

Rural Feminist Activism and Religious Fundamentalism in Nova Scotia, Canada

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Antigonish Women's Resource Centre

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Context

Antigonish is a small town in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia that serves an extensive rural area. The dominant religion is Roman Catholicism, with up to 80% of the people identifying as Catholic. Although the university, schools and hospital are now secular, they were originally established as Catholic institutions and the Church continues to hold considerable influence within the community. While much of that influence is socially progressive in its concerns about community health and well-being, there is an entrenched group of fervent religious fundamentalists who oppose women's social and economic autonomy and all things perceived to be feminist and, therefore, threatening to their traditional beliefs, customs and ways of living. In one rural school board district, there has been a concerted effort led by a small group of religious fundamentalists with support from fathers' rights activists to limit and to prevent students from accessing information about personal relationships, health and sexuality.

The Antigonish Women's Resource Centre

Established in the 1980s, the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) is a local women's organization that provides support services and programs to women, adolescent girls and women's rights advocates, and provides educational programs to promote women's equality and social justice. Its support services and educational programs for youth are seen as key to addressing social inequities and different forms of discrimination and to advancing the status of women. As a feminist organization, however, it tends to be a lightning rod for anti-woman, anti-equality sentiments, and its work with youth has generated sustained opposition from religious fundamentalists and their allies.

Opposition

Between 2002 and 2008, members of the local school board actively resisted the provision of resources and programs that were approved for students by the Nova Scotia Department of Education, including the Rural Youth Healthy Relationships Education Project (2002), *Sex? A Healthy Sexuality Resource* (first edition, 2004), Youth Health Centres (2006), and the Healthy Relationships for Youth Program (2007). Fundamentalist opposition to these initiatives asserted that they focused primarily on advancing the sexual autonomy of girls by giving them information about contraception and abortion, thereby encouraging “recreational” sex outside of marriage. The programs and resources were perceived as challenging the privileged position of the traditional family by allowing students autonomous access to sexual health services and education, and by promoting acceptance of same-sex relationships. To religious fundamentalists, these efforts represented a threat to the patriarchal order that centres on the control of female sexuality and the preservation of heteronormative relationships.

The opposition included members of Catholic civil rights groups and conservative Roman Catholic congregants who adhere to a strict interpretation of scripture, traditional doctrines and practices, collaborating with anti-feminist and fathers’ rights groups that maintain that society is biased in favour of women and discriminates against males. These groups identify the traditional, nuclear family as the cornerstone of society, whereby fathers are the authority in the home and men are the leaders in the community. They support traditional male and female roles within the family and society, thereby keeping women subordinate to men, and they claim parents’ rights to make decisions for their children, regardless of what educational leaders or youth themselves determine is in their best interests. Their ability to network across North America and across religious denominations contributes greatly to the strength of their campaigning. While the fundamentalist group in Antigonish is predominantly Catholic, it has relied on support from members of the American religious right, which is mainly Protestant.

Strategies

The decision of the Women’s Centre to take action was precipitated by major opposition at the school board level to the youth-centred initiatives named above, each of which the Women’s Centre viewed as crucial to the health and well-being of young women. The strategies they used were:

Analyzing discourses: AWRC built an analysis that unmasked fundamentalist ideologies, identified their agenda, and named them

as a distinct, oppressive and regressive ideology within a dominant religion. This distinction allowed those practising the religion to separate themselves from the imposition of narrow interpretations and to challenge the fundamentalist message.

Building support for the programs: Through their website, media interviews, press releases, and public speaking engagements, AWRC provided accurate information about the programs to the general public, including documentation of their goals and the positive impacts from the perspective of students, teachers and program facilitators. In this way, it broadened the community support base for the initiatives, which proved essential in countering resistance from fundamentalist groups.

Engaging with allies: AWRC worked with healthcare providers, organized a letter-writing campaign, collected signatures for a petition, provided testimony to the need for the centres at a public school board meeting, and engaged the media, thereby rallying considerable public support for students to access Youth Health Centres autonomously.

Building positive working relationships: AWRC prioritized building positive working relationships with parents, academics, healthcare providers, and local women’s religious orders and was able to call upon support from organizations and individuals across the province. Over the years, it had also built good relationships with local media and was thus able to use the media to inform the public about its programs and counter the misinformation being disseminated by fundamentalist groups. As the local and provincial media reported on the struggle, support continued to grow.

Looking Ahead

Progressive feminist organizations from all parts of the world that are concerned with social justice and equality would benefit from identifying the many texts and arguments that fundamentalists use and the campaigns in which they are involved (either explicitly or under other mantles), undertaking policy and discourse analyses of these texts and campaigns, and sharing their findings. Using discourse analysis to build multiple strategies and action plans that both expose and challenge the fundamentalist message is critical to advancing positive social change for women and girls at the local level, as well as for connecting with the work of women’s rights activists around the world. Although fundamentalisms are pervasive, exposing them—while at the same time cultivating new alliances and broadening community support—is vital to progressing a woman-positive vision.

www.antigonishwomenscentre.com