

FINAL REPORT

CANADIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN ANNUAL CONFERENCE 1991

WHERE: Westin Hotel, Edmonton

DATE: November 8-10, 1991

THEME: Global Vision Globale/Local Action Locale

SPONSORSHIP:

National CRIAW organization

CO-HOSTED BY:

Misener/Margetts Women's Research Centre, U of A
Women's Program and Resource Centre, Faculty of Extension, U of A

RESUME:

Over 350 women attended the conference at the Westin Hotel in Edmonton, November 8-10, 1991. The conference provided academic and community women with an excellent opportunity to share their concerns, their interests and ideas regarding women's research in Canada and indeed, around the world. Many issues including removal of barriers to women's success, encouragement for women to take a more active and prominent role within society and support for career and educational opportunities for women were discussed throughout the conference.

A major purpose of CRIAW conferences is to bring together the research concerns of academic and community women. These two groups or "solitudes" as they have been called, all too often do their research work and action in isolation from each other. Opportunities for bridging and integrating are few, usually taking place between individuals or through local organizations such as the co-sponsoring Misener-Margetts Women's Research Centre. One of CRIAW's major roles is to provide a national forum for such bridging and integrating. As such, each annual conference is a unique opportunity for Canadian women from all provinces and territories, as well as women from other countries, to come together to exchange and share diverse research interests and concerns around a certain theme.

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS:

The conference attracted participants from across Canada, including all provinces and both territories. As well, CRIAW national received funding from CIDA to coordinate and facilitate a "Western Tour" of representatives from women's networking organizations in the Third World who are engaged in action-research. Hence there were representatives from the Philippines, Bangladesh, Africa and Guyana.

Most, although not all, participants were women working with universities, community women and women working with government departments and agencies. University women included academic staff and students. Community women included some with very low incomes.

Special effort was made to promote the conference among francophones, women with disabilities, Aboriginal women and women representing visible minority groups. The composition of the conference committee reflected a conscious effort to include representatives of the above groups in the planning and implementation of the project. Many participants commented on the truly bilingual nature of the conference as well as the diversity of women present at the conference.

BUDGET REPORT:

see attached budget

Feminism's not-so-secret nether world: lesbianism

A national convention testifies to their growing, disproportionate influence

Mainstream feminism continued its awkward alliance with radical lesbianism last week, when 385 women from across the country gathered in Edmonton at the annual conference of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. The event was sponsored by a battery of governmental organizations and universities, even the staid old Alberta Treasury Branches. The four-dozen workshops and general assemblies ran the usual feminist gamut—from prosaic examinations of female labour participation to the “abortion experience” in Tasmania. For the sexually normal majority of the sisterhood, homosexuality remains an accepted but incidental aspect of the movement. For the lesbian minority, however, it is the central point of feminism. And they are an amazingly powerful minority.

For instance, at the workshop entitled “Now You See Us, Now You Don’t—Lesbian Visibility in Canadian Feminist Organizations,” P.E.I. delegate Houston Stewart publicly proclaimed her gay relationship with Jeri Wine. She did it shyly, vulnerably, moving many of the two-dozen lesbians in the study group to tears. (She presented a less self-effacing front to a reporter later on—see accompanying story.)

Ms. Wine declared: “The weight of the feminist movement has been carried on the backs of lesbians.” Her wife, for example, is active in Prince Edward Island’s provincial status-of-women council. Similarly, two former board members of the provincially funded Alberta Status of Women Action Committee (ASWAC) stated that 75% to 90% of ASWAC’s directors have consistently been lesbian. A current ASWAC board member assured the seminar that it is still mostly lesbian.

Kathy Hamre and Evanna Simpson, a lesbian pair from Saskatchewan, remarked that they are no longer shy about their relationship and that they attend civil-service parties and dances together openly. Ms. Hamre informed the group that she is the third lesbian in sequence to occupy her federal position in the Regina operations office of the Secretary of State Department, the main federal funder of feminist programs. (She refused last week to divulge her title or function.) When she remarked later that the conservative women’s group REAL Women has described her department as “plagued with lesbians,” another

woman in the room responded that it *is* and that lesbians should be proud of it. The Hamre and Simpson duo later gave a seminar entitled “Discrimination Against Lesbians in Saskatchewan.”

Others from the lesbian seminar spread out to contribute their unique insights to other workshops on other subjects. Sharda



Stewart (upper left): A tearful coming out.

Vaidyanath discussed her Carleton University master’s thesis, which she describes as a “radical feminist critique of the institution of marriage.” Woven throughout many

of the weekend’s discussions was the theme of oppression, intolerance and the violence of men against women.

Some were kooky. Christabelle L. Sethna from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education led one called “Too Much On My Plate,” a discourse on “flesh, food and feminism.” She discerns an “oppression connection” between animals and women. Meat is just “dead animals disguised with sauces and spices,” she said. Dead animals represent patriarchal society and war, live animals represent women; therefore, “meat eating is misogyny” and dairying is a rampant exploitation of the female sex. Her thesis engendered mainly scepticism.

Heavy attention to sexual alienation was common, even in the lighter events, such as Jennifer Berezan’s tuneless performance (in both official languages) of her own ditty, “Why is there ‘men’ in menstruation?/It’s the mystery of the nation.” Perhaps the preoccupation helps explain why University of Alberta undergraduate Danielle Forth, one of the few women present under the age of 26, reported that there are almost no feminist students on campus any more.

—Celeste McGovern

Manhandling the press

Lesbian Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIA)W conventioneer Houston Stewart was visibly shaken when Celeste McGovern from *Alberta Report* told her that the proceedings of the morning’s lesbian workshop would be recounted in the magazine. That evening Ms. Stewart followed the reporter out of the main conference room and into a deserted hallway of Edmonton’s Westin Hotel. The stalwart Ms. Stewart then forcibly ushered the slight Miss McGovern into an empty meeting room, shoved her against a table and wrestled away her note pad and began tearing up the pages.

Miss McGovern exited the room and told three women in the hall that she had been assaulted and robbed. One of the trio turned away while the other two watched with blank faces as Ms. Stewart walked out of the room and marched

down the hallway, still ripping up the stolen book.

CRIA W organisers were unapologetic. Agathe Gaulin, a conference planning co-chairman, claimed that she had been in the room with the reporter and Ms. Stewart and had witnessed their “conversation.” Her story was automatically supported by others. When she changed her account and said she was in the washroom with Ms. Stewart at the time of the theft, the women then backed that version as well.

Conference co-chairman Marilyn Assheton-Smith, an education professor at the University of Alberta, told Miss McGovern to leave because her presence was “spoiling the entire conference;” but, as a duly registered and paid participant at a tax-subsidized, media-covered national conference, the reporter refused to do so. She returned the following day to finish the story.