

STARTING AND ENERGIZING AN ISSUES GROUP

What is an Issues Group?

Quite simply, it is a group of women gathering to discuss current issues, and developing some plans for action. An Issues group can range from the very informal, to a structured interest group, with the Chair as a member of the Board or Executive.

Why Start One?

One of CFUW's main purposes is to promote the common good locally, nationally and internationally, and to advocate for the equality of women and girls. An "issue" is where it all begins.

Starting an Issues group can be an opportunity for life-long learning, civic engagement and even a bit of fun.

Getting Started

If you would like to start a group to discuss and work on advocacy issues within your Club, first speak to your Club's Interest Group leader or your President. Like any other interest group, you would usually start this by signing up members at the beginning of the CFUW year in September. It is OK to begin small and even to stay small!

Alternatively, you might start with a small group of people that you know are interested in advocacy, just to test the idea first.

Kitchen Table Talks

So many of our meetings, as with meetings around the world, are held at the kitchen table. As with family dinners, it is a comfortable way to talk and discuss.

Organize your meetings either based on a single topic that everyone has been challenged to find out something, or allow each person to bring something of concern to the table. There is no need for action, it is simply awareness and education.

You can begin by looking at issues that are easy to discuss/study. For example:

- Use newspapers and/or news articles, and take action items from CFUW newsletters to spark discussion;
- Issues that are important to members individually;
- Newly adopted CFUW resolutions that have come with suggested actions and advocacy materials in the Fall, but don't feel limited to the adopted resolutions;
- Key issues within your own community or within your province; and
- Books, usually non-fiction, that are of interest to the group.

Like other interest groups, try to meet on a regular monthly basis. Some Club Issues Groups have gone on field trips, had guest speakers, organized film screenings, etc.

Taking Action

There may be times when you wish to move beyond studying and debating issues to take some sort of action, such as writing letters to or meeting with your local politicians, organizing a public event, and/or working on the adopted resolutions. Always discuss this with your President. Please familiarize yourself and your members with the *CFUW Guidelines for Advocacy*.

The Club receives emails both from CFUW Ontario Council and CFUW National asking for your Club to take actions, such as writing letters to your MPP or MP, or signing petitions. CFUW will often create template letters that your Club can adapt, and for individual use. Any help that you can give will be appreciated.

Politicians are much more likely to listen to their constituents (i.e. you and your members), which is what makes CFUW's network across Ontario and the country so valuable. As one of the few women's organizations left with the capacity to advocate, our voice has become more important than ever.

Other Considerations

If your group begins to do the advocacy work for the Club, consider having a member of your advocacy group sit on the Executive of your Club. This will help ensure the executive is aware of the issues you are working on, and what the Club is being asked to support.

Use your newsletter on a regular basis to inform other Club members about the existence of your advocacy group, what it does, and to update them on issues that are currently being addressed.

Become a part of the CFUW business portion of your General Meetings, telling the Club members of the issues that you are working on.

If you find that your group is becoming tired, think back to Kitchen Table Talks. You may also want to have a brainstorming session to develop some new plans, such as an issues-based book club, discussion group, speakers, and field trips. Many times you just need a holiday. Saving the world can be exhausting!

Helpful Resources

The CFUW websites: The Advocacy section of CFUW Ontario Council's website, www.cfuwontcouncil.org and the CFUW National Members' website, www.cfuwadmin.org (log in: viewonly; password: cfuw4321) You will find information about campaigns we're working on under **TAKE ACTION**, and a number of resources, including the *Advocacy Handbook* and *Act On It – Locally*.

Emails to Issues groups – When CFUW creates either template letters or an action alert package, these will be emailed to the Issues groups directly for your use. These may be time-sensitive.

The Advocacy Blogs: CFUW Ontario Council: <http://cfuwontcouncil.org/advocacy/advocacy-action/>
CFUW National: <http://cfuwadvocacy.wordpress.com/>

Facebook: CFUW Ontario Council: <https://www.facebook.com/CFUWOntarioCouncil/>