

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

REBEKKAH ADAMS, *Glass Houses: Saving Feminist Anti-Violence Agencies from Self Destruction*. Halifax: Fernwood, 2008, 121 p.

University students who engage in community-based learning often return from their experiences in the non-profit sector with more questions than answers. Why must social change organizations devote so much time to completing government paper work? Why aren't the organizations as diverse as their hiring policies would imply? Why is there a disjuncture generally between organizational guidelines and practices? Why are frontline workers so burned out? Why is power not more equally shared among staff? Why do executive directors seem less experienced and knowledgeable than the staff they supervise? In *Glass Houses: Saving Feminist Anti-Violence Agencies from Self Destruction*, Rebekkah Adams courageously provides answers to these questions and many more based on 20 years experience in organizations contending with Violence Against Women (VAW), and interviews with colleagues in the field.

Adams writes as if standing on hot coals – this is more manifesto than carefully considered scholarship, but her passion may stand to keep readers awake more than most published analyses of organizational behavior. In this relatively short and punchy text, Adams works from micro experiences of the frontline worker to mezzo questions of organizational funding and decision-making, to macro questions about the future of feminist social change work in Canada. To Adams, the battered women's shelter is proxy for the women's movement generally, a physical manifestation of feminist desire – to protect women from the systematic violence to which they are subject – in a world that has otherwise fairly successfully resisted feminist transformation. While her analyses and suggestions are practical, the reader is left with a much more tangible understanding of the psychic implications for women who have dedicated their lives to contending with this very painful and seemingly intractable problem.

Adams' text functions as a salve for any frontline worker in this field. She painstakingly recounts the ways in which management treat staff like factory workers, ignoring their input, imposing unreasonable shift-work type schedules, compensating inadequately, and perfecting staff surveillance rather than appreciation. She argues that staff come to fear their managers in the way their clients fear their batterers, creating a shocking behavioral mimicry in daily shelter life. In detail, Adams enumerates the policies, benefits, and behaviors needed to keep talented women in shelter work without burning them out. While shelters need to be

better employers, she argues, frontline workers need more mechanisms for self-care to respond in a healthier manner to the stories they absorb from the women they serve. Adams shows how dealing with women in crisis leads workers to develop poor eating and sleeping habits, lose self-esteem, and forget how to be good to themselves and experience joy. All too often, Adams explains, shelter spaces come to physically reflect the abuse women have come to escape – chipping paint and sparse walls adversely affect client and staff alike.

On the level of organizations, Adams indicates that the presence of non-feminists on staff, in supervisory positions and on the Board, diminishes the political force of the organization, making it a service provider rather than a catalyst for social change. She states that Violence Against Women organizations must do more public education and outreach work, more capably infiltrating schools and other community institutions. The problems which result from receiving government funding are perhaps Adams' chief concern. She does not have many kind words for state actors, indicating the ways in which they develop accountability schemes to trick organizations out of their funding. Adams extensively discusses the costs of government funding – cooptation, depoliticization, professionalization, that have undermined feminism in the organizations it inspired.

Adams promotes moving away from government funding of VAW organizations altogether, suggesting they be funded by a combination of what she calls “wealthy matrons” and corporations. While she advocates creative fundraising, it is unclear how her suggestions would be less taxing and more freeing than government grants. Adams maintains that feminist organizations suffer from a lack of transparent processes and feminist approaches to leadership, arguing there is no template for a feminist executive director, and little vision for how to combine the consensus and hierarchical decision-making models. Without new approaches to organization, Adams indicates, VAW organizations generate policies in reactive rather than proactive ways.

According to Adams, the feminist movement as a whole needs overhauling. She bemoans the absence of a voice for feminism on the national level, stating that feminists in Canada have privileged their differences over their similarities to such an extent that women can no longer unite in common cause. While she does not name the National Action Committee (NAC) and its demise, it is implicated in her critique. More generally, she claims feminism has still not contended with women's depressing social modes of operation with one another, the passive aggression, back biting, inability to celebrate one another's accomplishments, petty competitiveness and constant critiques. Adams also confronts superficial approaches to diversity that leave racism and homophobia in feminist organizations intact. Strategically, she proposes a return to radicalism, or a more incisive and confrontational feminism, one that names violence against women femicide, more accurately reflecting the systematic nature of men's control of women through abuse and murder. She urges feminists to reconsider traditions such as Take Back the

Night and December 6 vigils that may in fact produce more fear and depression than social change. Finally, Adams raises significant questions concerning generational divisions, asking established feminists to more purposefully mentor young girls and women if they care about the survival of the institutions and consciousness they have worked so hard to build.

Adams' writing is a bit haphazard and contradictory. In various places she writes both that feminists should demand more government funding and abandon it altogether, become more radical and more mainstream. She suggests staff in feminist organizations should protect themselves from burnout and focus on healing, while also becoming more actively engaged in political confrontation, without acknowledging the emotional costs of activism. And, Adams shoots from the hip in ways that make her book slightly less useful. She consistently refers to government funding as "blood money," dismisses the involvement of men in anti-violence work without discussing the reasons why, and tangentially critiques women who consume pornography. She both urges readers to resist professionalism and neo-liberalism, while urging us to view Violence Against Women organizations as "businesses." And, while Adams suggests that in general we make involvement in feminist frontline work and activism more fun and exciting to be a part of, she does not explicate how this levity might be produced. These contradictions, uneven discussions, and the absence of a conclusion to the book suggest poor editing, but do not interfere with the overall usefulness of her work. Faculty teaching about work and occupations and social movements, and feminism and violence against women specifically, will find much to engage their students in this heart-felt, incisive book.

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