its Board for several years to assist in resolving residents’ and management issues.

### *Transportation*

The Transportation Circle made countless deputations to make transit more accessible, not only for disabled persons but also for women on the move with shopping, strollers, children or elderly people in tow. Any design that helps disabled persons also helps women. For several years, Colleen Weir headed the transportation circle and made many presentations to conferences. WPT also deputed for public washrooms, an ongoing concern especially for women who cannot just step into a dark corner or behind a tree to relieve ourselves.

### *Municipal governance and elections*

In the 1988 municipal election, Carolyn Whitzman and Debbie Hierlihy with a network of ward-watchers, surveyed all the candidates on their position on issues of particular concern to women. They graded the candidates in a report card which they presented at a press conference - a truly astounding project considering that it was done without a computer at the time.

For the 1991, and 1994 elections, WPT published brochures on women’s issues in several languages, and conducted workshops encouraging women to bring forward their issues and to vote. One such brochure was reproduced in its entirety in the Toronto Star, Canada’s largest daily newspaper.

In 1996, WPT participated in the futile battle against amalgamation with a fact sheet on how women would be affected. Amalgamation of the six local municipalities which made up Metro Toronto was imposed by a neo-liberal government of Ontario. For the 1997 elections, WPT collaborated with the City of Toronto Women’s Committee, in a pamphlet “Make Women’s Needs Heard.”

In the mid-nineties WPT, realizing its limited foothold in the suburbs, made efforts to become Women Plan Metro. This, however, had limited success, as meetings still ended up downtown. While this location was central to everyone, it was within easy reach only to those living closest.

### *Olympic bid*

A grant from the City of Toronto allowed Barbara Rahder, Brenda Doyle Farge and Colleen Weir, to prepare a groundbreaking report entitled “How Women Loose at the Games.” It was the first gender-based analysis of the effects of mega sports events on women. It contributed significantly towards Toronto NOT getting to host the 1996 Olympics. It showed how female athletes were still not equally recognized; how major competitive team events resulted in spikes of domestic violence; how space for such events displaced affordable housing and siphoned off funding for community services which women badly needed.

### *Other*

In addition, there were countless deputations, interventions, speeches at conferences, articles in newspapers and magazines, media interviews, participation in rallies and further workshops with women's groups, lawyers, professional planners and planning students to increase awareness of women's issues.



Carrying the WPT banner at an International Women's Day rally

### Impact?

Just as Women Plan London inspired WPT, WPT in turn inspired women in other cities in Canada and abroad to organize and raise women's issues; these included Montreal, Hamilton and Vancouver - Montreal being the most enduring and successful. WPT had an impact and perceived strength well beyond its actual numbers. *Women & Environments International Magazine*, and an increasing number of websites and list-serves helped broadcast WPT's efforts and successes around the world. A spirit of sisterhood links local groups with international coalitions such as the Huairou Commission- which displayed WPT's work in the UN Building in New York - and Femmes et Villes (Women and Cities).

WPT's and METRAC's work on women's safety especially emitted waves of awareness that reverberated around the world while the epicenter seems to be reverting back into a pre- if not anti-feminist bulwark. Neo-liberalism crept into our society. Conservative Mayors, Provincial Premiers and Prime Ministers were elected who rolled back most of the victories. The Ontario

Planning Act was changed back, eliminating the requirement for affordable housing, planning for social services and many other measures. Funding for non-profit and co-operative housing was gutted and programs eliminated. Municipalities were amalgamated. Services for women and children were cut to reduce deficits. At the same time, the “green” or environmental movement started raising some of the same planning changes - mixed uses, intensification and public transportation - with more resources.

WPT’s achievements occurred in a relatively supportive political climate that gave women the illusion that there was nothing wrong with the underlying system. WPT, therefore, never demanded a systemic restructuring or “gender mainstreaming”. The term had not yet been born!. As the tsunami of reaction hit, WPT volunteers had to reinvent themselves each year to qualify for increasingly scarce and limiting project grants - a very tedious, time-consuming and unsettling process. It demanded the skills and discipline which typical middle-class, university-educated women tended to have. As a by-product the WPT leadership tended to reflect this demographic and lacked the full diversity of Toronto’s women’s community. By the end of the nineties, many volunteers were exhausted, felt that their efforts were futile, needed to focus on their careers or started having families with less time to spare for volunteering. As a result, WPT collapsed.

All documents are now deposited at the Archives of the Canadian Women’s Movement at the University of Ottawa, Canada.

Meanwhile other cities around the world made giant strides towards gender equity. From San Francisco, USA, to Santo Andre, Brazil, from Naga City, Philippines to Vienna, Austria and from London, UK to Seoul, South Korea, cities have committed to transforming local governance to reflect and be responsive to women. Vienna has shown the way most notably, with a women’s office that created women’s housing projects, streetscapes and park designs that ensure that women’s and girls’ needs are met.

Back in Toronto, in 2003 awareness of women’s issues had completely disappeared from the radar. One evening late in 2003, Pabha Khosla, Sonja Greckol and Reggie Modlich bemoaned this contradictory state of affairs. They decided on one further attempt to raise women’s issues, and this time to demand systemic change. In February, 2004 an open meeting tested the pulse of women in Toronto. The pulse was there and Toronto Women Call for Action, later renamed [Toronto Women’s City Alliance](#) (TWCA), was born with the goals to:

- Put girls’ and women’s voices and priorities on the political agenda in the City of Toronto;
- Ensure political commitment to and action on anti-racism and women’s human rights;
- Remove barriers to women’s active participation in all spheres of public life;
- Secure an equal share in all decision-making processes;
- Institutionalize inclusive, democratic and participatory processes in local governance;
- Support women across their diverse identities to meet their rights and needs through systemic institutional change;
- Reverse cutbacks to services and institute gender-responsive budgeting.



To this end TWCA made numerous interventions at budget, Access, Equity and Human Rights (AEHR), and social service discussions in and outside of City Hall. TWCA was strongly involved in revisions of the City of Toronto Act, trying to stem the centralization of power in the Mayor's office and reduction of elections from 3 to every 4 years. Instead, we demanded participatory budgeting, greater transparency and accountability. During 2008, TWCA launched a campaign to achieve greater gender equity through a Women's Equalities Office (WEO) at City Hall. TWCA met with councillors to explain that such an office would ensure that:

- all policies, budgets and reports contain an explicit evaluation in terms of their impacts on women;
- gender specific data is collected to enable measuring, evaluating and monitoring projects in terms of their effects on women;
- all civic boards, agencies and committees have 50% women,
- reflecting their full diversity in Toronto;
- this would take place in close and open collaboration with the full diversity of women in the community.

In 2009, TWCA collected signatures under a declaration in support of a WEO. Even with a reform-minded mayor and council, the request fell on deaf ears. Women bureaucrats, too, were reluctant to support us. We were dismissed as yet another special interest group and urged to consider ourselves as part of the AEHR division that deals mostly with minority issues. So far, not even data collection to enable more accurate analyses of women's realities has been achieved, let alone a WEO.

Almost 25 years after WPT's participatory research, TWCA conducted another major grass roots research project to assess the status of women in Toronto. In 2009, a city grant allowed Melissa Wong to speak with over 100 women, in in-depth interviews and workshops. *Communities in which Women Count, a Women's Equality Report Card Project* reflects where Toronto's women are at.

Little has changed: unaffordable, inappropriate, and unavailable child care, housing, services and transit have marginalized women then and now. Public and private violence still haunt women and girls, particularly racialized and minority women. With these findings in hand position papers were prepared on housing, child care, transportation, and recreation. These were distributed during the 2011 International Women's Day (image 6). TWCA, like WPT, is a fluid group, with a steering committee operating on a consensus basis and a staff coordinator, whenever grants permit, yet without a permanent physical office - somewhat easier in the age of laptops and internet. TWCA does, however, reflect far more accurately the full range of diverse women and girls living in Toronto.



**TWCA launching its research report: "Communities in which Women Count"**

### **What's next?**

In November 2010, Toronto elected her most conservative mayor yet. With a bullying personality, under the motto "Respect for Tax Payers" he supports subways to free up surface road space for cars, privatization of public services, an end to property tax increases and cut backs of social services. Pushing for a WEO or systemic changes to meet the needs of women is out of the question at this time. When the TWCA coordinator tried to raise women's issues at an open and public budget discussion, the deputy mayor verbally assaulted her for questioning the lack of women on the City's Executive Committee.

On April 17, 2011, TWCA met to evaluate its strategies and structure in the light of this "climate change" in Toronto. A diverse team of dynamic and mostly young women, backed by a secondary ring of supporters, agreed to serve on a Coordinating Committee to guide and implement new strategies. TWCA is increasingly working in coalitions with other groups to maximize impact and voice of the growing number of marginalized people. Many groups are fearful of reprisals or cuts to their funding. The new strategies include defending existing services against cut backs, privatization and against the elimination of civic committees. TWCA is backing groups such as Mothers and Child Care, the Bathurst Finch Neighbourhood's campaign for Community Recreation for All, the Proud of Toronto Campaign and initiatives of the Social Planning Council of Toronto. One such emerging coalition, *One Toronto*, still lacks consciousness of women's issues, and needs TWCA to build this awareness. Backed by several women's groups, TWCA is attempting to get women's issues recognized in the current review of the Toronto Official Plan. It appears that the planners' mindsets are as reluctant today, as they were 20 years ago.

The experiences of both WPT and TWCA have taught that it is easier to win specific - often short term - victories, than to achieve systemic change; they have lead to the realization that women's safety means a lot more than better lighting; that indeed, it requires an end to

discrimination, violence and exploitation of all women. Yet this inequity is deeply embedded in systems built on an ethos glorifying power, property and profit at any cost. Thus, systemic change is needed to address women's needs comprehensively and permanently. We also learned that the general consciousness and mood of society can change - and not always forward.

We have shared our experiences to nurture awareness and in this way strengthen women's struggles for equality and social justice. Who said that one generation of feminists could change the system? Our daughters and hopefully sons need some challenges too.