

Lavender Shadows:
An Analysis of the Role of Lesbian Feminism in the British Columbia
Federation of Women

by
Ann VanDerAa

A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfilment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
History

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2025

© Ann VanDerAa 2025

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This thesis examines the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC) of the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), an umbrella organization that brought together diverse feminist groups from 1974 to the late 1980s. The ROLSC provides a lens through which to analyze the paradox of lesbian feminist politics in Canada: how could a feminist movement claim to fight for all women while continually marginalizing women who loved women? Through archival research at Simon Fraser University, the University of Ottawa, and other collections, this study reconstructs how lesbian feminists negotiated inclusion, contested heteronormativity, and reshaped the Federation from within.

This thesis challenges historiographical narratives that portray lesbian feminism as separate from, or oppositional to, the broader women's movement. Instead, the experience of the ROLSC demonstrates an alternative trajectory of integration, in which lesbian feminists strategically leveraged their position inside the Federation to achieve systemic change. By situating the ROLSC within Canadian feminist and queer historiography, this thesis shows that lesbian feminists did not merely occupy the shadows of the women's movement. Their activism reconfigured its very terms, ensuring that feminism in Canada could not remain solely about gender but had to grapple with sexuality, heteronormativity, and the politics of self-determination.

Acknowledgements

Since the inception of this project, I have been fortunate enough to receive much support and guidance. The faculty and students in the Department of History at the University of Waterloo and the larger Tri-University community have been supportive and helpful with their encouragement and suggestions on the process and the subject. A special thank you to my committee members Dr. Matthew Hayday (University of Guelph) and Dr. Susan Roy (University of Waterloo) for their thoughtful engagement and constructive criticism. A particular thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Jane Nichol. Dr. Nicholas: your generosity with your time, your sharp eye for detail, and your unwavering belief in my work carried me through the most difficult stages of research and writing. You have been both a mentor and an inspiration, and I could not have asked for a more supportive guide through this process.

This research would not have been possible without the assistance of archivists and librarians at Simon Fraser University Archives, where much of my work was based, as well as the University of British Columbia, the City of Vancouver Archives, and the University of Ottawa. I am deeply grateful for the care and expertise with which these collections are maintained, and for the archivists' patience in helping me navigate the archives.

Finally, I thank my family, especially my parents Charlene and Shawn, for their love and belief in me, which sustained me through the challenges of writing and research, and who survived the endless ramblings. To my partner, Dominic, thank you for your patience, humour, and believing in me even when I doubted myself.

To all of you: thank you; I am so grateful.

Table of Contents

Author's Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One.....	26
Chapter Two.....	48
Chapter Three.....	70
Conclusion.....	105
Bibliography.....	110

Introduction

In December 1975, a letter began circulating quietly but urgently among feminist groups in British Columbia. Addressed simply “To Sisters,” it came from the newly formed Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC) of the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW). Its tone was warm, direct, and unmistakably political. It went:

As feminists, however, we have an obligation to examine all the institutions of our culture ... no matter how personally difficult it may seem.

We in the Subcommittee, as lesbians, have been forced for our own survival to examine the myths and fears, and we would like an opportunity of sharing our insights with you about lesbians.

Our B.C.F.W. constitution states ‘no woman is free until all women are free,’ and until the women’s movement includes and stands behind ALL women, our strength is seriously impaired.¹

This wasn’t just an invitation to a workshop; it was a challenge and a declaration. It was a carefully worded insistence that the feminist movement had to reckon with its own silences around sexuality if it hoped to live up to its ideals. This letter emerged from what might be called the lavender shadows of the movement—lesbian feminists whose presence was unmistakable but often cast into the margins of visibility.

The story of the ROLSC begins here: with the recognition that lesbian feminists were essential to the movement and yet had to constantly prove it. They were leaders, strategists, organizers, and writers. But they were also asked to make themselves smaller—to not be too political, to prioritize unity over truth, to set aside their full selves in the name of the cause. Lesbians as individuals were accepted into the movement, but not lesbianism as a political

¹ ‘To Sisters’ Letter from Laurie Morrison for the Lesbian Rights Subcommittee of the B.C. Federation of Women, 1975. University of Ottawa Library Archives and Special Collections [hereafter ARCS], British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) Fond [hereafter BCFW], File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 – Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

analysis and theory.² The central paradox of this thesis is precisely that tension: how could a feminist movement claim to fight for all women while continually marginalizing women who loved women?

Formed in the early 1970s, the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) was the largest feminist umbrella organization in the province.³ It brought together women's centres, union activists, Indigenous women's groups, and grassroots collectives in an ambitious coalition aimed at structural reform. The BCFW's decentralized structure enabled the formation of subcommittees like the ROLSC, whose members fought to make lesbian rights a feminist priority—on issues ranging from employment discrimination to child custody, the legal age of consent, and cultural visibility.⁴ But the mere existence of the Subcommittee was no guarantee of inclusion. Its members encountered continue resistance—from subtle rhetorical exclusions to outright hostility in meetings and motions. Yet lesbian feminists stayed. They insisted on being heard. They kept showing up—with position papers, workshops, open letters, and a vision of feminism that did not stop at the borders of heterosexuality.

Set against the backdrop of British Columbia's dynamic 1970s political landscape—with the rising popularity of the New Democratic Party, expanding social services, and the growth of radical feminist and social networks—this thesis tells the story of the ROLSC not as a footnote,

² British Columbia Federation of Women ROLSC Report, 1977. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

³ British Columbia Federation of Women Newsletter Volume IV, undated. Simon Fraser University Archives [hereafter SFUA], Ellen Frank Fonds, 1974-1984 [hereafter EF], File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁴ "British Columbia Federation of Women Lesbian Caucus Policy Proposals." *Gay Tide* 1975. City of Vancouver Archives [hereafter CVA], BC Gay and Lesbian Archives [hereafter BCGLA], File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

but as a lens.⁵ A lens through which historians can understand the politics of inclusion, identity, and feminist coalition-building in Canada. Archival documents like the letter quoted at the beginning of this introduction show lesbian feminists within the BCFW speaking in a language of solidarity even while being treated as outsiders. It underscores the price they paid to stay in the movement—and the changes they made because of that choice.

Research Purpose and Questions

This thesis examines the work of the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC) within the British Columbia Federation of Women in an attempt to understand the complex and contradictory historical reality that lesbian activists simultaneously were marginalized within the feminist movement and the gay rights movement and yet were crucial to it. Still, they played a critical role in advancing a more inclusive feminist agenda that centers lesbian rights as part of the feminist struggle in British Columbia. By examining the experiences, strategies, and contributions of the ROLSC, this research seeks to bring into sharper focus the ways lesbian activists navigated structural and ideological barriers to achieve meaningful social change during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Ultimately, this thesis will use the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee within the British Columbia Federation of Women to argue that lesbian feminists were structurally marginalized within the feminist movement. Despite such challenges, lesbian feminists, as evident in the legacy of the ROLSC, played a vital role in shaping feminist discourse and advancing feminist rights within the BCFW and British Columbia. By analyzing the strategies employed by the ROLSC, including internal policy proposals, public education campaigns, network-building events, the hosting the 1981 National Lesbian Conference in

⁵ Jean Barman, “Equality Revolution 1945-1980,” in *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2007), 315-344.

Vancouver, this research demonstrates how lesbian feminist activists challenged the heteronormative boundaries of the second-wave feminist movement and redefined terms of feminist solidarity.

Feminist historiography of Canada has documented major organizations, campaigns, and policy gains.⁶ However, less attention has been paid to the experiences of lesbian activists working within mixed feminist coalitions. The ROLSC, active as a formal subcommittee of the BCFW from the late 1970s through to the early 1980s, offers a valuable case study in the tensions between feminist solidarity and the persistence of heteronormativity within the women's movement. The subcommittee's history illustrates both the limitations and opportunities of lesbian feminist politics. Chapter two will discuss the limitations of lesbian feminist politics, particularly in the way of denied equitable resources, recognition, and influence. The opportunities for subcommittee to embed lesbian concerns into the broader feminist agenda were successful to a degree, as will be outlined further in chapter three.

The purpose of this research is twofold. First, it seeks to document and analyze the formation and evolution of the ROLSC within the BCFW and position their existence within the broader history of second-wave feminism in Canada. Second, it aims to evaluate the

⁶ For feminist historiography more broadly, see: Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), which maps organizational dilemmas across Canada; Linda Briskin, "Feminist Practice: A New Approach to Evaluating Feminist Strategy," in *Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada*, eds. Jeri Wine and Janice Ristock (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1991), 24-40, which reframes everyday organizational practices as political strategy; Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); Joan Sangster, *Demanding Equality. One Hundred Years of Canadian Feminism* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2021); and Amanda Ricci, *Countercurrents: Women's Movements in Postwar Montreal* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023). While these studies richly document the organizational cultures of Canadian feminism, lesbian-feminist politics are generally subsumed within wider concerns, reflecting a broader historiographical trend of marginalizing sexuality as a distinct axis of analysis. Whereas Canadian queer historiography (e.g., Warner, Kinsman and Gentile, Korinek) has primarily traced the lives, communities, and political struggles of lesbians and gay men, feminist historiography (e.g., Adamson, Briskin, Vickers, Sangster) has focused more on the organizational cultures, strategies, and coalition-building of women's movements, with lesbian politics often subsumed rather than foregrounded.

subcommittee's contributions to feminist activism in the province, particularly in the areas of grassroots resistance, the advancement and protection of family and human rights issues, and educational campaigns challenging homophobia.

The BCFW, like other feminist organizations of the time, was a site of progressive activism and a microcosm of the larger social tensions surrounding sexuality, identity, and politics.⁷ The BCFW was established in 1974 as an umbrella organization for women's groups across British Columbia, aimed at fostering women's liberation through fundamental societal change, facilitating coordinated action, and providing a support network across diverse struggles. Its archival records reflect formal engagement with key social issues, primarily exemplified through subcommittees on lesbian rights, women and prisons, women's health, and violence against women. These demonstrated how questions of sexuality, identity, and politics were embedded in the Federation's agenda and on a larger scale, serves of a case study for the inner workings of progressive feminist organizations in Canada. The ROLSC's story reveals how lesbian activists were forced to navigate an organizational structure that often rendered them invisible, even as they used the same structure to press for systematic change. These dynamics reflect what Adrienne Rich has described as "the lesbian continuum," a spectrum of women's resistance to compulsory heterosexuality, but in a politicized, organizational context where solidarity was continually negotiated and contested.⁸

This project asks how these lesbian feminist activists navigated the structural and ideological barriers that limited their influence and visibility. It asks and answers the following questions. What form did these barriers take, and how did they operate within a feminist

⁷ British Columbia Federation of Women Report, undated. SFUA, Simon Fraser University Women's Centre fond [hereafter SFUWC], Series, F-40-7 – British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) records, 1976-1986

⁸ Adrienne C. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980), 648.

organization that was committed, at least in principle, to inclusivity? In what ways did the ROLSC's work align with or diverge from the broader agendas of both the provincial women's movement and the larger feminist network emerging across Canada? What strategies allowed them to resist marginalization, and how effective were these approaches in shifting internal debates? Finally, on a larger scale, how did the activism of the ROLSC reverberate beyond the BCFW, contributing to provincial and national conversations about lesbian rights as part of feminist concerns? Answering these questions on the history of the BCFW and its lesbian feminist history requires reading a mixture of archival records from the BCFW alongside the wider social and political context in which the organization operated.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This project uses a qualitative historical methodology grounded in feminist and queer scholarship based on archival research to reconstruct and interpret the history of the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC) within the British Columbia Federation of Women. Through both archival sources and secondary source analysis, the project examines public statements and convention news, internal communication, financial and resource flows, and governance practice to piece together the BCFW's political and social priorities and practices.

Archival research primarily was accessed from Simon Fraser University Archives, focusing on materials related to the British Columbia Federation of Women and the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee. A wide range of fonds were consulted to trace how lesbian feminist concerns were articulated, negotiated, and supported or marginalized within the broader organizational structure of the BCFW in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Key materials were drawn from the British Columbia Federation of Women fond (F-40) including internal correspondence (F-40-1-0-0-6), financial committee minutes and correspondence (F-40-7-1-0-1),

and grants and funding applications (F-40-7-1-0-5). These files were useful in analyzing the material supports, or absence of such, within the federation. Newsletters, correspondence, and planning materials of BCFW conventions were accessed from the Working Women Unite fonds (F-45).

The Ellen Frank fonds (F-82) covers the years 1974-1984, included material relevant to the ROLSC and lesbian feminist organizing in British Columbia more broadly. Files F-82-2-0-0-1, F-82-2-0-0-2, and F-82-2-0-0-3 contain correspondence, meeting notes, and personal notes from ROLSC members that reveals the challenges they faced within the BCFW, along with their persistent efforts to center lesbian rights within the larger feminist movement.

The Archives and Special Collections at the University of Ottawa Library hold the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) fonds (10-045). The file titled “*Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee*” (10-045-S9-SS2-F2) included meeting notes and strategic planning documents that offer a close view of how lesbian activists organized within the BCFW. Related files such as “*Structure Questionnaire*” (10-045-S9-SS1-F3) and “*Constitution, Policy, Structure, Resolution*” (10-045-S1-SS1-F1) provided insights into governance models and debates around inclusion, while the “*Constitution and Policy Handbook*” (10-045-S1-SS1-F2) revealed how formal policy structures reflected, in more often or failed to reflect, lesbian feminist concerns.

In addition to Simon Fraser University Archives and the University of Ottawa Library and Archives, other archival materials came from the University of British Columbia’s Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) and the City of Vancouver Archives. Selected records were accessed from the University of British Columbia’s Rare Books and Special Collections, under the BCFW fonds (RBSC-ARC-1058). Particularly valuable were materials authored by lesbian activists, including “A Day on Feminist Collectives” by the BC Lesbian Caucus and

internal publications like those from Press Gang Printers, a feminist-focused publication company. Additional context was provided by records from the City of Vancouver Archives, particularly a series of files documenting local feminist and lesbian activist networks from the early 1970s through the 1980s. The selection and use of archival documents was focused on tracing on lesbian feminist concerns were framed within the greater BCFW agenda and how material supports, or the lack of such, reflected those framings.

This thesis follows an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together feminist theory, queer theory, and intersectionality to analyze the dynamics of power, exclusion, and resistance within the British Columbia Federation of Women, specifically as experienced by the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee. Each lens provides a critical pathway to understanding how lesbian activists navigated structural and ideological obstacles while advancing transformative feminist goals. Feminist theory functions as both an analytic and political framework, interrogating how organizational structures and practices within the BCFW shaped the possibilities for lesbian feminist activism, and to highlight lesbian feminism as integral to, rather than marginal within, feminist histories in Canada.⁹ Drawing on Canadian feminist scholarship, particularly the work of Nancy Adamson *et al.*'s *Feminist Organizing for a Change*, feminist organizations are viewed not simply as political spaces but also as a stage where ideologies, identities, and interests often collided. Adamson *et al.* observe that “one of the important elaborations provided by feminist theory is the understanding of how sexual orientation also divides and brings women together.”¹⁰ This understanding on the role of sexual

⁹ Mary Hawkesworth and Lisa Disch, “Introduction: Feminist Theory: Transforming the Known World,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-4.

¹⁰ Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 105.

orientation is foundational to chapter two, which examines how procedural choices and resource allocation functioned as mechanisms of support or containment. These structural designs, while framed as neutral or pragmatic, often reinforced the marginal status of the ROLSC within the BCFW.

Queer theory, particularly lesbian feminist thought, provides a critical lens through which to read both the visible and invisible elements of the archival record. Drawing on theorists such as Charlottle Bunch and Adrienne Rich, the project examines how lesbian identity was positioned in BCFW discourse. Charlotte Bunch, an American author and organizer of women's and human rights movements, is quoted by Adamson *et al*, that "no females will ever be free to choose to be anything until we are also free to choose to be lesbians," and her argument was foundational to understanding the ROLSC's push for visibility not just as a private identity, but also as a public political stance.¹¹ Similarly, Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality helps interpret the broader discomfort within the BCFW when lesbian rights were forced to the forefront, particularly in chapter two's analysis of BCFW convention debates and correspondence, which like many other feminist organizations at the time, often deflected or reframed lesbian issues in depoliticized terms such as "sexual preference" or "private matters".¹²

A key strategy within queer theory is in identifying and interpreting archival silences, moments where lesbian concerns are conspicuously absent or minimized in otherwise detailed records.¹³ These silences are treated not merely as gaps, but as active sites of erasure shaped by dominant discourses of acceptability and coalition politics. Chapter three analyzes how the

¹¹ Adamson et al., 105-106.

¹² Rich, 648.

¹³ Gina Watts, "Queer Lives in Archives: Intelligibility and Formas of Memory," *disclosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 27 (2018), 103.

ROLSC responded to these silences by producing their own materials such as newsletters, manuals, and publishing internal critiques in annual reports, to assert their presence and reframe the narrative.

This archival research was conducted with attention to how issues of class, race, and sexuality occasionally emerge in the record, particularly in relation to lesbian feminist organizing. While these dynamics are not the central focus of this study, they are acknowledged where relevant, especially in shaping the broader political climate of the BCFW. In line with socialist feminist traditions, this project recognizes that power within feminist movements was not always equally distributed, and that dynamics of race, class, and sexuality sometimes influenced coalition work. As noted in *Feminist Organizing for a Change*, “central to socialist-feminist analysis is a recognition of, and a desire to change, the unequal distribution of power inherent in gender, class and race relations.”¹⁴ Although such issues appear unevenly in the archival material, moments of tension, such as those between lesbian and heterosexual feminists, are noted where they offer insight into the internal dynamics of the BCFW.¹⁵

Finally, this framework is animated by a commitment to recovering the power and possibility of collective feminist action. As Adamson *et al.* argue, “The power of collective action, not as chaos but as effective and meaningful democracy, must be rediscovered.”¹⁶ This thesis traces how the ROLSC practiced this principle, even when operating on the margins, through consciousness-raising workshops, caucus meetings, educational initiatives, and public

¹⁴ Adamson et al, 102.

¹⁵ Adamson et al, 102.

¹⁶ Adamson et al, 159.

advocacy. In doing so, they enacted a vision of feminist democracy that challenged the BCFW's internal hierarchies and expanded its political horizons.

Historiography & Definition of Terms

This project examines lesbian feminist organizing within the broader context of the second-wave feminist movement, focusing on how sexuality shaped coalition politics. While the specific focus is on British Columbia and the BCFW, understanding national currents of lesbian feminism in the United States and Canada is essential for situating this case within wider tensions and debates. U.S. historiography is more extensive than its Canadian counterpart and provides a comparative framework for interpreting the dynamics of sexuality and feminist organizing.

The historiography of lesbian feminism in the United States is both extensive and foundational, providing a strong theoretical and comparative framework for interpreting the dynamics of sexuality and feminist organizing. Wendy Kline's *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (2010) situates the women's health movement at the core of late twentieth-century feminist politics, emphasizing how debates around bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and sexual freedom often interacted with lesbian activism, sometimes in solidarity, often in tension. Kline's work demonstrates how reproductive politics became a flashpoint for negotiating lesbian visibility, though her primary focus remains on health activism rather than sexuality, leaving space for further exploration of lesbian-specific agendas.¹⁷

¹⁷ Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Specifically looking into the role of lesbians within feminist organizations, Christine Bedikian's recent contribution, "Lesbians and Their Role Within the Women's Liberation Movement in the Early 1970s," (2023) uses primary sources, specifically *The Woman Identified Woman* manifesto by the New York Radicalesbians, to review the often-overlooked leadership of lesbians in early second-wave organizing. Bedikian's close reading of the manifesto foregrounds its critique of compulsory heterosexuality, encapsulated in the observation that "'lesbian' is the word, the label, the condition that holds women in line," limiting their perceived power in a patriarchal society. Importantly, she situates this analysis within the context of tensions with prominent heterosexual feminists such as Betty Friedan and Susan Brownmiller, who at times actively distanced themselves from lesbian organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis. Bedikian highlights how the Radicalesbians reshaped the women's liberation agenda even while encountering forms of exclusion that echo the Canadian experience.¹⁸

Beyond narrative histories, American scholarship has produced a substantial body of theoretical literature that helps explain the internal politics of feminist and queer movements. These works offer frameworks for analyzing how identities, privileges, and power hierarchies operate within activist organizations—precisely the questions at the heart of the BCFW and its Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee.

Earlier feminist theory often attempted to categorize movements in liberal, socialist, radical, or cultural. Zillah Eisenstein's *Feminism and Sexual Equity* (1984) is a representative example, mapping feminism's political ideologies in relation to state politics.¹⁹ Her critique of

¹⁸ Christine Bedikian, "Lesbians and Their Role Within the Women's Liberation Movement in the Early 1970s," *Gender & Sexuality in World History* (Fall 2020)

¹⁹ Zillah R. Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984)

liberal feminism's limitations provides a framework for analyzing how feminist organizations positioned themselves in relation to broader social movements. However, this framework, like most early theory around feminism, largely omits lesbian perspectives. This silence reflects broader exclusions in the second-wave feminist movement and theorizing, where sexuality was often secondary to gender. More recent scholarship has moved beyond fixed ideological categories, embracing concepts of intersectionality, identity politics, and queer theory to better capture the complexity of feminist organizing.

More recently, American scholars Barbara Ryan (2001), Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski (2007), and Elizabeth Evans (2020) wrote more extensively on the integration of queer thought into feminist theories and politics. Barbara Ryan's work in *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement*—is not only historical but also deeply theoretical. She conceptualizes identity politics as a dual-edged phenomenon: capable of mobilizing marginalized groups, but also of reinforcing boundaries that fragment coalitions. This formulation is critical for understanding the tensions between lesbian activists and heterosexual feminists in both the U.S. and Canada, and why inclusion was often conditional on lesbians downplaying their sexual identity. Ryan situates lesbian feminism as a pivotal case study in how movements negotiate difference in the realms of alliances and divisions. The insistence of lesbians on naming sexuality as a political category expanded the concepts of feminist theory and practice, but it also provoked resistance for fear of division and alienation. Her analysis of this dichotomy is reflected in the BCFW's internal debates over lesbian visibility and the ROLSC. Similar cases documented and analyzed by Ryan, notably the National Organization of Women, the Radicalesbians and the Second Congress of Women in 1970, and the 1977 women's conference in Houston Texas, helped explain how and why the ROLSC faced the dual challenge of asserting

the legitimacy of lesbian-specific concerns while relating them to broader feminist issues to prove their place within the feminist movement.²⁰

Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski's *"A Part and Apart"* (2007) also straddles history and theory. Drawing on organizational sociology and feminist theory, they model coalition-building as an inherently negotiated and fragile process, where participants continuously balance the benefits of solidarity against the costs of identity compromise. Their findings resonate with—and help conceptually frame—the ROLSC's navigation of alliance politics within the BCFW.²¹ Elizabeth Evans's *Intersectionality in Feminist and Queer Movements: Confronting Privileges* (2020), though global in scope, builds on the American tradition of theorizing movement politics through Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework.²² Evans extends this approach to show how privilege and marginalization can exist simultaneously within the same activist space, shaping an agenda of whose concerns become central and whose are sidelined. While her examples range widely, the attention she gives to sexuality–gender–race interplay offers a sharp lens for interpreting how lesbian activists in mixed feminist spaces like the BCFW encountered both solidarity and exclusion. Evans and her collaborators document a wide variety of contemporary cases to show how intersectionality has functioned both as an analytical framework and as a movement practice. For example, the Paris-based Black feminist collective Mwasi embraced intersectionality as a core political identity,

²⁰ Barbara Ryan, *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001)

²¹ Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski, "A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Feminist Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 1 (2007), 95-113.

²² Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality highlights how systems of power, such as racism, sexism, and classism, interact to create unique forms of oppression for individuals who occupy multiple categories of marginalized identities. Crenshaw's argument looks at how the experiences of women of colour must be understood through the lenses of both race and gender, and how they overlap in compounding inequalities. For further explanation, refer to Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989), 139–167.

explicitly linking race, gender, and colonial history to challenge France’s white-dominated feminist movement. In Philadelphia, the “More Color, More Pride” campaign redesigned the rainbow flag to include brown and black stripes, a visual intervention to address racism within the LGBTQ+ community—sparking backlash from those who preferred a universalist symbol. Evans’s insights illuminate the ROLSC’s strategic efforts to link lesbian rights with issues of class, race, and motherhood decades before “intersectionality” became common feminist vocabulary. Yet the parallels with Evans’s contemporary examples are telling: just as the Philadelphia Pride redesign met resistance in the name of unity, BCFW leadership sometimes rhetorically endorsed diversity while procedurally sidelining lesbian-specific motions.²³

Together, these contributions provide the conceptual vocabulary needed for this thesis: intersectionality to map overlapping systems of exclusion; identity politics to interpret strategies and tensions; and coalition theory to understand the conditional nature of alliances. By drawing on this American scholarship, the analysis of the ROLSC situates a Canadian case within broader feminist and queer movement scholarship, revealing both shared patterns and distinctive national differences.

Canadian scholarship, while less extensive in the documentation of lesbian feminist conflicts and organizing, has made some crucial contributions that situate these struggles within a distinct national context. Central to Canadian scholarship on lesbian feminist contexts in Canada is the work of Becki Ross. Ross’s *The House That Jill Built* (1995) remains one of the few focused histories of lesbian feminism in Canada. Her work documents the rise of lesbian

²³ Elizabeth Evans and Éléonore Lépinard, “Confronting privileges in feminist and queer movements,” *Intersectionality in Feminist and Queer Movements: Confronting Privileges*, eds. Elizabeth Evans and Éléonore Lépinard (London: Routledge, 2019), 1-2.

activism in Toronto, particularly in relation to space-making, cultural production, and community formation. Ross was able to trace the first strands of lesbian activism in Toronto to a collective under the Toronto Women's Liberation Movement (TWLM) and the divisions due to a rejection of lesbian involvement and the refusal to promote gay rights demands. Ross notes the splinting of queer women out of women's liberation groups as queer organizations popped up in major cities such as Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa, York, and Halifax.²⁴ Ross briefly expands to reference the emergence of other lesbian caucuses within women's liberation groups across Canada, including the BCFW. Ross's work is foundational to studying the intersection of feminism and lesbianism as a connected issue.

In addition to Ross, Canadian historians Cameron Duder, Valerie Korinek, and Liz Millward each have made foundational contributions to the recovery and interpretation of lesbian histories in Canada, even if their work does not always foreground activism or formal organizing. Cameron Duder's work *Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65* is foundational in beginning to understand the lifestyles and daily struggles of queer individuals in Canada in the earlier half of the twentieth century. As Duder contends, the history of lesbians in Canada is only now beginning to be explored and written.²⁵ Duder's work, and specifically the time period she examines, traces the shifting discourse in the language and understanding of "romantic friendship" toward a more medical focused framing of lesbianism as deviant and pathological.²⁶ Valerie Korinek's *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930–1985* (2018) intervenes in Canadian queer historiography by refuting

²⁴ Becki L. Ross, *The House That Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 30–31.

²⁵ Cavanagh, Sheila L. Review of *Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65*, by Cameron Duder. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 3 (2013), 532.

²⁶ Cavanagh, 532.

the assumption that queer life and activism could only flourish in large urban centers such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. She demonstrates that lesbians, gay men, and queer people built vibrant communities in prairie cities like Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, and Edmonton. By recovering these subcultures, Korinek challenges the “misperception that queer people did not live in the prairies, and that queer communities did not form in prairie cities.”²⁷ For many individuals active between the 1930s and 1960s, she argues, the act of living openly as gay or lesbian in prairie cities was itself a form of political resistance, “sufficiently political” even without formal activism.²⁸ Liz Millward’s *Making a Scene: Lesbians and Community across Canada, 1964–84* (2015) adds another dimension by emphasizing the importance of physical and cultural spaces, such as bars, bookstores, cafés, and women’s centers, as infrastructures of belonging, visibility, and political identity. For Millward, these spaces were not simply meeting places but vital infrastructure of lesbian communities itself. The works of these historians highlight how lesbian history in Canada cannot be reduced to metropolitan narratives or singular activist movements. Instead, these studies reveal a more diffuse and context-specific story of resistance, belonging, and identity formation. Building on this foundation, it becomes possible to examine how lesbian feminist organizing itself took shape within these national particularities, and how it was both enabled and constrained by broader cultural, political, and geographic conditions.

Tom Warner’s *Never Going Back* (2002) remains one of the most useful broad overviews of Canadian gay and lesbian political history. Warner’s narrative is especially helpful in tracing the timeline of legal and political gains, including anti-discrimination legislation and Charter-

²⁷ Valerie Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: a History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930-1985*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 13.

²⁸ Korinek, 65.

based advocacy. He clarifies early on in his book that he deliberately chose the use of the term “lesbian and gay liberation” instead of the typically used “gay liberation” in order to ensure equal treatment and representation of both the gay and lesbian identities within the movement.²⁹ This however does not reflect the attitudes of many of the activists Warner wrote about. The leadership and focus of most groups were still gay men. Similarly, the role of lesbians within feminist organizing was not a central concern, and women’s movement politics often appear only in relation to the broader gay rights movement within Warner’s work. As a result, lesbian-specific organizational work—especially within feminist institutions—was mentioned in passing rather than explored in depth. Warner’s work has an abundance of information on the history of the queer community and activism in Canada, and this information provides strong background knowledge. There is little intersection through between his work and the feminist movement of the same period.

Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile’s *The Canadian War on Queers* (2010) is one of the most comprehensive studies of Canadian state surveillance and repression of LGBTQ+ individuals. While not focused specifically on feminist movements, the book provides essential context for understanding the broader climate in which lesbian feminists operated—especially around employment discrimination, child custody cases, and national security campaigns.³⁰ Its insights into the gendered nature of state surveillance support and contextualize the activism of groups like the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC), even if the BCFW itself is not a central focus.

²⁹ Tom Warner, “Introduction: Coming to Terms,” *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 1-14

³⁰ Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

While lesbian history scholarship has begun to illuminate the lived experiences, community formations, and spaces of queer women in Canada, broader feminist historiography has traced a somewhat different set of concerns. Canadian feminist historians have often emphasized organizational structures, political strategies, and coalition-building, with lesbian activism more often subsumed within, rather than foregrounded in, these narratives.

One of the earliest systematic studies of the Canadian feminist movement was Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail's *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (1988). This book maps feminist groups across the country and examines the organizational dilemmas they faced, including whether to centralize or remain decentralized and regional, and whether to focus on consciousness-raising, service provision, or political reform. The study emphasizes Canada's tendency toward inclusivity, both as a strength and a source of conflict, foreshadowing what historian Jill Vickers later termed the "operational code" of Canadian feminism.³¹ Building on this work, Briskin's article, "Feminist Practice: A New Approach to Evaluating Feminist Strategy" (1991), proposes a broader framework for analyzing feminist organizing and its successes. She critiques traditional evaluations of feminist groups that focus primarily on policy outcomes or institutional influence. Instead, Briskin argues that the daily practices of feminist organizations, their decision-making processes, interactions, and organizational culture, should also be considered political. According to Briskin, strategy should be assessed based on its commitment to

³¹ Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988).

challenging hierarchical and male-dominated structures, promoting inclusivity, and sustaining feminist consciousness and identity over time.³²

In the edited collection *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, edited by Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty in 1992, historian Jill Vickers identifies and further explains the “operational code” of Canadian second-wave feminism; an underlying set of assumptions, strategies, and practices that distinguish the movement in Canada as its own, unique form of activism separate from the United States. Vickers’ concept of the operational code refers to the rules and practices of feminist organizing, such as how coalitions were formed, how disagreements and debates were handled, and the relationship between activist organising and the state. She argues the unique patterns of Canadian activism were shaped by the Canadian socio-political environment that emphasized federalism, policy reform through state structures, and a focus on regional needs.³³ The Canadian movement, Vickers argued, privileged inclusiveness, coalition-building, and support across ideological and regional lines. Backhouse’s book and its contributors put these claims to the test through comparative analysis. The volume includes important contributions including Francine Dumon and Micheline de Seve’s explorations of feminism in Quebec, and various works addressing racism in feminist theory and practice. Yet, lesbian-feminist politics are almost entirely absent.

³² Linda Briskin, "Feminist Practice: A New Approach to Evaluating Feminist Strategy." In *Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada*, eds. Jeri Wine and Janice Ristock. Toronto: James Lorimer, 1991, pp. 24-40.

³³ Jill Vickers, “The Intellectual Origins of the Women’s Movement in Canada,” in *Challenging Times: The Women’s Movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 39-60.

The collection advances key debates on race, region, and ideology within feminism, but offered little insight into lesbian visibility within the movement.³⁴

More recently, Joan Sangster's *Demanding Equality* (2021) brings a long view to the history of Canadian feminism, tracing shifting demands and ideologies from the early 20th century to the present. Her analysis spans a century of feminist activism and engages with class, policy, and labour politics. While she does reference sexuality, lesbian concerns are usually subsumed within broader coalition efforts. This absence mirrors a broader trend in Canadian feminist historiography, where lesbian feminism is rarely treated as a distinct or sustained field of inquiry.³⁵ Expanding on the study of feminism in Quebec, Amanda Ricci's work *Countercurrents: Women's Movements in Postwar Montreal* (2023) enriches the understanding of francophone women in the larger Canadian social activist context, multilingual organizing, and the interplay of feminism with national, regional, and community politics. Ricci addresses regional and linguistic tensions, while lesbian feminist politics remain peripheral.³⁶

While there is a rich body of Canadian scholarship on lesbian lives, queer activism, and feminist movements, there remains relatively little work that brings these strands together. Studies have often treated sexuality as part of broader feminist histories or situated lesbian activism as a subsection of queer narratives, but few works explore lesbian feminism as a distinct formation or examine its influence within both larger feminist and queer movements. This gap stands in contrast to the U.S. context, where scholars such as Barbara Ryan, Stephanie Gilmore,

³⁴ *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992)

³⁵ Joan Sangster, *Demanding Equality: One Hundred Years of Canadian Feminism* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021)

³⁶ Amanda Ricci, *Countercurrents: Women's Movements in Postwar Montreal* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023)

and Elizabeth Kaminski have explicitly analyzed lesbian feminism as an intellectual and political force.

This thesis frequently uses the terms *lesbian*, *queer*, and *lesbian feminist*. This thesis uses these terms with care and the understanding that these terms are not fixed, but historically contingent on the time, geography, socio-political context, and the activist organizations being referenced. In this work, the term *lesbian* is used to refer to women who identified as same-sex attracted and who organized around that identity socially, politically, or culturally.³⁷ However, this does not imply a single or unified definition. As ROLSC member and co-author of *Stepping Out A Line: A Workbook On Lesbianism and Feminism*, Yvette Perreault stated in 1980, “most lesbians identify as ‘woman’, not as ‘homosexual’, and have chosen to fight with the women’s liberation rather than the gay rights movement.”³⁸ For many, lesbian identity was not simply about their sexual orientation but was an embedded part of feminist politics. The term *queer* appears often in this thesis as well. Following Kinsman and Gentile’s *The Canadian War on Queers*, this study acknowledges that “queer” as a political identity emerged in tension with earlier categories like “lesbian” and “gay,” often critiquing the assimilationist goals of the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement.³⁹

The term *lesbian feminist* is used to describe women who not only identified as lesbians but who saw their sexuality as politically transformative, challenging gender normativity and

³⁷ Radicalesbians, *The Woman Identified Woman* (1970); Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lesbian>

³⁸ Yvette Perreault, *Vane* magazine February 1980. CVA, BCGLA, File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

³⁹ Kinsmen and Gentile, 30-36.

confronting heterosexual dominance within these movements themselves.⁴⁰ As articulated in foundational documents like *The Woman-Identified Woman* manifesto (1970) and as reflected in the activism of the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC), lesbian feminism was a strategic intervention that sought to make the feminist movement accountable to all women.

This review has shown that American scholarship provides a well-developed theoretical and historical foundation for understanding lesbian feminist organizing. In contrast, Canadian literature, while rich in documenting feminist and queer histories, rarely centers lesbian feminist politics as a sustained subject of analysis. What remains underexplored is how lesbian feminists in Canada operated within feminist coalitions, especially how they negotiated visibility, inclusion, and political influence from within feminist organizations that were not always prepared to accommodate sexuality as a central political concern.

By placing the ROLSC's history within this combined historiographical frame of American theoretical models alongside Canadian historical narratives, this thesis acknowledges the richness of Canadian feminist and queer scholarship while identifying the gaps that remain. This dual lens makes it possible to see the ROLSC both as a product of its local feminist landscape and as part of a transnational story of lesbian feminist organizing. The ROLSC's story offers a case where lesbian activists neither separated from nor were consumed by the feminist movement but instead shaped it from within. In doing so, this thesis contributes a critical Canadian case study to the broader transnational conversation on the politics of lesbian feminism and organizational change.

⁴⁰ Valk, A.M. "lesbian feminism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 21, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/lesbian-feminism>.; Verta Taylor & Leila J. Rupp, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism," *Signs* 19, no.1 (1993), 32-35.

Overview of Thesis Layout

This thesis is organized into three chapters. These chapters will collectively trace the evolution of lesbian feminist activism within the British Columbia Federation of Women and examine the complex relationship between inclusion, resistance, grassroots organization, and unity within difference. The first chapter offers an overview of the BCFW and its lesbian feminist sub-group, the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee. This chapter outlines the Federation's structure, regional priorities, and early ideological commitments, situating the organization within the broader context of second-wave feminist organizing in Canada in the 1970s. The chapter goes on to examine the emergence of the B.C. Lesbian Caucus and its transition into the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC). Chapter two focuses its analysis on the multiple forms of marginalization, exclusion, and ignorance suffered by lesbian feminists within the BCFW. Drawing on archival documentation including correspondences, and internal ROLSC and BCFW reports, this chapter demonstrates how the ROLSC was forced to navigate a heteronormative feminist landscape.

The third chapter highlights the accomplishments and long-term significance of the ROLSC's work despite such previously mentioned conflicts. It explores the group's education and awareness programming, its policy-making efforts, and the network-building initiatives. Despite limited institutional support, the ROLSC made lasting contributions to lesbian visibility and lesbian feminist policymaking in British Columbia and within the larger feminist and gay rights movements. The thesis then concludes with a broader consideration of the legacy of lesbian feminist activism in shaping intersectional approaches to Canadian feminism. Across these chapters, the lavender shadows of the ROLSC come into view, revealing how lesbian

feminists shaped coalition politics in British Columbia, even when their contributions were obscured.

Chapter One

Setting the Stage: Foundations of Lesbian Feminist Activism within the British Columbia Federation of Women

In the early 1970s, lesbian feminists in the United States embraced a very performative approach to activist efforts aimed to shock, disrupt, and confront contemporary public discourses, particularly issues of gender and sexuality. This strategy was deeply influenced by both the feminist and gay rights movements, which had, by that time, developed a well-honed language of protest rooted in spectacle, humor, and public confrontation. Feminist protestors in the late 1960s had already staged headline-grabbing acts like the 1968 Miss America pageant demonstration, in which members of New York Radical Women threw bras, girdles, and beauty products into a “Freedom Trash Can” while crowning a live sheep as “Miss America”—a stunt designed to ridicule sexist beauty standards.¹ Meanwhile, gay rights activists were increasingly deploying what became known as “zaps”—carefully planned but theatrically disruptive interventions at political events, press conferences, and even television studios, meant to embarrass public figures and draw attention to gay issues.² These tactics were loud, flamboyant, and media-savvy, reflecting a shared understanding that visibility itself was a form of power.

The overt embrace of spectacle staged lesbian identity in direct opposition to the patriarchy and heteronormativity that was still present in both the mainstream feminist

¹ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 90–94.

² John D’Emilio discusses the emergence of the zap as a distinct form of gay liberation activism in the early 1970s. Developed especially by activists in New York, zaps were disruptive, media-heavy protests that combined confrontation and challenges of authority with humour, flamboyance, and attention-grabbing. For more information, refer to John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 231–33.

movement and the male-dominated gay rights movement in 1960s and 1970s America. Historian Lillian Faderman references the 1970 guerrilla protest by the Radicalesbians at the American Congress to Unite Women and the "sauciness of the zap", describing the theatrics of dimming the lights, yelling and stampeding down the aisles and the lights return to display signs plastered across the auditorium with flashy statements such as "'Superdyke loves you!' 'Take a lesbian to lunch!' 'You're going to love the Lavender Menace'" and "Women's liberation is a lesbian plot."³ These actions spoke to the radical phrases of the American New Left.⁴ The expressive theatrics worked to forcibly bring lesbianism into the conversation. The performativity of groups like the Radicalesbians was powerfully symbolic but lacked sustainability, a reoccurring issue noticed in the analysis of the lesbian feminist movement in the United States.

Theatrical spectacle became a hallmark of lesbian feminist organizing in the United States, embodied by figures such as Rita Mae Brown.⁵ The lesbian feminism activist and expelled former editor of NOW's New York newsletter epitomizes the American emphasis on showmanship and performativity for activist causes. As a prominent member of the 'Lavender Menace' and cofounder of the Furies Collective, Brown was vocal in social, political, and literary circles, pushing the lesbian feminist agenda through written works such as "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970), *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), and *Class and Feminism* (1974).⁶ Brown became individually prominent for her vocalization of the issues faced by lesbians within a larger women's movement.

³ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* Book Talk, "Part Three: 1970s", Mazer Lesbian Archives, October 18, 2015, <https://www.mazerlesbianarchives.org/mazer-video-collections/4-lesbians1970s-tgr>

⁴ D'Emilio, 236.

⁵ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: the Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 230, 233.

⁶ Faderman, 230, 233.

The theatrics used by American organizations was a double-edged sword which succeeded in pushing lesbian feminist issues to the forefront with media attention. However, due to the intensity and ideological rigidity, internal conflict collapsed several organizations and risked any social or political progress that may have been made. American lesbian feminism was more visible overall but less stable than their Canadian counterparts, whose quiet, more universal, and local approach provided more opportunities for political and legislative change.

In contrast to their American counterparts, Canadian lesbian feminists organizing developed along a quieter, more pragmatic path. Grassroots organizations of lesbian feminist activism in Canada did not make news headlines in the same way as their American counterparts. However, their actions were objectively successful at a similar level as the flashy spectacles of the Radicalesbians or the Furies Collective. In response to the Canadian political landscape, a lower-profile, steady form of activism was a pragmatic response with stronger ties to government funding and policy propositions. Canadian groups like LOOT focused first on community-building, which led to the establishment of enduring support networks and gradual policy advancements.⁷

The British Columbia Federation of Women exemplified this quieter but highly effective model of Canadian lesbian feminist organizing. Founded in 1974 as a coalition of feminist and socialist feminist women's groups, the BCFW aimed to unite women across British Columbia around shared goals categorized into four key issues: health, childcare, education, and employment.⁸ Though it was not initially established as a lesbian organization, it became a crucial site for lesbian feminist activism. The BCFW provided a unique political space in which

⁷ Ross, 4-5, 8, 16-19.

⁸ Samantha Rushowic, "Intersectionality and the Second-Wave: An Analysis of the British Columbia Federation on Women in the 1980s" (MA Thesis: Simon Fraser University, 2023), 4.

lesbian voices could be amplified through organizational mechanisms like workshops, resolutions, and caucus structures—particularly the formation of the B.C. Lesbian Caucus in the mid-1970s. These internal caucuses allowed lesbians within the broader movement to organize around issues specific to their lives and experiences, such as child custody battles, homophobic discrimination, and invisibility in feminist politics.

Unlike their American counterparts, members of the BCFW and its Lesbian Caucus strategically embedded lesbian concerns within broader feminist discourses rather than through public spectacle. This pragmatic approach reflected both ideological intentions and institutional realities. Since the BCFW received partial funding from provincial sources, there was an incentive to maintain a degree of political legitimacy. Yet this did not preclude bold action. Lesbian members pushed successfully for the adoption of resolutions condemning homophobia and supporting lesbian parenting rights at BCFW annual conventions, gradually shifting the organization's stance on lesbian inclusion. Importantly, these changes were institutionalized through policy rather than protest.

In Canada, social movements and organizations, particularly those associated with the development of feminist politics, have more access to governmental funding and support than in the United States. The BCFW, for example, received roughly \$26,000 in funding from the federal government in 1978 and 1979.⁹ Therefore, large spectacular displays of defiance were not needed to direct government attention to specific issues; the government was already aware and, to some extent, willing to support social change. Canadian queer activism evolved with supports from political accommodations that contrasted the American rights-based model, which relied on theatrics and protest. This level of political openness disincentivized confrontation.

⁹ Dominique Clément. State Funding for Social Movements Database. Retrieved from <https://database.statefunding.ca>.

Activists could get farther by working within feminist institutions and building long-term local capacity rather than by disrupting public events or engaging in mass symbolic protests.

Non-theatrical activism is not to be mistaken with silence or a lack of activism. While less visible, Canadian groups are often more long-lasting and foster strong community ties and networks. Canadian lesbian feminist organizing in the 1970s—particularly within organizations like the BCFW—was not loud, but it effectively created lasting infrastructures and policy amendments. The BCFW helped institutionalize lesbian rights within the broader women's movement, fostering a legacy that influenced provincial and even national policy directions.

This chapter explores the formation of the BCFW and the ROLSC as a case study of embedded lesbian feminist activism. It examines how lesbian women used the institutional frameworks of the BCFW to make their issues legible within a broader feminist movement, challenging their marginalization not through confrontation, but through strategic policy advocacy. Their activism may have been less visible than the dramatic protests of the Lavender Menace or the Furies Collective, but it was no less radical—and arguably more enduring. In the process, these activists institutionalized lesbian rights within Canadian feminist politics and helped shape provincial and national policy in ways that still resonate today.

Formation of the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW)

The formation of the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) can be understood within the broader influx of feminist activity and increased activism targeting social injustices in North America in the late 1960s to early 1980s. Known by many scholars as the 'second wave' of feminism, these decades of feminist activist activity were identifiable by their focus on expanding female rights beyond voting and beyond the white, middle-class, heterosexual

woman. Key issues included economic inequalities and job discrimination, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and systematic sexism. While 1960s remained heavily focused on the white, middle-class, heterosexual women - embodied in the American feminist Betty Friedan's 'problem that has no name' from her work *The Feminine Mystique* - the late 1970s and 1980s added a push for inclusion of minority identities and rights in their battles for equality.¹⁰

By the early 1970s, women across Canada became increasingly disillusioned with the limited scope of political and state feminist activity. One of the most prominent examples of this disillusionment was the backlash against the Royal Commission on the Status of Women established by Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson in 1967. The Commission, chaired by Florence Bird, released its final report in 1970, offering 167 recommendations aimed at improving the status of women in Canadian society—ranging from equal pay and maternity leave to greater access to education and employment opportunities.¹¹ The Commission and its final report was criticized soon after its publication for failing to produce real political change and for ignoring minority and regional needs with its vague goals and generalizations about women in Canada. Criticism particularly arose from radical and socialist feminists “who rejected its embrace of male-defined success, its failure to address the structural basis of women’s oppression within capitalism, and its milquetoast recommendations.”¹² By promoting a generalized vision of Canadian womanhood, the RCSW effectively sidelined the voices and needs of many.

¹⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1963), 15-32.

¹¹ Royal Commission on the Status of Women, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970).

¹² Joan Sangster, “From the Royal Commission on the Status of Women to the National Action Committee,” *Labour / Le Travail* 89 (2022), 149.

In contrast to the centralization and deep ideological emphasis of American lesbian feminist organizations, Canadian counterparts instead placed an emphasis on regional autonomy and coalition-building that reflected both geography and political culture.¹³

Instead, regionally specific activist efforts emerged to combat local social and political issues. In Canada's major urban centres, such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, lesbian feminist groups were formed to promote community building, consciousness-raising, and legislative change over headline-worthy acts of spectacle.

Due to the socio-political climate of British Columbia in the late 1960s and 1970s, the groundwork was laid for grassroots activism and the formation of socialist-feminist alliances. The province of British Columbia during this period was shaped by rapid economic expansion, intense industrial labour, and a pattern of left-leaning politics. The province's reliance on its resource sector, namely forestry, mining, and fisheries, nurtured a strong labour movement, which influenced grassroots activism and led to the intertwining of labour and feminist activist movements.

Politically, this era in B.C. was defined by a dramatic shift in party leadership. After decades under the conservative and pro-business Social Credit Party, the province elected Dave Barrett's New Democratic Party (NDP) in 1972, the province's first NDP government. Barrett's administration enacted reforms such as the Agricultural Land Reserve, the Insurance Cooperation of British Columbia, an expansion of social services, and advocating for amendments to the B.C. Human Rights Code.¹⁴ This was not a first for British Columbia in terms of radical politics. In

¹³ The emphasis of regional autonomy is seen through the collection of microhistories and individualized groups. See Christina Rousseau, "Wages Due Lesbians: Visibility and Feminist Organizing in 1970s Canada," *Gender, Work, and Organization* 22, no. 4 (2015), 366-367; Ross, 11; and Valerie Korinek, "VOICES of Gay, Lesbian, and Feminist Activists in the Prairies," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 28.2 (2018), 135.

¹⁴ Gene Homel, Review of *The Art of the Impossible: Dave Barrett and the NDP in Power, 1972-1975* by Geoff Maggs and Rod Mickleburgh. *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (2014), 331.

the nineteenth century, the first socialists elected to a provincial legislature in Canada came from the mining communities of BC.¹⁵ While Barrett's administration was only in power for three years from 1972 to 1975, it has been characterized as "*The Art of the Impossible*" for its success in "modernizing BC's public administration after twenty years of neglect under Premier W.A.C. Bennett, Bill Bennett's father."¹⁶ The NDP's platform advocated for the advancement of social services, education, human rights, public enterprise, and environmental protection.¹⁷

Coinciding with this tradition of leftist politics came a strong feminist presence in B.C. Even before the official formation of the BCFW, feminist activity and collective consciousness was on the rise in B.C. Local and city-based organizations such as the Vancouver Women's Caucus (VWC) formed in the 1960s.¹⁸ The VWC played a prominent role bringing attention to the issue of reproductive rights with the Abortion Caravan, a cross-country protest that ended at Ottawa's Parliament Hill, advocating for women's rights to abortions on demand.¹⁹ As historian of British Columbia history Julia Creet notes, the organizing of women's right activism expanded exponentially in the early 1970s. In 1969 there were two established groups, and five in 1970. By 1971, seven more groups had formed, and the number doubled the following year. Creet counted seventy-two groups formed in 1974 alone, bringing the province's total to nearly one hundred.²⁰

Canadian feminist activism at the time was a mosaic of local movements where key goals of these groups varied province to province and city to town. However, these local collectives shared a universal dissatisfaction with the political and social rights of women in Canada. With

¹⁵ Philip Resnick, "Social Democracy in Power: The Case of British Columbia," *BC Studies* 34 (1977), 5.

¹⁶ Homel, 331.

¹⁷ Homel, 331.

¹⁸ For more information on the Vancouver Women's Caucus, refer to: SFUA, Vancouver Women's Caucus; Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt, "Clandestine Operations: The Vancouver Women's Caucus, the Abortion Caravan, and the RCMP," *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (2009), 466-468.

¹⁹ SFUA, Vancouver Women's Caucus, Sethna & Hewitt, 467-468.

²⁰ Julia Creet, "A Test of Unity: Lesbian Visibility in the British Columbia Federation of Women, 1974-1975," in *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), 185.

the need for more large-scale, province-wide organizations capable of exerting political pressure and facilitating wide-spread communication, the British Columbia Federation of Women came in fruition. Representatives of over 20 women's groups in the province volunteered to work on a steering committee to organize a founding convention for a federation to unite these groups and their causes.²¹ By the steering committee's second meeting, the group decided on a name for their new infant organization: the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW).²² The goal of the BCFW was to "co-ordinate the diversity of organizations" with the organization's leadership to "represent the needs of women from every walk of life and from every part of the world."²³

The BCFW grew out of discussions held in the early 1970s among women active in local women's centres, student movements, and socialist organizations. The idea for a provincial federation began circulating among women attending conferences hosted by the Vancouver Women's Caucus and other regional collectives.²⁴ It brought together small women's groups with varying focuses and ideologies. According to scholars who have studied activist movement in British Columbia, a key motivating factor was the lack of a unified feminist voice in British Columbia that could influence public policy, health care, education, and labour practices from a distinctly feminist perspective.²⁵ The BCFW became an umbrella organization attempting to invent "a structure that could meet the infinite needs of women with extremely varied political experience, ideology, and geography."²⁶ This would certainly be a difficult goal to accomplish, impossible even by some standards. Therefore, two distinct approaches formed to combat this

²¹ Creet, 186.

²² Creet, 186.

²³ Erica Greenup, "'Women Rally for Action 1976: Politically Engaged Feminism in British Columbia'" *The Graduate History Review* 10 (2021), 13.

²⁴ SFUA, Women's Bookstore collection, 1937-2019, predominant 1937-1997 [hereafter WBC], File F-111-5-0-0-1-British Columbia Federation of Women, newspaper, 1974-1975

²⁵ Adamson *et al*, 49, 70.

²⁶ Creet, 186.

conflict: that membership should not be required to support *all* issues; the other being that “the umbrella group would have to risk the loss of those who can’t or won’t agree with someone else in the group.”²⁷ To bridge these approaches and meet as many needs as possible, the founding convention of the BCFW occurred the weekend of September 13-15, 1974, with 350 women in attendance proposing policies around health, education, childcare, and employment, all major issues for women of all races, classes, and sexualities.²⁸

Eschewing hierarchy, the Federation operated through a loose, participatory framework that involved a Standing Committee and regional teams. British Columbia was divided into twelve regions, each represented by a team that met monthly to discuss local issues, draft reports, and contribute to the organization’s newsletter. Each region focused their efforts on the issues that plagued that particular region. For example, in Vancouver and Victoria, where access to hospitals and medical infrastructure was more readily available, BCFW affiliates often prioritized reproductive rights, including access to abortion services and the defense of existing clinics, such as the Everywoman’s Health Centre in Vancouver. Meanwhile, less population-dense regions, such as Prince George, Kamloops, and the Kootenays, frequently emphasized employment equity for rural women or access to health services in remote areas.²⁹ This regionalism was not just practical—it was ideological and grounded in the belief that feminism must respond to the specific material and cultural conditions of the communities it served. These regional insights were integral to the Federation’s democratic function. The Standing Committee consisted of ten people, including key positions such as a treasurer, an internal communications officers, and an external communications officer, among others. The Standing Committee was

²⁷ Creet, 186.

²⁸ Creet, 186.

²⁹ Article from BCFW Newsletter Vol.1 No. 1 entitled “BCFW Herstory” written by Cynthia Flood, 1975. SFUA, WBC, File F-111-5-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women, newspaper, 1974-1975

tasked with running the day-to-day financial and administrative tasks.³⁰ Yet, true to its grassroots origins, significant decisions—such as policy formation and structural changes—were left to annual conventions where all Federation members were present to discuss and vote. Both the Standing Committee and regional delegates convened monthly to exchange updates and coordinate policy agendas, ensuring that local and marginalized voices could influence provincial feminist strategies.³¹

While the Standing Committee managed the day-to-day tasks, a variety of subcommittees were formed to investigate, report on, and offer programs or solutions for issues that were specific to the region. For a subcommittee to be ratified, which opened opportunities for funding, editorial space in the BCFW newsletter, as well as dedicated time and space at conventions and on meeting agendas, the BCFW had a simple list of criteria. Subcommittees were to have a minimum of 25 members from at least three different regions in British Columbia, they must have an elected chairwoman, a policy prepared, and a minimum of two meetings scheduled each year.³² Subcommittees were ratified at annual conventions “whose task and objective shall be to initiate, develop, promote, and implement B.C.F.W. policy on specific needs of a provincial nature.”³³ While subcommittees had the freedom to meet and discuss their specific concerns, the BCFW policy handbook was explicit that “no activities shall be initiated prior to obtaining approval of the coordinator and regional representative for local matters or coordinator and rural

³⁰ Article from BCFW Newsletter Vol.1 No. 1 entitled “BCFW Herstory” written by Cynthia Flood, 1975. SFUA, WBC, File F-111-5-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women, newspaper, 1974-1975

³¹ Article from BCFW Newsletter Vol.1 No. 1 entitled “BCFW Herstory” written by Cynthia Flood, 1975. SFUA, WBC, File F-111-5-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women, newspaper, 1974-1975

³² Information Sheet on Subcommittees, October 1977, pg 2. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

³³ British Columbia Federation of Women Constitution, Article IX – Provisional Sub Committees, 1975. pg 16. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

organizer for provincial matters.³⁴ The BCFW's framework exemplifies distinctly Canadian principles of balancing grassroots activism with centralized coordination and representative to regional concerns. This approach allowed Canadian organizations such as the BCFW to maximize their impact with directed effective supports to regional issues. The federation maintained both ideological coherence and political efficacy within a decentralized, participatory model of governance.

Formation of the B.C. Lesbian Caucus and the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee

While work was being done at local, regional, and to a limited extent national levels for the rights of women in Canada, it was only select women who made up the workings of this activism. Specifically, white, heterosexual, middle-class women were the targeted group of activist efforts. This left many women, including lesbians, on the sidelines. While the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was a federal initiative, and a National Action Committee on the Status of Women was formed to lobby the government to implement the recommendations from the Royal Commission's report, there were no national-level organizations that specifically took on lesbian feminist issues.³⁵ Even the official report by the Royal Commission made no mention of lesbianism.³⁶ Lesbian women were still very present in several of the organizations and initiatives that took place across Canada, but a major slice of their identity, their sexual orientation, was hidden or dismissed and was not allowed a role in their forms of activism. It was left to those lesbian feminists to fight an identity battle in a liminal space; be a feminist in the

³⁴ BCFW Constitution - Article VIII Sub Committees, 1977. University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections [hereafter UBCL], British Columbia Federation of Women fonds, 1977-1980 [hereafter BCFW], RBSC-ARC-1057

³⁵ Ross, 30.

³⁶ Sangster, "From the Royal Commission on the Status of Women to the National Action Committee," 149-150; Royal Commission on the Status of Women, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970).

midst of the second wave feminist movement and be a lesbian within the rising gay rights movement.³⁷

From the outset, the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) sought to include marginalized voices in its advocacy work, often through the creation of dedicated subcommittees. In addition to the Standing Committee and regional chapters, subcommittees formed around specific issues the BCFW found worth investigating. The fourth volume of the BCFW newsletter presented the British Columbia Federation of Women as “an umbrella organization of women’s groups in B.C. whose objective is to bring about the liberation of women through fundamental change in our society. The intent of the Federation is not only to mobilize women around specific issues, but also to provide a network of full support for women’s diverse struggles”.³⁸ These groups aimed to give political space to constituencies such as Indigenous women, working-class women, and lesbian women, whose experiences and demands frequently diverged from those at the center of white, middle-class feminist organizing.³⁹ In particular, lesbian women established a visible and vocal presence early on, ultimately leading to the formation of the B.C. Lesbian Caucus in 1975.⁴⁰ This caucus became a driving force for pushing lesbian concerns into the broader feminist agenda in the province.⁴¹

While this structure enabled visibility for particular constituencies, it had a significant structural limitation. Many women inhabited multiple oppressed identities simultaneously—such as Indigenous lesbians or working-class queer women—identities that could not be neatly

³⁷ Ross 29, 55.

³⁸ BCFW Newsletter Volume IV. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

³⁹ Rushowic, 4, 5-6, 70.

⁴⁰ BCFW Standing Committee Meeting Minutes, December 6, 1975. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

⁴¹ Minutes of the BCFW Standing Committee, December 6, 1975. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

confined to one subcommittee. The bureaucratic division of identity into discrete categories failed to capture women's lived realities. This critique echoes the voices of Black feminists in the U.S., particularly the Combahee River Collective, who famously resisted compartmentalizing identity and instead stressed that “we also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.”⁴² These critiques were foundational in later advancing the concept of intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw developed intersectionality in response to the way traditional frameworks treated race and gender as separate—ignoring how women at the margins experienced overlapping oppression.⁴³ Meanwhile, Deborah King’s theory of “multiple jeopardy” further emphasized that the discrimination women face due to intersecting identities is not merely additive but multiplicative—creating unique and compounded forms of marginalization.⁴⁴ By contrast, the BCFW’s subcommittee model, though inclusive in intention, risked reinforcing identity categories and rendering experiences that spanned multiple categories invisible. While the Federation was committed to advocating for diverse groups, its organizational structure at times undermined its ambitions, reflecting a broader contradiction within second-wave feminist organizing: the difficulty of honoring both individual uniqueness and needs within a vision of collective solidarity.

At the founding convention of the BCFW, various policies and suggestions were discussed, but there was no mention of lesbian concerns of policies. In a group interview from March 22, 1986, some women recall standing at the back of the convention hall talking. Pat

⁴² Sharon Smith, “Black Feminism and Intersectionality,” *International Socialist Review*, no. 91 (2013) <https://isreview.org/issue/91/black-feminism-and-intersectionality>

⁴³ “What Is Intersectionality? Let These Scholars Explain the Theory and Its History,” *Time*, March 28, 2019. <https://time.com/5560575/intersectionality-theory>

⁴⁴ Deborah K. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 47, 58–60.

Smith, one member interested in working with the BCFW “articulated her concern in a simple question: ‘Why no lesbian policy?’”⁴⁵ Her question, while brief, reflected a shared sense among others present that lesbian issues had been overlooked. The others had agreed with this concern of the overlooked group and later planned to meet and discuss both the convention and next steps to bring lesbian issues into the folds of BCFW policy.⁴⁶ As Creet notes, “lesbian visibility in BCFW would become a backdrop for many issues: autonomy and unity; the nature of what is personal and what is political; organizational structure; the gap between radical and conservative politics; rural/urban differences; and, most fundamentally, the connection between lesbianism and feminism.”⁴⁷ Lesbian visibility was not just about representation; it touched on foundational tensions within the feminist movement—between collective unity and personal autonomy, between differing political ideologies, and between members from rural versus urban contexts. The decentralized framing of an urban south and a rural north appeared a uniquely Canadian issue. Urban feminists, particularly in cities like Vancouver, often embraced more radical politics and advocated openly for lesbian inclusion as central to feminist praxis. In contrast, rural feminists—operating in more conservative and isolated contexts—sometimes viewed lesbian issues as divisive or risky, prioritizing broader, less contentious goals like reproductive rights or economic justice.⁴⁸ Most critically, the question of how lesbian identity fit into feminist praxis challenged members to rethink the very definitions of feminism itself.

The BCFW’s commitment to inclusion was reflected in the ratification of their subcommittees. One of the Federation’s key mechanisms for engagement was the ratification of

⁴⁵ Creet, 187.

⁴⁶ Creet, 187.

⁴⁷ Korinek; Rushowic, 29; This conclusion is formed by a review of what issues were and were not referenced in regional reports in BCFW newsletters. For more information or specific references of chosen focuses, refer to SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

⁴⁸ Creet, 187; SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

subcommittees at its annual conventions.⁴⁹ At the second annual convention, delegates ratified two issue-based subcommittees—one addressing the conditions of incarcerated women, and the other advocating for the rights of lesbians.⁵⁰ The creation of the latter marked a critical turning point in the inclusion of lesbian perspectives within feminist organizing in British Columbia. This decision was not imposed from above but grew out of grassroots organizing and consciousness-raising efforts by lesbian members of the Federation.

The B.C. Lesbian Caucus came from politically charged discussions held during the October 1974 BCFW convention, where a group of about twenty women discovered shared political goals.⁵¹ Out of these discussions, a proposal for a formal inclusion policy on lesbian rights was created and submitted to the Federation’s leadership. The result was the ratification of the subcommittee and the recognition of the B.C. Lesbian Caucus as an “up-front political lesbian group”—a designation that underscored their unapologetically public and political stance.⁵² By December 6, 1975, the Standing Committee had officially recognized the Caucus as “a member in good standing”, and by January 1976, lesbian rights were integrated into the Federation’s formal monthly meeting agendas.⁵³

Initially, lesbian activists within the Federation organized as the B.C. Lesbian Caucus. Later, a more formal structure—the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC)—was ratified by the Federation, signaling institutional recognition of lesbian concerns.⁵⁴ With the formal

⁴⁹ ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S1-SS1-F2 – Constitution and Policy Handbook

⁵⁰ Pedestal Newspaper, January 1975, pg 7. CVA, BCGLA, File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

⁵¹ Pedestal Newspaper, January 1975, pg 7. CVA, BCGLA, File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

⁵² Pedestal Newspaper, January 1975, pg 7. CVA, BCGLA, File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

⁵³ BCFW Standing Committee Meeting Minutes, December 6, 1975. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

⁵⁴ BCFW Newsletter II.II, January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

creation of the ROLSC within the federation, the BC Lesbian Caucus melded itself into the ROLSC to unite as a singular group advocating lesbian visibility and rights.⁵⁵ The reason for this merger was due to the need to streamline lesbian activism within the Federation, avoid duplication, and make their work more efficient amidst increasing internal and external pressures. By late 1976, the distinct presence of the B.C. Lesbian Caucus had disappeared from regional reports and committee news, and the ROLSC had taken on the dominant role in advancing lesbian rights both within the Federation and in the general community.⁵⁶ Annual reports and newsletters in the early years of the BCFW referenced the B.C. Lesbian Caucus, including in the August 1976 edition of the newsletter that recognized the B.C. Lesbian Caucus as an affiliate member group of the BCFW.⁵⁷ However, by 1978, the Convention announced Tish Lakes, Venge Dixon, and Penny Arrand as chairwomen of the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee.⁵⁸

The B.C. Lesbian Caucus, while ratified in December 1975, had been meeting monthly since October of that year. By early 1976, the Caucus launched a series of workshops on lesbian feminism, lesbian motherhood, mental health, and related topics. Workshop materials emphasized personal relevance—starting with the question of why participants were attending—and then moved through key areas including lesbian-feminist theory, common myths about lesbians, misconceptions within the women’s movement, and practical strategies for navigating

⁵⁵ Nym Hughes et al. *Stepping Out of Line: A Workbook on Lesbianism and Feminism*. (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1984), 7.

⁵⁶ This conclusion is drawn from a review of multiple internal documents—newsletters, committee minutes, and annual reports—held in the British Columbia Federation of Women fonds at Simon Fraser University Archives (F-82, F-45), where the declining presence of the BC Lesbian Caucus and the increasing visibility of the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC) is evident.

⁵⁷ Member Groups of the BCFW List, August 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

⁵⁸ Standing Committee Members 1978/79. SFUA, Working Women Unite fonds, 1976-1982 [hereafter WWU], File F-45-2-0-0-5 – British Columbia Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

lesbian identity in groups, communities, and families.⁵⁹ Workshop topics included lesbian feminism, lesbian mothers, and mental health. These workshops were described internally as well-attended and “greeted with much enthusiasm”—an indication of significant grassroots interest.⁶⁰ This level of engagement was echoed in other organizing efforts, such as the weekly Lesbian Drop-In, which had consistently attracted 30–50 participants since the summer, serving as a space for the exchange of personal, political, and social dialogue.⁶¹

In tandem with its internal programming, the B.C. Lesbian Caucus also pursued external partnerships. One of its earliest cross-border initiatives was a collaboration with the Lesbian Defense Committee in Seattle.⁶² The two organizations exchanged resources and discussed strategies for legal and educational advocacy. With the additional resources and source material, the caucus developed a proposed course at the University of British Columbia focused on lesbianism from a feminist perspective.⁶³ This course aimed to integrate discussions of sexuality into broader topics such as motherhood, media representation, employment discrimination, mental health, and community engagement. In their 1976 report, the Caucus emphasized the legal and social ramifications of being an openly lesbian woman, declaring that “as a group we

⁵⁹ BCFW Newsletter II.III, February 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

⁶⁰ BCFW Newsletter January 1976, ROLSC Report, pg 6. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

⁶¹ Lesbian Drop In Flyer, undated. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁶² BCFW Newsletter January 1976, ROLSC Report, pg 6. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

⁶³ Records from the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC) indicate that the caucus developed a proposed course at the University of British Columbia addressing lesbianism from a feminist perspective (SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1, 1975-1977). However, no corroborating evidence appears in the UBC course calendars or other institutional records for the years 1976-1982, and details regarding whether the course was formally offered, or any associated presentations were hosted, remain unclear. For this ROLSC report referencing courses at UBC, refer to SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

have the power to confront and change the attitudes.”⁶⁴ This articulation of collective agency reflected a broader political shift in the 1970s toward viewing sexuality as both a personal identity and a terrain of political struggle

The Federation’s newsletter became a critical platform for subcommittees to report progress and raise awareness. Lesbians in the movement used it to document both achievements and ongoing challenges. The ROLSC, like other subcommittees of the BCFW, elected an individual to serve as a liaison between the subcommittee and the BCFW newsletter.⁶⁵ This liaison was responsible to attend editorial board meetings, assist in the preparation and distribution of the newsletter and contribute a subcommittee update or editorial to each issue.⁶⁶ Most reports discussed what programs they were planning, such as upcoming workshops, or suggested topics for discussion at the next scheduled meeting.

At various times, the BCFW also offered dedicated editorial space to lesbian voices and the promotion of lesbian-focused events. The May 1980 edition of the BCFW newsletter had a half-page column that outlined the program guide for “the Lesbian Show”, a weekly segment on Co-op Radio in British Columbia.⁶⁷ May 8th was highlighted to be an hour special as their contribution to the Co-op Radio fundraising marathon. During the segment, the Lesbian Show’s hosts will “fill you [listeners] in on who we are and how we put

⁶⁴ BCFW Newsletter January 1976, ROLSC Report, pg 6. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

⁶⁵ BCFW Constitution and Policy Handbook, Volume I, Article VIII – Sub Committees, 1975. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S1-SS1-F2 – Constitution and Policy Handbook

⁶⁶ BCFW Constitution and Policy Handbook, Volume I, Article VIII – Sub Committees, 1975. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S1-SS1-F2 – Constitution and Policy Handbook

⁶⁷ BCFW Newsletter, May 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

together a show, also what our relationship to the station as a whole is.”⁶⁸ They also were preparing segments on lesbian mothers, lesbian humour, and lesbians and music.⁶⁹

The lesbian feminist education program reached its peak with the publication of the workshop manual *Stepping Out of Line: A Workbook on Lesbianism and Feminism* in 1984. The manual was co-authored by Nym Hughes, Yvonne Johnson, and Yvette Perreault, three longtime lesbian activists who play a critical role in shaping and progressing lesbian feminist organizing in British Columbia. The back cover of the manual emphasizes their shared commitments: “friends as well as co-authors, [they] share interests in feminism, storytelling, gardens, animals and how lesbians survive. Longtime lesbian activists in British Columbia, they have taken part in developing and presenting workshops on lesbianism and feminism to over 40 women’s groups. As individuals, they have amassed a wealth of lesbian organizing experience in rural and urban settings. Their clarity and commitment are apparent through *Stepping Out of Line*.”⁷⁰

Each author brought unique experiences that strengthened their contribution to the lesbian feminist movement. Nym Hughes is described in *Still Sane* (1985) as “a white, working-class lesbian and feminist activist. Co-author of *Stepping Out of Line*, she lives in rural British Columbia and teaches people with developmental disabilities.”⁷¹ Hughes’ background as a rural, working-class lesbian influenced the manual’s attention to class and regional barriers to feminist organizing. Yvette Perreault’s journey shows how lesbian feminist work connects with community activism. As noted in *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*, Yvette Perreault

⁶⁸ BCFW Newsletter, May 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁶⁹ BCFW Newsletter, May 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁷⁰ Hughes et al.

⁷¹ *Still Sane*, ed. Persimmon Blackbridge & Sheila Gilhooly (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1985), 101.

grew up in the Prairie regions before moving to Toronto. She was a community organizer and counselor for decades, addressing violence against women and children and later, helped with the AIDS effort. Her long-term involvement highlights the ongoing influence of lesbian feminism in various efforts.⁷² Although there is less documentation about her individually, Yvonne Johnson is just as important in this collaboration. Together with Hughes and Perreault, Johnson co-facilitated workshops on lesbianism and feminism in over forty women's groups in British Columbia. The joint authorship of *Stepping Out of Line* represents a model of feminist knowledge production based on lived experiences, collective effort, and teaching commitment. Their contributions show that movement leadership was expressed not only through formal groups or prominent individuals, but also through the shared creation and use of tools, workshops, and manuals that spread lesbian and feminist knowledge.

Despite its early momentum, the visibility of the B.C. Lesbian Caucus within the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) gradually declined over the organization's lifespan. This waning presence was the result of several intersecting factors. Internally, the Caucus grappled with the typical challenges of volunteer-led activism, including burnout, inconsistent participation, and limited resources. Ideological divisions also played a role—particularly tensions between lesbian separatists and those who favored working within broader feminist coalitions—which created strategic disagreements and hindered cohesive action.⁷³

Externally, the Lesbian Caucus faced ongoing resistance from more conservative elements within the BCFW, as well as from the broader socio-political climate of British Columbia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By 1980, mounting concern over the withdrawal of

⁷² Stephanie Chambers et al, *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer* (Coach House Books, 2017)

⁷³ Rushowic, 19.

institutional support for Women's Studies programs—particularly in community colleges—was often linked to public discomfort about the increasing visibility of sexual minority groups. Within the Federation itself, tensions around lesbian representation were already surfacing. In 1975, the BCFW's Standing Committee held a vote on whether caucuses organized around specific identities or concerns—such as the Lesbian Caucus—should be granted representation on the committee. The vote proved deeply divisive: four women chose not to vote at all and ultimately resigned from the committee in protest over the inclusion of lesbians in organizational leadership.⁷⁴

As the feminist movement expanded into more conservative regions of the province, some members became increasingly uncomfortable with what they saw as the overt politicization of lesbian identity. For rural and traditionally minded members, the presence of lesbian concerns within Federation organizing threatened to alienate local support or distract from "universal" women's issues. These conflicts reflect the ideological fault lines within the BCFW—between inclusion and respectability, radical change and strategic caution. The BCFW's decentralized model may have lacked the cohesion of national organizations like NOW in the United States, but it offered flexibility and responsiveness to local struggles. This structure allowed minority voices—such as the B.C. Lesbian Caucus—to emerge, influence policy, and shape the movement's direction. Their efforts not only challenged legal and social norms but also contributed to a broader redefinition of feminist politics in Canada.

⁷⁴ SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

Chapter Two

Negotiating Inclusion: Rhetorical Acceptance and Material Marginalization of Lesbian Feminism in the BCFW

The formation of the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee – a group within a feminist organization dedicated to educating about and advocating for lesbian-focused concerns – should have been a breakthrough moment for lesbian feminists in Canada. A province had finally worked to unite its various grassroots organizations to form a provincial body advocating for women's rights. Yet, in the wider scheme of fighting for lesbian acceptance and inclusion, the ROLSC quickly become no more than a rhetorical mirage of solidarity and acceptance. With a deeper look beyond the outsider view of the BCFW and its partnership with lesbian feminists, one can find a clear pattern of systematic discrimination against queer feminists. Within the wider Canadian feminist movement, the distribution of resources and organizational priorities often reflected unequal valuations of different feminist concerns. As scholars like Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail have argued, the British Columbia Federation of Women was widely regarded as one of Canada's more left-leaning feminist organizations. In contrast to more reformist national bodies like the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), the BCFW developed a grassroots structure rooted in socialist-feminist analysis, frequently addressing issues of class, imperialism, and systemic inequality from a regional perspective.¹ However, its structures and practices did not consistently reflect a sustained commitment to lesbian feminist issues. Despite formal statements of inclusion and solidarity, lesbian activists frequently encountered barriers to full participation and recognition within the

¹ Adamson *et al*, 34-36.

Federation, as will be further elaborated upon in this chapter. These tensions highlighted the gap between ideological commitments and the practical realities of organizing within a diverse feminist coalition.

Lesbian members participated in the activities of the Federation from its inception, yet their presence was not continually understood or embraced. They had to fight for any of their concerns or questions to be addressed or for them to be seen as lesbian feminists. Internal documents, newsletters, and subcommittee reports outline continuing strains among heterosexual feminists and lesbian members, often centering on whether so-called "lesbian issues" were at the heart of the feminist agenda or incidental.² This internal struggle mirrored broader debates within the North American feminist movement, where lesbian activists were routinely accused of pursuing "personal" or "sexual" agendas that would divide or detract from the presumed unity of women's organizing.³ As this chapter emphasizes, while lesbian feminists in the United States often faced overt hostility from within the broader feminist movement, Canadian feminist organizations enacted more discreet but equally damaging forms of exclusion and discrimination, revealing a quieter yet deeply entrenched resistance to lesbian inclusion.

Julia Creet, a historian and professor of cultural memory studies, and whose earlier works heavily focused on the marginalized queer community, captures this contradiction well. She implies in her article, "A Test of Unity: Lesbian Visibility in the British Columbia Federation of Women," that although lesbians in the BCFW were not subject to the overt homophobic campaigns that plagued organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW) in the United States, marginalization still operated through more subtle mechanisms.⁴ MA student

² For reports regarding this topic, refer to: SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

³ Creet, 190.

⁴ Creet, 183.

Tania Sharp Dopler (1996) reflected similar considerations in her dissertation on lesbophobia within official feminist organizations.⁵ Dopler further argues that “lesbophobia is endemic to feminist organizations” in Canada but that the expression of discrimination is influenced by organizational structures and the sociopolitical context of a specific organization, marking the difference of intensity between American and Canadian lesbophobia.⁶ Creet observes that, lesbians within the NOW faced deliberate and hostile discrimination, most noticeable when deliberate campaigns were launched to marginalize or expel lesbian members.⁷ The situation within the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) was more ambiguous. Within the BCFW, marginalization took the form of bureaucratic deferrals, structural exclusion, and symbolic sidelining. Lesbian members were not formally ousted—but their demands were frequently redirected or postponed in broader debates, and their activist efforts were quietly deprioritized in funding decisions.⁸ Though Creet conducted an examination of BCFW newsletters from 1974, it remains unclear whether there was a coordinated effort to formally oust lesbians from the organization.⁹ In this comparison of American and Canadian approaches to lesbian feminist conflict within organizations, I am arguing a step beyond, that what is evident is a consistent pattern of harmful marginalization that functioned to render lesbian members and their political priorities invisible. Whether through outward hostility or systematic discrimination, lesbian feminists were persistently sidelined, their concerns deprioritized, and

⁵ Tania Sharp Dopler defined lesbophobia in her MA Thesis in 1996 through the Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (1993) as “irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality” with her addition “to refer specifically to the experience of lesbians”; refer to: Tania Sharp Dopler, “Lesbophobia in Feminist Organizations: An Examination of the Effect of Organizational Structure and Sociopolitical Context on the Expression of Lesbophobia,” (MA Thesis: Carleton University, 1996) 5-6.

⁶ Dopler, ii,43.

⁷ Creet, 183.

⁸ Rushowic, 24-25

⁹ Creet, 188.

their contributions minimized, reinforcing a culture in which their political priorities remained obscured and their presence largely erased from the organizational narrative.

The need of heterosexual feminists to differentiate themselves from lesbian feminists came largely from concern of dividing priorities weakening the movement. As Alice Echols notes, “radical feminists’ emphasis on women’s commonality masked a fear of difference, one which had serious implications for the movement. When lesbians and working-class women finally pierced the myth of woman’s commonality, the movement was temporarily paralysed, thus proving to some that differences were inevitably crippling.”¹⁰ This fear drove the feminist movement to try and display a united front against the foe that was the patriarchy.¹¹ Focusing on finding unity within sameness, framing the movement heavily around issues of gender, there was no room for differences that could splinter the focus and priorities of the organization. Division based on difference appeared to be the downfall of organizations, and therefore many mainstream feminist organizations thought it better at first to ignore any of their differences and remain under a façade of unity and similarity.

Such a dynamic was visible in American feminist organizing. Abbott and Love argued in *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* (1972) that these differences drove the conflicts that raged in the American National Organization of Women.¹² In the United States, the fear revealed itself as rumours circulating in 1972 and into 1973 about “a lesbian plot to take over the organization.”¹³ The mainstream feminist leadership stacked votes to ensure lesbians, and their sympathizers remained out of the New York NOW elections. The co-founder of NOW and dubbed by many

¹⁰ Echols, 11.

¹¹ Echols, 11.

¹² Sidney Abbott & Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* (New York: Stein & Day Publishers, 1972), 133.

¹³ Dopler, 35.

social historians as the ‘mother’ of the modern women’s movement, Betty Friedan struggled with the expansion of the women’s movements to include more diverse voices.¹⁴ In 1969, Friedan identified lesbians as an internal threat to their progress and named it the “lavender menace.”¹⁵ As historians Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski conclude, NOW members across the United States built chapters by uniting diverse groups of women; yet “in collective identity terms, they wrestled with the question of what happens to an organization that contains both ‘us’ and ‘them’.”¹⁶ For Friedan, whose focus was primarily on issues like workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, and the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) through the US Senate. Lesbian visibility posed a perceived risk to the mainstream acceptance of feminist goals.¹⁷ This labeling of lesbian activists as a “lavender menace” by Betty Friedan became one of the most iconic and damaging moments of early second-wave feminism in the United States.

Friedan’s views of homosexuality and the influence of conservative women within the feminist movement led to the isolation of lesbians from several NOW chapters. It did not mean lesbian activists were ready to bow down. At the Congress of Unite Women in New York City in 1970, over 40 lesbians and heterosexual supporters stormed the stage in purple shirts with the words “lavender menace” across them.¹⁸ These protesters insisted that lesbian rights were women’s rights. This demonstration gained massive support across the United States, and in

¹⁴ “Betty Friedan (1921-2006)” ed. Debra Michals, *National Women’s History Museum*, 2017.

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/betty-friedan>

¹⁵ Gilmore & Kaminski, 96.

¹⁶ Gilmore & Kaminski, 100.

¹⁷ “Betty Friedan (1921-2006)” ed. Debra Michals, *National Women’s History Museum*, 2017.

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/betty-friedan>; Faderman 233-236, 307, 315.

¹⁸ For literature on feminist activism in 1970s United States of America reference: Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women’s Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Barbara Ryan, *Identity Politics in the Women’s Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Christine Bedikian, “Lesbians and Their Role Within the Women’s Liberation Movement in the Early 1970s,” in *Gender & Sexuality in World History: Student Writings on Primary Sources*, ed. Mir Yafitz (2023); Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski, “A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Feminist Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 1 (2007), 95-113.

1971, a resolution passed at the NOW national meeting acknowledging lesbian issues as feminist issues and lesbian rights as part of NOW's agenda; many individuals and chapters within the movement struggled to comprehend and confront the intersection of feminist and lesbian rights "as cultural philosophies and social movement goals."¹⁹

The American example demonstrates how homophobia within a feminist organization can divide and potentially destroy the efforts of their organizations. In the United States, it was not until NOW gave public support to lesbian issues that the intensity of internal conflict subsided slightly.²⁰ In 1960s and 1970s USA, various groups of lesbian feminists splintered from the women's liberation movement to forage their own educational and activist campaigns against not only sexism, but all heteropatriarchy, misogyny and homophobia.²¹ Lesbian feminists across America formed networks and connected based on shared experiences, ideologies, and what historian Becki Ross referred to as the rejection of any "trappings whatsoever of heterosexual femininity."²²

Such splintering became typical of the second wave of feminism. As Klien describes, "while core feminist causes drew women together, differences in class, race, politics, sexuality and other elements of identity often divided Canadian and American feminists" as "the white, heterosexual, middle-class model of feminism did not encompass the spectrum of race, class and sexuality."²³ This American division and eventually compromise can serve as a reference point to examine similar division and concerns in Canadian feminist organizing. While the BCFW never mirrored these tactics exactly, comparable anxieties surfaced within its ranks. Concerns were

¹⁹ Gilmore & Kaminski, 96.

²⁰ Ross, 46; Faderman 304-306, 315.

²¹ Klien, Candice. "'We Thought We were the Only Lesbians in the World': 1971 Vancouver and the Rise of Lesbian and Transnational Feminist Identities Between Canada and the USA," *Gender and History* 1, no. 13 (2023) 4; Ross, 80.

²² Ross, 80.

²³ Klien, 4.

raised, for instance, that lesbian-authored articles in the BCFW newsletter were sensationalist and contributed to an "anti-male" image that might alienate potential allies.²⁴

Canadian feminist organizations, true to their stereotype for kindness, were more subtle in their attacks against the lesbian community. The BCFW was one of many Canadian feminist groups who subtly dismissed lesbian inclusion out of concerns that homosexuality could discredit the goals of the feminist movement. Ross references the example of Toronto activism, where prior to the 1970s there was no mention of lesbian issues in the Toronto Women's Liberation Movement platform.²⁵ Vancouver had its own issues with lesbian fears before the formation of the BCFW. The Vancouver Women's Caucus, a precursor to the BCFW established in 1971, was not welcoming to lesbian members either.²⁶ A Vancouver-based feminist newsletter, *The Pedestal*, refused to publish any "lesbian content."²⁷ While it was not outright hostility and name-calling, the actions of Canadian feminist groups aimed to keep lesbian voices as far from the spotlight as possible, keeping lesbians invisible.

A reoccurring tension in BCFW meeting minutes and correspondence throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s was the tension between demands for lesbian visibility and fears of internal conflict.²⁸ As Creet noted, most women within feminist organizations in Canada could tolerate lesbians within their ranks so long as it was discreet and the topic of lesbianism was not politicized.²⁹ Lesbian members who advocated for explicit lesbian platforms or lesbian-led initiatives was frequently perceived as a threat to organizational unity. A Kamloops representative explained that the diversity of feminist concerns was great and they could not

²⁴ Creet, 191.

²⁵ Klien, 6.

²⁶ Klien, 6.

²⁷ Klien, 6.

²⁸ For archival documents referencing the tensions regarding lesbian visibility in the BCFW, see: UBCL, BCFW, RBSC-ARC-1057; SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

²⁹ Creet, 189-190.

afford to alienate potential members and therefore their actions “must be non-threatening to ‘Misses Joe Smith’.”³⁰ Rhetoric of derailment and distraction was called upon repeatedly in workshop notes and convention evaluations, implying an implicit hierarchy of political concerns, in which gender was universal but sexuality was particular, disruptive, or even threatening.

As an extension of the fears, several misconceptions about lesbians surfaced. One persistent belief was that lesbians were overly political, single-minded, or simply had more time to “disrupt” the Federation’s operations.³¹ As some heterosexual members believed, lesbians had “no families to take care of or jobs or responsibilities—they had nothing to do but go to meetings and infiltrate the women’s movement.”³² Such characterizations were not only patronizing but patently false: many lesbian activists were working-class women, caregivers, mothers, or precariously employed.³³ Yet this stereotype of the ‘radical lesbian saboteur’ gained traction, partly because it justified the marginalization of lesbian concerns under the guise of pragmatism and organizational focus. Compounding this was the lingering social perception of homosexuality as pathological—despite the American Psychiatric Association’s 1973 decision to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder, stigma persisted well into the 1980s in both medical and public discourses.³⁴ Within the BCFW, lesbian feminists were too often treated as politically extreme, emotionally unstable, or simply too “fringe” to lead collective feminist action.

These misconceptions resulted in several instances of lesbianism being excluded in discussions. In a letter printed in 1976, lesbian members of the Federation complained that their

³⁰ Creet, 186.

³¹ Hughes *et al*, 23.

³² Hughes *et al*, 23.

³³ Hughes *et al*, 23, 30-31.

³⁴ Jack Drescher, “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality,” *Behav Sci(Basel)* 5, no. 4 (2015), 565-575.

concerns were continually referred to subcommittees rather than being included in all phases of Federation planning.³⁵ During publication phases, the BCFW editorial team would often try to omit texts or reports that did not align with their goals of mainstream feminists.³⁶ In November 1975, shortly after the incorporation of lesbians as a visible group within the BCFW, the organizations first press release omitted “the two most important paragraphs” on lesbians rights and mandates for action.³⁷ The specific paragraphs that were removed are unknown due to not be published, but the BCFW External Communications Chair Susan Sanderson wrote to the editor in disagreement over the removal of these subject from their press release.³⁸ In various other press releases or statements made by the BCFW, lesbians rights would be mentioned on in passing or within a list of subcommittees and topics of investigation.³⁹ They were listened to but not given priority.

The limitations of this organizational unity were especially evident in the ROLSC’s critiques of how their work was supported—or rather, how it was not. While the BCFW did not block the subcommittee from using meeting spaces or publishing their views in organizational newsletters, they also failed to provide any additional financial, social, or political support to advance the subcommittee’s goals. As the ROLSC argued in one report, “it is not up to lesbians alone to implement BCFW policy on lesbianism, just as it is not up to mothers alone to work on

³⁵ Kinesis article, March 1977, pg. 10. CVA, BCGLA, File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

³⁶ BCFW Newsletter, January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

³⁷ BCFW Newsletter, January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

³⁸ BCFW Newsletter, January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

³⁹ BCFW Newsletter, January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

childcare issues!”⁴⁰ This pointed comparison made clear that lesbian rights were feminist issues and should not be treated as the sole responsibility of a marginalized subgroup within the movement. They were listened to, but never made a priority as concerns went in one ear and out the other of the larger BCFW membership and executive.

Despite policy-level support, lesbian activists found themselves largely left to navigate the Federation on their own, without sustained organizational backing or meaningful inclusion in broader decision-making processes. Regional representatives had to be repeatedly reminded to share information about the ROLSC in their areas.⁴¹ Events organized by the subcommittee were rarely publicized outside of their immediate networks, leaving much of their work invisible within the broader Federation.⁴² The BCFW’s failure to institutionalize its commitment to lesbian issues made it difficult to achieve meaningful structural change.

The ROLSC was not silent about these issues. In one of their most pointed early statements from a letter written in 1977, the subcommittee critiqued the exclusionary nature of feminist organizing in Canada, writing: “the ‘women’s movement’ [is] not a women’s movement” when it “trashes and abuses women who ask questions about actions undertaken in the name of all women, calling the questioners ‘disrupters’ and ‘troublemakers’.”⁴³ This rhetorical turn was powerful. Rather than shy away from the label of “troublemakers,” members of the ROLSC embraced it, asserting their right to challenge the boundaries of a movement that often claimed to speak for all women while excluding many. These women became “easily-

⁴⁰ ROLSC Report, October 1977. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁴¹ Letter from Laurie Morrison for the ROLSC of the BCFW, April 27, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁴² Letter from Laurie Morrison for the ROLSC of the BCFW, April 27, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁴³ ⁴³ When is the ‘women’s movement’ not a women’s movement? Letter by Marjaleena Repo & Cady Williams, November 19, 1977. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

identifiable symbols of the rejection of the traditional female role,” and lobbied for sexual liberation and a more egalitarian society of equal power.⁴⁴

The underlying problem, as the ROLSC repeatedly emphasized, was a fundamental misunderstanding of lesbian feminist politics. While many mainstream feminists treated lesbianism as a separate or even disruptive concern, lesbian feminists argued that their struggles were inseparable from broader feminist goals. As articulated in the 1980 ROLSC Annual Report, “even though B.C.F.W. policy plainly states a firm commitment on the rights of lesbians, a commitment to legal change and open discussion regarding our lifestyles—even though every member and member group of the B.C.F.W. must, at one time, endorse this policy—there still remains a prevailing attitude among feminists that lesbianism is an issue completely separate from other feminist issues, that Lesbian Feminist politics are relevant to lesbians only.”⁴⁵ This passage lays bare the limitations of rhetorical inclusion: having a policy was not the same as building a culture of solidarity.

This disconnect was shaped in part by prevailing assumptions about womanhood and feminist priorities. For many heterosexual feminists, lesbianism was seen as a rejection—not only of patriarchy, but of motherhood, marriage, and even femininity itself.⁴⁶ In this framing, lesbian identity was perceived as a political liability or distraction from the so-called ‘real’ concerns of women. Yet this was a fundamental misreading of lesbian feminist priorities. The issues that lesbian women faced—such as job discrimination, housing insecurity, child custody battles, and institutional violence—were deeply intertwined with broader feminist concerns.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ “A Day On Feminism,” June 11, 1977. UBCL, BCFW, RBSC-ARC-1057

⁴⁵ ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5-British Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

⁴⁶ Feminist Lesbian Action Group Statement of Purpose, undated. UBCL, BCFW, RBSC-ARC-1057

⁴⁷ SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

Mainstream feminist platforms commonly failed to address intersectional identities, resulting in the reinforced marginalization of lesbian feminists. While feminist campaigns for workplace equality focused on gender-based discrimination, they ignored the unique vulnerabilities faced by lesbians who risked harassment, violence and termination based not only on their sex, but also their sexual orientation.⁴⁸ Similarly, the BCFW and other feminist organizations worked to secure reproductive rights and parental rights for women, but their focus centered on heterosexual norms.⁴⁹ Lesbian mothers who were often denied custody due to their sexuality and their supposedly harmful lifestyles were sidelined in any campaigns.⁵⁰ The limited definitions of goals in the feminist movement treated gender as a single unifying category detached from sexuality, race, or class. The problem was not that lesbian feminists rejected the goals of the women's movement, but rather that they insisted on broadening its definitions.

Efforts to correct these misconceptions came not only from subcommittees, but also through independent feminist media. The *Waves* newsletter, produced and circulated by lesbian feminists, served as a key venue for challenging stereotypes and deepening political conversations.⁵¹ One annual report from the ROLSC directly confronted the myth that anti-lesbianism was simply a product of male institutions.⁵² “These attitudes,” it explained, “are not exclusive to institutions such as the male media and the police department—they are part of a

⁴⁸ BCFW Newsletter, July 1981, Communications Committee Report, pg 5. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3- British Columbia Federation of Women Newsletters, 1980-1982

⁴⁹ BCFW Newsletter, January 1981, Update on Lesbian and Feminist Mothers’ Political Action Group, pg 13-14. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3- British Columbia Federation of Women Newsletters, 1980-1982

⁵⁰ BCFW Newsletter, January 1981, Update on Lesbian and Feminist Mothers’ Political Action Group, pg 13-14. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3- British Columbia Federation of Women Newsletters, 1980-1982

⁵¹ ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5-British Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

⁵² ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5-British Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

growing antagonism toward us [lesbians] in society.”⁵³ The unnamed author of the report, a member of the ROLSC described a fraction of the harassment her and other lesbians underwent;

most of us have in the past, written letters which express anger at sexist attitudes, either as individuals or from other groups, and these assumptions and threats have not been made. The harassment we experienced maybe, in part, due to increased anti - feminist feeling in the general system. We believe, however, that the main cause for this negative reaction relates directly to the name of the group who sent that letter - a group of self - professed Lesbian Feminists.⁵⁴

The author is referencing a police visit to the home of Yvette Perrault, whose signature was found on one such letter, and the assumption made by the police that for simply writing the letter Perrault and her peers were suspects of property damage.⁵⁵ Crucially, this antagonism extended into feminist organizations themselves. The same report states that, “as antagonism towards lesbians increases, so does the violence against us.”⁵⁶ The report named what was often left unsaid: that the women’s movement, like other institutions, could replicate the very exclusions it claimed to oppose.

Recognition Without Resources: A Lack of Financial Support

This ideological exclusion had tangible consequences. As lesbian feminist concerns were treated as secondary, the material support they received within the Federation reflected such an attitude. Solidarity in name did not guarantee support in practice. As the ROLSC’s advocacy made increasingly clear, recognition without resources was an empty gesture—one that allowed mainstream feminist organizations to maintain a progressive image while continuing to

⁵³ ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5-British Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

⁵⁴ ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5-British Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

⁵⁵ ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5-British Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

⁵⁶ ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5-British Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

marginalize those who pushed beyond normative definitions of womanhood. This marginalization was not only a matter of discourse but of funding, resource allocation, and institutional support. One of the major barriers lesbian activists faced within the BCFW was economic: the persistent underfunding of lesbian-led initiatives, which underscored the structural limits of inclusion within the feminist movement itself.⁵⁷

Chief among these barriers faced by the lesbian feminist subcommittee within the BCFW was the consistent underfunding of lesbian-led initiatives and programming—a material reality that both reflected and reinforced the ideological marginalization of lesbian concerns within the Federation. Though the BCFW officially endorsed anti-oppression principles and operated under a banner of inclusion, in practice, lesbian activists were frequently denied the financial resources needed to advance their work, educate the broader membership, and create meaningful change for minority identities. The official BCFW policy handbook from 1975 declares that “society defines women in relation to men. Women who choose not to relate to men at all, are regarded with contempt and fear. All women who do not fit the ‘approved’ female stereotype suffer severe consequences, especially those who deviate the furthest, that is, lesbians,” and that “the intent of the Federation therefore is not only to mobilize women around specific issues, but also to provide a network of full support for women’s diverse struggles.”⁵⁸ A ROLSC report from August 1977 did clarify that the BCFW “has set aside money to be used for lesbian/feminist workshops,” though no exact amount was provided; therefore, a comparison of this funding to other BCFW sponsored workshops cannot be accurately completed.⁵⁹ However, more specific

⁵⁷ Letter from Laurel Kimbley on behalf of Vancouver Lesbian Mothers’ Defence Fund, 1982. SFUA, SFUWC, File F-40-7-1-0-1 – Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

⁵⁸ BCFW Constitution and Policy Handbook, Volume I, 1975. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S1-SS1-F2 – Constitution and Policy Handbook

⁵⁹ ROLSC Meeting Notice, 1977. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

examples of underfunding have underscored this statement and demonstrate an implicit discrimination of support to lesbian feminist initiatives.

As early as 1977, the ROLSC had been allocated a modest \$1,000 in the Federation's annual budget—a figure that, while meager, acknowledged the presence of lesbian organizing within the BCFW.⁶⁰ However, this initial gesture of support would prove to be more symbolic than structural. As education was one of the subcommittee's goals, they offered to visit regions and host lesbian feminist workshops. However, they included with that offer a request for regional groups to contribute to their travel expenses as “at present [the ROLSC has] a bank account of \$28.00.”⁶¹

In subsequent years, funding for lesbian-led initiatives remained minimal, even as other groups within the Federation received more substantial allocations. In a financial statement from January 1978, the ROLSC was listed under BCFW expenses with a mere total of \$11.60. Meanwhile, the Health Subcommittee was granted \$1000 and regional groups such as Fraser Valley and Vancouver were allotted \$250 and \$115 respectfully.⁶² Even media initiatives faced similar disparities. The earlier mentioned ‘Lesbian Show’ radio station program was provided just \$100 from the BCFW in December 1979 “for the reimbursement of their materials only.”⁶³ No operational or programming support was made available, nor was the initiative promoted within BCFW newsletters or events. That same year, other subcommittees and feminist media initiatives received funding upwards of \$500 to \$2,000, depending on their focus and perceived

⁶⁰ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, September 8, 1979. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁶¹ Lesbian and Feminist Workshop Report in ROLSC Report, April 27, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁶² BCFW Financial Statement, 1978. SFUA, SFUWC, File F-40-7-1-0-1 – Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

⁶³ BCFW Newsletter, December 1979. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

relevance to the BCFW's overarching mission.⁶⁴ For example, the Childcare Committee was allocated \$1,800 to produce materials advocating for universal daycare—an initiative that, while certainly critical, was not subjected to the same financial scrutiny or skepticism as lesbian-led efforts.⁶⁵ These precedents made clear that while lesbian organizations were considered in discussions of financial supports, they were far from a priority.

Attempts to address these inequities were often blocked. When a proposal was sent to the Standing Committee of the BCFW at the 1979 Convention to provide all subcommittees with \$1500 for the 1980 year to complete any subcommittee led or issue-focused campaigns, the proposal was met with controversy and quickly withdrawn.⁶⁶ Many supporters of the BCFW felt the money would be best allocated toward issues representative of all women; or at least of the majority of the women they made up. This left several minority groups at a disadvantage, including the lesbian-focused group who still by large made up a minority of the BCFW community. By 1980, the ROLSC had an exact \$872.64 in their account, all of which had been allocated to various events, logistical needs, and initiatives.⁶⁷ As they put simply, the subcommittee could not continue to run its number of activities and initiatives with such a small budget; specifically mentioned was a need for more money to continue publishing Victoria B.C.'s *Waves* quarterly newsletter for lesbians.⁶⁸ In internal notes from spring 1980, the ROLSC

⁶⁴ BCFW Financial Statement, 1978 SFUA, SFUWC, File F-40-7-1-0-1 – Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

⁶⁵ Childcare Committee Budget Memo, 1979. SFUA, EF, File. F-82-4-0-0-7 – Women Against Rape (WAR)

⁶⁶ Resolution for 1979 Convention of the BCFW. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5-British Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

⁶⁷ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, January 27, 1980. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁶⁸ ROLSC Report 1980. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]; ROLSC Meeting Minutes, January 27, 1980. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

expressed frustration that the newsletter, despite its demonstrated reach and readership, was not considered a priority within the broader BCFW media strategy.

Faced with limited financial support from their umbrella organization, lesbian women within the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) were often left to shoulder the burden of educating others—both within and outside the feminist movement—about their lives, identities, and political concerns. In the early 1980s, a group of three lesbian activists—Nym Hughes, Yvonne Johnson, and Yvette Perreault—took on this task in support of the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee.⁶⁹ These women drafted a *Workshop Manual on Lesbianism and Feminism*, which was envisioned as a practical and educational tool to raise awareness, promote solidarity, and bridge the gap between lesbian struggles and broader feminist activism.⁷⁰

The manual was intended for use in community and organizational workshops, helping feminists—particularly heterosexual ones—better understand the political dimensions of lesbian identity and experience.⁷¹ It aimed not only to affirm the place of lesbians within the feminist movement but also to foster allyship and collective political action. The opening statement of the manual powerfully declared: “This workshop manual reflects the commitment of many women linked through BCFW who struggled to validate our belief that lesbians [were] crucial to feminism and that confronting our shared pain and anger would strengthen us individually and as a movement.”⁷² This statement reflects a broader historical moment when lesbian feminists were actively challenging their marginalization within mainstream feminist spaces.

⁶⁹ Hughes *et al.* 7-8.

⁷⁰ Hughes *et al.* 7-8.

⁷¹ Hughes *et al.* 7-8.

⁷² Nym Hughes, Yvonne Johnson, Yvette Perreault & Esther Phillips, “In Production: A Workshop Manual of Lesbianism/Feminism, pg 2. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

The manual was part of a larger effort to legitimize lesbian voices and create educational resources that could be widely distributed. However, producing such materials required financial support. Despite the manual's alignment with the BCFW's stated educational goals, the ROLSC received minimal financial backing from the Federation. To this end, the ROLSC issued calls for donations to help offset printing and distribution costs.⁷³ By April 1980, after months of grassroots fundraising, the group had raised just \$380—far short of the \$1,880 required to cover the costs of printing and distribution.⁷⁴ The financial burden fell squarely on the shoulders of the three activists and their small network of supporters, who were forced to rely on donations, informal fundraising events, and support to make the manual a reality.⁷⁵ Somehow successful in their efforts (the archived newsletters or ROLSC reports do not specify how the group funded the total production costs, just that the manual was produced prior to the Convention), the handbook was printed and ready to distribute at the Convention in autumn 1980.⁷⁶ Similarly, the ROLSC discussed during their April 1980 meeting plans to create a video “on lesbianism/feminism”, intended as a companion resource to the workshop manual.⁷⁷ The initial goal was to have it prepared in time for the upcoming Convention that autumn as well.⁷⁸ No earmarked funding from the BCFW was provided for its production, and it is unclear whether this video was completed to accompany the manual or if the idea was eventually scrapped. The ongoing lack of

⁷³ BCFW Annual Report, ROLSC Meeting Minutes, May 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁷⁴ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, January 27, 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁷⁵ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, January 27, 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁷⁶ ⁷⁶ Perreault, Yvette. Letter from ROLSC Regarding Workshop Manual, January 12, 1980. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁷⁷ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, April 7, 1979. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁷⁸ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, January 27, 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

institutional funding had cascading effects. By August 1980, the *Waves* newsletter, which had previously received some support from both the BCFW and ROLSC, was forced to become financially independent. Subscriptions were introduced, and lesbian readers now had to pay for access to community-centered feminist media.⁷⁹

Later in 1981, a modest increase in ROLSC funding was approved: a February 1st budget shows the group receiving \$1,581.⁸⁰ While it was a higher amount of funding than the \$300 allotted to the prisons subcommittee, it was less compared to other initiatives. To complete and publish the BCFW's newest edition of the policy handbook, the BCFW set aside nearly the same amount that the ROLSC was provided for an entire year worth of events, initiatives, and publications.⁸¹ These situations highlighted a broader pattern: lesbian members of the BCFW were often expected to 'do more with less,' producing high-impact resources and events on shoestring budgets.

Outside of funding specifically, the BCFW lacked institutional backing with the resources and support provided to lesbian-led initiatives. One telling example was their attempt to establish a dedicated phone line to support lesbian women across the province—an initiative launched without Federation technical support.⁸² The subcommittee envisioned the phone line not only as a communication hub but also as a lifeline for isolated lesbians, particularly those outside Vancouver, who had little access to feminist or queer networks. With no official budget or staff, ROLSC members committed to running the project themselves and reaching women in

⁷⁹ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, January 27, 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁸⁰ Finance Committee Meeting Notes, February 1, 1981. SFUA, SFUWC, File F-40-7-1-0-1-Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

⁸¹ Finance Committee Meeting Notes, February 1, 1981. SFUA, SFUWC, File F-40-7-1-0-1-Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

⁸² ROLSC Meeting Minutes, April 7, 1979. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

rural communities via mail correspondence. Other initiatives faced similar constraints. A provincial conference on lesbian issues was discussed, but ROLSC members concluded that organizing such an event would demand more time and energy than they could spare, given the volume of ongoing, unfunded work already on their plates.⁸³ The idea was tabled—not due to lack of interest, but due to insufficient support from the Federation. Even participation in broader feminist networks proved financially unfeasible: when the 1981 LOOT conference, a cross-country lesbian gathering in Ottawa, send invitations for delegates from groups across Canada, the ROLSC determined it could not afford to send a delegate.⁸⁴ These examples underscore how inadequate resource allocation effectively marginalized lesbian feminist work; not through overt opposition, but through persistent logistical deprivation that rendered many projects unsustainable.

Recognizing the continuous need for financial support and more resources to pursue lesbian feminist concerns and goals too, the Lesbian Action Committee, co-chaired by ROLSC members Yvonne Johnson and Silva Trenebein wrote to the BCFW in late December 1981 with a request for \$5900 in funding.⁸⁵ A huge jump from the previously estimated grants for lesbian initiatives, Johnson and Trenebein had recognized that without any other external supports, lesbian initiatives were in desperate need of BCFW financial backing. The letter broke down their estimated expenses to justify their request, citing costs for routine correspondence and postage for bulk mailing, rentals or travel expenses, and a total \$1200 to aid with childcare

⁸³ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, January 28, 1979. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁸⁴ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, January 28, 1979. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁸⁵ Letter from Lesbian Action Committee, December 30, 1981. SFUA, SFUWC, File – F-40-7-1-0-1 – Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

expenses.⁸⁶ Johnson and Trenebein were confident that their request would be approved as “B.C.F.W. precedent is such that lesbian organizations are considered a high priority for funds.”⁸⁷ However, BCFW financial statements accessed from the Simon Fraser University Archives do not always support such a statement. The Lesbian Action Committee wrote the BCFW in earlier in November regarding their need for financial support and received no response.⁸⁸

This lack of response or aid was not an isolated incident, but part of a broader pattern of financial marginalization. This committee, the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee, and lesbian-focused initiatives were not financially supported to the same capacity as other initiatives that focused on more mainstream feminist concerns. Chronic underfunding of lesbian-led initiatives had broader implications than simply a lack of materials or missed programming and workshop opportunities. The actions of the BCFW reflected a fundamental devaluation of lesbian feminist knowledge, goals, voices and leadership. The second wave women’s movement was dedicated to sharing the experiences and concerns of women, however, the neglect recognized here exposed how certain female experiences were deemed less essential, less political, and less worthy of a platform to share and educate. This underscored what sociologist Kimberle Crenshaw later described as “intersectional indivisibility”, where individuals with identities at the crossroads of various marginalized groups are rendered invisible in movements claiming to be concerned with justice and equality.⁸⁹ Lesbian feminists, part of the invisible identities, were left to navigate the

⁸⁶ Letter from Lesbian Action Committee, December 30, 1981. SFUA, SFUWC, File – F-40-7-1-0-1 – Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

⁸⁷ Letter from Lesbian Action Committee, December 30, 1981. SFUA, SFUWC, File – F-40-7-1-0-1 – Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

⁸⁸ Letter from Lesbian Action Committee, December 30, 1981. SFUA, SFUWC, File – F-40-7-1-0-1 – Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982

⁸⁹ Crenshaw, 139–167.

contradiction between the Federation's progressive rhetoric and its continued material neglect of non-mainstreamed priorities.

Chapter Three:

Strategies of Persistence: The Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee's Contributions to Lesbian Feminist Visibility and Rights

The formation of the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC) within the British Columbia Federation of Women marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of feminist organizing in Canada. Some lesbians became political activists during the feminist movement of the mid-to-late twentieth century. The term “political lesbian” emerged to describe the idea that sexuality could be secondary to politics when claiming ones’ lesbian identity.¹ They recognized that to be able to one day identify as lesbian in a safe manner, they must first identify with the political struggles of such an identity and to defend those rights must be the primary concern for themselves and other non-heterosexual individuals.² The Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee remained dedicated to issues that plagued women but were particularly targeting and affecting the lesbian community in British Columbia. Either directly from the subcommittee or in conjunction with the larger BCFW membership, the group dedicated to lesbian rights focused on four main concerns. These were education and awareness regarding lesbian feminism, discrimination against lesbian mothers, employment discrimination, and the need to include sexual orientation as a category of protection against discrimination under the British Columbia Human Rights Code.

Although lesbian feminists within the British Columbia Federation of Women confronted persistent systematic discrimination, inadequate funding, and marginalization from their

¹ Rosalind Kichler, “A room of their own: White lesbian coming outs and second wave feminism,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (2024), 4.

² Kichler, 4.

heterosexual peers, they did not allow such barriers prevent them from advancing their political and social goals. As explored in Chapter Two, the ROLSC routinely had to fight for recognition and financial or resource aid in a climate of implicit exclusion. These obstacles, however, spurred on the lesbian feminists instead of silencing them as intended.

This chapter examines how lesbian feminist activities transformed adversity into action through creative grassroots resistance and coalition building, carving out space of lesbian issues within the larger feminist movement. To best further their cause and bring more lesbian feminist activists into the fold, the Rights of Lesbian Subcommittee created a variety of educational workshops and resources designed to confront myths about lesbians and foster understanding among feminist allies and the larger community. As will be further expanded upon later in this chapter, lesbian activist leaders Nym Hughes, Yvonne Johnson, and Yvette Perreault launched a series of public education efforts starting in 1979.³ By 1981, the ROLSC organized several workshops under the title *Stepping Out of Line*, which officially published its workshop manual in 1984.⁴ Their educational platform highlighted the intersections of sexism and homophobia, underscoring how the oppression of lesbians was deeply tied to patriarchal control of sexuality and family structures. Additionally, the ROLSC strategically developed initiatives that advanced lesbian rights in the domains of parental rights, employment discrimination and human rights legislation.

This chapter also highlights one of the most visible accomplishments of lesbian feminists in this period: the 1981 National Lesbian Conference held in Vancouver. The conference brought together activists from across the country and across the border to create a national forum for

³ Hughes *et al*, 7-8.

⁴ Hughes *et al*, 7-8; Denise Kulp, "Stepping Out of Line: A Workbook on Lesbianism & Feminism," *Off Our Backs* 15, no. 3 (1985), 22.

discussions of lesbian issues, network building, and strategy sharing. The success of this conference demonstrated that, despite institutional marginalization within the feminist community, lesbian activists could mobilize large-scale initiatives to strengthen the Canadian lesbian movement. This chapter argues that the successes of lesbian activists within and beyond the BCFW emerged from their ability to resist exclusion through grassroots organizing, strategic framing of issues, and alliance-building. In examining their campaigns and accomplishments, this chapter illuminates how the ROLSC expanded the boundaries of feminist politics in British Columbia and contributed to broader national shifts in the recognition of lesbian rights.

Creative Resource Collection and Use

Despite continuous implicit exclusion, underfunding, and institutionalized homophobia, lesbian activists found ways to pursue their agenda within the larger feminist organization and movement. Their tactics—rooted in feminist and lesbian values—reflected a larger commitment to non-hierarchical organizing, collective action, and mutual support. In 1979, when the newly formed ROLSC was denied organizational funding for their proposed province-wide outreach program, members such as Hughes, Perreault, and Johnson turned to grassroots fundraising efforts, including hosting benefit dances and pooling personal resources to keep their initiatives alive.⁵ Their grassroots funding efforts enabled them to launch their educational campaigns in the early 1980s, first at the annual BCFW conference in 1980, and then later taken to smaller women's centers across British Columbia.⁶ This grassroots resilience was both a practical response to structural barriers and an ideologically grounded rejection of patriarchal,

⁵ British Columbia Federation of Women Annual Meeting Minutes, June 1979. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁶ Mathieu Aubin, "Here and Queer in Vancouver: Queer Poetry, Small Presses, and Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movements," (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2019), 115, 123, 172.

heterosexual norms. Moreover, it highlights how such efforts enabled significant political achievements for lesbian feminists within the BCFW, despite ongoing marginalization and hostility.

In response to chronic underfunding between 1979 and 1982, lesbian feminists relied on networks of mutual support and resource sharing to sustain their activism. Activists such as Nym Hughes, Yvette Perreault, and Yvonne Johnson worked through personal contacts and BCFW regional caucuses to exchange practical skills, from printing and bookkeeping to event organizing and childcare.⁷ Workshops like those led by Hughes illustrate how lesbian feminist education depended on volunteer labour and collective infrastructure, with participants arranging childcare so mothers could attend.⁸ Groups frequently met in women's centres and other community spaces, pooling access to equipment and communication tools, often through donations or informal sharing.⁹ These practices went beyond pragmatism: they reflected a deliberate commitment to mutual aid, collective ownership, and the rejection of competitive or hierarchical structures. By embedding cooperation into their organizing, lesbian feminists not only kept their projects alive in the face of scarce resources but also laid the groundwork for future campaigns and public education efforts across British Columbia. These foundations would prove essential as the ROLSC began to channel its hard-earned resources into educational campaigns and public platforms, using the very networks they had built to extend their influence across British Columbia.

⁷ Hughes *et al*, 64-67.

⁸ *Grapevine*, Spring 1985, Rise Up! Feminist Archive, <https://riseupfeministarchive.ca/periodical/grapevine-spring-1985?highlight=grapevine>

⁹ ROLSC Correspondence, name unknown, April 1981. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

Education

With the material groundwork secured through grassroots and mutual aid networks, the ROLSC could turn its focus toward one of its most potent political tools: education. For the subcommittee, public workshops, conference sessions, and print materials were not ancillary activities—they were core strategies for challenging lesbophobia within the women’s movement and the wider public.¹⁰ The educational campaigns organized by the ROLSC were among the most powerful and longest-lasting elements of their political strategizing with the British Columbia Federation of Women. Education programs regarding lesbian rights was one of the starting initiatives of the ROLSC in early 1976 and continued through until the mid-1980s. Education was the backbone of the ROLSC’s program to promote awareness and fundamental change in the visibility and rights of lesbian women. More than just tools of information-sharing, these campaigns constituted a strategic mode of consciousness-raising and political intervention designed not only to share knowledge but to disrupt heteronormative assumptions, build networks of community, and lay the groundwork for further politic change.

Throughout its functioning, the ROLSC conducted a series of workshops on lesbian feminism as well as other topics about lesbian ways of life. These workshops covered not just theoretical frameworks such as critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and the intersection of sexuality with feminist praxis, but more practical issues surrounding lesbian ways of living, community building, and political mobilization.¹¹ By framing these lived experiences as worthy of critical and collective reflection, the ROLSC challenged prevailing liberal feminist ideas that

¹⁰ Dopler, 5-6.

¹¹ ROLSC Annual Report January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977; BCFW Newsletter Volume IV, 1978. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980.; Kinesis article March 1977, pg 10. CVA, BCGLA, File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

treated sexuality as a “private matter” and instead insisted on lesbianism as a political issue, both structural and systemic in nature.¹²

The subcommittee did not limit its work to the urban and executive core of the BCFW; it actively reached out to regional chapters with offers to facilitate workshops on request.¹³ This decentralized invitation permitted lesbian feminist discussions to spread to women across the province, including rural and remote areas. Regional representatives were receptive to such invitations. The 1976 BCFW annual report refers to a lesbian feminist workshop that was held in Prince Rupert region. Prince Rupert’s regional representative Denise Pemberton, in her report, indicated that the workshop “was received with lots of enthusiasm.”¹⁴ Cariboo regional representative Mary ten Wolde also indicated in her report that they were working to arrange a lesbian feminist workshop for members of their region.¹⁵ Beyond simply delivering content, the ROLSC’s educational outreach helped connect isolated lesbians with one another, fostering new solidarities and contributing to the slow but steady normalization of lesbian presence in feminist spaces.

The ROLSC also pushed for greater awareness and cross-committee connections by requesting regional representatives to pass along their messages and services to those outside of the executive. The subcommittee itself, in its October 1977 report, invited BCFW regional representatives to “make contact with women in their regions who may be interested in receiving

¹² ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

¹³ ROLSC Report January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

¹⁴ ROLSC Report January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

¹⁵ ROLSC Report January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

ROLSC info,” thereby restating the mandate of the ROLSC to go “province-wide” in scope and effect.¹⁶

Workshops such as “Lesbianism is Not a Side Issue,” presented at the 1980 convention, specifically aimed to reverse the prevailing liberal feminist assumption that sexuality was a private matter or side issue. Basing themselves on radical feminist and lesbian feminist ideas, like Adrienne Rich’s foundational idea of the “lesbian continuum,” ROLSC activists claimed that lesbianism was more than a personal choice but a political identity that radically undermined the heteronormative foundations of patriarchy.¹⁷ Lesbian feminists within the ROLSC pushed heterosexual feminists to acknowledge that lesbians’ exclusion from feminist communities was not an accident but structural, and that this exclusion duplicated the broader politics of power they claimed to challenge.¹⁸

To accompany their workshops, Nym Hughes, Yvonne Johnson, and Yvette Perreault developed a workshop manual that reflected the agenda and expectations of their “Stepping out of Line” workshop, which they first began hosting in 1978.¹⁹ The workbook was published in 1984 by Press Gang Publishers. The manual, titled after the workshop itself, primarily address lesbian feminists in Canada, but as reviews of the workbook state, “its information, resources and suggestions are useful to anyone dealing with the issues of lesbianism and feminism”.²⁰

The book served a clear purpose: to unite the concepts of lesbianism and feminism as integral and intersectional aspects of identities. The workbook proclaims that “lesbianism is much more than sexual intimacy with another woman. We situate our oppression as lesbians within the

¹⁶ Letter from Laurie Morrison for the Lesbian Rights Subcommittee of the BC Federation of Women. October 1977. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

¹⁷ Rich, 27.

¹⁸ Faderman, 227-231.

¹⁹ Kulp 22.

²⁰ Kulp, 22.

context of all women's oppression."²¹ There was initial debate on if the workbook should include 'feminism' in the title. When Hughes, Johnson, and Perreault took the workbook to their local feminist press, it was returned with the suggestion to "leave out the feminism. Just do a straightforward little book on doing a workshop to educate the public about lesbianism."²² The authors disagreed with the suggestion, seeing themselves as "feminists who were doing political work using lesbianism as the focus" and whose workshops could be a support for all women "beginning to make sense of their lives."²³ The women ultimately decided, "we couldn't leave out the feminism. In fact, we decided to make our political perspective even more explicit and enlarge the book to include a wider range of organizing ideas."²⁴

The workbook is split into two main parts: the first is a step-by-step guide to facilitating workshops on lesbianism and feminism; the second a series of resources and personal experiences. The first section of the workbook served as a script of a two-day workshop. It provides suggestions for a list of 'ground rules' to help establish confidentiality, trust, and openness that allows for a successful workshop. The script then includes a variety of exercises and activities, such as confronting and changing the narratives on myths around lesbianism. As Denise Kulp's review of the workbook defines it, the script outlines the steps of a workshop "from Remembering to Defining to Choosing to Myths to Understanding Why to Creating Visions to Changing Our Reality to Celebration."²⁵ With detailed examples and logistical steps to hosting a workshop, the section enabled activists regardless of location or experience to organize and host lesbian feminist workshops in their own communities across British Columbia.

²¹ Hughes et al, 44.

²² Hughes et al, 7.

²³ Hughes et al, 7-8.

²⁴ Hughes et al, 8.

²⁵ Kulp, 22.

The second section of the workbook shifts focus to the lived experiences of lesbians and their struggles across multiple spheres of society, including the workplace, education, healthcare, religion, and the media. These narratives expose both the pervasive discrimination lesbians faced and the ways in which they built relationships and networks of support to resist oppression and create solidarity.

Ultimately, *Stepping Out of Line* sought to inspire lesbians to see activism as a collective responsibility. It encouraged readers to move beyond internal divisions and debates that fragmented organizing efforts, asking:

Shall we continue to focus on the difficulties of organizing as lesbians? Shall we foster the divisions between us? Shall we argue interminably about whether it's 'better' to work with gay men or straight women? Shall we continue to rank each other on the basis of political correctness? Shall we demand feminist identification as a prerequisite to organizing as lesbians? Or, in the latest turnaround of 'more radical than thou,' shall we denounce feminism as the primary agent of our repression as lesbians, denying our identity and connection as women?

Or shall we begin the work of building a movement of lesbians? A movement of all the different kinds of lesbians we are, a movement based on the commonalities of our experience of living as lesbians in the world and a high level of tolerance for our differences. Can we take our long tradition of survival against high odds, our talent for helping each other survive, our gifts for creating warm loving circles of friends, of giving each other respect and validation as lesbians – and use those skills in our political work? Can we envision our lesbian movement not as a traditional formal organization, but much more as a sense of identification, source of information, of access to other lesbians, of political and emotional and practical support?²⁶

The *Stepping Out of Line* workbook's rhetorical series of questions directly addresses the persistent fault lines within lesbian feminist organizing in late 1970s and early 1980s Canada. Its opening queries point to internal conflicts that mirrored those in the United States, where debates over separatism, alliances with gay men, and tensions with heterosexual feminists repeatedly fractured groups such as the Radicalesbians.²⁷ Within the BCFW and the broader Canadian

²⁶ Hughes et al, 194-195.

²⁷ Faderman, 231-237.

feminist movement, these debates were less publicly explosive but no less damaging, often operating through subtle exclusion. The question of working with gay men versus straight women recalls the fraught coalition politics of the late 1970s, when alliances between lesbian feminists and male-led gay liberation groups like *GATE (Gay Alliance Toward Equality)* were often strained by sexism, and collaborations with mainstream feminist organizations like the BCFW were hampered by homophobia.²⁸

Juxtaposing these divisions with the call to begin the work of building a movement where “every women (sic) in B.C.F.W. [is] to understand why it was so important for feminists to support lesbianism and ... to be prepared to speak out publicly on lesbian rights in their community” deliberately shifts the focus from purity politics to coalition-building grounded in shared lived experience.²⁹ In practical terms, the workbook proposes a movement model that is less about formal organizations and more about sustaining networks of political, emotional and practical support. In the context of the BCFW, this vision also constituted an implicit challenge to the organization’s existing modes of operation, urging it to recognize lesbian organizing not as an side concern, but as an integral part of the feminist struggle. Through its combination of practical tools, personal narratives, and political vision, the workbook empowered lesbians to take on leadership roles in organizing while emphasizing solidarity and shared purpose.

Workshops were not the only educational programs that the lesbian committee within the BCFW employed to spread their goals and messages. At a ROLSC Local meeting on March 8, 1978 (the region of the Local is not stated), handwritten notes indicated the circulation of 6000 leaflets and 3000 posters by mid-February of the year.³⁰ To further media education programs,

²⁸ Ross, 59, 187.

²⁹ Hughes et al. 7.

³⁰ ROLSC Local Meeting (Name of Local unknown), March 8, 1978. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

the Co-op Radio station held a fundraising marathon in May 1980 for the Lesbian Show, with the goal to “fill you [listeners] in on who we are and how we put together a show, also what our relationship to the station as a whole is.”³¹ The Lesbian Show maintained a schedule of educational topics including parenting, queer humour, and queer music and culture (with a spotlight on the Berkeley Women’s Music Collective).³²

Notably, these educational efforts were not only directed outward toward heterosexual feminists. They also served an equally critical internal purpose: it was also a place where lesbian feminists could establish their political self, vent shared complaints, and build a sense of solidarity within a typically isolated environment. The work of creating places where lesbians could be heard without mediation was itself political and affectively transformative.³³ ROLSC spaces from these educational workshops became sites of affirmation and community.

The success of the ROLSC’s internal consciousness-raising initiatives laid valuable groundwork for broader structural change within the BCFW. By creating heightened awareness about lesbian feminist concerns and challenging deeply ingrained heteronormative assumptions, these actions had the impact of reshaping the organization’s ideological profile. Such reshaping created room for more explicit political interventions stretching from taking on inclusive policy resolutions to strategic involvement in BCFW decision-making. Simply put, the ROLSC’s approach to education was not supplementary—it was central. It reflected a comprehensive strategy: to make lesbian feminism legible, urgent, and indispensable to the

³¹ BCFW newsletter May 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

³² BCFW newsletter May 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

³³ Taylor & Rupp, 32-35.

women's movement in British Columbia. By doing so, it laid the intellectual and political groundwork for a more inclusive, more radical, and ultimately more transformative feminism.

The ROLSC's commitment to education was not an isolated strategy but a core part of a comprehensive plan for transforming both discourse and policy in the feminist movement in British Columbia. By organizing workshops, producing informational materials, and facilitating consciousness-raising events, the committee sought to challenge stereotypes about lesbians and dismantle the pervasive silence surrounding lesbian issues within the women's movement. These programs created spaces where difficult conversations about sexuality, motherhood, and the intersections of oppression could occur, fostering greater understanding among heterosexual feminists and building solidarity within the BCFW. Education was not merely about awareness; it was a political tool aimed at shifting the ideological foundation of the federation itself and the building of new policies for the rights of queer community.

Once misinformation and prejudice were confronted through education, the next step is then to turn knowledge into tangible policy changes. The committee recognized that without structural reforms—such as explicit resolutions affirming lesbian rights, the inclusion of lesbian concerns in BCFW policy statements, and advocacy for legal protections—education alone would be insufficient to protect lesbian mothers, workers, and activists from systemic discrimination. The ROLSC pushed the federation to adopt formal positions on issues like custody rights for lesbian mothers, workplace protections, and the inclusion of sexual orientation in human rights legislation. These goals signaled a deliberate effort to embed lesbian rights within the feminist agenda of the BCFW, ensuring that the concerns of lesbians were not treated as peripheral but as integral to the movement's broader struggles for equality and social justice.

Parental Rights & Family Structures

The ROLSC's educational initiatives did more than confront stereotypes; they laid the groundwork for direct political interventions on issues where lesbophobia had the most tangible, devastating consequences. Nowhere was this more urgent than in the realm of parental rights and custody, where discriminatory laws and courtroom biases routinely separated lesbian mothers from their children. The networks, visibility, and public awareness fostered through their workshops and conferences became crucial tools in mobilizing support, influencing public opinion, and challenging legal injustices faced by lesbian parents.

For a most of North American legal history, lesbians were largely absent from court proceedings, even those involving homosexual acts. Legal prosecution overwhelmingly targeted gay men. The only significant exception to this was in the realm of family law.³⁴ As with several other areas of legal, social, and political grounds, there was a heavy “out of sight, out of mind” approach to women.³⁵ However, women could not be ignored in the field of family law and child custody cases. This made custody battles one of the few, but most emotionally charged and legally fraught, arenas where lesbian identity became a direct matter of judicial concern. Within the BCFW, the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee identified the rights of lesbian mothers as a critical and recurring issue. At all points in the subcommittee's existence, lesbian mothers were a prominent point of discussion.

Although Canadian law maintained that custody decisions should be guided by “the best interests of the child,” this standard was vague and open to subjective interpretation. As historian Katherine Arnup explains in her article on lesbian custody cases in Canada, that “there is ... no

³⁴ Katherine Arnup, “Out of This World: The Social and Legal Context of Gay and Lesbian Families,” *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* (Routledge, 1999), 19.

³⁵ Arnup, 19.

rule or formula for determining which arrangement operates in the child's best interests."³⁶

Judges were given wide discretion and relied on various factors to determine parental fitness, including the reasons behind the marriage dissolution, the actions of each parents, the parents' sexual conduct and lifestyles, the perspective home environments, and the preferences of the parents and child(ren).³⁷ As historian Daniel Rivers argues, "the prevalent judicial bias was that 'the best interests of the child' always lay in a heterosexual household", depriving queer individuals of their right to be parents to their children.³⁸

Legal historian Lori Chambers situates this standard within a larger and longer history of child custody reform, noting Ontario (her regional focus of study) to be in the vanguard of children's rights when it adopted the "best interests" principle. This shift overturned the traditional view of children as property and to instead ensure the needs of the children were the primary consideration in custody decisions.³⁹ Chambers emphasizes that the standard privileged bonding of children with the parent to whom they were closely connected. She also, however, raises the unresolved questions of how a child's best interest were to be determined in practice, and who could speak for younger children who cannot articulate their own needs.⁴⁰ By placing such decisions in the hands of family court judges, the principle opened the door to significant judicial discretion, which often reinforced heteronormative assumptions even as the reform was framed as child-centred.

In practice, lesbian mothers were disproportionately penalized by their sexuality. While sexuality is not formally a bar to custody under Canadian law, personal opinions on

³⁶ Arnup, 25.

³⁷ Daniel Rivers, "'In the Best Interests of the Child': Lesbian and Gay Parenting Custody Cases, 1967-1985," *Journal of Social history* 43, no. 4 (2010), 920-921.

³⁸ Rivers, 920.

³⁹ Lori Chambers, *A Legal History of Adoption in Ontario, 1921-2015* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 38.

⁴⁰ Chambers, 7.

homosexuality bled into legal decisions as judges commonly determine lesbian mothers as unfit parents. As advocate for lesbian mothers in Vancouver Laurel Kimbley explains in a letter promoting the Vancouver Lesbian Mothers Defense Fund in 1976, “when a lesbian mother is fighting for the custody of her children, the judge’s decision is based on his attitude toward homosexuality as much as the mother’s fitness as a parent.”⁴¹ The concern from courts was that a queer parent’s supposedly deviant lifestyle could harm their children.⁴² Their ‘irregular’ lifestyles was often seen as a hinderance to proper parenting and would put children on the path of ‘abnormal tastes and proclivities’.⁴³ Lesbian mothers were often denied custody as “what is on trial is lesbianism itself.”⁴⁴ One of the earliest policy proposals in June 1975 by the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee included the addition that sexual orientation, specifically lesbianism, and chosen living arrangements, should not be cause of loss of custody of ones’ child or children.⁴⁵

The subcommittee’s report from the end of 1976 referenced the difficulty of the fight for lesbian mothers and discrimination in custody cases. Their efforts to protect lesbian mothers were hampered by a lack of readily available information as family court cases were sealed to the public.⁴⁶ Judicial decisions during the 1970s reflected the inconsistencies and biases that lesbian mothers encountered. In *Case v. Case* (1974), Mr. Justice MacPherson granted custody of two children to the father, noting that while the mother’s sexual orientation was not the primary reason for her loss of custody, her “irregular” lifestyle was a factor. The judge remarked in the

⁴¹ Letter from Laurel Kimbley on behalf of the Vancouver Lesbian Mothers’ Defence Fund, 1982. SFUA, SFUWC, File F-40-1-0-0-6 – Correspondence – Lesbianism, [ca 1976] – [ca 1981]

⁴² Joanna Radbord, “Lesbian Mothers and the Law of Custody, Access, and Child Support,” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 1, no. 2 (1999), 87.

⁴³ Radbord, 87.

⁴⁴ Letter from Laurel Kimbley on behalf of the Vancouver Lesbian Mothers’ Defence Fund, 1982. SFUA, SFUWC, File F-40-1-0-0-6 – Correspondence – Lesbianism, [ca 1976] – [ca 1981]

⁴⁵ Gay Tide News Report, June 1975, pg 4. CVA, BCGLA, File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

⁴⁶ ROLSC Report, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

case that the father was “stable and secure” while the children’s mother, who was the vice president of her local gay club, led a questionable life. MacPherson stated, “but the evidence shows, I think, that her way of life is irregular.”⁴⁷ The mother’s visible, organized involvement in gay and lesbian communities was seen as morally deficient. Lesbian mothers who did receive custody were praised for hiding or minimizing their sexuality. In court cases reviewed and referenced by Alison Sawyer, a contributor to the workbook on lesbianism and feminism published by Hughes *et al*, she found some cases in which custody was awarded to the lesbian parent “so long as she is not militant and keeps a low profile.”⁴⁸ It is therefore suggested that the court’s concern was not simply the mother’s private sexuality, but her public and visible connection to queer communities, which was seen as incompatible with raising children in a ‘proper’ environment. Even in the rare instances when a lesbian mother won custody, courts still viewed homosexuality as a potential social liability for children. Due to the “rampant heterosexism” in society, judges often expressed concern that a child might face harassment or exclusion if their mother’s sexuality became known. Arnup writes, “the child of a lesbian might well be the object of abuse and ridicule by neighbourhood children... Such an experience would, of course, be an unpleasant one for the child.”⁴⁹ In the section of *Stepping Out of Line: A Workbook on Lesbianism and Feminism* that discusses friends and family, Yvonne (no last name recorded) recalled her former husband refusing her custody of their four-year-old son after she came out as lesbian. He told her that he “would rather see my [their] son in an institution than living your [Yvonne’s] kind of life.”⁵⁰ In other words, it was not the mother’s actions, but society’s reaction to her identity, that could justify withholding custody. The mother’s visibility

⁴⁷ Arnup, 26.

⁴⁸ Hughes *et al*, 102.

⁴⁹ Arnup, 28.

⁵⁰ Hughes *et al*, 85.

challenged the expectation that queer identities were to remain hidden and exposed children to openly queer networks that could in the courts and society's eyes threaten moral development.

The social and legal vulnerabilities of lesbian mothers were compounded by economic precarity. Women were often “invisible and disenfranchised by the state and society; working in low-paying jobs to support their families, they stood to lose both if found out as homosexual.”⁵¹ The emotional toll was profound. In one open letter to anti-gay activist Anita Bryant, a lesbian mother implored, “To be a lesbian mother is heartbreaking. Today you have your children, tomorrow you may not, solely because of whom you love... May God forgive Anita Bryant for her persecution of us.”⁵² Anita Bryant was an American singer and Christian evangelical spokesperson of the ‘Save Our Children’ campaign, which claimed that homosexuals corrupted youth and threatened the traditional family structure. Bryant toured Canadian cities in 1978, sparking mass protests and a rising focus on lesbian parenting and custody cases. Her tour came at a time of political turmoil: The Toronto queer newspaper *The Body Politic* published an article about adult-child sexual relationships before being raided by police, a young boy was killed in a reported “homosexual orgy” and the Human Rights Commission in Ontario recently recommended that sexual orientation be included in the Human Rights Code.⁵³ Bryant became an enemy of the lesbian feminist movement in Canada with her commentary that “homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they must recruit,” and the continued comparison of homosexuality to child abuse, pornography, and pedophilia.⁵⁴ Canadian lesbian feminists immediately recognized Bryant’s campaign as an existential threat to lesbian mothers. In a moment of unity for lesbians

⁵¹ Julia Pyryeskina, “‘A remarkably dense historical and political juncture’: Anita Bryant, *The Body Politic*, and the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Community in January 1978,” *Canadian Journal of History* 53, no. 1 (2018), 72.

⁵² Pyryeskina, 72.

⁵³ Pyryeskina, 58.

⁵⁴ MCC & Dignity, Edmonton Queer History Project (last revised March 2023), 2.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f61141fa6215237a5ee5a36/t/6419b0239c7de36e8c6869f3/1679405093742/MCC+Dignity+032123.pdf>

and women alike in the BCFW, the proclamation was made “whereas, Anita Bryant and the Renaissance anti-lesbian/gay crusade represents a fundamental attack on women’s rights, Be it resolved that we, the B.C.F.W., actively work to oppose this crusade.”⁵⁵ Protests against Bryant’s appearances drew hundreds, uniting lesbians, feminists, and gay liberationists under banners that explicitly defended lesbian motherhood and family legitimacy.⁵⁶ The BCFW’s Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee and allied caucuses used Bryant’s tour as a rallying point, arguing that custody cases were not private tragedies but political injustices rooted in patriarchal and heterosexist law. For many lesbian mothers, Bryant symbolized the intertwined legal and moral persecution they faced; resisting her became a way to affirm both their right to parent and their right to exist as lesbians without fear of losing their children.

Trying to break this pattern and reverse attitudes toward homosexual parents, the ROLSC worked to counter this injustice on several fronts. The BCFW’s lesbian-focused subcommittee met with lawyers to build a network of those interested in defending lesbian mothers. They hoped to continue building the network to include social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists that could help lesbian mothers to retain custody of their children.⁵⁷ One of the lawyers working with the BCFW had already won a court case for a lesbian mother in Alberta, the first in Canadian history.⁵⁸ The case, known as *K. v K.*, Justice D.W. Rowe of the Alberta Provincial Court award custody to a lesbian mother under the reasoning that “a child’s likelihood of becoming gay would not increase solely by being raised by a homosexual parent,” and that “Mrs. K’s homosexuality is ... no more of a bar to her obtaining custody than is the fact of Mr. K’s

⁵⁵ SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁵⁶ MCC & Dignity, Edmonton Queer History Project, 2.

⁵⁷ ROLSC Report, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁵⁸ ROLSC Report, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

drug use.”⁵⁹ However, this singular case was not necessarily a spotlight endorsement for lesbian activism. As Arnup notes in her review of the case, lesbian mothers were more commonly deemed acceptable parents if they were “not militant, did not flaunt [their] homosexuality, did not engage in overt sexual conduct on front of the child, and did not seem biased about the child’s sexual orientation.”⁶⁰ While this case did not set a new legal standard for custody cases with a homosexual parent, it continued to fuel activist focus and network building to make a new legal precedent.

This issue expanded to the motions of the Standing Committee during their May 1978 meeting. The motion passed that “BCFW will send a letter to the National Film Board to support the film on Lesbian Mothers.”⁶¹ This project eventually resulted in the 1992 premiere of the NFB’s *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, created by Lynne Fernie and Aerlyn Weissman.⁶² The women interviewed several older lesbians in Canada about their experiences regarding media representation, custody and parenting, abuse, and coming out.⁶³ The support for this project made clear that the discrimination against lesbians was distinct; “a lesbian afraid of loosing (sic) her job and her children is not paranoid.”⁶⁴ This statement underscored the compounded vulnerabilities lesbian mothers faced in the late 1970s, when both

⁵⁹ Kevin Allen, “Defending Lesbian Moms in YYC,” *Calgary Gay History*, October 7, 2021, <https://calgarygayhistory.ca/tag/d-w-rowe/>; Arnup, 27.

⁶⁰ Arnup, 27.

⁶¹ BCFW Newsletter Volume IV, 1978. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁶² The NFB had included female-directed films about queer lives since the 1970s, beginning with *Some American Feminists* in 1977, which shifts toward the lesbian community’s marginalization halfway through the documentary, to lived experiences such as *Lorri: The Recovery Series* in 1985. The NFB’s crowning achievement regarding queer media is the *Forbidden Love* film from 1992, which is the first to openly discuss lesbian parenting and custody cases, among other important topics of lesbian feminist rights.

⁶³ Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie, *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* (National Film Board of Canada, 1992), https://www.nfb.ca/film/forbidden_love/

⁶⁴ ROLSC Report, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]; emphasis in the original.

employment and family law operated within overtly heteronormative and often hostile frameworks.

This was a pressing concern and not a conflict ROLSC could fight on its own. The ROLSC therefore partnered with various established or newly formed groups to combat this injustice. They shared financial and communication resources. Further promoting awareness of this issue, the Lesbian and Feminist Mothers Political Action Group (LAFMPAG) formed as a member group of the BC Federation of Women in fall 1979.⁶⁵ This group was open to not just biological parents, but any mother as “‘to mother’ is synonymous with ‘to nurture’” as the group projected.⁶⁶ The group met biweekly on Wednesdays with childcare provided to limit hurdles to attendance. Recognizing this to be a lesbian issue, but on a wider scale a women’s concern, the group was open to any mother, developing a unique mix of experiences of heterosexual and queer motherhood. Promoting inner-federation cooperation, the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee sent a donation of \$50.00 to the LAFMPAG in early 1980.⁶⁷ These two groups within their larger umbrella organization collaborated on family law reform. As mentioned previously, the ROLSC followed personal and professional channels to develop a network on family law specialists across western Canada to help them in their crusade of equal rights within the realm of child custody.⁶⁸

By linking legal advocacy, professional networking, and public education, the ROLSC fought to reshape both the legal system and cultural narratives around lesbian motherhood. These

⁶⁵ BCFW Newsletter, January 1981. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982

⁶⁶ BCFW Newsletter, January 1981. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982

⁶⁷ BCFW Newsletter, January 1981. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982

⁶⁸ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, September 8, 1979. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

efforts reflected the Subcommittee's broader political vision: to expose how heterosexism was deeply embedded in law, economics, and family structures—and to insist that lesbian existence, and lesbian parenting, were legitimate and worthy of protection. Although systemic change was slow and victories were rare, the ROLSC's work laid critical groundwork for later legal reforms and demonstrated how the fight for lesbian rights was inseparable from broader struggles for women's equality and family justice.

Employment Discrimination

The fight for parental rights exposed how deeply institutionalized homophobia permeated legal and social systems, but it was only one front in a broader struggle. Discrimination also shaped lesbians' economic realities, as bias in hiring, workplace harassment, and the threat of dismissal created persistent barriers to financial stability. Just as custody battles revealed the stakes of family security, employment discrimination underscored the vulnerability of lesbian women's livelihoods—and the urgent need for political organizing to secure both.

The ROLSC pursued protections for homosexual individuals against employment discrimination. At a time when no provincial nor federal legislation explicitly protected individuals from being fired or denied job advancement due to sexual orientation (the BC Human Rights Code was not officially amended to add sexual orientation as a protected category under 1992), lesbian workers faced systematic barriers in nearly every professional sector.⁶⁹ Although there is limited material on the working lives of lesbians in Canada in the period, American evidence is instructive. Blue-collar jobs were unsafe for lesbians; one woman who worked at GM in the United States in 1973 recalled that those who were most abused were “lesbians who

⁶⁹ Equaldex, "LGBT Rights in British Columbia," last modified April 29, 2025, <https://www.equaldex.com/region/british-columbia>

were really physically fit”.⁷⁰ Lesbian women in male-dominated position were harassed and shunned for both their gender and sexual orientation.⁷¹ Queer workers had no protection, as no other minority group has so few claims to formal or legal protection in the workforce.⁷² This vulnerability was compounded by the prevailing climate of homophobia, which rendered lesbian identities not only marginalized but also dangerously stigmatized in many workplaces. In BC, the caucus advocated for protection against job dismissal, demotion, or professional isolation because one’s assumed or declared sexual orientation. Their advocacy extended beyond legal reforms; they also sought to challenge deeply entrenched social attitudes within workplace settings that rendered lesbian identities invisible or subject to harassment.⁷³

This was a visible issue surrounded by intense discussion early in the running of the Rights of Lesbian Subcommittee. Since the first meeting April 12, 1979, a group for selected members was tasked to investigate and research the ways in which lesbian women were structurally oppressed under Canada’s economic and legal systems.⁷⁴ They reported on lesbians and their experiences with federal labour codes, the federal immigration act, the Bill of Rights (the pre-cursor to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms), the BC Human Rights Commission, and union contracts.⁷⁵ These analyses underscored how structural silences and policy omissions reinforced the marginalization of lesbians in both public and private employment sectors. The ROLSC sought to combat this institutional erasure by forging connections with other lesbian feminist groups across the country. They collaborated with

⁷⁰ Margot Canaday, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 160.

⁷¹ Canaday, 160.

⁷² Canaday, 11.

⁷³ Ross, 79; Canaday 160; ROLSC Report, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁷⁴ ROLSC Report, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁷⁵ ROLSC Report, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

Montreal's lesbian-feminist newspaper *Long-Time Coming*, seeking access to court documents, personal testimonies, and case studies to help raise awareness of these issues and to formulate concrete strategies for change.⁷⁶

As part of their community engagement, the ROLSC also organized a series of workshops aimed at addressing employment discrimination and promoting labor rights for lesbians. One workshop was sponsored and co-run by the group Working Women Unite and their representative Lou Nelson at a conference for women in the workplace in October 1979. These workshops offered practical tools—such as how to file a complaint with the B.C. Human Rights Commission, how to navigate union grievance procedures, and how to mobilize community support—while also validating the lived experiences of queer women.

On a policy level, the ROLSC lobbied for amendments to the B.C. Human Rights Code and criticized the inadequacies of federal labor and immigration laws that enabled discrimination against queer people. They submitted formal recommendations to the B.C. Human Rights Commission, critiqued the limitations of the pre-Charter Canadian Bill of Rights, and called for explicit protections for sexual minorities in employment law. By situating lesbian oppression within the broader structure of economic injustice, the ROLSC challenged the long-standing idea that queer liberation and queer identity, as Gary Kinsmen explains, was merely a private or “moral” issue and instead insisted on its material, legal, and systemic dimensions.⁷⁷

Human Rights

⁷⁶ ROLSC Report, 1976. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁷⁷ Gary Kinsmen, *The Regulation of Desire: Queer Histories, Queer Struggles* 3rd ed. (Montreal: Concordia University Press, 2024), 222.

In the August 1977 ROLSC meeting minutes, the members were looking for recommendations on “how the Subcommittee could become more ‘real’ for more lesbians (so far, the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee has been ‘real’ mainly for women we reach through the lesbian/feminist workshops, but is public education our only goal????)”⁷⁸ Eager to expand their effectiveness beyond educational purposes, the subcommittee widened their focus to make more direct contributions. This largely came in their fight for human rights protections based on sexual orientation. The previously aforementioned campaign to adopt a formal resolution against discrimination based on sexual orientation within the BC Human Rights Code was a major success for the Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee.

On June 13, 1978, lesbian feminist Verge Dixon addressed the Coalition on Human Rights on behalf of the Lesbian Feminists of Vancouver. Although she was not speaking directly for the BCFW, Dixon was a prominent member of its Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee. In her remarks, she underscored the connection between queer discrimination and the broader denial of full civil rights for lesbians, as she stated, “we do not believe it is enough to say that we as Lesbians and gay men are being denied our civil rights. We must examine why they are denied us and by whom and recognize the larger social implications of this campaign will allow it to grow in the first place.”⁷⁹ With this statement, Dixon pushed beyond identification of discrimination to instead interrogate the social and political structures that enabled it, centering her argument on the inseparable connection between lesbian activism and larger social issues. Her intervention aligned with a broader strategy in British Columbia, where lesbian feminists, often in

⁷⁸ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, August 1977. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

⁷⁹ Lesbian Feminists of Vancouver Statement to Coalition, June 13, 1978. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

collaboration with Women in Focus and other allies, concentrated their efforts on advancing formal legal protections.

One of the ROLSC's most sustained and visible contributions was their dedication to reform of the British Columbia Human Rights Code. The BCFW Constitution and Policy handbook passed at the November 1976 convention had a section outlining recommended amendments to the Code. The BCFW lobbied to amend subsections four (equal opportunities in property purchases) and five (tenancy rights) of the BC Human Rights Code to include "sexual orientation, parental status, source of income, age, and choice of living arrangements" as categories of protection against discrimination.⁸⁰ They further sought to expand protections around sexual orientation and other categories of difference in subsections seven, eight, and nine, which focused on employment discrimination, access to promotions, and equal treatment in professional organizations.⁸¹

The BCFW policy handbook justifies these demands "because the Human Rights Code is one of the few legal protections women have, it is necessary that we work together to make full use of its provisions as they now exist and continue to pressure for additions to the Code to more fully guarantee full opportunities and rights for ALL women."⁸² The inclusion of sexual orientation represented one of the earliest sustained efforts by British Columbia women's groups to include lesbian identities in provincial human rights legislation.

As there was a consistent lack of support provided by the umbrella of the BCFW, the ROLSC had to outsource support and build their own networks of resource sharing and aid to achieve

⁸⁰ Constitution and Policy Handbook, Volume II, November 1976, pg 12-14. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S1-SS1-F2 – Constitution and Policy Handbook

⁸¹ Constitution and Policy Handbook, Volume II, November 1976, pg 12-14. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S1-SS1-F2 – Constitution and Policy Handbook

⁸² Constitution and Policy Handbook, Volume II, November 1976, pg 14. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S1-SS1-F2 – Constitution and Policy Handbook

their goal. Women's groups in Vancouver were some of the most influential policy lobbyists west of Toronto. Several supports originated within British Columbia. In Vancouver the *Vancouver Status of Women* (VSW) provided an ongoing point of contact and collaboration, attending human rights conferences and backing the proposals of their lesbian external partners. The VSW was the organization behind the publishing of *Kinesis*, which had published various articles reporting on the successes of lesbian feminist organizing in the Vancouver area.⁸³

Additionally, Rosemary Brown, a key figure in the women's movement in British Columbia, recalled that "feminists in the rest of Canada looked on in disbelief at the audacity of the action and pronouncements" of women's groups such as the Vancouver Status of Women and the British Columbia Federation of Women, and that their radical demands and actions "contributed to the Canadian myth of British Columbians as unusual, and although they admired our organization no province moved to duplicate it; all were convinced that such an organization could not survive outside BC."⁸⁴ Brown focused her feminism on intersectional identities. In her memoir *Being Brown*, she reflects upon a common experience of exclusivity within feminist circles, noting that many white, heterosexual, middle-class feminists in the 1970s and 1980s struggled with accepting women who did not fit their description of feminist into the folds of their organizations.⁸⁵ While Brown's focus was on racial identities within feminist circles and her approach to lesbian feminism was less expressive, the same concerns could be applied.

The Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee played a particularly significant role in elevating this issue within the BCFW and collaborating with other feminist and lesbian organizations to further

⁸³ UBCL, Open Collections – *Kinesis*: News about women that is not in the dailies, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/kinesis>

⁸⁴ Dominique Clement, *Equality Deferred: Sex Discrimination and British Columbia's Human Rights State, 1953-84*. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 20.

⁸⁵ Rosemary Brown, *Being Brown: A Very Public Life* (New York: Random House, 1989), 98.

their agendas. As Becki Ross notes in her book *The House That Jill Built* (1995), the emergence of lesbian caucuses within feminist mainstream organizations in Canada was a response to exclusion as well as a strategic effort to influence feminist agendas from within and promote more lesbian-focused issues.⁸⁶ Lesbian subcommittees within larger women's groups insisted that "sexuality was a legitimate political issue and not a private concern", challenging the heteronormativity that was systematically embedded in much of liberal feminist politics during the period.⁸⁷ The Rights of Lesbian Subcommittee was not merely a symbolic presence, it was a strategic and influential force shaping the Federation's human rights platform.

By cultivating reciprocal relationships with other feminist, labour, and progressive organizations, the ROLSC ensured that its activism could continue even when denied access to institutional resources. One of the most prominent examples of the alliance dynamics can be seen in the relationship between the ROLSC and feminist publishing collective Press Gang Printers. Press Gang Printers, later Press Gang Publishers, was a Vancouver-based printing co-operative founded in 1970 and reconstituted as a women-only, anti-capitalist collective in 1974.⁸⁸ Between 1974 and 1989, Press Gang provided graphic design and printing services to feminist, queer, anti-racist, and labour groups, training members in technical skills ranging from typesetting to offset printing, thereby reducing dependency on commercial print services and fostering skill-sharing within activist circles.⁸⁹ By reducing dependence on commercial print services and fostering skill-sharing, the press created both an activist infrastructure and a social space where lesbian and heterosexual women could meet, learn, form intimate relationships, and

⁸⁶ Ross, 29-30, 60-61.

⁸⁷ Ross, 117.

⁸⁸ Aubin, 4.

⁸⁹ Aubin, 7.

support each other.⁹⁰ Press Gang became a hub for lesbian-feminist community-building, circulating radical literature through networks of independent bookstores such as Little Sister's and feminist periodicals like *Kinesis*.⁹¹

Press Gang's publishing activities reflected its anti-homophobic, anti-sexist, and anti-racist values. In the roughly 20 years of its operation, the collective published approximately 20 books and countless pamphlets, periodicals, and posters. Works such as "Still Sane", published in 1984, addressed the pathologization of lesbians – one of many issues largely overlooked by the mainstream feminist movement – and provided resources for victims of discrimination while validating many of the shared lesbian experiences.⁹² As Alisa Margaret Klinger noted in her PhD dissertation "Paper Uprisings: Print Activism in the Multicultural Lesbian Movement", Press Gang Publishers "provided lesbians with unparalleled opportunities and forums for their self-expression," publishing the majority of lesbian content in Canada before 2003.⁹³ Press Gang members' oral histories attest that the press functioned as both a technical training ground where women "learned as much about the trade and the equipment as they could, both out of a sense of responsibility and a sense of empowerment," and also a meeting space for lesbians in a city where feminist spaces were controlled by heterosexual women and queer spaces were dominated by gay men.⁹⁴

Press Gang exemplified what Pat Parker of the Women's Press Collective described as the politics of publishing: "the way we publish a book... is political. Not holding back is political.

⁹⁰ Aubin, 14-15.

⁹¹ Aubin, 95.

⁹² Aubin, 95.

⁹³ Alisa Margaret Klinger, "Paper Uprisings: Print Activism in the Multicultural Lesbian Movement," (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1995), 27, quoted in Aubin, 5.

⁹⁴ Lynn Giraud & Sheila Gilhooly, "A Herstory of a Women's Press: Press Gang Printers," *Feminist Bookstore News*, 16, no.2 (1993), 49; Warner, 83.

You live politics.”⁹⁵ Through its publications and networks, Press Gang advanced anti-homophobic social justice efforts, contributed to a transnational feminist dialogue, and promoted what Judith Butler called “citational politics,” by transforming “abjection into political agency,” and contributed to a transnational dialogue amongst heterosexual and lesbian feminists about issues affecting women.⁹⁶ Its texts encouraged readers to engage with radical lesbian literature as a means of confronting stigma, interrogating privilege, and supporting ongoing liberation efforts.

Smaller but still significant nodes of support can be seen in surrounding regions. On the North Shore of Greater Vancouver, the North Shore Women’s Centre promoted lesbian feminist programming by the ROLSC, including hosting a workshop on September 17, 1977 at Highlands United Church.⁹⁷ This arrangement not only gave ROLSC a platform to reach new audiences but also allowed the Centre to diversify its programming and address lesbian issues more directly. Additionally, leadership often overlapped between the ROLSC and other B.C.-based organizations; for example, Verge Dixon—who frequently served as the ROLSC’s media and government liaison—was also a leading figure in the Lesbian Feminists of Vancouver. Her dual roles enabled both organizations to share strategies, coordinate campaigns, and maintain a united public voice.

ROLSC members were deeply connected to broader feminist and labour activism. Lou Nelson of *Working Women Unite* highlighted strong interest in a ROLSC-led session at the group’s October “Women in the Workforce” conference; a collaboration that brought lesbian

⁹⁵ Libby Woodwoman, “Pat Parker Talks about Her Life and Her Work,” *Margins* 28 (August 1975) 61, quoted in Aubin, 26.

⁹⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 21.

⁹⁷ Flyer for Lesbian Feminist Workshop sponsored by North Shore Women’s Center, September 1977. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

perspectives into labour organizing while positioning ROLSC within a powerful working-class network. That same year, ROLSC took part in the December Human Rights Conference in Vancouver, joining Working Women Unite, Women in Focus, the Vancouver Status of Women, and the Feminist Lesbian Action Group.⁹⁸ Together, these groups pooled resources, shared research, and coordinated campaigns to confront employment and housing discrimination. The intention of these various groups attending was to collaborate, unite, and “expose the many irresponsible, racist, sexist, and homophobic members of the Commission”.⁹⁹ The cross-membership and collaboration of women across lesbian feminist groups in B.C. created a dense web of relationships that strengthened ROLSC’s capacity for coordinated action.

This political radicalism was shaped by the unique context of British Columbia. Specifically investigating lesbian rights in British Columbia, historian Jill Vickers stated that “experience with right-wing governments in British Columbia ... has made Vancouver feminist groups much more anti-system than many of their eastern counterparts.”¹⁰⁰ This included the early development of lesbian caucus to these groups and their commitment to lesbian issues and the protection of all women. The broader political and legal significance of lesbian rights advocacy in this era was further underscored by the landmark case of a gay and lesbian organization against a prominent newspaper publisher. In *Gay Alliance Toward Equality v. Vancouver Sun* (1975), the newspaper *Vancouver Sun* was accused of discrimination based on sexual orientation for refusing to publish an advertisement in their paper for the Gay Alliance Toward Equality

⁹⁸ BCFW Newsletter, December 1979, Human Rights Conference, pg 6. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

⁹⁹ BCFW Newsletter, December 1979, Human Rights Conference, pg 6. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

¹⁰⁰ Jill Vickers, “The Intellectual Origins of the Women’s Movements in Canada,” in *Challenging Times: The Women’s Movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 44.

(GATE).¹⁰¹ The newspaper appealed, making it the first gay rights case to reach the Supreme Court of Canada.¹⁰² While the case itself was unsuccessful for GATE, it acted as a catalyst for lesbian and gay rights groups, as well as lesbian caucuses of women's groups, to mobilize politically and spread their message on a political stage. The ROLSC was not directly involved in the 1979 Supreme Court of Canada case, but the case and the media storm that surrounded it significantly influenced the political context in which the ROLSC operated. Their focus on the inclusion of 'sexual orientation' within the BC Human Rights Code was a direct address of the gaps exposed through the GATE v. Vancouver Sun case. The subcommittee's lobbying efforts and participation in discussions around human rights can be viewed as both a reaction and a continuation of the legal, political, and social momentum created by the GATE case. Some of the work done by the ROLSC represents an early example of queer legal activism in Canada that predated many of the formal legal victories of the 1980s and 1990s.

1981 National Lesbian Conference

These interconnected political projects—spanning education, legal advocacy, and workplace rights—were not isolated campaigns but building blocks in a larger struggle for lesbian visibility and influence. Their cumulative momentum converged in the 1981 Lesbian Conference, a landmark gathering that solidified the ROLSC's viability within the BCFW and signaled the political maturity of lesbian feminism in British Columbia. Positioned within both the province's feminist history and a broader transnational context, the conference became a keystone event: a space where decades of grassroots organizing intersected with a growing recognition of lesbians as indispensable actors in shaping the feminist movement's direction.

¹⁰¹ Clement, *Equality Deferred*, 164.

¹⁰² Clement, *Equality Deferred*, 164.

One of the most successful initiatives led by the lesbian faction of the BCFW was the running of the hosting of the 1981 nation lesbian conference. A proposal was brought to the ROLSC in April 1980 for “BC lesbians to host the 1981 nation lesbian conference.”¹⁰³ The subcommittee enthusiastically endorsed the idea, and the BCFW formally sponsored the initiative, recognizing the political importance of bringing a national lesbian gathering to Western Canada for the first time. The BCFW lent organizational legitimacy and material resources to the project, highlighting how the ROLSC had succeeded in carving out space for lesbian-specific issues within a broader feminist framework.

Despite a history of limited financial and institutional support, the ROLSC and their supporters in the BCFW successfully hosted a weekend conference from May 16-18, 1981.¹⁰⁴ The event drew over 500 women from across Canada and parts of the United States, representing all regions of Canada except the territories and Atlantic provinces.¹⁰⁵ Despite being a provincial group and the lesbian feminist movements in Canada being more decentralized as a whole, this national reach demonstrated the ROLSC’s ability to mobilize and unite lesbians across geographic boundaries.

Workshops addressed themes such as sexuality, madness, workplace issues, culture, and spirituality. Overarching many of the workshops was exploring how lesbianism affected participants daily lives, including discussions about relationships, coming out, and discrimination in various aspects of their lives. Particularly poignant were the voices of lesbian mothers, a group who recognized that their issues were not specific to lesbians, and who opened their supports to

¹⁰³ ROLSC Meeting Minutes, April 27, 1980. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

¹⁰⁴ BCFW Newsletter, January 1981, Committee Reports, Lesbian Conference 1981, pg 7. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982

¹⁰⁵ BCFW Newsletter, July 1981, Events: Lesbian Conference, 1981, pg 14. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982

all women regarding childcare, custody, isolation, and financial difficulties.¹⁰⁶ The conference also foregrounded the challenges faced by lesbian mothers, many of whom risked losing custody of their children to ex-spouses, parents, or government agencies in a context where many believe that ‘lesbian mother’ is a contradictory term and that see motherhood as a biological definition; the conference and its organizers aim to widen the understanding of mothering to become “synonymous with ‘to nurture’”.¹⁰⁷

Even beyond the workshops, the conferences created spaces for networking, sharing, and celebrating their queer pride. Additional events included the lesbian pride march that occurred the first evening on May 16, 1981. The first of its kind in Canada, the streets of the march route were filled with over 250 women chanting.¹⁰⁸ The conference also featured a ‘new moon celebration’, a ‘great lesbian mystery barbeque’, a women’s music night, and performances by San Francisco band Swingshift and Toronto’s Mama Quilla II.¹⁰⁹ The latter “played to a crowded hall of frolicking, leaping lesbians.”¹¹⁰ Robin Tyler’s comedy routine and an evening coffeehouse further contributed to the affirming and connections-building atmosphere of the conference.¹¹¹

The fifth national lesbian conference in Canada and the first in the western provinces, the conference succeeded to demonstrate a unifying identity for lesbians. As one unnamed Montreal

¹⁰⁶ ROLSC Annual Report, 1980. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-5 – British Columbia Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979

¹⁰⁷ BCFW Newsletter, January 1981, Update on Lesbian and Feminist Mothers’ Political Action Group, pg 13. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982

¹⁰⁸ BCFW Newsletter, July 1981, Events: Lesbian Conference, 1981, pg 14. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982; Lesbian/Lesbienne Newsletter, Issue 2, October/81, Vancouver Lesbian Conference Report. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

¹⁰⁹ BCFW Newsletter, July 1981, Events: Lesbian Conference, 1981, pg 14. SFUA, WWU, File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982; Lesbian/Lesbienne Newsletter, Issue 2, October/81, Vancouver Lesbian Conference Report. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

¹¹⁰ Lesbian/Lesbienne Newsletter, Issue 2, October/81, Vancouver Lesbian Conference Report. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

¹¹¹ Lesbian/Lesbienne Newsletter, Issue 2, October/81, Vancouver Lesbian Conference Report. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

participant stated, “Let’s stop calling ourselves people or even women. We are lesbians and, by not using that dreaded word, we make ourselves invisible even within our own communities.”¹¹² The conference, in all aspects from workshops to networking and social events, became the prime opportunity to “bring together lesbians from across the country to share their experiences, and to recognize and analyse their oppression as lesbians and as womyn (sic), in an attempt to unite and build the struggle of all lesbians.”¹¹³

The 1981 National Lesbian Conference illustrates the ROLSC’s ability to enact meaningful political and social change within the BCFW’s feminist framework. In securing BCFW sponsorship for the conference, the ROLSC gained crucial legitimacy and access to resources that allowed them to undertake a project of wide-reaching significance. The conference’s success highlights the ways in which lesbian feminist activists, from all categories of difference. Bringing the lesbian movement onto focus in British Columbia helped reshape the Canadian feminist landscape to more fully include lesbian voices and experiences.

Altogether, the ROLSC’s work—from grassroots fundraising and mutual aid networks to educational platforms, legal advocacy, and coalition-building—demonstrates both the persistent structural barriers faced by lesbian activists and the innovative strategies they used to overcome them. These narrative and examples shape the argument that lesbian feminists, despite persistent exclusion, were not passive recipients of marginalization but active agents who reshaped the political and cultural terrain of the BCFW and beyond. Their political projects were never confined to the margins; they reshaped the feminist landscape of British Columbia and forged lasting connections with broader movements for social justice. The 1981 Lesbian Conference

¹¹² Lesbian/Lesbienne Newsletter, Issue 2, October/81, Vancouver Lesbian Conference Report. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

¹¹³ Press Release, undated. ARCS, BCFW, File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 - Rights of Lesbians subcommittee [1976] – [1981]

marked both a culmination of these efforts and a launching point for future activism, proving that sustained, collective action could carve out space for lesbian voices in even the most resistant political climates. In this way, the ROLSC's history offers more than a record of past struggles—it provides a framework for understanding the endurance, adaptability, and vision that defined lesbian feminist organizing.

Conclusion

In 1976, lesbians involved in the newly formed Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee (ROLSC) within the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) declared that “we no longer have to explain and argue our existence” and that, consequently, “we can actually get on with implementing our policy.”¹ Their words signaled a crucial turning point: lesbian presence had been acknowledged, recognition secured, and the terrain of struggle shifted from visibility to implementation. Yet, as another statement from only a few years later made clear, recognition was never simply about rhetorical inclusion. As that declaration insisted, “as feminists we recognize lesbian/feminist theory as integral to a thorough feminist analysis and believe that fighting for the acceptance of lesbianism as a valid life-style is fighting for the right of any woman to self-determination.”² Together, these statements underscore the dual nature of lesbian feminist activism within the BCFW: both ideological and organizational. They also frame the broader argument of this thesis: lesbian feminists transformed Canadian feminism not by withdrawing from it, but by reshaping it from within.

This study has traced how lesbian feminist activism took root and evolved within the institutional framework of the BCFW. The ROLSC, while always a subcommittee and therefore structurally constrained, nonetheless carved out space to advance both policy change and theoretical innovation. Through this embedded activism, they pushed the Federation to address

¹ Rights of Lesbians Subcommittee Report, British Columbia Federation of Women Newsletter II.II January 1976. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-1- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977

² Nym Hughes, Yvonne Johnson, Yvette Perreault & Esther Phillips, “In Production: A Workshop Manual of Lesbianism/Feminism, pg 2. SFUA, EF, File F-82-2-0-0-2- British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980

sexuality, heteronormativity, and women's right to self-determination as central feminist concerns. The ROLSC thus operated at once as a site of visibility, of ideological challenge, and of organizational pressure.

Looking beyond the confines of the British Columbia Federation of Women, this case speaks to the wider dynamics of later-twentieth century Canadian feminism. Lesbian feminists across the country faced similar challenges of negotiating visibility, recognition, and institutional inclusion, while simultaneously contributing intellectual and political labour that expanded the feminist agenda. At the provincial level, advocacy by lesbian feminists helped pave the way for the inclusion of sexual orientation in human rights legislation, beginning with Quebec in 1977, Ontario in 1986, and eventually British Columbia in 1992.³ These legislative gains reflect strategies developed within groups like the ROLSC, where change was pursued from within institutional frameworks rather than solely through external protest. Coalitions between the ROLSC and other lesbian feminist groups helped translate feminist resolutions into public campaigns, petitions, and submissions to government committees, linking grassroots advocacy with formal policy change.

The ROLSC's strategies also influenced the formation and growth of local queer organizations and coalitions. Vancouver and Toronto's lesbian collectives, along with later umbrella groups such as Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (Egale) Canada, which was established in 1986, drew on the experience of embedded activism to balance policy engagement

³ Government of Canada, "Rights of LGBTI Persons," *Canada.ca*, last modified August 1, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-lgbti-persons.html>; Government of Ontario, "Key Dates in LGBTQ Rights in Ontario and Canada," *Ontario.ca*, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/key-dates-lgbtq-rights-ontario-and-canada>; The Canadian Encyclopedia, "LGBTQ2 Timeline," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/timeline/lgbtq2>

with community organizing.⁴ Egale Canada became a leading advocacy organization in campaigns to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act, which resulted in the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected ground against discrimination in 1996.⁵ Publications and conferences throughout the 1980s and 1990s, including periodicals such as *Fireweed* and newsletters produced by lesbian organizations, documented the cross-pollination of ideas between feminist and queer movements, linking struggles over reproductive rights, childcare, and anti-violence initiatives with broader campaigns for sexual minority recognition.⁶ Many of these issues had been identified and advanced earlier by lesbians working within feminist groups, including the BCFW, demonstrating the continuity of activism and the foundational role of embedded lesbian feminist organizing.

This case study contributes to a growing body of feminist and queer historiography that challenges linear narratives of women's movements. Much of the earlier scholarship on Canadian feminism, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, tended to describe lesbian activism as a separate offshoot to the mainstream women's movement. Placing the ROLSC within the broader landscape of feminist historiography challenges a tendency to narrate lesbian feminism as a separate current running alongside, or even against, the broader women's movement. Instead, the ROLSC illustrates an alternative trajectory: one of integration, where lesbian feminists strategically leveraged their position inside an umbrella feminist organization to pursue systemic change. This embedded approach highlights that lesbian feminist politics in Canada were not

⁴ Egale Canada, "Our History," *Egale Canada*, <https://egale.ca/about/#tab-history>.

⁵ Government of Canada, "Rights of LGBTI Persons," *Canada.ca*,

⁶ Government of Canada, "Rights of LGBTI Persons," *Canada.ca*; Egale Canada, "Our History,"

defined primarily by separatism or withdrawal, but by sustained efforts to expand the feminist movement's scope and analytic depth.

At the methodological level, investigating the ROLSC also shows the value of studying subcommittees, caucuses, and other semi-formal structures that existed within larger feminist organizations. These bodies often appear marginal in the archival record, yet they were spaces where ideological innovation and practical strategy converged. The ROLSC's story underscores that power within social movements does not only flow from national leadership or from highly visible protests, but also from smaller units working persistently to shift the terms of debate from within. Paying attention to these institutional dynamics helps us see how feminism changed not only through confrontation but also through negotiation, policy work, and sustained presence.

This tension between ideology and organization runs throughout the history of lesbian feminist politics. The ROLSC's campaigns was not merely about passing policies, it was also about ensuring that lesbian viewpoints helped shape the movement's priorities, strategies, and theories. Practically, this meant challenging the assumption of heterosexuality in discussions of feminism and equality. It involved pushing for anti-discrimination language in policy resolutions, the inclusion of sexuality as protected identities, and insisting that self-determination included choices about desire and relationships. Lesbian feminists demanded not just tolerance but real change, urging feminism to fulfill its most radical promise.

Ultimately, the experience of the ROLSC within the BCFW demonstrates how lesbian feminists reconfigured the terms of Canadian feminism itself. They insisted that feminism could not be complete without addressing sexuality and heteronormativity, and that the fight for lesbian recognition was inseparable from the broader struggle for women's autonomy. Their activism

exemplifies the generative tension between ideology and organization: between theory-making and institution-building, between cultural recognition and material change. In reshaping feminism from within, lesbian feminists ensured that the Canadian women's movement could not remain solely about gender, but had to grapple with sexuality, desire, and the politics of self-determination. The history of the ROLSC demonstrates that while lesbian feminists often worked in the shadows of larger feminist organizations, their presence obscured, they were never absent. These lavender shadows were not merely a category of exclusion but a site of innovation, where strategies were developed, and feminist theory was reoriented to include sexuality and heteronormativity. In this sense, the history of the ROLSC demonstrates that the so-called lavender shadows were not peripheral, but constitutive, leaving a legacy that continues to influence the contours of Canadian feminism.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

City of Vancouver Archives. BC Gay and Lesbian Archives fonds, File AM1675-S1-F1331 – Political activism – B.C. Federation of Women [1975] – [1982]

Hughes, Nym, Yvonne Johnson, & Yvette Perreault. *Stepping Out of Line: A Workbook on Lesbianism and Feminism*. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1984.

Radicalesbians. *The Woman Identified Woman*. 1970

RiseUp! A Digital Feminist Archive. *Grapevine* – Spring 1985. Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund. <https://riseupfeministarchive.ca/periodical/grapevine-spring-1985?highlight=grapevine>

Royal Commission on the Status of Women. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada*. Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970.

Simon Fraser University Archives. Ellen Frank Fonds, 1974-1984. F-82. File F-82-2-0-0-1 – British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1975-1977.

Simon Fraser University Archives. Ellen Frank Fonds, 1974-1984. F-82. File F-82-2-0-0-2 – British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW), 1977-1980.

Simon Fraser University Archives. Simon Fraser University Women's Centre Fonds, F-40. File F-40-1-0-0-6 – Correspondence – Lesbians, [ca 1976]-[ca 1981]

Simon Fraser University Archives. Simon Fraser University Women's Centre Fonds, F-40. File F-40-7-1-0-1 – Financial committee minutes and correspondence, 1978-1982.

Simon Fraser University Archives. Simon Fraser University Women's Centre Fonds, F-40. File F-40-7-1-0-5 – Grants and applications, 1977-1980.

Simon Fraser University Archives. Women's Bookstore Collection, 1937-2019, predominant 1937-1997. F-111. File F-111-5-0-0-1 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newspaper, 1974-1975.

Simon Fraser University Archives. Working Women Unite Fonds, 1976-1982. F-45. File F-45-2-0-0-3 – British Columbia Federation of Women – newsletters, 1980-1982.

Simon Fraser University Archives. Working Women Unite Fonds, 1976-1982. F-45. File F-45-2-0-0-5 – British Columbia Federation of Women – 1979 Convention, 1979.

Still Sane. Edited by Persimmon Blackbridge & Sheila Gilhooly. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1985.

University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections. British Columbia Federation of Women Fonds, 1977-1980. RBSC-ARC-1057.

University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections. Open Collections – Kinesis: News about women that is not in the dailies.

<https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/kinesis>

University of Ottawa Library Archives and Special Collections. British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) Fond. 10-045. File 10-045-S9-SS2-F2 – Rights of Lesbians subcommittee

University of Ottawa Library Archives and Special Collections. British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) Fond. 10-045. File 10-045-S1-SS1-F1 – Constitution, policy, structure, resolutions

University of Ottawa Library Archives and Special Collections. British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) Fond. 10-045. File 10-045-S1-SS1-F2 – Constitution and Policy Handbook

University of Ottawa Library Archives and Special Collections. British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) Fond. 10-045. File 10-045-S1-SS1-F3 – Policy Handbook proof

Secondary Sources

- Abbott, Sidney, and Barbara Love. *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism*. New York: Stein & Day Publishers, 1972.
- Adamson, Nancy, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail. *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Allen, Kevin. "Defending Lesbian Moms in YYC." *Calgary Gay History*, October 7, 2021. <https://calgarygayhistory.ca/tag/d-w-rowe/>
- Arnup, Katherine. "Out of This World: The Social and Legal Context of Gay and Lesbian Families." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* (1999): 17–32.
- Aubin, Mathieu. "Here and Queer in Vancouver: Queer Poetry, Small Presses, and Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movements." PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2019.
- Barman, Jean. "Equality Revolution 1945–1980." In *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, 315–344. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.
- Bedikian, Christine. "Lesbians and Their Role Within the Women's Liberation Movement in the Early 1970s." *Gender & Sexuality in World History* (Fall 2020).
- Briskin, Linda. "Feminist Practice: A New Approach to Evaluating Feminist Strategy." In *Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada*. Edited by Jeri Wine and Janice Ristock. Toronto: James Lorimer, 1991, pp. 24-40.
- Brown, Rosemary. *Being Brown: A Very Public Life*. New York: Random House, 1989.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Canaday, Margot. *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.
- Cavanagh, Sheila L. Review of *Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900–65*, by Cameron Duder. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 3 (2013): 532–534.
- Chambers, Lori. *A Legal History of Adoption in Ontario, 1921-2015*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016.
- Chambers, Stephanie, et al. *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2017.

- . “MCC Dignity.” March 21, 2023. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f61141fa6215237a5ee5a36/t/6419b0239c7de36e8c6869f3/1679405093742/MCC+Dignity+032123.pdf>.
- Clement Dominique. *Equality Deferred: Sex Discrimination and British Columbia's Human Rights State, 1953-84*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014.
- . *State Funding for Social Movements Database*. <https://database.statefunding.ca>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–167.
- Creet, Julia. “A Test of Unity: Lesbian Visibility in the British Columbia Federation of Women, 1974–1975.” In *Lesbians in Canada*, edited by Sharon Dale Stone, 185–202. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990.
- D’Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Dopler, Tania Sharp. “Lesbophobia in Feminist Organizations: An Examination of the Effect of Organizational Structure and Sociopolitical Context on the Expression of Lesbophobia.” MA thesis, Carleton University, 1996.
- Drescher, Jack. “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality.” *Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2015): 565–575.
- Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Egale Canada. “Our History.” *Egale Canada*. <https://egale.ca/about/#tab-history>
- Eisenstein, Zillah R. *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984.
- Equaldex. “LGBT Rights in British Columbia.” *Equaldex*. Last modified April 29, 2025. <https://www.equaldex.com/region/british-columbia>
- Evans, Elizabeth, and Éléonore Lépinard. “Confronting Privileges in Feminist and Queer Movements.” In *Intersectionality in Feminist and Queer Movements: Confronting Privileges*, edited by Elizabeth Evans and Éléonore Lépinard, 1–20. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Faderman, Lillian. *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.

- . “The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle Book Talk, Part Three: 1970s.” Mazer Lesbian Archives, October 18, 2015. <https://www.mazerlesbianarchives.org/mazer-video-collections/4-lesbians1970s-tgr>.
- Friedan, Betty. “Betty Friedan (1921–2006).” Edited by Debra Michals. National Women’s History Museum, 2017. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/betty-friedan>.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1963.
- Gilmore, Stephanie, and Elizabeth Kaminski. “A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Feminist Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 1 (2007): 95–113.
- Giraud, Lynn & Sheila Gilhooly. “A Herstory of a Women’s Pree: Press Gang Printers.” *Feminist Bookstore News* 16, no. 2. 1993. 47-53.
- Government of Canada. “Key Dates in LGBTQ Rights in Ontario and Canada.” *Ontario.ca*. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/key-dates-lgbtq-rights-ontario-and-canada>
- . “Rights of LGBTI Persons.” *Canada.ca*. Last modified August 1, 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-lgbtq-persons.html>
- Greenup, Erica. “Women Rally for Action 1976: Politically Engaged Feminism in British Columbia.” *The Graduate History Review* 10 (2021): 1–21.
- Hawkesworth, Mary, and Lisa Disch. “Introduction: Feminist Theory: Transforming the Known World.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, 1–4. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Homel, Gene. Review of *The Art of the Impossible: Dave Barrett and the NDP in Power, 1972–1975*, by Geoff Maggs and Rod Mickleburgh. *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (2014): 331–333.
- Kichler, Rosalind. “A Room of Their Own: White Lesbian Coming Outs and Second Wave Feminism.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (2024): 1–15.
- Kinsmen, Gary. *The Regulation of Desire: Queer Histories, Queer Struggles* Third edition. Montreal: Concordia University Press, 2024.
- Kinsman, Gary, and Patrizia Gentile. *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010.
- Klein, Candice. “‘We Thought We Were the Only Lesbians in the World’: 1971 Vancouver and the Rise of Lesbian and Transnational Feminist Identities Between Canada and the USA.” *Gender and History* 1, no. 13 (2023).

- Kline, Wendy. *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Korinek, Valerie. *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930–1985*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018.
- . “VOICES of Gay, Lesbian, and Feminist Activists in the Prairies.” *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 28, no. 2 (2018): 135–153.
- King, Deborah K. “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology.” *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 42–72.
- MCC & dignity. *Edmonton Queer History Project*. Last revised March 2023.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f61141fa6215237a5ee5a36/t/6419b0239c7de36e8c6869f3/1679405093742/MCC+Dignity+032123.pdf>
- Michals, Debra. “Betty Friedan (1921–2006).” National Women’s History Museum, 2017. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/betty-friedan>.
- Pyryeskina, Julia. “‘A remarkably dense historical and political juncture’: Anita Bryant, The *Body Politic*, and the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Community in January 1978.” *Canadian Journal of History* 53, no. 1. 2018. 58-85.
- Radbord, Joanna. “Lesbian Mothers and the Law of Custody, Access, and Child Support.” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 1, no. 2. 1999, 86-96.
- Resnick, Philip. “Social Democracy in Power: The Case of British Columbia.” *BC Studies* 34 (1977): 3–29.
- Ricci, Amanda. *Countercurrents: Women's Movements in Postwar Montreal*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023.
- Rich, Adrienne C. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–660.
- Rivers, Daniel. “‘In the Best Interests of the Child’: Lesbian and Gay Parenting Custody Cases, 1967–1985.” *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 4 (2010): 917–953.
- Ross, Becki L. *The House That Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.
- Rousseau, Christina. “Wages Due Lesbians: Visibility and Feminist Organizing in 1970s Canada.” *Gender, Work, and Organization* 22, no. 4 (2015): 366–382.

- Rushowic, Samantha. "Intersectionality and the Second-Wave: An Analysis of the British Columbia Federation on Women in the 1980s." MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2023.
- Ryan, Barbara. *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Sangster, Joan. *Demanding Equality: One Hundred Years of Canadian Feminism*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021.
- . "From the Royal Commission on the Status of Women to the National Action Committee." *Labour/Le Travail* 89 (2022): 143–171.
- Sethna, Christabelle, and Steve Hewitt. "Clandestine Operations: The Vancouver Women's Caucus, the Abortion Caravan, and the RCMP." *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (2009): 463–495.
- Smith, Sharon. "Black Feminism and Intersectionality." *International Socialist Review*, no. 91 (2013). <https://isreview.org/issue/91/black-feminism-and-intersectionality>.
- Taylor, Verta, and Leila J. Rupp. "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism." *Signs* 19, no. 1 (1993): 32–35.
- Time. "What Is Intersectionality? Let These Scholars Explain the Theory and Its History." March 28, 2019. <https://time.com/5560575/intersectionality-theory>.
- The Canadian Encyclopedia. "LGBTQ2 Timeline." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/timeline/lgbtq2>
- Valk, Anne M. "Lesbian Feminism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 21, 2018.
- Vickers, Jill. "The Intellectual Origins of the Women's Movement in Canada." In *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*. Edited by Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992. 39–60.
- Warner, Tom. "Introduction: Coming to Terms." In *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada*, 1–14. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.
- Watts, Gina. "Queer Lives in Archives: Intelligibility and Forms of Memory." *Disclosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 27 (2018): 103–119.
- Weissman, Aerlyn & Lynne Fernie. *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*. National Film Board of Canada, 1992. https://www.nfb.ca/film/forbidden_love