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WOMEN IN TRANSITION — A Case Study of Yakima County, Washington

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My perception of the problems of women in transition, or displaced homemakers, was restricted until about a year and a half ago. The term displaced homemakers is defined as women in their middle years who have been "displaced" from their jobs as full-time homemakers because of divorce, death of a spouse, or loss of family income. They are generally ineligible for state or federal assistance or other benefits, and they are not eligible for unemployment insurance, having been solely engaged in unpaid labor in the home.

With a rising divorce rate and women increasingly outliving their husbands, every married woman not gainfully employed is a potential displaced homemaker.

I became involved with the displaced homemaker issue when the Washington State Women's Commission was charged to provide input into a displaced homemakers' bill in Washington State. Because of my work with women, I was asked to meet with agency and club leaders to identify needs of women. The task seemed fairly simple. I had been a group facilitator many times before.

The job became one of conflict management as the meeting progressed. Three different groups were vying strongly for the state or federal funds being requested to help displaced homemakers. Competition was for power and money, however, and not to meet the needs of individuals, since none of the three had an actual program in progress. Despite the conflict, interest was expressed in coordinating efforts.

Following that meeting, a member of the National Organization for Women asked me to help teach a class for women seeking employment. The target audience was displaced homemakers. We met with staff members of the Job-Finding Project, under Employment Security, and began planning an eight-week series — "Women and Employment." Objectives were as follows:

1. Provide an opportunity for displaced homemakers to get acquainted and share experiences.
2. Surface frustration and concerns and provide a model for dealing with them.

3. Involve participants in group discussions and activities to improve self-concept and attitude.
4. Assist participants to develop short and long range goals.
5. Provide information and techniques for creative job hunting.
6. Inform participants of current legislation relating to displaced homemakers, equal rights, and additional laws affecting women in Washington State.

"Women and Employment" had all of the characteristics of a traditional Extension short course. A need was identified, a program developed, an audience recruited, lessons taught, and participants evaluated the total effort. The only difference between this short course and others I had been involved with was the inclusion of information about related policy. Such information was given at that "teachable moment," after the participants received answers to their initial concerns.

Public policy education, as such, is new to me. Like most other Extension home economists, I am called upon frequently to clarify or interpret public policy regarding consumer rights and responsibilities, labeling, safety, and home ownership. Yet I never thought of this involvement as policy education. When asked how to effect policy I often assumed an advocacy position rather than an educative one. I feel it is very important for agents to learn how to effectively provide information about public issues and policy.

During the workshop "Women and Employment," I first acted as a catalyst in the promotion on radio and TV and in the newspaper by surfacing the problem and encouraging women to attend. I was also a catalyst in class. Participants recognized a need to come and I encouraged each one to believe in their own abilities and worthiness. My position moved to facilitator as we dealt with problem solving and goal setting; then to resource as I presented information on job finding and policy. All three positions were essential in affecting change within the women.

Although my work assignment is home economics, I realize how intertwined CRD programs are with family living. Last year the policy education workshop further impressed on me the importance of integrating programs. This year, because of the interest in Yakima County Extension Homemakers, I developed an educational program for clubs on school funding. I used the issues

as a vehicle to briefly teach the public policy making process and taxation. In November, we will have a three-part public program on school funding.

Public policy education is addictive. I appreciate the training received and look forward to further study.