

A Women's Liberation Approach to Solving Career Problems

By Marylin Bender April 11, 1970

Credit...The New York Times Archives

EIGHT women sat upright and fiercely attentive in the living room of midtown Manhattan apartment one evening last week. They were sustained by coffee and mutual need.

There was a red-haired grandmother and a black woman in her 20's who wasn't sure she would ever marry. One woman was living with her husband, the rest were divorced, separated, widowed or single. Their occupations ranged from psychologist to vice president of a theatrical corporation, to artist, writer and fund raiser.

For two hours they talked—about money, men, other women and themselves.

Difficulties With Money

"I automatically feel dirty asking for money. I guess that's a female complaint," said a suburban housewife turned writer. She was trying to develop courage to ask the male publisher of her book for an advance and contract.

The others agreed. "When it comes to money, I feel I'm worthless. I've always done work for nothing," said the mother of four who was living on a small income from a husband in another city. "But now I've got to learn to be independent."

"You're like a lot of women, afraid to be practical and businesslike," said the black woman, going on to recount how she had learned to make salary demands in a huge corporation.

"And yet, I've never felt right taking money from my husband even when I was just a housewife. Now I want to be paid for my writing, but I find myself thinking, 'I'm just a lousy writer,'" the author said.

"We've all been raised to work for nothing. We've been trained to give our labor for its use value, not for exchange value. But we live in a society where men's work has always had monetary or exchange value, but women's work did not," said the fortyish blonde with the girlish body.

Janice LaRouche seemed to know when the discussion needed halting or rerouting. She has been running Career Workshops, as she calls them for lack of a better name, three or more evenings a week since last August.

Those participants who are in the feminist movement, as is Miss LaRouche (a board member of NOW, the National Organization for Women) call these meetings consciousness-raising sessions. One of the techniques of the women's liberation

movement is to help women understand and recognize what they deem oppression by sharing experiences with others of their sex, by talking out what custom and culture have taught them to repress.

The LaRouche-led groups differ from most women's liberation sessions in that they are directed toward the job market. If a woman cannot be helped in this area, as one group decided about participant whom they urged to consult a psychiatrist, she is asked to leave.

Talk of money the other evening led to the subject of power and the reluctance some women have about wielding it.

"I'm not used to it, it's embarrassing. I don't want power, but I have to learn to use it," moaned the artist who supporting herself and her children by working as a secretary-bookkeeper.

Boss Wasn't a Problem

The difficulties she related did not involve her male boss but other men, such as lawyers and tradesmen, with whom she must negotiate on his behalf.

"You're afraid to take a firm stand," Miss LaRouche told her. The group then offered suggestions for resolving real estate deal in which she was entangled.

"When I was a secretary working for one man I felt fine," the psychologist confessed. "But then I went back to school and became a professional. Now I find myself in an equal position and in competition with men, and I'm so anxious. I just feel everybody's mad at me. If you act assertive, you're not feminine. If you're to be effective as psychologist, you often have to fight and confront hostility."

"I run into hostility because I'm female, black and very talented," the black woman said in a consoling tone.

"I'm sweet and charming. I can deal well with men, but I've always felt uncomfortable with women," said the corporate vice president, a pants-suited, long-haired blonde. She went on, almost tearfully, to describe her frustrations with a female secretary who refused to take orders from her.

"The sabotaging secretary is one woman-to-woman problem we encounter all the time," Miss LaRouche said after the meeting had adjourned. "She accepts the authority of the male. She's willing to say she is his subordinate, but she'll knife another woman. The ruthless woman boss is another problem. She knifed to get where she is, and she won't let another woman have power."

The Career Workshops tackle specific problems like the writing of a resume or securing a title or a better salary for a member. As an example, Miss LaRouche read from a newspaper advertisement for a “community affairs assistant” at \$7,500 a year. It was listed under the “executive secretary” column.

“But the job description is really for a director of volunteers in a fund-raising organization. They're getting director for the price of a secretary. They should be offered \$10,000,” said Miss LaRouche, who is director of volunteers for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies.

“We learn how to get the title here. We confront them. Men are not used to being confronted,” she said.

One workshop participant, Jacqueline Ceballos, was offered a job as director of field services with a market research concern at a low salary she was ready to accept.

Perceiving Her Qualities

“We elevated her ego an inch or two,” Miss LaRouche said. “She couldn't perceive her valuable qualities, her years of experience in organization work, her articulateness, the fact that she doesn't mind traveling, which a lot of women are afraid to do. We told her to research the salary scale for the job, and she found it was a couple of thousand dollars more,” Miss LaRouche recalled.

Mrs. Ceballos got the job at \$2,500 more than originally offered, tried and quit. “I found it was much too simple,” she said the other day. “I decided I'd rather live poorly and fight for feminism.”

Miss LaRouche said that she bringing “25 years of conscious awareness of women's problems,” based on her own experiences, to the workshop. Nine years ago, after the break-up of her marriage, she found herself obliged to support herself and her son, then five.

“I had been home for seven years and before that had worked only as lark,” she said.

She secured a job as assistant director of volunteers at Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital at \$4,000 a year. She gave up her lunch hour so that she could work from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M., paralleling her child's hours at school. Five years later, she moved to another agency as director of volunteers.

The fee for the workshop is \$30 month. Members meet once a week for two hours in groups of six or eight. “Most of them stay on and on,” Miss LaRouche said. “We resolve an immediate problem through more money or another job but that, in turn, brings new problems.”