

FINAL REPORT

**1981 LESBIAN
CONFERENCE**

***LESBIAN POWER:
ORGANIZING FOR THE 80'S***

**MAY 16-17-18
LANGARA COLLEGE
VANCOUVER, B.C.**

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Beginnings

The Lesbian Conference started very simply. One night in May 1980, Anne knocked on Linda Ruedrich's door, and said, "we have to do it." They had just heard that the Winnipeg women would not be able to organize the 1980 conference, because of lack of time, funds and womanpower. So, it seemed essential and not too far-fetched to organize the first western national conference in Vancouver.

Anne and Linda approached the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee of the B.C. Federation of Women for a loan to begin organizing fund-raising events and advertise planning meetings. The next few months were spent pulling a core group of organizers together.

The intent of the conference was outlined in the early months of planning. The conference objectives were three-fold: to begin building a national network of lesbian organizations; to strengthen lesbian organizations in each region; and to celebrate our lesbianism. The conference organizers are pleased that so many of our objectives were met.

INTRODUCTION

While the gay community supposedly "surfaced" during the 1970's, what most of us saw on t.v. or in the press were predominantly young male white faces. The Lesbian Conference 1981 presented a very different image, and was a turning point for lesbians, the lesbian movement and all women and gay men organizing for the difficult times of the '80's.

This was the first national conference since one held in Toronto in 1979, and the first ever west of Ontario. May 1981 saw 500 women come from all across the country for the weekend of workshops and cultural events. While a majority came from the lower Mainland and the rest of B.C. there was a good representation from every other region, from Quebec and the United States.

At times resembling more of a festival than a conference, the 500 women attended over forty workshops which included every aspect of lesbian life — from work to sex; spirituality to organizing; workshops for children and of every medium we use to express ourselves. The evenings were filled with the performance of Robin Tyler, a dance with Mama Quilla, and a coffeehouse of musicians and poets.

For many women, everything about coming to the conference and meeting with so many others was new. For others, many of the workshop themes were entirely new, on subjects like lesbian health matters, disabled lesbians, lesbians and welfare and lesbians and sports. And for others, while the topics were familiar, as in the workshop against right-wing repression, they themselves came away with a lot of new energy to tackle the problems.

The Conference was a major opportunity for women to express what is seldom heard anywhere else — how our lesbianism affects all of our lives. Of course there were workshops about our sexuality and our relationships, workshops with an amazing amount of candour, and tolerance for other's individual choices. We've come a long way from the separatist seventies with its strict code of dress, conduct and thought.

But there were also several workshops about the closeting and self-censoring effect on each of us when we are not able to risk "coming out", and the discrimination when we are open. The loss of promotion, job, of housing, friends and family are still major threats hanging over most women, and gay men. Just as vulnerable is the lesbian mother who risks losing her child to ex-spouse, parents or government agency until her child grows up.

While power and visibility for all lesbians were *the* buzzwords, the women with the least amount of power among us had even more to say. Lesbian mothers spoke forcefully of their need for support from other women, and the importance of including care for children as a first priority in planning any event including women. Lesbians on welfare, many of whom are mothers, spoke of the support they need to organize for higher benefits, support they expect from other lesbians with more money, education and opportunities. Lesbians of colour spoke of the urgency of their meeting and the younger lesbians reminded the older ones that they had a lot of revolutionary fervour to pass on.

The conference was also important because of the degree of public exposure of a very positive lesbian image. The first lesbian march in Canada outside of Quebec took place on Saturday afternoon through the westend amidst cheering from 'presumably' gay and straight by-standers and apartment dwellers. The local media covered every part of the conference from the opening performance of Robin Tyler, the March, the Press Conference after the closing Plenary and the Woman to Woman Art Show. The Local TV "Vancouver Show" featured two shows on us, the CBC repeated their special report on lesbian mothers, the Vancouver Sun ran their own feature on lesbian mothers, and we heard news that an Ottawa newspaper ran a story on the conference.

The level of participation from so many women, involved in so many activities makes it clear that a young and vibrant movement exists. With the widespread cut-backs of jobs, welfare and social services for women, and outright attacks against our right to choose how we want to live and with whom, it is even more urgent to develop a strong and public lesbian movement. As long as any lesbian can be silenced by the threat of discrimination, it is harder for all women and gays to organize for more economic and political autonomy.

We are distributing this brochure to continue the organizing started by the conference. It is being sent to women who are planning further lesbian events, to women who want to connect with lesbians organizing, and to anyone else who wants to learn from lesbians themselves, who we are and how we are organizing.

A Sharp Tempered Woman*

"You wield your bitterness like a battleax," he said.

"I am an old battleax," I said.

an Amazon Labrys
ancient sword
with double edges
tempered through the flames
of burning times
honed on a maze
of contra-dictions
metal tested by the snarl
of his speakings against me
bronze burnished
from the heat of battle
flashing love for women
slicing silence and deception

I wield my acrid truth with accuracy and skill,

Claiming this:

I am a fierce bold battleax,
my anger a deadly weapon to his kind,
a shining tool to mine.

cc 1-80

©Cyndia Cole

*battleax: 1. a broadax for use as a weapon of war
2. a domineering, sharp-tempered woman, esp. a wife
Random House Dictionary of the English Language

WORKSHOP REPORTS

LESBIANS ON THE JOB

The workplace is one of the primary places where women-loving-women come into contact and/or conflict with the rest of society. A group of workshops, "On the job", dealt with the special problems and experiences of lesbian mothers, lesbians on welfare, lesbians in trade unions, prisons, schools and rural lesbians.

Women in the Lesbian Mothers and Child Custody Workshop agreed that Lesbian mothers have less time and mobility than other lesbians. They are often involved in long-drawn-out child custody battles, and need the emotional and physical support of child-less women. To promote outreach and legal work in cities across the country, they need access to resources like phone-lines and drop-ins in women's and lesbian centres. Information regarding good lawyers or legal clinics, anywhere in Canada, should be forwarded to the Lesbian Mothers Defence Fund, Box 38, Station F, Toronto, M5G 3E1.

The Mothering Workshop produced several very specific resolutions around the issue of day-care:

1. More than 80% of women have children. Therefore be it resolved that we actively encourage women who mother children to attend lesbian and feminist events by providing high quality daycare and by cost-sharing with women who need home child-care. In the event that childcare is inadequate, all functions should stop until the problem is resolved.

2. Children of lesbian and/or feminist mothers often have difficulty fitting into the "straight" system because their home-taught values are different. As well these children are often isolated from each other. Therefore be it resolved that we set up support systems where our children can meet on a regular basis.
3. The current daycare subsidy is completely inadequate, especially for single mothers, and mothers who work evenings and weekends. Therefore be it resolved that we support the fight for increased daycare subsidies to cover all of the costs of daycare and that some centres be open on a 24 hour, 7 days-a-week basis.
4. When children are seen as the private possessions and sole responsibility of their parents, it leads to the isolation and oppression of both children and mothers. Therefore be it resolved that we find ways to take more community responsibility for our children.
5. Child tax credit benefits the privileged and family allowance is universal. Therefore be it resolved that we support the concept of tax refunds for families in order to bring their incomes above the poverty line.
6. Be it resolved that we work on having school sex education address the total concept of human sexuality rather than reinforce heterosexuality. Contact: Lesbian and Feminist Mothers Political Action Group c/o 924 Commercial Drive, Vancouver

Women in the *Lesbians and Welfare Workshop* also wanted recognition of lesbian mothers living below the poverty line. They stressed the necessity for childless women to recognize and share their privileges in terms of free time, money, access to education, information, skill development and the celebration of our culture.

Sixty women in the *Lesbians and Trade Unions Workshop* raised many work-related concerns: heterosexism, unionizing, "coming out" as lesbians to co-workers and/or as politically-active women and talking about these issues within trade unions. Call SORWUC in Vancouver at 684-2834 for information and support.

Lesbian Students discussed the lack of lesbian content in Women's Studies courses and homophobia amongst Women's Studies professors. On-campus counselling for lesbians "coming out", networking with lesbian students locally and nationally, building connections with the off-campus lesbian community and encouraging involvement in campus Women's centres were all suggested as ways of developing a more visible, effective and supportive campus, lesbian organization.

Women from the Fraser Valley, Kootenays, Vancouver Island, Okanagan, Quebec, Yellowknife and United States attended the *Rural Lesbians Workshop*. Discussion focussed on "coming out" in the country, avoiding country burn-out and ending isolation through country-city exchanges and through support networks. If interested contact Rural Lesbians Association in care of Amazon, Box 6, RR1, Ruskin, B.C.

Lesbians in the *Women in Prisons Workshop* strongly encouraged women organizing around the issue of violence against women to become aware of and expose violence against women in prisons. We must all become more aware of our legal rights in the face of increasing oppression. To become involved, contact Women Against Prisons P.O. Box 46571, Station G, Vancouver. Phone 879-4741 or 253-1227.

LESBIANS ORGANIZING

The importance of having a group of workshops on the various ways of organizing became more apparent as the conference progressed. The facts and trends revealed in the *Fighting the Right Workshop*, as well as the shocking reports of gay and lesbian harassment in Toronto set a tone of urgency and led to several resolutions calling for more political action, public education and networking within and beyond the lesbian community.

The well-attended workshop *Fighting the Right* heard a presentation about the background of the Rise of the Right. Further discussion centered on how right-wing attacks affect us as lesbians. Major tactics for fighting back are developing our visibility, public education, reaching lesbians who are isolated, learning to physically defend ourselves and gathering current information about the Right's activities. It was decided to organize a Lesbian Day of Protest against the Right on April 10, 1982 in as many cities as possible.

This day could include education, outreach, a march and rally. It would be one of the first major activities of local anti-right organizations. Local groups could decide at that time who they wish to ally with.

It was suggested that regional lesbian anti-right groups include the following in their activities:

- outreach and education about Right-wing activities to unorganized lesbians in our communities
- public education aimed at unions, schools, neighbourhoods, immigrant and minority groups, women, feminists and gays
- establishing regional alliances with other groups under attack who will support our concerns
- support Lesbian/Lesbienne with contributions and dollars so that it can be published regularly, and in French
- undertake local research on Right activities
- help create a pamphlet which can be used for education
- organizing a Lesbian Day of Education & Protest vs. The Right.

The *Younger Lesbians* workshop named institutions that oppress young lesbians — psychiatric institutions, the Ministry of Human Resources and the legal system. Women talked about the benefit of input from a young radical segment to the women's movement.

Lesbians of Colour expressed their frustrations around the racism within our own community. They were concerned that their workshop had not been restricted to Lesbians of Colour and that they were referred to as "you people" by white women in the workshop. They agreed that it is im-

portant and necessary to define, and analyze their distinct position within the greater context of the women's movement. It was decided to form a support/education and action group. Contact the Lesbian Conference Organizing committee.

Disabled Lesbians listed their needs — transportation, signing, accessible space, home services, practical, emotional and social support. They plan to organize a function with their needs as disabled lesbians as a first priority. Able-bodied lesbians would be invited. Information about a support group for disabled lesbians can be obtained by calling 263-8150 in Vancouver.

Facilitators in the workshop about a *Lesbian/Feminist Workshop Manual* described how the manual connects lesbianism and feminism, and ways to deal with the negative reactions to lesbianism. Women from Calgary, Nanaimo, Winnipeg and Toronto workshops using the manual. Contact Press Gang Publishers, 603 Powell St., Vancouver.

The workshop on *Lesbians in the Women's Movement* recommended that Lesbian caucuses be established within women's organizations or within women's caucuses. It was also suggested that we organize workshops on Lesbian/Feminism across Canada.

Lesbians in the Gay Movement workshop spoke of the services they help provide: information to isolated lesbians about groups and events through gay newsletters, phone-lines and individual counselling; and lobbying for protection for gays in human rights codes across Canada. They also discussed their feelings of isolation and lack of trust with other lesbians who do

not want to work with men. They asked for support, and resolved to continue to ally with gay men in a cross-Canada network to help combat increasing social and economic discrimination against gay people.

The workshop *Lesbians in Quebec/Francophone Lesbians out of Quebec* talked about the need for finding translation resources. The group also set up an information centre in the form of contact people in various cities who will introduce lesbians who are newcomers to other francophone lesbians in the area. See Network List.

LESBIAN SEXUALITY

The Lesbian Sexuality Workshops were well-attended; the Lesbian Sex Workshop alone attracted over 100 women or about 1/4 of the registrants. The workshops gave lesbians the opportunity to exchange thoughts and feelings about a subject that is often clouded by myth and fear.

In the *Lesbian Sex Workshop* women overcame their shyness and began to share in detail what they considered erotic. Two hours seemed not enough time so a weekend National Lesbian Sex Conference was suggested.

The workshop *Violence in Relationships* addressed the problem of non-consensual violence in Lesbian relationships. It was recommended that therapists working with lesbians become familiar with the dynamics of non-consensual violence between women. A support group for women dealing with violence has been formed.

The *Coming Out Workshop* used a

guided fantasy to help women focus on taking back our power in a confrontative or uncomfortable situation regarding our lesbianism. A number of women were unable to feel that the outcome of a situation could be improved. Energy was shifted then to conquering fear that prevents us from changing.

The *Monogamy, Non-Monogamy and Celibacy Workshops* all stressed the right of each woman to choose her own form of sexual expression and her right to expect other women to support her choice. On the final day of the conference the three workshops met together to promote an understanding of the different forms of sexual relationships.

About thirty bisexual women attended the *Bisexuality Workshop*, as well as several non-bisexual lesbians. Several women spoke out about their pride in a definite bisexual orientation. They also spoke about the various resulting problems. They feel denied and rejected by both the Lesbian Movement and society at large. They decided to form a support group in Vancouver and have since met regularly. For information call Lil at 734-1016 in Vancouver.



Lesbian Pride March

Linda Eng

THE LESBIAN BODY

Encouraging women to develop their autonomy, strength and health was the purpose of the Lesbian Body workshops. Some of these workshops also provided clarification of controversial issues such as Alternative Fertilization and the Politics of Madness.

Women talked about their fear concerning giving and receiving support in the workshop called *Personal Support Systems* or *Where the Hell are My Sisters When I Need Them!* Experiences were shared in the *Incest Survivors Workshop*. Discussion revealed that taboos exist around naming and talking about incest. Ending the silence is the aim of an incest survivors group that meets every Tuesday and Thursday at the West End Community Centre in Vancouver. To further public education a video about incest survivors has been made recently and will be available through Women In Focus. The *Healing Reality Workshop* provided an opportunity to explore healing magic and power.

One subject discussed in the *Politics of Madness Workshop* is the recurring pattern of "going crazy", "getting treatment" and then coming out as a lesbian. The formation of a feminist mental patients liberation group is recommended. A feminist/lesbian analyst of "madness" was suggested as alternative therapy. The Vancouver Women's Health Collective has an alternative therapy referral service and the Women's Self-Help Counselling Collective (872-3122) provides one-to-one counselling and self-help group from a feminist, anti-capitalist perspective.

Lesbians in the *Health Care Workshop* discussed the need to educate health care practitioners about the specific needs of lesbians. There was a suggestion that Lesbian health care groups be formed to share information about doing our own pap tests, herbal education, breast self-exam, massage and other alternatives. Contact the Vancouver Women's Health Collective about these groups.

A.A., Women for Sobriety, Aurora House and the Addicted Women's Network offered information about their programs at the workshop on *Addictions*. The Addicted Women's Network has just received funding to do outreach across Canada.

The *Alternative Fertilization Workshop* discussed the politics of reproduction and alternative fertilization to reclaim pregnancy and child-bearing for lesbians. They decided to use the Vancouver Women's Health Collective as an information centre. It was further decided to establish a liaison with the political gay male community in order to obtain a donor list.

Women from the *Sports Workshop* made plans to discuss ways of encouraging more women to develop their physical potential and more involvement of women coaches and administrators.

LESBIANS AND SPIRITUALITY

Sexual freedom need not imply spiritual repression — this was one topic of discussion in the *Traditional Religions Workshop*. Although "religion" has patriarchal connotations for some women, "spirituality"

need not. Some women who attended the workshop felt that the only authentic way to live out their spirituality is outside the structures of traditional religions, whilst others felt compelled to grapple with these structures and work within them as lesbian women. Workshop women all agreed that each woman must make her own spiritual choice without pressure or criticism from other women.

Our foremothers were persecuted for using "womancraft" which threatened the economic and social power of male-dominated religions. Lesbians in the *Matriarchal Spirituality Workshop* examined "womancraft" (use of colour, sound and movement to heal, protect and overcome patriarchal societal restrictions) as well as spirituality in terms of power and energy beyond the five senses.

LESBIAN CULTURE

The experience of lesbians is seldom heard in mainstream culture. One of the major purposes of the conference was to make visible who and what we are. One of the most significant outgrowths of the current lesbian movement has been the expression of lesbianism in every cultural form.

In the *Lesbians and Publishing Workshop* plans were made to work toward forming a national association for feminist print media and a distribution network. Discussion in the *Communications Workshop* focused on the problems of publishing the magazine

Lesbian/Lesbienne. Only one issue was distributed in 1980.

The following ideas were proposed as ways of continuing its publication:

1. Articles and news of various regions should be accompanied by a small amount of money to help print it.
2. Lesbian groups, specifically the emerging Lesbians Against the Right groups, should look to the magazine for communication of news and coordination of actions.
3. A shorter news bulletin should be published with a longer quarterly with analysis of actions and other news.
4. All articles should be in English and French.
5. Toronto should continue to be used as the printing and distribution centre.

Women from the *Media Workshop* suggested a media contact list as a way of forming a network of lesbians involved in the media. Women also talked about the need for effective use of alternative media and the development of our own media wherever possible. They also spoke of how care should be taken not to identify individuals without permission, by name or image, for not all women can afford to come out. To encourage the effective use the "straight media" some workshop members have compiled a tip sheet for handling the media.



TIP SHEET "HOW TO HANDLE THE STRAIGHT MEDIA"

from the Media Workshop

General Information:

- make yourself aware of what media is available (i.e., radio programs, T.V. programs, newspaper columns, free public service announcements, etc.), what their format is, are the interviewers and researchers sympathetic? how many people watch, listen or read this media and who are they? (this info is available in "The Broadcaster Magazine" or from the C.R.T.C. in Ottawa)
- tour the media establishments if possible
- make yourself available to the media
- make a list of sympathetic media personnel
- contact these people in person or by phone and introduce yourself as a contact
- when an event occurs or is about to, compile a NEWS RELEASE (see sample)
- follow up the press release with a phone call to your contacts
- always be positive and honest . . . you're really selling yourself, then the story, be consistent, if you say you'll phone back at a certain time, do so
- acquaint yourself with the deadlines and formats of media programs and stories, and remember the media works on a news 1st basis, therefore if a major story breaks, you may not get the coverage you were promised
- if the media says no to an interview, send a P.S.A. (public service announcement) it's still free advertising and may get carried more than once
- allow good lead time
- if an event is cancelled, notify the media immediately
- don't give up on the straight media because of bad coverage or misquotes, but be wary of that reporter
- if you have a sympathetic contact in the straight media who gives you good coverage, support her work with letters and phone calls to her editor/producer

The Interview:

- go to the interview with your own agenda including 2 or 3 points that you want to get across AND STICK TO IT
- say the most important thing first, then again if there's time (include dates, phone #, addresses, etc.)
- answer briefly then move on to the next point
- keep cool and relax
- pretalk the interviewer but be aware that they may ask you different questions during the interview
- be friendly and polite even if the interviewer is not. Assume that the audience will not be sympathetic to rudeness
- stay on topic and don't wander or you will lose the attention of the audience
- if you have never been interviewed before, practice with someone who has
- research and prepare how you are going to illustrate your point with current examples

NEWS RELEASE . . . sample

For the News Media Immediate Release

Event: title and simple description
: why event being held

Time/Place

Tickets

More Information: background

Phone and Contact Name and number

SPECIFIC TIPS FOR:

T.V.

- appearance
 - allow them to put make-up on you, the T.V. lights will blank out your face otherwise
 - wear dark clothes (so your socks won't glare in the camera)
 - dress neatly but comfortably, you can be discredited by your appearance
- body language
 - lean forward to appear interested
 - look at the interviewer (the camera people will find you)
 - don't fidget
- remember you are talking to the audience, not just the interviewer
- wear a watch, you will only have a certain amount of time
- get *all* agreements re. use of the tape and reruns in writing and check out the legalities BEFORE you allow yourself to be filmed

RADIO

- make yourself comfortable in front of the mike and stay there
- watch nervous habits such as pen tapping etc.
- maintain eye contact with the interviewer, this will help you remain calm
- dress comfortably and remember that you have to breathe
- wear a watch (see T.V. tips)
- get written agreements (see T.V. tips)
- pick or train a good talker who can put the organization's ideas forth best

PRINT

- a sympathetic contact is most important as you are not talking to the audience directly
- there is no such thing as "off the record" so watch what you say, they may not realize the implication their lack of discretion may have on your life
- make photos and background information available after you have sent out

your news release

- remember that they have deadlines to meet and they are not likely to allow you editorial control (no, you can't see the final copy before it goes in the paper)
- if you are misquoted:
 - 1st go back to that reporter and ask for a correction
 - 2nd if #1 doesn't work, write a concise letter to the editor pointing out the mistake and correcting it
 - 3rd assume it was an honest mistake unless you are sure otherwise
- compile a "shit list" of reporters who consistently misrepresent you; include your reasons for why you don't trust them and circulate it among your allies
- offer feedback to the reporter, you may need that contact again



Coral Arrand

Victoria

by Anne Cameron

Rising, rising, lifting, rising
above the bed, above the room,
rising through light to a place
where there is only warmth and
the satin-stroke touch of your lips,
your fingers pressing against my back
rhythmically
as your body moves against mine
rhythmically
and my breath mingles with yours,
our fingers entwine
and I am rising, rising out of my skin,
rising and lifting
rhythmically, floating and drifting,
floating and hearing only
the sound of your oh oh oh
rhythmically oh oh oh
and you are slippery-slick against my thigh
as I am slippery-slick against yours
rhythmically rising past lucid thought
past logic and theory, rising to a
pounding intensity, a maelstrom whirling,
our voices lost our words lost
your fingers in the tangle of my hair
my lips against your shell ear
rising slippery-slick juices flowing
breathing ragged rhythmic motion
completion surging rising flower-opening
opening, swallowing absorbing
drifting drifting down
down to your arms your lips your soft
smile your whispered Woman, Jesus, Woman

WOMAN TO WOMAN: ARTWORK IN CELEBRATION

From a conversation with Persimmon Blackridge.

... "Ellen was working on the Lesbian Organizing Committee, and she and I had put on a Mother's Day Art Show the year before. She kept saying, 'let's do a lesbian art show', but knowing how much work was involved, I wasn't sure. But, finally we decided to do it.

"We wanted to do it at the Carnegie Centre in Vancouver's poor downtown. The woman who runs the centre was really excited. She thought it would be a real consciousness raising event, even though some people would have a really hard time with it.

"We decided we wanted to do a show of lesbian images. We wanted to show all aspects of our lives, not only the sexual — everything from the mundane to the sublime, from lesbians washing dishes, to lesbians organizing for social change, to lesbians changing diapers to lesbians holding up banners.

"Then the Municipal Workers went on strike and the community centres were closed for the next few months. We looked madly all over for a public space rather than an "art space" because we wanted a place that all kinds of women and men could feel at ease to wander into. But, we couldn't find one because we didn't have any money and little extra time and energy.

"We finally asked Women In Focus, a women's art gallery, if we could rent their space. It's ten times bigger than the Carnegie Centre, so we had to change our concept of the show. In order to contact artists we put signs up everywhere, every artsy place and women's place; plus we put out a public press release and notices in local and national women's newspapers.

"The show became artwork by lesbians and about lesbians. We had tons of stuff — wood and clay sculptures, photographs, paintings, life-size stand-up cut-outs, weavings, hangings and cartoons. One woman came with vulva-like clay sculptures all the way from Quebec. The work was amazing. It ranged from the really specific and realistic to the abstract and came from beginning artists to women who define themselves as artists and have been working for a long time.

"We were very worried about breaking even, so we decided that we needed to sell food and drinks, raffle tickets, make a poster to sell and include some closing events. This meant that we could also provide space for other kinds of art. For the final event, we had a comedienne, a dance performance, a soap opera, a video called "Women loving women loving children", a film and poetry.

"It's difficult to isolate any one piece or one woman's work, but one thing for me was Coral's photographs, portraits of women. They have this real warmth and gentleness in the way women are relating to each other. She takes women's really interesting faces, and there's this feeling that that's what people really look like . . .

"Because we live in a world that constantly invalidates the reality of lesbian lives such as mine and my friends, I consider it important to focus my photographic energy on recreating the images I see around me of women who are strong and powerful; and relationships between women that are loving and affirming.

Mostly I take my photographs for other lesbians — and hope they feel an emotional connection with the women in my photographs, and a sense of pride for our diversity and beauty."

Coral Arrand

"Then in another realm entirely there were painted collages made of paper that Jo Cook did. They hung on the wall behind glass. They were only about a foot square but they felt very environmental. They had a lively use of line and colour, with really rich and kind of shocking colours. And they put your teeth a little bit on edge. The forms just drew you in, with a strange feeling of depth to them. They kind of gave me a vague feeling of vertigo like I was up on the ceiling looking down on this total chaos.

"The art show brought together hundreds of people. There were also at least 200 at both the opening and the closing. The Vancouver Province ran a quarter page article headlined, "Lesbian Art Witty and Sensitive" as well as a large photo of my two women acrobats. So we felt that even though we were using an art gallery and a space run by women that we did get out to a very wide audience.

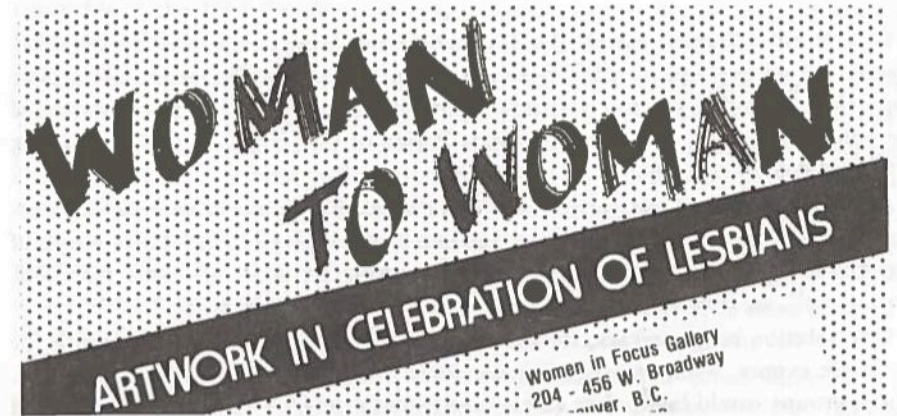
"I don't think that we can draw any general conclusions about lesbian art or artists. What I thought was important about the show was that tons of people came, mostly lesbians, and they were really delighted to see their existence validated, and that we were able to have such a major lesbian show out in public."

"Photo art can lay claim to consummate objectivity, but fails in the same measure as so called "objective journalism". The eye is directed from one point of view. The viewers see that which is pointed to and no other. In this way a vision of the status quo is formed. Normal, sub-normal, invisible are so defined. Men are the subjects, eccentric women and gay men are sub-normal, lesbians are invisible.

In my portrait work I strive to bring us out of the shadows; to show that we are also valued and ubiquitous members of society. Only by putting our faces to the public eye can we change the definitions of normal or status quo. An attempt to alter social values is a political act.

Holly Devor

A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE CULTURAL EVENTS



From June 1980 to June 1981, the Lesbian Conference 1981 held several cultural events. These included a salmon bake, four dances, a jazz concert by Swingshift, a performance by Robin Tyler, two coffeehouses and a lesbian art show complete with opening and closing night festivities. The aim of these monthly events was to build the power of the lesbian movement by making visible all our diverse forms of culture, and to raise money for the conference.

When we analysed the success of all the events, several points were clear. The dances were the most successful fund-raisers, particularly those that featured live bands. They were also very well attended, and generated a lot of enthusiasm and excitement about the conference. We used each of the dances as an opportunity to inform women of plans for the conference, and to organize helpers for events, workshops and general organizing details. Although the other events did not make much money, they did make us aware of the unique strength of our culture.

There are a few general tips that we can offer future organizers of cultural events.

- 1) Check that the date you have chosen doesn't conflict with other benefits, etc.
- 2) Budget your money and time very carefully so that you are able to pull off the event without burning yourselves out and driving you into debt.
- 3) Plainly state your agreements with everybody, performers, managers, helpers, preferably on paper, no matter how close you are to the people involved.
- 4) Make sure that you have a lot of help on the day of the event, for all the last minute details.
- 5) The month before the conference should be event-free so you have time and energy for it. (For a good reference of how to organize a concert, see *Making a Show of It*, by Ginny Berson, published by Redwood Records.)

For the organizers, the cultural events made us feel proud of the lesbian culture that we have been part of developing. The pre-conference events helped to draw us together as a group, and taught us many of the organizing skills necessary before tackling the biggest job of all, the conference.

THE CONFERENCE RE-VISITED, AN EVALUATION

One month after the event, the Conference organizers met with fifteen other women for an evaluation. The meeting was an opportunity for everyone to offer appreciations and to discuss criticisms. The discussion ranged from the theme of the conference itself, "Building Lesbian Power in the '80's", to the organizing details of how it was run.

A major concern of the participants was the small number of women who carried most of the work load. Other women had been involved in the earlier stages of organizing, but had left due to the immense amount of time involved, "burn-out", or differences about the objectives of the conference.

One solution suggested was for more women to work in smaller sub-groups, or on single events, without becoming members of the core organizing committee. These groups would be in close co-ordination with the core committee, but would require less time of each individual, and allow more diversity. Most women also thought that everyone who attended the conference should be asked to contribute by signing up for a work shift when they registered.

The conference organizers readily agreed with these suggestions. They felt that their energy had been expended on pre-conference fund-raising events, and on all the housekeeping details of the conference itself. This had meant that there had been little enough time or energy to plan the workshops and plenary sessions to maximize the conference as a building and organizing opportunity.

The organizers felt that future budgets should include wages for a full-time coordinator for the months before the conference. As a minimum requirement, the budget should also include a central office and phone to make the planning process accessible to everyone across the country.

At the conference, there had been a lot of discussion about quality childcare, and how to provide it. The organizers had been unable to use the college facilities, and as a result, there had been problems with the off-site childcare, and with providing childcare during evening cultural activities. The organizers suggested that quality childcare be a priority of all future organizing, and that its coordination start at the first planning meeting. They also suggested that the practice of paying childcare workers, begun at this conference, continue.

Many women voiced concerns about the forty workshops. Some felt that there should have been fewer workshops, with very well-defined objectives, to better focus the energies of all participants. Others liked the wide variety and the opportunities presented for so many different kinds of discussion and activity, appealing to very different groups of women. The conference organizers explained how the workshop topics had been chosen from the results of a national survey, and how difficult it had been to eliminate any of them.

Several suggestions were made for planning workshops in the future. Information about the content and times of the workshops should be made available several weeks early to allow women time to plan their own schedules. When workshops are full, there should always be an attempt to repeat them at another time. A heavy

workshop schedule should be lightened with cultural or sports events, and allow plenty of time for eating and informal get-togethers. Due to the packed workshop timetable at the 1981 Conference, many women had to choose between the Lesbian Pride March, a cultural event at Women In Focus or dinner.

The discussion about the plenary sessions included some very practical comments and indicated the wide ranging opinions about the direction of the lesbian movement. Many felt that the workshop reports at the final plenary were very helpful, making everyone realize just how broad and diverse is the lesbian movement. They commented on the large number of women who stayed throughout all of the reports at the final plenary, contrary to everyone's usual conference experience. Although this wonderment at so many women refusing to leave was unanimous, many felt that the reports should have been edited, to allow more time for discussion of the priorities of lesbian groups organizing for the '80's.

The organizers themselves had been mixed about how much direction they should and could give to such a young and widely divergent movement. They had opted for allowing as many groups as possible to develop workshops and cultural events; with a special emphasis on making visible the least powerful and therefore most vulnerable among us. One woman felt that this approach presumed the existence of a lesbian movement, which she thought did not yet exist. Another wrote to criticize the organizers for their lack of analysis about lesbian oppression, and the political direction lesbians should take. The evaluation left this discussion still unresolved.

Finally all the women at the meeting described their positive impressions of the conference. For many the conference had been an empowering experience, allowing them to go back to their individual situations with renewed energy and ideas. Some commented on how the conference had stirred lesbians working in coalitions to speak out for the first time as lesbians about their specific oppression and the ways to counter it. Everyone also commended the conference organizers for their months of hard work and creative organizing.

POST-SCRIPT

Since the conference we have heard of many women continuing to meet and to form groups. Lesbian Resistance was formed in Vancouver and has been organizing throughout the summer. Lesbians Against the Right in Toronto was strengthened as a result of the conference and has continued to organize. A Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund has been set up in Vancouver and has maintained contact with the Toronto Defence Fund, and the US National Defence Fund which operates out of Seattle. The Third World Women's group has continued to meet, as have the disabled women's group, the bisexual women's group, and a new women's music production group in Vancouver.

Lesbian mothers

by ELIZABETH GODLEY

Thousands of Canadian mothers live in fear of having their children taken away from them — by the courts or by the government.

They are lesbian mothers, a vulnerable and almost invisible segment of the homosexual community in cities, towns and villages across the country.

"The biggest problem that we face is losing our children," explained Mary, one of two Vancouver women organizing a support group for lesbian mothers. Both she and friend Lee, fearing recrimination from ex-spouses and others, asked that their full names not be used.

"The whole attitude of society is that lesbians are sick and perverted, and children need to be protected from all that, including our own children," Mary said. "A woman can be an exemplary mother for three, five, 10 years. But when she comes out as a lesbian, all of a sudden she's considered unfit to raise children."

Francie Wyland, of the Toronto-based Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund, in Vancouver recently for the 1981 Lesbian Conference, said that only in the past five years have the feminist and gay communities become aware of the plight of lesbian mothers.

Some remain married, some are single parents. Many keep their sexual preference secret, "sitting on the edge of their seats, hoping that the public climate will change, not yet able to come out," Wyland said.

Lesbians and gay men who announce their sexual preference risk losing their jobs, Lee pointed out. "But losing a job is nothing compared to losing a child."

Both Lee and Mary speak of the stress involved in keeping part of their lives hidden from neighbors, teachers, social workers — even the letter carrier and the local grocer — who may decide it is their duty to report the woman.

"We have two choices," said Lee. "We can be honest with our children about our sexuality, or we can hide it from them."

"If we don't come out to our children, the child senses that something is hidden, and there is a lie at the basis of your relationship."

Worse, the child may grow up never seeing her mother in a loving relationship with another adult.

"Even though a woman may feel good about being a lesbian, the fact that she hides it implies that it's something bad, something guilty."

But if a woman explains her sexual preference to her child, she is faced with another set of difficulties. "If you come out to your children, they may experience ostracism and hatred," said Lee, who has watched her eight-year-old son cope with these pressures. Demanding that a young boy defend his mother's way of life against the taunts of schoolmates places a burden on him that many adults are unable to bear, she points out.

Ellen Frank has a son and daughter, both in elementary school. Protected by a unlisted phone number, Frank was prepared to speak openly to The Vancouver Sun. But other women's fears are legitimate and understandable, she said.

"I am really dreading the day one of my children comes home and says, 'So-and-so isn't allowed to play with me any more because you're a lesbian.'"

Growing up Jewish in a Christian neighborhood taught her how tough it is to be different from everyone else.

"But you don't stop being who you are because other people don't like it. My mother never told me it was wrong to be a Jew, she told me it was wrong to be bigoted."

When her daughter was five, Frank explained to her that some people might dislike her mother because of her sexual preference. "It is possible to explain something like that to a five-year-old, and it's necessary."

"I don't see how you can teach children pride if you have to hide."

But some lesbian mothers fear coming out will mean facing a bitter custody battle with their ex-husbands.

"We want the courts to look seriously

at which parent is closer to the child," Wyland said, adding that in the past 10 years a number of lesbian mothers have won custody in Canadian courts.

"Before that, it was a really grim prospect, and it's still an uphill fight."

Vancouver lawyer Joanne Ranson agreed, saying that in any custody case, a lesbian mother will be at a disadvantage.

Most make every effort to negotiate a custody settlement out of court, forgoing child support payments if necessary, she said. "They know if they go into court, they are going to get put down."

In the few cases where children have been awarded to lesbian mothers, the father is usually unemployed, financially unstable or otherwise clearly unsuitable as a parent, Ranson said.

"Where both parents are perceived by the court to have equal capabilities and equal bonding with the child, the woman's sexual preference is likely to be the deciding factor in granting custody to the father," she added.

"Regardless of what a judge may say, that homosexuality is immoral or it is just a different kind of lifestyle, the moral disfavor is still there. In this way, the court system is definitely not up-to-date, not in the vanguard of the community."

While it may sound like a contradiction in terms for a woman to be both a lesbian and a mother, Mary and Lee say that most are refugees from relationships with men.

"We've been taught all our lives that sexual feelings must be directed towards men," said Mary. Lesbianism has not, until very recently, been seen as an alternative to heterosexual relationships.

Wyland, Lee and Mary deplore the categorization of human sexuality into watertight compartments, and view homosexual love as just one of a range of possibilities.

"We may reach a point, one day, when we don't have to build an identity around a definition of sexual preference. . .

Lesbian conference seen as a milestone

Many lesbians got the support they needed this weekend to continue facing their sexuality, despite the consequences that go with it, Dorothy Kidd, one of the 1981 Lesbian Conference organizers, said in an interview Monday.

More than 500 lesbians from across the country gathered at the Vancouver Community College on Langara campus for a three-day conference.

"It's really important for other lesbians from across the country to find out that 'I'm not the only person' — that there are 500 other women in Vancouver and that's just the tip of the iceberg," Kidd said.

The fact that so many of them from across Canada were able to get together for a convention is a very important step towards becoming a solid and strong political force, she added.

The lesbian movement is still much weaker than the male homosexual one, she said. Only one out of 10 gay centres are for women.

The reason, Kidd explained, is that lesbians fight discrimination on

two fronts. Just being a woman, she said, makes it more difficult for them to acquire power and strength.

"Homosexuals are still men and therefore still have the same privileges as other men have, that women do not have, like money, resources and power," she said.

Plans were made at the conference to organize a national lesbian organization and a national day of protest "against the Canadian right wing who wants to destroy us," she said.

"What we want is to end all discrimination against lesbianism, so we can be realized as part of the society and so we won't have to risk harassment by the whole community when we choose our sexuality."

Kidd said the conference tried to show the public that lesbians are not different from other women; that they need and want the same things, including sexual independence, to be with the people they love. She said they shouldn't have to pay for that with the loss of their jobs, friends, and family.

One of the conference's major workshops was for lesbian mothers to discuss a variety of situations that range from those where the children know about and understand their mother's lesbianism, to those where the woman is about to leave her husband and cannot afford to disclose her sexuality openly.

Many people believe that "lesbian mother" is a contradictory term, and that a woman has to be one or the other, but about one-third of all lesbians are mothers who were once involved in a heterosexual relationship, Kidd said.

Francie Wyland of the Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund, said: "Some women are immediately aware that they're lesbians, while some women have been married and then fall in love with a woman. They then suffer an immense struggle in a marriage which they're no longer happy with so they won't have to pay for their lesbianism by losing their children."

Vancouver Sun, May 26, 1981

Vancouver Sun, May 19, 1981

Lesbian art display witty and sensitive

By ART PERRY
Province Art Critic

A lesbian art exhibit may sound a bit too specialized for the average gallery-goer. Curiosity might draw a few observers yet, to be sure, the coupling of lesbianism and art is at best just another category: Like black art, gay art, kids art, golden agers art, even Canadian art, it's an attempt to put some specific corner or edge on the making of art.

The result is that a lesbian art exhibit brings with it all the preconceptions of woman-to-woman relationships. (The exhibit in question now on at the Women in Focus Gallery is entitled *Woman to Woman*.) The same is true for any collective art show which is assembled on a non-art pretext.

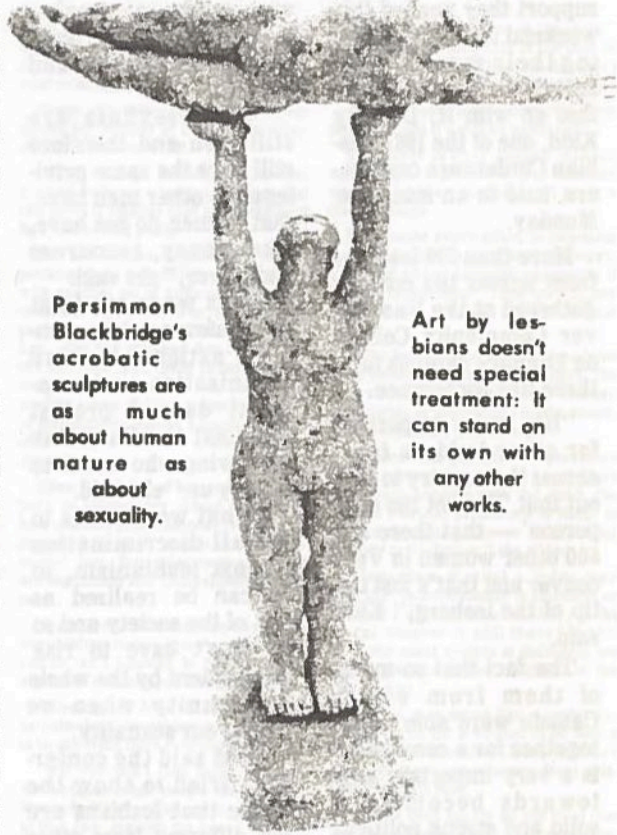
Personally, I am against art exhibits that use the artists rather than the art to form the *raison d'être*, because we naturally look for lesbianism in lesbian art, we look for Canadianism in Canadian art, we look for experience in golden agers art and so forth.

The result is that the art doesn't get a chance to breathe on its own. For instance: What if the *Woman to Woman* exhibit was labelled *A Collective Show of B.C. Artists*? Not a very exciting title to be sure, but it would allow the assembled art, which in this case is quite worthwhile, to make its womanly statements without some umbrella label that does much more harm than good — especially when the social nature of the art becomes a major basis.

In other words, lesbian artists may be doing their art and their own creativity a disservice by using their sexuality as a focal point.

The *Woman to Woman* exhibit is a good one. Much of the work is fun, witty, and sensitive. Yet, to return to my problem of non-art labelling, much of the lesbian art show has little to do with womanly relationships. There are forceful collages by Josie Cook; there are soft and lush hand-colored photos of Galiano Island by Robyn Elphick, and there is a standout series of pastel drawings by Jill Weaving.

To be sure, many of the women artists in this show direct their art to their sexuality. Yet, as gallery spokesman Jill Pollack explained,



Persimmon Blackbridge's acrobatic sculptures are as much about human nature as about sexuality.

Art by lesbians doesn't need special treatment: it can stand on its own with any other works.

although the exhibit was arranged by the National Lesbian Conference 1981, which recently met in Vancouver, the artists need not be lesbians. This further adds confusion to the *Woman to Woman* in Focus Gallery's statement that this is the "first ever Canadian lesbian art show."

To my mind, those works intended as lesbian statements can carry such concerns within the art itself, as can those that needn't be grouped under that heading. The charming acrobatic sculptures by Persimmon Blackbridge and Hindy Avery's wonderful *Sixty Women* are as much about human nature as about male or female sexuality.

In the end, this is really what comes through from the collected art in *Woman to Woman*. Even with, or despite, the lesbian labelling of this exhibit, it is a show containing much non-social, non-sexual, non-specialized art. I am sure their premise for mounting this show was not to present a trite, "Lesbians are people too" theme, yet the format of the exhibit almost forces such a deduction.

Art by lesbians has an exciting and important place in the greater context of art. There is no reason to take it from the mainstream; it can handle the current just fine on its own.

The Province, May 29, 1981

Lesbian pride march is a first for Canada

VANCOUVER — "Look over here, look over there, lesbians are everywhere." The chant drew the attention of highrise dwellers who hung from their balconies gaping. Along the march route, the din of car horns followed the 200 women who wound their way from Robson's Square through downtown streets to the West End Community Centre. Canada's first lesbian pride march must have been one of the country's rowdiest and most boisterous demonstrations.

By the end of the May 16-18 weekend, more than 500 women had registered for the fifth Binational Lesbian Conference. They were there, as organizer Dorothy Kidd said in her opening remarks, to define what it means to be lesbian and come out, not just as individual women, but as a movement.

The opening plenary began with reports from across the country. All regions but the Territories and Atlantic Canada were represented. A woman from the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee of the BC Federation of Women expressed the concern that was to be echoed over the course of the three-day meeting. "We can't afford to underestimate our enemies and their credibility to the outside world," she said, referring to a full-page ad for the

Moral Majority that had appeared in the *Vancouver Sun*. "We need to work together to be visible and credible. We need to work hard to survive — to be able to be around to congratulate ourselves afterwards that we managed it."

That evening Toronto rock group Mama Quilla II brought together some of the key elements of the conference — fun, anger, sexuality, sharing — in a dynamic social and cultural form. The event, which crested on the spirit and enthusiasm of the demonstration, was one of many opportunities for women to meet, share and unwind outside of the confines of meetings. Workshop topics ranged from sex to sports, from media to madness during two-and-a-half intensive days of discussions and deliberations.

Conference organizers centred out three priorities for the final plenary: childcare (which had broken down a couple of times over the weekend and was seen as crucial to continuing and encouraging involvement of mothers in the movement), fighting the right and the formation of a national lesbian organization.

Further comment on, and analysis of, the Binational Lesbian Conference will appear in the next issue of *TBP*.

Chris Bearchell □

The Body Politic, June 1981

NETWORKING

(This is only a partial list of groups and services for lesbians, and was updated in the fall of 1981.)

Nova Scotia

Coalition of Women's Groups
c/o YWCA
1239 Barrington St.
Halifax, N.S. B3J 1Y3
(902) 423-6162

Lesbian Drop-In
c/o Women's Place
1225 Barrington St.
Halifax, N.S.
(902) 429-4063

Quebec

Co-op Femmes
CP 223
Succ. Delorimier
Montreal, P.Q. H2H 2N6
(514) 843-8993

Gay Women's Info Line
(514) 931-5330

Montreal Gay Women
C.P. 128, Succ. G.
Montreal, P.Q.

Women's Information &
Referral Centre
3585, rue Saint Urbain
Montreal, P.Q. H2X 2N6
(514) 842-4781

Ontario

Lesbian Organization of Kitchener
Box 2422, Stn. B.
Kitchener, Ont.

Northern Women's Centre
316 Bay St.
Thunderbay, Ont.
(807) 345-7802

Lesbian Mother's Defence Fund
Box 38, Stn. F
Toronto, Ont. M6H 4E1
(416) 465-6822

Gays and Lesbians Against the
Right Everywhere
Box 793, Stn. Q.
Toronto, Ont. M4T 2N7

Toronto Rape Crisis Centre
P.O. Box 6597, Stn. A
Toronto, Ont.

Potluck Suppers
Box 6771, Stn. A
Toronto, Ont. M5W 1X5
(416) 368-0355

Manitoba

Winnipeg Lesbian Society
730 Alexander St.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
(204) 786-4581

Women's Building
730 Alexander St.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
(204) 783-7889

Saskatchewan

WAWAW Saskatoon
Box 1892
Saskatoon, Sask.

Saskatoon Gay Community
Centre
Box 1662
Saskatoon, Sask.

Alberta

Womyn's Collective
c/o GIRC
Box 2715, Stn. M
Calgary, Alta, T2P 3C1

British Columbia

Nanaimo Rape Relief
285 Prideaux St.
Nanaimo, B.C.
(604) 753-1021

Rural Lesbians Association
c/o Amazon
Box 6, R.R. 1
Ruskin, B.C.

Bisexual Women's Group
c/o LIL
1501 West Broadway
Vancouver, B.C.

Bread and Roses
c/o 2043 Pandora St.
Vancouver, B.C.

Disabled Lesbians
(604)263-8150

Lesbian Feminist Mothers
Political Action Group
c/o East Side Family Place
924 Commercial Drive
Vancouver, B.C.

Lesbian Resistance
c/o Vancouver Status of Women
400A West 5th Ave.
Vancouver, B.C.

Lesbian Feminist Workshop
Manual
c/o Press Gang
603 Powell St.
Vancouver, B.C.

Lesbian Information Line
1501 W. Broadway
Vancouver, B.C.
(604) 734-1016

Lesbian Mother's Defence Fund
P.O. Box 65563, Stn. F
Vancouver, B.C.

Service, Office, Retail Workers
Union of Canada
✓814 - 402 W. Pender St.
Vancouver, B.C.
(604) 684-2834

Vancouver Status of Women
400A W. 5th Ave.
Vancouver, B.C.
(604) 873-1427

Vancouver Women's Health
Collective
1501 West Broadway
Vancouver, B.C.

Welfare Rights Coalition
c/o S. Vancouver Family Place
4932 Victoria Drive
Vancouver, B.C.

Women In Focus
466 West Broadway
Vancouver, B.C.

Women Against Prisons
P.O. Box 46571, Stn. G
Vancouver, B.C.

Women's Self-Help Counselling
(604) 872-3122

Young Lesbian Association
1501 West Broadway
Vancouver, B.C.

Feminist Lesbian Action Group
Box 237, Stn. E
Victoria, B.C.

FRANCOPHONE CONTACTS

B.C.

Jocelyne Lecompte
1773 East 4th
Vancouver, B.C.
(604) 253-9253

R.R. 3
Webb Rd.
Courtenay,
Ile de Vancouver
(604) 338-7565

Jeanne Perreault &
Sandy Northrup
6159 Dallas Drive
Kamloops, B.C.
(604) 573-4678

Quebec

Anne Michaud
4055 Rivard
Montreal, Quebec H2L 4E1
(514) 845-6523

Daniele Leroux
5808 Esplanade #4
Montreal, Quebec
(514) 276-4810

New Brunswick

Roberta Clair
364 University Ave.
Fredericton, N.B.
(506) 454-6818

Nova Scotia

Anne Versailles
5261 Kent St. #1
Halifax, N.S.
(902) 429-6717

Media

Broadside
P.O. Box 494, Stn. F
Toronto, Ont.
M5S 2T1

Fireweed
P.O. Box 279, Stn. B
Toronto, Ont. M5T 2W2

Grapevine
P.O. Box 38, Stn. F
Toronto, Ont. M6H 4E1

Images
Box 736
Nelson, B.C.

Kinesis
c/o VSW
400A 5th Ave. West
Vancouver, B.C.

Leaping Lesbians
CKMS-FM
Kitchener, Ontario

Lesbian/Lesbienne
Box 2531, Stn. B
Kitchener, Ont.

The Lesbian Show
337 Carrall St.
Vancouver, B.C.

Les editions du remue-menage
C.P. 607, Succ. C
Montreal, P.Q. H2L 4L5
(514) 845-7850

Radical Reviewer
P.O. Box 24953, Stn. C
Vancouver, B.C.

International

International Gay Association
c/o CHLR
Box 931
Dublin 4, Republic of Ireland

Lesbian Feminist Centre
Shisyobako 84
Nakano Yubin Kyoku
Nakano Ku
Tokyo To
Japan

National Women's Mailing List
1195 Valencia St.
San Francisco, CA 94110

Wages Due Lesbians
P.O. Box 287
Kilburn, NW6 5QU
London, England

IF YOUR GROUP IS INTERESTED IN HOSTING THE NEXT NATIONAL LESBIAN CONFERENCE IN 1983, OR IF YOU WANT MORE COPIES OF THIS BOOKLET, CONTACT THE LESBIAN CONFERENCE 1981 AT BOX 65563, STATION F, VANCOUVER, B.C.



Lesbian Pride March, May 16, 1981 Vancouver

Mary McEwan