

The Concept of Self-Help

Most of us have grown up in a culture that has taught us that information about our health and the knowledge and skill to treat ourselves when something goes wrong is the property only of experts and professional doctors. We have learned to rely on professionals and to believe that we ourselves do not have knowledge about our bodies and are not capable of learning about them. Also, because most doctors are men, we are often confronted by their sexism when we, as women, approach them for health care. Their sexism comes from their socialization as men generally, from their medical training which is male dominated, and from a lack of empathy towards women's sexual and reproductive functioning because it is not their personal experience.

If we look at the situation historically, we find that in many societies women used to be the healers. In European society up until about the year 1500, it was women who had control over much of the information about healing, contraception, abortion, and birth. Women passed on skills and recipes for herbal cures to one another. Most medieval villages had at least one "wise" woman who was a midwife and possessed other healing skills. During the period of the witch hunts in Europe, it was often these women who were condemned as witches and hung or burnt at the stake. This was one way in which the church (which was dominated by men) consolidated its power over the people and in the process much knowledge was lost.

In the 19th century, various approaches to healing co-existed--there was more than one health system (e.g. homeopathy, midwifery, herbology). In North America in the late 19th century and early 20th century, the American Medical Association with its specific model of drug-oriented health care consolidated its position and successfully lobbied the government to bar other forms of medical practice, many of which had been more accessible to women, black people and working class white people. Much of the thrust came because of the increasing awareness of the great profits to be made from the manufacture of drugs.

It is interesting to note that the present concept of a doctor being an expert in whose trust you place yourself to be cured is a recent concept, as opposed to the more traditional concept of a healer being a person you consulted for advice on how to treat yourself.

As women we have had a lot of power over our own bodies and our health

care taken away from us. One way women have begun to take back control is to collect and share information with each other. In fact, we all have valuable information and can share and learn it together. This concept is called "self-help".