

Rural Feminist Activism and Religious Fundamentalism in Nova Scotia, Canada



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Antigonish Women's Resource Centre

Lucille Harper, Leona M. English and Betsy MacDonald

In one rural school board district in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, there has been a concerted effort led by a small group of religious fundamentalists, with support from fathers' rights activists, to limit and in some instances to prevent students from accessing information about personal relationships, health and sexuality. This paper will explore four situations that occurred between 2002 and 2008 in which some 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. It will provide an analysis of the strategies used by a local women's organization working with community allies to support the provision of 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).

Background

Antigonish is a small town in northeastern Nova Scotia that serves an extensive rural area. Its serene and picturesque exterior covers a diversity of cultures, ideologies and religious affiliations. The town and county are populated predominantly by sixth- and seventh-generation families of strong Scottish and Acadian heritages, people who came to work at the local university and hospital and those who settled the area as part of a "back to the land" movement in the 1970s, along with rural communities of African Nova Scotians and First Nation Mi'kmaq, one of the region's indigenous populations. The dominant religion is Roman Catholicism, with up to 80% of the people identifying as Catholic. Both the university and the regional hospital were established as Catholic institutions, and many of the local public schools began as parish schools. The Antigonish Movement, founded in the 1920s, inspired a cooperative movement that has been internationally acclaimed for its progressive approach to working with communities to address social

and economic concerns. Although the university, schools and hospital are now secular, many Catholics continue to express their faith through social justice activism and community development work, and the Catholic Church continues to have 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.

Who Are the Religious Fundamentalists?

We understand religious fundamentalism as an intersection between faith, patriarchal tradition and power. It is a selective interpretation of religious texts and doctrines that aims to further a specific political or cultural agenda (whether it be controlling women's bodies, maintaining a patriarchal social order or resisting perceived external threats). Fundamentalism exists in various religions and geographic/cultural contexts, and it takes on diverse forms. We acknowledge that the term "fundamentalism" has been used by Western political leaders to justify imperialist interventions and other racist, neo-liberal and militaristic projects. However, we recognize that religious fundamentalism is a reality that affects many women, men and children, and we believe that as feminists we need to address this issue with critical praxis on numerous fronts.

Religious fundamentalism in Antigonish is a mix of religion, politics, and cultural and historical sentiment. An intricate relationship exists among a variety of partners who promote their own fundamentalist views, largely by attacking initiatives they see as threatening to their values and beliefs. They are predominantly, but not exclusively, male. The collaborating groups include members of Catholic civil society groups and conservative Roman Catholic congregants who adhere to strict interpretations of scripture, traditional doctrines and practices, working together with anti-feminist and fathers' rights groups such as REAL (Realistic, Equal, Active, for Life) Women of Canada and Men Opposed to Misandry, an organization that maintains society is biased in favour of women and discriminates against males. Both 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.

In Antigonish, they have sought and been elected to public positions, including at the local school board level, where they use their influence to promote a fundamentalist, anti-equality agenda. It appears that their collective agenda is to re-establish the strict moral authority of 1950s Catholicism. At the school level, they focus on policing the activities of adolescent girls by limiting access to information about health and reproductive rights, and by limiting their right to make autonomous decisions about their health and sexual practices. They use local media, write letters to the editors of local papers, and initiate email campaigns through which they call upon an international network to support their colleagues who participate in elected bodies such as the school board. They routinely draw on dubious academic studies about the plight of youth and the violence perpetrated by women; at the same time, they cite the horrors of feminism and the decline of family values.

In the campaigns waged against the programs provided or supported by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC or Women's Centre), their *modus operandi* is to create a climate of fear of feminism and mistrust of the work of the Women's Centre among school board members, school staff and the general public. To this end, they attack feminism as a danger to the traditional family structure and to society. They simultaneously use misinformation and make damaging statements to malign Women's Centre staff personally. They misrepresent positions taken by the Centre. They dismiss the Centre as a special interest group with a covert agenda to destroy the family. They incite both misogyny and homophobia, and they attempt to intimidate non-aligned members of the school board by playing to both their Catholicism and traditional family values. Examples of their efforts include the following:

[The school board member] had good reason to be concerned about the program because the people who developed it are feminist with a radical agenda to promote... [T]he family has taken a beating from the local feminists. (Letter to the editor, The Casket, June 2007)

[The school board member] is a strong Christian, [the Women's Centre's executive director] is an ardent feminist. [He] is a strong believer in the family... [She] sows the seed of family discontent by encouraging women who are having marital problems to leave their husbands, file restraining orders, and/or file charges of domestic violence. (Email sent to members of the Strait Regional School Board and copied to the AWRC, May 2008)

Among other appellations that could be added to her [the Women's Centre's executive director's] name are: anti-Catholic (the Catholic Church is unswerving in its opposition to abortion and does not

ordain women) ... anti-father, pro-lesbian, etc. ... Board members who profess to be practicing Roman Catholics must vote in favour of [the school board member's] motion. For a Roman Catholic to vote in collusion with an avowed pro-abortion organization is a grave error and could lead to excommunication. (Email to the members of the Strait Regional School Board and copied to the AWRC, May 2008)

What is the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre?

Established in the 1980s, the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre exists to provide support services and programs to women and adolescent girls, advocate for the rights of women, and provide educational programs to promote women's equality and social justice. It has concentrated its efforts on economic and social justice issues such as violence against women, housing, poverty reduction and income support for women, and it has been proactive in providing health services for women and adolescent girls. It employs local women and works with a wide variety of partners, including women's religious groups, local health authorities, community-based service providers, and provincial social justice organizations. As a feminist organization, it tends to be a lightning rod for the anti-woman, anti-equality sentiments espoused by religious fundamentalists.

The Issues

As an organization concerned with prevention as well as intervention, with social change as well as service delivery, the AWRC has identified the provision of support services and educational programs for youth as key to addressing social inequities and different forms of discrimination and to advancing the status of women. It is this work with youth and the promotion of educational programs and resources for youth that has generated the most sustained opposition from religious fundamentalists and their allies. The common rallying cry of opposition has been the accusation that the Healthy Relationships programs provided by the Women's Centre, the services provided by the Youth Health Centres, and the information provided in the *Sex?* booklet all focus primarily on advancing the sexual autonomy of girls by giving them information about contraception and abortion and thereby encouraging "recreational" sex outside of marriage. They see these programs and resources as challenging the privileged position of the traditional family by allowing students autonomous access to sexual health services and by providing students with a broader understanding of sexual practices and promoting the acceptance of same-sex relationships. They object to students being able to access information without the express permission of, and therefore outside the control of, their families.

To religious fundamentalists, these efforts represent a threat to the patriarchal order that centres on the control of female sexuality and the preservation of heteronormative relationships.

School-Based Programs, Health Centres and Sexuality Resources

In 2002, the Women's Centre approached the local school board with the offer to provide programs to educate teens about healthy relationships and teach them skills for negotiating their relationships, be they familial, social or intimate, in a healthy, non-abusive way. Between July and September 2002, both the school board and the Women's Centre were bombarded with an email campaign opposing the programs. Most of the 140 email messages had attached articles that drew links between and condemned feminism, homosexuality, contraception and abortion while challenging research on violence against women and maintaining that women are as abusive as or more abusive than men. Much of it came from people who were traced, through their email addresses, to fathers' rights organizations in Ontario, Canada and the United States. The emails were copied to the national office of the Catholic Women's League, the national office of REAL Women of Canada, local parishes, and the Women's Centre. The personal attacks made in the email about Women's Centre staff contained information not in the public realm, inaccurate though it was. This information evidently was provided to these fathers' rights activists by persons in the community with an agenda to discredit the Women's Centre and to convince school board members to vote against their program.

In response, the Women's Centre worked with an educator to demonstrate how the program met specific learning objectives for school curricula and, at the request of the school board, sought and received approval for the program from the provincial minister of education. At a meeting with the school board, Women's Centre staff were questioned intensively about whether the proposed curriculum included sexuality education. The assumption from the school board member was that "relationships" equated with "sex." Only with the approval of the minister of education and the assurance that it was not "sex education" was the program approved by the local school board for delivery in two local schools.

In 2004, the Nova Scotia Departments of Health and Education, working collaboratively with NGOs (including Planned Parenthood) and a youth advisory group, produced the *Sex?* booklet, an educational resource to be distributed through schools to students in grades 7 to 12 (ages 12 to 18). The booklet provided young people with healthy sexuality information to assist them in making informed decisions about sexual activity and their health. While there was debate among many school boards across

the province, the local school board was the only one that refused by a vote of 6-4 to allow any distribution of the booklet to students or their parents through their schools. Objections to the booklet voiced by some school board members as well as some community members and religiously affiliated groups dedicated to preserving traditional mores and heteronormative practices included the explicit nature of the material, the information on contraception and abortion, and the acceptance of homosexuality.

In 2006, when the school board voted to introduce and support Youth Health Centres in all grade 9-12 schools (ages 14 to 18) in the district, the fundamentalist-based forces again joined in opposition. They opposed the Youth Health Centres on the grounds that they provide students with information about puberty, abortion, sex, contraception and homosexuality and that they are a way of providing birth control to teens without parental permission. The Catholic Civil Rights League¹ (CCRL) provided a public voice to the opposition, taking the stance that if the Centres were to be in the schools, students would need parental permission to access them. In their public presentation to the school board, they made a point of identifying the current president of the local chapter of the CCRL as a “non-custodial parent” and noted that “[h]e would like to tell you how difficult it is to be included in his children’s education as a non-custodial parent. He would tell you how especially difficult it is to bring up his children in the faith in a world that seems to have gone mad in many ways.”² One member of the CCRL, a teacher, saw “the health clinics as tools for third parties to lobby children in forms of sexual behaviour and ideologies that offend their identity as Christians.”³ In support of the opposition to the Youth Health Centres, some school board members stated that Youth Health Centres do not belong in local schools because their services are inappropriate and they promote a far left-wing agenda.⁴ Believing that denying students autonomy in making decisions regarding their own health would violate their human rights, the Women’s Centre worked with the local health district and members of the community to call for the right of students to access confidential health care to take precedence over their parents’ right to deny them access to that care.

Although the Women’s Centre had been providing Healthy Relationships programs in two local schools since 2002, when the program expanded to ten schools in 2007, the school board members allied with fundamentalist religious groups and fathers’ rights groups to begin an increasingly vocal opposition to all in-school programs that the Women’s Centre provided. Again, the Women’s Centre’s educational programs were perceived by right-wing fundamentalists to be a way of covertly providing sex education to teens, thereby promoting premarital sex, teen pregnancy and abortion. When the Women’s Centre was invited

to a school board meeting to answer questions about their programs, the board members opposing them grilled Women’s Centre staff about using a feminist approach, objected to their presence in the schools on the basis they are a special interest group, and questioned their professionalism and ability to deal with students on sensitive issues. When cautioned that their questioning was becoming inappropriate, one of the board members stormed out of the room, effectively bringing the meeting to a close and shutting down school board business. Subsequently, in April 2008, a school board member announced his plan to present a motion to ban Women’s Centre services from all schools in the school board district. This ignited a campaign of emails and letters to the school board both in support of the programs and calling for their removal from the schools. The public opposition to the programs was particularly vitriolic and personal in their attack on Women’s Centre staff. Again, most of the opposition came from fathers’ rights organizations traced to the United States as well as from local religious fundamentalists and traditional-family proponents. Both the local and provincial media picked up the story, and interest in the outcome grew.

Intersection of Fathers’ Rights and Religious Fundamentalist Arguments

What is at issue for both religious fundamentalists and fathers’ rights groups is preserving and maintaining male dominance by controlling women’s reproduction, women’s sexuality and women’s bodies. All of the fundamentalist arguments are couched in the discourse of “family values” with the traditional heterosexual, two-parent, nuclear family held forth as the model. Within the traditional family, where the father is provided with dominant status as “the head of the household,” any suggestions of women’s right to autonomy and equality are perceived to be threatening to “the family.” Children are subject to the rule of the father (often translated as “the parents”) and the girl child is under particular pressure to adhere to his/their will and worldview. Adolescent girls, like women, are seen primarily as bodies and, as such, are both vulnerable and dangerous, and need to be kept under tight control. The mantle of religion provides a language for this control, under which it is euphemistically referred to as providing “protection” or “saving” and “rescuing” girls.

[Youth Health Centres] are forums which interest groups are using to promote their moral views and opinions and they are using the principle of doctor-patient confidentiality in order to prevent parents from exercising their right to teach children their own moral beliefs ... [T]he school board’s primary duty is to parents. (Catholic Civil Rights League presentation to the Strait Regional School Board, December 2006)

Parents have the right to teach their children chastity and respect for their bodies without interference. Unless, of course, these [Youth Health Centres] plan on teaching chastity to students and the meaning of chastity to a Catholic individual. (Letter to the editor, The Casket, April 2006)

Both fathers' rights adherents and religious fundamentalists fear women's autonomy and the threat it poses to male privilege. They both purport that there are natural and innate differences between the sexes and they both oppose social change as envisioned and worked towards by the feminist movement. Both use an anti-feminist, anti-woman discourse to support their views. Fathers' rights adherents claim that women have achieved equality, that feminism is anti-family and discriminates against and victimizes men,⁵ and that mothers are given preferential custody treatment by the courts and use it to keep fathers from their children.

In working with a number of militant homosexuals and militant feminists, I found that in both cases there was a rage toward fathers. That rage was politicized into a general rage against men and masculinity.⁶ (Email to members of the Strait Regional School Board and copied to AWRC, May 2008)

Feminism is an ideology: an analysis which explains evil and facilitates change. In this case, feminism would have us believe that all men are evil by nature and responsible for most of the violence in the world ... It's a destructive theory because it pits women against men and daughters against their fathers, thus creating dysfunctional families. It also suggests that women are anti-family. (Letter to the editor, The Casket, May 2008)

So many children [are] being born out of wedlock to girls and women who have no intention of marrying the father of these unfortunate children ... A mother is not a substitute for a father, neither is her brother, uncle or male friend. Every child, unless by death, deserves to have a father in his or her life. It is extremely immature and selfish to become pregnant when not married. This is a form of child abuse itself. (Email to the Strait Regional School Board, AWRC, local parishes, and REAL Women, July 2002)

Religious fundamentalists support clearly defined gender roles and see the only role for women as being within the traditional family; in this worldview, sex is only acceptable within heterosexual marriage, and the rights and values of the family take precedence over those of students within the public education system.

Human sexuality has two organic purposes: procreation and spousal unity. Sex produces babies, and sex bonds the man and the woman to each other... Catholic readers may recognize this as the Church's traditional teaching... [M]any egalitarians are offended by gender, because men and women can never be made completely equal ... We can see our differences as opportunities for growth and sharing, or we can view them as something to fight about. Modern feminism seems to encourage the fighting. (Letter to the editor, The Casket, March 2006)

Feminist, progressive women's organizations from all parts of the world, including the West, who are concerned with social justice and equality would benefit from identifying the many texts that fundamentalists create—the campaigns in which they are involved both explicitly or under other mantles—and undertaking policy and discourse analyses on these texts, and sharing their findings. Discourse analysis is important in that it focuses on the medium through which the message is conveyed, the tone and use of language of the protestor, and the textual analysis of the messages. Developing an analysis and understanding of medium, language and message provides insight into social power relationships, as discourse both reflects and influences social context. Discourse helps shape and is an active element in changing social relationships and is key to identifying and understanding possibility within political struggles. Using discourse analysis to build multiple strategies and action plans that both expose and challenge the fundamentalist message is key to advancing positive social change for women and girls at the local level as well as for connecting with the work women are doing around the world.

Strategies of Resistance and Lessons Learned

The decision for the Women's Centre to take action was precipitated by major opposition played out at the school board level to each of the initiatives named above: the Women's Centre healthy relationship/violence prevention programs, healthy sexuality information resources and youth health centres. Each initiative was seen by the Women's Centre to be crucial to the health and well-being of young women. The strategies the Centre employed were a combination of building support for the programs by providing accurate information to the general public about the programs; building positive working relationships with the schools, the school board administration, and the Department of Education; engaging with allies in the health sector; and organizing supporters to voice their concerns. Program information was provided to the public through the AWRC website, media interviews and press releases. The information included findings from external as well as internal annual program evaluations that documented the impact of the program from the perspective of students, teachers and program facilitators.

Although the lead organization changed in each struggle to move an initiative forward, the Women's Centre was seen as a key organizer and/or collaborator. In the case of the healthy relationship programs, the Women's Centre was the lead organization working with allied health sector groups, educators and members of the general public. In the case of the *Sex?* booklet and the Youth Health Centres, the Women's Centre was called upon as a key ally, integral to the effort. With each struggle, the Women's Centre moved forward methodically and procedurally, learning more about how to build public and political support for the threatened programs. In each struggle, the Women's Centre chose to fight its campaign on the strength of its programs, to write and speak publicly only about its programs and never about those opposing them. As people in the community rallied to support the programs, opposition from fundamentalist allied individuals and groups increased.

From the beginning, the Women's Centre sought to develop positive working relationships with the school board administrators, school staff, and key members of the communities in which their programs were to be delivered. With the Rural Youth Healthy Relationships Education Program, this was done by providing the school board administration with information about the program, inviting school staff and community representatives to act in an advisory capacity for its implementation and delivery, and meeting with key bureaucrats in the Department of Education. When resistance from the fundamentalist groups appeared, there was already an understanding of the goals of the program and strong support for it among key community people. The Women's Centre ensured that the school board members who were in favour of the program had the information they needed to argue for its implementation. Further, the AWRC identified to the school board administration the U.S.-based fathers' rights group supporting the local campaign. In the end, the majority of the school board members were not persuaded by the overpoweringly anti-woman message from the email campaign and assuaged the opposing board members by insisting that the program be approved by the Minister of Education. Once that approval was provided and the program implemented, it became more difficult to argue that it was inappropriate for students.

However, government sanction for the *Sex?* booklet did not hold sway with the school board, and the religious fundamentalist position supported by conservative Catholic allies won the appeal to ban the distribution of the booklet to students through their schools. Because the booklet was explicitly about sexual health and provided information about birth control and homosexuality, they were able to raise fear about the potential disintegration of traditional family values. Although Public Health Services held public information meetings and worked with their allies in the community and the province to call for distribution

of the booklet, the local school board was the only one in the province to completely deny access to students and their parents. As a means of ensuring that young people had access to the booklet, it was made available through local stores, the Women's Centre and other community organizations.

Thus, when the request to establish Youth Health Centres was brought before the school board, the debate about students' rights to access information about their health, especially their sexual health, was already a hotly debated topic, with strong forces prepared to rally against it. With the banning of the *Sex?* booklet, more community members were aware that Youth Health Centres might also be banned and were ready to be more vocal in their support of the centres. When a complete ban of the centres looked as though it would be unacceptable to the majority of school board members, the fundamentalist members and their allies sought to limit students' access by requiring parental permission. Working with healthcare providers, the Women's Centre organized a letter-writing campaign, collected signatures on a petition, provided testimony to the need for the centres at a public school board meeting, spoke with the media, and rallied considerable public support for students to access Youth Health Centres autonomously. Aware that preventing youth from autonomous access to health services could be a violation of their human rights, the school board sought a legal opinion. After the legal opinion was found to support students' rights to access health care without parental permission, and after those opposing were unsuccessful in their attempt to secure support from the full school board for a second legal opinion, autonomous access to Youth Health Centres was approved.

Having failed to ban access to the Youth Health Centres, the fundamentalist opposition turned to Women's Centre programs, attempting to ban them from all schools. Allying once again with international fathers' rights organizations and individuals, REAL Women and conservative Catholics, they waged a fiercely misogynistic campaign against the Women's Centre and its staff. However, by this time school principals, teachers and students, as well as school board staff and many parents, saw the benefit of the programs and were ready to defend them. The Women's Centre had built widespread support among parents, academics, health care providers, and local women's religious orders and was able to call upon support from organizations and individuals across the province. Because local media regularly attended all public meetings of the school board, they were well apprised of the stances of individual members and the issues regarding health-related programs for youth. The AWRC had built good relationships with local media over the years and so was able to use the media to inform the public about its programs and correct misinformation coming from the right-wing

coalitions opposing them. As the local and provincial media reported on the struggle, support grew. Both sides wrote letters to the editors of local papers, sent letters and emails to the school board, called school board members individually, and made their case through the media. Youth wrote letters documenting their positive experiences with the Healthy Relationships for Youth program and expressing support for Youth Health Centres.

The emails that school board members received were reported to be 60% in favour of keeping the programs. Women turned out in numbers for the school board meeting at which the vote was to take place. Interestingly, one school board member noted at the meeting that most of the emails he had received in support of the programs had been from women, while most of those opposing had been from men. What he did not say was that several had originated from mens' rights groups based in the western United States. After all attempts by opposing school board members to derail the meeting failed, the vote was taken and the programs supported with seven in favour and four opposing. Within days, the Minister of Education disbanded the board, citing their inability to function. During the subsequent 2008 school board election, people came forward and four candidates ran in each of the two constituencies where they saw the school board members had been most problematic. Clearly, the public was calling for change, and their call was partially answered: one of the members opposed to programming for young women's health was defeated and another candidate with similar views was elected only by a slim margin due to a vote divided among four candidates.

Crucial to the success of each struggle was the firm belief of the school board administrative staff that students have the right to access information in order to make informed decisions about their health and well-being, that it is the responsibility of the principals to decide which programs they want in their schools and who will deliver them, and that the wishes of the school board will not supersede the policies as set out by the Department of Education. The refusal of the school board administration to be bullied by board members created space for public opinion and action to be taken in support of the programs. Also crucial was the use of different campaigning methods, including letter-writing, broadening our bases of support both within and outside the school system, and providing positive and accurate information to the public through the media. These various approaches were interconnected from the beginning and built upon each other as they evolved. The Women's Centre was careful to speak publicly only about the programs and their benefits to students and to refrain from engaging in discussions about the actions of individual school board members. At the same time, the Women's Centre built an analysis with and among their allies that

unmasked the fundamentalist ideologies and exposed the collaboration of fathers' rights groups in opposing the different programs and services. This allowed allies to speak publicly about the actions of oppositional school board members and to identify to the public the ideologies informing their opposition.

It remains to be seen what the next step will be for the fundamentalist allied groups, although local politics likely will remain an arena in which they will run for office and continue to put forward a misogynist agenda. Unmasking fundamentalist ideologues, identifying their agenda, and naming them as a separate, oppressive and regressive ideology within a dominant religion and, therefore, distinct from the religion itself, allows those practicing that religion to separate themselves from the imposition of fundamentalist interpretations, values and mores to which they do not adhere. Likewise, the series of struggles recounted in this case study demonstrate how feminists and progressive allies succeeded in "de-centring" fundamentalism from public discourse. Each time fundamentalist groups are stopped from imposing their will on the larger community, they lose ground in their claim that they represent the majority, mainstream voice.

The process of unmasking fundamentalism must be accompanied by continued efforts to build community support for feminist projects. By focusing positive attention on the Rural Youth Healthy Relationships Education Project, the *Sex?* booklet, Youth Health Centres and AWRC programs in schools, the AWRC was able to broaden its community support base and cultivate relationships that will play an important role in future struggles.

Looking Ahead

The alliance formed by partnering religious fundamentalism with fathers' rights discourses served to convince conservative religious and traditional family adherents that their beliefs are in line with fundamentalist, patriarchal values. This is powerful, effective and insidious. It operates below the surface and uses personal attack, fear-mongering and dubious academic data to support its case. Fundamentalist adherents appeal by employing a rhetoric of justice and rights to incite hatred and mistrust among the general public. As strategies for resisting social change and the advancement of the rights of women and girls, they play on fears of feminism, misogyny and homophobia, and they perpetuate stereotypes about women's activist organizations.

In our part of rural Nova Scotia, we are beginning to unmask these fundamentalist groups and understand that their power primarily

lies in their ability to claim a moral high ground by using tactics of intimidation, coercion, discrediting and isolating. We are also learning that there are different and overlapping fundamentalisms, and that the success of their campaigns depends on their ability to network across regions and across religious denominations (while the fundamentalist group in Antigonish is predominantly Catholic, it relied on support from members of the American religious right which is mainly Protestant). Finally, we are learning that although fundamentalism is here, is pervasive, and is so conservative it makes the mainstream look radical, exposing it—while at the same time cultivating new alliances and broadening community support—is vital to progressing a woman-positive vision.

Endnotes:

¹ The Catholic Civil Rights League describes itself as “a national lay Catholic organization committed to combating anti-Catholic defamation, working with the media to secure a fair hearing for Catholic positions on issues of public debate, and lobbying government and intervening in court challenges in support of law and policy compatible with a Catholic understanding of human nature and the common good.” From “About CCRL” page, [CCRL](#) website.

² Alexander J. MacDonald, Civil Rights Perspective, Catholic Civil Rights League, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Presentation to Strait Regional School Board, 6 Dec. 2006.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Alexander J. MacDonald, Civil Rights Perspective, Catholic Civil Rights League, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Presentation to Strait Regional School Board, 6 Dec. 2006.

⁵ Barbara Legault, Unofficial draft translation of “Des hommes contre le féminisme,” *À Bâbord!* Oct.-Nov. 2006.

⁶ This fathers’ rights adherent is quoting from an article he attaches to his email. In an article entitled “[Militant Homosexuality and Feminism: The Politicizing of Research and Feelings](#),” Gerald Schoenewolf contends, “the gist of militant homosexual and feminist activists seems to be to make heterosexual males the scapegoat for society’s problems.” He goes on to say, “The mothers of these patients tended to be women who felt frustrated by the traditional women’s role.” From the NARTH (National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality) website, 3 Sept. 2008 update.

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Author Bios:

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Betsy MacDonald is a musician, community organizer and researcher in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. She holds a Master of Arts in Social Justice and Equity Studies from Brock University, Ontario, Canada. Her activist work focuses on feminist social change, economic justice and LGBTQ issues.

Organizational Bio:

The Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre was established in 1983 as a centre for feminist collective activity in rural Nova Scotia. The AWRC focuses on education regarding women’s issues and on the provision of information, support and advocacy for women and adolescent girls. The AWRC has been a passionate voice for activism and social change in Nova Scotia, walking beside women for justice, equality, economic independence and freedom from violence.

www.antigonishwomenscentre.com