

# Remaking Waves

## The Québec Women's Movement in the 1950s and 1960s

CHERYL GOSSELIN

*Cet article explore les activités de sept groupes de femmes du Québec qui se sont exprimées publiquement sur la condition féminine entre les années 1947 et 1970. Ensemble elles ont continué à militer après l'obtention du droit de vote des femmes et avant la deuxième vague du féminisme à la fin des années '60. On retient de cet article que les groupes étaient politiquement impliqués et affichaient différentes idéologies concernant le statut de la femme et ses droits de citoyenne. Entre autres, on croyait qu'un Québec interventionniste était la voie la plus efficace pour améliorer le sort des femmes.*

Feminist historians of the women's movement use the wave model as a convenient analytical concept to describe the ideas and politics of women's groups in English Canada. The first wave is considered the period from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when activists campaigned for, and won suffrage for women. The second wave or the women's equality/liberation movement began in the late 1960s, galvanized by the civil rights movements in the U.S. and globally as well as Canada's Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW). Today, a third wave is underway among young women focusing on the connections among race, class, gender and sexuality. Historians assume periods of non-activity between waves.

The recent turn in women's and gender history to more inclusionary theories and practices of listening to the voices of differently situated women in their historical, social and cultural specificity has led to questions about the usefulness of the wave concept for analyzing the history of the women's movement (Ladd Taylor; Kealey and Sangster). Kimberley Springer argues the wave model excludes women of colour from the history of western feminism because of its focus on white activism only (2002). Her view is that the construct of wave disregards the role race played in the U.S. women's movement. As well, the continuity work that women, many of them non-white, did before, in between, and after each wave is similarly omitted. As Springer asserts, if these differently situated women and

their activities were included they would make all three waves "much bigger swell(s)." Clearly a more helpful concept is needed to overcome the hegemonic view of the women's movement and highlight how various women at different times have contributed to the struggle for gender equality and rights.

The same critique can be applied to the francophone women's movement in Québec. The first wave started later than English Canada, in 1907 when a group of French-speaking women broke away from the Montréal Local Council of women to form *la Fédération nationale Saint-Jean Baptiste*. They were Christian feminists, not suffragettes, and their struggles to grant women the vote lasted until 1940, a lot longer than others did provincially or federally. The second wave did not begin with the RCSW but earlier with the formation of *La fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ)* and the fusion of the *l'Union catholique des femmes rurales (UCFR)* with *les Cercles d'économie domestique (CÉD)* to form *l'Association féminine d'éducation et d'action sociale (AFÉAS)* in 1966. The one constant ideological force influencing the francophone women's movement was Québec nationalism. Women's fight for equality with men was always combined with Québec's struggle for recognition and autonomy at the national level. It was the nationalist furor of the 1950s and 1960s, today referred to as the Quiet Revolution, that produced a climate favourable for the rise of a number of women's groups.

This paper discusses French-speaking women's organizations in Québec and their activities for the years between 1945 and 1967. A number of women's groups existed in Québec during this time. The *Cercles des fermières*, *La Fédération nationale Saint-Jean Baptiste* and the Montréal Local Council of Women were left over from the pre-vote era. They were joined by, among others, *l'Association des femmes diplômées des universités de Montréal (AFDUM)*, *l'Association des femmes de carrière du Québec métropolitain (AFCQM)*, *le Cercle des femmes*

*journalistes (CFJ)*, provincial branches of the Canadian Association of Consumers (CAC), several Québec sections of *la Fédération nationale des femmes libérales du Canada (FNFLC)*, *les Cercles d'économie domestique (CÉD)*, and *l'Union catholique des femmes rurales (UCFR)*. Most of these organizations were made up of professional, upper-to middle-class, and urban members but the latter two were rural-based, confessional, and run by the Catholic Church. *La Ligue des femmes du Québec* was formed in 1946 by a group of working class women to initially support their striking Air Canada employee husbands. They later campaigned for working women's rights. There were also a number of nonpolitical, cultural groups such as the Montréal Ladies Musical Club.

For the purpose of this paper only seven of these groups will be discussed.<sup>1</sup> Since my focus is on a select group of organizations, I do not intend my work to be a comprehensive history of feminism or the women's movement throughout Canada. However, I do want to give readers a critical account of the major developments in feminist ideas and mobilization strategies among group members for the period in Québec under study.

I argue that the *AFDUM*, *CFJ*, *AFCQM*, *CAC*, *FNFLC*, *CÉD* and the *UCFR* were composed of women who came together to pursue an agenda of reform in the areas of women's rights and civic matters. They demanded more opportunities for girls in post-secondary education, the application of the equal-pay-for-equal-work principle in the formal economy, increased social security measures for families, and progressive changes to discriminatory marriage laws. Their efforts to expand women's civil and political capacities represent a bridge linking the first and second waves of the Québec women's movement. The years between 1945 and 1967 can be viewed as a time in the history of the movement when the preparatory work necessary for the continuation of the second phase occurred.

The remaining sections of this paper will provide a brief outline of the methodological concerns raised by this study, followed by a description of the Québec context in which the seven groups were situated and then a discussion of their activities and ideas.

### **Methodological Concerns**

Three traditional views of the women's movement must be contested to fill in the contours of women's activism for the years between 1945 to 1967. First, is the common paradigm among North American historians of the women's movement that distinguishes between two waves of feminism. As was previously discussed, viewing the women's movement through the framework of a two-wave dichotomy is an analytical and methodological dead-end especially when one is documenting the movement in the 1940s, '50s and early '60s. This is generally viewed as a period of *eminisme silencieux* or the *grande noirceur* of the Québec movement. Instead the focus must be on

feminism not simply as a social movement, but as an evolving intellectual tradition.

A second related challenge is the necessity to contest the traditional notion of politics. An approach to politics that only focuses on those practices which women undertake in the arena of formal, party politics is questionable for discovering the spaces where feminist challenges exist apart from the women's movement. An alternative approach is "women's politics" which considers that women have a distinct way to mobilize, sometimes outside men's traditional power bases. Women's way of doing politics

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may comprise grassroots or community-based associations, networks of advice and self-help and interests beyond equality rights to include legislation centered on women's duties and responsibilities in the private sphere (Strong-Boag).

The third challenge questions the legitimacy of using feminism as the only analytical category to describe women's movement ideologies (Cott; Offen). An expanded vocabulary and conceptualization of the differences among members and their ideological preoccupations reveals many voices of activism such as equal rights/equality feminism which focuses on egalitarian principles and emphasizes women's equality with men. "Difference feminism" is the engagement in reform activities to demand sex-based labour legislation and social security measures in light of a belief in the equal but disparate nature of women and men (Gordon). Maternalists rely on a specific ideology of motherhood and press for state services to expand women's domestic duties to the public sphere (Ladd-Taylor).

These revisionist directions in historiography of the women's movement inform my work and provide a clear picture of how various women's groups carved out a democratic, participatory role for themselves in post-war society. The different political orientations among the organizations reflect the multiple identities of members and their claims for social change.

### **The Quiet Revolution**

Québec's Quiet Revolution of the 1960s was preceded by a decade of critical institutional and intellectual changes (Behiels). Rapid processes of urbanization and modernization of the provincial economy marked the 1950s prelude, processes which were guided by a nationalist reawakening.

Also, federal reconstruction plans to foster national progress and a welfare system for all Canadians, sparked nationalist sentiments among increasing numbers of university trained specialists about Québec's aspirations to manage its own institutions, especially immigration, as well as social and health programs (Dickinson and Young).

Ideologically, these societal changes were accompanied by a reevaluation of traditional nationalism. The tired, old way of thinking by conservative elites and clerics faced mounting opposition by an emerging francophone middle-class that believed a new ideology was needed in modern

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Québec. This contemporary social class was composed of intellectual thinkers and social critics, health, psychological and educational experts, trade union activists, women's associations, and university students who were outspoken about the conservative political regime that had a stranglehold on the province's economic and social development (Neatby; Hébert; Piché). This social class wanted to see a number of changes happen, with themselves at the helm of the Québécoise nation and its future.

To set these changes in motion the French-speaking middle class wanted an interventionist Québec state to take control of church-run social and educational institutions. To achieve this, they institutionalized state involvement in the economy and social spheres through nationalization of public services and social security for individuals. These modernizing and democratizing processes constituted the background for the Quiet Revolution that began in 1960 and that accelerated these forces.

### **Women's Groups**

The social and economic changes taking place in Québec society after World War II affected women in diverse ways. While many women seemed to settle into a state of normalcy through marriage and the virtues of domesticity, more and more combined the role of housewife with that of salaried worker. The level of Québec women's participation in the formal economy went from 21.95 per cent in 1941 to 33.65 per cent in 1971 (Barry). Married women especially increased their employment rates. In 1941, eight per cent of working women were married, in 1951 their participation rate rose to 17 per cent, and in 1971, 48 per cent of working women were married (Barry). In addition, fertility rates continued their century-long decline with the exception of an increase in the birth

rate at the beginning of the 1950s. The sharpest drop in the birth rate took place in the decade between 1956 and 1966 due in part to more widespread information on, and use of, contraception (Gauvreau and Gossage). Francophone women were also spending more years in post-secondary education. Young women, whose families could afford it, went to university for degrees leading to professions like law and careers as notaries or to teachers' training colleges. Even working-class girls realized that if they wanted to work in manufacturing, they needed a general education or diplomas in secretarial work or nursing (Clio Collective).

Other women, concerned about how these upheavals would impact their lives, entered public life to further longstanding feminist goals of extending full citizenship rights to women. Their motivation stemmed from the realization that the attainment of the provincial vote in 1940 was only a partial victory for women. Enfranchisement did not bring total equality. In addition, national and international issues of democracy, citizenship, and the guarantee of human rights influenced the groups. Sparked by nationalist promises of national autonomy the solution was to call on Québec's ruling officials to design their own interventionist state capable of extending the nation's democratic principles and modernization practices to the advancement of women's rights.

In addition to promoting feminist concerns, women's organizations incorporated contemporary nationalist sentiments and their practical applications in the reforms of the 1960s Quiet Revolution. The groups made a clear statement that they wanted inclusion in the democratic civic order of post-war society. They were able to use the dominant themes and ideologies of the period in their pronouncements on the status of women. The groups believed that in order to build a modern, democratic and economically prosperous nation state for Québec, women, alongside men, must be active citizens capable of actualizing their individual and collective rights.

Québec women who were politically active from 1945 to 1967 expressed views about the status of women through feminist and maternalist lenses. The groups envisioned Québec's interventionist state and the democratization processes of the Quiet Revolution as the most effective means to improve the lives of all Québécoise. Three themes central to the reform agendas of each organization can be discerned.

First, is the defense of women's claims to citizenship—always an important issue for feminists. A careful analysis of the parameters of each association reveals that the feminist movement of the pre-vote era changed direction shortly after 1940. Different strands of thinking directed the groups' efforts to the cause of citizenship rights. Associations like the *AFDUM* and *AFCQM* focused their energies on achieving higher educational choices, reform of existing marriage laws, as well as equality in economic and social rights for women. *AFDUM* members believed

their association to be an advocacy group demanding equal treatment for women in education and the labour force. Their activities consisted of pressuring municipal, provincial, and federal governments for legislative changes in the areas of higher education and the workplace for women's equal participation. Likewise, for the *AFCQM* discovering the facts about women's position in the formal economy was an important plan of action. The group studied, collected, and disseminated information that it used to pressure the state for amendments to Québec's Civil Code and the implementation of equal pay for equal work legislation. Each group advocated the tenets of liberal feminism that believes women should be treated equally with men on the basis of their sameness. The *CFJ* focused its efforts on gaining more visibility for women in journalism, promoting their special interests, and improving women's status in the profession.

Other groups expressed a maternalist view by invoking women's unique role as homemaker as the basis for according them higher status in society. The *CAC* directed its consumer protection goals towards housewives investing them with the maternal responsibility of safeguarding the family and society. "Mrs. Canadian Consumer," as she was pragmatically called, served the nation as well as her family through her buying habits. These maternal commitments to the nation were viewed by the *CAC* as "...the most important step in the business of being full, participating citizens in the management of their own affair" (Canadian Association of Canada Fonds). The *CÉD* and *UCFR* viewed women's maternal duties as central to the survival of rural families and their communities. These responsibilities were transposed to the public realm where members petitioned the state for legislative and social reforms in education, family allowances, government services for poor families, and better health care for the province's population.

These different strands of thinking about women's place in society were not mutually exclusive. All the groups professed, at one time or another, some combination of women as equal to men and as different through their maternal roles. The groups did not label themselves as feminist or maternalist. Since the political climate in the 1950s and early '60s was hostile to women's causes, the groups did not see themselves as belonging to an organized feminist movement. However, they did grow out of a feminist background and were reform minded. Because of these conditions, historians of the women's movement use these feminist and maternalist concepts as useful tools to study their political expressions.

Second, the groups embraced the ideological flourishing of the period and the search for a new nationalist identity that would best reflect the processes of social and economic development of the times. Indeed, the resurgence of nationalist sentiments along with issues affecting women's status constituted the primary sources for their activism. The groups were part of the reform-minded, new French-

speaking middle class who embraced the ideologies of neo-nationalism and liberalism and supported a number of secular reforms they felt were necessary for Québec in the post-war period. For example, the main goals of the *FNFLC* were to promote women's liberal organizations, support the cause of liberalism, improve women's status in society, and encourage their participation in good government and national unity.

Other reforms included economic progress, individual liberty, an interventionist state and modern, and democratic institutions where decision-making powers were in

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the hands of francophones. For example, the *AFDUM* demanded equal pay for equal work laws and anti-discrimination legislation as important measures for granting equality in the formal economy. What the club advocated for women was "an equal deal" with men. Along with other groups like the *AFCQM*, the *AFDUM* requested state-supported guarantees for women's individual economic rights in areas such as married women's right to unemployment insurance and pension program for retired female workers. The latter association also lobbied state officials to ensure women's access to government institutions and agencies. Members wanted francophone women appointed to state ministries, school boards, municipal committees, and the senate. They hoped the entry of women into public life would mean greater state intervention in female issues.

Women's organizations appropriated the contemporary nationalist rhetoric to affirm their distinct French identity and culture within English Canada and their role in civic reform. The *AFDUM* and *AFCQM* used nationalist views to seek a distinct status and autonomy from their English federations. Both groups were not satisfied with equal representation in their federations so, in keeping with the "nationalist sentiment" of a modern Québec, they changed their club names to sound more French. The *CFJ* promoted the proper use of French grammar and communication among children through its demands for upgrading school textbooks and the promotion of educational television programming.

The last theme is the way in which women constructed identity. Although a politically recognized feminist movement did not exist until the late 1960s and the larger society showed little concern or understanding of women's issues, the associations encouraged their members to be involved in public life because they viewed it as an important aspect of democracy and citizenship. The groups accomplished



this by exploring women's limited status and their lack of representation in the political and social processes of the Quiet Revolution. The organizations established their commitment to collect and disseminate the facts about issues of gender inequality, informing members and changing public attitudes regarding women's position in society. Proof of women's inequalities was a powerful weapon when demanding representation in all levels of government and lobbying the state and courts for social change. These goals helped the groups legitimize a woman's space in the reform processes taking shape during the post-war era. Using democratic values, they fostered an identity for women based on the principles of citizenship rights and respect for individual integrity, which went beyond what the larger society thought possible.

Amid this variety of ideological orientations each association wanted two things: equal rights for women and their integration into the public order through state intervention. The groups used the context of socio-economic reforms and political modernization to place their demands for more rights, expansion of women's responsibilities and legislative changes on the state's agenda of nation building. However, the instigators of the Quiet Revolution designed Québec society based on a gendered double standard and incorporated women into its institutions and practices unequal to men. The provincial state was no longer an ally. In reaction, by the mid-'60s, a number of groups consolidated their efforts to more effectively legitimize the political voice of francophone women. The *CÉD* and *UCFR* fused into the *AFÉAS* to better represent their constituencies who were becoming increasingly independent of the church and more urban. Their concerns included improving married women's employment and family conditions, legal equality between spouses, daycare, and higher educational opportunities for women. The *FFQ* was organized into a coalition of different groups including the *AFDUM* and the *CFJ*. It lobbied the provincial and federal governments to address issues such as education, day care, maternity leave, equal pay laws, pensions for women, and abortion. In 1966 the two umbrella organizations saw similar strategies at coordinating activities in English Canada with the committee for the equality of women in Canada as well as internationally. The *AFÉAS* and the *FFQ* joined these national and international feminist alliances and adopted a liberal feminist view as their only political platform for seeking women's equality rights.

The venue to showcase their new platform and orientation was Expo 67. While Québec nationalists used the world's fair to announce their "coming of age," groups such as the *CFJ* saw the occasion to focus international attention on their feminist agenda for fundamental improvements to women's place in society. Women's groups from many different countries converged in Montréal and made front-page news with headlines like, "Women invade Man and His World." Expo politicized Québec women, providing them with the means to discover the

facts ahead of the upcoming national inquiry. Viewing women's rights through a liberal feminist lens gave activists the opportunity to participate in the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which presaged the second wave of the feminist movement.

## Conclusion

Far from a period of inactivity, the years between 1945 and 1967 were a time of renewal and preparation for the women's movement in Québec. Many issues still needed to be resolved after 1940 and still others had not been addressed by women. The Quiet Revolution provided a spring-board linking the previous generation of feminists to current activists. Together they worked to prepare for the new round of the feminist movement. Without the Quiet Revolution there could not have been a second generation of feminists articulating the specific demands of Québécoise women. With their expectations heightened through promises of a nation-state, and influenced by the national and international discourse on human rights and citizenship status, women already grouped in provincial units and/or federations quickly united as the *AFÉAS* and the *FFQ* to oppose the sexism of nationalist processes. These occasions began yet another era in the history of Québec women's politics and more opportunities, such as the calls for a federal inquiry on the status of women. The *RCSW* created the context for a new awareness of, and challenges to, women's francophone identities, individual rights and national autonomy—now commonly referred to as the second wave.

*Cheryl Gosselin has been teaching Sociology and Women's Studies at Bishop's University for the past sixteen years. Her research interests include the history of the Québec women's movement and the nature of contemporary women's politics. She is currently working on a manuscript about the 25-year history of the Lennoxville and District Women's Centre.*

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on my Ph.D thesis, "Vers l'Avenir. Québec Women's Politics Between 1945 and 1967: Feminist, Maternalists and Nationalists Links," Université de Montréal, 2003. The following criteria was used to select which groups to explore: few studies or none existed for a particular organization, documents were deposited in the national archives of Québec or Canada, the associations were active for the entire period, they established after 1945 for the purposes of context, they expressed concerns about women's issues and engaged in activities geared toward improving their status as well as reaction to changes happening in Québec society at the time, they were francophone groups with some sort of Canadian or international affiliations.

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## PATIENCE WHEATLEY

### For Leah's Tenth Birthday

I remember your father  
left by the English midwives  
in a crib beside me.

Streaked with my blood,  
a few minutes old  
he sucked his thumb

then air  
testing new freedom  
with searching mouth.

I stroked his head  
squeezed out of shape by birth  
and remembered I'd been told

*there's no pain so terrible  
as the pain of being born.*  
Ten years ago

you, my granddaughter,  
full of tiny swelling eggs  
a mouth open for love

struggled into midday, like your father  
with less pain in being born —  
no doubt about it

I wish you to be  
a better maker than your grandmother  
who would assuage all pain for you

but failing that  
will try at least to help you  
change pain to art.

*Patience Wheatley's third book of poetry was published by Pendass Productions. Her poems appear in The Missing Line published by Inanna Publications in 2004.*