

**Lesbophobia in Feminist Organizations:
An Examination of the Effect of Organizational Structure
and Sociopolitical Context on the Expression
of Lesbophobia**

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines lesbophobia in feminist organizations in English Canada. Through an exploration of herstorical accounts I establish the intensity of lesbophobic reactions to lesbian visibility from the most legendary account of the "Lavender Menace" debates within the U.S. National Organization of Women in the 1970's to similar debates within the British Columbia Federation of Women and other organizations in English Canada a few years later. Canada's National Action Committee on the Status of Women has managed to avoid similar conflict as a result of its particular organizational structure which allowed difference to be somewhat more easily accommodated. A framework of oppression theory advances an understanding of the micro and macro(cultural-structural) components of lesbophobia.

Case studies of St. John's Status of Women Council in Newfoundland and Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre in Ottawa illustrate varying degrees of success in resolving conflict and addressing lesbian issues/lesbophobia. The organizations are compared in terms of organizational structure and the surrounding sociopolitical context. The specific focus is upon how structure has affected conflict resolution and how sociopolitical context might affect the expression of lesbophobia.

Through analysis of the case study data, the thesis argues that lesbophobia is endemic to feminist organizations in English Canada but that the manner in which it is expressed is influenced by both the organizational structure and the sociopolitical context in which organizations operate. Some suggestions are presented to aid feminist organizations in combating lesbophobia and creating more lesbian-positive organizations.

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Chapter One

Introduction

We have no heterosexual privileges, and when we publicly assert our Lesbianism, those of us who had them lose many of our class and race privileges. This does not mean that there is no racism or class chauvinism within us, but we must destroy these divisive remnants of privileged behavior among ourselves as the first step toward their destruction in the society (Bunch 1975: 33).

1.1 The Research Question

Feminists and feminist organizations expend most of their energy fighting those aspects of patriarchal society perceived to have a negative effect on the position of women in society. Issues such as violence against women, the right of women to choose what happens to their own bodies, equal pay for work of equal value, sexism, racism and classism are some of the common themes that have brought feminists together to work for change. The notion of our “universal sisterhood” arising from an assumed common oppression as women in a patriarchal society is still often put forward as we try to ignore the differences that may divide us. We are encouraged (and encourage each other) to overlook difference in order to form a “more perfect” unity to fight the patriarchal foe.

As a lesbian who has worked in a number of feminist organizations, I have often been baffled by the manner in which our “feminist solidarity” seems to dissolve when lesbians make their presence known. When we suggest that it is within the mandate of the organization to address lesbian issues, we are often dismissed with a variety of arguments: the organization cannot take the chance of mentioning lesbian issues; the organization would lose its legitimacy in the eyes of the main(male)stream; or the particular issue is not a serious concern and we must deal with more pressing issues first. For example, in the case of violence against women, many feminist organizations are reluctant to

discuss the issue of battering in lesbian relationships since most violence against women is believed to be perpetrated by men against women. Since battering within lesbian relationships is assumed not to be common, it is judged that organizations should not be distracted from effecting change to create the "greater good". Feminists who take this stand fail to realise that all violence against women is wrong and that ignoring it, even for "the greater good", is also wrong because it silences the victims and allows abuse to continue. As Pharr argues:

We must take a very hard look at our complicity with oppressions, all of them. We must see that to give no voice, to take no action to end them is to support their existence (1988: 52).

In this thesis I explore lesbians experience of lesbophobia within feminist organizations in English Canada. It is my contention that feminists and feminist organizations in English Canada continue to deny their own lesbophobia. It is my assertion that they categorically must acknowledge this lesbophobia as a first step toward dealing with this contradiction. I hypothesise that examples of the marginalization of lesbians concerns by and within feminist organizations are common to the experience of many lesbians who have worked with/in feminist organizations. I demonstrate that lesbophobia exists within and may be problematic for feminist organizations. I also demonstrate that feminist organizations have had different degrees of success in addressing lesbian issues and lesbophobia. By presenting this analysis, I hope to provide a tool (a means of identifying the problem) that might enable feminists and feminist organizations to begin the process of identifying and actively dealing with their own lesbophobia.

My primary focus will be to outline the potentially destructive repercussions of lesbophobia which can divide feminists and feminist

organizations along the lines of sexual orientation. I also explore the effect this type of marginalization has on lesbians who experience it. These effects may range from: simply feeling silenced to feeling alienated from the organization to which you have devoted much time and energy, to being deprived of access to a service or being denied a benefit enjoyed by other members of the organization. Why has lesbophobic behaviour occurred in the past within feminist organizations and why does it continue to happen? How can lesbophobia be more effectively dealt with within feminist organizations? Is it the responsibility of lesbians to teach other feminists to be aware of their lesbophobia? Or is it a shared responsibility of both lesbian and non-lesbian feminists? Through the examination of herstorical accounts of conflict around "the lesbian issue" and an analysis of case studies I attempt to answer these questions.

I chose two organizations as case studies since to undertake an exhaustive survey of feminist organizations across Canada would be far beyond the scope of research at this level. I chose two different types of feminist organizations which are typical of local (grassroots) English-Canadian organizations in two different provinces. Although the case studies involve grassroots feminist organizations, I also present evidence of similar problems in larger organizations by exploring accounts of conflict within the U.S. National Organization of Women (NOW) and the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) in Canada. I have chosen not to study Francophone feminist organizations, Aboriginal women's organizations or racial/ethnic minority women's organizations. These additional dimensions of difference would have added complexity to my research but it would have called on research skills I do not yet possess. Instead, my project takes the form of "self-studies" since I have

been involved in each group.

1.2 Terminology Defined

At this point it is necessary to define some of the terminology I will use in this thesis since the terms I use can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Language can be a point of misunderstanding and conflict if we assume that there is only one meaning to any given concept. We must clearly articulate what we mean, especially when we use contested concepts.

In a discussion of feminism or feminist organizations it is important to ensure that there is some agreement of what is meant by the term **feminism**. Adamson et al. recognise the difficulty in defining this term but provide a point of reference through a political perspective:

[F]eminism itself is not a unified political ideology. At the core of all feminisms are certain commonalities in political perspective: All believe in equal rights and opportunities for women; all recognise that women are exploited and oppressed by virtue of being women; and all feminists organise to make change (1988: 9).

While I agree with the first two of these suggested commonalities, I do not agree with the third because I believe that some women are feminists in spite of their lack of involvement in organising. Nonetheless I believe a **feminist organization** can be defined as an organization that operates out of these three common principles.

Within a discussion of feminist organizations it is necessary to identify the currents of feminism upon which feminist theory and practice are based. I address two of the most common forms of feminism in English-Canadian feminist organising in this thesis: liberal and cultural. I argue that the differences between the philosophy and practice of these two currents of feminism in English Canada may become a point of conflict around a wide range of issues.

This is not to say that feminist groups organised around different ideologies have been unable to work together for change. In fact, the relationship in Canada among feminist groups with differing theories and practices has been different from the situation in the United States. As Vickers et al. point out: "the Canadian tradition of integrative feminism is no anomaly. In English Canada, quite radical women and groups were willing to work with quite traditional women and groups" (1993: 38).

The currents of feminism I will be most often discussing are liberal feminism and cultural (or radical) feminism. Adamson et al identify the central theme of **liberal feminism** as equality of opportunity. Liberal feminists believe that, "each individual in society should have an equal chance to compete for the resources of that society in order to rise within it as far as talents permit unhindered by law and custom" (1988: 10). By contrast, Adamson et al. concluded that: "Unlike liberal feminism which identifies the power of men as a goal for women, **cultural feminism** validates the differences between women and men and in fact, argues that we need an anti-militaristic, non-hierarchical, co-operative society organised on the female values of life-giving and nurturance" (1988: 10-11). I will demonstrate below the role these differing philosophical approaches may play in polarising groups of women in feminist organizations around lesbian issues.

As the title of this thesis indicates, my focus is lesbophobia in feminist organizations. Earlier I articulated the problems that arise due to the inaccuracy of the English language in defining certain terminology. In order to ensure there is no confusion of meaning, I will clearly outline what I mean by lesbophobia. Homophobia, defined in Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1993) as, "irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or

homosexuals", is the term most often used to refer to discrimination against lesbians and gay men in society. I prefer to use the term **lesbophobia** to specifically refer to the experience of lesbians, however, it is my experience that the commonly accepted definitions of homo/lesbophobia are insufficient to describe this highly complex, systemic mechanism of oppression.

In order to understand lesbophobia more deeply, I have found it useful to refer to Philomena Essed's concept of "everyday racism" (1991). Essed asserts that, "a working definition of racism must acknowledge the macro (structural-cultural) properties of racism as well as the micro inequities perpetuating the system (1991: 38). In the same way, I assert that a working definition of lesbophobia must also acknowledge both the macro properties and micro inequities which perpetuate the system. To define homo/lesbophobia as irrational overlooks the very rationality of the social construction of oppression in all its forms. **Lesbophobia** is a socially constructed negative attitude towards lesbians that is made concrete through **discrimination** which Essed asserts includes; "all acts - verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal - with intended or unintended unfavorable consequences for ... dominated groups" (1991: 45). This definition is useful because it removes the requirement of intent to determine if an action is or is not based on homophobic attitudes.

Throughout this thesis I have made use of the terms **oppression**, **discrimination**, and **marginalization** which are explicitly linked with each other in our understanding of responses to difference in patriarchal society. Iris Marion Young suggests that it is impossible to give one essential definition of oppression because of the wide range of factors that must be considered in defining the term. She identifies oppression as structural in nature and asserts that:

Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules. It names, as Marilyn Frye puts it, "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilisation and reduction of a group or category of people" (1990: 41).

Oppression, therefore, is the social structure that allows some groups to be negatively defined or even deeply stigmatised as "other" and therefore subjected to discrimination and marginalization.

Discrimination was defined above in the explanation of lesbophobia as oppressive structures and attitudes put into action. **Marginalization** is defined by Young as, "perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. [In which] a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination" (1990:53). I would suggest that marginalization is linked with discrimination as facets of the the social construct of oppression. It is difficult at times to separate these concepts from each other in theory as well as in practice. I will explore theories of oppression, discrimination and marginalization in more detail in chapter two of this thesis.

1.3 Theoretical Orientation

In this thesis I examine lesbophobia in feminist organizations through a consideration of the role of structure and context in the response of organizations to lesbians and lesbian issues. To accomplish this, it is necessary to have an understanding of the nature of feminist organising in English Canada, with a particular emphasis on grass-roots organizational structures. We must first recognise that the women's movement in English Canada is different in many respects from the women's movement in the United States in spite of the fact that some consider the two movement's to be one and the same.

English-Canadian feminist organising has been influenced to some degree by U.S. radical feminism but that influence has been limited by the sociopolitical structure within which English-Canadian feminist organising has evolved. Jill Vickers clearly articulates the limits of U.S. radical/cultural feminist influence on the English-Canadian women's movement:

The commitment of feminists to the welfare state that Canadian women helped to create and our movements development of a multipartisan strategy in relation to the official politics of the state, illustrate that [U.S.] radical feminist ideas were of relatively little importance in shaping these aspects of the movement. Nonetheless, radical feminist ideas concerning the projects of creating organizations which “bend the iron law of oligarchy” had considerable influence in Canada within feminist groups and in the development of feminist critiques of mainstream political institutions (1992: 40).

The strongest influence of U.S. radical/cultural feminism on English-Canadian feminist organizations is evident in the predominance of grass-roots organising (this is not the only influential factor identified by scholars) and the commitment to a “feminist process”. Adamson et al. state that the basic aspects of feminist process are: “collective organization, no leadership, rotation of administrative tasks, agreement by consensus and an emphasis on personal experience” (1988: 236). The rejection of leadership and the decision-making by consensus model have been identified as problematic by a number of feminists. As early as 1973, Jo Freeman (Joreen) addressed the problems (tyranny) inherent in what she termed “the ideal of structurelessness”. Feminist writers such as Vickers et al. (1993), Adamson et al. (1988), Ristock (1991) and others have contributed their own observations regarding the way these ideals have affected feminist organising.

I will also explore how assumptions underlying feminist epistemologies

may also contribute to the existence of lesbophobia within feminist organizations. Has the ideal of “universal sisterhood” fostered lesbophobia in feminist organizations because of the practice of overlooking difference in the name of sisterhood? Grassroots feminism has tended to emphasise the importance of women’s own experiences and sharing those experiences through mechanisms such as the consciousness-raising (C-R) group. The experience of feminists who were part of such groups led to the development of the idea “the personal is political”. Nonetheless, the homogeneity of such groups led to an unrealistic belief in common experiences of women as women. Since the majority of women in feminist groups were heterosexual this led to a failure to challenge the oppression of lesbians in society and within feminist organizations.

Along with a theoretical framework to describe the structure of some feminist organizations in English Canada and the role it may play in conflict within those organizations, I also had need to understand oppression within feminist organizations in terms of lesbophobia. As stated above, lesbophobia is a social construct that must be understood in terms of both micro and macro manifestations of oppression. The work of a number of feminist theorists has been particularly valuable in constructing just such a framework within which to understand lesbophobia in feminist organizations in English Canada.

Iris Marion Young (1990) provides a particularly useful, women-centered framework that will aid me in illustrating how lesbians may be victims of marginalization and/or oppression within feminist organizations. Young identifies five dimensions of oppression which are the primary frame on which I identify both structural and everyday instances of lesbophobia in feminist organizations. Young’s five dimensions of oppression are: 1) exploitation, 2)

marginalization, 3) powerlessness, 4) cultural imperialism, and 5) violence. She suggests that:

Because different factors, or combinations of factors, constitute the oppression of different groups, making their oppression irreducible, I believe that it is not possible to give one essential definition of oppression. The five categories [I have] articulated ... are adequate to describe the oppression of any group as well as its similarities with and differences from the oppression of other groups (1990: 42).

Later in this thesis I discuss Young's five dimensions of oppression more fully, articulating clear links to the experiences of lesbians within some feminist organizations.

Another theorist who has contributed greatly to my understanding of oppression is Philomena Essed who discusses the importance of "understanding everyday racism" (1991). I believe that Essed's theory about the importance of understanding both the micro (everyday) and macro (structural) components of racism may be easily applied to lesbophobia since both of these forms of oppression are rooted in heteropatriarchal structure and ideology.

According to Essed:

Racism [lesbophobia] is more than structure and ideology. As a process it is routinely created and reinforced through everyday practices... a concept of "everyday racism" connects structural forces of racism with routine situations in everyday life. It links ideological dimensions of racism with daily attitudes and interprets the reproduction of racism in terms of the experience of it in everyday life (1991: 2).

Theorists such as Noël (1995), Pharr (1988), and Kallen (1989) have clarified the links among various forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and homo/lesbophobia. I will draw on their work to enhance my understanding of oppression in the form of lesbophobia.

These theorists analyse oppression and intolerance in the wider society,

providing clear frameworks for identifying marginalization and oppression in many forms. By extrapolating from these works, I hope to identify lesbian oppression within feminist organizations with some precision. These theories will provide a lens through which to study particular instances of lesbian-straight feminist interaction in my case studies.

1.4 Methodological Approach

It is my hypothesis that lesbophobia is endemic to feminist organizations in English Canada and that the manner in which it is addressed is influenced by the organizational structure as well as the sociopolitical context in which the organizations operate. This means that organizations experience varying degrees of conflict over the issue of lesbianism as well as varying degrees of success in addressing lesbophobia. In this thesis I explore this hypothesis by examining herstorical accounts of conflict around lesbianism and through my two case studies of grass-roots feminist organizations in English Canada; one in Ontario and one in Newfoundland.

My own experience as a lesbian involved with a number of feminist organizations in two provinces has generated my interest in researching the issue of lesbophobia in feminist organizations. The herstorical accounts of conflict over the issue of lesbianism within organizations includes the high-profile case of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in the United States and the case of the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) in Canada. These cases led me to question why this issue caused such intense reactions. I begin with these accounts since they were the most available and most clearly documented. Certainly:

The acrimonious debates in the U.S. organization NOW over lesbianism and its place in the feminist agenda and the subsequent division between lesbian and heterosexual feminists, are now part of feminist legend. The herstory of these issues in

Canada is different (Adamson et al. 1988: 58).

My examination the accounts of Canada's National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) revealed that there was no **recorded** conflict over the issue of lesbianism within this organization. There was a period of conflict during the 1980's that was primarily triggered by the growth of the organization, the demands made by new member groups, and a need for change in the organizational structure (Vickers et al. 1993). By most accounts NAC has been able to organise a wide variety of women and groups around a range of issues while maintaining a fairly effective coalition.

The next step in my research process was to set up my case studies. I chose two organizations in which I had been previously involved. Indeed, it was my vastly differing experiences within these organizations that originally led me to this research. The organizations are: St. John's Status of Women Council Women's Centre (SJSWC) and Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre, in Ottawa. The difference in the level of lesbophobia I experienced as a lesbian in these organizations was dramatic, causing me to question what the factors were that created this variation. As I will later demonstrate, the very different sociopolitical environment (or context) in which each organization operates plays a role in how the organizations have addressed the issue of lesbianism. My position as an "insider" in these organizations has made access to some information much easier than if I had approached the research as an "outsider". While this will influence my interpretation of the results, the experience of some aspects of oppression is subjective, therefore, this is not necessarily negative. As Adamson et al. have stated:

Not only would we argue that as feminist activists our writing must and will inevitably reflect our own experiences but, further, that all writing about politics, must make explicit the vision, politics, and

point of view of the authors. All writing on the social sciences, including that on feminism and the women's movement, has a particular point of view, for all such writing, explicitly or implicitly, makes underlying assumptions about how the world ought to be. These judgments are the essence of politics... The cloak of objectivity disguises the necessity, and indeed the inevitability, of a point of view and suggests the existence of one absolute truth(1988: 17).

It is important to recognise that in this work I speak in two voices; as a lesbian and as a feminist and neither voice is separable from the other.

I have been fortunate to be able to begin my study of each organisation with a written herstory of some sort. It is often the case that the herstory of a feminist organisation is not recorded in any form. It is only recently that some of us have begun to recognise the importance of keeping track of our herstories so that the struggles of the past are not lost to those who come later. As I argue, such herstories are important tools that may enable us to perceive the meanings behind some of our current actions as an organisation in order to give us a view to the future.

The purpose of this self-criticism is not to "blame" the women's movement for the difficulties faced in transforming women's lives...we do know that we must address the question of where the women's movement ... [might] go from here. To do that we need to come to terms with where we have already been (Adamson et al. 1988: 21).

I believe that the problems faced by some feminist organizations occur precisely because we fail to learn from our past and therefore repeat the same destructive cycles.

Following a review of the written herstory of each organisation, I began my primary research in St. John's. The organization being studied there is St. John's Status of Women Council (SJSWC), a multi-issue, grass-roots feminist organization founded in 1973 to establish a women's centre. The organization

had the distinction of being the longest running women's centre in Canada until it closed temporarily in December of 1991 following an intense conflict that had the feminist community in St. John's divided along the lines of sexual orientation. The conflict revolved around a complaint by an ex-employee of wrongful dismissal and alleged sexual harassment by lesbians also employed by SJSWC. I started with a perusal of the records (steering committee minutes and correspondence) of SJSWC for any information they might contain about the crisis of 90-91. This search was undertaken with the permission of the organisation but yielded very little information as a result of a lack of policy for the organization or retention of documents. The state of the records and documentation at SJSWC could best be described as haphazard. This is not uncommon for a predominantly volunteer based organization.

I then approached a number of women who had been involved with the feminist community at the time of the crisis to see who I could convince to participate. Having been directly involved with SJSWC at the time of the crisis, I knew who I would like to approach about the crisis. I also employed a sociometric or snowball technique by asking each woman who participated to suggest other possible informants on the topic. Some of the women who participated had not been considered originally as participants as I was unaware of their involvement in the crisis. I knew that some women would be unapproachable for a variety of reasons and that others would take some convincing to share their memories of that time as much pain still remains in the community. I wanted to get a good cross section of women from both sides of the conflict so that I could get a balanced account of the story.

In St. John's, I interviewed nine women who were involved with SJSWC at the time of the 1990-91 crisis. These women were 32-72 years of age, all

Caucasian, and employed in a variety of occupations which still support their feminist philosophy. Many of them have had a long herstory of feminist activism but sadly, a number of the lesbians are no longer involved with any feminist organisation. They identified themselves as lesbian, heterosexual, neuter, relationship phobic and simply feminist. Specific women were chosen to participate in this research because of my own perception of the role they played in the particular events under research. I was also directed to some participants by lesbians in the group who were aware of which straight feminists were involved at the time.

None of the women who participated in this study were central players in the human rights complaint which precipitated this crisis. This was deliberate as I did not wish to get bogged down in the particulars of that complaint because I see this event simply as a trigger for an underlying problem within the organisation which had long gone unaddressed. Further, ethically I did not wish to trigger painful memories for women involved as complainants or respondents as they had already endured quite enough and because the women named in the complaint remain under a "gag" order not to discuss the issue as part of the final settlement.

Each was invited to discuss her personal herstory of involvement with the organisation and to recount her memories of the crisis. The discussions were recorded on tape and the information transcribed. At least half of the women had been involved with the organisation since its founding in 1973 or shortly after. The stories of these women were particularly valuable as they hold the herstory of the organisation in their experience.

The second organization, Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre, was founded in 1979 to meet the needs of women with substance abuse problems

in the Ottawa-Carleton region. The study of Amethyst followed much the same lines with the obvious difference that there was no specific crisis on which to focus. This organisation has recently undertaken to produce an account of the organisation's herstory in a written format. *Here's To You Sister* (1995) outlines the herstory of Amethyst from before its beginnings to the present day. The guiding philosophy is presented along with the account of the challenges and victories of the organisation through the years. As with SJSWC, I have been involved personally with this organisation and it was my experience there that led me to study the organisation more closely. During my involvement I experienced a strong sense of support of my issues as a lesbian. There is at Amethyst an atmosphere of safety for lesbians that was made evident to me in a number of ways: the agency provides a separate group for lesbians, lesbian issues are included in group discussions of life issues, the support for lesbians as individuals (staff or clients) and lesbian issues was quite visible within the organization as well as in the public face of the organization . Because of the thoroughness of the written herstory in *Here's To You Sister* and also because of issues of confidentiality in organizations involved with treating substance abuse, I chose not to undertake the same type of documentary search that I did with SJSWC.

In the Amethyst case study, eight women participated. Three of the women are current board members who volunteered to participate; the remaining five were staff or ex staff members who agreed to my request to participate. The staff members were chosen by two criteria; the length of time that they had been with the organisation and whether they identified themselves

as lesbian (or seemed to be lesbian-positive¹). I felt it was important to get a significant amount of lesbian input from a staff perspective in this case since this organization is maintained by a fairly large paid staff, in contrast to SJSWC where most of the women involved were volunteers and the number of paid staff in the organization was minimised because of funding constraints and the multi-issue focus.

The age range of the women who participated in the Amethyst case study was between 38-64. All of the staff interviewed had at one time worked or still worked for the organisation as counsellors, while the others were board members. Some of the women who participated in this study had also experienced the organisation "from the other side", as clients who made themselves healthier through the alternative treatment of addictions offered at Amethyst.

As with the SJSWC study, each woman was invited to discuss her personal herstory within the organisation. I conducted the interviews in an open-ended style with limited guiding questions designed to maintain the focus on lesbian issues within the organization. This follows Essed's view that: "In nondirective interviewing the function of the interviewer is to encourage the interviewee to talk about a given topic with a minimum of direct questioning or guidance" (1991:68). Essed's technique for exploring racism was to "adapt a global interview schema to the style and personality of each participant." (1991: 68) My guiding questions were based on the information I wished to obtain:

- general perceptions of how the organization has addressed lesbian issues
- personal experiences or observed instances of lesbophobia
- personal perceptions of the problem of lesbophobia in society and

¹ From my perspective as a lesbian, there is a range in internalised lesbophobia among the staff that is evident to me but does not seem to affect the way in which those staffers deal with lesbian clients. This will be discussed more fully in the case study.

- within the organization
- how the participants thought lesbophobia in feminist organizations could best be addressed.

The data gathered through these taped herstories is presented below to give the reader an impression of the dynamics of each organisation. Following this, an analysis of the herstory of the organisations and a comparison of the factors that have created the different dynamics in dealing with lesbophobia is described. The most important aspect of this comparison is the consideration of the variables that cause vehement lesbophobia in one organisation as compared to the positive experience of lesbians involved with the other. These comparisons are juxtaposed with the herstorical accounts of conflicts in other organisations in the early 70's. The research concludes with my own observations on these organisations and some suggestions on how feminist organisations can attempt to honestly deal with the issue of lesbophobia.

This research has been undertaken from an interdisciplinary feminist perspective. My analysis of the case studies is through the frame of feminist structural theory and oppression theory and illustrates the effects of various structural characteristics upon the ability of some feminist organizations to address the issue of lesbianism. As Johnson concludes:

Although it is structurally useful to think of the separate effects of each structural characteristic of a social system, their interconnections make them best understood as threads of a more complex fabric. It is also important however, to be aware of the connections through which the structures of different social systems affect one another (1991: 65).

The realities of organizational structure and the sociopolitical context in which these organizations exist are highly interwoven since each has some impact on how the other has (and continues) to evolve.

This research consists of an herstorical and theoretical literature review and case studies of two feminist organizations in English Canada. The literature review:

[S]erves many purposes for the research. It validates the importance of the study's focus and may serve to validate the eventual findings in a narrowly descriptive study. It also helps develop explanations during data collection and data analysis in studies that seek to explain, evaluate and suggest causal links among events. In grounded theory development, the literature review provides theoretical constructs, categories, and their properties that are used to organise the data and discover new connections between theory and real-world phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman 1989: 41).

Feminist social science is concerned with describing the experience of women within society with a goal of advancing the eventual emancipation of women. To achieve this, feminist social science begins (as I have in the case studies) with the ordinary life of women, then: "we locate individual experience in society and herstory, embedded within a set of social relations which produce both the possibilities and limitations of that experience. What is at issue is not just everyday experience but the relations which underlie it and the connections between the two" (Acker et al. 1991). In this work I attempt to make connections between the theories of oppression and feminist organizational structure and the real-world experience of lesbians in feminist organizations in English Canada.

One of the common stereotypes of the type of qualitative research I have undertaken here is that it is unsystematic and therefore unscientific. In response to that criticism, I adopted the three stage systematic approach outlined by Jayaratne and Stewart (1991). They argue that:

- to attempt to uncover the structure of the experience, we should scrutinise a part of each participants account to determine its meaning
- we should construct analytic categories arising from the combination of

- the accounts and the theoretical framework
- we should described the accounts as we see them to identify the structure of the experiences.

In this way I have been able systematically to explore the experiences of my participants and to understand better the influences of structure and sociopolitical context on feminist organizations way of addressing lesbianism. The research has also evolved with the collection of data thereby reducing the objectification of the participants experience.

Limitations of this research

All research has limitations and this work is no exception. One potential limitation that must be recognised is that by choosing to study organisations where I have been involved, there is the risk that I will only find there what I expect to find.

As researchers, we must not impose our definitions of reality on those researched, for to do so would undermine our intention to work toward a sociology for women. Our intention is to minimise the tendency in all research to transform those researched into objects of scrutiny and manipulation. In the ideal case, we want to create the conditions in which the object of the research enters into the process as an active subject (Acker et al. 1991: 136).

It could also be suggested that since I am a lesbian, I can be expected to encounter lesbophobia at every turn. Any research I might do on this topic, therefore, can be seen as affected by that bias. This could particularly affect my interpretation of data provided by heterosexual participants. I might project my definition of reality, that straight feminists can tend to be lesbophobic, on to those participants thereby invalidating their contribution to some extent.

In fact I recognise clearly that I am biased because of my oppression as a lesbian, however, this does not preclude me from making sound observations about lesbophobia in feminist organisations. Indeed it makes me most qualified

to make such observations. By recognising the bias in my work, I am taking a concrete step to lessen the impact of that bias. Further, all of the participants were aware that I was approaching this research from my perspective as a lesbian and those who had concerns felt free to articulate them to me. My assertion, therefore is that “self-studies” in this case produces better research than “disinterested” research.

To counteract any potential bias as much as possible, I hope to allow the herstories/memories of the women who participated to speak through this work. I hope to present as much of their observations of the organisations as possible and to limit my contribution to analysis. In the process of conducting this research, I drew the participants into theorising about why each organisation had evolved in the manner that it had. The observations of these women supported my hypothesis that organisational structure and the sociopolitical context of each organization were factors in determining the organizations response to lesbian issues.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

In chapter two I present a review of herstorical accounts of conflict around the issue of lesbianism in feminist organizations to provide a backdrop to my current case studies. The first account is of the debates in the U.S. National Organization of Women (NOW). Because of the legendary character of such debates, examination of the specifics is useful to illustrate how contentious the issue of lesbianism can be within feminist organizations. The debates over the issue of lesbian visibility threatened to destroy NOW. What resulted, however, was the integration of lesbian issues into NOW's agenda and an apparent resolution of the conflict. The same arguments reappeared although to a lesser degree, however, when the current president of NOW, Patricia Ireland, revealed

her bisexuality in the 1990's, indicating perhaps that the issue had not been resolved in the 1970's but that it had simply moved underground ... out of sight in an atmosphere of denial. The case of NOW illustrates the longevity and persistence of the issue of lesbophobia in feminist organizations.

The herstorical portion of this chapter deals also with accounts of conflict within some feminist organizations in English Canada. A conflict arose within the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) that strongly mirrored the conflict in NOW. BCFW also survived the crisis brought about by the debates over lesbian visibility and like NOW, later integrated lesbian issues into its mandate of advocacy. Lesbians also experienced difficulty in other organizations in English Canada. The struggles of lesbians in Ontario, for example, are chronicled by Becki Ross in her herstory of lesbian organising in that province. A brief exploration of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women reveals little overt conflict over the issue of lesbianism. Scholars have attributed this, in part, to the coalition type organizational structure which allows very different groups to work together on specific issues with a minimum of conflict.

The balance of chapter two is a review of literature on feminist organizational structure and oppression theory. This review has enabled me to construct a theoretical framework through which to analyze my case studies. From this review, I suggest that the specifics of feminist organizational structure may contribute to the development of conflict within feminist organizations in English Canada. The practices of unclear and unaccountable leadership, consensus decision-making, the denial of difference and a fear of conflict can create a situation that is potentially explosive. The addition of an overwhelming, socially constructed oppression that denies lesbian existence and experience

linked with a demand by lesbians that their issues be addressed is sure to create an unpleasant situation. As my case studies will illustrate, these combinations of structural difficulties versus clearly defined structures and a highly lesbophobic sociopolitical structure versus a less oppressive sociopolitical atmosphere towards lesbians can have dramatically differing results.

In chapter three I present the case study of SJSWC Women's Centre located in St. John's Newfoundland. I have chosen to study this organization for a number of reasons. First, I was a member of the board of SJSWC when some of the conflict described occurred, which gave me greater access to official documentation, such as board meeting minutes to aid my research. Second, I have strong roots in the lesbian and feminist communities in St. John's and have established a level of trust with many of the women who were involved with SJSWC at various times, which is important since personal histories inform my research in this case. I begin with a herstory of the organization as well as some insight into the sociopolitical environment in which SJSWC has evolved. I will show how lesbophobia, left unaddressed, caused the virtual destruction of the organization.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the past there were a number of "lesbian scares" that the founding mothers of SJSWC had acted to dispel to "save" the organization from being discredited in the public eye. This suggests a herstory in which lesbians were welcome as long as they kept quiet about their issues and were not visibly associated with the organisation in order to protect the credibility of SJSWC. (This is similar to the herstorical accounts of conflict in other organizations over this issue.) This also reflects the effect of lesbian-baiting on SJSWC and the very real repercussions it can have for lesbians. The

result in SJSWC was a refusal to address lesbian issues or to acknowledge the importance of considering difference.

I will show, in this case, that unresolved lesbophobia had a serious cost for the feminist community in St. John's. The energy and experience of those lesbians who felt most betrayed by this organization has been diverted away from feminism, denying the feminist community access to a valuable resource. It is unclear at this point what would heal this division, if it ever could be healed. This case study will illustrate that the particular structural and contextual factors of SJSWC and within the province and city, played a role in deterring SJSWC from addressing lesbophobia or lesbian issues to the detriment of the organization.

In chapter four I present a case study which illustrates that not all feminist organizations fail to recognise and deal with lesbian issues. One case in point is Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre in Ottawa. Many lesbians have availed themselves of the services provided by Amethyst and have found an atmosphere that supports them not only in their recovery from addictions, but also as lesbians in a lesbophobic society. An in-depth exploration shows an organization that has attempted to deal honestly with lesbophobia and has taken steps to ensure that lesbian needs and issues are addressed. The single issue focus of this organization and the more positive sociopolitical atmosphere towards lesbians in the province of Ontario, along with other factors, have enabled Amethyst to evolve in a way that addresses the needs and issues of lesbian clients and staff.

I present an overview of the herstory of this organization which was recently undertaken by a committee of women who have been staff workers and clients of the program. This herstory covers the development of the organization

from its formation to the present. There is no indication that there was any more lesbian involvement than in any other feminist organization not specifically lesbian-centred. While there has been some conflict over organizational issues, the question of whether or not the organization would support lesbian issues has not created the type of conflict evident in many other organizations. Along with the herstorical background I include an overview of the sociopolitical context of Ontario permitting a comparison with that of Newfoundland within which SJSWC worked.

Through the accounts of my participants I examine the dynamics of Amethyst in terms of addressing lesbian issues and exploring if it has a framework that might be useful to other organizations. I also explore how difficult it has been for Amethyst to confront the issue of lesbophobia and to be sensitive to lesbian issues. Finally, I examine whether the issue of funding affected or has been affected by the agency's decision actively to include lesbian issues as part of the organization's mandate. In this case study I show that the particular factors of a solid organizational structure and the sociopolitical context within which Amethyst evolved allowed this organization to address effectively the issue of lesbophobia.

In my fifth and final chapter I review my findings from the two case studies. I also present the questions that I have been unable to answer with this study. Why, after twenty years of feminist theory and organizational evolution, have some organizations successfully dealt with lesbophobia while others have not? Based on my analysis, I outline my conclusions about the nature of lesbophobia in feminist organizations, that is; I conclude that lesbophobia is endemic to feminist organizations but each organization's ability to address lesbophobia effectively is influenced by its organisational structure and by the

sociopolitical context in which it operates. Feminists cannot continue to deny that they are sometimes as guilty of oppressing their lesbian sisters as patriarchal society is of oppressing women. If we are truly to stand together to fight our common oppression as women, we cannot put the issues of some women ahead of the issues of other women. We must work diligently to discern how we may address the issue of difference as it is an important aspect of many women's lives. Feminists have a responsibility to face the attitudes within themselves that lead to the oppression of their lesbian sisters. No woman should fear that she will be, by her sisters, betrayed.

CHAPTER TWO

Herstory and Theory: Building an Analytical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This research was conceived of out of my own experiences as a lesbian active within a number of feminist organisations. My experiences led me to review some of the literature pertinent to my central topic. In this case I undertook a review of the (often scarce and hard to find) herstories of conflict within some feminist organisations. I also reviewed the recent work produced about the nature of feminist organizational structure and oppression theory. I believe that it is important to construct an analytical framework based on structural analysis and oppression theories in order to understand how lesbophobia has been manifested in feminist organisations in the past as well as in the present.

It is important to note that the most detailed accounts of conflict over lesbianism within feminist organisations have been written by or from the perspective of lesbians. Such conflicts tend to get mentioned only briefly and with little detail in historical accounts of the organisations written by other feminists. Why is this? Is it a function of the continual denial of our own lesbophobia by feminists? Is it simply not judged to be important if the organisation has managed to survive and continue on in its work? I believe that such conflicts are of the utmost importance as they point out the extent to which we are all held hostage by the values we carry inside of us as a result of being raised in a heteropatriarchal society. These accounts of conflict also provide insights into how feminist organisations dealt with/dealt with lesbianism (difference) in a manner that parallels how they have (or have not) dealt with the issue of race.

In this chapter I begin by presenting some herstorical accounts of conflict over lesbianism in several feminist organizations. I present all accounts I was able to find. I next present a review of theories on the structure of feminist organizations. Consideration of this work is important in order to allow us to perceive how the structure of feminist organisations might contribute to lesbophobic behaviour and conflict within those organisations and especially, to promote or inhibit structural efforts to deal with such conflict. A number of feminist writers have also suggested that it is of utmost importance to consider the sociopolitical context in which feminist organisations exist since organizations and individuals are shaped by that sociopolitical context. I concur with these scholars as my case studies indicate that the sociopolitical context in which the organizations exist played a significant role in how those organisations have reacted to the issue of lesbianism.

Finally I turn to feminist oppression theories as a means of explaining these events of the past and to develop analytic tools through which to view the events of the more recent past and present in my case studies. I have chosen to review oppression theories that are written from a feminist perspective because more traditional oppression theories tend not to perceive the connections among different types of oppression or to recognise the importance of those links although they do provide an understanding of some of the mechanisms of oppression.

2.2 The U.S. Experience: The “Lavender Menace” Within NOW

Because of the significant effect that our herstory has on us, I begin with the herstory of second-wave feminist organising as it involves relationships between lesbian and non-lesbian feminists. The beginning of second-wave feminism in Canada and the United States is set by feminist herstorians in the

time frame of the late sixties and early seventies. During this time there was a great deal of organising and activity as feminism was reborn from the embers of the first-wave suffragist movement and the new sparks of the women's peace movement. Women were coming together to share their experiences in consciousness-raising groups and other forums. I begin with the account of the rise of second-wave feminism in the United States, focusing on a specific conflict that arose during the early years of the National Organisation of Women (NOW). This high profile U.S. event is important because it is one of the best documented cases of conflict over the issue of lesbianism within second-wave feminism, having an almost legendary status.

Feminists in the United States began formulating new theories in the mid to late 1960's to explain the position of women in society and to strategize how to improve the position of women. The new ideology they used to bring women together to fight their oppression as women was that of radical feminism which asserted a universal sisterhood in which all women were sisters united against the common foe, patriarchy. This powerful theory, however, had a flaw which could prove to be the undoing of the whole second-wave women's movement. It was the spark which would later set off intense debates in the U.S. on the nature of feminism and the importance of difference; a fear of difference. As Echols argues:

Radical feminists' emphasis on women's commonality masked a fear of difference, one which had serious consequences 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 (1989: 11).

Echols and others also recognise that there is little record of the early activity of the second-wave women's movement. Certainly there is very little written record

of early conflict within the feminist movement in either the United States or Canada even though much of the early theory is readily available. In spite of the lack of written records, we do know that there was intense conflict in the late 1960's and early 1970's in some parts of Canada and the United States. It is this herstory that I explore to illuminate the forms conflict around the issue of lesbianism has taken both in the 1970's and in the present.

The "Lavender Menace" debate within the National Organisation of Women (NOW) in the United States is one of the best documented examples of the struggles that have taken place within a feminist national organisation in North America around the issue of lesbianism. This conflict has been described in many of the written herstories of the rise of second-wave feminism in the United States. No account is more detailed than that presented by Abbott and Love in *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* (1972) who perhaps give this conflict particular attention because they are concerned with lesbian experience within feminist organizations. Other accounts of this particular conflict are less detailed, being concerned with other aspects of the organisation and its development.

A conflict raged within NOW between the years of 1968-1971 over the issue of lesbian visibility. In spite of the scope and intensity of this conflict, the issues seemed to be resolved when NOW gave lesbian issues public support. It is necessary to take a close look at this conflict to see how lesbophobia can divide feminist organisations (temporarily or permanently) just as any issue of difference may threaten an assumed "sisterhood". The account of this conflict provided by Abbott and Love will be explored in some detail as many of the events and behaviours have been repeated in other organisations in Canada and the United States. Further, it is important to get an idea of the scope of

lesbophobic behaviours before beginning an examination of the underlying causes for such contradictory actions by “straight” feminists towards their lesbian-feminist sisters. The conflict in NOW thus can serve as a reference point for exploring what has occurred in some organisations in Canada because it is so extensively documented.

A significant number of feminist organisations in the U.S. are organised at the grassroots level and are maintained by a steady stream of volunteers who are members of steering committees, boards of directors and even staff. NOW is an exception to this as it operates as a highly structured, complex organisation with chapters across the United States and a powerful and well staffed lobby office in Washington (Abbott & Love 1972: 108). NOW was/is based on individual memberships acquired through local chapters and further organised into state conferences with a national office to oversee the management of the organisation (Vickers et al 1993: 76). The creation of NOW in the late 1960's is described by Sara M. Evans:

When the organisers of the Third National Conference of State Commissions on the Status of Women refused to entertain resolutions, those most concerned were galvanised into independent action. Friedan recalled that they “cornered a large table at the luncheon, so that we could start organising before we had to rush for planes. We all chipped in \$5.00, began to discuss names. I dreamed up N.O.W. on the spur of the moment” Thus the National Organization for Women, NOW was born with a clear statement of purpose: “To take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, assuming all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men” (1992: 67).

As I will later demonstrate, the founding mothers of organisations often maintain their influence over the organisation long after they have stepped down from positions of power. This certainly was the case with founding mother

Betty Friedan who was a key player in much of the conflict around lesbianism within NOW although she no longer held any executive position with the organization. Friedan was certainly one of the most vocal women at the time.

Her historical accounts show that until just before the conflict erupted, lesbians had been involved in NOW but had not really made an issue of their presence.

Lesbians have been able to become members of NOW on the liberal grounds that all women were accepted and that what one does in bed is one's own business. But for the most part, Lesbians joined NOW in their straight disguises. Lesbians were permitted to work behind the scenes and even found their way to top offices if they could pass for straight and if they kept silent (Abbott & Love 1972: 109).

The tacit compliance with the lesbophobic norms of society by women within NOW was not recognised at the time as such by either straight feminists or lesbians. As I will later illustrate, it is often the experience of lesbians that this type of attitude prevails in many feminist organisations even today. Lesbians and straight feminists still fail to recognise how we give in to lesbophobic attitudes that continue to prevail in mainstream society.

The dominant attitude of mainstream society at this time was even more oppressive towards gays and lesbians. There was no indication of any sort of acceptance as homosexual activity was (and still is) outlawed in most states, clearly conveying the notion that what one might do in bed was a matter of concern to the authorities. In spite of the invisibility of lesbians in the written law which proscribed only homosexual acts, lesbians could face harassment from police, were prosecuted under sodomy laws and faced discrimination in the courts. The gay liberation movement had just begun in 1969 with the Stonewall riots, but gays and lesbians still faced deep stigmatisation with very concrete

negative repercussions if they were found out. There was no protection for their rights as individuals if they were exposed as “deviant”, or “perverts” in mainstream society.

A number of factors combined to bring the lesbian issue into the open within NOW from about 1968. Consciousness-raising as a means of applying the theory that the personal is political led to discussions of sexual preference as women shared their experiences within groups (Abbott & Love 1972: 110). For some closeted lesbians this caused a great fear of exposure and negative repercussions both individually and for the movement. This fear of exposure was linked to the intensely negative attitudes towards homosexuality in the U.S. Being exposed as a lesbian could mean loss of employment, alienation from family or even violence. For many women (lesbian and non-lesbian) it brought the fear that the movement could be discredited by the mainstream if the presence of lesbians was acknowledged.¹ In spite of the amount of time that has passed the experience of fear brought on by lesbian visibility is still common to straight feminists and lesbians alike.

In 1969, Rita Mae Brown a well known author, joined NOW and immediately announced her lesbianism. This forced the issue even more into the open and as she became more outspoken, other people became antagonised (Abbott & Love: 111). The virulent lesbophobia of Betty Friedan, founding president of NOW, was made evident in the manner in which she spoke out at a National Executive Board meeting of NOW held near the end of 1969. She accused the New York chapter of NOW of being run by lesbians (Abbott & Love: 112). Friedan had made her position on the issue of lesbianism

¹ This was an accurate fear. Right-wing, Anti-feminist groups like the Eagle forum described NOW as “perverted” and anti-family. These are the same descriptions used by current Canadian right-wing, anti-feminist groups such as R.E.A.L. Women against feminist organizations.

quite clear with her now infamous comment on the issue and lesbians as a "Lavender Menace" to the movement. She later referred to both as more of a "Lavender Herring"... a diversion from the **real** issues of feminism.

Tensions within the movement continued to escalate as a result of the attitudes of women like Friedan and the refusal of some lesbians to back down. In 1970, Rita Mae Brown and two other lesbians resigned from NOW and together issued a statement that made more than clear the manner in which they had experienced discrimination at the hands of their feminist sisters:

We protest NY NOW's sexist standpoint. The leadership consciously oppresses other women on the question of sexual preference—or in plain words, enormous prejudice is directed against the lesbian. Lesbian is the one word that can cause the Executive Committee a collective heart attack. This issue is dismissed as unimportant, too dangerous to contemplate, divisive or whatever excuse could be dredged up from their repression. The prevailing attitude is, and this is reflected even more on the national level, "Suppose they (notice the word, they) flock to us in droves? How horrible. After all, think of our image" (Marotta 1981: 235).

The fear that lesbians will overrun an organisation and the dismissal of lesbian issues as unimportant or marginal prevails in many feminist organisations to this day.²

Abbott and Love describe an atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion in NOW as tensions escalated. These feelings were certainly helped along by what some have referred to as McCarthy-like scare tactics. According to Echols, Betty Friedan was at the head of a successful effort to prevent lesbians from being elected or re-elected to office in the NY NOW elections. It has also been suggested that she was successful because of help she received from two

² Feminist organizations continue to be held hostage by the fear of lesbian-baiting and the idea that we must maintain a particular image in the mainstream. Unfortunately we still fail to recognise the cost of this type of sell-out to heteropatriarchal control.

closeted lesbian members who feared exposure (1989: 219). These events demonstrate that Friedan, as a founding mother, wielded a great deal of influence over NOW even though her term of office as president had ended. This directing role of “founding mothers” appears importantly in one of my case studies.

The alleged scare tactics did not stop with the purge of lesbians from NY NOW. Abbott and Love show that:

In the closing moments of a New York chapter meeting in late December 1970, a motion was introduced. The essence of the motion was to link Lesbianism insidiously with other negatively charged words like ‘communism’, ‘infiltration’ and ‘diversion’, and to propose that anyone who spoke on the Lesbian issue could not identify herself as a member of NOW (1972: 125).

The spirit of this motion carried over into the new year as scare rumours of a lesbian plot to take over the organisation made the rounds of “concerned feminists”.³ The scare tactics worked as concerned feminists “stacked the vote” to keep lesbians and lesbian sympathisers out of the running at the January NY NOW elections (Abbott and Love 1972: 126-7).

Within a year, the organisation recognised its culpability in oppressing lesbians and later passed a resolution to support lesbianism both legally and morally (Abbott & Love: 131). Indeed, NOW came to include lesbian issues in its public demands for change and has maintained this commitment to supporting lesbians for the past twenty years despite vicious attacks from the anti-feminist right. There appears to be little reported analysis of why the tide turned in such a short time. It may be that this conflict was the catalyst necessary for change. What may have happened is that the women who were involved most closely

³ One of the lesbians interviewed for the case study portion of this research has suggested that there is still a negative attitude towards lesbians being visible in feminist organisations: “if one lesbian is there ... lesbians are there; if two lesbians are there it is a lesbian conspiracy; and if there are three or more visible lesbians then lesbians have taken over” (SJSWC #8: 30 August 1996).

with the conflict drew back from active involvement with the organisation due to burn out or the negative experience of the conflict. Perhaps the change of heart came about as a result of an infusion of “new blood” in the organisation. In this case, the work of some feminists to stack the vote at the 1971 elections eventually backfired against them. The lesbian issue was apparently resolved following the passing of the resolution to support lesbian issues.

Shortly after her election to the presidency of NOW in 1991, however, Patricia Ireland was interviewed by *The Advocate* and it was revealed that she was living a double life; living both with her husband in Florida and with her longtime “female companion” in Washington. According to a March 1992 edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, this revelation, “disturbed women across the ideological spectrum and stirred old animosities within NOW” (2) This article goes on to discuss how the issue of lesbianism has haunted NOW since its inception, mentioning the allegations against Betty Friedan as responsible for a purge of lesbian members. Friedan’s own words in this article illustrates her unchanging negative attitude towards lesbian issues; “I’ve never objected to anybody’s private life or sexual preference but I resent a division of energy into turf battles and sexual circuses” (8). I would suggest that continuing to reduce lesbian issues to being private, merely sexual, or unimportant is an indication of Friedan’s level of lesbophobia.

I would suggest that the fact that some of the same arguments voiced against lesbian visibility have resurfaced twenty years later in NOW indicates the tenacity of lesbophobic attitudes in mainstream society and within this organisation. The arguments about Patricia Ireland’s sexual preference⁴ did not reach the same fevered pitch as in the 1970’s, yet the fear still remains that

⁴ Some lesbians were also unhappy about Ireland’s “bi” lifestyle.

lesbian visibility could discredit the movement in the eyes of the mainstream. Twenty years of support of lesbians and lesbian issues, however, has had some positive effect on NOW. There was certainly no indication in 1992 of the type of panic reaction that was evident in the 1970's. The issue also seemed to draw much less media attention and there was little indication of the same type of fevered activity to silence the issue as in the 1970's.

2.3 Canada's National Action Committee

Feminists also organised on a pan-Canadian basis although the form of feminist organising in Canada differed markedly from NOW in the United States. Vickers et al clearly outline the differences between the U.S. National Organization of Women (NOW) and Canada's National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC):

The organization emerging under the NAC umbrella was quite different from the chapter based National Organization of Women (NOW) in the United States. NOW was based on individual memberships organised around local chapters and state conferences. There was also a national headquarters in Washington with a lobbying office, legal staff and so on. NOW members made an active choice as individuals to affiliate with the organisation and its objectives. This structure was similar to most of Canada's "national" organizations. In NAC, by contrast, the affiliated members were organizations, not individuals; hence women who joined an affiliated organization might not even know that they were indirectly affiliated with NAC (1993: 77).

It is important to note the differences between Canadian and U.S. feminist organising since English-Canadian movements are so often overshadowed by the U.S. movements. Vickers et al suggest that this is likely due to media representations of the two movements as similar if not identical in spite of the reality that they are very different due to a variety of factors (1993: 30). A brief examination of NAC will next be presented in order to situate this research

within a Canadian base.

Although NAC has experienced many kinds of conflict, Vickers et al conclude:

There has been relatively little conflict in NAC over the issue of lesbianism, which suggests a tolerance of different, non-traditional ways of being a woman. There has never been the sort of crisis concerning lesbianism in NAC that there was in NOW (1993: 263).

A number of sources (Vickers et al 1993, Black 1992) have suggested that the structure of NAC and the sociopolitical milieu in which it was born played a significant role in both the success of the organization and its ability to avoid cataclysmic conflict:

The realities of both geography and economy have led Canadian women to create groups that share resources, contacts and so on - that is, umbrella or network groups... The umbrella structure⁵ for which NAC opted allowed for the incorporation of radical, local groups with limited disruption (Vickers et al 1993: 92).

The umbrella/coalition structure so characteristic of Canadian organizations enables a national group to call on a wide range of other sympathisers - on the necessary local basis. Radical supporters, included but not incorporated, have not surfaced as a liability (Black 1992:107).

The ability to operate within an umbrella/coalition structure allows for a greater tolerance of difference in ideology, experience and praxis especially since organisations tend to be mobilised around specific issues and have little other contact beyond those issues.

NAC was founded in 1972 as "a coalition to monitor the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women." (Vickers et al 1993: 65) Since that time the organization has evolved into a

⁵ Adamson et al (1988: 245) define an umbrella organization or coalition to be an organization of groups which may or may not permit individual memberships. Various member groups agree on a basis of unity for the coalition, but each member group remains independent and no "party line" is involved. In NAC, only a pro-choice position was required of member groups.

modern-day "parliament of women" representing a significant portion of the Canadian Women's movement. Nonetheless, conflict has been viewed in much the same way in Canada as in the U.S. Despite the advantages of its umbrella structure Vickers et al report that conflict within NAC "was both feared and seen in personalistic and moral terms" (1993: 99). This perception of conflict appears to be common to feminist organisations in both Canada and the United States whether the organisation is national or local in scope and regardless of its focus.

NAC has faced some open conflicts over the years as growth in membership increased diversity and increased demands that the organisation change to meet the needs of new member groups. Lorraine Greaves describes the challenges that led NAC to an organizational review in the period 1986-88:

The complaints regarding committee structure and policy making in NAC were also about a keenly felt lack of representativeness. NAC did not represent the full texture of the women's movement in Canada. The issues under scrutiny and the priorities and strategies of the organization were not decided upon collectively by the membership (1991: 106).

NAC responded to demands by hiring Catalyst Consultants of Ottawa to research and present a report on organizational needs as perceived by the membership. Unfortunately, when the report was presented to the executive it was not well received since some felt that to publish it would threaten NAC because of its brutal honesty regarding the organization's weaknesses (Greaves 1991: 108-110). It is my observation that feminist organizations are often reluctant to admit that there could be any flaws within the organization (or within feminism). This is perhaps not surprising since they are so often pilloried by the male dominated media and by anti-feminists. This leads us to the conclusion that a perfect image before the mainstream (and ourselves) is

necessary to maintain our credibility.

What is striking about this conflict and the response to the Catalyst report by the executive of NAC is the similarity to the reactions of other feminist organizations to conflict around different issues.

The value placed on the process of NAC, and the value of reflecting and cultivating a healthy women's movement became lost to the value of saving face, maintaining control of the organizations's agenda, protecting certain issues, and maintaining the fallacy that NAC indeed had three million involved members fully representing the Canadian women's movement (Greaves 1991: 111).

The review of the "Lavender Menace" conflict at NOW and the less contentious conflict within NAC indicates how the need to save face and maintain the organizations public image is a prime factor influencing the response of organizations and individual feminists to a variety of issues that arise within those organizations. This motivating factor will also be evident in the following accounts of feminist organisations in Canada as well as in my case studies.

2.4 Earlier Canadian Turmolls

Canadian feminists generally assume that we have managed to avoid intense internal conflicts such as those encountered by our neighbours to the south, as we tend to overlook the conflicts that have occurred within our own feminist movement. Julia Creet's article in *Lesbians in Canada* (1990) chronicled the herstorical beginnings of the British Columbia Federation of Women (BCFW) identifying a conflict similar to that in NOW.

In 1974 and 1975 a crucial debate focusing on the issue of lesbian visibility took place within the B.C. women's movement which had the potential to split the movement as it had almost done in the United States. The Lesbian issue produced fear in some women who then attempted to silence Lesbians, arguing that visible Lesbians would hurt the credibility of the movement (Creet 1990: 183).

Creet identifies the parallels between the situation that arose in BCFW and NOW, pointing out that the conflict arose once lesbians found their voice and refused to be silenced. The strongest difference between the two organisations was that lesbian consciousness and feminist consciousness seemed to evolve at the same time in BCFW so that the conflict occurred as the organisation was forming. At the founding convention in 1974, a Lesbian Caucus of BCFW was formed to look into the needs of lesbians and to help BCFW in formulating lesbian policy. At first there was no overt reaction to lesbians voicing their needs within the organisation but this was to soon change. The first issue of the *BCFW Newsletter* clearly outlined the concerns of lesbians and it was soon after this that the conflict erupted.

In November, a representative of the Lesbian Caucus was surprised to see a discussion of the Newsletter and the Lesbian Caucus on the agenda:

When the discussion began she found the hostility and anger directed against the Caucus "quite phenomenal". The Caucus had taken the critical step of making the Lesbian presence in BCFW public. Most women could tolerate Lesbianism as long as it was discreet, but demanding rights and recognition launched it from the private into the political sphere and into the lives of all women in BCFW (Creet 1990: 189-90).

The same attitude that had prevailed at NOW was evident at BCFW; lesbians were more than welcome in the organisation as long as they kept their mouths shut and did not make an issue of their lesbianism in the public sphere. Not only did the attitudes at BCFW mirror those at NOW, some of the same lesbophobic behaviours surfaced as well. Belief in the stereotypical lesbian who had nothing more to do in her life than to "infiltrate" the women's movement was common.⁶

This exemplifies the lesbophobic belief that lesbians are not *real* women. In this

⁶ My question is, how do those who have every right to be in a movement by virtue of belonging to the group for which the movement was formed **infiltrate** that group? In the words of bell hooks, "ain't i a woman?" (1981: South End Press)

way, straight feminist's insidiously acquiesce to patriarchal definitions of womanhood.

Patriarchal definitions of what constitutes a "real" woman often leave great numbers of women on the margins. Lesbians certainly fall outside the margins in the mainstream definition of womanhood. That marginalization is further maintained by straight feminists in an insidious acquiescence to patriarchal definitions of womanhood. When straight feminists are confronted about how they support patriarchal oppression of women in this way they typically react by denying that they could possibly support patriarchy in any way simply because they are feminists, defining feminism as heterosexual in the process.

BCFW further mirrored NOW in its concern for the way in which lesbian visibility could affect the public image of the organisation. One of the arguments was that lesbian articles in the Newsletter were creating controversy and sensationalism and giving BCFW an anti-male image (Creet 1990: 191). Here again we see the way in which feminists and feminist organizations are often overly concerned with their image in the mainstream and how that concern influences the course of action of a given group. As in NOW, an atmosphere of paranoia set in at BCFW as women scrambled to be able to identify who was a lesbian (or a lesbian sympathiser) and who was not.

The lesbian issue was used as the scapegoat for the inability of BCFW to move forward or encourage participation during its first tumultuous years. In spite of this, the organisation continued and in October 1975 a constitution was ratified that included a section on the rights of lesbians (Creet 1990: 193-4).

These resolutions stated:

[L]esbianism itself should not be considered grounds for loss of custody of children; self-supporting attitudes and life/style

alternatives should be discussed with women, and lesbianism is one of those alternatives; there should be no discrimination in the hiring or promotion of lesbians in jobs relating to children (day care and teaching); divorce, immigration, and age-of consent laws should be amended so they cease to discriminate against lesbians and gays (Ross 1995:249).

This is similar to what occurred at NOW following the intense conflict over the issue of lesbianism which led the organization to take action on behalf of lesbian issues. BCFW also put their resolution into action starting in the Fall of 1975 with a series of seminars on lesbianism organised by members of the lesbian caucus and the University of British Columbia Women's Office (Ross 1995: 249).

From the account provided by Julia Creet, it is not clear if there was the same effort to oust lesbians from the organisation as occurred at NOW. There was certainly an effort to keep lesbians quiet and lesbian issues out of public view. A search of newspapers of the time did not yield any information that could suggest that the media followed this story to any extent, by contrast to the situation in New York where the media played a role in escalating the conflict through their exposé of Kate Millett and other sensational stories on the issue.

2.5 Conflict over Lesbianism in Grassroots Organizations

Becki Ross (1995) chronicles the struggles of lesbians within feminist organisations in Canada in her history of lesbian feminist organising in Toronto. The bulk of her work describes how lesbians organised autonomously to create organisations that operated outside of both feminist and lesbigay⁷ liberation organising. She does provide a glimpse however, into the lesbophobia encountered by lesbians who did attempt to work within various feminist organisations in Toronto. She describes the atmosphere at the time quite

⁷ Lesbigay is a term coined by queer theorists that includes lesbians, gays and bisexuals. This term is more inclusive and less awkward than the more commonly used "lesbian and gay".

clearly:

In large part, relationships between straight feminists and lesbians who identified as feminists during the late sixties and early seventies in Toronto (and elsewhere) were fraught with tension, suspicion, and confusion. Feminists I interviewed, both straight and lesbian, told me that too much fear and not enough honesty repeatedly clogged communication channels. Lesbians just out of the closet didn't anticipate marginalization or the fear of guilt by association. Nor did they expect the (unspoken) desire of some straight feminists to suppress a visible lesbian-feminist presence (Ross 1995:26).

Ross describes the Toronto Women's Liberation Movement (TWLM) as a typical multi-issue feminist organization founded in 1969 by a group of white fairly privileged heterosexual women.(1995: 24) Within a year of its founding, bitterness and divisions that erupted in response to the "lesbian question" at a conference sponsored by TWLM revealed serious problems within the organization. The situation deteriorated because of a lack of understanding or acceptance of lesbians and lesbian issues; "women became categories, not people ... and began to polarise." (1995: 25) The organization later established a forum to facilitate discussion but was plagued with confusion over the links between this and other issues until it folded in 1972

The situation within New Feminists (NF) was no better as this radical feminist organisation unsuccessfully struggled with the issue. Here the leadership refused to acknowledge the presence of lesbians within the organisation, warned against the negative influence of lesbians in the ranks and told lesbians who refused to be silenced to get out of the organisation. Ross points out that "even in the feminist press years later, not one of the NF leaders profiled addressed the subject of lesbianism or lesbian oppression" (1995: 25)

The painful experiences of lesbians in other feminist organizations in

Toronto are also briefly chronicled in this work. While some lesbians advocated the merits of collaboration with straight feminists on common issues, others carried painful memories of scorn, purges and snubs (Ross 1995: 28-9). There are many accounts of lesbians being told to be discrete, to render themselves invisible so their presence would not scare off straight women. This type of behaviour has been recorded in other organizations and is common to lesbian experience in feminist organizations today.

Ross makes clear links between struggles within other feminist organisations in North America over the issue of lesbianism. She makes reference to the conflict within NOW as well as the conflict at BCFW indicating that in spite of the intensity of the conflicts there eventually was a positive outcome in that lesbians had access to a forum to voice their issues and concerns. Ross asserts that:

[T]here was no centralised, broad-based feminist organization in Ontario within which Toronto lesbians might agitate for the inclusion of a lesbian platform (however defined). And without this body, there was no urgent, immediate, and irrefutable need for lesbian and straight feminists to work together in pursuit of conflict resolution (1995: 30).

The presence or absence of certain structures and contexts have clearly determined the course of action of lesbians within feminist movements in Canada and the United States. It is also important therefore, to understand the role the structure of feminist organizations may play in determining how organizations deal with conflict and certain high-conflict issues.

2.6 The Structure of Feminist Organisations

The herstories reviewed provide a background of feminist organising at different levels in Canada and the United States. The herstories of particular conflicts also indicate the level of discomfort with the issue of lesbianism and

the way in which organizations have reacted to the issue. It is my hypothesis that organizations react to the issue of lesbianism as a result of a combination of specific factors. These factors include the structure of the particular organization as well as the sociopolitical context in which the organization operates. It is necessary to understand the structure of feminist organizations as arising out of women's experiences within heteropatriarchal society and the impact that has on perceptions of conflict and conflict resolution.

I will concentrate primarily on some structural analyses of grass-roots feminist organising since most feminist activity occurs at this level and also because it will be applicable to my two case studies. I focus on three principle aspects of feminist organizational structure: structural forms and ideology; feminist process and consensus; and finally conflict and conflict resolution.

Adamson et al present a good overview of feminist organising in Canada, addressing history, structure, ideology and practice. They begin by recognising that:

The women's movement [in Canada] has a shifting, amoeba-like character; it is, and has always been, politically, ideologically and strategically diverse. It is not, and has never been, represented by a single organizational entity (Adamson et al 1988: 7).

They also suggest that feminist practice is shaped by a number of factors such as: "political, economic and social conditions; the nature of public consciousness, the level of development of women's and other progressive movements, the degree of state repressiveness, the state of the economy and so on" (Adamson et al 1988: 21). It is also my contention that feminist behaviour within and through feminist organizations is strongly influenced by factors arising from our experiences as women in a heteropatriarchal society. The recent work of Pauline Rankin outlines how women's movements in Canada

are influenced by the realities of space and place. She argues that:

Women's movements are found to be affected significantly by prior experiences with the state, the political opportunities they both confront and create, and the particulars of the locales and jurisdictions in which they organise (1996: iii).

Vickers et al agree that the realities of geography, economy, and politics have influenced the structural choices of Canadian women's movements (1993: 92). They further posit that:

Feminist theories of leadership, representation and democracy have, to date, been shaped by women's reactions against their experiences in mainstream patriarchal institutions. Rarely having experienced female leadership, women tend to assume the "maleness" of all leadership and therefore to reject it as inappropriate in a women-centred institution (1993: 158).

The rejection of forms of leadership and organizational structure women associate with patriarchy has meant that we have defined feminist structure and process as being what patriarchal structure and process is not. This type of reactive or negative defining is certainly problematic because it results in unclear boundaries, confusion and contradictions in theory and practice. It may also "throw the baby out with the bath water" as it results in a loss of practices to hold decision-makers accountable.

Richardson (1983) argued that there is a problem in the way feminist organising has been defined. We have reactively defined ourselves based on what we are not: that is, male. This type of negative defining is certainly problematic as it may obscure a range of oppressive realities within feminist models. Feminists have made much of the importance of establishing our own definitions for ourselves and the issues that are important to us. What we fail to do is apply our critical theory to ourselves. Conflict is viewed as male therefore we must avoid conflict. This means that you either agree with the dominant

group or you leave which leads to homogeneity of groups and elite formation/control (Richardson 1993: 414-415). Richardson's account of organizational instability in women's movements in Montreal clearly illustrates this point.

Ristock argues that feminist organizations have embraced non-hierarchical collective structures which allow for an integration of both feminist principles and practice. She also asserts that for many women the collective structure is a site of contradiction, confusion and frustration because working collectively causes the same feelings as working in a structureless group where consensus is difficult [if not impossible] to reach and where organising efforts are entangled in a web of unacknowledged conflict (1991:42).

Early on in the United States, the problems with the ideal of structurelessness were outlined by Jo Freeman (Joreen) in her article *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (1973). I believe that this critique is also applicable to some of the difficulties experienced within feminist organizations in Canada because the commitment to the ideal of structurelessness is a common feature of feminist organising in both countries. Joreen discusses how the attempt to maintain the ideal of structurelessness may lead to dramatic conflict within feminist organisations. Feminists often go to great lengths to avoid setting up formal structures within their organisations because of the belief that structure is inherently patriarchal and therefore bad for women. Joreen is quick to point out that this ideal of structurelessness is a myth because:

Any group of people of whatever nature that comes together for any length of time for any purpose will inevitably structure itself in some fashion. The idea becomes a smoke screen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can be so easily established because the idea of

structurelessness does not prevent the formation of informal structures, only formal ones (Joreen 1973: 286).

The covert or informal type of structure that Joreen refers to is problematic for feminist organizations because it allows some women to establish an unquestioned power over other women in the organization with no accountability. We end up with an unrecognised leadership and no mechanisms to ensure accountability of individuals or the organization.

Stephanie Riger (1994) discusses the fears early feminists had of reproducing patriarchal hierarchical structures of domination and submission which led to the formulation of the ideal of structurelessness. She agrees with the findings of Joreen that the dangers inherent in this type of set up is the masking of covert power structures. The author limits her analysis to small grass-roots feminist organisations in the U. S. and states that this analysis is not meant to be universal. I would suggest that Riger's analysis is applicable to many grass-roots organizations in Canada which have adopted the ideal of structurelessness embodied in the concept of "feminist process".

To avoid any confusion over the definition of the term **feminist process** I will outline what I mean by it. Adamson et al state, "[a]lthough the details of 'feminist process' differed somewhat from group to group, its basic aspects - collective organization, no leadership, rotation of administrative tasks, agreement by consensus and an emphasis on personal experience - were the same" (1988: 236). They go on to describe their experience in grass-roots organizations, supporting the suggestion of Joreen and others that no matter how much we attempt to eliminate leadership, some type of covert leadership usually emerges. The denial of its existence tends to become a constant source of tension as personalism and decision-making by an unacknowledged "in" group become a substitute for leadership. This creates a sense of manipulation

as well as a feeling of unimportance in the larger group but because of the covert nature of the leadership, there is nothing concrete to point to... just a feeling that things are not quite what they seem to be (Adamson et al 1988: 238).

The demand for consensus as key to good “feminist process” also brings about a number of problems for feminists and feminist organizations. The problems of consensus decision-making are most often felt by those who fall outside the circle of unacknowledged leadership of many feminist organizations. The problems with the demand for consensus are most clearly stated by Vickers et al:

The demand for consensus is seen by some feminists as the prelude to a suppression of differences. Feminist process is often seen as a code-name for a politics that ‘takes homogeneity as its standard’ and perpetuates a myth of ‘sisterhood’ [that] is oppressive when it rules out [political debate over] differences of race, class, ability, language, political perspective, and sexuality (1993:201).

In this statement, the oppressive potential of the feminist process is made clear. If debate is ruled out and women cannot articulate their experiences, then our ability to organise effectively cannot help but be inhibited.

The way in which feminist process seems to inhibit effective strategies for feminist organising is clearly articulated by Linda Briskin:

Feminist process has suffered from a peculiar counterposition and defence of personal over political experience and a paradoxically abstract characterisation (and rejection) of leadership, voting, organizational structures, etc, as male and patriarchal by definition. Both lead to a depoliticization of feminist organizational structures, a result of which is that process becomes separated from political analysis, particular strategies and an identifiable set of organizational norms, and further becomes a mechanism of exclusion. The internalised, personal and often unarticulated character of the norms and practices of feminist alternatives make them inaccessible and uncomfortable to women on the outside.

This process of exclusion reinforces a politic of isolation and exacerbates the potential for marginalization (1991: 32). By the very process we have adopted and maintain we may be involved in marginalising some women in the same way as patriarchal society has marginalized most women. To be a "successful" feminist means that you must adapt to the established, acceptable (feminist) way of doing things or you are doomed to failure and to remain on the margins. Just as leadership often remains covert within feminist organizations, this requirement to adhere to feminist process is also unspoken but understood.

According to Vickers et al; "the values of feminist process place a great deal of emphasis on internal solidarity, which, in turn, requires that members put a high premium on non-conflictual processes" (1993: 98). We feel that we must present a united face to the mainstream because we fear that to acknowledge our differences or to be embroiled in conflict will reduce our legitimacy or cause the movement to split into factions. This fear of the destructive aspect of conflict is understandable when one considers the destructive, aggressive face of conflict within a patriarchal society. We are socialised as women to avoid conflict because of its negative effect and our experience reinforces the reality that we often lose what is valuable to us as a result of conflict. Feminists tend to place great value on the organizations they establish or are involved with and so are reluctant to allow those organizations to be threatened in any way, particularly from within.

One of Stephanie Riger's key points is; "Conflict within feminist groups differs from that within other organisations in part because of the importance of the feminist group to its members" (1994: 291). Vickers et al assert that conflict or difference was seen in personalistic and moral terms and that this could cause groups to split when consensus could not be reached (1993: 99) This

moralising tendency is evident in the herstories I have reviewed in the justification of silencing lesbians for the “good of the movement”. It is also evident in my case studies.

Feminist organizational analysts suggest that conflict and disagreement are signs of a healthy, well functioning group and are in fact necessary components of the group process. Adamson et al concur with this idea but also recognise that:

The resolution of conflict in a healthy way has been difficult for many grass-roots feminist organizations, which have responded to conflict in one of two ways. Either the group would minimise the importance of dealing with the conflict and maximise the importance of “getting on with it”, because time was of the essence, our numbers small, and the tasks we were undertaking large or it would focus entirely on conflict resolution and tend to turn disagreements into personal ones (1988: 243).

I have observed that it is not only grass-roots organizations that fall into this pattern of moralising and personalising disagreement and conflict since the same pattern of dealing with conflict is also evident in the herstories of large scale, highly structured feminist organizations like NOW and NAC.

I believe our problem of dealing with conflict must be addressed. Janice Ristock suggests that a clear understanding of power relations is key to addressing difficulties within collectives:

Traditional small group theory cannot adequately explain the internal dynamics operating within collectives, for it assumes that all groups are hierarchical in construction and that it is individual leaders who emerge to bring the group through conflict ... What I have observed is that it is not so much individual leaders who emerge and struggle for power as it is small factions which form and disagree with one another ... Collectives, therefore, need to understand the emergence of authority and leadership through the development of factions. Explicit discussions of power, rather than an assumed equality and denial of power, may be a route for addressing collective difficulties (1991: 52).

Riger (1994) also observes that we need to be focused on ways to develop conflict resolution techniques rather than deny that conflict can and will happen within feminist organizations. As I will illustrate in the case study portion of this thesis, the type of factions which emerge is problematic for collective organizations which in any conflict quickly establishes a we-they mentality that exacerbates the conflict and impedes communication which would help resolve it.

2.7 Understanding Oppression

Having reviewed some of the herstory of conflict in feminist organizations around the issue of lesbianism and having also explored the role of structure in conflict it is now necessary to create a framework that will allow me to analyse events and actions in terms of lesbophobia. To this end, I have reviewed a number of works on the topic of oppression. Oppression or prejudice has been the subject of sociological theory since the middle of the twentieth century. For the purposes of this research, however, I chose to focus on theory developed by feminist writers who recognise the links among different types of oppression. Feminist writers are often leaders in the analysis of many types of oppression in society and their work is written from a woman centred perspective. I also felt it was important to utilise more current material on oppression as this field has grown significantly in recent years. I begin with a detailed presentation of the work of Iris Marion Young in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990) concentrating her five dimensions of oppression. I also explain how I interpret lesbophobia as experienced by lesbians in feminist organizations fits within this scheme.

Young criticises, from a postmodernist perspective, the notions of sameness and unity that operate as the cornerstones of normative theories

which shy away from the recognition of difference. She suggests there can be no one essential definition of oppression and so she presents oppression as a function of five factors that are common to the experience of many oppressed groups. She further points out, however, that not all groups who are oppressed will necessarily experience all of these aspects of oppression or experience them in the same way, but that the experience of any combination of these forces of oppression makes evident the domination and subordination of a group by another group. Using this framework she also provides the insight that we can be simultaneously oppressed and oppressor.

Young's framework is valuable to my research in that she provides a clearly articulated framework for identifying the oppression of lesbophobia. Further, it makes clear the link between different forms of oppression such as racism and heterosexism that some other oppression theorists fail to make. Young's five dimensions of oppression are: 1) exploitation; 2) marginalization; 3) powerlessness; 4) cultural imperialism; and 5) violence.

Young perceives exploitation to consist of "social processes that bring about the transfer of energies from one group to another to produce unequal distributions, and the way in which social institutions enable a few to accumulate while they constrain many more" (1990: 53). If we apply this to lesbian-straight relations within feminist organizations, it could be suggested that the manner in which lesbians are often the workhorses of the feminist movement while their issues and needs are being ignored fits within Young's definition of exploitation. White, heterosexual, middle class feminists reap the rewards of lesbian energies put into feminist organisations since the issues being addressed are of prime importance to that particular group of women. Lesbians certainly do not often reap benefit from their own expenditure of

energy in feminist organisations to the extent that their needs and issues are left unaddressed or deemed unimportant.

Young next identifies marginalization as the most dangerous form of oppression because it expels a whole category of people from useful participation in social life, which potentially subjects them to severe material deprivation and even extermination (1990: 53). Lesbians may experience this extreme form of marginalization within mainstream society but also often experience marginalization within feminist organisations. Here, marginalization is much more insidious as it is rarely recognised as such. Within feminist organisations, lesbians are marginalized because we are often only permitted to participate if we do not make an issue of our lesbianism. Once we take that step, we are set apart and accused of creating division within the organisation; if we are not accused of the more terrible crime of attempting to take over.

Young identifies several injustices connected with the powerlessness aspect of oppression; inhibition in the development of one's own capacities, the lack of decision making power in one's own life and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the status one occupies (1990: 58). An examination of the herstory of lesbian-straight relations in feminist organizations indicates how lesbians are often powerless to convince others that lesbian issues warrant attention. Certainly some of the accounts of statements made by lesbophobic feminists illustrates the type of disrespectful treatment that lesbians have endured from their feminist sisters.

The fourth dimension of oppression identified by Young is cultural imperialism. Young views cultural imperialism as a paradox whereby one experiences oneself as invisible at the same time one is marked out as different. The injustice inherent in this is that those who are oppressed find little

expression of their own experiences and interpretations of social life that touches the dominant culture, while having imposed upon them the experience and interpretation of social life of the dominant culture (1990: 60). While this is a common experience of lesbians in mainstream society, it is an unexpected reality that this same treatment occurs within feminist organisations. In this case it is evident in the manner in which lesbian experience is so often kept invisible and unrecognised within feminist organisations. It is also evident in the manner in which we are rendered invisible when our presence is made known. The dominant “party line” is that there are (or were) no lesbians involved with the organisation.

Young last addresses violence as one of the faces of oppression. She acknowledges that: “[m]embers of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate or destroy the person” (1990: 61). Young goes on to recognise that violence is a systemic social practice because it is directed at individuals because of their membership in a particular group. The problem lies not only in the act of violence itself but in the psychic cost of those victimised on a daily basis by the knowledge that they could be targeted. As Young has observed:

To the degree that institutions and social practices encourage, tolerate, or enable the perpetration of violence against members of specific groups, those institutions and practices are unjust and should be reformed. Such reform may require the redistribution of resources or positions, but in large part can come only through a change in cultural images, stereotypes, and the mundane reproduction of relations of dominance and aversion in the gestures of everyday life (1990: 63).

Thus, I would suggest that feminist organizations which fail to support lesbians in their struggle to obtain protection under the law maintain the mechanisms

that allow violence to be perpetrated against lesbians. I would further suggest that silencing and failing to recognise the validity of lesbian experience can be considered a form of violence. It is more subtle and insidious than physical violence and that fact alone can cause it to have a tremendous impact on lesbian lives.

Another author who expands on the theme of identifying mechanisms of oppression is Philomena Essed in *Understanding Everyday Racism*. While her primary focus is racism, her theory is important to my work as she clearly explains the importance of examining the everyday manifestations of racism. The everyday manifestations of racism often tend to get overlooked, just as the everyday manifestations of lesbophobia are often overlooked. Other theorists have pointed out the importance of paying attention to the micro levels of oppression and not just the macro levels that are obvious to us.

Essed identifies racism as more than structure and ideology arguing that it is routinely created and maintained as a process through everyday practices. She suggests that:

A concept of "everyday racism" connects structural forces of racism with routine situations in everyday life. It links ideological dimensions of racism with daily attitudes and interprets the reproduction of racism in terms of the experience of it in everyday life (1991: 2).

This approach could prove valuable in deconstructing lesbophobia within feminist organisations. If we can see lesbophobia in its everyday manifestations, we may become more sensitised about how we reproduce lesbophobia ourselves and in our interactions. This is important as lesbophobia is often denied in the same way as racism is often denied. (We assure ourselves that we have dealt with the problem. In the words of one wise

woman...we figure we have done that workshop so now there is nothing left to learn.) Within that self assurance we continue to support and maintain the structures that allow racism and heterosexism to continue.

One of the key points of Essed's work is, "a working definition of racism must acknowledge the macro (structural - cultural) properties of racism as well as the micro inequities perpetuating the system" (1991: 38). This is also required for a working definition of lesbophobia. As in the case of racism, however, the problem usually is viewed as being "out there" and too big for us to tackle as individuals rather than looking at the aspects with which we can deal. We certainly do not see how we are ourselves part of the problem or how it is insinuated into many aspects of everyday life and interaction. As Essed argues:

... discrimination includes all acts - verbal, non verbal and paraverbal - with intended or unintended unfavourable consequences for ... dominated groups. It is important to see that intentionality is not a necessary component ... It is not the nature of specific acts or beliefs that determines whether these are mechanisms... but the context in which these beliefs and acts operate (1991: 45).

This definition of discrimination⁸ clearly points out how insidious discrimination is and how we can so easily fail to recognise that we are operating out of oppressive attitudes. It is the focus on the intentionality of the act that allows feminists to stridently disavow that they are or could be operating out of lesbophobic attitudes.

A common thread in the work of Essed and Lise Noël (whose work I explore below) is the idea of the role that "tolerance" plays in maintaining structures of oppression. Essed concludes:

⁸ Discrimination is one of the practices of oppression. I use the terms interchangeably in this research.

If the reality is defined as a reality of tolerance, there is no legitimate basis for opposition to racism...confronting dominant group members with another view of reality, such as the infusion of racism into the routine practices of everyday life, induces moral indignation (1991: 115).

We may expand Essed's theory to apply to other oppressive structures such as lesbophobia. The herstorical accounts and more recent experiences of lesbians in feminist organisations are rife with just this sort of moral indignation when straight feminists are confronted with the everyday instances of their own lesbophobia. Straight feminists who are confronted with their lesbophobia are quick to point out their tolerance for their lesbian sisters. We hold forth that as feminists we are all equal, more similar than different because the realities of lesbian existence are unfamiliar or bogged down in stereotypes which allow lesbians to be demonized and lesbianism to be stigmatised.

Lise Noël conceptualises intolerance, defined as the unjustified condemnation of an opinion or behaviour as the root of all oppression and domination. She asserts:

Although the discourse of intolerance legitimises relations of domination in all their subtlety, it also gives validity to the most brutal forms of oppression. Intolerance is the theory; domination and oppression are the practice (Noël 1995: 5).

I concur with Noël that one of the things we should beware of is attempting to address oppression mainly by fostering an attitude of tolerance. Simply replacing intolerance with tolerance does not actively deal with the problem of oppression. Rather, it has the effect of glossing over difference and maintaining an unhealthy atmosphere of denial of the importance of difference. It is only through acceptance; that is, by actively addressing differences that make us uncomfortable that we can truly eliminate phobic reactions to difference.

Noël asserts that the most radical oppression of all is to oppress an individual on the basis of what that person is; therefore, she concludes that this merits the closest attention. Having made this observation, she goes on in the balance of her work, to “analyse the parameters of identity from the perspective of discourse, that is, the social production of meaning” (Noël 1995: 5). While the content of the discourses of oppression vary from one type to another, Noël recognises that there are fundamental similarities among their structures.

It is in defining identity that one of the controlling aspects of the discourses of oppression is made most obvious. Marilyn Frye makes this clear as well as making a strong link between heterosexism and racism:

If the question does not arise, or does not arise explicitly or blatantly, one will generally be assumed by white people to be white, since the contrary assumption might be (by white judgment) insulting. A parallel to this is the arrogant assumption on the part of heterosexual people that anyone they meet is heterosexual (1983: 116).

This author goes on to point out that this is arrogant behaviour since the oppressing group abrogates definitional power to themselves and thereby asserts that such defining is their exclusive prerogative. It is often the case that when conflicts around sexual orientation arise, the first order of business is to be able to recognise those who are lesbian. The categorisation is based upon appearance and the fit of the individual to dominant patriarchal stereotypes. Often when we self identify, we are told to be careful, not to make an issue of it and that we are “inviting trouble” since we can so easily “pass” and therefore do not have to endure oppression.

Noël also identifies the arrogant assumptions of the oppressors in how they control discussions of injustice:

It is always said that someone is exaggerating when (s)he describes an injustice to people who do not want to hear about it,

Albert Memme observed. For apart from its balanced tone, the discourse, to be credible to the dominator, must obey the logic of measurement. Indeed, no rule would be a better guarantee of objectivity than that of the "happy medium". Starting from the implicit postulate that two opposing points of view are necessarily extremes, the happy medium is defined as the ideal dialectical position, equidistant from the contrary positions demanded by opposing forces in a given period... A militant's statement of the problem will then always, necessarily, be considered extreme (1995: 74).

This is often the case when lesbians or women of colour bring injustice to the attention of their feminist sisters. We are told that we are being "overly sensitive" or that we are surely exaggerating things. Lesbians, in particular, are often labelled as "militants" when we attempt to bring our issues to the fore or when we confront straight feminists about their own lesbophobia. Here again we realise the arrogance of oppressors in defining others as (among other things) "militant."

Being defined as militant for bringing our issues to the fore has the effect of further marginalising lesbians within feminist organisations. Once one is defined as militant, it is much easier for your voice to be dismissed or silenced by those who do not wish to hear what is being said. Marginalization has been identified by Young and other oppression theorists as a key dimension of oppression although its effects range widely depending on the sociopolitical context.

The role of stigma in creating minority (or marginalized) groups is discussed thoroughly by Evelyn Kallen in *Label Me Human* :

Central to labelling theory is the concept of stigma, originally defined by Goffman(1963) as deep discreditation. Labelling theorists... argue that stigma has its roots not in the particular characteristics singled out for deep discreditation, but in the discrediting label imposed upon assumed bearers of the attribute by majority authorities (discrediting sources) (1989: 29).

This links the negative impact of stigma and marginalization with the definitional authority of those who control the dominant discourses. Kallen clearly articulates the role of stigma in marginalising groups when she states: "At the group level, the long-term consequence of stigmatisation and collective discrimination is the social creation of a minority category characterised by collective disadvantage, subordination and degradation" (1989: 30). Feminists also marginalize lesbians by failing to validate lesbian experience and support lesbian issues. A contradiction occurs when straight feminists accuse lesbians of "infiltrating" the movement while maintaining that differences among women are unimportant. It is obvious to me that if lesbians can be seen to be "infiltrating" the movement, we must be perceived to be "other" in comparison to straight women. This reflects the unconscious or conscious acceptance of the deep discrediting (stigma) attached to lesbianism by the society. If we are so perceived, our differences are therefore highlighted in a negative way and feminists are participating in marginalising lesbians. Yet, straight feminist's continue to deny the importance of difference in women's lives, thereby allowing a number of important issues to go unaddressed and cause difficulty for feminist organizations.

Feminists are horribly focused on the belief that maintaining the denial of difference somehow will bring about equality for all. That is, equality is associated with sameness. In this, feminists fail to see that differences must be recognised if we are to stop contributing to oppression on a number of fronts. The topic of difference and the dangers inherent in denying the importance of difference is well addressed by Annette Lee (1993) in her thesis on how difference is conceptualised. Lee also makes use of Young's five aspects of

oppression, recognising that these were never meant to be definitive but rather to capture the various meanings of harm recognised by social movements (Lee 1993: 30); that is, to give us a point of reference for identifying oppression in its different forms.

One of the difficulties often faced by queer theorists when they attempt to link homophobia with other forms of oppression is that those links are viewed by many as invalid. We are told that we have **chosen** to be oppressed by choosing to be queer whereas others are oppressed involuntarily because of factors beyond their control. We are told that we have no right to compare our oppression with supposedly more valid oppressions such as those of racism or sexism. The morality issue, as well as the general ignorance about the nature of human sexuality/identity, creates an emotional reaction to the issue of homosexuality quite unlike any other prejudicial reaction. I have outlined some of the important work put forward by a number of theorists who do make concrete links between varying forms of oppression.

Another particularly important contribution to this field is Suzanne Pharr's work *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*. One of the reasons I find this work valuable is that the author clearly identifies homophobia as one of three weapons of sexism designed to cause or threaten women with pain or loss (1988: 9). She outlines how all women are controlled by homophobia through lesbian baiting and the threat inherent in being labelled lesbian. She also asserts that an atmosphere of tolerance within feminism is problematic rather than helpful in terms of dealing with homophobia. Pharr sees the contradiction in feminists' attempts to make lasting effective change, while also attempting to maintain an acceptable image for the mainstream. She asserts:

The fear of loss of acceptability is great. But can lasting change be made by closet feminists? And to use Audre Lourde's metaphor,

can the master's house be dismantled using the master's tools - and I add, by exhibiting only behaviour he approves and accepts... Yielding to those in power by striving to be acceptable to them simply enhances their power and does not bring about lasting change (1988: 38-9).

This fear continues to hold feminists hostage. We do not want to appear to be "radical", "man-haters". We struggle to maintain a "nice" respectable image in order still to hold the attention of the masters (patriarchal society). We justify this by pointing to our relative success thus far and maintaining that none of this would have been accomplished if we had lost our legitimacy through alienating ourselves from the mainstream.

Lesbians have often found themselves excluded from feminist practice in the refusal of feminist organisations to recognise the importance of lesbian issues. We also find our experience excluded from a significant amount of what is considered feminist theory. Elizabeth Spelman (1988) effectively discusses from a philosophical perspective the problems of exclusion in feminist thought. She begins with a discussion of how the writings of Western philosophers reproduced and entrenched the misogyny of their time. She then relates this to the manner in which feminist theorists may unthinkingly sustain demeaning images and stereotypes of women (1988: 8). Another valuable connection this author makes is the manner in which difference is used by both patriarchy and feminism to maintain a politics of domination She argues:

In Plato and Aristotle it is the insistence on the importance of differences among humans that serves as the metaphysical foundation of a politics of domination. Paradoxically, in feminist theory it is a refusal to take differences among women seriously that lies at the heart of feminism's implicit politics of domination... To stress the unity of women is no guarantee against hierarchal ranking, if what one says is true or characteristic of woman as a class is only true or characteristic of some women; for then women who cannot be so characterised are in effect not counted as women (1988: 11-12).

Women have then, legitimately feared attributions of difference because they have been the basis of men's oppression of women.

Lesbians are not counted as women by mainstream society. There has been much theorising on the place of women as "other" in patriarchal society, yet little consideration on how lesbians are "othered" within feminism.

Historical and recent accounts have shown that, if a number of lesbians make their presence known in a feminist organisation, there is often a fear that "those people" have infiltrated or are attempting to take over. How can we infiltrate a movement we have every right to belong to by virtue of being women unless we are deemed not to be women? By their language, straight feminists are maintaining the scripts of heteropatriarchal society in relation to lesbians.

Spelman also discusses the epistemological problems posed by the sheer variety of women. She further identifies the contradiction of the concept of tolerance. "Tolerance requires looking but not necessarily seeing, hearing but not necessarily listening, adding voices but not changing what has already been said" (1988: 162). This statement quite succinctly sums up the experience of many lesbians in feminist organisations. We are present, yet invisible; our issues are heard but our reality is not listened to; we are counted as "sisters in the struggle" but our experience continues to be viewed as a mere bedroom issue.

The contradictions of feminism are also addressed by Caroline Ramazanoglu (1990). Unlike many feminist theorists, Ramazanoglu recognises that she writes from a privileged perspective. She also recognises the importance of dealing with difference if feminism is to be a successful project. She argues that :

It is only by facing divisions between women honestly, and by

accepting that some women are oppressed not only by men but also by other women, that the implications and desirability of liberation can be approached. We should not then be afraid of, or ashamed of our contradictions. If they exist we need to understand them before we can tackle them (1990: 23).

Feminists must address their denial that they too contribute to oppression of women in heteropatriarchal society. It is this denial that seems to cause so much of the conflict when feminists are confronted with their complicity with heteropatriarchy. Our fear or shame that we could be guilty prevents us from seeing what we most need to perceive in order to create true social justice for all women.

Ramazanoglu directly addresses the conflict that has arisen in feminist organisations over sexual-political differences. She states:

The understandable reluctance of many feminists to air sexual-political differences in public meant that a serious flaw in feminist political strategy was given insufficient critical attention. Where sexual differences have proved divisive, attacks have been by women on each other rather than on the problems of a political strategy derived from an inadequately explored notion of the social construction of sexuality (1990: 163).

Lesbianism becomes, in effect, the diversion from the *real* work of feminism that some have claimed it to be. I understand that we must first deal with the divisions within our own organisations as a step to understanding and deconstructing the more general antagonisms between all people. Denial continues to lead us down the path to destruction and non-viability.

2.8 Conclusion

This review of some of the relevant literature and herstories has shown that examining the issue of conflict within feminist organisations is far from easy. A variety of factors combine to allow conflict to arise in feminist organisations, such as structural flaws, internalised lesbophobia (and other negative social

attitudes), and simple human nature. Understanding why one organisation may be overwhelmed by lesbophobia and another may successfully deal with lesbophobia on a variety of levels is a challenge not easily met. I hope through my case studies and the application of some of the theory I have just reviewed to be able to explain the expression of lesbophobia in two Canadian feminist organisations and account for how each organization dealt with the challenge. If nothing else is accomplished, the illustration of these two very different cases will show that lesbophobia can take many forms and have quite different effects on feminist organising. There is some hope that feminist organisations can learn from one another to deal more effectively with lesbophobia so that the masters tools of oppression no longer serve to divide us and impede our ability to organise and create change.

Chapter Three

Conflict and Struggle in St. John's

3.1 Introduction

Feminism in Newfoundland¹ has a long and remarkable herstory which has not been particularly well documented in traditional historical accounts and is just recently beginning to be explored by feminist historians. The first wave of feminism in Newfoundland was marked by the struggle for women's suffrage from the 1890's to victory in 1925 (Duley 1993: 14). The development of second-wave feminism in Newfoundland has evolved along the same lines as feminism elsewhere in Canada. Following the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 women in Canada and in Newfoundland began educating themselves and organising in a variety of groups.

In this chapter I first briefly outline the herstory of second-wave feminist organising in Newfoundland with a specific focus on the development of St. John's Status of Women Council (SJSWC). An account of the conflict that arose at SJSWC in 1990-1991, taken from the personal herstories of women (including myself) who were involved at the time is next. Finally, I analyze the series of events connected with this conflict in terms of the structure of the organization and other contextual factors. Within this analysis I include the background of the sociopolitical environment in Newfoundland.

3.2 Overview

Most second-wave feminist organising in Newfoundland has occurred at the grass-roots level, with both positive and negative consequences. This type of grass roots organising in Newfoundland has meant that women have organised around very specific issues at very local levels. Because of the

¹ I do not discuss the women's movement in Labrador since I am concerned with the movement on the island and most specifically in St. John's

isolating geography of the island and the way in which outport life is lived women's groups in Newfoundland have not usually had much contact with each other. This type of fragmentation of the movement is one aspect of grass roots organising with negative consequences (Pope & Burnham 1993: 163). This is not to say that feminist organisations in Newfoundland have never managed to work together. It has been made evident through some past events that Newfoundland feminist organisations can not only mobilise together but also can influence coalition forming on a national level. While there may be some similarities to other groups in Canada, there is still a unique quality to Newfoundland feminist organising and the Newfoundland feminist response to various issues. The unique quality of Newfoundland feminism has become a point of focus for feminist researchers both on and off the island.

The organization under scrutiny in this study is the St. John's Status of Women's Council (SJSWC) and the Women's Centre run by the council. In the minds of many, the Women's Centre is SJSWC even though this multi-issue organization is often involved in a wide range of projects. Adamson et al describe multi-issue organizations as: "single groups that share a common political analysis and/or agree on a series of goals. These groups address a wide range of issues and are frequently members of coalitions" (1988: 246). SJSWC is a member group of NAC and has also been involved with other coalitions on the local or provincial level. In St. John's, as in other locations, this form of organising is used as a means of providing a range of services to women that are not otherwise funded by government agencies.

SJSWC receives the bulk of its funding from the federal government through the office of the Secretary of State and is thereby subject to the criteria of that program which disallows funding to groups who deal with issues of

reproductive choice or sexuality. To sidestep such restrictions, SJSWC provides a piggy-back structure to coordinate and support small groups or committees which deal with these and other issues. Just before the crisis erupted in 1990 at SJSWC, the organisation had spearheaded a successful effort to lobby the federal government to replace recently withdrawn funding for women's organisations. Being in the national spotlight and having very intense level of activity doubtless contributed to the likelihood of conflict.

SJSWC is run by a volunteer board, the Steering Committee, that oversees the operation of the Women's Centre. Through the Women's Centre a variety of activities and groups are coordinated by staff or members of the Steering Committee. During the period under study, SJSWC coordinated or otherwise supported, the St. John's Rape Crisis Centre, *The Spokeswoman* newsletter committee, provided meeting space for groups such as Gays and Lesbians Together, discussion groups and ad hoc political action groups.² SJSWC also had a strong link with Iris Kirby House, having played an integral role in establishing the shelter for battered women. The organisation also aided in establishing Newfoundland's first free-standing abortion clinic. SJSWC Women's Centre has been a resource centre for women in St. John's, provided counselling, some job training and a base from which to organise various activities and political actions for over twenty years.

In 1990-1991 a conflict arose at SJSWC that caused a split within the women's community predominantly along the lines of sexual orientation. Tension related to this conflict, media scrutiny and a high political activity level combined with staff and volunteer burnout later led to the closure of Canada's

² SJSWC most often provided support in the form of use of the space at the Women's Centre, access to office equipment, phone lists, and coordinating action with other groups. Due to budgetary restraints, SJSWC could not often provide any sort of funding to other groups beyond this "in kind" support.

longest continuously running Women's Centre in December of 1991. Before embarking on my study of this conflict, it is important to take a look at the history of SJSWC in order to get a sense of how the organization has evolved.

3.3 Herstory

In 1972 the Newfoundland Status of Women Council (NSWC) was founded and began addressing special areas of concern in the Royal Commission Report by organising women in "ginger" groups. In 1973, a \$3000 grant from the Secretary of State's newly formed Women's Program was used to establish a women's centre called The Woman's Place in downtown St. John's (Pope & Burnham 1993: 172). Within a year, the collective who ran the Women's Centre and the council split over what has been described as philosophical differences (Pope & Burnham 1993: 173). This type of division within the organisation parallels splits in many small consensus groups which have been documented by Vickers et al in *Politics as if Women Mattered* (1993). The philosophical differences that caused the split revolved around issues of structure and practice. Members of the collective viewed NSWC members as "middle class" while members of NSWC viewed the collective as "radical". One of the founding mothers recounted the story to me in much the same way, saying that the whole thing had occurred as a result of differences in how each group defined feminism. This could be interpreted as a conflict over the incompatibilities between liberal feminism (the council members) and radical/cultural feminism (the collective members). This woman remembered the conflict coming to a head over the NSWC members wanting to hang curtains at the Centre and the "radicals" who ran the Centre challenging this as middle-class and politically incorrect. Later in our discussion she stated that

most of the “radicals” were probably lesbians.³ Lesbians recall the story very differently, remembering it distinctly as a “lesbian purge” and noting that lesbian involvement was minimal or nonexistent from that point until the early 80’s.

In 1978 twenty members of NSWC contributed to the purchase of a house at 83 Military Road to serve as the Women’s Centre (Pope & Burnham 1993: 181). The SJSWC Women’s Centre has been run from this location since that time. This has provided a measure of stability since previously a combination of bad locations, high rent and funding insecurity threatened the organization and impeded its ability to provide effective services for the women of St. John’s. In 1984, following a long term debate between NSWC and other women’s councils on the island, the name of the organization was changed to St. John’s Status of Women Council.

Pope and Burnham (1993) recognise that the issue of lesbian rights has been divisive within the women’s movement both in Canada and elsewhere and that lesbians have experienced discrimination from other feminists. They further point out that opinions among feminists about discrimination against lesbians in St. John’s differed:

Barbara Doran said that lesbianism never actually became an issue with the St. John’s Council. “The development and acceptance of lesbian women came through a very slow, quiet process that was almost an internal thing. Both sides knew there wasn’t going to be any public attention drawn to it, and somehow both sides lived with that.” Yet Diane Duggan recalled that, when she moved back to Newfoundland from Waterloo, Ontario and became involved in the St. John’s Women’s Centre, lesbian rights were not taken up as an issue. “It’s a very scary issue for a lot of women’s centres, they’re afraid of scaring people away. But the issue of lesbianism has to be incorporated into our work ... or we

³ It is interesting to note how the labels radical and lesbian are often linked ... almost unconsciously. I argue that some feminists use the term radical rather than lesbian as part of their unconscious denial of the reality of lesbian existence. Because of the fear engendered by the word lesbian they do not even wish to articulate it in reference to other women who are known to be lesbian.

are doing our own oppressing”(1993: 215).

One could suggest that these differing perceptions might indicate the experience of each woman in terms of her own identity as heterosexual or lesbian. Those who do not live with oppression are not always as attuned as those who live with oppression daily.

The brief written herstory of SJSWC notes that a number of attempts have been made to include lesbian issues. First, following at the provincial women’s conference of 1981, SJSWC lobbied government for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The second attempt was made in 1987, during the provincial women’s lobby, where the movement formally recognised the issue of lesbian rights and urged the provincial government to include sexual orientation in the provincial Human Rights Code⁴ (Pope & Burnham 1993: 215). Lesbian issues were also addressed at the 1990 conference through a workshop on homophobia (suggested and organised by lesbians). Pauline Rankin (1996) describes how the Clyde Wells Liberal government refused to consider any amendments to the Human Rights Code in spite of lobbying by feminist and other groups. She goes on to identify the factors that have made it difficult for lesbians to build a “politics of difference” within the Newfoundland feminist movement:

The combination of the geographic isolation from other parts of Canada coupled with the sparseness of the island’s population means that minority feminists in Newfoundland and Labrador often live and work without a community base of support on which to build their “politics of difference.” The homogeneity of the provincial population coupled with neo-nationalism that still prevalent within the provincial culture creates an environment where it is often difficult for the women’s movement to address

⁴ There is still no provincial protection for lesbians and gay men in the Newfoundland Human Rights Code, none of the recent provincial governments have come through on any of their often repeated promises. This is a big difference from the situation in Ontario which will be discussed later.

issues that expose differences within its ranks (Rankin 1996: 260).

The 1990-91 conflict at SJSWC which I am about to describe illustrates the difficulty women's movements in Newfoundland have had addressing difference within that movement, particularly differences in sexual orientation. During this conflict, the atmosphere of anger, tension and mistrust provided no safe place or sense of respect for lesbians who were involved. There continues to be a very real feeling of pain around the whole series of events for both lesbians and non-lesbian feminists in St. John's. It is my perception that there has also been no resolution of this conflict in spite of the reports by many of my case study participants that there is a need to address the issues raised by the conflict.

The conflict was preceded by a time of high intensity activity at SJSWC. A training project was undertaken by the women's centre to give women some marketable job skills and a coordinator was hired to oversee this and other projects. The woman was highly skilled but had no experience working in a feminist environment. Monies brought in through various projects allowed the centre to hire a full time counsellor (who happened to be lesbian) and later an assistant for the project coordinator (who was not lesbian) This assistant later took on some responsibilities of the project coordinator/office manager following the office manager's resignation.

Later that year, the federal Progressive Conservative government pulled the rug out from under many women's organisations when it announced the elimination of funding to women's centres, deeming them a provincial responsibility. Women and men in St. John's and elsewhere rallied and participated in the occupation of the Secretary of State offices. The actions of SJSWC were a catalyst for action Canada-wide and eventually brought about

the temporary reinstatement of the funding. Many lesbians were involved with SJSWC and played key roles in the occupation during this time. The feminist community was riding high on the euphoria of success in grabbing back the much-needed funding.

In spite of the euphoria of the time, stresses were building at SJSWC and the women's centre. Political differences and personality clashes among staff were creating a difficult working environment. The Steering Committee attempted to deal with the problems through facilitated discussions and retreats...to no avail. Stresses among the staff continued to build and the Steering Committee also concluded that the woman acting as office manager was not fulfilling the responsibilities of her position. She was subsequently fired.

That woman then filed a wrongful dismissal complaint with the Human Rights Commission against SJSWC. "The complaint included four examples of alleged harassment based on sex and political opinion linked to what was described as pay discrimination" (Amended minutes SJSWC AGM June 27, 1991). This action caused a flurry of activity at SJSWC as the Steering Committee and the membership attempted to discern the best course of action. It was in the context of this activity that the split in the feminist community in St. John's occurred.

As a result of funding difficulties, staff burnout, and tensions within the organization over the Human Rights Complaint and other issues, the longest running women's centre in Canada was forced to close temporarily in December of 1991. SJSWC then undertook an organizational review with the hope that this would be a starting point to deal with the problems. Catalyst Research of Ottawa was brought in to conduct the organizational review in hopes that an outside perspective could more effectively mediate discussion in

the community. The final report and its recommendations were submitted in December of 1992. Whether or not this process has fulfilled its purpose remains to be seen.

In spite of this small attempt to heal, there still exists a rift in the women's community in St. John's. This is evident in the stories of women who were embroiled in this conflict and who still carry painful memories of a community in turmoil. Whether the memories come from lesbians or non-lesbian feminists, there remains a sense of frustration that "the other side" simply would not listen, that groundless accusations were made and that the conflict was needless.

3.4 The Conflict Close Up

I asked nine women to recount their memories of the 90-91 crisis at SJSWC. They represent both "camps" of the conflict as well as some women who saw themselves more as outside observers than direct players in the conflict. They range in age from 32 to 72 and are employed as writers, researchers, filmmakers, librarians, teachers, activists. One of the women is semi-retired. They are lesbians, heterosexual married women, mothers and grandmothers, but no category is necessarily exclusive of any of the others. Some have been involved with SJSWC on the steering committee, as casual volunteers, as staff members, and as founding mothers. Most of the lesbians who participated in this research are no longer associated with the organization because; *"it is not a place where I want to put my energy right now as I don't feel that it is a lesbian friendly atmosphere ... it doesn't feel like a healthy place to be"* (Participant # 8: 30 August 1996).

The story recounted by these women is one of great suspicion, paranoia, righteous indignation, profound pain and vehement hatred. Their story also very strongly mirrors the conflicts that occurred within NOW, BCFW and other

organisations in the 1970's. The homophobic, inflammatory statements hurled by some women at the lesbian community certainly echo similar statements made in earlier conflicts at other venues. The manner in which many of the lesbians involved have chosen to withdraw from the organisation and limit their involvement to lesbian focused organisations also mirrors the actions of lesbians who were embroiled in conflicts in the seventies.

We must question why such a conflict occurred in this community given the advances made by feminists and the number of lesbians who have worked with SJSWC over the years. A great deal of the conflict seemed to be the result of poor or no communication among groups and individuals and the media making a great deal of the conflict in the organisation and attributing all of it solely to heterosexual/lesbian divisions. In the telling of the story, I hope to illustrate the way in which various factors operated together to sustain the lesbophobic atmosphere and behaviours that continue to consume this community.

As stated earlier, the conflict had been brewing for some time before it escalated into public view. Lesbians involved with SJSWC at that time perceived any lesbophobic actions as a result of personal interactions and lesbophobic attitudes of certain individuals rather than as a consequence of any organisational flaw. Before the complainant in the Human Rights case was fired, the Steering Committee had been very supportive of both heterosexual and lesbian staffers. There were some problems of communication between the staff and the Steering Committee. Staffers attended Steering Committee meetings and there was some question as to whether or not this was a good practice. It also created a difficulty for the staffers as they felt that boundaries were very unclear between themselves and their employer (the Steering Committee) due

to this set up.⁵

SJSWC was founded upon feminist principles and was committed to the practice of “feminist process” in decision making. For the purposes of legality and incorporation as an organisation, SJSWC did have outlined in its constitution a formal structure for its Steering Committee and the manner in which decisions were to be made. This structure was implemented primarily in name only since most of the women involved with the Steering Committee felt that the type of structure defined was not compatible with feminist process because of the perceived hierarchal design. Just before the conflict a group of women undertook a review of the constitution of SJSWC to enable it to better fit the changing needs of the organisation. It is ironic that since that time, the constitution and other documentation of SJSWC are missing, including computerised membership lists.

It was my experience while a member of the Steering Committee at SJSWC that the “feminist process”, particularly consensus based decision-making, did not seem to work well for this organisation. I have previously established that consensus based decision-making cannot accommodate conflict in any way. Further, the absolute devotion to the ideal of consensus meant that decisions often were deferred because of a failure to reach consensus until the last minute or beyond. Some decisions had to be forced by circumstance or absolute necessity, meaning that staff or any available Steering Committee member might have to make a quick decision on the spot. Another problem was the lack of well kept records of past decisions as a reference for

⁵ Unlike the staff at NAC and in some other feminist organizations, the staff at SJSWC were not unionised. This was likely due to the high rate of turnover in staff as well as the structure which had paid staff employed by a volunteer board. Vickers et al (1993: 233) identify the problems with volunteerism and the way in which it may affect relationships between paid staff and volunteer boards.

each new Steering Committee.

Women often came to the Steering Committee with very limited experience in running any type of organisation and unaware of to what exactly they had committed themselves. Steering Committees at SJSWC tended to burn out quickly and also dwindle in numbers throughout their mandate, necessitating the recruitment of new women willing to commit their time and energy. Such turnover can only have a negative effect on the organisation and all women involved. It is also important to consider how this type of unstable dynamic allows for the organisation to be controlled by factions or individuals. If there is no written record to guide women in decision-making, the most logical course of action would be to consult with those who have experience in such matters, such as founding mothers and other prominent feminists in the city. This would allow that group of people to maintain control over SJSWC without appearing to be directly involved with the organisation. This is not to suggest that this dynamic is conscious or planned in any way ... just that it is a likely happenstance.

The Steering Committee felt that they had made every attempt to deal with the issues of all of the women concerned. As mentioned above mediation and a facilitated retreat to address some of the problems among staff and between the staff and Steering Committee were unsuccessful in resolving the issues. The minutes of the 13 June 1991 Steering Committee meeting noted that, "there had been problems between staff and Steering Committee since September 1990. Attempts to resolve the problem (meeting with a facilitator and a retreat) had not achieved a satisfactory conclusion." As the tension and conflict in the workplace escalated, services offered by the Centre such as counselling and coordinating other activities began to suffer.

One of the key actions by some women was undertaken before the complaint even went to the Human Rights Commission. The staffer who had been fired contacted a “prominent feminist”⁶ who was a founding mother of the organisation to discuss her recent firing and concerns about SJSWC. This founding mother gathered a group of other prominent feminists to meet with this woman to give her the support she alleged that she had not received from the Steering Committee. The meeting was held without the knowledge of the Steering Committee. One of the prominent feminists at this meeting also had at one point been on the Human Rights Commission. Her inclusion at this meeting may have been intentional.

The ex-staffer described to the assembled women the atmosphere she found offensive at the Women’s Centre.

The way she described it was that there was a group of women who were lesbians who found that it was a good place to come during the day to hang out, to talk, to make love...whatever...she felt that a terrific conflict had arisen because the women that were there obviously resented her and her attitudes... the Board gave her no advice or help with her problems and ... she was feeling very harassed by a group that was using the Centre... at times she had to go in and lock her office door to escape and harassing notes would be pushed under the door (Participant #3: 29 August 1996).

The prominent feminists who heard this account of the “goings on” at SJSWC were appalled and they encouraged the woman to go to the Human Rights Commission.

The woman who organised this meeting with the complainant then approached a number of women involved with SJSWC to set up a committee of

⁶ I use the term prominent feminist deliberately. First, it protects the identities of women who were named by informants; Second, this term was used in media reports of the events at SJSWC and the manner in which these women made statements while refusing to be identified added to the atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion.

“twelve feminists, tried and true” who were not intimately connected with SJSWC at the time to do an inquiry into the allegations of the complainant, to find out what was” really going on” at SJSWC. Some of the women she approached for this committee challenged her motives and refused to support her in the same spirit with which she seemed to be approaching the issue.

[She] wanted to set up a parallel feminist inquiry into what was going on and I said ... this sounds really strange because she had said that what was going on was just like Mount Cashel ... I said that it must be done properly ... you can't just set up some kind of kangaroo court and say that somehow you have got justice (Participant #8: 30 August 1996).

They wanted to set up a tribunal of twelve women tried and true to look at what had gone on in the women's centre ... the women's centre steering committee wasn't going to be involved and to me that seemed like back stabbing ... and I almost came to blows over it ... she accused me of being involved in another cover up as bad as Mount Cashel ... I told [the woman] that I would give her 24 hours to tell the steering committee what she intended to do or I would tell them ... she called me back and said that she was not prepared to go to the steering committee so I called them and told them about it (Participant #9: 31 August 1996).

The Mount Cashel analogy indicates, to me, that those who chose to use this descriptor viewed lesbians as deviant, self-serving unconscionable individuals who had managed to systematically cover up their abuses of SJSWC and the other women involved with the organisation. The Mount Cashel scandal rocked Newfoundland when it was revealed in 1989 that there had been long term physical and sexual abuse of the wards of the Christian Brothers at the orphanage. A public inquiry into the abuses and the 1970's cover up engineered by government and church officials conveyed in graphic detail the horrific reality of the victims experiences. Few in Newfoundland were unaffected by the raw emotion generated by the revelations made public over a

number of years through the inquiry process as well as the trials of the abusers. The fact that the victims were boys abused by men linked the abuses with homosexuality in the minds of many. To make an allusion to these events in reference to any group could only be an effort to cause pain, create hatred and generate indignant disgust towards the perceived abusers.

These types of statements along with the covert actions of certain “prominent feminists” were the beginning of the fragmentation of the feminist community in St. John’s. It was through this that the we/they atmosphere was first created. The feminist committee of inquiry was never set up. It was suggested at one of the many meetings over the course of the conflict but none of the “prominent feminists” volunteered to participate, so the idea fizzled. Nonetheless, charges by prominent feminists emerged that a cover up was ongoing at SJSWC.

I have interpreted this whole series of events as a conspiracy on the part of these prominent feminists to find a means to rid SJSWC of its visible lesbian presence. Others involved agreed:

... I don't think there was a conspiracy on either side in terms of it being conscious or we want to overthrow. I think there was a conspiracy on the heterosexual side amongst some women to rid the women's centre of lesbians ... but I don't think they would have even defined it like that themselves ... I think ... they thought that the women's centre should be safe and welcoming for all women ... What they didn't take into account was that some of those women... might be lesbian! The whole idea that having visible lesbians in the women's centre as more frightening [than other issues] shows the level of lesbophobia (Participant #9 31 August 1996).

In one respect, they did succeed because most of the lesbians who endured this conflict are no longer involved with SJSWC. The other irony is that in all of the rumours and innuendo flying about at the time, there seemed to be no

mention in the lesbian community of the possibility of a heterosexist conspiracy beyond the evident lesbophobia of some women. There was, however a great deal of discussion among straight feminists around the idea of a lesbian conspiracy to take over SJSWC.

3.5. An Analysis of The Conflict

A wide range of factors combined to precipitate this conflict and likely influenced the course of events and behaviour of individuals in a substantial way. Even in the midst of the conflict, some women (myself included) attempted to understand why things were unfolding as they did. The behaviour of some straight feminists shook our belief that we (lesbians) were a valued, integral part of the women's movement in Newfoundland, making us realize that we were perceived as "outsiders" by straight feminists who feared that we would "take over" the movement.

Almost every woman who participated in this study mentioned that she had heard of the "lesbian conspiracy theory" at the time of the conflict. This accusation seemed to be one of the most inflammatory remarks directed at the lesbian community. One lesbian shared with me her own theory about how straight women are threatened by visible lesbians in an organisation:

I have this theory; if one lesbian is there, lesbians are there; if there are two lesbians, it is a lesbian conspiracy and; if there are three or more lesbians, they have taken over (Participant#8: 30 August 1996).

What was interesting about this whole conspiracy debate was the manner in which information got back to the lesbian community. The first time the "lesbian conspiracy' theory was raised was at a social gathering of prominent feminists. In a very short time, the story of the remarks made at this social event got back to the lesbian community. The information was relayed by some lesbians who

were part of this privileged group who, were mostly invisible as lesbians within the group. This was likely because these women had established themselves as successful and even though they were lesbian, they did not make an issue of it...they were “nice”, “quiet”, “respectable” lesbians.

Intersecting Issues: Class

This brings us to the issue of class and the role it may have played in creating and maintaining the lesbophobic attitudes that seemed to be held by a certain group of women. Newfoundland has been a very class-structured society from very early in her history beginning with the division between the merchant class and the fishers. It is my experience that Newfoundlanders have always been very conscious of their place within the structure of their society. In discussions many have claimed that there is little division in these days since confederation. However, those same positionings and class based reactions to events still hold true.⁷ The interesting point is that those who are less privileged in Newfoundland tend to be more attuned to the way in which individuals act out of their “class scripts”. Privileged feminists in Newfoundland maintain that their empathy and feminist commitment has erased any obstacles to their interaction with less privileged women ie, their classism. They often do not even see that there are ways in which some women they are acquainted with are less privileged than themselves. They hold true to the old feminist notion that we are all oppressed as women and so our experience as women is the same and other factors simply do not matter.

Class was definitely a factor in this conflict. The opposing camps were

⁷ One phenomenon of Newfoundland culture is the “come from away” (CFA); any individual who is not a Newfoundlander. CFA’s are not easily assimilated into Newfoundland society due to the insularity of most Islanders. Most CFA’s have either married into a Newfoundland family or are on the island because of their particular occupation. There were some CFA’s involved on both sides of the conflict yet their presence did not appear to be a factor.

not only divided along the lines of sexual orientation, there was a marked difference in the socioeconomic positions of most of the women in each group. This difference was quite easily discerned by simple observation of the groups, the circles in which they moved and the way in which they tended to interact. The two groups rarely came together with the exception of their involvement in SJSWC.

The women marked as “militant” lesbians could be considered working-class at the time, if they were employed. Some of them were students, and many were “transplants” to St. John’s from small communities around the island. This meant that they likely came from lower or lower middle income families, since there does not tend to be a lot of money in small Newfoundland communities. These were the women who were putting a great deal of energy into SJSWC at the time working towards providing a variety of services for women at the grassroots level. Many of the women were politically active, out lesbians who refused to back down to lesbophobia in any form. It is likely their political activity on behalf of their own rights which caused “prominent feminists” to mark them as militant.

The women who were marked by lesbians as belonging to the “phobic” camp were predominately heterosexual women who were or had been married at some point to successful men. They had established themselves in the community through their careers as politicians, writers, media persons and as active feminists throughout the history of SJSWC. There were a few lesbians who were considered part of this privileged group, perhaps by virtue of their success, or their age or the fact that they were not perceived as militant as the younger lesbians were. Few of these women recognised that they enjoyed a certain amount of privilege within Newfoundland society due to their

socioeconomic position in that society. Certainly, they did not think that any privilege they enjoyed had any impact on their role as feminists. They seemed to believe that they could set that aspect of themselves aside.

Intersecting Issues: Age

Linked with the division of class was the division of the two camps according to average age. The average age of the “militant” lesbian group was approximately 27 , while the average age of the “phobic” group was approximately 45 or 50. This age difference was keenly felt by both groups as was expressed by a number of participants in this study:

... when they saw there was something going on they thought never should have happened... I think they felt like elders... saying, come on , you are young and stupid, this is not the way it should be ... and I kind of resented that because they were not there doing the work, they did not really know what was going on. ... I felt that they should not tell us that we were being stupid or that we didn't know what we were doing or that we were immature or not as good a feminist as they were. I don't know if anyone said any of this directly but my sense was that it was implied (Participant #6: 30 August 1996).

Studies have shown that the older segment of the population tends to be less accepting of homosexuality. A recent federal government poll found that in a sample of the population, those 35 and under were 70% in favour of same sex rights and that those 55 and over were only 35% in favour of same sex rights. (Beth Lacey, Nfld. Women's Policy Office: 29 August 1996) There can be no doubt that the older women involved with SJSWC have been strongly influenced by the society in which they were raised. That society has changed significantly in terms of certain issues and we do know that it is difficult for people to change the values with which they have been raised. This by no means excuses the behaviour of these women in this situation. It is important to

understand where they have come from in order to understand why they have acted as they have.

Pauline Rankin has effectively described the social milieu which has likely contributed to the attitudes of (particularly) older feminists:

For lesbians therefore, the difficulty of making space for their issues on the agenda of Newfoundland feminism relates in part to firmly entrenched religious taboos against homosexuality that permeate the Newfoundland state and social institutions as a consequence of the continued omnipresence of the Church. Wendy Williams states that Newfoundland society offers “no celebration of sexuality in any way,” thus complicating the process of tackling matters of sexuality openly within the women’s movement (Personal Interview 16 August 1992)... The system of denominational schools and, until recently, the profound influence of the Church in the provinces political system constrained public debate over sexual orientation(1996: 261).

My own experience growing up in Newfoundland reflects this description of the overwhelming influence of Church on every aspect of life. While most Newfoundlanders may not follow the guiding principles of their particular religion chapter and verse, there is still a strong adherence to the basic moral principles. It has also been my experience that older people tend to be more rigid in adhering to religious ideology.

Intersecting Issues: Sense of Ownership

Most of this group of older women had been involved with SJSWC from its very inception. Many of them were among the women who had provided the money for the down payment on SJSWC’s permanent home at 83 Military road. There can be no doubt that fronting the money for the secure home of SJSWC would give the women involved a very strong sense of ownership. It is therefore understandable that their lesbophobic reactions might have been connected with their sense of ownership of SJSWC; protecting their investment. If this is

the case can we still suggest that these women were operating out of lesbophobic attitudes? We are all familiar with the manner in which a mother may react if her child appears to be threatened in any way. Many of us have experienced the way in which our mothers will rush in to protect us from our own stupidity (her perception) at any point in our lives. It could be that was the case when this conflict arose at SJSWC.

Many of the women who participated in this study expressed the thought that the older feminists felt an ownership of SJSWC:

There is a sense of ownership on behalf of the older women ... they have a sense that they made it ... Things have happened since then which they tend to neglect to consider and they want it to remain what they made it and a lot of people, particularly those older women, feel that they can't talk about difference so they can't appreciate the sisterhood of lesbians (Participant #5: 29 August 1996).

There seemed to be a division between the "old school", who had a real vested interest in the women's centre because they had been the founders and felt some ownership I suppose. I think there were some territorial issues there (Participant #4: 29 August 1996).

There was a group of women who had put up the money to found the centre ... those women were very proud of the centre and they had been involved with all kinds of activism ... they were extremely strong minded older women and ... I guess I also felt part of that older group and they had worked hard to set up the centre ... and I think they were very angry about what was going on (Participant #2: 28 August 1996).

Some of the lesbians involved at the time could understand the concern of the founding mothers to save the centre from any kind of disaster. What caused feelings of resentment however, was the way in which these women swooped in with the attitude that only they knew how to save the centre. Many of these older feminists had only been marginally involved with SJSWC for many

years before the crisis. They maintained their memberships and appeared occasionally at the annual general meeting or some other functions, but were rarely involved in any other way.

Intersecting Issues: Profile of SJSWC

SJSWC has, throughout its history, maintained a fairly high profile in St. John's and across the province. This is due in no small measure to the efforts of the founding mothers to establish the organisation as a force to be reckoned with. It is also due to the high profile of those founding mothers in their lives apart from SJSWC. Being women of some privilege, they would likely be concerned with maintaining the high positive profile of SJSWC.

Conversely, the lesbian community in St. John's has a fairly low profile in the public eye. We are in many ways invisible, except for the times that we are exposed by lesbian baiting or some sensational story. Much of the activism in the province around lesbian rights is led by gay men, few lesbians are involved. From time to time one or two lesbians will get involved with the male-dominated gay rights groups, but the men still hold most of the spotlight. In another respect, lesbians in St. John's have had few spaces to meet other than the (predominately male owned and frequented) bars and SJSWC. We have had no place to call our own.

The high profile of SJSWC may also be attributed in some way to the reality of social life in Newfoundland. While St. John's is indeed the capital, those who live there suggest that the social dynamic is not very different from that of a small outport. "St. John's is just another big bay". This means that people are involved in one another's lives in a manner rare in other areas of Canada. It is not uncommon for people in Newfoundland to move in rather large extended social circles. People know you by the company you keep and the

history of your family. Consequently, the founding mothers are inextricably linked with SJSWC therefore it is important to maintain a positive image of the organisation in order to maintain their own positive profile.

Theorists have suggested that one of the difficulties in dealing with oppression in feminism is precisely that need to maintain our positive image (discussed above) and the few bits of privilege we are allowed. At the same time, we feel ashamed of our privilege and that encourages us to deny that we might be privileged in any way. Older feminists do not want to jeopardise the secure place they have wrested from “the boys”. They are also usually too far into their own denial and the shame that comes with the recognition of being a privileged feminist to recognise their unconscious need to maintain their privileged position. In other words, we are so consumed with what is happening outside that we fail to see what is going on inside. This can refer not only to society at large versus feminist organisation but also to feminism versus the individual.

3.6 How the Complaint Focused Conflict

What happens on the outside often keeps us scrambling to stay on top of things so that it is all too easy for important issues to fall by the wayside. One of the factors that distracted the attention of feminists away from the problems within their own organisation was the manner in which the local media was treating the situation. Once the media learned that a Human Rights complaint had been brought against SJSWC they began to scrutinise the organisation intensely. The fact that the complaint was about wrongful dismissal seemed to be lost in the glare of the alleged lesbian sexual harassment. When SJSWC Women’s Centre closed in December of 1991, the media continued to focus on the lesbian/heterosexual conflict in spite of statements from SJSWC

spokeswomen that this was not the primary reason for closing.

This media attention could in one respect be interpreted as positive. Even though the media motives were likely a sensational story, it did make public the fact that there was a problem at SJSWC between lesbians and heterosexual feminists. It could have had the effect of getting the problem out there and making it that much harder to deny, providing a starting point for discussion. Unfortunately, the issue was never really dealt with. The strategy was to find a way to get back a good image, by stopping the talk about “the lesbian thing” and “getting our house back in order.”

The negative effect was that it all made the organisation even more vulnerable to lesbian baiting. It was likely the lesbian baiting, the possibility that all women connected with SJSWC might be perceived as lesbians, which produced the reaction of phobic feminists. There is also the obvious connection mentioned above that the taint of lesbianism made public was viewed as abhorrent by phobic feminists. Again, the notion that any lesbian connection undermines our credibility as feminists and also keeps women from joining in our mutual cause contributes to the likelihood of a lesbophobic reaction.

There is one additional contributing factor to this conflict that could easily be overlooked; that is the Human Rights investigation process. Until notification by the Human Rights Commission, SJSWC and its members were unaware that this action had been or was likely to happen. Upon notification, the Steering Committee took the very astute step of contacting a lawyer to find out the legalities of this whole process. On the advice of the lawyer, the Steering Committee decided to not make public at any meeting the particulars of the complaint. The documentation was made available to all members of SJSWC if they wished to peruse it at the Women’s Centre. Some women did not

understand the need to refrain from public discussion of the complaint and allegations. This was likely what lead some women to think that there was a cover up ongoing at SJSWC. The legal reality was that, SJSWC could not afford to allow public discussion of the matter. The membership had a right to the information but only within a particular forum and format.

While some women were feeling left out of the loop in the Human Rights complaint, many of us were becoming all too familiar with the allegations made against SJSWC and the lesbians who worked there. The Human Rights Commission undertook a preliminary investigation of the complainant's allegations in order to see if a Board of Inquiry into the matter was justified. A significant number of the lesbians who were involved with SJSWC were interviewed by the Human Rights Commission regarding the allegations, which made it seem as if the whole lesbian community was on trial. At no point was the Human Rights process explained to any of us. We had no information how this investigation or the eventual outcome might impact on our lives or on the lesbian community. From our perspective the whole process seemed rather secretive. We also questioned whether or not the Commission would pursue similar claims by a lesbian complainant with the same enthusiasm.⁸

During this time there was little or no support offered to the lesbians who were named in the complaint. Few women, other than those interviewed were even aware that women were being questioned about the complainant's allegations. The investigation process was quite slow, which meant that the lives of women named in the complaint were essentially "on hold" because of the potential career implications of a decision in favour of the complainant's

⁸ I was one of the members of the lesbian community interviewed by a representative of the Human Rights Commission. I found the process distasteful since I felt as if I was on trial for being lesbian. The lack of support or even acknowledgement from SJSWC for women who were subjected to this process was disappointing.

allegations. The determination of sufficient cause for a Board of Inquiry meant that there could be another long investigation process that would further delay the ability of women named to move on with their lives. In 1993, an undisclosed monetary settlement was made to the complainant by SJSWC rather than allowing the issue to go to the Board of Inquiry. Many of the older feminists had been advocating a cash settlement from the first meetings about the complaint. They thought of it as a means of shutting up the complainant and getting back to the way things used to be as quickly as possible.

For the lesbian community in St.John's this settlement was perceived as an admission of guilt, that women were being preyed upon by lesbians at the Women's Centre. None of the prominent feminists asked the lesbians for their side of the story. It seemed from the perspective of the lesbian community that we had already been judged guilty so the "phobes"(participant choice of term) had no need to ask. Because the media and others had focused only on the sexual harassment aspect of the complaint, there was little discussion of the wrongful dismissal charge. The complainant and the women named in the complaint were bound by the terms of the settlement to not discuss the terms or the amount of the settlement.

The Human Rights Commission refused to provide any information on the complaint, even to acknowledge that a complaint was filed against SJSWC. This is in spite of the fact that their 1993 Annual Report notes the case:

A complaint was filed with the Commission against a St.John's women's centre, by a former employee, in June 1991. The complaint alleged sexual harassment and discrimination on the basis of political opinion. The Commission investigated the complaint and ordered the appointment of a Board of Inquiry on March 25, 1993. A settlement was later reached in the matter and

the Board was cancelled (Nfld. HRC Annual Report 1993: 20).⁹

There is only one women's centre in St. John's so it could only be SJSWC that was referred to in this case. When contacted about the complaint for information regarding when the settlement was reached, the HRC staff was completely unhelpful.

3.7 Consequences

The Women's Centre did eventually reopen but the effects of the 1990-91 crisis are still being felt. Few lesbians are involved with the Centre. There has been yet another collapse of the Steering Committee (which current members refused to comment on), leaving the staff at the Centre trying to cope. A flood in the basement has destroyed years worth of important documentation.

Coincidentally, this flood occurred during a debate at SJSWC around placing this documentation in the archives of Memorial University. There was quite an intense debate that brought forward fears of access to the information and what someone might do with the information once they had accessed it at the archives. The end result of the debate was that only a file box of newspaper clippings was sent to the archives. A short time later the basement holding all of SJSWC's historical documentation was flooded.

Lesbians in St. John's have begun to organise on their own, without connections to other feminist organisations in the city. During the 1990-91 crisis at SJSWC, lesbians recognised that our needs and issues were not going to be addressed by our feminist sisters. We started organising as a response to the attack we felt on our community, to create a support network for ourselves and for other lesbians in the city. Out of this arose the Newfoundland Amazon

⁹ There is no mention in the HRC case note that the initial claim was for wrongful dismissal as well as the other allegations. The focus is maintained on the sexual harassment... [by lesbians]. Interestingly, this is the angle that the media and others also chose to focus on. This aided in demonising the lesbian community and likely inflamed the conflict.

Network (NAN). Just as lesbians in Toronto in the 1970's realised that they would best be served by looking after their own interests, a core group of lesbians in St. John's has started organising in the 1990's. For now, the organisation is not much more than a phone line where lesbians can find out about any current events or places to contact other lesbians. The women who are involved with NAN hope that the organisation will evolve to a resource reading room and possibly a coffee house. There is no notion that this organisation can be all things to all lesbians because the women who have initiated it have lived through that fantasy and seen the damage it can cause. Rather, the hope is that this can be a place where lesbians can gather the vital information they need and perhaps make some human contact to alleviate the feeling of isolation in a homo/lesbophobic society.

3.8 Some Theoretical Conclusions

What can be said after reviewing the events of the 1990-91 crisis at SJSWC? I believe that the actions and the vehement hatred directed against the lesbian community by some of their sister feminists is not so different from the same behaviours exhibited by lesbophobic feminists in the 1970's. What is it that has allowed this crisis to happen after twenty years of feminist organising, theorising and experience? Feminist organising in St. John's has just as long a history as feminism in the rest of Canada. The women who pioneered feminism in St. John's certainly could not be described as unintelligent or as unaware individuals. Many of them are likely aware of the history of conflict and the theory behind feminist organising and interaction. Yet, it seems that they have been unable or unwilling to really learn from the experiences of other feminists in this type of conflict. Perhaps it is not an unwillingness to learn but rather that these women are more moulded by the society in which they live than they are

willing to admit. In addition, the organizational structure and a reliance on government funding meant that conflicts were avoided and therefore remained unresolved.

Lesbophobia does not operate in a vacuum. A variety of factors combined to create the atmosphere that was ripe for lesbophobia to be expressed. This same atmosphere allows the women who are acting out of their own lesbophobia to be able to deny that this is so. In the case of SJSWC, the factors of age, class, ownership, and organizational structure combined to create an explosive mix that was sparked by the actions of a few.

The Human Rights Complaint certainly was one of the initiating factors but that was still just a symptom of a much bigger problem that the organisation was failing to deal with. The actions and statements made by some “prominent feminists” who refused to take responsibility for their behaviour certainly was a key factor in creating the emphatic split in the community. Older lesbians who counted “prominent feminists” as their long time friends found themselves marginalized by the women they had known for so long.

I think that some of the women, ... if they could have just stopped for a minute... if they could have just stopped demonising and stopped being so suspicious and stopped being so homophobic. I felt so incredibly hurt by this process, I had never been treated like that before... in such a way that my whole personhood was taken away or denied by women that I cared for and respected
(Participant #8: 30 August 1996).

What is it about the word lesbian that can allow any women who call themselves feminist to treat other women in such a dehumanising way? Further, how can those feminists continue to deny that they are acting out of lesbophobia and fail to see the pain that they are causing women they once called friend?

It was not only internal factors such as heteropatriarchal socialisation and denial that caused lesbophobia to generate this conflict to the point of splitting the community. External factors such as the attention to and sensationalism about the conflict by the media simply added more pressure for all concerned to quickly make everything “normal” once again. Part of the problem was that we all had very different ideas of what “normal” meant. Some of us thought it meant things should stay the same as they always had been while others felt that it was time for evolution and change. The next most significant external factor was the Human Rights investigation process which trapped all concerned in the silencing aspect of legal implications and privacy rights. Both groups of women share the responsibility for the failure to communicate and the breakdown of the community.

SJSWC is still dramatically influenced by this crisis. The rift in the community has not healed with the passage of time because the crisis was never truly resolved. The conflict erupted, angry words were exchanged and an organisation fell apart as women went their own ways in an attempt to heal the hurts that had just been inflicted. There has been no opportunity for healing in spite of an organisational review and a needs study completed by the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women. SJSWC operates as a shadow of its former self lacking the profile and effectiveness that it once enjoyed. This time our failure to see how we have maintained the oppressive structures of heteropatriarchal society through the mechanisms that cause us to deny difference, avoid conflict, and abuse power within feminist organizations has had disastrous consequences.

Chapter Four

Recovery Is Not a Single Issue

4.1 Introduction

The range of feminist activity is limited only by our imaginations and our ability to perceive the needs of women within heteropatriarchal society. Many feminist organisations have sprung up out of the recognition that women in a particular community require specific services to meet their needs. We have seen that in St. John's Newfoundland, one organisation evolved to address a number of needs and issues of women in that community. We have also seen that particular community torn apart by internal conflict and the virtual destruction of the organisation that had accomplished so much. Not all feminist organisations however have felt the destructive impact of virulent lesbophobia. Some organisations have managed successfully to address lesbophobia within the organisation as well as creating a comfortable, safe atmosphere for lesbians who are involved with the organisation at different levels. In this chapter, I explore an organization of this type.

Now I turn my attention to a very different feminist organisation in Ottawa, Ontario, Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre which is an alternative treatment centre for women with substance abuse problems. I became involved with Amethyst in 1993 continuing until the present time. My experience as a lesbian with this organisation was starkly different from my experiences with other feminist organisations. I found that other organisations could "talk the talk" but failed to match their words with action. At Amethyst, I found a group of women who ran an organisation that backed up feminist philosophy with effective practice. This led me to question why other feminist organisations had failed to effectively address lesbian issues and how this organisation had managed to

succeed.

4.2 Overview

Here's to You Sister (1995) was produced by a committee of women who have been involved with Amethyst in a variety of capacities along with a group of outside consultants. This book chronicles, in a clear, concise fashion, the history of Amethyst from before the doors opened to the present. The introduction states:

This book is about change, and resistance to change. About caution and courage. It is the story of many committed women trying to find their way in a larger culture in which women-only, feminist -inspired services were and continue to be suspect and marginalized. It is the story of women helping women with wonderful success, and it is also the story of organisational conflicts, failures and resolutions (Amethyst 1995: iv).

Right from the start, the authors acknowledge that the process of organising has not been easy or conflict free. They also acknowledge that the organisation has gone through some change over the years but still has managed to maintain the commitment to providing services based on feminist principles which guide the evolution approach and structure. Three main themes are addressed in this work: the combination of the knowledge of the addictions process with a feminist awareness of women's needs; the impact of funding on the development of an organisation; and the internal structural issues.

Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre was founded in 1979 to provide an alternative addictions service to women in Ottawa-Carleton. The program at Amethyst is not based upon the well known twelve-step model. It is based upon feminist principles that recognise important links between a variety of issues in women's lives and their substance abuse. The program consists of a pretreatment phase of individual and group counselling, a ten day intensive

component and finally a two-year follow-up consisting of group work and individual counselling. At the moment, the services of Amethyst are offered to women free of charge and it is hoped that this will continue to be the case in spite of government cuts to health funding. (More about funding later)

4.3 Origins

In 1975, during International Women's Year, the Ottawa Task Group on Women and Chemical Dependency was formed to look into the needs of women with addictions. This arose from an awareness that services for women at that time were virtually non-existent. Studies had shown that conventional programs such as the twelve-step based Alcoholics Anonymous and medical models of treatment were not meeting the needs of the few women brave enough to seek help for their addiction (Amethyst 1995: 3). Following four years of hard work by committed individuals, Amethyst opened its doors in February of 1979, breaking new ground in a number of ways:

The new centre broke new ground on several fronts: it was a women-only service, it rejected the conventional medical model of treatment, it was committed to developing programs that would reach women in the community who might not otherwise come to the centre, and it was committed to educating service providers and the community at large about the issues surrounding women with addictions (Amethyst 1995: 4).

Through the commitment to education on issues surrounding women with addictions Amethyst is fulfilling what I perceive to be the highest purpose of feminism. We must be focused upon educating ourselves, each other, and society at large if we are to create lasting social change. Most feminist organisations recognise education as some aspect of their mandate regardless of the issues they might primarily address.

It is important to note that the timing of the founding of Amethyst has likely

played a significant role in the way the organisation has developed. The mid to late 1970's was a time when there was more openness towards the funding of women's organisations and services. It is also important to note that this organisation is situated within a prosperous government town in one of the more affluent provinces in Canada. The reality that Amethyst would be primarily a health service for women won the support of feminist bureaucrats inside National Health and Welfare (Amethyst 1995: 53). This enabled the organisation successfully to acquire initial funding and begin the project of developing the service. *Here's to You Sister* describes the generous initial funding as a "double edged sword" since the full funding meant that Amethyst was not a grass-roots agency in the community (Amethyst 1995: 53). The organisation has since evolved to be a grassroots agency because of the manner in which it has been supported by the community and the way in which the needs of the community influence the organization. They do not appear to have been held hostage by the institutions which provide the much needed funding.

This is not to say that certain decisions in this organisation were not influenced by the consequences of mainstream perspectives. Choices of words, particularly in documents were very important in order to establish credibility in the community and to attract clients. "While the original founders were very committed to a women's perspective, and spoke of the organization as feminist, official documents avoided being explicitly feminist in order not to jeopardise funding or alienate potential clients" (Amethyst 1995: 12). This is a step that some feminist organisations have had to take in a social milieu that requires government funding in order for feminist organisations to survive. There is often little public or private financial support for feminist organizations since women

usually don't have the extra income to donate and business is rarely interested if they cannot profit from their investment. Other organisations may not have had to be subtle about their feminism but they did have to be careful of the type of feminism they espoused.

Some might interpret this as a failure to maintain a commitment to feminist principles. After all, if you let the mainstream control your choice of words does that not leave you open to other manipulation? In some respects this may be true. Indeed, because of its somewhat confusing messages about its feminism over the years, Amethyst has faced some tensions within the organisation. Nonetheless, it has managed to hold true to three basic principles over the years which maintain its feminist commitment, although these principles have been differently expressed through the years, reflecting both changes in the women's movement and at Amethyst. These principles are:

- The program focuses on the social and economic context of women's lives. The fact that women live with sexism every day is considered relevant to understanding and healing their addiction. Abuse of alcohol or drugs, rather than being seen as an individual pathology, is seen as one more way of coping with the pressures of being female in a male-dominated society.
- The program provides a place of safety for women, and is staffed exclusively by women.
- The organisation tries to identify and eliminate the barriers that prevent women from participating in the program (Amethyst 1995: 7).

While these principles are specific to this organization I believe that the underlying themes which recognise the importance of realising that many issues in women's lives are interconnected, the importance of safety for women, and the elimination of barriers, should be adapted for use in other feminist organizations. Some of the organizations with which I have been involved have tried to operate out of similar principles which arise from a feminist analysis of

women's oppression.

4.4 More on Structure and Funding

Discussion over just how feminist Amethyst was continued through the whole of the organisation's development. Board members who have been involved with other organisations describe how, when it began, Amethyst was perceived as a more "respectable" type of feminist organisation by other feminist organisations that were considered more "radical". Former board members remember intense debates in the 1980's over whether or not to use the f-word (feminism) in the organisation's mission statement (Amethyst 1995: 11). The organisation has evolved since that time to articulate better the commitment to feminist principles.

The funding structure for Amethyst is another aspect of the organisation that has changed significantly over the years. When Amethyst first opened its doors in 1979, the initial three year grant was tied to the research component of the program and so a great deal of energy was devoted to proving that this type of service was both viable and necessary (Amethyst 1995: 53). Unfortunately, this financial security and the amount of energy directed to the research brought the organisation to a crisis at the end of the grant. Little consideration had gone into funding strategies to be implemented when the grant ran out. A fund-raising Committee was established to address this pressing need. Strategies like seeking support from business and influential community members ensured the organisation's survival until 1987 when permanent funding by the Community Services Division of the Ontario Ministry of Health was secured (Amethyst 1995: 52).

This permanent funding has meant that since 1987, Amethyst has enjoyed financial security unlike many other feminist organisations. The Friends

of Amethyst Foundation was established in 1981 to handle monies raised through various fund-raising efforts (Amethyst 1995: 54). Fund-raising continues in order to ensure that the organisation has a secure safety net in case of changes to funding arrangements or unexpected expenses.

The Friends of Amethyst Foundation launched a Capital Campaign in 1985 to purchase a home for Amethyst. In 1988 the current facility was purchased thanks to the successful effort to raise \$200,000 (Amethyst 1995: 54). The acquisition of a permanent base of operations is often a key factor in the long term viability of many feminist organisations. Having a secure “home” also creates a positive effect in terms of the effectiveness of the organisation in achieving their goals. Since permanent funding was provided by the province a significantly smaller portion of the annual budget is supported by fund raising (Amethyst 1995: 55). Amethyst has also developed a list of criteria for funding partners to ensure that there is no conflict between sponsor’s agenda’s and those of Amethyst.

4.5 Conflicts at Amethyst

Conflict is often a sign of an organisation that is growing and evolving. It may also be a sign of an organisation that has some serious issues that require addressing. If the conflict is worked through honestly and relevant issues are dealt with, conflict can be a catalyst for growth. I have illustrated how conflict, when not addressed and thoroughly resolved can negatively impact an organisation. Questions of accountability and power as well as how most efficiently to accomplish our goals arise for any organisation. This is the balancing act that many feminist organisations have failed to resolve, unable to strike the balance needed to create and maintain strong, effective feminist organisations. Success is often hindered by the requirements of outside funding

agencies and our awareness of the watchful eye of the mainstream. Our need to remain true to feminist principles which require that we deny the structures prescribed by heteropatriarchal society causes us to create organizational structures which are inadequate in addressing conflict and power within feminist organizations.

The most intense conflicts at Amethyst have centred around the structural form of the organisation.

“Running the ship” according to feminist principles has proven much more difficult than running a feminist addictions program. Over the years, Amethyst has functioned as a participatory hierarchy, a staff collective, a more traditional management structure, and currently as a modified staff collective (with a board of directors). Questions of accountability and power remain central to Amethyst’s struggles (Amethyst 1995: 60).

Perceptions of the most effective “feminist” structure differed as much as how women felt that Amethyst’s practice of feminism should be articulated. From about 1989 to 1992 the tensions that had been escalating over contrasting views regarding the best organisational structure for Amethyst became quite obvious. “As time went on, they manifested themselves most clearly as a division between staff and executive director/board” (Amethyst 1995: 64). It is ironic that these tensions manifested themselves after the organisation had managed to successfully acquire permanent funding and a permanent home. Having some security may allow issues to surface as the attention of the individual or organisation is no longer diverted by more pressing concerns.

The conflict was centred around the structural form of the organisation. From about 1987 the organisation had become more hierarchal, moving away from the collective type structure that had been in effect at the beginning. Staff expressed their anger about being left out of decision-making because of what

they perceived as an hierarchal structure. They felt that it was contradictory for the program at Amethyst to teach women to take charge of their lives and to respect their own judgment when the board of the organisation was not respecting the judgment of staff nor allowing them a voice in decisions that could impact on their daily work practice.

Following a great deal of conflict, legal action, and division between staff and board which was exacerbated by mutual mistrust and paranoia, the staff unionised, in 1991.¹ While this did not resolve the tensions ongoing at Amethyst it did unify the staff.

This entire phase in Amethyst's history was rife with conflict, between board and staff, and between staff themselves. It was taking an enormous toll, and resulted in the resignations of two executive directors, several board members and some staff....There were no "winners" in the conflict... Virginia Carver comments, ... I think all of us who have been involved with Amethyst over the years as board, staff, or directors has had some responsibility for what has happened and for the way we treated each other (Amethyst 1995: 73).

Since that time Amethyst has continued to evolve creating a more healthy environment for the women who work at the agency as well as the clients. This has come about as a result of community involvement from members of Amethyst who did not want to see the organisation destroyed.

In June of 1992 a new board was elected with a common goal to "get on with the business of healing the rifts and the hurt that had festered over the years" (Amethyst 1995: 75). A new structure was invented that combined the elements of both collective and a board/staff setup with a unionised staff. The structure is still evolving but appears to be working quite effectively. Both Board members and staff have stated that they are quite happy with the current

¹ The staff at NAC also unionised finding this "patriarchal" structure quite useful in a feminist context.

structure of Amethyst. The organization has been successful in meeting the needs of clients as well as developing new programs such as the sexual abuse survivors group. Some women have doubts that this structure is viable for the long term but the commitment to “making it work” for all concerned is still strong (Amethyst 1995: 83).

4.6 How Context & Structure Affected Conflict-Resolution

The herstory of Amethyst makes clear that the organisation has had its share of conflict over a variety of issues. In spite of this, the organisation continues to be a viable, energetic agency that every day helps women build healthier lives. Unlike many earlier feminist organisations, Amethyst has had a lesbian-positive philosophy for much of its existence. The lesbian-positive philosophy is not relegated to mere lip service here. In 1992 the agency began offering a separate counselling group for lesbians. This, as well as the addressing of issues of sexuality in the ten-day intensive program and the normalising of lesbian experience are the concrete expressions of Amethyst’s lesbian-positive philosophy.

In an effort to understand how this organisation has evolved to such a point to create a safe, supportive environment for lesbians whether they are clients, board or staff, I undertook a case study of the agency. I asked eight women to recount for me their personal histories of involvement with the organisation. I have also included some of my own observations from my experience of the organisation. Board members and past staff were asked to volunteer for this project. I was fortunate to have three women volunteer that I would have chosen to participate because of their particular circumstances. I asked particular staff to participate because of their lengthy involvement with the organisation or because of their sexual orientation since I wanted to have as

close to equal representation of lesbians and heterosexual women. The histories provided by these women complemented the account provided in *Here's to You Sister*.

The women ranged in age from 38 to 64 years of age. The majority have been involved with Amethyst for a considerable length of time, only two of the women have been involved fewer than five years. This is an important factor since those who have lived through the history can provide a valuable insight from having evolved with the organisation. The women are or have been counsellors or board members. Some of them are also graduates of the Amethyst program.² It is my hope that telling their stories will provide an understanding of the mechanisms that allow lesbophobia to be successfully addressed in this organisation.

According to women who have been involved with Amethyst from its very beginning, the lesbian-positive philosophy and practice has always been assumed. It may not have been always directly addressed in discussions or as part of the educational aspect of the program but there has always been a (sometimes unspoken) assumption that lesbians were welcome.

In 1980 you did not hear the word homophobia or the word lesbian except in terms of being derogatory. When I went in the program, the third or fourth day, one of the counsellors came to the group and said that there was a lesbian who wanted to join the group and would we mind...we looked at one another and said that we have the common problem of substance abuse so that would be all right... but she never did come to the group. That was the only experience that I had as a client...that was the only time I can remember that they spoke about lesbians then. Then all of a sudden we became aware (Subject # 4: 01 October 1996).

I have been with Amethyst since 1983... I have never thought of it as how we have dealt with lesbianism... for me it has always been

² I have been involved with Amethyst as a client for the past 2.5 years and plan to later volunteer with the agency in outreach and perhaps as a Board member. I am currently a member of Amethyst and have an interest in the welfare of the organization.

part of Amethyst and it hasn't been dealt with or not dealt with, it has just been ...I have always known that until we got the lesbian group going we did lack that (particular service) but I never thought of it as an issue that had to be dealt with (Subject #7: 01 October 1996).

I started here in 1982... I think it was a real slow evolution of the need for consideration of lesbian issues... early on it was not being talked about, it certainly was not asked about on intake... I think that in any of my recollections there is still the sense that as it evolved there was always an acceptance of it.... it was very informal ... kind of an awakening. There were discussions about providing services for lesbians... it was a recognition and an answer to the awareness (Subject # 6: 03 October 1996).

A number of factors have combined to allow this awareness to evolve into a concrete response to lesbian needs at the agency rather than becoming a point of conflict. Some significant factors were linked with the founding of the organisation. These are; the timing of the founding, the social situation and geographical location of the organisation in Ottawa and, the proposed focus and role for this new organisation. There could not have been a better time to propose the founding of a women's addiction service than International Women's Year. Women's programs were definitely part of the government and social agenda of the time. In spite of the skepticism of some in the addictions field that a women's agency could be effective, the founders of Amethyst were able to secure the support and money required. Perhaps the fact that the organisation began as an experiment, with an agenda to prove to the malestream that the idea was viable, created a rather unique energy which linked with the commitment of these women to provide addictions services for women and brought about the success that Amethyst has since enjoyed.

It must also be recognised that the location of Amethyst in Ottawa, played a significant role in the success of this organisation. Being in Ontario meant

access to the prosperity of one of the more affluent provinces in Canada. Ontario is where many people from less prosperous provinces often migrate in search of better opportunities. Ottawa, being the capital enjoyed a prosperity unlike many cities in the country. Also, the spotlight is on Ottawa as capital so there is often some pressure for government, both federal and provincial, to put its best face forward.³ Ottawa claims to be a centre of culture and education so there is likely a more open mind to exploring new ideas.

The reality of the big city allows for greater anonymity for individuals and groups thereby reducing the focus of media on any one group or individual. This certainly lessens outside pressure on an organisation in case of conflict. The media are less likely to get involved because there are so many other stories to focus on, particularly with the seat of federal government in this city. Further, because of the sheer scope of difference in the city, there tends to be more of an open mind set towards difference. Some would describe this as a result of the higher educational level found in larger centres, that these centres are more “evolved” than smaller centres.

The fact that lesbian and gay rights groups have had a long term visible history in this city must also be considered as an influence on this organisation. This is related to having the critical mass of out lesbians that allows for effective organising. Gays of Ottawa (GO) was founded in Ottawa in 1971 to provide community services and organise political action.

GO played an active role in a growing national movement and hosted the First Interprovincial Conference of Gay Groups... in 1973... and a federal election strategy was established. ... In 1976, Marie Robertson and Rose Stanton founded Lesbians of Ottawa Now (LOON) the city's first lesbian organisation ... Two GO members were given permission to lay a pink triangle wreath

³ There is less dependency on federal money within an affluent province so organizations may not be as severely impacted by federal cutbacks (as is the case in Newfoundland) as funding may be secured from other sources.

during Canada's official 1975 Remembrance Day ceremony. ... April of 1976 saw another victory: Ottawa city council voted to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation from its employment practices. (Capital Extra History Supplement, 28 June 1996)

Further support for lesbians was made evident when the Ontario *Provincial Human Rights Code* was amended in 1986 to prohibit discrimination against lesbians. There can be no doubt that all of this activity had an effect on the awareness of people in this city on lesbian issues as well as affecting the response of feminist organizations to gay bashing. Here in Ottawa, the experience and issues of lesbian existence were not being silenced or made invisible. Silence and invisibility are our greatest enemies.

Amethyst was founded with a very specific research and service focus; to provide addictions healing for women. Some other feminist organisations have been founded with a much less specific focus, hoping to answer a variety of needs for women in a particular community. I believe that this single-minded focus has had much to do with the success of Amethyst. With a clearly outlined objective, there can be no doubt of what the organisation is about. Thus there is less possibility that the organisation can be distracted by other issues arising in the community. There is also less likelihood that the staff providing services will suffer from the burnout that comes from trying to be all things for all women or trying to answer every need that arises.

Burnout has been a problem for many feminist organisations. The stress of trying to run organisations that often have inadequate funding combined with the usual feminist obsession of trying to right every wrong has injured many well intentioned women. That stress may exacerbate conflict over differences within an organisation to the point of explosion. Amethyst has had some conflict escalate to the point that women involved have felt burnt-out from the the

particular circumstances of the time yet this has not had a significant effect on the agency's capacity to offer services.

The focus on health-care issues for women has to be in itself, a factor in the way Amethyst has evolved. As stated above, the underlying philosophy of Amethyst has been to provide an alternative to the medical model of addictions treatment. Part of this alternative approach is a recognition that many issues in women's lives are connected with their addiction. The holistic approach to women's addictions requires that the various issues in any woman's life be considered as connected to her addiction. Therefore, it is not much of a leap to consider a woman's lesbianism as a factor in her life and to recognise the importance of supporting her in that aspect of her life.

Beyond the health care philosophy, the underlying feminist philosophy of Amethyst has also contributed to the health of this organisation. There has also been a clear recognition of the importance that there be no "feminist line" for women to measure up to at any level . *We are all very politically diverse here, even to this day ... there are radicals and there are some not so radical. It creates some exasperation but we have really recognised our differences* (Subject # 8: 02 October 1996). As Vickers et al (1993) have suggested, this is very different from most radical/cultural feminist organizations where if you don't agree with the "party line" you are "bad", not feminist, and your choice is usually to agree or leave. The board and staff realised early on that to set up a strict ideological agenda could have a negative impact on the service. Each woman's health was to come first above all other issues and a feminist "party line" could very easily distract the organisation from its primary goal of providing effective addictions treatment for women. Amethyst's feminist philosophy is expressed by action rather than elaborately stated rhetoric which might alienate some

women. In realising the importance of each woman's life issues in relation to her health as a whole person, Amethyst truly had made the personal political.

Amethyst has differed from many feminist organisations in the way the organisational structure has evolved and changed quite drastically over the years. Change is viewed by experts such as Adamson et al (1988: 243), as not only healthy but necessary for growth on both the individual and organisational level. Feminists have challenged many heteropatriarchal institutions because of their strong resistance to change and growth. As feminists we seem to be able to see the error in maintaining a structure for the sake of tradition, because that is the way it has always been done in the mainstream. However, we are often unable to see that it is necessary for our own organisations to grow and change often through conflict according to the needs of the community. We can be just as stubborn as some mainstream organisations in our staunch adherence to tradition.

Amethyst's structure has had built in from the beginning, a mechanism for accountability to the community. This mechanism has taken the form of reports to the community as well as an ongoing evaluation of the organisation from a variety of perspectives (board, staff, clients). Another strong point is the way the structure has been very clearly defined with unambiguous boundaries. Therefore the likelihood of falling into the trap of structurelessness which might allow informal networks to prevail has been minimised. The evolution of the structure has been a catalyst for conflict when Amethyst went through a more hierarchal stage, but I believe that the clarity of structure has been more beneficial for the organisation than not. I have earlier illustrated the way a lack of clarity of structure can affect an organisation in a very negative manner.

The conflict over structure from 1989-92 brought about a number of

significant changes for Amethyst. Some of the concrete changes in structure were the unionisation of staff and the elimination of the executive director position. These changes had the effect of eliminating the hierarchal structure among staff, thereby creating a more egalitarian work environment. The relationship between staff and board has been harmonised as staff now have a voice in terms of decision-making through board/staff consultation. Staff also have a voice in nominating women to the board. Women are invited to join the board if they share the commitment to inclusiveness and of maintaining this service for women.

One striking feature of this organisation is its "professionalism"; for example, the staff and other members of Amethyst have very limited interaction outside of the workplace.

I think it is that we are not in each other's pockets all the time ... we work from Monday to Friday ... none of us tend to mix with other staff ... we have our own lives ... certainly when I first started here there was this feeling that we should all be going out together and doing things together ... I think that could be one part of it ... that we didn't feed on each other (Subject # 8: 02 October 1996).

I have been involved with some feminist organisations where this "being in each other's pockets" is expected (especially of staff) and it has led to some serious problems. It is difficult for most individuals to compartmentalise different aspects of their lives. If we work and socialise together it is almost impossible for the stresses or conflicts that occur in one setting to have no impact on our interaction in the other setting. It is also important for individuals to have some kind of space within most of our relationships or personal interactions. This space allows for a cooling off period when conflict arises. If we cannot make this space then conflict tends to escalate to an exploding point.

I believe that the approach to conflict at Amethyst is a factor in the way

the organisation has successfully managed to come through some fairly intense conflict over organizational structure. The staff spend many hours educating women about building a healthy lifestyle as part of dealing with addictions. Part of this education involves discussion of how we can fall into the trap of denial and the effect that denial may have on our interactions with others as well as ourselves. I believe that this discussion about the negative implications of denial has to impact on the staff individually as well as on the interactions of women involved with the organisation. This is not to say that these women are super-human super-feminists or that they have never fallen into the trap of denial.

I am not sure but it certainly could be because of our training in addictions perhaps makes us more aware of denial and the dangers. When things were at the worst here it certainly was a very sick organisation in terms of denial ... when women tried to point that out they were told to shut up, they were trouble makers (Subject # 8: 02 October 1996).

Other organisations have experienced catastrophic conflict when one group of women have confronted another about their denial around any given issue. Clearly Amethyst survived this crisis point.

The decision to provide a separate support group for lesbian clients is the most concrete expression of the lesbian-positive philosophy at Amethyst. The lesbian group was started as a result of the work of a student doing a placement at the agency and one of the long term counsellors. At the time the group started there were also many lesbians in the program. One lesbian who has been involved with Amethyst saw the input of one heterosexual woman as key to the issue being addressed.

My perception is that someone walked in and made a very political statement about the needs of lesbians... there were some other women who were quite outspoken about the issue... one

heterosexual woman in particular spoke up and challenged the ignorance about lesbianism and that carries a lot of weight because it is not coming from a lesbian.... if it comes from a heterosexual woman it makes a difference because it really makes people think sometimes. At least it was being openly discussed ... It got heated at times and it was highly emotionally charged but it touched everybody in the group (Subject # 2: 30 September 1996).

This exemplifies how self-criticism is easier to deal with than "other" criticism. I would argue that feminists are more open to criticism from those they perceive to be more like them (heterosexual) than from those they view as different (lesbians). Other staffers described an atmosphere of excitement when the lesbian group began, a sense that finally the agency was concretely addressing some of the needs of lesbians.

I remember when we started the lesbian group we were very excited about it... when we started it, I thought it was an exciting process and I was delighted to be part of it. We have had lesbians in our program who are very open about themselves and their experience and women who are in the closet and so I know that we have not met all lesbians needs here ... we couldn't have. I think we did give it the best shot we could (Subject#7: 01 October 1996).

Amethyst recognises that it cannot meet the needs of all women, but it also has made attempts to open the program to First Nations women as well as women of colour. They realised however that they cannot offer what First Nations women need to heal in their traditional ways so Amethyst remains predominately a white organisation although they have had success in reaching out to a wider range of clients.

When the organisation was founded the women involved were mostly white professional women who had an interest in addictions and feminism. For a number of years after the founding, the clientele continued to be mostly

middle-class white women. Over the years, Amethyst has succeeded in reaching out to the broader community so that the clientele now represents more of a cross section of women in the city. One of the likely factors that has brought about this change in clientele is that in the years before permanent funding was secured, the agency had to charge user fees for the service. This economic reality made this service unavailable to women who had little or no income. Since permanent funding was implemented the service operates free of charge to clients. Now, while the groups are still mostly white, there is a significant amount of difference in terms of age, socioeconomic status, experience and sexual orientation.

The commitment to a lesbian-positive atmosphere at Amethyst has created a safe supportive atmosphere for lesbians. Women are informed at intake that the organisation is lesbian-positive, that every woman's experience is respected and supported. During the ten day intensive program a discussion of sexuality is included and lesbianism is presented as a healthy expression of sexuality. Homophobic reactions are dealt with by the counsellors reaffirming that Amethyst is lesbian-positive and by trying to understand what is behind the reaction. In group sessions during follow up the inclusive term partner followed by "he or she" is used as a means to normalise the idea of alternative expressions of sexuality. Posters on the bulletin board and announcements that the lesbian group is available for women who wish to attend prevent lesbian existence from becoming invisible. Some lesbians even feel secure enough to attend the main group and share their experience as a lesbian with whoever else is attending that group.

Amethyst is committed to being inclusive in every way possible and to creating a safe supportive environment for the women who have need of the

service. Lesbianism is not the only issue the organisation has grappled with. Through client feedback and staff input, the organisation has changed over the years to meet the needs of the women in the program. Issues such as sexual abuse, learning healthier life skills, a children's program and a family program are among the needs voiced by clients that the agency has addressed through some action. This type of growth and change is what makes this organisation viable and strong.

Support of lesbians is not only directed at clients although those are the women of primary concern to staff. There have been a number of lesbian staffers at Amethyst who, for the most part, had a very positive experience working at this organisation. One lesbian staffer described a situation where she experienced lesbophobia from an outside group that had asked Amethyst to conduct a workshop on barriers to lesbians in recovery. This woman was astounded to encounter lesbophobic reactions to her presentation and further to find that there was no support for her from that group following the presentation. She returned to share her anger and pain in a staff meeting. Her colleagues were as angry as she was about the experience and immediately asked what they could do to support her through this. The result was that the staff composed a letter to the outside organisation expressing their outrage at what had occurred and suggesting that steps be taken to address this issue (Subject # 5: 03 October 1996).

From my perspective, this is another example of how Amethyst takes its support of lesbians seriously and is willing to take action on behalf of lesbians involved with Amethyst. The protection of lesbians in the *Ontario Human Rights Code* combined with the strong lesbian activist presence in Ottawa have likely influenced feminist organizations in their response to lesbian issues. It is

often the case elsewhere that feminist organisations will support lesbians internally, allowing lesbian groups or private discussion of lesbian issues. Few organisations will take a public stand on lesbianism or further support their stand with concrete action on behalf of lesbians. From the perspective of a lesbian, the failure of some feminist organisation publicly to support lesbians and lesbian issues conveys a clear message to lesbians within that organisation, that is; there is still much fear and shame connected with lesbianism. For organisations to react or fail to react as a result of this fear indicates that lesbian experience is not judged valid if not also judged deviant.

Not Without Struggle

While the organisation has for the most part been very supportive of lesbians involved with Amethyst, there have been some difficulties on the personal level. From a lesbian perspective there are differences in the comfort level of various staff members in relating to lesbians. To their credit, this has never interfered with their ability to create a supportive atmosphere for clients. However, some lesbians involved with Amethyst have expressed their observation that there is some personal or internalised lesbophobia among women at Amethyst. As Essed (1991) has suggested, racism (or lesbophobia) is always there but what is critical is what we do and say.

Each individual in the agency came in knowing that it was a lesbian positive agency and that there was a commitment to that... each individual had varying degrees of comfort with that .. what I ran into was internalised lesbophobia ...this did not interfere in the agency's commitment to lesbians at all. ... because the women there were very sincere in their commitment ... I think that the only time it sort of got tripped over was when it was more personal ... In terms of the commitment to lesbians ... it was more than that it was true support of lesbians (Subject # 2, Amethyst).

We may all be victims of our own internalised lesbophobia whether we are

lesbian or not. We cannot escape the reality of living in a lesbophobic society. What is striking about this organisation is that regardless of individuals varying degrees of comfort or internalised lesbophobia they have managed to establish and maintain a service that truly includes and supports lesbians. This success is due to a number of factors that will be further explored below.

4.7 Why Amethyst Succeeds In Dealing with Conflict

The final question I put to the participants in this study was what they thought other organisations might learn from Amethyst. Some of the women felt that they could not answer this question. They did not see that Amethyst had accomplished anything extraordinary. Others stated that the determination to not give up and to continue to dialogue in spite of pain was key to getting through conflict. One woman summed it up quite eloquently:

I think what they can learn is never give up .. we don't have any magic formula here ... I think what they can learn is to never give up the belief in women in the power within women ... the power that we as women have ... the magic that is created with women
(Subject # 7: 01 October 1996).

Others suggested that the key was to look to our history, that the written history of Amethyst can act as an example of how conflict may be managed effectively though not always easily (Subject # 1: 25 September 1996, Subject #6; 03 October 1996).

Understanding how Amethyst has created a supportive atmosphere for lesbians is no easy task. It would seem at first glance to be a combination of unique personalities and circumstances. Perhaps the key is the direct confrontation of conflict. This organisation has not shied away from conflict; in fact, the staff and board has quite a history of confronting issues. The fact that Amethyst has not only directly confronted conflict but also acknowledges the

conflict in its herstory has allowed the organization to grow through conflict. Maintaining a connection with herstory ensures that the lessons learned in the past are not forgotten thereby saving the organization from repeating cycles of conflict. This is in stark contrast to some other feminist organizations who both fear and avoid conflict with the result that issues are not resolved and the organizations becoming trapped in a cycle of internal struggle and pain.

The women at Amethyst take a very matter of fact attitude to what some may perceive as a significant accomplishment. Some wonder why other organisations have not managed to “get on with it.” *After all, it is 1996, we have all had an awful lot of time and it is not a big deal so why can't they deal with it?* (Subject # 8: 02 October 1996) I concur, why can't we get on with putting our theory into practice? Why can't we take the risk and push the fear aside to rise above the manipulations of heteropatriarchal society and truly support each other through our struggle?

4.8 Some Theoretical Conclusions

The case of Amethyst illustrates that a feminist organization may grow through conflict and that lesbian issues may indeed be successfully addressed. An examination of Amethyst has revealed that a variety of factors have combined to allow this organization to evolve through conflict and to address the needs of women involved. First, the structure of Amethyst has progressed through a number of evolutions to discern how different forms might best “fit” the organization. This has allowed for a critical examination of everything from the typical collective feminist process model through a more rigid hierarchal model and finally to a type of participatory management that allows staff to have input as well as keeping staff better informed. It has been described as a, “hybrid, somewhere between a true collective where everybody is involved in decision

making and a more traditional management structure with one main authority figure at the top" (Amethyst 1995: 76). Amethyst has adopted structures that other feminist organizations have rejected as patriarchal and therefore incompatible with feminist process. Unionisation of the staff has been beneficial in that it provides clear boundaries and mechanisms for dealing with grievances, staff evaluation and other issues that have proved difficult for other feminist organizations. A recognition of the importance of accountability at all levels has further stabilised Amethyst since in many feminist organizations accountability is nonexistent due to unacknowledged leadership, and a lack of mechanisms to enforce accountability. The organization has also grappled directly with issues of power rather than denying that power could become an issue on a feminist organization. Finally, the organization has recognised the limitations of the ideal of consensus. "The board strives to make decisions by consensus, but sometimes resorts to majority rule" (Amethyst 1995: 78). This is where some feminist organizations experience difficulty as the commitment to consensus makes decision-making sometimes impossible.

The role of the sociopolitical context of Ottawa in regards to the evolution of Amethyst must also be recognised. Being located in a prosperous city and province has given Amethyst a measure of financial security few women's organizations in English Canada enjoy. The fact that Amethyst is a health service rather than a lobby or activist group probably makes it a more attractive or justifiable expense to the mainstream. The presence in this city of a critical mass of lesbians who have actively lobbied for rights over the past twenty years have created an awareness and an acceptance of lesbian rights unlike that in many other centres. This activism has resulted in government action to protect the rights of lesbians on both the provincial and the municipal level. All

of this contributes to an openness to difference on both an individual and an organizational level. Further, the more secular nature of a larger city allows for more open discussions and expressions of sexuality, or any other form of difference. The most key factor in all of this however, is the fact that Amethyst has not avoided conflict but has faced it head on and as a result has evolved into a healthy, successful agency.

Chapter Five

Comparison and Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

What can we learn from these case studies about lesbophobia in feminist organizations? While it is true that the focus of these two organisations are dissimilar, there are a number of similarities in how they were founded and in their basic underlying feminist principles. The most stark difference is the manner in which these organisations have put their principles into practice and how lesbians have experienced these organisations. What is it that has created such different atmospheres around the issue of lesbianism in these organisations? I suggest that the combination of structure and sociopolitical context in each situation has caused these organizations to react differently to the issue of lesbianism and to have varying degrees of success in addressing lesbophobia. I will next outline the similarities and points of divergence between these two organisations. I then suggest how these organisations have come to practice feminism in the manner that they have exhibited. Finally, I will present my concluding observations on the revelations of the case studies.

5.2 Comparison of Critical Factors

Before discussing the differences between these two organisations I would like to discuss the similarities and common features. Both organisations were founded by women who were very committed to the ideals of second-wave feminism and who felt that they were responding to the needs of women in their communities. Both organisations have quite a long herstory, being pioneers in their own areas. Also, both organizations have a herstory of government funding. These organisations have also had a significant amount of conflict over a variety of issues although the response to conflict in both

organisations differs. Each organisation has attempted to maintain a commitment to feminist principles however defined. Another common factor for these organisations is that they have both had to struggle, as any feminist organisation has had to do, to establish their legitimacy in the mainstream and to maintain their viability. The most important similarity for the purpose of my research is that both of these organisations claim to support lesbians and lesbian issues as part of their mandate arising from the ideals of feminism. It is here that the differences between these organisations become apparent.

In comparing these two organisations, the structural differences immediately demand your attention. SJSWC is a multi-issue feminist organisation while Amethyst is a single-issue feminist health service. The Amethyst program is focused on addictions but also has a strong educational component which does not stop with the clients or the other members of the organisation but also involves the whole community. Participants in the Amethyst case study made the point, that by supporting women in all aspects of their lives, the organisation allows women to learn from one another. This type of education enriches our lives and makes us more sensitive to the needs of others as well as some of the issues that are important to them.

SJSWC also has education as part of its mandate. The organisation's work in the past to establish the women's shelter in St. John's, to establish and maintain the Rape Crisis Centre and to provide counselling for women, SJSWC was in the position to educate the community about a wide range of key issues. In spite of the courage the organisation has shown in challenging the malestream on a variety of levels (such as the occupation of the Secretary of State offices in 1990) it did not rise to the challenge from within to support lesbian issues with the same energy. As I have illustrated a weak organizational

structure and fear of conflict combined with a particular sociopolitical context to allow lesbophobia and conflict around lesbianism to virtually destroy SJSWC.

Both Amethyst and SJSWC were founded by a group of white middle-class women who enjoyed a significant amount of privilege in their own communities. Some were professional women who held influential positions, others were homemakers married to successful men. By examining these groups of women and their later involvement with the associated organisations we can begin to understand some of the factors that might have created different atmospheres for lesbians in these organisations. At SJSWC, the founding mothers were the first to address issues of import to “women”. Being in positions of relative privilege, these women established a women’s centre to provide resources for women where more women could be introduced to the ideals of second-wave feminism. A different group of women was brought in to staff this centre, likely because the founding mothers had limited time to contribute and also, as Vickers et al report, “younger feminists rejected volunteerism as one of the self-sacrificing norms of the older generations of feminists” (1993: 102)

The reality was that the two groups of women were polarised from the start. The founding mothers espoused a feminism along the lines of liberal feminism while the staff and volunteers at the Women’s Centre espoused a more radical line, often adopting the values of cultural feminism. There is still a significant gap between the philosophy/theory of the group of women who tend to be involved on the periphery of SJSWC (including the founding mothers) and those who are involved directly in the day-to-day running of SJSWC Women’s Centre. There is still a stark difference in the social position of these two groups of women as well as their background experience.

In Ottawa, it is much easier for like minded groups of women to come together around an issue in the numbers needed simply because the larger population base provides a critical mass for ideologically specific organising. In the case of Amethyst, the focus on addictions required that the staff be professionals trained in the field. This meant that there was likely less difference between the women who were on the board and those involved in the day to day running of the agency, shaping a shared "professionalism". This organisation first reached other middle class women who were more similar to than different from the women who had founded the organisation. This similarity between the two key groups involved with the organisation likely continued in terms of the educational level and values shared by the women involved. These days the clientele at Amethyst is somewhat more varied. The make-up of the board has changed as well since a number of women who previously were clients have moved into board positions and other women have been recruited from the community regardless of their educational or professional background. The staff are all educated in the field of addictions but have a variety of life experiences; some are even out lesbians. Some of the staff have also struggled with addictions themselves. The life experiences of the staff has made them more aware of some of the issues brought forward and this has had an impact on Amethyst's response to the needs of the community.

Each of these organisations had significantly different experiences in securing funding for their services. In the case of SJSWC, funding has always been precarious. The organisation has been fully funded by government with a very minimal contribution from the community. In St. John's, money for women's organisations tends to go to those organisation that have a very tangible effect on the community, such as the women's shelter. Feminists in St. John's have

significantly less success in convincing business or the general public to contribute to an organisation with a vague structure and multiple purposes. Another part of the difficulty is the distaste many have for the idea of feminism. The other stark reality is that there just is not a lot of money to go around in Newfoundland. A consistently poor economy compounded with the recent failure of the fishery and other factors makes business and individuals reluctant to part with hard earned dollars. There is so much need in the province and in St. John's, that SJSWC falls low on the priority list.

The constant threat and reality of government cutbacks to funding have created a highly stressful environment for those who are committed to the organisation. A great deal of energy at SJSWC always has to be directed to finding new ways to stretch the money and to prepare for the eventuality that funding will dry up which has distracted activists from some key issues and made controversial issues like lesbian rights hard to handle. Nonetheless, SJSWC did advocate adding lesbian rights to the provincial Human Rights Code despite risks to its funding.

The story of Amethyst's funding is much more positive than the bleak picture of finance at SJSWC. Amethyst was fortunate to acquire a research grant for the first three years of its existence. Participants in my case study said that Amethyst was considered quite the fat cat, and that they have been lucky since the beginning to securely fund the agency. Amethyst's saviour when the initial funding ran out was the community. A number of influential individuals and organisations got involved with fund raising, the May Court Club (a first-wave feminist organization) and later the United Way, have contributed significantly to Amethyst. In 1987, the Ontario government implemented permanent funding for the agency through the Ministry of Health. This has given

Amethyst a measure of security unlike many other feminist organisations in Canada. With security of funding, women involved have been able to give their full attention to the organisation and issues that have arisen. This can only have a positive effect on any organisation.

To return to the discussion of founding mothers, it is a point of interest to note the level of involvement of both groups of women with the organisation. At SJSWC the founding mothers have, for the most part been involved with the organisation only on the periphery. In spite of this they still wielded significant influence over the organisation. In one sense their relationship with the organisation has not changed since those early days. During the time of conflict of 1990-91, the founding mothers appeared to play a key role. Some of my lesbian participants in the SJSWC case study suggested that they are simply a group of lesbophobic women whose prejudice is inexcusable.

When analysing the factors that might have caused groups of women to behave as they did in this conflict it became evident that the sense of ownership of SJSWC played a role in the founding mothers reaction to the events. This sense of ownership is understandable when you consider that these women put up the front money to give SJSWC its permanent home many years ago. In some sense, the way they swooped in to attempt to avert negative publicity and repercussions against SJSWC was their way of protecting an investment. The investment was not simply financial as they had all created and nurtured this organisation through the years. Their sense of ownership therefore went beyond the financial to that protective connection an individual has with an entity she helps create. In this instance the "founding" mothers were reacting just like many mothers.

There is perhaps less of that sense of ownership by the founding mothers

of Amethyst. Unlike the founding mothers of SJSWC, the founding mothers of Amethyst were not personally financially linked to the permanent home of the organisation. The group Friends of Amethyst undertook a capital fund raising drive which, over the course of two years raised the funds to purchase the current facility (Amethyst 1995: 52). Because the funding came from outside the organisation there was little chance the founding mothers could fall into the trap of feeling that same sense of personal ownership that the founding mothers of SJSWC exhibited.

Further, in terms of ownership, Amethyst has evolved structurally so that the organisation is owned just as much by those who staff it as those who are otherwise involved. Also, client-graduates from the program seem to feel a strong sense of ownership of the organisation. This likely occurred as a result of the positive experience many women have at Amethyst. For many graduates of the Amethyst program life has been enriched by the supportive atmosphere of the agency and they are committed to the survival of Amethyst. The founding mothers of this organisation and the staff appear to be willing to share “ownership” of Amethyst.

The influence of founding mothers on the organisations is only one of a number of factors that must be considered if we are to understand how these organisations have evolved the way they have. I believe that the structure of these organisations has also played a role in the way the organisations have evolved. Structure affects the way individuals connected with the organisation interact with each other as well as the way the organisation deals with issues.

The structure of SJSWC has changed little over the years, maintaining cultural-feminist ideals of consensus and “feminist process”, although there has usually been a Steering Committee to make major organisational decisions and

the staff of the Women's Centre have dealt with day-to-day concerns. Part of the difficulty at SJSWC was a result of a lack of clarity of boundaries between board and staff. The informality of the structure of SJSWC as well as the realities of social life in St. John's meant that, staff, board and volunteers often socialised together. This further blurred already vague boundaries. As I have stated before, it is important for individuals to know where their boundaries are in their interactions with others. A lack of boundaries can only create a difficult situation when problems arise. This was in fact the case at SJSWC. The Steering Committee was unable to deal with employee problems which led to the firing of one employee and later a Human Rights Complaint. The staff of SJSWC usually consisted of only one or two women but in the two years before the conflict there had been up to five women employed. Staff was not unionised so there were no mechanisms in place to deal with grievances, complaints or employee evaluations. Having such mechanisms in place might have averted the complaint which triggered the conflict.

At Amethyst, the structure has undergone a full range of changes from the collective style common to many feminist organisations to a more professional or business style and back to a modified collective style. These changes have brought conflict, heated discussions and explorations of other models to find something that works. I believe that this willingness to change has allowed the organisation to grow through conflict rather than be destroyed by it. Clear boundaries and responsibilities have created a healthier working environment for the staff. Another positive result of the structure and some outside influence is the accountability to the community that the organisation exhibits with annual reports and feedback in both directions.

Part of the problem at SJSWC is that there was no formal accountability

process. Accountability on an individual and organisational level has been problematic for many feminist organisations. Because of the covert leadership in the organisation, feedback from the community was not often sought or listened to. When parts of the community made its needs or demands known to the organisation, the response was that there was no money or it was not enough of an issue. The organisation was very much subject to the agenda of the outside funding agency and the covert leadership of the founding mothers.

This is not to suggest that the founding mothers of SJSWC have acted out of a conscious decision to influence this organisation. Rather, I think that they have influenced the organisation because the women who have come after them have allowed them to do so. Again, this was not necessarily a conscious decision on the part of any woman involved with SJSWC. I think it reflected a tendency to bow to tradition and to hold individuals such as founding mothers in a particular place of respect. Also women are educated to avoid conflict. Certainly, the founding mothers would be more subject to this agenda than younger feminists because of the time in which they were raised and socialised.

The social situations of St. John's and Ottawa are about as different as we can imagine. St. John's is located in one of the poorest provinces in Canada while Ottawa enjoys the prosperity of being located in one of the more affluent provinces. There is also the reality of the population base. In St. John's there still remains a small town mentality. Organisations and individuals who are placed in the public spotlight are subject to intense scrutiny. In Ottawa, it is fairly easy to get lost in the crowd and the media have many hotter stories to report. Certainly the fact that the federal government is located in Ottawa provides media with more than enough grist for their story mill. Being in the "big city" also

brings with it a greater acceptance of difference because there is more obvious difference for individuals to deal with in everyday life.

In Newfoundland one finds a fairly white culture, with few people of colour. The greatest difference expressed between people is in religion. The Church in Newfoundland certainly wields great influence over the psyche of the Newfoundland people, making homo/lesbophobia especially intense. I believe that the strongest influence the Church has over Newfoundlanders is the way we have been raised within a dogma of denial. It is this type of denial that allowed the abuse at Mount Cashel to go on for so long. It is this type of denial that allows Newfoundland feminists to continue to deny the validity of lesbian existence and create an atmosphere of suspicion and pain within feminist organizations. You need not be entrenched in the dogma of a particular religion to fall into this trap of denial since, as Pauline Rankin (1996) has noted, the influence of the churches is completely woven into the social and political fabric of Newfoundland. The influence of the Church in state institutions is made obvious in the lack of Human Rights protection for lesbians in Newfoundland. The omnipresence of the Church makes the discussion of sexuality taboo in any forum so it is no surprise that lesbians have been kept silenced for so long. Add to that the constant migration of people from the island to larger centres and there is little likelihood of having the critical mass required to effectively organise to make change.

Cities like Ottawa tend not only to be more secular but to also allow for an anonymity which permits a greater range of expression for both individuals and organizations. A more secular social context lessens the oppressive influence of Church on state institutions and therefore allows those marginalized by Church dogma to be protected under the law. The amendment of the provincial

Human Rights Code in Ontario as well as similar action at the regional-municipal level in Ottawa conveys a message that discrimination based on sexual orientation will not be tolerated. Conversely, a province (like Newfoundland) which fails to protect lesbians in the *Human Rights Code* conveys the message that discrimination against lesbians is tolerable (in a legal and perhaps even moral sense).

5.3 Understanding Everyday Lesbophobia

Philomena Essed provides an analysis of everyday racism that is quite useful when applied to other forms of oppression such as lesbophobia. The value of Essed's analysis is in how she perceives the interrelationship of individual acts and oppressive structures. She cautions against focusing only on the structure and ideology of racism to recognise that it is created and maintained through everyday practices (Essed 1991: 2). The same may be said of lesbophobia. It has earlier been established that some feminists make the mistaken assumption that the oppressive structures and ideology of patriarchy; that is, racism, classism, and lesbophobia, to name a few, exist outside of feminism and feminist practice. Feminists concentration on what are considered "outside" structures blinds us to the reality that we have been socialised within those oppressive structures and are therefore likely to create and maintain those structures through everyday acts. As Essed suggests, "structures of racism [lesbophobia] do not exist external to agents - they are made by agents - but specific practices are by definition racist [lesbophobic] only when they activate existing structural inequality in the system" (1991: 39).

Application of Essed's theory to the case studies presented in this thesis reveals the way in which oppressive structures have affected each organization as well as how these organizations have either maintained or deconstructed

some oppressive lesbophobic structures. SJSWC has for the most part, recreated the oppressive structures of lesbophobia within the organization due in part, to the influence of a highly lesbophobic sociopolitical environment. In contrast, Amethyst seems to have successfully deconstructed the oppressive structures of lesbophobia within this organization due in part, to a more lesbian-positive sociopolitical environment.

When confronted with their lesbophobia, straight feminists at SJSWC reacted strenuously, adding fuel to the fire of the conflict. In this they reacted out of what Essed describes as the “myth of tolerance”:

If the reality is defined as a reality of tolerance, there is no legitimate basis for opposition to racism [lesbophobia]....In consequence, confronting dominant group members with another view of reality, such as the infusion of racism [lesbophobia] into the routine practices of daily life, induces moral indignation. They claim that they mean well, thereby reversing the problem: How dare you make such an accusation? (1991: 115)

A number of other oppression theorists (Young 1990, Noël 1995) have warned against the dangers of “tolerance” versus a more productive practice of acceptance and understanding. Essed goes on to describe the myth of tolerance as a sophisticated form of oppression in which there is, “lots of talk, no commitment, and little understanding” (1991: 115)

When the case of Amethyst is scrutinised it is clear that the organization has not fallen into the trap of “tolerance” because discussion has led to a commitment to action indicating that there is an understanding here of lesbophobia and the impact it may have on lesbian lives. There can be no doubt that the advances in lesbigay rights through government legislation in the city and province has fostered discussion and understanding. The visible presence and activism of lesbigays in a more open social context provides a

resource for dialogue and may in fact “normalise” the existence of alternative expressions of sexuality. This is not to say that the situation for lesbians in Ottawa is ideal. There are still barriers to overcome.

This stands in stark contrast to the situation in St. John's where little progress has been made in terms of lesbian rights, where the population base is small and where the rigid morals of the Church permeate the social fabric. Within this repressive atmosphere, any discussion of sexuality is taboo let alone discussion of something considered morally wrong and repugnant. The effects of the Mount Cashel Scandal set back any advances made by lesbians in the years just prior. This has meant that the tremendous sensitivity of some people to any topic related to homosexuality has caused intense emotional reactions that support and maintain the oppressive structures of lesbophobia.

5.4 Structure, Conflict and Lesbophobia

The organizations studied in this thesis have clearly been dramatically influenced by the context in which they have evolved and currently exist. This has had both positive and negative repercussions for lesbians in each organization. However, the organizational type, and structure of these organizations must also be considered as having a significant role in the way each organization has addressed conflict and lesbophobia in the organization.

SJSWC is a multi-issue feminist organization concerned with a wide variety of issues. The organization has been and continues to be completely dependent upon federal funding to survive. Over the years, the constant threat of funding cutbacks has caused the organization to be very concerned with finances; how to get by on less money, what the alternatives are if funding is completely cut and how to continue to meet the rising needs of women in St. John's with a decreasing budget. SJSWC has been involved in a number of

very successful projects; establishing Iris Kirby House shelter for battered women, maintaining the Rape Crisis Centre and coordinating various ad hoc political action committees. With this type of activity level, it is not surprising that internal issues tend to get pushed aside in the interests of "getting on" with the tasks at hand.

The structure of SJSWC is typical of many grass-roots feminist organizations in English Canada. There has been a long standing commitment to the ideals of "feminist process" which means that there is little or no formal leadership other than a Steering Committee which operates on consensus based decision-making with shared leadership. The commitment to this type of essentially "structureless" organization has brought about the situation inherent in the feminist commitment to structurelessness identified by Joreen (1973). This has allowed the formation of an informal leadership, a lack of accountability and problems in employee relations. The organization has avoided utilising structures or mechanisms that might be considered patriarchal such as unionising staff and/or establishing a clear leadership with mechanisms for accountability and organizational evaluation. This has clearly had a negative impact on the viability of the organization.

The structure at SJSWC has changed little over the years, perhaps because of our tendency to bow to tradition, we have always done it this way; because we fail to perceive any alternative structures; or because the cycle of intense activity followed by burn-out and withdrawal has made it impossible to see that the structure just does not work. The result of this lack of change and growth is that SJSWC continues to be trapped within a cycle that perpetuates misuse of power, avoidance of conflict and oppression of lesbians. As long as SJSWC continues to operate in this cycle without looking inward to deal with

some very important issues of oppression, the organization is doomed to continue to stagnate and perhaps crumble.

Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre is a single-issue alternative health service for women in the Ottawa-Carleton region. This organization has been and continues to be fairly dependent upon government funding to survive. The difference is that Amethyst is funded at a provincial rather than a federal level and through the Ministry of Health rather than a precarious women's program. The reality that Amethyst is a health service may give it somewhat more financial security than other types of feminist organizations, such as SJSWC. In these times of government fiscal restraint however, no organization is completely secure. Amethyst also has good support within the community through a number of philanthropic organizations, business and individuals.

The structure of Amethyst has evolved over the years from a typically feminist collective through a more business or professional style to a type of participatory management structure that combines aspects of collectivity with somewhat other mechanisms. This evolution through change has allowed the organization to look critically at a variety of organizational forms to arrive at an effective structural form. The women of Amethyst realised that they had to have "their house in order" if they were to accomplish their goal of helping women build healthier lives. The structural form of the organization continues to grow and evolve according to the needs of the women involved and other issues which become evident. This growth and change is a sign of a healthy viable organization.

Issues of power, accountability and lesbophobia often go unaddressed in other feminist organizations with negative results. At Amethyst, these issues have been grappled with through sometimes intense conflict. What is

noteworthy is that the organization did not avoid the conflict or the issues which arose as some other organizations have done. Amethyst rose to the conflict, weathered it and has reaped the rewards of becoming a more stable organization. One of the key stabilising factors is the fact that the staff has been unionised since 1993 thereby providing mechanisms for accountability, complaint and grievance procedures and employee relations. Having such mechanisms in other feminist organizations (such as SJSWC) might avert conflict around some staff/employer issues. In the case of Amethyst, adopting and adapting some patriarchal structures has had a positive effect.

Finally, the built-in evaluation process of Amethyst has made the organization more aware of the needs of women who use the service. This feature is lacking at SJSWC. The awareness of the needs of the community that Amethyst serves combined with a more lesbian-positive social context has allowed the organization to respond with action to the needs of lesbians. In doing this, Amethyst is helping to deconstruct the oppressive structure of lesbophobia by recognising that it must be addressed with both words and actions.

5.5 Conclusion

In sum, I concur with Pauline Rankin's argument that, "women's movements work for change within specific temporal and spatial locations which influence their choice of issues, organizations and strategic action (1996: 356). As a result of these influences, feminist organizations can get "locked in" to destructive, oppressive cycles which impede our ability to effectively organise for change and our ability to address important issues within our organizations. Through analyses of the herstorical data as well as the case studies I have illustrated how the ability of feminist organizations to successfully address

lesbian issues and lesbophobia is contingent upon: 1) having effective organizational structures with mechanisms for adequate conflict resolution, accountability, and effective decision-making; and 2) being located in a sociopolitical environment that permits difference to be discussed, understood and accepted. I have argued in this thesis that lesbophobia is endemic to feminist organisations and that the organizations ability to address lesbophobia effectively is determined by the combination of organizational structure and sociopolitical context.

Through further “self-studies” and a critical examination of our “everyday acts” of oppression, feminists and feminist organizations may begin to address the ways in which we maintain oppressive heteropatriarchal structures. It is also necessary to undertake further critical study of the way in which we organise and structure our organizations in order to perceive how those structures may be inadequate. We need to open ourselves to the idea that not all “patriarchal” structures are inherently bad for women. If we adapt them, combining the best elements of “feminist process” with the more effective mechanisms of “professional” structures, we may be able to effect greater change with less pain and turmoil. We cannot let fear continue to rule us and to therefore prevent us from rising to the challenges before us.

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Case Study Interviews

**** Interview participants are referred to by number only and with a minimum of identifying information to maintain confidentiality.**

Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre:

Subject #1. Amethyst Board Member.25 September 1996

Subject #2. Amethyst former staffer.30 September 1996

Subject #3. Amethyst Board Member.01 October 1996

Subject #4. Amethyst Board Member.01 October 1996

Subject #5. Amethyst Staffer.03 October 1996

Subject #6 Amethyst Staffer. 03 October 1996

Subject #7 Amethyst Staffer. 01 October 1996

Subject #8 Amethyst Staffer. 02 October 1996

St. John's Status of Women Council:

Participant #1.Heterosexual Member SJSWC.27 August 1996

Participant #2.Lesbian Member SJSWC.28 August 1996

Participant #3.Member SJSWC.29 August 1996

Participant #4.Lesbian Member SJSWC.29 August 1996

Participant #5.Member SJSWC.29 August 1996

Participant #6.Lesbian Past member SJSWC.30 August 1996

Participant #7.Founding Mother. SJSWC.30 August 1996

Participant #8.Lesbian Past member SJSWC.30 August 1996

Participant #9.Member SJSWC.31 August 1996