


# A Decade of Lesbian Organizing

by Helen Fallding

*Lorsque les lesbiennes du Yukon ont formé leur premier groupe, l'emphasis était mise sur les rencontres sociales mixtes (lesbiennes et homosexuels). Depuis 1992, un groupe de*

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*lesbiennes féministes s'est formé. Une intense résistance se fait sentir face à la visibilité des lesbiennes et le soutien qu'elles reçoivent de la part d'autres groupes opprimés est pour le moins inadéquat.*

When I first "came out" to myself in 1981, I might as well have been the only lesbian in the Yukon. The closest I could get to a community of like-minded women was reading a few books I dug up at the Whitehorse Public Library and the Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre. Until a few years ago, the Yukon had no gay organization or even contact person. The first people I talked to about my feelings for women were heterosexual men. I was afraid that heterosexual women would think I was "coming on" to them if I raised the topic.

In an effort to find women like myself, I became a lesbian detective. I remember looking in the back of the relevant library books to see who had taken them out before me. I once followed a woman down the street when I saw a labrys on her necklace. (The labrys is a double-headed axe supposed to have been used by Amazons in battle.) This went on for years and got me precisely nowhere. Getting the support and political education I needed meant going south. For years, I moved back and forth like a yo-yo between the Yukon and southern Ontario.

In 1984, I wrote an anonymous article for the *OPTIMIST* (Yukon's women's paper) about the connections between lesbianism and feminism. That was the *OPTIMIST*'s tenth anniversary and as far as I know, mine was the first article by a local lesbian. A Whitehorse lesbian responded and we started a monthly potluck, with on average four women attending. I discovered there were many lesbians in the Yukon—most of them intensely closeted. Some had their own social circles, which were often organized around

sports. As a remarkably unathletic dyke, I didn't have much chance of connecting with them.

I dreamed of living in the Yukon full time, but I wasn't sure whether I could live the kind of open life here that I require for my emotional well-being. There were few role models. In the summer of 1987, I made an exploratory visit and in 1988, my partner Lisa and I made the move. Given the lack of gay community, we intended to rely on heterosexual feminists for support. But we also consciously set out to build an accessible gay community.

In some ways, our community-building efforts have been amazingly successful. With the help of a few long-time Yukon lesbians and gay men, we started hosting barbecues and potlucks at our homes. We got a post-office box and put ads in local papers. For the first time, lesbians and gays in the Territory had a way to find each other. Responses to the ads helped us build a mailing list, which eventually included 100 names of men and women (both Native and non-Native) from almost every tiny Yukon community. We also made a point of welcoming newcomers into the community when they moved from "outside."

In 1991, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance of the Yukon (GALA) was incorporated. For the past few years, members have organized dances every few months and an occasional newsletter. Support and/or social groups for men and women meet on and off. Some of us have spoken out about gay issues and lobbied for recognition of our relationships.

Lisa and I have also experienced some major disappointments over the years. We expected heterosexual feminists to speak out more strongly in the face of the intense anti-lesbian backlash we encountered. We also hoped they would engage with us more deeply in an effort to understand heterosexuality.<sup>1</sup>

More traumatic was the active hostility of feminists who were secretly lesbian. They treated us as if we were the enemy—likely to "out" them at any moment. Even some of the Yukon's few "out" lesbian-feminists tried to discredit us with accusations of "man-hating." The lesbophobia of some Aboriginal women leaders has also been particularly painful. Meanwhile, GALA became dominated by apolitical men and women with little analysis of their own oppression, let alone anyone else's. Decisions made in that context grew increasingly absurd. One response was the formation of new lesbian/feminist group. The Klondykes<sup>2</sup> put on their first dance in December, 1992.

For a Yukon lesbian coming out today, things are already very different than they were for me. But we've still got a long way to go. I'd like to see a lesbian and gay phone line to make connecting easier and to handle the crisis calls

that local social services are ill-equipped to deal with. Among other things, we have a responsibility to gay youth, who commit suicide at an alarming rate. I also wish the Human Rights Commission would address heterosexism as forthrightly as sexism, racism, and disability rights. And I dream of real coalition building among oppressed groups in the Territory.

I'd also like to see more lesbians and gays being out, loud, and proud. And we need hetero- and bisexuals to be as fervent in their support of gay and lesbian rights as fundamentalist Christians are in their opposition. When

only a few of us are vocal, we are very easily targeted.

Lisa and I left the Yukon in 1993. We are proud of our contributions toward building a self-sustaining lesbian community there. But we are also exhausted after five years of an often painful struggle. We've run our lap and it's time to pass on the torch.

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Janet Moore, *Untitled, Scratchboard, 1992*

<sup>1</sup>"Heterosexuality...is not simply a matter of men...having sex with women. [It is] an entire way of life promoted and enforced by every formal and informal institution of the fathers' society, from religion to pornography to unpaid housework to medicine. Heterosexuality is a way of life that normalizes the dominance of one person and the subordination of another...to such an extent that we cease to perceive dominance and subordination in any of their benevolent capacities as wrong or harmful: the "loving" relationship between men and women, the "protective" relationship between imperialists and the colonized, the "peacekeeping" relationship between democracy (U.S. capitalism) and threats to democracy." Sarah Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup>To contact the Klondykes, write: Klondykes, Box 31091, Main St. Post Office, Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 5P7 or inquire at the Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre, 8-106 Main St., Whitehorse.

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## **Lesbians and Homophobia**

*In 1992, ten Yukon lesbians met for a "focus group" which supplemented the Yukon government's survey of women. Workplace harassment, fear of violence, youth suicide, and the inaccessibility of services with lesbophobic staff were all raised as serious issues that we challenged the government's Women's Directorate to help us tackle.*

*There's one church minister in town who believes that gay people are possessed by the devil...*

Ten lesbians met to talk about living in the Yukon. They expressed particularly their concerns about the hostility they face on a daily basis. Our survey results indicate that 72 per cent of Yukon women feel that society should respect lesbians' rights to be open and honest about their relationships. Generally, however, the ten lesbians in the focus group feel this degree of 'acceptance' is not what they see in their daily lives.

Personal safety is a significant issue for gay women in the Yukon. One woman who has received harassing phone calls spends a lot of time thinking about her personal safety. She believes that larger communities offer more security than a place like Whitehorse or even the broader Yukon community because of the sense of anonymity. Walking alone on a street means double insecurity for lesbians.

*I feel like a walking target. One, I am a woman walking the street at night and two, I do not want to be pegged by a bunch of red-necks in a pick-up truck as "there's a dyke; let's beat her up." It's a double whammy.*

The women describe the need for front line workers in service agencies to have "some kind of understanding of gay issues." They comment, for example, that some of the best foster mums around are lesbians, but that they live ridiculously closeted lives because they fear not being allowed to do what they do best—care for children.

Homophobic reactions directed at lesbians vary in degree—from name calling and innuendo to outright physical violence. The women comment that they have had negative experiences with doctors, school systems, social agencies, police, government, clergy, family, and others in their communities.

*When I got harassing phone calls, I did call the police. Their idea of an investigation was to drop by my house and interrogate me about my gay activities. We're subject to a lot of threats and not a lot of protection.*

Better education about sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular could help ease some of the fears that lead to homophobic behaviour. Discussions and training about workplace harassment should include information on harassment of gays in the workplace. The Women's Directorate could organize workshops around racism, sexism, and homophobia, the women say.

*What happens if someone burns my house down? What happens if I get beaten up? What happens if my partner gets killed? None of us should have to think about these kinds of things just because of who we happen to love.*

In schools, principals could make sure there is counselling available for gay students. They could also invite organizations to make presentations to students to help improve knowledge and initiate discussion. Education about homosexuality would help gay students who may need help coping.

*A gay youth line would be great, too. High school is that tragic time that we all went through and a lot of us were suicidal. That's when it hits you; when you realize that you are one of the ten per cent that doesn't fit the puzzle. An anonymous phone line would be a great start.*

There is frustration with Yukon society, a society where personal safety is a major issue for lesbians.

*There is nowhere for us to go. We don't have counsellors; we can't consult the conventional medical profession; we can't go to the police; we can't even go to the transition home... We rely on each other and that's all we have. But not all of us have the skills to deal with any problems that come up. No community of people should have to be that isolated.*

*Excerpted from Multiple Roles, Multiple Voices. A Survey of Yukon Women: Their Concerns, Their Priorities (Whitehorse: Yukon Women's Directorate and Bureau of Statistics, 1993). Reprinted with permission.*