

# Who Needs PW?



Young women gathering at an NNPCW leadership event use string to create webs of communication and interconnectedness.

Photo by Carol Hykema

## A look at why women's organizations are needed today (and tomorrow)

BY CHERI HARPER

I must admit, in years past, when I was invited to join or simply attend a women's group such as Presbyterian Women, I thought to myself, "Why? Everything is so different (in other words, so much better) for women today. Why bother with those old-fashioned social action groups, Bible studies or sewing circles? Aren't they all so passé? Women are equal now," I would say to myself. "We have choices that didn't exist before. We're integrated into almost every area in which we seek to have a place. We've come such a long way, baby; we don't need to separate ourselves off into a single-gender group."

This outlook on women's groups continued throughout my earlier years of college, entering the workforce

and becoming a stay-at-home mom. I felt like I was doing just fine on my own, thank you. However, things began to change after I left the familiar world of work and family and enrolled in seminary. A few weeks into my new adventure, I was awash in guilt and confusion. One minute I was convinced I was a terrible wife who had banished her husband to laundry land for eternity. The next minute I knew my daughter would be eternally scarred because of my inattentiveness. I would tie myself in knots, thinking, I'm really lucky to be here. My professors demand so much of me and I have big expectations to fulfill. But I haven't finished the reading assignments from last week yet, much less last night!

In the midst of this inner chaos, I attended a meeting at the seminary's Women's Center. Women students and professors gathered together to share ways of coping with the everyday stresses of school, work and family. During our conversation, one woman spoke of feeling guilty for not being the perfect wife, mom, writer, teacher, friend, daughter and everything else that she felt she should be. At first I had a hard time accepting how closely I identified with this woman—not because of what she said, but because of who she was—a professor! As she shared her story, I began to see that in spite of the fact that we were in dramatically different stages of our careers, we had much in common for the simple reason that we are both

women. What's more, she didn't conclude her story with a simple platitude or placating answer. Instead, she mused over the ways in which women wage a daily battle just to "keep our guilt at a manageable level!" As I left that meeting, I thought to myself, I am not alone.

## More Than Just Another Meeting

With a little more time and maturity, my understanding of the purpose of a women's organization has expanded. While personal connections often form the foundations of successful and meaningful groups, women of faith are called by Christ to look beyond our own worlds and to embrace the experiences of our sisters and brothers. Yes, our roles in society, home and the workplace have changed dramatically. No, we do not suffer the same discrimination and sexism that our foremothers experienced. However, just because some individuals are more independent, have visible, public roles and enjoy access to more choices, does this mean that we can declare the work on behalf of women complete? Not at all.

On average, women still earn only 70 cents to every dollar their male counterparts earn for the same work. Women continue to be the primary objects of emotional and physical violence. Rape is still used as a weapon of war, and domestic violence is the greatest cause of injury and death to women globally.<sup>1</sup> Many women lack access to adequate health care, often choosing to treat themselves or to seek traditional healers rather than pay for professional services.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, in sub-Saharan Africa, women make up 75 percent of people under the age of 25 who are living with AIDS.<sup>3</sup> Women still lack access to seats of power and influence, averaging only 15 percent of

seats in national parliaments worldwide. Though women and children are often the most affected by wars and armed fighting, they are seldom invited to peace negotiations or involved in reconstruction efforts.<sup>4</sup> And women still have their voices silenced. Women still need each other. It is in and through a women's organization that we can learn about each other's struggles and do something to improve them.

For women of privilege, though our place in the world has changed, our conflicts have not completely ended. Since many women now have more choices in how to live and serve in the world, we need more guidance and support when making tough decisions. With women pulled in many different directions, we need a place in which we can come together to support one another and figure out ways to resist feeling such pressure. When we find ourselves fractured by work, family and social obligations, we need a circle that will draw us back together and forge tighter bonds of community, compassion and love.

As children of God, women continue to need an organization that will speak to our unique relationship with our Creator. Though we acknowledge that all of us, male and female, are created in God's image and likeness, we still struggle to relate to our God who has been imaged for millennia as only male. A women's religious organization has the unique gifts and abilities to speak to the special theological needs and concerns of women.

Of course, women in the United States occupy only a part of God's world. Many of us feel that our lives, though still filled with challenges and setbacks, are quite comfortable now. But this is not the case for most women in today's world. Women in the United States need an organization that calls our attention to our

sisters who do not have the same benefits and choices we enjoy. We need a place that helps us think of ways to walk in solidarity with those who are not as fortunate. We need a place in which we can combine our efforts in order to offer help that is deep, wide and ultimately an answer to God's call for us to tend to the widows, orphans and strangers that compose our community. All of this, and more, is what Presbyterian Women offers me (and you).

## Talk About It

As your PW group thinks about its hopes and dreams for the year ahead, discuss why women in your congregation and/or community need your group.

Some women may feel they do not need another meeting or activity in their already hectic schedule. So, why be a part of Presbyterian Women?

What makes PW different from other women's organizations? (Consider both your group and the organization as a whole.)

How is PW vital and relevant to the needs of women today?

What can your group do to be more responsive to the changing concerns of women?

Are the answers to any/all of the questions above reflected in the activities/events you have planned for the upcoming year? 🍷

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1 "How Is Poverty Different for Women and Men?" *Oxfam Magazine*, No.1 (2005), 8.

2 Ibid.

3 "Mobilising Women's Leadership," World YWCA Annual Report, 2003- 2004, 4.

4 "Progress for Women Is Progress for All," UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2005.