Special Issue Editor's Comments on the
10th Anniversary of WH & UL
& the Looming Funding Challenges

Dear board members, contributing authors, reviewers and readers of the WH & UL. As many of you who are the editors, authors and/or the reviewers of our journal know well, we are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the WH & UL. As those of you who are avid readers of our publications know, in the past 10 years, we never missed an issue, we never delayed a publication, and we never failed to respond, in the best way we know how, to your suggestions, comments or inquiries. Within the first decade of our existence, we published research papers and theoretical contributions from—literally—four corners of the world, thus serving as an arena for the exchange of ideas within a truly international and an interdisciplinary forum. We continued to print a small number of paper copies and offered them to university libraries and interested individuals for a reasonable subscription fee. However, our main effort was concentrated on making our on-line version free-access, with no fees or strings attached. Our goal has always been to make new knowledge created through our publications available to all those who seek such knowledge. Our goal has been to facilitate an intellectual exchange about ways of improving women’s health, and showing where change is most needed. Honouring the peer review process, we openly and proudly supported critical, non-traditional research without falling into the trap of exclusively publishing research that buttresses and/or duplicates the status quo. We sought, and found ‘academic excellence’ in the efforts of academics who work on women’s health issues in both the developed and the developing parts of the world.

As the founding editor of the WH & UL, I am exceptionally proud of the critical axis of analysis this journal and all the contributors to this journal brought into the complex issues women face in their mental or physical health and/or in the hurdles they suffer in obtaining access to healthcare. In different ways, our contributing authors informed us about health-related problems people face in different countries, many of which are irrefutably connected to age, race, ethnicity, birth-place, class, and above all, gender. In their different ways, our contributing authors enlightened us about the collusion of the traditional forms of knowledge in healthcare and its frequent failure to address the special needs of women, be it in birthing and other reproductive issues, childcare, women-focused diseases, ageing and violence. In its 10-years of existence, this journal never compromised in
giving a forum for novel ideas and debates that had the potential to benefit the health of women and girl-children.

As the founding editor of the WH & UL, I am also extremely proud to announce that the journal has many thousands of readers from all over the world. Our long-term collaboration with the Robarts Library, the University of Toronto Free Access system (T-Space) has benefited the journal greatly, by opening our issues—literally—to the world. The unique capabilities of T-Space also include keeping an accurate track of our journal’s usage, issue by issue, as well as article by article. Who, from which country, at what day accessed the journal, whether this particular reader was a habitual reader or a new reader can be tracked, and preserved as usage data. It is through this ingenious tracking system that we know exactly how many readers access our published articles, and we can produce year-by-year comparisons of usage across time. It is my great pleasure to report to you that we have both repeat and new readers from many countries in Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, not to mention the North and South Americas. Some of our published articles have reached a few thousands of readers, a fact that is worthy of celebration in itself. Many of our published articles have been republished in edited books, and course readers. Some of our published articles have been translated into other languages. Throughout its decade-long existence, the WH & UL journal has never failed to give free access to all these intellectual activities and dissemination of knowledge.

Despite all of its noteworthy accomplishments that I briefly touched upon, the WH & UL is at a seriously critical point in its life. To put it more bluntly, the WH & UL is now at a stage where its service to the academic community is seriously threatened. Regrettably, the WH & UL’s collapse seems much more plausible than its continuation of service within the realm of women’s health. I know that many of you will be surprised to see the incongruity between the many accomplishments of this journal, and the very high probability of its demise. Please believe me when I say that I am as baffled and as frustrated about this incongruity as you are. Let me try to explain, in as few words as possible, the ‘macro’ forces that are threatening the WH & UL journal’s existence.

Publication of academic journals takes up an enormous amount of time and energy. Fortunately, most of the serious and time-consuming work is done by academics, who voluntarily serve as editors, co-editors, associate editors, and reviewers. We are deeply grateful to the totally voluntary contributions of each of the members of our distinguished editorial and review crews. As the founding editor of the WH & UL, I myself have devoted possibly many thousands of hours to the day-by-day needs of this journal in the last decade, which was easily offset by the immeasurable pleasure and pride I derived from the journal’s growth and maturity. University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) also provided
space and many other administrative resources, and we are exceptionally grateful for its ongoing support. Yet, despite the magnitude of the selfless and generous contribution of many academics and the continuing administrative help we receive from UTSC, academic journals also need funds to cover inescapable expenses. We need to upgrade our computers and printers to keep up with the leaps and bounds of development in electronic communication, we need to hire professionals to manage and upgrade the journal website. Although the T-space services are free of charge, we need the help of professionals to dovetail the journal efforts with the services provided by the T-space. Other major expenses involve the professional help required to design, format, and actually publish the hard copies. These relatively substantial costs are further exasperated by the mailing/shipment costs and long-distance call expenses. In sum, despite the fact that all academic labour is kindly and generously donated to the WH & UL, and despite the administrative support and space provided by UTSC, running a journal still requires a stable flow of funds. To my knowledge, no academic journal survives solely on the trickle of subscription fees. Publication requires a steady infusion of funding from either a mega-publishing company which has well-established advertisement capabilities and can charge large subscription fees, or through funding from the government sources earmarked for academic activities.

Up to this point of its existence, the WH & UL has been the grateful recipient of some funding. Our first two years of existence were made possible by a generous contribution from the Wellesley Central Health Corporation (WCHC), which is closely affiliated with the University of Toronto. At the inception of the journal, the WCHC made funds available for start-up costs on health-related new initiatives. After engaging in a stiffly competitive selection process, the WH & UL received its much appreciated start-up funding from the WCHC.

The third and the fourth years of the journal were shadowed by funding anxieties, which were temporarily ameliorated through support from sociology departments both at the University of Toronto and at UTSC. The WH & UL owes much gratitude to all those badly-needed bridging funds, which served as a life-line in its maturation process. Starting from its 5th year, the WH & UL reached its maturity by gaining both national and international exposure. It is in our 5th year that we were able to compete for journal funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). At first, and after a grueling competition process, we were awarded funds as an ‘open access’ journal. Then, in 2007, we successfully competed and won in the SSHRC funding competition reserved for mainstream Canadian journals. At the time, the prestigious SSHRC support showed us that we have really ‘arrived’ at the serious academic publishing scene.
The WH & UL journal gratefully acknowledges all the SSHRC support which helped pay for many of our obligatory expenses over the past five years. Indeed, it is through the last bit of the SSHRC funding that this particular issue (Vol. XI, Issue 1) is being published. Moreover, what we are most grateful for is the SSHRC’s recognition of the quality and academic integrity of the WH & UL journal, expressed through the generous funding we received after their elaborate review process. As the founding editor of this critical feminist journal, I cannot overstate the importance of a government-based organization to give the green-light to a journal which openly challenges the status quo in healthcare provision, delivery and access. Critical feminist works like our journal need and thrive on no-strings-attached funding—with the single expectation of academic integrity—to keep on doing what they are set out to do.

In the months that were approaching the 2010 Canadian journal funding competition of the SSHRC, the WH & UL journal was confident in the knowledge that we had everything that it takes to successfully get our funding renewed. We had the published hard-copies of our issues, we had our peer-review process in place, we had the requests for reprints for some of our published articles. Above all, we had T-Space statistics which showed not only a steady, but a rising trend in readership; we had the open-access credentials to show the spreading influence of the important work we published. Yet, under its new organization, the SSHRC dramatically and quite abruptly changed its own criteria, and unequivocally barred all ‘health related’ journals (and health research in general) from entering its competition. Previous recipients of funding which may have had ‘health’ connections in their content were asked to ‘prove’ that they were not a health-related journal as a condition to re-enter the funding competition. Of course, that obligatory disassociation would have been disingenuous as well as deceitful for a journal which has ‘women’s health’ mentioned right in its title and in its stated goals (Women’s Health & Urban Life). The following is a direct quote from the SSHRC eligibility criteria:

**Guidelines for the Eligibility of Journal Subject Matter**

New SSHRC guidelines regarding subject matter eligibility for health-related research came into effect in 2009 for all SSHRC funding opportunities. For the Aid to Scholarly Journals funding opportunity, SSHRC’s health-related and general subject matter criteria mean that a journal is ineligible if either of the following occurs:

- the mandate of the journal is primarily focused outside of discipline(s) within SSHRC’s mandate; and/or
• the journal’s content is primarily health-related, or aimed at improving, promoting or influencing health, health care, health policy, or health-care related services.

Given that Aid to Scholarly Journals funding is based on a journal’s content in the two years preceding the application deadline, SSHRC staff can offer prospective applicants advice regarding the eligibility of a journal’s subject matter prior to the deadline. Journals that wish to receive advice from SSHRC as to whether they are eligible to receive SSHRC funds, based on their previous two years of publications, are asked to follow these steps:

Address a formal letter (maximum two pages) from the journal’s editors to the program officer for the Aid to Scholarly Journals funding opportunity, explaining how the journal meets SSHRC’s newly clarified subject matter criteria.

Alongside the letter, submit the four most recent issues of the journal (or, for online journals, 12 most recent articles) published prior to November 1, 2010, as well as a copy of the journal’s mission statement or mandate.

Send any formal requests prior to January 31, 2011.

Source: www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/program-programmes/scholarly_journals-revues_savantes-eng.aspx#a5

The SSHRC never bothered to give a cogent argument for its dramatic criterial change. Instead, there was a brief announcement that ‘health’ issues really do not fall under the domain of social sciences, and therefore should seek their funding from other, more appropriate sources. The more appropriate sources the SSHRC might have in mind are the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and possibly hospitals, other medically oriented bodies and pharmaceutical corporations. To our understanding, the CIHR is not a funding body for critical feminist work, but more inclined to fund research within long established fields with medical links. In the first five items of its mission statement, the CIHR states:

Through the research it funds, CIHR helps to:

• reduce the adverse impact of disease and illness on Canadians, increasing life expectancy, improving quality of life and contributing to a healthy and productive workforce;
• respond quickly and effectively to health crises such as outbreaks of infectious diseases, by rapidly mobilizing
researchers as was evidenced during the SARS outbreak;

• contain the high and rising cost of delivering health care, by identifying innovative and cost-effective ways of providing health services;

• deliver concrete research evidence to help individual provinces make critical, evidence-based decisions about reforms to their health-care systems, reforms that will save money and improve services;

• sustain and enrich industry with a rich pipeline of new discoveries;

Source: http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/7263.html

The close affiliation of the CIHR to the dominant medical paradigm is clear in its mission, and the CIHR has a very important role to fulfill in the generally medical dimensions of health-related research. The problem arises only when critical social science journals such as the WH & UL are disallowed to remain within social sciences, and forced seek funding from medically oriented establishments. For a critical feminist journal like the WH & UL, it is obvious that the fit between its stated goals and the stated goals of medically oriented funding agencies are fraught with difficulties of conflict of interest. It is likely that institutions/organizations that closely work within the medical paradigm will be reluctant to support efforts whose raison d’etre is to challenge the very paradigm they work within. At worst, such an unholy dependency would mean the critical voices the WH & UL harbours may have to be muted or silenced because of its monetary dependence on systems of established modules of power. In sum, as the founding editor of WH & UL, I feel that what the SSHRC sees as the appropriate alternate funding sources is really not viable, if not totally inappropriate for this journal.

To be fair, the SSHRC’s own budget is probably experiencing severe cut-backs during a long-term, and increasingly more emboldened tenure of the current Conservative government. Especially since forming a majority government in its second term, the Harper government seems to be in an accelerated cost-cutting mission. There is a retrenchment in healthcare, education, research support, and environmental concerns; investment into more inclusive social services and social welfare are on the chopping block. Until recently, closely following the exemplary lead of the Nordic countries, Canada was known as one of the few ‘socially responsible’ countries in the world. Unfortunately, we are losing on some moral as well as social grounds. For example, in the last few years, Canada lost two whole points on its GINI index ranking. The GINI index is an international measure of household income inequality within a
given society. Unlike the calculation of Gross Domestic Product (GDP),
the GINI incorporates measures of women’s own economic security as it
is infused into the calculation of income inequality. Where small
numbers are more desirable (showing more equity) than larger ones,
Canada now stands at 32, whereas it used to be at 30. So, as the saying
that goes “the fish starts to smell from its head”, Canada’s toughening
stance in relation to social equity and social justice issues is probably
much more invasive than the specific shrinkage and pursuing
retrenchment in the SSHRC budget.

The Canadian Association of Learned Journals (CALJ), is
founded in 1990, and is an association focused on the well-
being of peer-
reviewed, or learned, journals in Canada. The CALJ is aware of the
predicament of scholarly publishing under the reign of conservative
government cutbacks. In an e-mail addressing all Canadian scholarly
journal editors, the CALJ observes:

*Independent Canadian scholarly science journals are at risk, with
  reduced government funding of the sciences and science
  publishing, changing business models, declining library budgets
  and increased foreign competition as a few of the current
  challenges.*

Yet, shouldn’t the uniquely rare governmental organizations
such as the SSHRC be the last bastion to protect and encourage the
generation of critical knowledge and to fend against Conservative
entrenchments? Should’t the uniquely rare governmental organizations
like the SSHRC be a sentinel against falling prey to business models?

Unfortunately, the new model for the SSHRC seems to be much
closer to a cut and slash business model than one that fights to protect
the uniquely critical contributions that only social sciences can yield. I
have heard from numerous (younger) colleagues that they are not even
bothering to apply for SSHRC funding, fearing that SSHRC seems to be
increasingly less interested in funding critical feminist research they
wish to undertake. Such comments from younger academics who still
have many years left to serve in academe evoke trepidation in my heart.
The SSHRC I know and respect from my own, long career was much
more welcoming and open to critical research. The SSHRC I remember
was an *empowering* institution, in its openness to alternate, out-of-the-box
models of thought. As a matter of fact, my own academic career
benefited immensely from more than a dozen SSHRC funding awards I
have competed for and received. Maybe it is precisely because of my
own long-term respect and deep gratitude for the cutting-edge research
SSHRC was known to support that I experience such a profound loss in
seeing the emerging lean and mean business model in the same organization.

The SSHRC is experiencing a shift in its model, and in my view, not for the better, and certainly not for more inclusiveness. Its one-size-fits-all withdrawal of funding from ALL health-related journals and research is one, but not the singular example of this change. Without much of a forewarning or discussion, the change in the SSHRC’s eligibility criteria appeared at the time when Canadian journal editors like myself were preparing for their funding renewal applications. The new criteria which barred all health related journals from eligibility was abrupt, top-down, and exclusionary.

The conservative budget retrenchment the SSHRC itself might be experiencing notwithstanding, there is still an eerily misguided belief that surrounds the singling out of health-based issues for the chopping block. The misguided belief appears to be that health related issues belong under health related sciences, and by some strange logical extension, under the medical models. Excluding all health related research from the eligibility criteria of the SSHRC is not only an economic consideration, but an ideological one—albeit a misguided one. In its rush to redefine itself, the SSHRC governance seems to be totally dismissive of or blind to the social, cultural, environmental and gendered factors that determine health outcomes. These factors are the pillars of social sciences, not medical sciences. Just to give a few examples, the fact that racialized women in particular show reluctance to seek help from healthcare establishments is very much related to their health outcomes. Yet, this is not an issue that can be explored through the medical models, since the genesis of the problem rests in social relations of power. Likewise, only social sciences are able to critically evaluate why medical establishments are overmedicalizing women’s health by over-using drugs, by over-using hormone replacements, by over-performing surgical techniques such as C-section deliveries, and by allowing the misuse and abuse of reproductive technologies such as in-vitro sex assignment. The robust explanatory power of the crucial social factors in determining health outcomes is well-established. Thus, it is naïve to assume that the medical institutions, themselves, are going to fund research which critically challenges the side their toast is buttered. Moreover, the fact that life expectancy in developing countries is much shorter than those in affluent societies, reasons why women in the developing world has much less access to food and medicine than their male counterparts, and why countries such as China and India are shifting their sex ratios so dramatically and so unfairly on gender lines through misuse of medical innovations are social science questions although each problem has its own health implications (especially for women and girl children). Similarly, why the transmission of AIDS in
Africa is showing the highest level of a rise among married, heterosexual women are certainly important health issues, but not necessarily isolated ‘medical’ issues. It is the social science researchers rather than medical experts who commit their careers and even lives to the study of such, often gendered social problems, so that they can inform the world of the close link between health (mental, physical and reproductive) and the socioeconomic, sociocultural and gendered determinants. Critical social scientists like the contributors to this journal, have been amongst those who are trying to inform the world about the irrefutable link between health and social conditions of life. My question is, who should inform and educate the SSHRC about the need to continue to support journals who give an arena for such reflexive and illuminating social research?

When I found out about the ‘new’ eligibility requirements of the SSHRC which singlehandedly barred all health journals from seeking support, I wrote to President Chad Gaffield, urging him for more thought, more discussion and a further evaluation and re-thinking about the abrupt change. In the same letter, I also discussed some of the probable conflicts of interest that will inevitably arise for critical journals like WH & UL, if they were to seek funding support from established medical corporations and/or organizations, with clearly different vested interests. In my mind, the latter will be analogous to asking a fox to see to it that the chickens are appropriately housed and fed. Neither Dr. Gaffield, nor any other person from his team bothered to respond to my letter, let alone provide a convincing explanation.

As the founding editor of this important journal, I never expected an easy and undeserved handout. For the WH & UL, the only thing I and its board members wanted was the ability to compete in a level playing field, amongst all other social-scientific journals. Just like the other Canadian journals, the WH & UL wanted a fair shot at renewing its funding, and insuring its continuation of service. In terms of the quality of our peer-review system, and in terms of the quite remarkable international exposure and readership the WH & UL has achieved within only 10 years of its young life, we were sure that the journal’s future was bright and secure. Alas, we now face a situation where the SSHRC singlehandedly, and quite inexplicably, changed the rules of eligibility. Thus, although once being our benefactor we proudly and gratefully acknowledge, the SSHRC now has chosen to indirectly facilitate our demise. The demise of journals like the WH & UL will also silence the many critical voices in the battle for demanding an improved health for women.

In the bitter-sweet celebration of our 10th anniversary, I again thank each and every member of the editorial board, our contributors, our reviewers, and the temporary staff who has done miracles in bringing the WH & UL to its scholarly maturity and international claim
and exposure. I thank the UTSC administrators who provided space and expertise, the University of Toronto Sociology research office which helped with our earlier SSHRC applications, the T-Space personnel who meticulously documented our usage statistics, the UTSC Printing services who printed our hard-copies, and students who mailed out our copies. Of course, we will keep on publishing for as long as we are able to meet our monetary obligations, hoping the Conservative retrenchment both within the Canadian society at large, and within the new SSHRC business model will somehow blow over and dissipate. In case we are unable to secure a new funding source which does not require an iota of compromise of our critical feminist orientation or academic freedoms, we will turn out our lights knowing that it was not our quest for critical knowledge, but the simple lack of money that undersigned our demise.

Aysan Sev’er, Founding Editor
February 24, 2012