

Feminist Activism in Conservative Times conference at X

by Brendan Dunbar

Dealing with adversity isn't a new experience for feminists. Many women have learned that safety lies in numbers.

That's why organizers were delighted at the turnout for the "Feminist Activism in Conservative Times" conference, which was held on Saturday at the Keating Millennium Centre.

"We've got a fantastic, diverse group of women, not just from Antigonish, but from all over the province," Betsy MacDonald, one of the conference facilitators, said.

The eight-hour conference looked at the effect the country's political conservatism is having on feminism.

MacDonald said that, although times are tough, most of the conference's participants have not lost their faith.

"There's a sense of optimism in the face of a political climate that's opposed to feminism and activism in general," she said.

Recent decisions to cut funding to Status of Women offices and the elimination of the Court Challenges Program highlight the continued need for activism on behalf of women's rights.

The morning session opened with Dr. Nancy Forestell, coordinator of the women's studies department at St. FX., and Doreen Paris sharing their stories.

Forestell examined the links



Ten-year-old Molly Crosby shows off her T-shirt from the "Feminist Activism in Conservative Times" conference, which was held on Saturday at the Keating Millennium Centre at St. Francis Xavier University. (Brendan Dunbar photo)

between activism and women's studies, while Paris discussed her efforts against racism.

MacDonald said the stories the women shared highlight the different perspectives and experiences they bring to their activism.

"Quite often those differences do get silenced," she said, especially in the case of minority women.

Feminism can be a unifying force for women, no matter what their points of view or backgrounds may be, she added.

Many other viewpoints were

heard, including those of aboriginal women, university students and women living in poverty.

Lucille Harper of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre directed an afternoon session that concentrated on cuts to women's programming.

She said the social and political climate has become more conservative over the past 20 years.

"By conservative, I mean small-c as well as large-c conservative," she said.

"It's also looking at what's

been happening by and large as we've moved from a social welfare ideology to a neoliberal, private state."

The burden of the shift has fallen on the disadvantaged, she said, which include women. Cuts to programming have negatively affected those who are most vulnerable.

"The image of Canada is that we care for each other, but we're moving toward 'I'm looking after myself.'"

The conference gave women from different backgrounds,

ages and careers ways to examine and to see what can be done to counter the shift.

"How do we, as feminists, as activists, address this conservative time?" Harper said.

She noted that the conference was "great" in so many ways, but she found one thing in particular to be heartening.

"What was really wonderful

about the day was the leadership shown by the younger women."

Harper disagreed with critics who might say that feminism is dead.

"Feminism has always continued to evolve," she said.

"It's not the labels that are important, it's the work women are doing for change. That was apparent at the conference."