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Lesbianism, Feminism, and The National Women's Conference of 1977:
A Turning Point
The decade of the 1970s proved to be an eventful time for American women. For those who supported the movement to increase women’s rights, progress finally seemed possible. Advancements such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, Title IX, the Supreme Court’s decision in Roe v. Wade, the opening of battered women’s shelters, and the increased number of organized groups that encouraged and assisted women all gave hope to feminists.\(^1\) While much more needed to be done, women had taken some steps forward. In November of 1977, a conference took place in Houston, Texas to provide Americans with an opportunity to discuss issues of importance to women. Plank 23 of the National Plan of Action, adopted at the National Women’s Conference, declared that legislation should be enacted "to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual and affectional preference."\(^2\) In the Plan of Action, the background information about the plank stated:

Lesbians point out that they are often the focus of attempts to ‘keep women in their place.’ A woman who does not choose to play a traditional or male-centered secondary role may find herself labeled too strong, too aggressive, too masculine, and finally, a lesbian. The fear of the effects of that label may limit the non-lesbian woman in the expression of her individuality. Only when the word ‘lesbian’ has lost its power to intimidate and oppress will women feel free to be strong and independent human beings.\(^3\)

The information pointed out that lesbians met with discrimination, both as women and as a result of their sexual orientation. While the resolution regarding “sexual preference” received enough support to become part of the National Plan, the issue of lesbianism caused contention not only at the National Conference, but also within the feminist movement.\(^4\) With so much dissension about the issue, one might question whether or not the National Women’s Conference was the appropriate place to debate concerns about rights for lesbians. This paper will argue that it was an appropriate place for the discussion, and that the Conference and the proceedings related to it became a turning point for lesbianism within the feminist movement and, possibly, for the public as well.

The National Women’s Conference, held November 18-21, 1977, originated from the United Nations’ declaration of 1975 as International Women’s Year (IWY).\(^5\) The United States’ participation began in January of 1975, when President Gerald Ford issued an executive order establishing the National Commission on the Observance

\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) The term “sexual preference” was used in the National Plan of Action as the title of the plank regarding lesbian rights. Its use reflects the ideas of the time period regarding homosexuality, emphasizing choice, as opposed to today’s ideas that consider sexual orientation as an unchangeable part of one’s identity.
of International Women’s Year to study women’s issues.\(^6\) The resulting Conference, organized to “draw up recommendations for ending the barriers to women’s equality in the United States” by the official orders of President Jimmy Carter, aimed to give a voice to a wide variety of women, especially those not typically involved in the decision-making process of the country’s government.\(^7\)

Women from the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, the Trust Territories, and the Virgin Islands, as well as from every state, were invited to attend “state meetings” held in their respective areas during the spring and summer of 1977. Congress had approved five million dollars to help finance the Conference, and over half of that amount was distributed in grants to the states to help fund the meetings. Many states provided free transportation, childcare, food, or lodging for attendees with this money in order to facilitate participation. The meetings, arranged under the direction of the National Commission, gave everyone 16 years of age and older, including men, the opportunity to vote for the delegates who would represent their areas at the National Conference. All state meeting attendees discussed and voted on the same set of sixteen resolutions proposed by the National Commission, but the Commission also encouraged the introduction of concerns specific to each state’s group. The Commission then used the resolutions and concerns to form a tentative plan that would be deliberated on by the delegates at the Conference.\(^8\) By the end of the Conference, a National Plan of Action with 25 planks was ready to be presented to President Carter, the Congress, and the people of the United States.

The National Women’s Conference was a product of a resurgence of the women’s movement that began in the 1960s. An increase in activism for human rights, in particular the movement for African-American civil rights, reawakened in women a drive to question their own position within society. In 1961, the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, formed by President John F. Kennedy, initiated at state and federal levels investigations into the lack of opportunities available to women and the disadvantages they faced. The President’s Commission not only brought women’s inequality to public attention, but also helped to build a network of politically active women and increased expectations that progress could be made in the struggle for women’s rights.\(^9\)

With public discussion of women’s inequality increasing in the 1960s, the second wave of feminism grew, ignited by the civil rights movement and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).\(^10\) Women, especially white, middle-class, educated


\(^8\) Caroline Bird, *What Women Want: From the Official Report to the President, the Congress and the People of the United States* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 47-48. Despite the fact that some meetings were held in U.S. territories, the meetings will be referred to as “state meetings.”


\(^10\) After the first wave of feminism (the women’s movement of the nineteenth and early
women, began to express dissatisfaction with their domestic roles and frustration about the careers they had passed up in order to fulfill those roles. The women’s movement, largely fueled by liberal feminist ideology that focused on making changes within the existing gender system, led to the formation of organizations to empower women and to pass legislation for their advancement.\textsuperscript{11} The most prominent of these groups, the National Organization for Women (NOW) formed by a group of politically-minded feminists in 1966, proclaimed its purpose to be “to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society..., exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men.”\textsuperscript{12} The group elected Friedan as its first president and set out to change the idea that “a woman has to choose between marriage and motherhood, on one hand, and serious participation in industry or the professions on the other.”\textsuperscript{13} NOW members concentrated mainly on discrimination against women in the employment setting and in their educational opportunities.\textsuperscript{14}

Some women felt that NOW’s agenda did not go far enough, however. Feminists, such as the women of NOW, believed they spoke for \textit{all} women, but women from different perspectives began to point out their differing needs.\textsuperscript{15} Disagreements about goals and strategies, inherent to most social movements, arose within feminism. Feminist Robin Morgan, in the introduction of her 1970 anthology \textit{Sisterhood is Powerful}, noted that “NOW’s membership was mostly comprised of middle- and upper-middle-class... professional, middle-aged, white women.” She stated her fear that the women’s movement was “falling into precisely the same trap as did our foremothers, the suffragists: creating a bourgeois feminist movement that never quite dared enough, never questioned enough, never really reached out beyond its own class and race.”\textsuperscript{16}

Some women began to question the movement’s focus on issues more specific to middle-class, white women. The middle-class, college-educated women active in the feminist movement strove, for example, to end gender inequities in their professions, change the disparity in wages between men and women, and to increase the number

\begin{quote}
Enumen by twentieth centuries in which women fought to gain rights such as the right to vote and to own property), activity waned until the early 1960s when women began again to organize and work to increase their rights. In this second wave of feminism women focused, initially anyway, on changing employment and educational inequalities between men and women.
\end{quote}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Judith Lorber, \textit{Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics} (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2005), 26-27. Many different theories of feminism developed as the second wave of the feminist movement grew throughout the 1960s and 70s. Liberal feminism, a key theory of the 1960s and 70s, focused on women in employment, educational, and political settings.
\item Ibid., 212.
\item \textit{Sisters of ‘77}, DVD, directed by Cynthia Salzman Mondell and Allen Mondell (Dallas, TX: Circle R Media and Media Projects, Inc., 2005).
\end{enumerate}
of women in political positions. These were not the same issues that concerned white working-class women, who often had to work because of economic necessity, or African-American women, for whom the burdens of racial prejudice often took precedence over gender biases. Women of these underrepresented groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, the poverty-stricken, and lesbians, were starting to call attention to the double discrimination under which they suffered.

As the diversity of the women’s movement expanded, it became apparent that women from all social and racial backgrounds were unhappy with their positions in society. By the early 1970s, the persistence of women to keep their fight for rights in the forefront of public attention influenced the United Nations’ decision to initiate the International Women’s Year. Inspired by IWF events, women in Congress introduced a bill for a national women’s conference. In response, the United States formed the National Commission to set in motion an evaluation of discrimination against American women. The forty-six members of the Commission included forty-one women and five men, thirty-five of whom had been appointed by President Ford and the remaining eleven by President Carter. Most of the appointees had backgrounds in political activities, but the members also included a homemaker, a sociologist, a poet, an attorney, and three magazine editors. An attorney, activist, and United States Representative from New York, Bella Abzug, served as presiding officer of the Commission.

The sixteen initial resolutions proposed by the Commission for consideration at the state meetings targeted economic, political, and educational discrimination and violence against women. Data from studies and hearings, the results of which were compiled into a report entitled “...To Form a More Perfect Union...”: Justice for American Women, guided the Commissioners as they chose the issues to be included as the core resolutions. The state meetings and the Conference intended to shine a spotlight on discrimination and to engage as many American women as possible in a discussion of issues crucial to the advancement of women. They provided a platform from which women could raise concerns that could be brought to the public’s attention and considered for addition to the list of resolutions.

The issue of discrimination against a person because of her sexual orientation was not included as one of the Commission’s initial resolutions proposed for discussion at the state meetings. However, women in thirty states were able to win approval of a sexual preference resolution addition to their agendas. Caroline Bird, author of The Spirit of Houston, the official report of the Conference proceedings, reported, “In response to this showing, Commissioners attending their pre-Conference meeting in Washington in October had voted overwhelmingly to add to the National Plan a plank barring discrimination on the basis of sexual preference.” Why did the Commission hesitate to consider lesbian rights as one of the initial recommended resolutions to be discussed at the state meetings? Did they shy away from the controversial nature of the subject?
even though other issues on the agenda, such as reproductive freedom and the ERA, were also regarded as sensitive by many Americans? A brief examination of the history of public and feminist attitudes towards same-sex relationships may help us understand the reluctance to introduce the issue into the Conference.

After the last two decades of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, same-sex relationships came to be defined through their “oppositeness” from heterosexual relationships.23 Pathologization by the medical profession and religious beliefs that tied sexual intercourse inextricably to reproduction caused negative associations with homosexuality. In the 1950s, renewed emphasis on the family and the domestic role of women produced even more fear and distress about homosexuality.24 Lesbians suffered doubly, through discrimination as women as well as through discrimination over their same-sex relationships.

Activists for lesbian rights, in similar fashion to women’s rights activists, gathered inspiration and experience from the civil rights movement and from anti-war protests in the United States. The sexual revolution of the 1960s helped to pave the way for the gay and lesbian rights movement as well. Historians Walter L. Williams and Yolanda Retter noted in Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States that “[a]s heterosexuals became more open about sex for the sake of enjoyment, even outside the bonds of matrimony, this opened the door for homosexuals also to claim the right to enjoy sex with the partner of their choice. Consensual relationships, rather than heterosexual marriage, became the new moral arbiter for sex.”25 While gays and lesbians had been working discreetly to form networks and a community for themselves since the mid-twentieth century despite formidable discrimination, it was not until the late 1960s that activism for gay and lesbian rights brought the issue into public discussion, increasing awareness and understanding for some, but resulting in fear and hostility for others.

Even within the feminist movement, lesbianism caused dissension. In a culture based on women’s dependence on men, the association of feminism and lesbianism might have seemed logical. However, discord developed over issues such as the concern that the difficulties faced by lesbians would overwhelm the feminist movement, the assumption of heterosexuality by our society (including many feminists), the effects those assumptions had on lesbians, and concerns over the negative connotations of homosexuality.26 A closer examination of these points of contention between lesbian and straight feminists may help to explain why conflicts arose.

Many women feared being associated with homosexuality in a society that defined women by their relationships to men. Often people with anti-homosexual beliefs

misused the word “lesbian” as a derogatory term, reinforcing the negative connotations linked to homosexuality. In 1970, the feminist group Radicalesbians addressed this point, asserting that “Lesbian is the word, the label, the condition that holds women in line. When a woman hears this word tossed her way, she knows she is stepping out of line. She knows that she has crossed the terrible boundary of her sex role. She recoils, she protests, she reshapes her actions to gain approval.” Anti-feminists often used the term “lesbian” to describe feminists in a derogatory manner in an effort to detract from feminism’s message, causing some in the women’s movement to worry about feminism’s reputation. In a NOW newsletter from 1971, an article discussing lesbian rights stated, “Some members of NOW object that the lesbian question is too controversial to confront right now, that we will weaken the movement by alienating potential and current members who are comfortable with NOW’s ‘respectable’ image.” Some women felt the “respectable image” needed to be tied to heterosexual experiences because those are the experiences that permeate our culture, so much so that even feminists had a difficult time separating themselves from them.

All women in our culture, whether they are straight or lesbian, are affected by the heterosexually-based organization of our society, but not all feminists regarded this fact in the same way. Imelda Whelehan, in Modern Feminist Thought, observed “that heterosexual feminists of the ’70s rarely scrutinized the patriarchal assumptions upon which conventional definitions of heterosexuality rest, nor did they spend much time redefining the terms of their intimate relations in line with the radical restructuring envisaged in other areas of social life. By this lack of attention they risked accepting that being heterosexual was an essential part of their being....” Liberal feminists did not see the need to change the whole structure of the existing gender system, while radical and lesbian feminists viewed the patriarchal system as the root of women’s problems. Straight feminists sometimes took offense to the lesbian feminists’ hostility towards heterosexuality and the implication that a heterosexual relationship constituted traitorous behavior, while lesbians sometimes felt as oppressed by heterosexual women as by men. Women’s historian Sara Evans described one view of lesbian feminist ideology, pointing out that “[i]f lesbians were the only women truly independent of men, and independence (emotional as well as political) were a prerequisite of feminism, then it made sense according to Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love to argue (in their book Sappho Was a Right-on Woman) that ‘Lesbians provide an example of Feminist theory in action... for lesbians live what Feminists theorize about; they embody Feminism.’” The problem was that not all feminists wanted to live a lesbian lifestyle.

These differing views often led to differing agendas. Jo Freeman, in The Politics of Women’s Liberation, emphasized that the inclusion of lesbians in the movement was...
not questioned, but that “[t]he conflict was over the role that lesbians as lesbians, not simply as women, ought to play in the movement, and the prominence that lesbian demands ought to have within the spectrum of feminist concerns.”\textsuperscript{33} Lesbians’ desire to break free from the institution of heterosexuality—sexually, socially, economically, and politically—caused unease for many feminists, who worried about the divisiveness of such ideas and about the direction of the women’s movement.\textsuperscript{34} For example, in 1970, at the second annual gathering of the Congress to Unite Women organized by NOW, the meeting was interrupted by radical lesbian-feminists demanding attention to lesbian issues. The lesbians were reacting to an incident from the preceding November, in which NOW had removed the name of the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian organization, from a press release regarding the first Congress to Unite Women. The confrontation resulted in the Congress endorsing these statements:

1. Be it resolved that Women’s Liberation is a Lesbian plot.
2. Resolved that whenever the label “Lesbian” is used against the movement collectively, or against women individually, it is to be affirmed, not denied.
3. In all discussions on birth control, homosexuality must be included as a legitimate method of contraception.
4. All sex education curricula must include Lesbianism as a valid, legitimate form of sexual expression of love.\textsuperscript{35}

While it is not clear what exactly resulted from the Congress’ endorsement of these extreme statements, in 1971 NOW did adopt a resolution declaring lesbian rights a “legitimate concern of feminism.”\textsuperscript{36} However, strong demands such as these caused apprehension for many mainstream feminists.

Public reactions to lesbianism in the 1970s and feminists’ hopes for the women’s movement’s success through acceptance by a broad base of people may explain why the Commission avoided the issue of lesbian rights in their initial resolutions. Once it became apparent that the people of many states, or at least many of those people active in the state meeting process, supported rights for lesbians, the Commission acted to add the issue to the list of concerns. It is worthy of note, however, that the final plank that made it into the National Plan of Action was euphemistically entitled “Sexual Preference,” with the word “lesbian” carefully avoided, reflecting the emphasis on sexual orientation as a choice.

Despite attempts to ease the issue of lesbianism into the Houston Conference’s agenda, newspaper and magazine articles about the Conference focused a great deal of attention on the controversy over “hot button” issues, which, along with lesbian rights, included the ERA and abortion (part of the reproductive freedom resolution). On Monday, November 21st, headlines for articles describing Sunday’s proceedings proclaimed, “Women’s Conference Approves Planks on Abortion and Rights for Homosexuals” in the \textit{New York Times} and “Women Endorse Abortion, Gay Rights” in the \textit{Minneapolis Tribune}, even though ten other planks were deliberated on and

\textsuperscript{33} Freeman, \textit{The Politics of Women’s Liberation}, 134.
\textsuperscript{34} Whelan, \textit{Modern Feminist Thought}, 90.
\textsuperscript{36} Freeman, \textit{The Politics of Women’s Liberation}, 99.
passed the same day.\textsuperscript{37} The ERA plank had been on Saturday’s agenda. It seems that controversy made interesting news.

On Saturday, November 19th, in another Houston arena, a number of groups opposed to the feminist movement and to the Conference proceedings made themselves heard as well. A group called the Pro-Family Coalition conducted a rally to voice its opposition to the feminists, the National Plan of Action, and the use of federal money to finance the National Women’s Conference. Representatives of organizations such as Stop E.R.A., the Eagle Forum, the Conservative Caucus, the National Right to Life Movement, March for Life, the National Council of Catholic Women, the Mormon Church, Daughters of the American Revolution, and the John Birch Society attended the rally.\textsuperscript{38} Lesbian rights, along with abortion and the ERA, were central issues to the opposition forces and in their public relations about the rally. The Pro-Family Coalition took out an advertisement for its rally in a Houston paper on Friday, November 18\textsuperscript{th}, the opening day of the Conference. The ad featured “a small blond girl, clutching a bouquet of flowers and asking, ‘Mommy, when I grow up, can I be a lesbian?’”\textsuperscript{39} The ad played on fears about homosexuality, implying that any exposure to lesbianism would negatively affect people, especially children, and therefore the family. Americans’ fears had recently been inflamed by the nation-wide, anti-homosexual “Save Our Children” campaign led by Anita Bryant, an entertainer and devout Christian from Florida, who spoke out against anti-discrimination laws and the employment of homosexual teachers.\textsuperscript{40}

Anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly, another outspoken religious conservative and leader of the anti-Plan faction, attended the Coalition’s rally, but her influence was apparent at the National Conference. Schlafly’s anti-feminist group, the Eagle Forum, had mobilized earlier in the year to urge conservatives to attend the state meetings and help elect delegates to the Conference who were anti-Plan. This tactic proved to be very successful, especially in religious conservative states such as Utah, Mississippi, and Alabama, where conservative delegates greatly outnumbered feminist delegates. At the Conference, as the plank for sexual preference came to vote on Saturday night and “passed with a more than comfortable majority,” the conservative faction showed their disapproval, as the delegates “from Mississippi turned their backs to the podium and bent their heads as if in prayer” while holding signs that read “Keep them in the closet.”\textsuperscript{41} In a July, 1977 interview with \textit{Newsweek}, Schlafly had predicted, “Houston will finish off the movement. It will show them off for the radical, anti-family, pro-lesbian people they


\textsuperscript{41} Bird, \textit{Spirit of Houston}, 166.
are.”

Schlafly’s followers were not the only ones opposed to lesbian rights at the Conference, however. Some women from within the movement voiced their opinion that the plank for sexual preference did more harm than good for the feminist cause, particularly in regard to passage of the ERA. Prior to the vote, during the deliberation on the plank, some feminists spoke out against it. Catherine East, who had been on the planning committee for the IWY Commission, asserted, “In the interest of the future of the women’s movement we must limit ourselves to areas in which women are discriminated against vis-à-vis-men, or in which our services are undervalued, as they are in the home. I have no trouble distinguishing between gender and sexual preference.”

In another statement against the sexual preference plank, Dorris Holmes, who had led the pro-ERA faction in her home state of Georgia, contended, “Lesbianism has been an albatross on the whole movement since the last century. It is an extra burden we do not need.”

Despite the adoption of the sexual preference plank, it must have been frustrating for lesbians attending the Conference to hear such negative comments from within the feminist ranks.

An article in the New York Times from November 15, 1977, three days before the Conference started, reviewed the women’s movement back to 1966, concentrating on opposition to the movement. The article pointed to lesbian rights as having a negative effect on the movement, stating, “The lesbian rights issue, perhaps more than any of the other feminist issues, has alienated many men and women from the movement.”

The same article also reported that the women’s movement would be on trial during the Conference, with many people using it to evaluate the movement’s viability or to predict its demise.

An editorial in the Minneapolis Tribune on November 27, 1977, a few days after the Conference’s end, brought up the same idea. Contributing Editor Geri Joseph stated, “A lot of people had expected the worst. Violence had been predicted outside the hall and disruptive arguments inside. Even supporters of the meeting feared that it would be chaotic, a parliamentary – and television – disaster. Opponents gleefully guessed it would mark the end of the women’s movement.”

While dissension was obviously present at the Conference, the predictions of chaos and doom proved to be unfounded.

Despite all of the controversy over the issue of lesbian rights, the Conference attendees voted to add the plank to the National Plan of Action. In Time’s December 5, 1977 cover story about the Conference, one delegate from Arizona, commenting on the sexual preference plank, observed, “It was a matter of sympathy, even though it makes things more difficult.” Another delegate from Kentucky stated, “This is a women’s rights issue because if any group of individuals is repressed, it affects us all.”

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43 Bird, Spirit of Houston, 166.
46 Ibid.
Houston, Bird noted, "Among those who stood up to vote for the resolution were many women of conventional lifestyle and middle-of-the-road politics."49

So much of the news before, during, and after the Conference focused on the polarity of the issues and made it difficult to remember that many women who attended were conventional and middle-of-the-road. The majority of the delegates were between the ages of 26 and 55, of medium income, and belonged to either the Protestant or Catholic faith.50 The Conference experience helped some women who may have been hesitant to become involved with feminism before the event to realize this—that many other American women felt the same need to work for change in our society, but that one need not be a "radical" to join the movement. However, while many women may have been middle-of-the-road, it became apparent that the feminist movement was no longer only for the white middle class. The diversity of women at the Conference and the diversity of issues discussed expanded the experience for all who attended. For example, for many attendees, it was the first time they ever met an openly lesbian woman.51 While feminism may have begun with the idea for women to form a united front to fight for their rights, by 1970, several differing viewpoints were beginning to be voiced by formerly underrepresented women.52 The Conference brought the movement's growing diversity to the public's attention and, in doing so, possibly encouraged women from the various underrepresented groups to step forward and join in. In addition, the Conference helped those who attended to build networks of like-minded advocates for feminism.

The Conference provided a place for women to connect with one another and to realize others shared their concerns about women's second class citizenship. In bringing American women together in a public forum, it helped to illuminate the diversity of experiences, as well as the different and multiple forms of discrimination in our culture. For many women who attended the Conference, and for the public who followed the proceedings, it perhaps started the process of lessening the "differentness" of unfamiliar lifestyles. The public discussion of discrimination against lesbianism may have initiated changes in public perceptions about lesbians, lessening some of the power of the word "lesbian" to intimidate and oppress women. For these reasons, the appropriateness of the issue of lesbian rights as a topic of debate at the Conference was unquestionable. However, the event may have also served to strengthen conservative views against both lesbianism and feminism. A review of the National Women's Conference proceedings and how they were reported to the public reminds us of the importance of continued communication between women and of the need to remain connected and, despite our differences, united on some levels in our struggle for the advancement of women.

49 Bird, Spirit of Houston, 166.
51 Bird, Spirit of Houston, 165.
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