

B.C. feminists meet, probe violence issue

700.23/19
NBN

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Kootenay women formed a strong contingent last week at the sixth annual convention of the B.C. Federation of Women (BCFW). With 150 other delegates and observers, 10 Kootenay women headed to Victoria to exchange information, forge policy and examine the state of the women's movement in B.C.

For rural women at the Victoria meeting, it meant a chance to discuss problems of isolation, organizing in transient or conservative districts, and to confront the question of violence against women in rural areas, a problem many people consider an urban phenomenon.

"To be labeled a feminist in a rural area is hard and even dangerous," said Pat Tryon of Dawson Creek. She described her area's high transient rate, where women and children live in hotel rooms while men work on the pipelines. "There's a lot of alcoholism and beaten women," said Tryon, "and women on farms who can't leave because they have no resources."

Nelson Women's Centre coordinator Bette Bateman will chair the BCFW's Women Against Violence committee. She's also active in creating the Nelson Rape Crisis Line and in the Coalition of B.C. Rape Crisis Centres.

BCFW's Women Against Violence group plans to co-ordinate action across the province on Mother's Day weekend May 9-11. Delegates emphasized they are "not against Mother's Day, but wish to raise subjects mothers face every day, such as sexual harassment on the job, wife battering, and rape."

In Nelson, the women's centre plans to show "Reclaiming Ourselves: a feminist perspective of pornography" — a slide show prepared by a Vancouver women's group.

Conference delegates previewing it were shown a correlation between "soft-core" pornography and violent pornography. Startling statistics from the BCFW accompanied the slides.

In Canada:

—A female is raped every 17 minutes

—One out of four females is sexually assaulted before she is 18 years old.

—There is one conviction for every 140 reported rapes.

—54 per cent of wives are battered.

"Violent pornography," said the slide show, "is death threats to a female population in rebellion."

GETTING TOGETHER

But the convention wasn't all "heavy." One woman from Terrace grinned ear-to-ear when she exclaimed "I've never been in such a large group of women!" Women danced, ate excellent meals, roared to feminist satire on stage, and heard excellent music by and about women.

Rural women from Cranbrook, West Kootenay, Prince Rupert, Dawson Creek, Kelowna, Vancouver Island, and Terrace met urban women from Victoria and Vancouver. Several rural women said the federation has promoted a respect between urban and rural groups, "a sharing of information and strength."

ARMISTICE DAY

CBC cameras recorded live a solemn but controversial contribution by the BCFW at Armistice Day celebrations in Victoria.

Unbeknownst to the crowd of nearly 4,000, the man about to move to the microphone collapsed. As a nurse from the BCFW stepped forward to aid him, another delegate moved to the podium to lay her rose with the wreath and make her tribute on behalf of the delegates.

"We remember the nurses who died tending the wounded . . . the women who were raped by soldiers . . . non-combatants whose lives were ended or foreshortened or crippled . . . we weep for them . . . we do not forget them . . . we remember the women of the world who are dying today, the beaten and abused wives, the victims of coathanger abortions, rape and unsafe birth control, the women who die slowly and watch their children die from malnutrition and disease . . . Let us pause to remember that our war is still going on . . . we are still waiting for our armistice day."

The Remembrance Day crowd was shocked, but not all were angry. One old man told the cameras he'd fought the war so people could speak freely. An old woman said that in her 50 years attending ceremonies as a veteran, no one had paid tribute to the women. But most were shocked that women dared relate past wars to present day violence and disrupt the ceremony.

OTHER ISSUES

Throughout the convention women attended workshops on women in the workplace, pornography, assault, human rights, prisons, rights of lesbians, constructive criticism, abortion and health care. Child care was provided all three days.

Delegates elected a 27-member standing committee which meets four times a year to co-ordinate BCFW activities and ensure communication among the 54 member groups.

Eileen Argatoff and Bette Bateman from the Nelson Women's Centre join Joy Green of IMAGES, the women's paper, and three Cranbrook delegates to form a large Kootenay caucus in the standing committee.

"The BCFW is strong when the member groups are strong," said one delegate, "and hearing from all these women and what they do in their home territories, you can see the women's movement is very healthy in British Columbia."