



# Canadian Women and Geography Newsletter

WINTER 2000/01

## LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

### EmPowering Women in Geography

For me, 'empowering women working in Geography' has always been central to CWAG's mission and activities. And yet we seldom talk openly or fully about how differences in power between women affect our working lives, or about how we should (and perhaps shouldn't) use the power we have to influence other women's lives. In competitive, high pressure working environments, such as academia, we seem to be able to talk about the power wielded by the white, male majority but not by ourselves. Is this just a strategic silence; perhaps intended to simplify the important project of building support networks and solidarity amongst working women? I don't think so. I think that talking about power and how we can use it to empower or disempower other women sometimes hits us a little too close to home.

Recent developments in my own professional life have reminded me of how important it is that we *do* talk about power and empowerment in collective forums such as CWAG, and in our day to day professional lives. In our School of Geography and Geology female graduate students are currently in the majority. This is a development that can, potentially, have empowering implications for women at this stage of their professional careers. It means, for example, that female graduate students are more likely to take on positions of leadership within the School; positions that will help build confidence and develop professional skills. By making a conscious effort to share information and decision-making opportunities with other graduate students, women in such positions can serve as positive role models in the professional development of their peers – challenging views of women as 'lesser leaders' and helping to build working environments which are inclusive across differences such as race, gender and disability.

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Will this happen? It depends. It depends on how power is used. I have seen many women graduate students use power to empower their peers; despite pressures to 'shine' as an individual. Simple acts such as sharing information on graduate scholarships or research opportunities, or experiences of working as a women in a male-dominated profession, often make a world of difference in whether women feel included and supported in the work they do. But I've also seen women graduate students use power to exclude and damage women regarded as 'threats' to their personal influence and advancement — actively excluding them from graduate student activities, giving 'advice' aimed at damaging their credibility or accomplishments, and even disparaging their work and ideas.

Of course, it is not women in graduate school or in junior positions in other professional workplaces who wield the greatest power over their female colleagues. But places of training are where we begin to define our working selves and our relationship to power – including whether we will use it solely for personal advancement and influence, or to empower and include others. And it is remarkable how enduring patterns of relating to and using our power can be. Women who start out using power to exclude and disadvantage potential female 'competitors' become professors and supervisors easily threatened by bright new women students and employees, and prepared to hoard power in any way they can to preserve their own influence and 'success'.

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While in my experience the vast majority of women working in geography are supportive and inclusive, it may only take one woman who is unwilling or unable to be supportive of other women to ensure that few if any women will be empowered on terms other than those of established men.

A female graduate student recently confided that she had been warned by a male professor 'never to work with a female professor because they will be too hard on you'. Such divisive and dismissive generalizations about the excellent supervisory work that so many women do are infuriating and troubling – loaded with negative meanings such as 'women are unfair to other women' and planting seeds of distrust that can last generations.

But they are also reminders that how we use the power we do have and for whom matters not only for the women we work with now, but for those who may follow us or be discouraged from following us in the future.

What can we do to ensure that CWAG remains a space and network of empowerment for women working in geography? We can participate in and support CWAG initiatives such as conference sessions showcasing the work and talents of women working in physical and human geography in and outside academic workplaces. We can support efforts to encourage the professional advancement of women, such as the recent workshops on the status of women held at the Canadian Association of Geographers annual conference. We can encourage other women to become involved in CWAG, particularly women who are under-represented and relatively new to the field. Perhaps most importantly, however, we can strive to use whatever power we have well and to further the empowerment of all women. After all, it can be pretty lonely at the 'top' unless you take others with you!

– Vera Chouinard, CWAG Chair  
chouinar@mcmaster.ca

### How to Subscribe to the CWAG Discussion List:

*E-mail:* cwag-request@geog.ubc.ca

*Subject:* subscribe

*Body of Message:* subscribe

**MEMBERS:** please join the discussion list ☺

### Some NEW websites that may be of interest to members...

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Last September, CPRN (the Canadian Policy Research Network) brought together policymakers, front-line workers, academics and others in the field for a workshop to explore alternate diagnoses of marginalization. The goal of the discussion was to begin to reconcile, to the extent possible, different approaches to studying marginalized groups and to identify promising directions for a policy agenda. The workshop sponsor was Human Resources Development Canada.

Jane Jenson prepared a background paper for the event; Thinking about *Marginalization: What, Who and Why?* You can read her full text by visiting:  
<http://lists.magma.ca:8080/T/A17.44.120.1.1580>

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The Gender Equality Network is proud to announce the launch of a new website: Gender Equality at CIDA. The site is located within the Canadian International Development Agency corporate website. An array of resources on gender equality are available at the site and can be viewed by visiting:  
<http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/equality>

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Get out there and do some surfing!

### In This Issue...

### From the CWAG Student Representative...

As student representative for CWAG I have two principle goals. First, I would like to make more students aware that CWAG is an organisation open to all women geographers - both human and physical - not only those whose research focus is gender issues. When I first heard about CWAG I was not aware that the group is as much about advocating for equity as it is about choosing 'gender' as a research topic. Second, as a mature student myself, I would like to gain an awareness of any particular concerns faced by older students, especially those juggling the demands of academia and family life. Finally, with the dearth of female faculty across the country, I have found that the interaction with respected, established women geographers to be an enjoyable experience. CWAG events are also a great way to meet fellow students. Join us at the CAG 50th anniversary celebration in Montreal! If any students would like to contact me about these ideas or anything that is on your mind, please email [blmurphy@uoguelph.ca](mailto:blmurphy@uoguelph.ca)

- Brenda Murphy, CWAG Student Representative

### From the CWAG Secretary...

Secretary - the secretary takes the minutes at the annual CAG meeting (in Montreal this year), sends them out to all who were present, as well as absent CWAG members.

I would like to use my term in the position to recruit new scholars in geography, especially graduate students, and to connect women in geography who may not know each other.

- Jennifer Hyndman, CWAG Secretary  
[hyndman@sfu.ca](mailto:hyndman@sfu.ca)

### From the CWAG Newsletter Editors...

Our goal is to produce two highly informative CWAG newsletters for the members of the specialty group during this academic year (2000-2001). We would like to increase the graduate student input, and provide information on upcoming conferences and sessions planned by CWAG members. Additionally, we hope to include submissions from as many CWAG members as possible, so please feel free to get in touch with us at any point with information regarding a submission or with questions regarding the newsletter, we'd love to hear from you!

- Valorie Crooks and Elizabeth Haack, CWAG Newsletter Editors  
[crooksva@mcmaster.ca](mailto:crooksva@mcmaster.ca), [haackea@mcmaster.ca](mailto:haackea@mcmaster.ca)



### From the CWAG Special Sessions Coordinator...

I am currently the Special Sessions Coordinator for CWAG. I became involved in CWAG because of my commitment to feminism and my academic work in geography. I have a BA in cultural geography from McGill University where I began my first serious exploration of some of the issues surrounding Aboriginality within Canada. At that time I was very fortunate to attend the First Inuit Women's Economic conference in Igloolik, what was then the Northwest Territories, and is now part of Nunavut. My Masters work was at the University of Saskatchewan, where my thesis, still within geography, explored gender as a social variable, and specifically, how Wood's Cree women's work intersected with, and was primary to, the functioning and maintenance of the land based economy.

I began a PhD with Dr Linda Peake at York University. Unfortunately, the combination of being a single parent and a full time graduate student was not an economically viable situation, so I accepted a full time faculty position at Trent University in the Native Studies Department. There, I developed a substantive knowledge of the issues involved in Aboriginal education.

After my term at Trent, I accepted the position of program coordinator and assistant professor for the Indian Studies Department at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) where I first became involved with distance education and Aboriginal women. I coordinated the SIFC's campus site at on Far Reserve of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band in northern Saskatchewan where there were more than 130 students in four separate programs. This is where I learned the importance of distance education for Aboriginal women in their home communities.

My present PhD work is in the Department of Geography at the University of Saskatchewan where I am in the process of rewriting my proposal for my thesis, the title of which is: Aboriginal Women and Distance Education. While I have completed the course requirements for my doctorate work, I am now on a term position within the Department of Native Studies. Last year, I am pleased to say, I was awarded one of the Teaching Excellence Awards at the University. It was the first time the award was presented to an instructor in Native Studies. This year I received the Jaqueline McKenzie Newstead Scholarship from the Canadian Federation of University Women.

I am very committed to issues of equity, both in terms of gender and race. CWAG presents a critical space for geographers to explore, discuss and provide theoretical debate on issues of feminism and gender within the discipline. I look forward to the CWAG sessions at CAG in Montreal this year, and I encourage all to consider a paper for this purpose.

- Colleen Youngs, CWAG Special Sessions at the CAG Montreal, May 31 - June 3, 2001  
colleen.youngs@usask.ca

### An Update on the CAG Newsletter...

At Audrey Kobayashi's suggestion, there is a short piece on equity in each issue of the CAG newsletter. Pamela Moss is coordinating the submissions. If you have an idea or you'd like to submit something please contact her at: PamelaM@Uvic.CA.