

# Feminism Reviled

## *Academic Non-Freedom at Canadian Universities*

By Anne Innis Dagg

*Même si les universités canadiennes prétendent respecter la liberté universitaire, il arrive souvent qu'on empêche une professeure féministe de présenter de l'information sur les femmes dans le cadre de ses cours pour contrebalancer le parti pris en faveur des hommes et qu'on lui refuse une carrière universitaire. De même, les étudiantes qui embrassent les concepts féministes se voient souvent ridiculisées et marginalisées par leurs professeurs et leurs pair-e-s.*

Society is imbued with the idea that universities provide academic freedom within their walls. Universities are considered temples of rationality, and acceptable professors are given lifetime jobs (tenure) to ensure this freedom cannot be taken away from them. It is a shock, then, to realize that those academics who really need academic freedom often do not have it. This is true of feminists who espouse equality between the sexes and critique male bias in academia.

This article will look at problems facing feminist teachers and feminist students in Canadian universities. University bias against women can only be overcome when these problems are combatted.

### **Feminist Teaching and Teachers**

No university in Canada has a policy stating that non-biased material must be taught in university courses. Not surprisingly, social science and humanities courses in the past have been biased toward men. Yet, paradoxically, the effort of feminists to correct this imbalance are seen by most students and other professors as unfair attempts to bias material. Nobody routinely collects information on what happens to teachers who try to teach

from an unbiased or feminist perspective, but anecdotal evidence indicates they have a hard time. For example, one professor was called a "fucking feminist" by a male student because she showed—in a social work class that had voted to see it—a CBC film on services provided to rapists.<sup>1</sup> This student and others were egged on in their revolt by anti-feminist male faculty. More recently, Prof. Rebecca Coulter received death threats to herself and her daughter when she inserted several lectures and tutorials on gender from a feminist perspective in a University of Western Ontario education course.

Other feminists have censored their lecture material to avoid antagonizing students and other professors. At the University of Western Ontario, some women have been deterred by sexism from teaching "in areas that are commonly viewed as challenging to heterosexual or male-dominant stereotypes."<sup>2</sup> One student complained to the head of a department that her professor was gay because she included academic materials on homosexuality and lesbianism in her courses and spoke in class about enforced heterosexuality. Some professors felt that, even if they did not encounter overt hostility from male students, the message was clear that "women faculty are attributed much less authority than their male counterparts."

The backlash against feminism has been most virulent at law schools, where feminism naturally arises among students taught to think critically about justice. Prof. Sheila McIntyre, who tried to teach unbiased law courses at Queen's University in the mid-1980's, found her efforts to raise feminist questions strenuously undermined by actions ranging from simply annoying disagreement or argument to more disturbing angry confrontation. The

classroom climate was made unworkable when students discredited their teacher's expertise and ability. Students sometimes boycotted classes, ridiculed feminist teachers in public, portrayed them pornographically in the men's washroom, and attacked them in course evaluations.

Similar antagonism exists at other Canadian law schools. In the spring of 1989, a law students' newspaper "contained critical, indeed scurrilous, comments about feminism at the law school."<sup>3</sup> Prof. Rob Martin, who reported this, himself writes contemptuously of women law professors who others say are trying "to transform the power within the classroom through the use of new and innovative teaching methodologies and methods of evaluation."<sup>4</sup> Martin calls the feminist professors "liars, bullies and charlatans," and notes "A lot of male faculty will not have anything to do with female students out of fear of being subjected to allegations."<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Prof. Constance Backhouse thinks that "What we are witnessing is a revolution in how women fit into the profession of law. It is a very creative, vibrant, exciting time."

Women's studies programs would seem to be a place where feminists can teach and discuss women's issues with complete freedom, but such is not the case. Many Canadian universities offer such programs but often with minimal support.<sup>6</sup> Women's studies courses are sometimes taught by non-feminists,<sup>7</sup> use negative course texts,<sup>8</sup> or are not especially relevant to the discipline of women's studies. Because the coordinator of the program often lacks tenure, her position may be short-term or she may downplay feminism to protect her career. She may be harassed by both faculty and students.<sup>9</sup> Male students sometimes waste class time by questioning the importance

---

**The backlash  
against feminism  
has been most  
virulent at law  
schools, where  
feminism naturally  
arises among  
students taught to  
think critically about  
justice.**

---

of women's studies and feminist scholarship, a position unimaginable in the traditional disciplines. Women's studies, too, evoke male backlash such as that of a Queen's geology professor who wrote to the Queen's Journal:

*There can be little doubt in anybody's mind... that the course [in women's studies] is taught by feminists and is solely concerned with orthodox feminist ideology. We regard this as a blatant and entirely unacceptable attempt to politicize legitimate academic activity at Queen's and we wish to take this opportunity to exercise... influence in redressing an intolerable distortion of our academic system.<sup>10</sup>*

The author claimed his views had wide support, especially in the Science Faculty.

Women professors, too, attack women's studies. Dr. Edit Gombay of the University of Alberta concluded a brief to that university's commission on alleged sexist transgressions of engineering students by saying, "the chief purpose of the women's studies courses is to provoke hatred against men and to instil contempt for non-feminist women."<sup>11</sup> Dr. Helga Vierich, a University of Alberta anthropologist, also distrusts women's studies, believing that the discipline breeds a "witch-hunt mentality" because of the importance in its theory of the concept of patriarchy.<sup>12</sup>

Given the negative way in which feminist teaching is received, it is easy to understand why few active feminists are hired at universities. At present, only 18 percent of professors are women and many of these are not feminists or are active anti-feminists.

Evidence concerning the hiring of feminists is necessarily anecdotal. In the 1989 Backhouse et al. report, one woman felt that department members interviewing her were trying to find out how feminist she was when they asked, "How would you feel working in a department that is mostly male?" Another said a male professor boasted to her about his "male chauvinist pig" tie after she gave a feminist seminar. A third reported listening to colloquia by two women candidates for one position. One had good credentials, gave an excellent talk, and handled questions with great confidence. The second, less competent, less confident and less

calm, was much prettier and dressed in a more feminine manner. The second woman was hired. "I think that she was chosen because she was less threatening to the men in the department." It is easy to believe that the second woman also seemed less of a feminist.

Recently, several positions became vacant in the Department of Sociology at the University of Waterloo, where there were only two women professors. One department member noted that a woman who seemed to be a feminist was interviewed for one of the openings, but that she "devoted her seminar presentation to uncovering male bias in the conduct of Canadian demography. It was not because she was a woman that the job went instead to a man. It was because of the kind of woman she turned out to be."<sup>13</sup>

Lesbians seem to have a particularly hard time being hired at universities, perhaps because they are often active feminists. One woman at the University of Western Ontario was asked if she would comment to a dean at another university about whether a colleague was a lesbian. This dean had apparently said, "we've got a couple of [lesbians] on our faculty and they're raising problems. I just couldn't get myself into a position of hiring another."<sup>14</sup> Other people were then questioned about this woman. She did not get the job.

One lesbian professor who felt harassed at her Ontario university decided to try for a job elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> She was finally accepted at another university, only to find that her old university had phoned her new university to try to persuade it not to hire her. Fortunately, this second university had said that it liked "troublemakers."

Three factors make it especially difficult for feminists to achieve tenure and promotion. Most importantly, feminist research will usually be judged by a predominantly male tenure committee, few of whom are familiar with feminist research. "Yet lack of knowledge doesn't seem to deter these people from judging feminist literature."<sup>16</sup> As well, feminist research often has a political basis, which offends men who prefer more academic and less immediately useful work.

Second, to provide an alternative viewpoint, feminists are commonly asked to sit on time-consuming committees. Such committees may be vital, yet women receive little credit for serving on them and

their time would be better spent on research to advance their careers.

Finally, by using gender-neutral language and examples pertinent to women in her lectures, a feminist is likely to anger male students. These students can hurt her career by complaining about her to the department head and giving her poor class evaluations.<sup>17</sup> One study "strongly suggests that women faculty in the social sciences must try harder than their male colleagues to convince male students that they are well prepared, decisive, and likable."<sup>18</sup> Another study showed that male students gave female professors significantly poorer ratings than they gave male professors.<sup>19</sup> If women professors are openly feminist, the bias of their male students against them will undoubtedly be greater.

The hiring data available for feminists are again *per force* anecdotal. One sociologist hoping to win tenure was Dr. Marylee Stephenson who helped launch women's studies in Canada.<sup>20</sup> A colleague said that McMaster University "felt very threatened because her field involved women reflecting on their changing role. It was very threatening for an established university." Seventy-six letters of support from across Canada were sent to the McMaster Tenure Appeal Tribunal which studied her case. Although her teaching and service to the community were judged "clearly outstanding," her research was found inadequate and she was denied tenure.

Another feminist who has won prestigious awards in her field was at first denied promotion to full professor because of systemic discrimination. Only full professors were asked to give references for her work, yet none was a woman or familiar with research on women. As well, outside referees were asked "Would you hire this person in your department?" even though almost all these people had shown by their past record that they were unwilling to hire a woman. They could only give a biased answer to this question. She finally won her promotion on appeal.<sup>21</sup>

### Feminist Students

Anecdotal evidence suggests that women students who raise feminist concerns in their classes (for example, a concern with bias against women) are often derided and silenced. One such A+

student was Sheelagh Conway, who objected when a psychology professor at the University of Windsor compared a twin-peak graph to a woman's breasts and referred to female staff as "girls."<sup>22</sup> Made to feel humiliated and isolated in class, she approached the professor privately, only to be flippantly dismissed. When she spoke to the department chairman, he compared her methods and motives to those used in Nazi Germany. Nor were her peers supportive. One male student complained that the class shouldn't have "to listen to this old lady" and her feminist views.<sup>23</sup> The class sent a petition to the university president requesting that the woman be expelled because her feminist views "were a threat to society."<sup>24</sup> She noticed that other women were silenced after witnessing her treatment.

Another woman, this time a University of Alberta engineering student, was verbally abused during an engineers' show.<sup>25</sup> The audience shouted "Shoot the Bitch! Get her off the stage!" because she had said in an earlier interview that she often felt like an outcast in the engineering faculty. Few feminists study engineering because of the "engineering tradition of degrading women."<sup>26</sup>

The students of Professor Sheila McIntyre who wanted their law courses to be non-gender-biased were continually harassed by male students and professors. One was labelled a lesbian, then shunned

and discredited. At least three others were trivialized or silenced by male teachers who made feminist-baiting jokes, ignored their questions, and allowed no class time to discuss the implications of sexist practice. Two women began to skip classes and three considered dropping law. The most ardent reformist "stopped talking in class and occasionally spoke to her teachers in private about remarks she had found offensive, but she did so jokingly and appeasingly."

A feminist graduate student at Queen's also experienced sexism from her professor.<sup>27</sup> He was pleased with her work until she began to pursue feminist ideas in her term paper and ask pointed questions in class; then he told a colleague she was "stupid," a "dolt," and threatened to fail her. When she discussed with a peer her work as a Teaching Assistant, he said "That gender stuff is crap." When asked to state the significance of women's role in the topic of study, the professor dismissed their involvement as "limited to woman-like activities such as making tea." More recently an anonymous letter threatened to rape and kill every woman on the editorial board of the Queen's newspaper, *Surface*. It said, "we're gonna rape u dykes. In fact, we will kill any and all feminists slowly."<sup>28</sup>

Women have received similar treatment at the University of Western Ontario. Graduate students in one depart-



Dawna Gallagher

ment found that, if they challenged traditional views in courses, the professors became very upset.<sup>29</sup> "One had walked out of class. Another asked a student to leave his office because she was "wasting his time." The woman reporting these events felt sure that the grades of some of these women students had suffered because of their stands.

The disparagement of women occurs in many disciplines. Recently at York University a variety of student comments were collected which clearly suggest that feminists and feminist ideas are unacceptable in many classrooms.<sup>30</sup> In a survey at the University of Waterloo, women students complained about sexist behaviour and comments from professors of history, geography, sociology, accounting, engineering, mathematics, and kinesiology.<sup>31</sup> An engineering student was called a "slut" by her male peers because she did well in a test, and another successful student was told to "wipe her mouth"; for both, the insinuation was that they traded sex with their professors for good marks.<sup>32</sup> Such sexism was not directed against feminist students but would have silenced any women who wanted to discuss feminist ideas not only in an offending professor's course, but also in other courses. Far from disciplining professors who use sexist comments in their classes, the University of Waterloo in 1991 gave two men well known on campus for such behaviour Distinguished Teacher Awards.<sup>33</sup>

For feminist students, the ultimate threat is that of murder. The man who killed 14 women, mostly engineering students, in Montréal on December 6, 1989, did so because he believed them to be feminists.<sup>34</sup> Shortly after these killings, some Toronto students suggested that feminist aggressiveness was partly to blame for the killer's action.<sup>35</sup> An administrator at the University of Waterloo said, what else could women expect? <sup>36</sup> And when a Wilfrid Laurier student asked a vice-president to give students time off classes to attend a march commemorating the killings, he said that such activities were like red rags to a bull so women shouldn't be surprised at a male backlash.<sup>37</sup>

Universities in Canada claim that they uphold academic freedom, but this is not so if one is a feminist advocating equality between women and men.

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication, December 12, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> C. Backhouse, R. Harris, G. Mitchell and A. Wylie, "The chilly climate for faculty women at UWO: postscript to the Backhouse Report" (London, ON: U of Western Ontario, 1989) 32.

<sup>3</sup> R. Martin, "More on right-wing feminism: Folly in the law school," *The Lawyers Weekly* (November 10, 1989) 7.

<sup>4</sup> D. Majury and C. Young, "Martin's views typify women's lot: readers" [letter to the editor], *The Lawyers Weekly* (December 8, 1989) 5.

<sup>5</sup> K. Makin, "Feminist content in courses creating a rift at law schools," *The Globe and Mail* (December 26, 1989) A16.

<sup>6</sup> A. I. Dagg and P. J. Thompson, *MisEducation: Women and Canadian Universities* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) 47-50.

<sup>7</sup> M. Eichler, "What's in a name: women's studies or feminist studies?" *Canadian Women's Studies Project Report* No. 3 (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1990) 18.

<sup>8</sup> G. Finn, review of *Feminist Perspectives* (eds. L. Code, S. Mullett and C. Overall), *Resources for Feminist Research* 18.3 (1989) 94.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication, May 10 and 17, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> D. J. Toogood, "Recruitment of feminists curbs academic freedom" [Letter to the editor], *Queen's Journal* (January 30, 1987) 3.

<sup>11</sup> V. Byfield, "Fembos in academe," *Alberta Report* (January 7, 1991) 28.

<sup>12</sup> Byfield, 26.

<sup>13</sup> K. Westhues, "Women in sociology: a note about the past" [Letter to the editor], *University of Waterloo Gazette* (November 22, 1989) 2.

<sup>14</sup> Backhouse et al., 33.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication, December 11, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> S. McIntyre, "Gender Bias Within a Canadian Law School," *Canadian Association of University Teachers Bulletin* (January 1987), cited in C. McLeod, "The Tenure Battle," *National* (November 1989) 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> Backhouse et al., 21.

<sup>18</sup> E. Martin, "Power and authority in the classroom: sexist stereotypes in teaching evaluations," *Signs* 9 (1984) 492.

<sup>19</sup> S. A. Basow and N. T. Silberg, "Student

evaluations of college professors: are female and male professors rated differently?" *Journal of Educational Psychology* 79.3 (1987) 308-14.

<sup>20</sup> Dagg and Thompson, 48-49.

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication, November 25, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> "Student charges psychology professor with sexism," *The Lance* (University of Windsor) November 27, 1986.

<sup>23</sup> "Activists protest sexism in U of W demonstration," *Windsor Star* (December 5, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication, May 1991.

<sup>25</sup> "University President 'shocked' by chants," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* (January 13, 1990) 8.

<sup>26</sup> R. Carter and G. Kirkup, "Barriers in Engineering," *Women in Engineering* (London: Macmillan, 1990) 147.

<sup>27</sup> "A personal perspective," *Stamp Out Sexism: the newsletter of the coalition for voices against sexism*, 1.4-6 (Women's Centre, Queen's University).

<sup>28</sup> "Female editors at Queen's receive rape-death threat," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* (November 6, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Backhouse et al.

<sup>30</sup> "Gender, power and silence in the classroom: our experiences speak for themselves," York University *Lexicon Supplement* (March 6, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> Dagg and Thompson, 7, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Personal communication, March 28, 1990.

<sup>33</sup> A. I. Dagg, "Opinion," Faculty Association of the University of Waterloo *FORUM* 28 (May 1991) 2, 4.

<sup>34</sup> S. Conway, "The Montreal Massacre — madness or misogyny," in A. I. Dagg, S. Conway and M. P. Simpson (Eds.), *Women's experience, women's education — an anthology* (Waterloo, ON: Otter Press, 1991) 33.

<sup>35</sup> C. Blattberg et al., "The constructive challenge of feminism," *University of Toronto Bulletin* (January 22, 1990) 16.

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication, December 8, 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Personal communication, November 26, 1990.