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FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S COMMUNITY ACTION IN THE 1980's:
NEW KNOWLEDGE AND NEW ACTIVISM IN
ANTIGONISH TOWN AND COUNTY, NOVA SCOTIA

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I - INTRODUCTION

This paper has come out of the author's experience of and reflection on women's activity in Antigonish town and County and beyond. More specifically, it is a product of my recent and continuing involvement in the Antigonish Women's Association (AWA) and its major project--the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC). I hope it will also be a contribution to that practice.*

Information about women's activism in the area will be found throughout the paper and a short chronological account of the whirlwind events that went into establishing the Women's Association and Women's Resource Centre in Antigonish over the last year are presented in Appendix A. However the main focus of this paper is analytical rather than descriptive. In it I draw on my experience as an active feminist in Antigonish and in urban centres, as well as my

*The paper is largely a product of discussions and joint research carried out with Barbara MacDonald and Oona Landry in the fall of 1983. They are both central to the activism this paper is concerned to understand and have a wide knowledge of local conditions. The paper could never have been written without them. It is the first product of what we expect to be a continuing and fruitful collaboration in our activism, research and writing.

research in feminism and in the changing conditions of women's lives in rural, small town and urban centres, to examine:

- the potential future increase of women's activism in non-metropolitan areas in this period, and
- the possible positive impact of this new activism on the development of feminism and the women's movement in general.

II - DEMOGRAPHY¹

Antigonish County is a rural Nova Scotia County with important farming (4.8% of the labour force), fishing (3.1%) and forestry (3.5%) activity. Twenty-eight percent of the county's population is urban compared to 75.5% of Canadians, as a whole. The non-farm rural population is the largest group, making up 65.1% of the population, while the farm population is only 6.1% of the total.

The county town of Antigonish is the government, business and retail centre whose main employers are a university founded in 1935 (350 to 375 employees), a hospital (450), dairy (75), printing and publishing company (25), and bakery (22). The total population of the County is 17,934, of these 5,144 live in town and 12,623 in the county.

In 1928, St. Francis Xavier University established an Extension Department which played a large role in the

development of the regional Credit and Co-operative movement known as the Antigonish Movement. The self-help principles of the Movement continue to be taught, today, in the Coady International Institute attached to the University and named after one of the founders of the Movement. The university as a whole has 2500 full-time students while more than fifty students from as many as 25 Third World nations are in residence at the Coady from June to December each year.

Antigonish is the only County in Nova Scotia which rates as ethnically diverse on all scores--ethnicity, mother tongue and country of origin. There is an overwhelming preponderance of British (74.7%), especially Scottish background, with significant localized populations of French (12.4%)², Blacks (275), and Native people (173) as well as more widely dispersed Dutch (2.7%) and American immigrants (295). The concentration of the French, Black and Native populations, the shared academic and/or counter-culture values of many recent American immigrants and the common farming activities of the economically-important Dutch means that each of these groups tends to form a community of identity.

The French and Dutch, however, share the Catholic religion with the numerically dominant British/Scottish group to make a population which is 82% Catholic. Antigonish is the Bishop's seat, a Cathedral town, head of the Diocese.

The University is a Catholic University. The Order of the Sisters of St. Martha is a local order founded to serve the University and hospital, which is one of the few in Canada which retains an Ethics Committee. The town and county divide is a deep one, economic and historic status differences among families and individuals are very real and Scottish feuds colour the perceptions of the MacDonalds and Chisholms of Antigonish to this day. Nevertheless, the strong sense of community of most Nova Scotian localities is reinforced for the British/Scottish group by the extreme predominance of one religion and the presence of an established Church hierarchy. There is a local radio station which retains a stronger local identity than most with an open-line talk show and a gaelic music and culture component. A local weekly newspaper with a circulation of 8,600 also reflects the unique characteristics of the County with a strong Catholic flavour and a special six page Diocesan Dialogue section.

III- WOMEN IN THE PROCESS OF MODERNIZATION

It is helpful to see the long-term changes occurring in the social and economic organization of Antigonish County as a particular instance of a worldwide pattern of increasing specialization, hierarchization, centralization, bureaucratization, and commodification. The

current impact of this process on society in general and women in particular has recently received wide attention with reference to the nations of the Third World.

Feminist historical studies of women's changing role and status in industrial nations have charted the same process for North American and European urban and urbanizing populations in an earlier period. These two literatures with very different foci provide important insights for the much less developed analysis of current changes in rural hinterland regions of what has been called the First World. For the changes from rural subsistence through commodity production to more centralized commodity production, and the decline of small rural communities with the development and centralization of government services, markets and such manufacturing as there is, parallel, in some degree, earlier changes in the urban parts of the country and current changes in "developing" nations.

It is very important not to glorify traditional societies and cultures, most of which are extremely poor and closed and can offer very few choices and little, but extremely hard work to their members. More important, subsistence and small commodity production communities in Canada and elsewhere are extremely patriarchial.

Nevertheless, despite their lack of ownership and control of resources, their lack of protection from physical

violence, their unequal work load, and greater vulnerability to insecurity and poverty, women play a central role in community life and development in these societies. Writers on these economies comment both on the rigid ideological segregation of women's and men's tasks and worlds and the frequent breaching of these divisions in production practice (though not in reproduction tasks). Both men's and women's work is based on the household--when no one of the other sex is present men and women do other sex jobs. Bachelor's cook and wash and women whose husbands are away or dead clear fields. When the pressure of men's work is heavy women participate in male work. Men, however, are much less likely to do women's work when women are under pressure.³ Women continue to breach the sex separations of work today in commodity production farming. And women's cross-sex agricultural contribution is even more pronounced in a farming/fishing/woodlot operation which involves male absence.⁴

Writers who document this flexibility (for women) of apparently rigid sex segregation of production tasks often imply that this explains women's lesser marginalization in rural society. But, it is more likely that this contributes more to women's generally heavier work load than to their recognition in the community.

Economic contribution does not translate directly into economic and social power as any slave could attest and all students of the working class should know. Social relations, not work done, determine power. In fact, it is usually safe to assume that those doing more work have less power or, put another way, those with power do less work.⁵

Women probably owe their relative significance in rural communities⁶ less to the fact that they breach divisions of labour than that these separations of male and female work and worlds and characters are so clearly defined ideologically. In traditional communities essential reproductive labour and much productive labour is clearly within women's realm. Women are responsible for peoples' survival and development and the quality of life in both the household and community. Social services and community support, identity and activity are all traditionally women's responsibility. Health care, education, libraries, churches, community halls, social events and communication are all public and collective activities of women. Women's organizations in such a context clearly play a large role in community development. Most of the female population belongs to them and they represent and communicate important, specifically female, concerns, activities, values and world-view. The point here is not that this important contribution and separate organization gives women equal

power or status with men, which it does not, but that it ensures women a specific voice and identity.

The continuing distinctness of women's values and concerns and the continuing existence, *even in urban contexts,* ~~today~~ of a woman's culture expressing these has been widely documented in a number of fields.⁷ The difference in traditional rural communities is that there is an institutionalization and public representation of this culture and voice that is lost in "modern" life. Women's concerns and characteristics have a lower status in these societies than men's but they, nevertheless, co-exist with them.

The changes that come with modernization and urbanization have sometimes been read as simple unilinear progress toward equality for women. Despite the fact that these changes opened the space in which the early women's movement developed, they more accurately represent the loss of the collective and public expression of women's culture and identity even while women's separate life pattern has persisted.

Urbanization and industrialization changed the organization of gender roles without in any way lessening their actual difference. In fact, the separation of production from the household clearly exaggerated the division.

Recent studies documenting the negative relative impact on Third World women of "development" involving the growth of market economics in which men have privileged access to wages and technology⁸ have thrown new light on the earlier process in our own societies--the process that continues today in rural areas.

The development of an industrial capitalist market economy based on wage labour in production of goods for sale; the separation of this activity from the home to which married middle class, and later working class women also, were relegated, and the inclusion of single middle and working class women in wage labour on extremely disadvantaged terms replaced the traditional mutual economic dependence of dominant men and subordinate women with "modern" female economic dependence.

This new social arrangement was accompanied, originally for upper class women and later for all women, by new ideological emphasis on the difference of women from men--their physical weakness, instinctive (not rational) moral superiority and natural aptitude for mothering and particular fittedness for 'the home'--the sphere that was then accorded women as their own.⁹ The recognition of women's strength and competence and economic importance as labourer (for individual men) and social organizer (for the whole community) gave way to a totally individualized notion

of help^{ate}~~ment~~ (still for the husband) focused more on aesthetic, emotional and ego than economic services. The public realm was explicitly denied to women.

Ellen Antler's¹⁰ description of the attempt to impose these ideas on Newfoundland communities today through the Home Economics curriculum shows clearly both the trivialization involved in this shift and its continued impact today in rural and hinterland areas:

Women of all ages . . . have more hypertension than men. There are province-wide nutritional deficits, an extraordinary amount of tooth decay and a chronic shortage of dentists. Newfoundland women suffer the highest rates of fatality from ovarian uterine cancers in Canada. Newfoundlanders earn the lowest incomes and pay the highest prices in Canada. In fact, however, the Home Economics courses are silent on these issues. . . . The courses offer heavy-handed messages stressing consumerism and amplifying the decorative, housewifely aspects of women's lives rather than the range of their productive work.

The lesson 'Traits that Contribute to a Happy Marriage' instructs girls how to structure their families: 'Husbands main supporter ... Wife home management leaders.' . . . The curricula never acknowledge the economic importance of wives and their work. . . . For the younger girls there is a persistent emphasis on marriage and weddings. . . . The lessons on 'Food and Nutrition' do not emphasize cooking or diet but highly elaborated instructions for entertaining . . . Several weeks are spent learning how to serve afternoon tea. . . . Lessons on hygiene neglect issues of health and disease and focus instead on grooming and attractive feminine presentation. . . . In 'Consumer Education' there is no instruction on comparison shopping, costs of credit or wise spending of food dollars. Instead a full month is devoted

to choosing a lot, planning a house and learning styles of furniture. (p.19)

Liberal and progressive thinkers have tended to counter this demeaning definition of the 'feminine' simply by abandoning it. At a time when women and men's life patterns, work concerns, personal characteristics and interests remain deeply divided these thinkers have simply declared that what is male is female. The term 'Man' is announced to include woman, and the identity of the two sexes is presumed. From the "new woman" of the turn of the century through the Flappers of the 1920's to the 'modern' housewives of the 1950's and early 60's a new ideology of sameness, equality and partnership overlaid the obvious structural divergence, inequality and service of women. Men and women were presumed by enlightened urban dwellers to be the best and only companions for each other. Women's (though not men's) shared culture and collective activities were displaced by co-education, dating, family activities and a social life built around the heterosexual couple. Self-respecting, liberal middle class women of my mother's generation learned to be included in male culture--to be broad minded rather than prudish, to renounce their mothers' suspicion of alcohol, to feel flattered when told that they thought "like a man" and to prefer (or at least pretend to prefer), listening to men at parties than to engaging in "trivial chatter" with "other women."

"Liberated" middle class women of my generation learned to participate in the male sexual revolution, and to add a paying job in the man's world to our full job of work in the home. Both of these generations of women denied our difference from men in favour of an incorporation in the male world that could not be equal. In the process modern women's specificity was rendered culturally invisible and we lost our voice and identity as women. It is this claim to a false equality and sameness that rural and Third World women are so deeply suspicious of in modern 'advanced' urban women. But this is not feminism.

In the analysis of women in Antigonish County that follows I reject the simple presumption of unilinear progress for women from traditional to modern, rural to urban, separateness from to incorporation in the dominant male culture. I emphasize both (1) the importance of the specifically female culture and values institutionalized in (also, unfortunately, contained within) women's traditional roles, and organizational forms, and (2) the necessity of recognizing the oppression of women as a constant (even intensifying) central feature of both traditional and modern society.¹²

IV - THE CASE OF ANTIGONISH

In the rest of ~~our~~ ^{this article} paper I use this perspective

- to analyze the impact of changing conditions on women in Antigonish;
- to show why I believe these changes are opening up potential for new forms of women's organization and activism here and in other areas;
- and to outline what I see as the special political significance of activism in these areas.

Although I use the relevant literature on rural change and development in Nova Scotia and elsewhere as well as such sources of local data as the census, and university and business records, my own research has consisted mainly of interviews and meetings with women from Antigonish town and county.¹² These interviews were undertaken in a context of, and as a supplement to, my observations as a participant in women's activities in the area. My research^{is} focused on finding out about the changes in women's lives and needs and interests from women themselves. The interviews allow me to see the ways that women are experiencing and reacting to the processes of change mentioned earlier as they are played out in the specific context of Antigonish in a period of general recession.

Over the long term the rural part of the County has seen the gradual encroachment of a cash economy on

subsistence forms of living. This has resulted today in the predominance of wage labour followed by farm, fish and forest production for the market, both supplemented by other cash forms such as unemployment insurance, welfare payments and old age pensions as well as non-cash rural production.

The farm population in 1981 accounted for only 6.1%¹³ of the people of Antigonish County while the rural non-farm population was 65.1% of the whole. The pressure on farm operations has been great and has resulted (along with their decline in numbers) in the co-existence of large highly mechanized farms¹⁴ often with a debt load on capital, and smaller less capitalized farms often supplemented by fishing, forestry and wage labour. Both these types of family farm operate under uncertain harvest, market and interest rate conditions. Studies of farming almost universally find that financial worries are listed as the greatest concern and source of stress for both the male and female farm population.¹⁵

Financial worry is not restricted to the small farm population in a County where the average employment income for both men and women is below average Nova Scotia levels¹⁶ which are in turn ~~below~~ below the Canadian average; and where there is an official unemployment rate of 11.4%. Both male and female rural, farm and urban inhabitants of Antigonish County are at economic risk. But women are

especially vulnerable and the stress is compounded for many by an increasing, almost unmanageable work load and an accompanying reduction in ^{their} community involvement and importance.

Increasing capital costs on mechanized farms, the decreasing viability of small farming, fishing and forestry operations as well as the growing difficulty of maintaining a family on a single wage¹⁷ has led to a marked and continuing increase in married women's participation in the labour force.¹⁸ This is occurring without any significant sharing of housework by men¹⁹ and with no additional social support services.

For both rural and town women this has resulted in a substantial net addition to their hours of labour. The triple work load of employed farm women is well documented and consists of paid work, housework and farm responsibilities. Non-farm rural women often have similar additional production responsibilities such as a garden and many do their housework in extremely primitive conditions. Both groups are forced to spend long hours in transportation for essential errands such as shopping, doctors' appointments, school visits and so on. Even without these additional burdens urban employed women are putting in a double workday which time budget studies show reaches inhuman proportions for women with young children.

Dissatisfaction that the unpaid part of women's work is not regarded as work was widely expressed by the women we spoke to. It appears that although women still suffer guilt and some disapproval when they "go out to work," the fact that some women have a paid job and do all the housework is used in some quarters to further devalue the housewife and her work. The host of the daily local open line^{show} in Antigonish ~~show~~ has been particularly dismissive of women's work in the home and is noted for comments about women who sit home and eat chocolates and watch television. This rankles both women who have paid jobs and those who do not, all of whom know that work in the home is hard. It is not at all uncommon in this ~~closely knit~~ ^{town} community to find women who refuse to listen to the show because the host is so insulting to women.

The lack of appreciation of women's unpaid work contributes to a general lack of awareness of the tremendous burden married women with paid employment bear. The difficulty of coping with this is a real concern of women and discussion of the problem was welcomed in all contexts. A tape slide²⁰ show on the topic presented by the Women's Focus of the Continuing Education Department of the University was well attended and widely appreciated. A number of women ~~were~~ interviewed said that they were ^{a course called} ~~particularly~~ attracted to ~~the~~ "Women Today" ^{offered by the} ~~course by the~~ Continuing Education Dept. because

included
advertised topics ~~the~~ housework and women's double/triple load. One woman who worked for the radio station suggested that an open line programme on the topic would be extremely useful to women.

The average income women receive for an overall work load well in excess of most men's is little more than half of men's annual average wage--\$7,050 compared to \$13,199 in 1981. This means that entry to the paid labour force has not appreciably lessened women's economic dependence on men. Women are restricted to relatively low pay²¹ and low status (though not necessarily low skill) job categories mainly in clerical, service and sales.²² They are often forced to take part-time work with no security or benefits to accommodate their other unpaid responsibilities.²³ Women's official unemployment rate in Antigonish is 20% higher than men's already high rate.²⁴

At a time when men's incomes are less and less adequate to support a family women's average wage does not keep an individual above the poverty line.²⁵ This economic inequality contributes to a frighteningly high incidence of poverty among women in general, and especially elderly women.²⁶ The Canada pension supplement to the Old Age Security is unavailable to people with no earned income. It is in any case a proportion of the wage earned, therefore women's lower average wages mean a lower average pension.

The type of work most commonly done by women is less likely to be unionized²⁷ and unlikely to entitle the worker to a pension. Private pensions too are related to earning level and are therefore also substantially lower for women.²⁸ At the same time, women marry men older than they are and have a life expectancy seven or eight years longer so are more likely to have an old age alone with only one pension to live on. In Antigonish County there are 1,025 widows and only 175 widowers.

The uncertainty and insecurity of old age is aggravated for women by the fact that they rarely have ownership rights to the farms or businesses they contribute to. The injustice of this is ~~extensive~~ *especially marked in highly capitalized farms where investment is extensive, often at the expense* of working conditions in the home. The Irene Murdoch case²⁹ still echoes among women in Antigonish. Property laws were the subject of well attended public meetings held *in Antigonish in 1975* by *a short lived women's group called* 'Women in Transition', ~~in Antigonish in 1975~~ and concern remains widespread. More recently large public meetings on women and pensions have been held all over the Province.

The incidence of divorce is low *in this Catholic County* ~~in Antigonish~~ but is rising rapidly. There were 190 divorced persons in the County in 1981 and only 70 in 1976, an increase of 270 percent. ~~This~~ leaves more women responsible for their own support, many of them with dependents. The increasing divorce rate adds to the general insecurity of all

economically dependent married women who must be aware that marriage today is not the permanent institution it has traditionally been. The lack of support services for women doing an extra job of paid work is doubly damaging for women raising children alone and the tragic results are easily seen in a small town.³⁰

All these changes, taken with the marked long-term trend toward centralization of government services, sales and other activities, are contributing to a major shift in women's role in the local community. Centralization aggravates the impact of other changes on women. Women's work in the clerical, sales, service, teaching and health areas is especially affected. Paid work in these areas becomes inaccessible to some and requires long hours of travel by others. Access to services and stores is harder and this adds, in turn, to women's hours of unpaid work. The lack of accessibility of services also makes it harder for women to play their traditional role in community activity and support. This is compounded by the increasing work load that leaves women less time to give to women's organizations and, through them, to the community and to provide neighbourly support to each other. Since more and more men and especially women are leaving home each day for paid work, and both men and women are going further afield for their jobs and to do their daily business, the isolation of women

who remain in the home in both town and county has increased enormously to become a problem of major proportions for women and for old people. This is compounded in rural areas by the consolidation and abandonment of farms.

Government policy has aggravated the pressures on women and their marginalization. No additional support services are provided for employed women or single mothers; training programmes in better paying traditionally male jobs continue to be restricted to men; male wage earning and leisure activities are privileged and women's loss of control of crucial spheres of influence and community functions is hastened.

Alison Hayford³¹ makes the point that:

Government policies have encouraged capital intensiveness and reliance on elaborate technology even as governments bemoan the loss of rural population to the city. . . . (The policies) encourage rural dwellers, especially farmers, to become more firmly tied to the structures and values of capitalism (p.17),

while at the same time, ~~promoting~~ *she notes, they promote* a nostalgia for the spirit of rural life built on a strong division of labour and interdependence of men and women. A social policy based on nostalgia that refuses to counter economic forces of social disintegration and is committed to the perpetuation of traditional sexual divisions and family relations cannot counter the increasing vulnerability of women in this period.

Virtually all government policy . . . assumes that men have the main role in farm operations and in off-farm employment and that women are primarily concerned with the domestic sphere alone. (p.18)

Even though farm and other rural and urban business wives often keep the books this has not prevented courses for bookkeeping being offered to men only.³² The decline of small service centres and the consolidation of schools and health facilities has had a disproportionate impact on the number of rural jobs available to women but they are not considered for training in non-traditional skills such as mechanic or construction work.³³ Rural teenage girls are trained for urban female work so a larger proportion of girls than boys leave rural areas and there is little paid work for those who remain and marry. Married women may not be considered unemployed even when the household financial situation is desperate.

The priority given to paid work for men together with nostalgic emphasis on community, means that government funding goes on winter employment projects which focus on leisure facilities most accessible to men and provide employment of a stereotypically male sort, rather than on the provision of local services that would serve the whole community, support women in their double and triple work load and provide jobs for women. Hayford reports the surprise of local inhabitants when the province of Saskatchewan insisted

that a skating rink being built with provincial funds should have a woman's washroom included in the design.

Linda Christiansen-Ruffman³⁴ has described the consistently male bias of development initiatives in Labrador which aggravate the detrimental effects of change on women by contributing to their loss of control over such traditional female spheres as gardening and the community hall, and by privileging men's applications for Canada Works projects:

Both women's and men's groups in communities applied for Canada works projects which would provide income for work previously done by community members without pay. The women's projects (knitting and handicrafts) tended to be rejected because of a fear of paying for work which had previously been done as a matter of course. The opposite judgement was made for men's projects which had previously been volunteer (e.g., constructing a church or community hall). (p.42)

In these conditions of change and government androcentrism the traditional infrastructure of community life and of women's support networks is grievously eroded. This decreases peoples' quality and control of life significantly and leaves women increasingly at risk. The decline in the community role of women, combined with the decreasing recognition of their unpaid individual contribution in the home along with their integration into the labour force at a dependent, relatively menial (though not unskilled) level, has major implications for women's

dignity and power as a group and women's survival as individuals.

V - THE POTENTIAL FOR WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN ANTIGONISH

But the changes we have outlined in women's condition and role in Antigonish are not complete. Small communities may be denuded of earlier functions and activities and be under considerable strain, but they have not entirely disappeared and they remain important potential foci of activity. Women's organizations remain far more central in community life than they are in cities like Toronto or Halifax, and a far larger proportion of the female population belong. Women still take a more active interest in community development as women and presume to make more input than in larger centres where active women, apart from feminists, tend to explicitly deny their connections with women in order to claim to speak to "general" issues.

The women's base that remains in Antigonish may prove to be an important strength at a time when there is also an active feminist voice. This voice echoes and re-affirms women's traditional sense of themselves as a group. But it goes further to recognize and resist the fact that this group and its voice and interests have always been subordinate.

Many women in Antigónish, who are under extreme individual pressure in private and whose traditional public role is being lost, are open, even welcoming, of an analysis which affirms their specific existence and importance as a group and their general subordination. This analysis articulates two essential aspects of women's experience and can provide a framework for individual and collective responses to change.

The women in Antigónish who begin to identify and resist the subordination and marginalization of their own interests and values are part of existing and entrenched women's networks which provide a context for dialogue and for activity that is unavailable to women in larger centres. Women's new questioning may, in this sense, have much more immediate significance for the mainstream of these communities than feminist activism has yet had in metropolitan areas.

In Antigónish there is a local radio station with an open line show, a local newspaper, a University with a Continuing Education, ^{and an} Extension Department, all reaching a far larger proportion of the population and with closer ties to the community than is true of any newspaper, radio station or university in a larger urban centre. Women work with and for and are related to men who control all the local institutions and resources. Each individual in such a relatively small

population can have a significance far beyond an individual in a larger town and there is much more opportunity for personal contact, discussion and persuasion.

The same tight channels that often work for one-way communication and control, and are noted for doing so in small communities, may also, especially when there are well developed all-women's organizations, be opened up to alternative messages and two-way communication. When the alternative messages reflect issues of immediate concern to women in areas that are crucial to their survival or have been women's traditional responsibility, they can be powerful. It is essential, however, that these messages truly reflect the complexity of women's experience and affirm that experience. The feminist analysis of women's subordination must be presented in a context which recognizes the importance of women's work and the human and community values which they (almost alone) have cherished and served.

Linda Christiansen-Ruffman presents a detailed theoretical and historical account of these specifically female human concerns in her analysis of what she calls the "female political culture."³⁵ In an article about the Women's Self-Help Collective in ^{British Columbia} ~~B.C.~~ Denise Nadeau³⁶ makes the same point as I am making here when she says that this group's experience has shown the importance of a practice which builds on female political culture in its recognition

of women's work and its affirmation of their special relationship to nurturance and care:

Perhaps the most crucial area of development in feminist self-help programming lies in providing a value context that speaks to the reality of women's lives . . .--a value context provided by two recent strains in feminist theory: the analysis of female relationality and the analysis of domestic labour.

The analysis of women's relational abilities expressed in nurturance, caring and loving, and their awareness of the interconnectedness of human beings--provides a definite moral direction. The valuing of women's relationality can provide a connection between individual and social responsibility and provide the basis for a 'communitarian relational politics' that can challenge the structures of daily life in a competitive and hierarchical society. Women are empowered more by being valued for who they are than for what they aren't. Building on women's strengths and encouraging the expansion of these strengths into the public domain can provide an ethical and political direction that moves self-help into public responsibility. (p.66)

This is an extremely important point because women will quite rightly not recognize themselves in an analysis which is only about subordination and not also about their shared strength and contribution. More important, only a shared value framework will enable women, divided by religion, life situation and status to discuss issues and come to shared positions. Women's particular work and responsibilities historically--and still today even though they are rendered more and more invisible--provide a basis

for a set of values which are deeply subversive of existing social structures and dominant values and are more and more essential not only to women's individual survival but the survival of our planet.

The affirmation of these values in feminist practice in Antigonish may make it possible for women to organize as women across social divisions and for women's established organizations to play an important role in this. Organization and cooperation around these values will necessarily address itself to community development as well as women's development and will presume to play a part in shaping the nature of society as a whole as well as women's place in that society.

Community concerns have traditionally been the focus of women's organizations. With a new feminist component these concerns can be developed to include not only the provision for human and community needs in a hostile environment but a challenge to that environment and its subordination of women and human needs. Without the feminist component these traditional organizations are doomed to lose even their earlier important support role and to witness the increasing disadvantaging and trivialization of women. *And with this will go even the remaining vestiges of community.*

VI - THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AS A RESOURCE

At first sight it is hard to see the impact of the wider women's movement in Antigonish. Apart from a short-lived group called "Women In Transition" in 1974/75, there had been, until the advent of the Antigonish Women's Association ^{in 1983} ~~this~~ year, no groups committed to dealing publicly with "women's issues." Nevertheless, the issues have been in the air and the existence of the women's movement is a crucial factor underlying women's increasing activism in Antigonish. Women are not only experiencing the pressures outlined above, they are hearing them articulated in the media.

The media tends to downplay the role of feminists and the women's movement in raising "women's issues." It is a rare occurrence to see any acknowledgement that media coverage of these issues results from the power that the women's movement has won to articulate "social problems" and force attention to them. It is even rarer to see the "experts," whose information and experience is cited, recognized as feminists. Nevertheless, the press, radio, television and popular magazines are full of women's issues (if apparently divorced from the women's movement). Rape, child molestation, property laws, pensions, unequal wages, spousal allowance, women priests, daycare, health issues,

educational opportunities, negative images of women, pornography and wife-beating are frequent topics today.³⁷

In Canada a special role appears to have been played by four of these issues, all of which have reached and mobilized a wide cross-section of women both inside and outside traditional and feminist women's groups across the country. The first of these was the furor over marriage and property laws following the Irene Murdoch case.^{37a} In Toronto this was the occasion of some of the first and largest mass public information meetings organized by feminists and attended by a wide variety of concerned women. In Manitoba this precipitated one of the most remarkable coalitions of women across the province and had a long-term organizational impact. In Antigonish "Women In Transition" organized public meetings on a variety of aspects of legal reform and raised the awareness of local women ~~in this area~~ ^{on these questions.}

More recently the initial refusal to guarantee equality of sex in the Constitution mobilized women in a similar but even more developed manner. This was a national as opposed to provincial matter. Instead of the earlier separate provincial property law campaigns there was a national response of women focused by the already existing feminist networks and groups but including responses by traditional women's groups and individual women.³⁸ Women were deeply incensed at this gratuitous insult to their

dignity and felt able to respond in a situation where women's reaction across the country provided a context in which even a single voice could be heard. Probably this was the first time that many women had any sense of the reality of the women's movement and the possibility that they, as individuals or groups, could be a part of the general defence of women's interests. The women's movement was revealed and created in the Constitutional struggle as a national network of women. This reinforced and developed for many women the early sense, initiated by the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women^{in 1970} and heightened by the debates over property law, that women are indeed a group with shared interests and potential power.

When male members of parliament laughed at wife beating and refused to apologize for it the shock among women already sensitized to the problematic nature of their status activated another immediate and national, though this time uncoordinated, response. The result was an immediate intense period of public education about wife beating and a growing awareness among ever greater numbers of women not only of the vulnerability of women but the callousness of men and public bodies in general. In the longer term, federal and provincial governments, in an attempt to save face and to respond to the public outcry and mounting well-organized pressure, voted funds to tackle the "problem." The federal

government established a Clearing House on Family Violence and mailed out information about the Clearing House and wife-beating with its Family Benefit cheques. Provincial governments are funding transition houses. Local groups are springing up as a result of people's new awareness and the availability of resources to act. The awareness that women are disadvantaged and vulnerable grew in all areas of the country. In Antigonish the local nurses' association sponsored a day long public meeting on the issue. This resulted in the founding of the Naomi Society ^{in 1983} ~~this year~~ which is cooperating with a group in the next County to make use of newly provided government funds to operate a helpline, carry out education and open a transition house to serve the whole area.³⁹

In this period of heightened awareness the release of the feminist film about pornography entitled Not a Love Story was met with widespread interest. The dismissive and insulting reaction of many male reviewers increased women's concern and the film, available free from the National Film Board, was shown in communities across the country, performing an invaluable educational function, and again reinforcing women's awareness of their vulnerability and sense of themselves as a group. The threat of pornography on Pay TV that emerged in the year after the film was released gave women at large another opportunity to act in a

spontaneous and concerted way to defend their own interests and express their membership in the group women. As a result the federal government has established a Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution⁴⁰ to hold public hearings across the country. These hearings will have a large educational impact and will give more women a chance to participate actively around an issue.

These four formative issues all emerged originally in response to an attack on women's rights and dignity. The insulting judgment that Irene Murdoch had contributed only what is expected from a wife; the government's refusal to recognize women's equality in the Constitution; the MP's laughing response to violence against women; the growing pornographic attack on women, all dramatize women's essential inequality. They graphically illustrate women's poverty, economic dependence and special vulnerability to violence and the crying lack of concern among the powers that be. Our interviews with women in Antigonish County revealed the importance of issues such as these. Women at kitchen meetings *held across the County 40a* identified some surprising felt needs such as self-defence training for themselves and their children which reflected a sense of physical as well as economic vulnerability.

Not only feminist issues but also ideas such as consciousness-raising and support among women have influenced

women who have had exposure to the women's movement or its literature. A number of women who have moved to Antigonish in the last ten years or so and who are associated with a counter-cultural lifestyle were involved in a consciousness-raising group about the same time as "Women In Transition" was active. The consciousness-raising group survived many personal upheavals and much change and evolved to become a powerful support network among these women which persists to this day. A pro-woman feeling and consciously-shared interests and sympathies is evident and inspiring among these women. Women only dinners and gatherings are common and memorable women's parties with as many as 30 or 40 participants are held from time to time.

Some of these women were involved with "Women In Transition" and one of WIT's 'straighter' members we interviewed commented somewhat longingly on the support network the counter-cultural women had maintained from those years. A member of the Board of the Antigonish Women's Association who was widowed seven years ago credits feminist writers with giving her a sense that she could survive as a complete person without a man. And many women who attended the Woman Today course cite a new and positive sense of women and potential relationships and support among women as the most valuable aspect of the course.

It is clear from this that, the indirect impact of the women's movement in Antigonish comes not only from ideas in the mass media but from individuals who have had direct exposure to the women's movement elsewhere and then moved to or returned to the County. Even in the absence of movement organization they have played an important role in the examples of their own lives, in making material available in the town library, influencing the offerings of the Continuing Education Department, and carrying out projects funded by the Secretary of State, Women's Programme.

Government programmes and activity have been an extremely important influence on women's awareness in Antigonish. Government funding is obviously a two-edged sword in any social movement, rightly viewed with much suspicion by feminists. We must watch our dependence on government and fight any damaging, blunting or cooptive influence on the shape of our projects. But the evidence of Antigonish suggests that this funding has played and continues to play a crucial role in communicating the concerns of the women's movement to wider groups of women and that it plays an especially important role in smaller centres and rural areas. There was much criticism ^{of the Government in} ~~the~~ International Women's Year for defining women's problems in individual terms. The government slogan, "Why Not?", for instance, implied that women's progress was being prevented only by

individual women's failure to seize the opportunities open to them. And the token injection of money into projects for only one year was suspected to have been designed to ensure failure. In fact, in a survey of Women's Resource Centres across Canada, Frieda Forman⁴¹ found that many of those originally started with the impetus of money in International Women's Year have managed to survive by sheer hard work, dedication and luck since then. "Women In Transition" in Antigonish started partly in anticipation of money available in International Women's Year. Its early demise was not caused by funding arrangements and in any case it has left a heritage which the Antigonish Women's Association can draw on today.

The Department of Labour's Women's Bureau, the Secretary of State's Women's Programme, the Human Rights Commission_s and Advisory Councils on the Status of Women all fund projects that are particularly important outside metropolitan areas. Much of the information used in this paper and many of the essential contacts for building a broad-based Women's Association emerged from a study of the learning needs of rural women carried out by a Women's Association member for the Secretary of State's Women's Programme. Another Women's Association member is able to network in a similar way in the course of holding workshops on women and drug dependence based on the Department of

Health and Welfare's kit "It's Just Your Nerves." The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission has lobbied for and supported the establishment of an Affirmative Action Committee at the University which is beginning to undertake educational activities on the campus.

It was the government funded National Film Board film Not a Love Story that took the issue of pornography beyond the women's movement. Government funding of transition houses and crisis centres and women's centres in Antigonish and neighbouring counties has been crucial in their initial establishment. And conferences funded with government support are indispensable means of communication. Women in Antigonish ~~were~~ attended three such conferences in 1982/83 ~~the first year~~: "Women and Development" (Antigonish), "Women in the Economy" (Sydney), and the Annual Conference of the Women's Health Education Network (Truro). A government funded conference in Halifax attended by a few women from Antigonish was a large part of the catalyst for the establishment of the earlier "Women in Transition" group. Government money is enabling the Battered Women's Educational Group in Stellarton to run workshops for volunteers and do public educational work. And these are just a few examples of the contribution that government funds are making to public awareness and women's organization in the area.

My interviews with feminists active in government funded projects and organizations and the practice of the Antigonish Women's Association reveals an acute awareness of the contradictions involved in this and the dangers of too great a dependence. Strategies for the long-term development of alternative funding and short term survival if funds are cut off are a constant theme of concern. The commitment of women in the Antigonish Women's Association to build a women's organization, provide support services for women and develop a pro-women's presence in the community was never contingent on receiving government funding for the Women's Research Centre. Although of course the process would have been far different and presumably far slower without money at the beginning to rent space and hire one and a half workers.

Government funded research and publications are also crucial to the definition and communication of "women's issues." The Federal and Provincial Advisory Councils on the Status of Women and Women's Bureaus ~~are some of the most~~ ^{both} ~~active~~ carry out important research which they make widely available in popular summary format and brochures. Their findings are routinely and widely published in the press. In recent years topics covered have included the employment patterns and wage scales of men and women, women and the trade unions, pensions, aging, images of women in

advertising, women and poverty, housework and housewives, women's work and technological development.

Government organizations rarely establish groups or hold conferences or even initiate projects with the offer of money. Rather they respond to proposals for projects by individual women and women's groups. In the final analysis, it is these groups, the organized women's movement, that have kept the pressure up to keep government funding available and growing despite fear to the contrary in International Women's Year and a growing recession.⁴² They are the initiators of projects, the organizers of conferences, the researchers and the publishers of the feminist periodicals and newsletters that are funded by the government. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW), The Women's Health Education Network (WHEN), and an ad hoc women's group, respectively, organized the three conferences mentioned earlier. ~~P~~ It is the organized women's movement, also, that has kept "women's issues" in the media and that lies behind the resultant growing awareness among women we described earlier. In Antigonish some of these groups (such as CRIAOW, WHEN and the Canadian Committee for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW)) have played a direct role in bringing the issues to women in the County with outreach educational events, health clinics, and workshops. One interesting case last year was the Voice of Women's mothers' day petition for

peace which was featured in the local newspaper (and in newspapers all over the province) and was taken up by the Catholic Women's League and eagerly signed by many members.

But all these organizations and many others such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, local women's groups, feminist individuals, government programmes and the activities and publications of all these are primarily resources which can be called upon by active women in places like Antigonish. The women's movement is in this sense not just developing the climate for women to become active; it is also the means which allows them to do so even when there is no organized feminist presence in the immediate area.

For instance, feminists involved in the transition house in Halifax were guest speakers at the original day long meeting that resulted eventually in the formation of the Naomi Society. Also, the Antigonish Women's Association in its process has drawn, and will continue to draw, on these movement resources. We decided to adopt a women's resource centre as our main project partly because of our collective awareness of local needs but also because of the nearby ^{Bridgewater} ~~Antigonish~~ Second Storey Women's Resource Centre in ~~Antigonish~~ Women in our group with previous experience in and contacts with regional and national women's groups were an invaluable source of knowledge about what channels to follow and how to

draw up grant proposals. Our Resource Centre will be full of material produced recently on all aspects of women's lives and activity by movement organizations and individuals.⁴³

The support and advice we can offer our members and women in Antigonish generally will depend to a large extent on existing women's networks and resources. We know that in our programme of public educational events and in our social action, we will be able to draw on a wide variety of committed individuals and groups with experience as advisors and resource people as well as feminist films and other audio-visual and print aids.

We can become part of feminist networks and subscribe to feminist publications that will keep us informed of events as they unfold and affect women and as women respond. This will in turn give us some sense of our own place in this process and the underlying significance of our work for women in Antigonish. For we expect that movement networks will enable us to contribute to that wider process and to play a part beyond Antigonish.

VII - CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CASE OF ANTIGONISH

The Antigonish Women's Association may be able to bring to women's traditional sense of themselves as a group and their traditional role in local communities, a feminist awareness of the subordination of women and their concerns

and the need to affirm both women's importance and power and the importance of their human concerns. We hope to do this both in our Association and in established women's groups, and to build an inclusive sense of women's identity that crosses divisions of town and county, religion, race, language, class, status, life situations and organizational loyalty. Such shared identity might make possible a powerful and compassionate female political presence that could claim the mainstream for 'women's issues' and show how the transfer of resources and power to women is the key to human and community development.

To have any chance of success this process will require a clear articulation of the values of female culture and female work outlined earlier as well as an uncompromising recognition of women's oppression. It will require (1) that all our activities and public positions clearly communicate these values and this analysis, (2) that we put major emphasis on building relationships and collaborating with established women's groups as well as (3) reaching women from all walks of life however apparently unavailable for involvement, (4) that we build slowly by face to face and individual outreach, (5) make very careful decisions about which issues to tackle when and how, and (6) hold a delicate balance between support services, self-help and social action, between inclusiveness and outspokenness.

This is, of course, no small task. It will be a very slow process and may never succeed. But the conditions in Antigonish outlined earlier in this paper and events elsewhere suggest that this may be a form of organizing whose time has come. Reports of feminist or woman-identified activities with a broad community base outside metropolitan areas are more common today than they have been in the past. The 1983 Annual Conference of CRIAW, for instance, included papers about women's activism in Courteney, B.C.; Whitehorse; rural Southwestern Ontario; Kitimat and northern resource communities. Some new women's newspapers such as Common Ground in P.E.I. are combining an inclusive approach to traditional women's news and affairs with new women's issues and clear feminist analysis.

At the same time, long established traditional women's groups are responding to issues defined by feminism. In the process of dealing with these issues they are redefining their sense of women as a group in a way that encompasses women's disadvantages without denying their strengths and importance. The Women's Institutes in Manitoba were moved by the Irene Murdoch case to play a major part in property law reform with women from the National Farmers Union and other traditional and feminist groups. Rural and farm women's organizations continue to identify and act upon women's rights and special needs.

The Nurses' Associations are playing a more prominent role in criticizing the medical system. They are proposing alternative forms of health care with an emphasis on less hierarchical, bureaucratic and centralized forms of care focused on prevention and human needs and using the skills of a wide variety of (mainly female) health professionals and paraprofessionals.⁴⁴ Recently they have addressed themselves to pornography as a health issue and their statements and proposals have an increasingly feminist ring⁴⁵; Nurses' growing awareness of themselves as women, their relative powerlessness and incredible importance is being more and more clearly articulated.

Influenced partly by the nurses and by the women's movement in general other female health professionals such as Dietitians and Nutritionists are also beginning to make public statements as women professionals and to challenge the hierarchical organization of medicine.⁴⁶

Feminist social workers have made some progress in introducing a consideration of social factors into a social work approach, identifying women as the vast majority of both clients and practitioners, uncovering the mystifications that divide the two from each other and moving toward a feminist practice which is social, collective, self-affirming and focused on social change rather than social control. Theirs is not an exclusively female profession so the movement

toward women-focused definitions is conflict ridden. However the feminist presence is strong in a number of schools of social work and represents a growing component in professional organizations, activities and journals.⁴⁷

Women teachers are losing their predominance in the profession in this period of recession and have, in any case, not been a defining voice in mixed teachers' associations. But the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario has played a strong role in defining and defending women's interests in education and has used its organizational strength to great effect in support of such feminist struggles as that over the Constitution. The growth of the women's movement has enabled female professional groups such as teachers and social workers to reclaim their reforming and pro-woman history. A consciousness on the part of these groups that they are women's groups can bring enormous power to feminism.

The Voice of Women is a long established women's political group dedicated to the struggle for peace. Recently, in response to the growth of the women's movement, it has begun to emphasize the connections between the struggle for peace and against male dominance. Feminism's growing awareness of the importance of female culture as well as women's oppression won the sympathy and allegiance of this group which is a long standing expression of that culture.

The influence of this group and others like it has in turn strengthened feminism's recognition of women's culture.

Within the trade union movement, as well, larger numbers of women are becoming aware of their specific interests as women. They are founding caucuses within the unions, and links between and beyond these unions and are bringing pressure to bear on the definition of the struggle, the articulation of demands, the distribution of resources and the establishment of priorities. This development has enormous potential to increase women's power and the power of the women's movement.⁴⁸

The growing feminist awareness in rural and small town women's and established women's professional and political groups and among individual women reformers in the consumer, health, environmental, trade union and peace movements may represent a gradual fusing of feminism and traditional women's reform concerns⁴⁹ which holds the potential of a stronger and broader feminism that can presume a central role in determining social priorities in general. Feminist analysis of women's oppression and the marginalization of women and their values is an essential tool for all women activists. Traditional women's networks and groups and their presumption of women's important role in community development can bring new power to feminism.

If this process is in fact underway the efforts of the Antigoniash Women's Association are a part of wider developments within the women's movement and may be blessed with success.

Appendix A - Detailed Chronology

The idea of establishing a women's group in Antigonish came from the desire of women who had been attending a Continuing Education course at the university called "Women Today" to continue meeting and to initiate some form of activity. Twenty women, class members and friends, met in April of 1983 and decided to appoint a steering committee to establish an Association and to examine the possibility of establishing a Women's Resource Centre along the lines of one in a neighbouring community (The Second Storey Women's Resource Centre, ~~Bridgewater~~ *Bridgewater*). In May the Steering Committee identified the steps involved in founding a resource centre, drew up a brief statement of the goals and objectives of the Antigonish Women's Association, printed membership cards and sold membership for \$3.00 each, and organized a general meeting of the membership. Approximately thirty women attended this meeting at which the steering committee was disbanded and a Board appointed, plans to seek funds from the Secretary of State to open a Women's Resource Centre were discussed, the steering committee's search for a possible location for the centre was reported and members were asked to raise and contribute money by selling sustaining memberships in the Association.

In June the Association Board met with a representative from the Secretary of State's office to discuss the proposed Resource Centre and funding guidelines, drew up a funding proposal for the Women's Programme of that office, sought letters of support for the Centre from agencies, groups and individuals in the community, held another general meeting and continued to increase membership by means of press releases and posters.

The application for funds was submitted in July. Board committees worked over the summer on housing, resources, policy and membership but the Board's next meeting as a whole was in September. In October word was received that the Secretary of State grant was approved; a hiring committee was established to draft a job description for a full-time co-ordinator and part-time office manager for the Resource Centre, to work with Canada Employment and Immigration and interview candidates; a general meeting of the Association was held to report on developments, increase members' participation in the Association's Committees. Letters were sent to established women's groups in the area inviting them to announce the meeting to their members and to send a representative of their group.

By November the Association rented a downtown location (after many disappointments and near misses over the summer), hired a very capable co-ordinator and office manager

13. This is true even though the size of a census farm decreased substantially from 1976 (one or more acres with sales of agricultural products during 1975 worth \$1,200 or more) to 1981 (an agricultural holding with sales of agricultural products during 1980 worth \$250 or more.)

14. The Dutch post-war immigrants are noted for their highly capitalized operations.

15. The Farmer Takes a Wife, A Study by Concerned Farm Women, Gisele Ireland, published independently, 1983, is one of the most recent studies to document this. It's findings are supported by research into women's educational needs done in Antigonish County in 1983. See Appendix II.

16. The 1981 average employment income for males and females in Nova Scotia and Antigonish County are:

	Male	Female
Nova Scotia	14,088	7,323
Antigonish	13,199	7,050

Median employment income

Nova Scotia	13,087	6,019
Antigonish	11,681	5,476

17. The National Council of Welfare estimates that there would be 50% more families below the poverty line if the wife had no earnings.

18. The 42.1% participation rate of women in Antigonish County in 1976 rose to 45.7% in 1981.

19. There is a large literature examining the sexual division of labour in the home and documenting men's virtual absence from the "regular, necessary and most time consuming work in the household" (Meissner, p.431), even in the extreme case when women's work load includes a full time paid job and the care of young children. One of the most interesting Canadian studies, based on a time budget survey of 400 Vancouver couples is: Martin Meissner et al., "No Exit for Wives: Sexual Division of Labour and the Cumulation of Household Demands." Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology XII, 4, Part 1 (1975):424-439.

20. The show called "On the Bias" was brought to town by members of the Development Education Committee (DEC) who were touring the Maritimes.

21. In Quebec 80% of the workers earning the minimum wage are women and the proportion is close to 75% in the nation as a whole.