

Violence and Poverty on the "Rock"

Can Feminists Make a Difference?

BY GLYNIS GEORGE

Cet article examine la façon dont les féministes de Terre-Neuve et du Labrador ont attaqué les problèmes de la violence et de la pauvreté pendant les années 90. L'auteure parle des récentes initiatives du gouvernement notamment, la Stratégie provinciale contre la violence, et met en lumière la participation des militantes. Elle indique les difficultés à établir des programmes reliés à la violence et à la pauvreté dans un contexte de restructuration et de coupures fiscales.

The 1990s were a cultural watershed in Newfoundland and Labrador. While the decline of the fishery threatened the livelihood which had sustained settlement for centuries, the public discourse regarding violence against women, children and dependent adults broadened, provoking a significant re-thinking of the way people live in this province, fondly referred to as "The Rock." As someone who has worked with activists in women's councils on the West coast, and in St. John's, I was impressed by the coordinated efforts of women who were differently positioned within government and community to address violence and poverty through lobbying, protest and advocacy in their paid work and in community-based initiatives.

This was particularly difficult in the 1990s when government restructuring and fiscal restraint generated immense changes to government services. At the same time, issues raised by women, poverty groups and labour organizations in this politically conservative climate were marginalized as the "narrow" claims of special interests which were somehow distinct from the concerns of "ordinary" citizens (Bashevkin; George). Hence, this period presented feminists with a formidable task. How could they address violence and poverty and its impact on women and children, given this chilly climate of change?

This paper focuses on the involvement of activists in government initiatives that have taken place in the 1990s, specifically, the Provincial Strategy Against Violence, a government initiative undertaken in 1993. I suggest that it is the multi-dimensional character of their activism that permits the expression of a critical, grounded and substantive feminist politics. This is crucial in light of the apparent contradictory behaviour of the provincial government and its dependence on federal decision-making. On the one hand it has expanded its attention to violence and the experiences of vulnerable populations, in its plan to create "safe, caring" communities. On the other, the structural changes it has developed and the fiscal restraint it exercises

has made these initiatives difficult to realize in a meaningful way.

While violence and poverty have been on the feminist agenda since the early 1970s, the 1990s mark a significant shift in feminist organizing. By this time, women were better positioned to participate in this process as a result of their paid work in government, as "femocrats" (Rankin and Vickers 352-60), and because they had developed a strong political and social network to make issues politically and locally meaningful (George). In this context, grassroots organizing is central to ensuring that the complex connections between poverty and violence

in the lives of Newfoundlanders are addressed in government policy and provide a basis for critical reflection on the substantive changes that underlie government rhetoric. Moreover, because these concerns are hardly peculiar to the province, this examination illustrates the centrality of grass roots organizing for sustaining feminism during times of political conservatism and structural transformation, and supports Brodie's call for an attention to the grass roots (Brodie).

Violence, poverty, activism and government in Newfoundland and Labrador

When a recent Statistics Canada report cited Newfoundland and Labrador as having the lowest rate of violence (five and four per cent), against both women and men (Government of Canada 14), Joyce Hancock, the President of the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women was concerned about the effect of this statistic, or rather that its report would belie more than it revealed. It certainly resonated with the depiction of Newfoundlanders as egalitarian, friendly, and resilient folks more accustomed to being violated (at last economically) than engaging in such actions themselves. Yet, it didn't speak to the experiences of front-line workers who observe the impact of uneven or inaccessible direct services on women's experiences of violence. Moreover, it had little bearing on the interests of aboriginal women in their

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efforts to document the number of violent crimes which go unreported in their communities, or in their concern for the paucity of community policing in Labrador (see, for example, Pauktuutit). Indeed, the problem of violence is one that has been taken on and legitimated in the 1980s and 1990s across the province.

There was a significant increase in reports of violence and sexual abuse against women and children from the 1980s to the present. Cases of child sexual abuse for

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example, rose throughout the 1980s, by 5,000 per cent (Community Response Team). Moreover, while Newfoundland reported lower rates of violence for women in national surveys, a more effective documentation process was indicating that the incidence of violence against women was much higher than criminal justice statistics had reported (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2-3). Prominent cases, such as the sexual abuse of boys by Christian brothers at Mount Cashel orphanage galvanized public opinion. Perhaps more so than elsewhere in Canada, this latter issue brought

into sharp focus the way power over dependent persons had been historically exercised in families, the church and communities.

While the concern for these forms of violence is relatively new in public discourse, economic crisis in the province is not. Periods of financial crisis have characterized Newfoundland's history, both before and after Confederation. But the moratorium on cod fishing has intensified related social and economic problems. Although out-migration has stabilized somewhat recently, more than 20,000 persons have left the province since 1993, the year the moratorium was imposed. There has been a 75 per cent increase in those who have sought short-term government assistance between 1989 and 1996. This represent 100,000 men, women and children in a province of 500,000 people who receive only 50 per cent of the recommended annual incomes for families in official Statistics Canada assessments. Unemployment rates are twice the national average at 19 per cent, and 29 per cent amongst youth (Social Policy Advisory Committee). This has contributed to a loss in government revenue, which was already reduced by federal changes including reduced transfer payments, and funds for social assistance and unemployment insurance. Families are equally affected by the loss of local and regional government revenue.

The provincial government responded to these conditions through dramatic restructuring throughout the 1990s and a vow to create "safe, caring" communities. The dismantling of the department of social services and the

denominational school system was accompanied by the creation of regional economic and regional health boards. It is in this context of restructuring, fiscal restraint and economic crisis that activists lobbied for community input in how changes would be implemented. This resulted in two government initiatives which permitted consultation from a variety of residents and community-based organizations: a Provincial Strategy Against Violence and a Social Policy Committee.

The creation of these kinds of committees is, however, no guarantee that substantive consultation will occur. Nor does the call for "safe, healthy communities," a gender-neutral discourse, necessarily attend to the interests and experiences of women and vulnerable persons.

Rather, this context of change necessitates activists to participate in many ways. As advocates, watchdogs, lobbyists and agents of government change, they seek to address the impact of changes on women with diverse problems and backgrounds.

Feminists working within and outside government had long pointed to the differential impact of the economy, labour market and training on women and men (see Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women; Porter; George). Moreover, violence against women and poverty had been important issues for feminists and activists in the anti-poverty and shelter movements since the early 1970s (Pope and Burnham; Hebert and Foley). Prominent cases such as Mount Cashel, as well as a few cases of women convicted of physically abusing children drew media attention which sometimes implicated men and women as equal participants in the problem of violence. By contrast, feminists acknowledge that women can be abusive, yet, they consider the cultural context in which such women are historically located as mothers, foster mothers and caregivers. This means situating the family as an institution within the larger context of Newfoundland history: poverty, large families and powerful churches.

By the early 1990s women were positioned to develop multi-pronged, provincial wide strategies to address these problems. They lobbied to participate in the way these changes were implemented, through their participation in community-based organizations, and the Provincial Strategy Against Violence. The networks between grassroots activists and feminists working within institutions has been important in developing a feminist, inclusive process within the strategy, and for centring and communicating the experiences of women. And yet, the context of economic restructuring and restraint have impinged upon the implementation of the strategy and curtailed the input of less powerful residents.

Feminist activism and the Provincial Strategy Against Violence

The Provincial Strategy Against Violence (PSAV) began

as a consultation process in 1993, and developed into the first coordinated and provincial-wide initiative in the province. The Strategy sought to create "safe caring communities" through enhanced prevention and service delivery. Its mandate was informed by the assumption that "solutions to the problem of violence against women, children and elderly and dependent adults" must be achieved through coordinated efforts of community and government (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador). The Strategy targeted specific aspects of legislation, policy, direct services, community, education, research and evaluation.

The Strategy is a plan to address violence in all areas of government in a way that incorporates community. Hence, its efficacy is directly connected to the way government departments operate and are restructured and the extent to which the diverse experiences of less powerful residents are represented. Five years later, an independent evaluation report summarized the limitations and achievements of the plan and confirmed what activists had themselves observed. Some successes had been made in the area of legislation and justice, and in the establishment of regional and community links. However, there was still a limited role for community-based players in areas of decision-making, and the strategy was unfulfilled due to a pre-occupation with government restructuring in other areas, and "government-wide restraint." Successes and limitations were significantly related to pre-existing networks and initiatives in regions as well as the larger historical context of regional disparity within the province.

For regions which had little community-based networks of persons working on these issues, the strategies appeared to be "top-down" and hence, did not always reach a wide range of residents. These problems were exacerbated by the large size of Newfoundland and Labrador which made meeting and networking difficult and expensive. Also, the cultural and racialized divisions (between whites and Aborigines for example) contributed to feelings of distrust, and inequity. Moreover, even in those regions that were considered very well coordinated, such as Bay St. George on the West coast, government restructuring posed numerous roadblocks. Firstly, government representatives did not always give time to the "Strategy" and were often pre-occupied with implementing immense changes in their own departments. As Sharon Whalen, the coordinator of the Bay St. George Women's Council put it,

There were so many changes and directives coming from St. John's, that we didn't have time to absorb or interpret them never mind to consider their impact on women lives, or on our attempts to address violence.

How then were feminists able to make an impact?
Feminists had some impact through their incorpora-

tion of a gender analysis in the creation of an inclusive process within the strategy. Also, pre-existing links at the grassroots with community-based organizations, allowed a greater range of residents to make more substantive contributions in certain regions, and to critically assess the changes that were being implemented.

The incorporation of a systemic gender analysis in all areas of the strategy would ideally inform new policies in areas of justice, policing, and education. This included the training of those who work with victims, offenders and clients. Also, the broad and systemic nature of the analysis was used to offset tensions and conflicts, such as the finger-pointing and the narrow outlook that can pre-occupy those who work in criminal justice, health and human resources on issues of child protection or the treatment of offenders. The incorporation of such an analysis however, is dependent on the ability of activists to be heard, to exchange information, and to reach those who actually implement specific projects.

Hence, feminists also attended to creating an *inclusive feminist process* through which the strategy was implemented. For example, the strategy included regional coordinating committees (along with government representatives) in its structure. Two of these, representing St. John's and the Western region, were considered to have made strong substantive contributions to the "Strategy." It is noteworthy that both regions had developed community-based models *prior* to the strategy, the Interagency Committee on Violence Against Women in St. John's, and the Sexual Abuse Counseling Service in Bay St. George which had laid the groundwork for an inclusive process (see George). Moreover, activists in Bay St. George for example, had already learned to utilize government initiatives where possible and had developed strong networks to do so effectively. For example, although council members recognized the problems regarding the 1993 Royal Commission on Violence Against Women (see also Gotell) they were nonetheless, able to use the resources and information gathering process provided by the Commission, to increase awareness in the community through their media activism, and to expand their informal group for survivors of violence.

Grassroots links such as this were also important for critically monitoring the strategy and advocating for substantial community input, particularly in the context of fiscal restraint and restructuring. Activists are concerned that the mandate of the strategy will be undermined by some of the changes being implemented. For example, services previously provided by a social services depart-

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ment, are now accessed by two separate departments (Human Resources and Health). This change can make it more difficult for service workers to apprehend connections between financial need and the social problems women may experience with partners, in cases of separation and in terms of child welfare, or disabilities. In this case, community-based organizations and networks are increasingly important contexts for these connections to be made, in other words, for a woman's social and economic experience to be considered in her attempts to get training, or child care.

Ultimately, the Provincial Strategy has not yet produced significant increases in direct services although its mandate has been extended. To paraphrase one activist: how can you call for prevention by educating people on violence and then provide few resources for them to address the problem in their lives in a meaningful way? The Newfoundland government has invoked its "havenot" status and the effect of globalization in response to the criticism that changes within government departments or failure to develop services, are fiscally driven.

This kind of response exemplifies the dilemma that activists who work within government face. Their complex and ambiguous relationship with the state, a problem that is familiar to feminist elsewhere, (Brodie, 1998: 24) allows for some negotiation and influence. But in the context of government restraint activists need to ask broader and more critical questions. In this context, the diversity of activism at play in anti-poverty and violence networks in the province is evermore important. Aside from "femocrats" who work within the Women's Policy Office for example, there are eight women's councils which are community based and critical, yet provide services for, and are funded by government. There are also community-based organizations, such as the Provincial Association Against Family Violence, which receive ad hoc funding; and more autonomous, well-resourced groups, such as those linked to the labour movement.

Grass roots activists such as Helen Murphy, a representative of the Provincial Association Against Family Violence, who have been involved in these issues for years are well positioned to consider the impact of changes, or the absence of resources on women's lives over time.

Women (who experience transition houses) have illusions of what people can do for them; women come with enthusiasm, determination to change their living circumstances and are then faced with full extent of problem that may underlie their particular abusive situation.

This includes their place of residence (rural or urban), their lack of training and access to education, the difficulty of getting adequate legal representation or the larger changes in their sub-regional economy. Because her organization is "community-based" and has limited gov-

ernment funding, Helen considers that she often acts as critic of government policies. She is also well-placed to "ask the really hard questions," including for example, whether moves toward mediation and alternate dispute resolution will reduce costs without negatively impacting on women's access to fair treatment in legal matters.

At the same time, grass roots initiatives are hardly a panacea to making change particularly when government points to its own impoverishment or powerlessness. This makes it crucial to maintain strong links between violence and anti-poverty activists and more autonomous feminist organizations, which can provide a critical public space for organized protest, and the expression of alternate ways of making change. This is exemplified by the strong networks which link a very active provincial advisory council, to annual provincial conferences, and representation on the National Action Committee (NAC). The annual Provincial Conference, to be held this October, will incorporate the "World March," an international series of meetings involving over 6000 organizations, into its program. Their March in Gander will, like its predecessor in Quebec in 1995, Bread and Roses March against Poverty, focus on the violence, poverty and structures that keep women poor, excluded and violated. Having completed more than 40 visits to communities across the province this past year, activists at the Provincial Advisory Council for the Status of Women hope to achieve widespread support for this event.

Activists recognize that their work within government and at the grass roots requires them to draw upon the gender neutral discourse of "safe" communities, or to underplay their analysis as "feminist." This poses several problems, including the "watering-down" of feminist insights, and the difficulty of actually documenting the impact of feminism itself. By focusing on activist links I do not mean to suggest that there is consensus among women who consider themselves to be feminist activists, or that all women who support these initiatives, would be comfortable with the label. At the same time, it is important to draw attention to the way women work on a daily basis to make and influences changes in the province to counter the impression that feminist activists represent the interests of a narrow few.

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2000 ANS D'INÉGALITÉ, ÇA SUFFIT!

Pendant plus de 2000 ans, les femmes du monde entier ont vécu dans un univers patriarcal fondé sur la supériorité, la domination et le pouvoir des hommes. Les valeurs patriarcales qui, de tout temps, ont imprégné notre système judiciaire ont longtemps relégué les femmes au rang d'êtres inférieures, dépendantes et impuissantes. Individuellement et collectivement, légalement et politiquement, les femmes ont été traitées comme des citoyennes de seconde zone. Les nations qui, au départ, n'avaient pas entériné la subordination des femmes, comme la Nation Mohawk et d'autres nations autochtones du Canada, ont été forcées, par les lois françaises et britanniques, de renoncer à leurs lois et à leurs coutumes égalitaires et de se plier au diktat patriarcal, causant ainsi des torts permanents à tous les peuples autochtones du Canada.

Pendant de nombreuses années, le gouvernement canadien a reconnu et préservé le droit des hommes d'exercer un contrôle sur les femmes par l'entremise de l'institution du mariage, en donnant au mari le droit de battre et de violer son épouse. Les lois et les pratiques sociales ont imposé l'hétérosexualité à la plupart des femmes, et les lesbiennes ont fait l'objet de discrimination et de répression, lorsqu'elles n'étaient pas forcées de se soumettre à des traitements d'électrochoc ou à d'autres formes de « thérapie ». Ni le travail domestique ni le soin des enfants et des personnes âgées n'ont été reconnus et rémunérés. Entre-temps, les femmes âgées continuent d'être perçues comme bénéficiaires de soins plutôt que comme citoyennes à part entière qui ont contribué et continuent de contribuer à la société de façon significative. Les défis auxquels sont confrontées les jeunes femmes sont perçus comme temporaires et ainsi n'obtiennent pas l'attention nécessaire malgré le fait que ces femmes deviennent de plus en plus pauvres et économiquement marginalisées. Au travail, les hommes ont pu exercer sans vergogne une discrimination à l'endroit des femmes, les opprimer et les exploiter, et le harcèlement sexuel a été la norme implicite de nos conditions de travail. Les institutions publiques et professionnelles ont collaboré à la subordination des femmes en permettant aux médecins, aux membres du clergé et aux enseignants d'abuser de la confiance qu'ils inspiraient et d'agresser sexuellement les femmes et les filles. Les femmes vivant avec une déficience ont été particulièrement exposées aux agressions sexuelles et aux abus de pouvoir tant au sein des familles que des institutions publiques.