

Nithi Deivanayagam

HC 444

Building Capabilities at WomanShare

Introduction

Formed in 1974, WomanShare stands as one of the longest-continuing women's lands, representing the feminist and planned community movements in the United States. Women came together in large numbers during the 1970s to resist rooted patriarchal systems and advocate for their rights, marking a turning point in the struggle for gender equality. To gain more independence and to break free from conventional home duties, women fought to abolish strict gender roles. The community's experiences and expertise cover a range of skills essential for communal living, from building design and construction to health and healing, gardening, and political activism. WomanShare's founding principles highlight its commitment to being a women-only space, a home for lesbians, and providing services to the larger community (Founding Principles of WomanShare, WomanShare Collective). This commitment aligns with the broader feminist ethos of collaboration, equality, and shared decision-making. The participants at WomanShare, including traveling women, extended visitors, apprentices, and the resident collective, contribute to the diversity of the community, reflecting intentional inclusivity and emphasizing communal living, conservation of natural resources, and creating a healthy and supportive environment.

Historical Context: Women's Liberation Movement and Lesbian Separatism

Several sociological and structural barriers prevented women from participating fully in society and achieving equality in the 1970s. Among the issues that fueled feminist advocacy were limited reproductive rights, unequal access to healthcare and education, and employment

discrimination. By questioning established standards and advocating independence for women, Germaine Greer's 1970 work "The Female Eunuch" made a fundamental contribution to the feminist movement. Greer claimed, "For the first time in history, the sex war is being fought out by women in the name of women" (Greer, 1970, pg 11). This quote highlights the significance of women advocating for themselves, rather than having their struggles and aspirations judged or defined by men. It reflects a shift in agency and self-determination, where women were not just passive recipients of change but active agents. Similarly, Kate Millett states that "each century and each culture has considered natural and normal in this complex phenomenon [of sex] has varied enormously" highlighting the constructed nature of gender norms (Millett, 1970). This shows the importance of questioning and challenging these norms, which are products of cultural and historical contexts. Millett's insight serves as a rallying call for feminists to dismantle rigid gender expectations and advocate for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of gender identity and expression.

WomanShare's commitment to questioning traditional understanding and empowering its members shows the broader societal shifts in perceptions of women's roles and capabilities. Its emphasis on shared learning and acceptance of communal living are examples of feminist efforts that challenge gender norms. To rectify these injustices, the women's liberation movement pushed for social and legal reforms that would overturn patriarchal systems. The movement's statement inspired women from all stages of life to take up the cause of gender justice since it reflected demands for equality, independence, and the recognition of women's rights as human rights. In the context of WomanShare, these quotes resonate deeply with the community's ethos of questioning traditional understandings and embracing alternative ways of living.

WomanShare's commitment to shared learning and communal living aligns with the spirit of

Greer and Millett's words, emphasizing the importance of women forging their paths and challenging societal norms. WomanShare embodies the feminist principle of empowerment through collective action, showing how feminist processes can manifest in lived experiences and community practices.

Lesbian separatism emerged as a radical branch within the broader women's liberation movement, advocating for the complete separation of women from patriarchal systems, including institutions, relationships, and communities dominated by men. This ideology, epitomized by WomanShare's emphasis on communal living and shared learning, was a dynamic feminist process for navigating the world. Adrienne Rich, a prominent figure in lesbian feminist theory, said the transformative potential of separatism, stating, "The institution of heterosexuality is a cornerstone of women's oppression. Lesbianism challenges the compulsory nature of heterosexuality and offers a vision of female bonding and empowerment" (Rich, 1980). Rich's words highlight the core principles of lesbian separatism, which sought to dismantle the structures supporting male dominance while encouraging alternative spaces where women could thrive. WomanShare's embrace of communal living and rejection of traditional gender roles exemplify the practical applications of lesbian separatist principles, providing a supportive environment for women to explore their identities and build solidarity (Founding Principles of WomanShare, WomanShare Collective). Julie Enszer's analysis suggests that lesbian separatism functioned as a dynamic method for living as opposed to a static ideology. By centering women's experiences and relationships outside the confines of heteronormativity, lesbian separatism offered a radical vision for feminist praxis, challenging the foundations of patriarchy and envisioning a future grounded in women's freedom and independence.

EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE

WomanShare has a reservoir of experience and expertise. This is most important on a day-to-day level, where expertise is provided by the resident caretaking collective. Some of the current skills available are:

- Building design and construction
- Building and grounds maintenance
- Health and healing skills
- Gardening and food production
- Community and political activism
- Group process and facilitation
- Program planning and production
- Education
- Accounting
- Art production
- General country skills

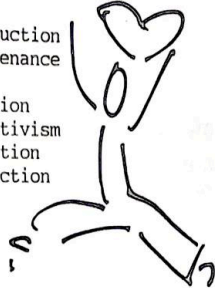


Figure 1, from WomanShare: The Twenty-Year Report

Diversity of Skills at WomanShare

At WomanShare, the women's experiences and expertise encompass a wide range of essential communal living skills (Figure 1). This diversity forms the foundation for a rich knowledge pool, which creates a strong support system within the community. As one member, Jemma Crae describes the community's founding principles: "Our goals for ourselves were to make a family, to learn to live together... We wanted to learn new skills, and then teach what we learned" (Burmeister, 2013, pg. 61). This commitment to shared learning reflects the broader societal shifts in the 1970s, a period marked by the women's liberation movement and a desire to challenge traditional gender roles. Women sought alternative living arrangements that allowed them to break away from conventional expectations and build communities based on shared principles. WomanShare thrived on the diversity of its members' backgrounds that brought together a range of skills and talents. Workshops, organized by members for members, are a testament to this diversity. The community's ability to provide a platform for members to showcase and share their professional skills is evident in the quote, "Workshops came from the recognition of how many skills and talents the WomanShare members had" (McCourt, 2000, pg.

28). This demonstrates the proactive approach of WomanShare in harnessing the diverse expertise of its members. Also, the quote, "Workshops, especially those that involve the participation of those attending, are one of the most powerfully bonding activities in WomanShare," emphasizes how the diverse backgrounds of members contribute to the community's cohesion (McCourt, 2000, pg. 29). Affinity groups within WomanShare also exemplify the diverse interests and concerns of its members. The quote, "Affinity groups came out of potluck go-arounds when an individual would bring up a life situation that she thought other members might have in common," illustrates how these groups address various topics and highlight the richness of experiences and backgrounds within WomanShare (McCourt, 2000, pg. 29). The resulting intimate connections fostered within affinity groups contribute to the diversity that shapes the community's abilities.

CARING FOR NATURAL RESOURCES

WomanShare has never cut timber for sale. We have cleared and maintained the fields and housing areas to protect them from fire danger. Pines are beginning to grow back into the open meadow. Recycling of metal, glass, plastic and paper is done regularly and the composting outhouse is functioning. The well is producing enough water for house, yards and garden although the 20+ year old pump will soon need to be replaced. Work on a gray water disposal system is being planned for the new bath house.

LIVING SPACES

Six cabins have been built, as well as several outhouses, a garden shed, garden fence, storage shed and wood shed. The main house has been minimally maintained and needs to be replaced. The resident collective has raised a small amount of funds but not enough to finance the rebuilding. Cabins have been improved and maintained but the Hexagon is showing some deterioration and will need structural repair. A bath house will be built in 1994 to replace the main house bathroom.

Figure 2, from WomanShare: The Twenty-Year Report

Educational Initiatives and Knowledge Transfer

WomanShare actively engaged in workshops and learning initiatives, emphasizing education as a means of empowerment. As Bethroot Gwynn notes, "We wanted to learn new skills, and then teach what we learned. As soon as we learned it, we wanted to teach it"

(Burmeister, 2013, pg. 61; Figure 2). This commitment to continuous learning and knowledge transfer becomes a cornerstone for fostering a culture of empowerment: “With help from other lesbians in the growing community, she built a small hexagon-shaped cabin. She also built an outdoor bed to entertain the potential lover she longed for” (Kleiner, 2003, pg. 31; Figure 3).

Women sought individual and group empowerment during the height of the feminist movement in the early 1970s. Schooling evolved as a vehicle for questioning social norms and for self-determination. The establishment of educational initiatives within communities like WomanShare reflects the broader feminist goals of the era.

We have been doing several projects this fall. The hexagon is almost restored to Desirable Cabin status...after the roof was repaired and replaced I removed and fixed all of the windows, built new steps, sanded the walls and moved the wood stove away from the center of the cabin. Yet to do...build a porch over the steps and build a new bed. Badly leaking, Yarrow got a new roof too...Becky and I tried to do the job between rain storms but we got caught by a sudden SNOW storm when we still had a third of the shingles left to put on. Now the snow is gone, the roof is finished and Becky is happy. We also had a new telephone line put in so that she can have her own phone and computer. It was another messy project. During breaks in the weather we had trenches dug and lines put in; one of the phone company trucks drove over the water line to the garden and now we have to repair the pipe before spring. One other project that we did, with the help of our visitor Nora, was to paint the living room. The walls are now white with pale yellow trim. It is so much lighter, in appearance and feeling...I think you will like it.

Figure 3, from the WomanShare Newsletter (1991)

Workshops were a vital tool for knowledge transfer and skill enhancement, encouraging an environment where individuals could engage in different skills. This collaborative interaction enriched the community and cultivated a broader network of shared experiences, promoting continuous learning and growth beyond local boundaries. The idea that workshops serve as a pipeline for knowledge transfer is supported by the claim, "Workshops offer opportunities for members who conduct workshops professionally to try out new formats" (McCourt, 2000, pg. 28). This organized sharing of skills allows for knowledge transfer and encourages experimentation and innovation within the community. Members actively participated in

different workshops and learned new skills to find their interests and ways they can contribute to the communities. The quote highlights the interconnectedness of WomanShare with other collective community projects stating, "Because WomanShare is cooperatively run, its members understand and are drawn to support other cooperative community ventures" (McCourt, 2000, pg. 30). This involvement extends knowledge transfer beyond the immediate community, creating a network of shared experiences and expertise.

Mentorship Dynamics

Mentorship plays a crucial role in empowering newcomers at WomanShare. The community values the importance of mentorship in guiding individuals through unfamiliar responsibilities. Hawk Madrone reflects on the significance of teaching, stating, "I became this woman, Petra, and I was this woman that everybody valued. It gave me a good idea of what it was like to have excellent self-confidence" (Burmeister, 2013, pg. 63). The mentoring relationships seen in WomanShare are reminiscent of larger feminist initiatives that highlighted the value of mentoring for women's growth. This method originated from the consciousness-raising movements of the 1960s and 1970s when female members supported and exchanged experiences while navigating a patriarchal society.

The dynamics of mentorship and mutual support within the community are fundamental to WomanShare's success. The communal gatherings, like potlucks, allow members to share their skills, fostering a mentorship culture (WomanShare Newsletter, 1990). These gatherings' check-ins, acknowledgments, and structured themes create a supportive environment. The potlucks serve as a platform for mentorship is supported by the statement, "Potlucks always start with a check-in by each member going around the circle" (McCourt, 2000, pg. 27), underlining the emphasis on individual connection and communication that strengthens mentorship bonds.

Also, barnraising exemplifies the cooperative spirit within WomanShare. The credit system for barnraising work is outlined, stating, "A good WomanShare barnraising calls for a good plan and a broker who thoroughly enjoys staging a production" (McCourt, 2000, pg. 28). This highlights the collaborative planning and execution involved in larger projects, showcasing a mentorship model where members contribute their skills and time. Also, the passage emphasizes the role of brokers in barn raisings, noting, "Brokers earn one credit for every hour they spend making arrangements," recognizing the value of organizational and leadership skills in mentorship dynamics (McCourt, 2000, pg. 27). Beyond potlucks and barn raisings, WomanShare's mentorship beliefs extend into various aspects of community life, presenting a holistic approach to support and skill-sharing.

Challenging Traditional Expectations:

At WomanShare, challenging traditional expectations is a lived experience that affects every aspect of community life. Visitors and newcomers to WomanShare are placed in a situation where they feel motivated to set themselves free from the limitations imposed by social norms and develop their skills in a supportive environment. This idea is deeply rooted in the community, as experienced members guide women and transfer their knowledge, creating an environment of empowerment and learning (Figure 4). Women can confidently take on new responsibilities because experienced members mentor and share their knowledge. As Jemma Crae states, "I became a self-confident person, so I could realize what it was like to be self-confident" (Burmeister, 2013, pg. 63). This transforming process emphasizes the sense of empowerment that results from rejecting stereotypes and valuing a variety of skill sets. WomanShare's commitment to challenging traditional expectations aligns with the broader objectives of the feminist movement in the 1970s. During this period, societal norms regarding

gender roles were challenged, and WomanShare challenged rooted stereotypes and advocated for a more inclusive and equal society. By creating an atmosphere that values individual independence and celebrates diverse talents, WomanShare challenges traditional expectations and serves as a motivation for social change within the larger feminist discourse.

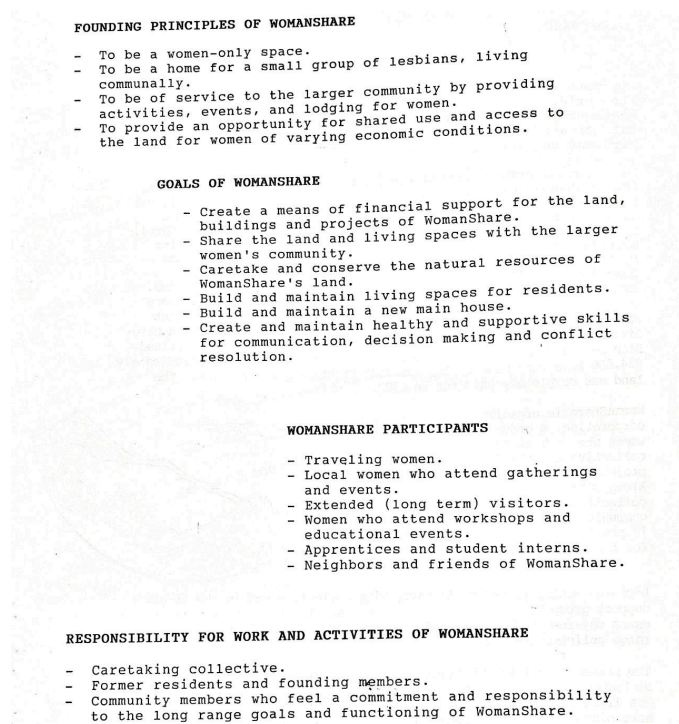


Figure 4, from the Founding Principles of WomanShare

Impact and Legacy of WomanShare

One lasting influence is the redefinition of societal norms and expectations surrounding women's roles. WomanShare's commitment to communal living and shared learning challenged traditional gender norms, which encouraged an environment where women could experiment with alternative ways of living (Reference Files II). This legacy is clear in the ongoing discourse surrounding gender roles and the broader acceptance of diverse lifestyles, reflecting a departure from the rigid expectations in the post-war era. The ongoing fight for gender equality requires a multifaceted approach combining intentional communities' principles with broader societal

changes to dismantle deeply ingrained biases and foster truly equitable workplaces (Enszler, 2016).

Despite significant progress in the fight for gender equality, inequalities continue in the workplace for women - the gender wage gap being one of the biggest issues with “women typically earning 82 cents for every dollar earned by men” (Kochhar, 2023). Women, on average, earn less than their male co-workers for the same work, which reflects the deeply rooted systemic discrimination. Inequality is further aggravated by occupational division, as women are frequently placed in lower-paying and historically female-dominated professions. Moreover, corporate limitations that prevent women from rising to leadership positions present obstacles to their professional success (Schieder and Gould, 2016; Starnski and Son Hing, 2015).

Workplace discrimination and harassment further perpetuate gender-based disparities.

Stereotypes that hinder women's professional potential, unequal access to resources, and unequal possibilities for advancement are common challenges for them (Pytlík, 2023). The interconnections of gender with racial, ethnic, and age characteristics complicate these problems, creating a complex web of inequity that requires creative responses. The continuing existence of the gender gap in the workplace highlights the necessity of ongoing awareness-raising, activism, and proactive measures to create genuinely inclusive and fair work settings.

- THE BASIC EXPECTATIONS FOR WOMEN LIVING AT WOMANSHARE:
1. WomanShare is separatist land. No men may live here or visit unless they are family members. No men may stay overnight on the land.
 2. The women who live at WomanShare are responsible for raising all money needed to pay for upkeep of land and buildings. Women living here will purchase, as a donation, tools and materials needed for projects. All buildings are a gift to the land.
 3. Women living at WomanShare must repair and maintain all of the buildings and the road.
 4. Women living at WomanShare must acquire and save money for a new main house/community building and any other needed buildings. The women living here must build, or have built, all new buildings.
 5. Women living here must keep good relations with neighbors, local community and former residents.
 6. WomanShare must be more than just a place to live...there must be community service, gatherings or projects happening here.
 7. WomanShare must be inclusive to other women not living here.
 8. Women living at WomanShare must work with the larger circle of former residents and former deed holders. The structure is called the coordinating council, responsible for long range plans and decisions.
 9. Women living at WomanShare must be open to and create a structure to welcome visiting women and former residents.
 10. Women living at WomanShare may own personal property that they may take with them when they leave. WomanShare cannot reimburse women for money spent to build cabins or for any items purchased as a donation to be shared as common property.

Figure 5, from the WomanShare Newsletter (1998)

Lesbian lands were practical spaces where women lived autonomously, challenging traditional family structures and providing a platform for the exploration of diverse lifestyles. In these environments, they actively rejected gender stereotypes and focused on communal living, which allowed for the development of alternative models of social organization (Figure 5).

Women in lesbian lands often engaged in shared responsibilities, decision-making processes, and resource allocation, fostering a sense of empowerment and disassembling preconceived notions about women's capabilities (Burmeister, 2013). The legacies of lesbian lands from the feminist movement have contributed to a broader acceptance of diverse lifestyles and alternative family structures, challenging the deeply ingrained biases that perpetuated gender inequalities.

Recognizing and celebrating the transformative influence of lesbian lands in disassembling traditional gender norms provides a better understanding of the multifaceted approach needed to achieve genuine gender equality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, WomanShare stands as a pioneering example of communal living deeply rooted in feminist principles and activism. Through its commitment to questioning traditional gender roles, encouraging diverse skill sets, and allowing knowledge transfer through mentorship, WomanShare has empowered its members and left a lasting legacy in the ongoing fight for gender equality. The community's emphasis on shared learning, communal gatherings, and collaborative projects challenged societal norms and provided a supportive environment for women to thrive autonomously. WomanShare's legacy highlights the importance of intentional communities in encouraging empowerment and challenging systemic inequalities. WomanShare is an example of how alternative social organization models can support greater gender equality and societal development by valuing shared decision-making, embracing diversity, and encouraging mentorship. Also, the significance of education as a tool for empowerment and self-determination is highlighted by WomanShare's emphasis on ongoing learning and information transfer.

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