

Reflections on Institutionalized Anti-Feminism

By Sheila McIntyre

L'anti-féminisme est une forme de harcèlement ayant non seulement l'effet de déprofessionnaliser les femmes mais aussi des conséquences sérieuses pour la santé des féministes qui sont déjà sujettes à des demandes impossibles. La note de service célèbre de Sheila McIntyre décrivant les incidents de sexisme et d'anti-féminisme pendant sa première année d'enseignement à l'Université Queens a généré beaucoup d'attention et a même provoqué des initiatives anti-sexistes à Queens. Ici, elle discute ce qu'il coûte de combattre l'inégalité sexuelle systématique dans des institutions qui dépendent des féministes pour remédier au sexisme .

Our most common conception of sexual harassment is centred on unwanted sexual comments and advances or coercive sexual encounters between people in power (usually men) and their subordinates (usually women). We understand such abuse of power to be educationally as well as emotionally or physically damaging. *More recently, feminists have defined sexist classroom and campus behaviour and pornographic campus media as a form of sexual harassment poisoning women's learning environment and undermining their self-image, academic performance, intellectual confidence and career aspirations.*

Anti-feminism, however, has not readily been seen as a form of sexual harassment even though its expression and damaging effects have much in common with predatory and environmental harassment. This may be because we tend to conceptualize anti-feminism primarily as ideological hostility to a political perspective without registering that it does personal and professional harm to individual women as women in a context of institutional gender inequality.

All sexual harassment conditions women to adopt a host of *preventative strategies* in order to forestall its occurrence or mitigate its disabling effects. We develop a sixth sense to avoid or defuse offensive or threatening interactions. We try to mute our womanhood to prevent our sexualization, guard our conversation to avoid the personal, and obscure our real feelings to prevent their trivialization. We plan conversational and physical escape routes, deliberately misunderstand veiled sexual allusions, circulate in pairs, choose our battles, resist being hated. We repress consciousness of the endless little signals of our denigration as women.

At a minimum such strategies impair our ability to concentrate on the work for which we came to the university and diminish our access to the educational resources and professional credibility which university men consider their entitlement. As well, systemic harassment impairs our personal well-being. It forces us to suppress and implode anger, outrage, indignity, fear and some-

times, loathing of our tormenters or of ourselves as reflected through the misogyny of the harasser. These are not minor injuries.

When I am asked what happened after the memo was widely circulated and publicized I usually describe attitudinal, pedagogical and institutional changes secured over the course of two years by women's activism on campuses across the country once male bias in academe was in the spotlight. *What I rarely mention is that during those two years, my health broke down completely in the form of rheumatoid arthritis.*

Consciousness of my own ill health caused me to register how many feminist scholars are struggling with serious illnesses. I know two other feminist legal scholars with rheumatoid arthritis. Among my academic acquaintances are feminists suffering from lupus, Epstein-Barr, serious insomnia, cancer, clinical nervous disorders, candida and cluster migraines. Given how few feminist scholars there are, it is difficult to write this off as mere coincidence.

I think anti-feminism plays a significant role in triggering or aggravating such diseases, not least because acute stress and exhaustion have been medically linked to all these illnesses. Sexual harassment is extremely stressful and draining: it wears us down and eats us up. Although all campus women are at risk of injury by sexual harassment, anti-feminism can amplify harassment's stress and distress.

Some examples: Sexualization of women students and faculty deprofessionalizes us to put us down. Feminists, additionally, are sexualized as deviants—as sexless, or sexually unattractive, as manhaters or lesbians. In a heterosexist world, such “deviance” discredits us as women at the same time as it deprofessionalizes us.

Sexism frequently makes women as a group the butt of misogynist and denigrating humour. The feminist who objects to such humour is additionally targeted for ridicule, ostracism or censure.

While sexism implicitly devalues women, women's experience and women's achievements, *anti-feminism* is overtly contemptuous of feminists, the woman-centred values they embody and feminist critique. Feminist research is called unscholarly; feminist comment is dismissed as propaganda or the product of a hypersensitive and/or paranoid perspective; feminist teachers are described as unqualified; feminist activism is deemed uncollegial. *And while overt sexism is at least officially frowned upon, anti-feminism is tolerated as freedom of expression.* If women faculty assume that there will be built-in headwinds against their renewal or promotion and that such sexism will be denied, feminists assume their work and politics will be openly

discredited in merit and promotional decisions and that such discriminatory breaches of academic freedom will be defended in the name of academic excellence.

These are some of the directly disabling consequences of anti-feminism. But anti-feminism breeds an indirect risk to women's physical and mental health as well. *Put simply, feminists working in anti-feminist environments are expected by their colleagues and their women students to carry the burden of remedying the systemic sexism in their institutions virtually single-handed.* Because we are conscious of the damage being done to women in such environments, because we see ending women's subordination as an urgent task, we have extreme difficulty saying no to the demands made upon us as role models, allies, mentors, academic and career counsellors, sisters, pioneers, spokeswomen, sympathetic listeners, thesis supervisors, community volunteers, strategists, and general resources available on demand for furthering in any and every way women's equality.

There is not a little personal and professional satisfaction to be found in being considered so necessary to women's struggles and so non-authoritarian and approachable in our student interactions and so instrumental in securing incremental classroom, social and institutional change. There is also no small risk that our visible presence and our modest successes will be used by our administrations to demonstrate that gender bias is no longer (if it ever was) a problem on campus with the result that the burden to effect further reform will remain on an already over-extended minority. *Most of all, however, there is an unacceptable personal cost to the feminists called upon to meet such impossible expectations.*

I believe the feminist project is urgent and important, and that every single woman's activism can make a difference in improving other women's lives. I also believe that as well-educated, predominantly white women with (some) job and income security and considerable flexibility in defining our work, feminist scholars owe less privileged women an unwavering commitment to advancing the equality of all women, but not at the cost of hospitalizing ourselves.

Sexual harassment, including anti-feminism, is systemic. The one-woman show—however inspirational and effective in securing change—is no match for systemic sex discrimination. A handful of faculty feminists cannot fight for women's equality in the face of pervasive sexism and anti-feminism and simultaneously constitute the entire affirmative action program of the universities. If certain reforms cannot occur without our involvement, then we must allow them to wait, blaming the university and not ourselves for letting women down.

If we are faulted for failing the cause, we should encourage our critics to hold our colleagues and institutions to standards half as high as those expected of us. Sexism and anti-feminism should not be our responsibility as well as our oppression.

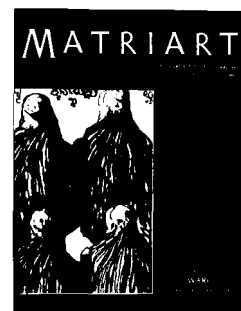
This article originally appeared in a special supplement to C.A.U.T. Bulletin (Canadian Association of University Teachers), Status of Women subcommittee (March 1989).

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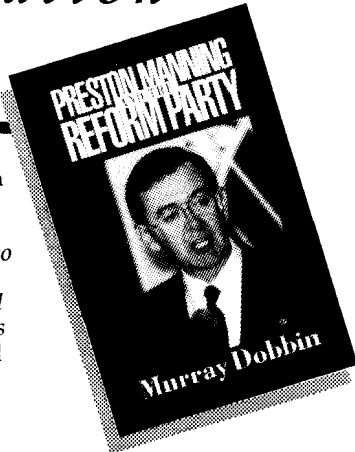
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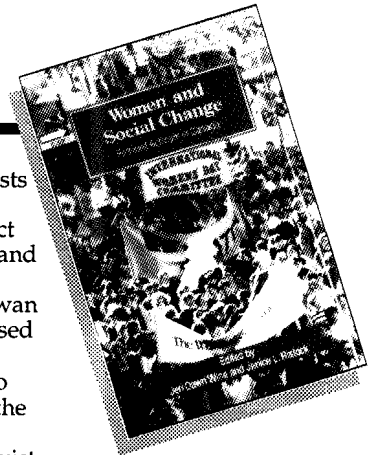
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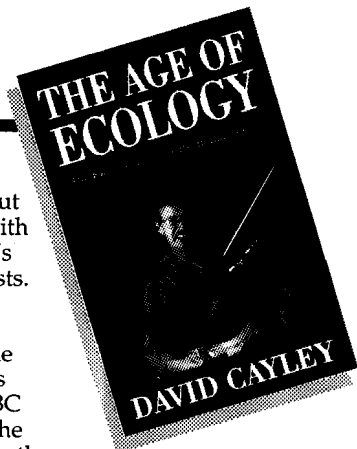
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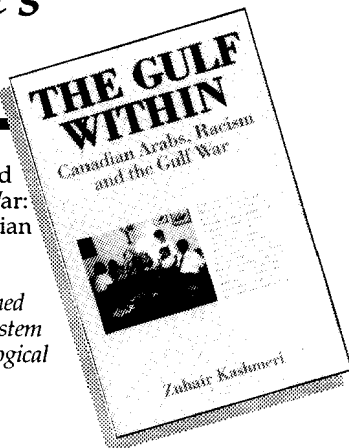
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