Francophone in Thunder Bay A Social Activist Speaks

by Jocelyn Paquette

L'auteur discutte des conséquences de l'isolementlinguistique des femmes francophones qui vivent dans les communautés isolées du Nord. Les questions qui préoccupent les femmes francophones sont rarement adressées par les organisations

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féministes. L'auteur préconise la mise sur pied de ressources par et pour les femmes francophones qui prendraient en considération leurs besoins particuliers.

As a franco-ontarienne living in Thunder Bay since 1991, I understand all too well the impact of linguistic isolation. This kind of isolation is not always obvious, especially to those who belong to the dominant linguistic group. Nevertheless, issues of linguistic rights and women's access to services and support must be seriously addressed. My position on these issues reflects personal observations. The source of my analysis comes directly from my experiences working with women's organizations at the municipal, regional, and national levels.

A city of slightly over 100,000 people, Thunder Bay is, in every sense of the word, the metropolis of Northwestern Ontario. Whether you are seeking cultural or leisure activities or keeping an appointment with a physician/dentist you are going to Thunder Bay. Aboriginal people make up 15 per cent of the population and Thunder Bay boasts the largest Finnish community outside of Finland.

In 1990, the city designated itself "English-only" despite the fact that francophones made up 3.1 per cent of the population at the time (Ontario Census). The problems created by this "English-only" designation were exacerbated in 1992 when the Official Languages Office declared that there were not enough francophones in Thunder Bay and District to warrant an official language officer. Once the officer was removed, the city could no longer serve as a point of service for the francophone community of northwestern Ontario. Then, in 1993 Thunder Bay re-qualified for an official language officer when the francophone population increased to four per cent—the magic number required by the government (Statistics Canada). However, to this day, the francophone

community is still anxiously awaiting the return of the official language officer. As a result, northwestern Ontario francophones continue to be "served" from Sudbury.

Francophone women wishing to attend workshops, seminars, conferences, or meetings of any kind know they are going to Toronto. The two hour, 2,000 kilometer flight from Thunder Bay to Toronto costs over \$800. Although travelling to Toronto is a reality for women in general from the North, francophone women must also deal with the fact that most of the resources, materials, and instructions will be in English. There are few tools for community development or organizational materials written by francophones for the francophone community.

As a community, francophones have had few opportunities to create for ourselves a range of resources that reflect our needs. Although feminist theory and practice affirms women's experience and values the personal as political, francophone women in the North seldom feel this validation. Ours is often an invisible struggle.

The francophone community of the North is left attempting to access their services in a town that is not supportive or tolerant of the French language. Go into a bank in this community and say "bonjour" to the teller. You will likely hear sighs and see the heads turn in the queue. Speak French to your companions and heads turn, eyebrows are raised. So you keep your language hidden away. You do your shopping, deal with government offices, all using the dominant language. As the years go by, you use your French less and less and eventually you feel ashamed to try. We are a community invisible to one another. We are a community isolated from each other as well as the community itself. There are no distinguishing marks, no skin pigmentation, no particular attribute that points to our linguistic makeup. As francophone women we have been silenced.

In Thunder Bay, L'Accueil Francophone is fighting for the rights of francophones in terms of health and information services. L'Accueil is the only interpretation/translation service available to the francophone community seeking health services. As one worker with this organization phrased it, "Accompaniment becomes more like advocacy when the patient is seldom informed about their options." Knowing your choices and your rights as a member of the community will influence how you make your decisions. The future of health care in this province and this country is now being decided and L'Accueil is assisting in a unique way to ensure that the voice of the francophone in Northwestern Ontario is being heard. L'Accueil is a visible presence for an invisible minority. Their continued support and efforts for linguistic rights for francophones remains a priority and a commitment.

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At times, the activist must walk a tight rope. I often find myself placed in the position of "token" francophone. Organizations claim they serve the francophone community simply because, they "have one on the board." This statement provides little sense of support or process. You wait, you continue to do the work, but eventually you feel as though you're going to implode. Eventually you hear, "we don't know why francophone women don't come." Inclusiveness, acceptance, and regard for diversity are absent in the discussion. No one person represents or stands for an entire community, nor should they. As feminists we must struggle against the model of exclusive, single-minded, and limited access which has been long-established in the patriarchal system.

Feminism remains an anomaly for many francophone women. We recognize our subordinate and often marginal position within the patriarchal order but at the same time we support, defend, and maintain this construct. While attending a meeting of a francophone women's group, I heard responses to a rape victim's story that startled me. The film strip we had just watched described the rape of a woman by her best friend's fiancé. "She shouldn't have been there anyway!" was echoed in three different ways. In the end, it was the victim who was to blame. Trapped within a strict patriarchal society, as a francophone woman, you find little escape for restructuring the mold. Our direction, training, and education have been closely related to the church and the home. It is within these confines that we must try and seek out our own presence. Our experiences, like those of many women in Canada, include the disabling and paralyzing results of violence.

As francophone women, we continue to work at educating ourselves about our realities. Though the Panel on Violence lacked process and did little to reach an understanding about inclusiveness, the statistics did bring to light what women in this country had known, that violence was part of our everyday lives (10). Yet, little or no services are available to women here. And although there exist over a dozen 1-800 crisis lines in Ontario, not one is designated French. Transition houses and shelters may or may not have a bilingual person on staff. Documentation is difficult to find in French and little material has been written by francophone women for francophone women. The expression "it loses something in translation" is very close to our hearts since most of what we receive is not reflective of our culture or experience.

And yet there is hope. Francophone women are coming to terms with their double isolation and converging on the issues that direct our lives. Le Comité de femmes francophones du nord-ouest de l'Ontario recently completed a survey entitled S'informer, c'est prévenir in May 1994 concerning violence against francophone women in Northwestern Ontario. Francophone women made their voices heard by providing this survey with a 20 per cent response rate! Distributed to 1,200 francophone women in Northwestern Ontario, this high response rate reflects a desire and commitment to contribute to positive social

change. Comments made overwhelmingly identified the need for access for women in the North to services such as a 1-800 crisis line. Women identified feelings of isolation and concerns about the great distances that must be travelled to centres where services are available. Though many such reports have been carried out, few have reached the francophone community with such success. The fight is one that must be won for all of us.

In closing, I would say that language does not stop with the spoken and written word. Language is part of culture, it defines and recreates you as you use it throughout your life. It wasn't until I reached my forties that I discovered a need for francophone linguistic and cultural influences in my life. Like many francophone women, I have returned to embrace that which I had lost, a sense of identity and connectedness with a culture that remains strong and vibrant. It is this commitment and drive that will bring together our experiences and help us make the changes needed to celebrate diversity, widen our understanding, and build strong, safe, vibrant communities.

Jocelyn J. Paquette is a Vice President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, membre executif du Comité des femmes francophones du nord-ouest de l'Ontario and executive member of the Northwestern Ontario Women's Decade Council. She has degrees in History and Philosophy from York University and completed her Masters in Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario in 1991. Published articles in Hot Flash, Northern Women's Journal, Waterlily and Remote Control have included topics ranging from women's oral history to popular culture and mass media.

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