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**Strategic Dis/Engagement:
Rural Feminist Organizing in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, 1982-1989**

By

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I dedicate this work to my mother, Nancy Constance Genn,
and to my husband and best friend,
Robbie Charles Fry.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes a rural, feminist organization in formation during the 1980s. It describes second wave feminist organizing, paying particular attention to the relationship between objectives, organizational strategies, and omissions. Through close study of the Antigonish Women's Association, and in particular, the organization's approach to debates about two significant second wave topics, abortion and pornography, the specific challenges of working towards social change in a rural, Catholic community are revealed. Examining the impact of engagement and disengagement as organizational strategies, this thesis utilizes the institutional records of the Antigonish Women's Association, input from former board members, and media coverage of women's activities during the period to illustrate the intricacies of rural second wave organizing.

List of Abbreviations and Symbols Used

AWA	Antigonish Women's Association
AWRC	Antigonish Women's Resource Centre
CARAL	Canadian Abortion Rights Action League
CBA	Canadian Bar Association
CCLOW	Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women
CEW	Committee for the Equality of Women
CFW	Concerned Farm Women
CMA	Canadian Medical Association
CWL	Catholic Women's League
ERA	Equal Rights Amendment
FFQ	Fédération des Femmes du Québec
LEAF	Women's Legal Education and Action Fund
LOOT	Lesbian Organization of Toronto
NAC	National Action Committee on the Status of Women
NDP	New Democratic Party
NRT	New Reproductive Technology
PPPC	Planned Parenthood Pictou County
RCSW	Royal Commission on the Status of Women
SUPA	Student Union for Peace Action
TAC	Therapeutic Abortion Committee
VOW	Voice of Women
WI	Women's Institute
WIT	Women in Transition

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Chapter One

The Emergence of a Women's Organization in Rural Nova Scotia

In 1982 the Continuing Education Department at St. Francis Xavier University offered a course called *Women Today*. Taught by feminist Angela Miles, the course provided women in the community of Antigonish with the opportunity to discuss contemporary women's issues, including such topics as housework, rural women's triple workload, and violence against women.¹ A group of Antigonish residents, fifty-one women and one man, signed up for the class.² Ultimately, twenty of the women who attended the course gathered in April of 1983 to pursue the formation of a women's social action group. The resulting Antigonish Women's Association (AWA) brought together women seeking social change. Chapters One and Two of this thesis describe the policies and organizational tactics of this feminist organization, and place the work of the AWA in the larger history of second wave feminist organizing. Two specific issues, reproductive rights and pornography, are examined in chapters Three and Four. Each of these topics were significant to the story of the development of feminist organizing, both nationally,

¹Angela Miles, "Feminism and Women's Community Action in the 1980's: New Knowledge and New Activism in Antigonish Town and County, Nova Scotia" (n.p.,1983),1.

² Katherine Reed, "Antigonish Women's Resource Centre," in *Groups Dynamic: A Collection of Nova Scotia Her-Stories* (CCLOW, 1990), 30.

and in this rural community. Anti-abortion activism was vocal and pervasive in the community of Antigonish throughout the 1980s. The relationship of feminist activism with local Catholic and anti-abortion groups reveals the necessity of compromise for the survival of a women's centre in this community. Similarly, momentum behind the anti-pornography movement in Antigonish peaked during the 1980s. Feminist activists used this opportunity to expand their activism. Chapters Three and Four also discuss the way in which feminists organizers attempted to strategically forge connections, and create distance from, community activism in these arenas of dissent. Close study of institutional records and media reports help to piece together this story. The main primary sources on which this work is based are the archival records of the Antigonish Women's Association. I also used questionnaire responses from fifteen former AWA board members, and materials from Antigonish's weekly newspaper, *The Casket*.

Angela Miles, whose course sparked the beginning of a new women's group, came to Antigonish from Toronto in 1981. Miles held a Ph.D. in Political Science, and had begun to establish a reputation as a feminist scholar. She arrived to take up a tenure track position in the Sociology and Anthropology Department and had the opportunity to teach a non-credit women's studies course through continuing education at St. Francis Xavier University. An academic and an activist, Angela Miles inspired her group of students to move beyond the walls of their classroom into organized feminist activity.³ Miles's particular brand of feminism, shaped by ideas about economic equality (Marxist)

³Miles, *Feminism and Women's Community Action*, 1.

and the 'rightness' of feminist activism for all women was a catalyst for organized feminism in Antigonish.⁴ Like Miles, many of the initial participants in the AWA had moved to Antigonish from other places in Canada, the U.S., and overseas. For example, out of fifteen questionnaire respondents, twelve would have been considered by the community to be 'from away'. This influx of newcomers was an exception to the massive out-migration, due to unemployment, that characterized post-war demographics in the Maritime provinces. Some of the new members of the community established 'back to the land' lifestyles in the countryside of Antigonish County. They were seeking, in part, freedom from cities and suburbs and their by-products: crime, consumption, and conformity. The back-to-the-landers bought property, built homes, planted gardens and settled in to try to create a less-complicated and less consumption-driven lifestyle. Inheritors of the hippie aesthetic, some of the women stood out in contrast to Antigonish locals who tended to mirror conventional sensibilities both in personal style and lifestyle.

Before the AWA there had been sporadic attempts at feminist organizing. In 1974 another women's group called Women In Transition (WIT) was established in Antigonish, and maintained a membership of 54 women for two years. A social action group called JUST Women involved some of those individuals who became members of the AWA. Also, a women's consciousness-raising group was organized in Antigonish at

⁴Angela Miles. *Feminism in Canada* (Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1982), 9-11.

around the same time.⁵ Though there is little information available on these organizations, their brief existence does indicate that there had been a mounting interest in women's issues by women in the community.⁶ It also indicates an increasing willingness to name social concerns, specifically 'women's' issues. Antigonish women had been involved in many activities that supported women, but usually through institutions that were perceived as non-threatening by the local establishment.⁷ This combination of circumstances: the influence of women from other communities, previous attempts to sustain a feminist women's group, and a general awareness of issues affecting women, resulted in a high level of interest in the Women Today course. Combining their interest in the topics raised by the course, and their previous experiences in community organizations, a group of women decided to meet and form the Antigonish Women's Association.

The first official meeting of the Antigonish Women's Association took place on

⁵A questionnaire respondent and former AWA board member noted with reference to the consciousness-raising group "most of us left our husbands during that time." Research Questionnaire.10, April, 2003.

⁶ Angela Miles, "Reflections on Integrative Feminism and Rural Women: The Case of Antigonish Town and County," in eds. Jeri Dawn Wine and Janice L. Ristock, *Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1991), 67.

⁷Throughout the 1980s, *The Casket* provided regular coverage of the following women's organizations: Nova Scotia Association of Homemaker Services, Tearmann Society, Catholic Women's League, Naomi Society, Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha, Women's Institute, etc.

May 25, 1983. Chaired by Mary Burns, the group elected four members to an executive committee: Grace MacKinnon (first President of the AWA⁸), Mary Burns, Janice Landry, and Avon Burkholder. The appointed board members of the association decided to meet monthly to discuss issues of process and policy, to plan special events, and to work on a women's centre project idea. Such a description, though accurate, does not reflect the level of excitement and commitment of the founders of the AWA.

While the initial *membership* of the AWA was composed largely of women from outside of Antigonish County, some events organized by the AWA board attracted local women from both town and county, most of whom were of Anglo-Celtic background. The board sent out invitations to special events such as film presentations and lunch hour lectures to local church groups, to Mi'kmaq and Black communities and groups, as well as to other community-serving organizations. Membership drives took place at the local shopping centre. For an initial yearly fee of \$3.00 new members received the AWA newsletter AWARE, and were kept notified of special events.⁹ Furthermore, personal community contacts and connections would prove to be a critical aspect of increasing membership and obtaining financial support for feminist organizing in Antigonish. While government funding for women's groups had become available through federal sources, the support of the community was critical to the opening of the women's centre for Antigonish. The creation of a space for women in the community was the first major

⁸AWA/RC Institutional Records. *Herstory* (n.d.)

⁹AWA Institutional Records. Membership form. 1983.

project of the new organization. With the potential reaction of the community in mind the AWA board devised their goals and strategy.

In a letter to Sylvia Hamilton of the federal government Secretary of State Women's Program, AWA board member Barbara MacDonald outlined the objectives of the newly formed AWA as follows:

1. provide a space where encouragement and support of fellow women is available on an informal drop-in basis;
2. have available literature covering a wide range of concerns and interests;
3. establish a Resource File which would enable women to identify the agencies and personnel available to provide support and/or assistance in a wide range of problem areas;
4. provide a babysitting area to enable women to take advantage of AWA sponsored programs or to enjoy an hour or two a week to devote to themselves, shopping, visiting etc.;
5. provide a space where women's special interest groups can meet on a regular basis.¹⁰

In December of 1983 the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC), the first major project of the Antigonish Women's Association, received a grant in the amount of \$19,734.01 from the Secretary of State Women's Program and took up office space above the Sears and MacIntosh Hardware Store on Main Street in Antigonish.¹¹ The small office space accommodated crisis counseling, accumulation of resources, and the organization of activities such as film presentations and discussions during the formative years of the centre.

¹⁰AWA Institutional Records. Letter. May 30, 1983.

¹¹AWA Institutional Records. Letter from Board President Grace MacKinnon. December 1, 1983.

The context in which the centre was funded is an important part of understanding some of the decisions made by the AWA board as the organization grew. In 1989 the AWA attempted to formalize 'charity' status for the purposes of funding various projects, but Revenue Canada turned down the AWA's application for a charitable tax number because of its political advocacy work. Some political lobbying groups, such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) were in receipt of funding from the Secretary of State, and were believed to be far less effective critics of government due to co-optation.¹² Partly in recognition of this, and partly as an act of self-preservation, the AWA sought another solution to the problem of funding their work. Instead of restructuring the work of the AWA to ensure continued funding, the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC), formerly a sub-committee of the AWA, was incorporated as a separate entity in order to give it independent charitable tax status based on its primary purpose of providing services for women. Potentially, this decision would protect the political viability of the AWA. With this new status, the AWRC moved ahead with providing a variety of programs and services to women and families in Antigonish, and the AWA attempted to maintain a political focus. On paper the organizations were now to be headed up by separate boards. Still, some indication of close linkages between the two groups remained, and would cause some confusion in ensuing years.

In the following section I provide a description of the community of Antigonish

¹²Marjorie Griffin Cohen, "The Canadian Women's Movement" in eds. Ruth Roach Pierson et al. *Canadian Women's Issues Volume 1*, (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1993), 22.

during this period. This context is critical because it has influenced many decisions made by the AWA/RC, including the attempt to distinguish between political activism and community service.¹³

The challenges of operating as a feminist organization were significant for the AWA/RC given their location in a rural, predominantly Catholic Nova Scotia community. The community of Antigonish is located on the north eastern shore of the Maritime province of Nova Scotia. Facing the Island of Cape Breton across St. George's Bay, Antigonish County is approximately 972 square kilometres of picturesque coastlines, and rolling farmlands. Mi'kmaq people were the original inhabitants of the area before the arrival of Europeans in the 15th century.¹⁴ At the beginning of the 17th century French colonization of the region began.¹⁵ Gaelic-speaking Highland Scots arrived in Nova Scotia's Pictou County in 1773.¹⁶ Black Loyalist immigrants and escaped slaves arrived during the late 18th century, while a large influx of Irish came to the region in the early 19th century. Antigonish county's population was dominated by Catholics of Scottish background by the 20th century. However, distinctly Acadian communities such as Havre

¹³The acronym AWA/RC will be used where both the Antigonish Women's Association and the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre are meant.

¹⁴Leslie Choyce, *The Coasts of Canada: A History* (Fredricton, N.B.: Goose Lane Editions, 2002), 34.

¹⁵Choyce, 67. The French colonized parts of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, P.E.I. and Quebec, a region that became known as Acadia.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 117.

Boucher and Pomquet, the Mi'kmaq community of Afton, as well as neighbouring African Canadian communities in Guysborough County, have created the ethnically diverse character of Antigonish County.

The area boasts various natural resources including apples and blueberries, hardwood and Christmas trees, fish, and shellfish. As well, dairy farms contribute significantly to the economy of the region. During the 1980s the farming industry in Antigonish experienced the reverberations of economic change in Canada. Shifts, including a decline in the overall number of family-owned farms, affected how people worked and the type of work available. The impact on local farm families was not unfamiliar. For example, men and women sought off-farm work, and out-migration was the trend. As Louise Carbert has explained, Canadian farms were rarely free of hard times for most of the 20th century.¹⁷ However, the influx of federal spending during the 1960s and 1970s did result in some growth in employment opportunities. For example, nearby Guysborough and Pictou Counties offered some alternative employment in the manufacturing sector for those Antigonish residents willing and able to commute.

The population of the town and county of Antigonish during the 1980s fluctuated between approximately 18,000 and 19,000 individuals, only 5,000 of whom lived in the town.¹⁸ The population of the town is strikingly variable because it is a university town.

¹⁷Louise Irene Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁸AWRC Research Collection: Population Status Binder. Population and Dwelling Characteristics - Census Divisions and Subdivisions. *Nova Scotia: Part 1 Profiles*.

With the addition of 3,000 St. Francis Xavier University students, it swells in September and then shrinks in April. The true ‘permanent resident’ population of the town of Antigonish for 1981 was closer to 2,000-2,300 individuals. Relatively few rural inhabitants were farmers. In fact the farming population made up less than 7% of the total during the period of the 1980s and occupations shifted according to seasons and economic trends. Seasonal work, such as construction, fishing, harvesting of fruit etc. was sometimes offset by other paid employment such as retail, service, child care etc, and sometimes by unemployment insurance and/or social assistance. The dependence of the community on federal and provincial support of various types figures importantly in the narrative of the development of a women’s centre in Antigonish, both in terms of the clients it served, and regarding the financial instability of the centre, and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

The town of Antigonish in the 1980s had a number of major employers including St. Martha’s Hospital, a modest shopping mall, town hall, and significantly, St. Francis Xavier University. Importantly, both the hospital and the university are Catholic institutions. In fact, Antigonish was the official headquarters of the Diocese from the 1880s onward.¹⁹ A collection of gift shops, pharmacies, car dealerships, and hairdressers line Antigonish’s Main Street, and on the hill behind St. Martha’s Hospital, the

(Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1987), 7.

¹⁹James D. Cameron, *For the People: A History of St. Francis Xavier University* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 1996),70.

convent/convalescence home of the Sisters of St. Martha houses an ever-dwindling number of devotees.

Certainly, Antigonish is rural. There is no public transportation in either town or county. Most children ride the school bus each day. The small communities they hail from, such as Arisaig, Lochaber, and Bayfield, maintain a somewhat independent relationship to the town. For example, most have their own churches. Maintaining traditionally religious activities and organizations was one way communities preserved a core of Catholicism. However, resistance to secularization took many forms in Antigonish. Community groups, such as the Catholic Women's League (CWL) and Knights Of Columbus, were an important part of social and political life in Antigonish.²⁰ In the absence of modern entertainments like big box stores and multiplex movie theatres, the powerful presence of church organizations, and the precarious economy of Antigonish seem to fit the stereotypical model of a rural community. However, in some ways Antigonish defies stereotyping. Neither strictly conservative nor consciously progressive, the people of Antigonish have, throughout the town's history, attempted to balance new ideas against revered traditions.

The development of the renowned 'Antigonish Movement' is a case in point. Dr. J.J. Tompkins, an advocate of adult education, along with Rev. Dr. Moses Coady, a Cape Breton priest and a teacher at St. Francis Xavier University, set out in the early 20th

²⁰These, and other religion-based service groups, continue to be influential in the community.

century to assist struggling Nova Scotians. At the end of World War I, fishing, farming, and in particular, mining concerns of north eastern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton were deep in an economic crisis brought on by a combination of rising interest rates and dropping commodity prices.²¹ J.J. (Jimmy) Tompkins believed that St. Francis Xavier University should play a role in addressing rural poverty.²² Similarly, Moses Coady felt that cooperative enterprise combined with adult education could relieve some of the financial strain on the community. These concepts, though not without precedent elsewhere, were new to the community of Antigonish.²³ Using St. Francis Xavier University as a base, Coady and Tompkins, along with a number of other committed individuals, began the process of educating unemployed and underemployed Antigonish men and women in a variety of practical classes and programs offered through the Extension Department. Functioning under the watchful auspices of St. Francis Xavier's largely Catholic administration, the "movement" provided an opportunity for individuals in the community to examine the impact of social and economic circumstances on their lives, and to devise methods of creating financial security in a communal way. Using his "radical critique of capitalism," and heavily influenced by Marxist thought, Coady

²¹James R. Sacouman, "Underdevelopment and the Structural Origins of Antigonish Movement Cooperatives in Eastern Nova Scotia." *Acadiensis* Vol. VII No. 1 (Autumn 1977), 66-85. Sacouman explains that "coal production in both Nova Scotia and the Sydney mine fields had peaked in 1913 and never recovered." 72.

²²Anne MacDonald Alexander, *The Antigonish Movement: Moses Coady and Adult Education Today* (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing Inc. 1997), 66-67.

²³See *The Rochdale Foundation* for information on previous cooperative ventures.

encouraged his disciples to seek cooperative ownership of their means of production - fish boats, farm equipment and distribution resources.²⁴

Following from this work, the Coady International Institute, established in 1959 and located on the campus of Saint Francis Xavier University, has focused its work on community-based development from a global perspective. Beginning in 1957, delegates from the Antigonish Movement were sent overseas to participate in community level activities.²⁵ A tradition of international exchange of individuals and ideas began. The multicultural character of Antigonish was somewhat enhanced by the presence of students attending the Coady International Institute from more than 120 countries. It will be described later how the AWA/RC was one of few community organizations to truly embrace the concept and welcome the Coady participants to Antigonish in a meaningful way.

In spite of Reverend Coady's best efforts, the economy of Nova Scotia, and of Antigonish, was in a steady decline by 1950s. The war years had brought some economic relief to the province, due largely to demands for coal and steel products.²⁶ The need for individuals to serve either in processing the materials of war, or in the military, meant work was available for many during the war. However, after the Second World War, as

²⁴Geoffrey Baum, "The Relevance of the Antigonish Movement Today," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 1 (Spring 1980), 110-117.

²⁵Choyce, 217.

²⁶*History of Nova Scotia with Special Attention given to Communications and Transportation*, July 24, 2002, <<http://www.alts.net/ns1625/nshist21.html>.>

oil became the energy source of choice in North America, the coal industry that had sustained many small communities throughout Nova Scotia (but particularly in northern regions) began to fall on hard times.²⁷ By 1960 half of the coal mines in the province were closed.²⁸ In short order, railways began to close as well. Though some mining activity continued throughout the province, economic repercussions in the north-east were significant. Still, many regions derived benefit from the increase in federal investment in the province. In particular, new manufacturing interests were developed and operating by the mid-60s.²⁹ Fishing communities also sought solutions to declining catches and low market prices, including the establishment in 1963 of the 12-mile limit, an exclusive fishing area.³⁰ Still, fishers in Nova Scotia continued to struggle just to make a living.

Tourism also became an important economic focus of Nova Scotia during the 1960s. Along with the development of a number of new national parks, such as Kejimikujik in western Nova Scotia, community festivals and exhibitions attempted to attract visitors year round.³¹ In Antigonish, the yearly Highland Games became

²⁷Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources. *One of the Greatest Treasures - The Geology and History of Coal in Nova Scotia*, (Nova Scotia: Department of Natural Resources, 1993), 20.

²⁸Ibid., 17.

²⁹E.R. Forbes & D.A. Muise, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 428.

³⁰*History of Nova Scotia*, 1-22.

³¹Forbes & Muise, 434.

increasingly popular with tourists. Still, as the 1960s drew to a close it became apparent that capital investment, whether used to increase industrialization or develop cultural attractions, could not compensate for the way in which the economy of Nova Scotia became increasingly sensitive to external forces.³²

Although the coal industry was somewhat revitalized in the 1970s the trend was brief. Economic shifts would hasten awakening feminist attitudes in rural communities. One response to high unemployment was the out-migration of individuals and families looking for work. Although the trend slowed during the late 60s, “many in the most productive and skilled age group, fifteen to thirty-four year olds, continued to leave.”³³ Another response to the crisis was for individuals to attempt to create new social and economic opportunities within their communities. Both responses situated women and their families in new and challenging circumstances.

By the 1980s the premiership of Conservative John MacLennan Buchanan was well established. In 1984 the Conservative government came to power at the federal level with Brian Mulroney as prime minister. Antigonish would reel from reductions of funding to social programs that came along with Mulroney’s policy changes. As in many rural areas during the 1980s, adjustment to economic and social change again became a necessity for the citizens of Antigonish. How those changes created space for feminist activity is an important part of the story of the AWA/RC.

³²Ibid., 458.

³³Ibid., 457.

This project places feminist organizing in the context of the economic, social and political status of the community of Antigonish during the 1980s. Examining the activities of the AWA/RC within the larger historical context of the second wave of feminist organizing will reveal the unique circumstances of rural activism.

The second wave of feminist organizing was a unique and pivotal period in the history of feminism. Emerging out of other social movements - especially the anti-war, labour, and civil rights movements - second wave feminists differed from their first wave foremothers both in their goals and in their approaches to organizing. During the first wave of activism, women's supposed moral superiority was used to bolster arguments for greater participation in political life. This 'Maternal feminism', which predominated in the first wave, found some continued support at the leading edge of the second wave.³⁴ In rural communities maternal women's organizations, particularly of the 'ladies auxiliary' variety, persisted before and throughout the second wave. For example, the well known Women's Institute (WI) formed in 1897 addressed rural women's needs across Canada throughout the 20th century.³⁵ The WI introduced programs to women who previously had been without access to educational opportunities. They justified their work based on

³⁴Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin & Margaret McPhail. *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 31-34.

³⁵Linda M. Ambrose, *For Home and Country: The Centennial History of the Women's Institutes in Canada* (Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1996), 21.

women's responsibility to home and family. However, post-war feminism gradually rejected maternal justifications for their activities, recognizing that this approach resulted in further oppression of women.

A different ideology, with several variants, animated the work of second wave feminist activists. Equity feminism held that women had traditionally been subjected to sub-standard treatment, and gave priority to *equal* recognition for women. However, dissent among second wave activists on a number of issues, including the meaning and usefulness of the concept of *equality*, also determined its character. For this reason the second wave was not a unified movement. Diversity of class, culture, sexuality, and ability created theoretical and practical divisions that second wave feminists struggled to overcome, or in some cases, ignored. These factors complicate any general description of the second wave. The scope of this project does not allow for adequate treatment, for example, of francophone women's contributions to the second wave. It is generally acknowledged that for a number of reasons, including competing nationalist ideologies, francophone feminists operated independently of English Canada's second wave.³⁶ In Chapter Two I will discuss the inclusions and exclusions of the second wave as it is represented in the history of feminist organizing.

However, some central themes of second wave activity relevant to the Antigonish

³⁶Constance Backhouse, "The Contemporary Women's Movements in Canada and the United States," in eds. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 5-6.

case can be summarized. They include work-related topics, reproduction, violence against women, and peace activism.

By the 1960s, middle-class women's relatively recent entry into the paid workforce brought a number of concerns to the feminist agenda. These included access to safe and affordable childcare, and equal pay, among others. The 'Wages for Housework' campaign was one example of middle-class women's efforts to legitimize women's work in the home.³⁷ In Antigonish, the changing economic picture made such topics particularly relevant. Women in the community were seeking solutions to new problems, including how to balance family life with the necessity of working outside of the home, or in some cases, off of the farm.

Second wave feminists also engaged with topics related to reproduction and sexual health. Abortion, midwifery, and sexual choices were all significant topics on the agendas of many feminist organizations. In Antigonish, Catholic leaders sought to suppress the momentum towards reproductive freedom that was building in the rest of the country. This created a particularly volatile atmosphere for feminists in the community.

Violence against women and children also mobilized numerous feminist organizations in the 1970s and 80s. In Antigonish, the Naomi Society for Battered Women and Children was formed during the same year as the AWA/RC. Since then the community has remained perplexed by the differences between the two organizations, often confusing one with the other. Other second wave organizations were also primarily

³⁷Adamson, 54 & 69.

identified by their position on a specific issue.

In Canada, through such organizations as the Voice of Women (VOW) and Student Union for Peace Activism (SUPA), anti-war activities remained visible throughout the history of the second wave. Some historians, like Linda Schott, have linked peace activism to maternal ideals.³⁸ Others, like Barbara Roberts, have attempted to offer a broader vision of women's peace activism that acknowledges strategic use of conservative rhetoric.³⁹ We will see the latter strategy employed by Antigonish feminists in their anti-pornography campaign. Regardless, the peace movement was significant to the development of the second wave, and feminists in Antigonish would participate in numerous peace initiatives throughout the 1980s.

By the mid-1980s, discussion about the 'end' of the second wave emerged within North American feminism, particularly in the media. Catalysts for this included young women's criticism of a feminist movement dominated by middle-class individuals and ideas, as well as women of colour criticizing the exclusionary practices and policies of white women. Women in developing countries also offered critiques of first world

³⁸See Linda Schott, *Reconstructing women's thoughts: the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom before World War II* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

³⁹Barbara Roberts, "Women's Peace Activism in Canada" in eds. Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1989), 276-308.

feminism.⁴⁰ Ultimately the notion of a ‘third wave’ was introduced, but the third wave’s beginning, like that of its predecessor, was hard to identify.

Moments of transition between phases of feminist organizing are diffuse and difficult to pinpoint. For example, while most histories of women’s movements identify a pause between first wave activities of the early 20th century - such as suffrage and temperance movements - and second wave struggles - including pay equity, reproductive freedom, and many others - other historians note that some social movements maintained or increased momentum during this phase. Labour and peace struggles, and sometimes student religious organizations, became a sort of training ground for second wave feminist organizing. Whether due to the upheaval of war, fluctuating economic circumstances, or shifting social mores, such transitions in the chronology of the feminism are among the complicating factors of its history. Chronologies differ by nation - note the different trajectories of Canadian and American feminist activity - but also, as historian Becky Thompson has explained, by racial perspective. A significant point of her analysis is that by rethinking the accepted chronologies we can see critical omissions: “Constructing a multiracial feminist movement time line and juxtaposing it with the normative time line reveals competing visions of what constitutes liberation and illuminates schisms in

⁴⁰See Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1986). Also, Jennifer Baumgardner, *Manifesta: Young Women, feminism and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

feminist consciousness that are still with us today.”⁴¹ In a similar exploration, Micheline Dumont’s commentary on the construction of women’s history points out that “women’s time is different”, and more importantly that “sometimes historical truth is disorderly.”⁴² I will return to this notion throughout as it is reflected in the Antigonish case, where chronology of the emergence and progress of feminist organizing strays from the standard history, while maintaining some typical elements of the second wave.

The progress of the women’s movement and its ideas were affected by numerous constraints and catalysts. Geography, not surprisingly, had a profound effect on the emergence and progression of second wave activities in Canada. Second wave activists in Toronto, for example, had developed a strong, overtly political presence of feminist activity by the late 1960s. Close proximity, via institutions, to American feminist thought and activism may have contributed to the rapid dissemination of feminist ideas and activities throughout urban locations in Canada. Feminist groups in Toronto included organizations such as the Women’s Press, Toronto Women’s Liberation, Toronto New Feminists, and Planned Parenthood. As we will show, rural communities used a different approach to presenting their feminist activities publicly. Seemingly benign rural women’s organizations, such as the Women’s Institutes, showed political support for feminist

⁴¹Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism.” *Feminist Studies* 28, no.2 (Summer 2002), 338.

⁴²Greta Hofman Nemiroff, “That which Divides Us; That Which United Us.” in *Challenging Times*, 272-288.

goals, albeit in less controversial ways.⁴³ This attests to the fact that the ‘lag’ of rural feminism behind urban feminist organizing is more myth and assumption than reality.

The relationship between the AWA/RC and other community groups mirrors some of the familiar national stories of feminist organizing. In other ways the story is uniquely rural, and uniquely Nova Scotian. The themes of engagement with and disconnection from the larger social context have enormous relevance for the Antigonish story. In the following chapter, I will attempt to place relevant themes of the second wave, such as diversity and rurality, in context for the community of Antigonish. Chapter Three will offer an analysis of how feminist organizers in Antigonish contended with the abortion debate and will deal directly with the problem of how feminists implemented selective cooperation with the community in a strategic way. In Chapter Four, an analysis of the pornography issue in Antigonish will demonstrate the intersection between moral concerns and feminist goals, and the way in which rural feminists attempted to exploit this connection for the benefit of their organization.

⁴³Federated Women’s Institutes participated, for example, in the Committee on Equality for Women (est. 1966). See Prentice et al., *Canadian Women: A History*, (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 346.

Chapter Two

Feminist History and Historiography: Relevant Themes

Integrating women with diverse backgrounds and experiences into second wave activities proved problematic for feminists in Antigonish. Though some, including Angela Miles, have made optimistic claims that rural feminist practices “represent a gradual fusing of feminism and traditional women’s reform concerns which holds the potential of a stronger and broader feminism that can presume a central role in determining social priorities in general,” I will argue that this ‘fusing’ results in a circumscribed feminism.¹ We can trace this development in the history of the AWA/RC. While it is important to emphasize that the intent of the organization’s activists was to embrace diversity and to create a sisterhood, their attempt to unify feminism with traditional women’s activities left little room for voices from the margins. I consider the inclusiveness of the AWA/RC from three important positions of difference: academic, rural, and marginal. Also, I describe the impact of organizational practices on the diversity of feminist organizations.

Firstly, from the scholarly perspective of a feminist history of the second wave, I examine the place of the AWA/RC within a larger context. I discuss aspects of the second wave that are relevant to the Antigonish story, and contrast other accounts of second wave activism with my findings. Looking at other feminist organizations and some of the topics and issues they addressed reveals the moments of commonality between a small rural

¹Angela Miles, *Feminism and Women’s Community Action*, 45.

organization and the larger, national women's movement, as well as the substantial and significant differences among feminist projects. Secondly, I include an account of the relationship of rural life to feminist organizing. Finally, throughout this work I will attempt to address the organization's history in a way that acknowledges the perspectives of marginalized groups and individuals, and calls into question the existence of an inclusive feminist sisterhood in Antigonish. To this end, comparing Angela Miles's writings with the contributions of other second wave feminists will be useful.

General histories of 20th century Canada often include second wave activities as a sub-topic in treatments of other social movements. One recent example is Doug Owrarn's history of the baby boom generation which cites the sexual revolution and the attendant demise of the cult of domesticity as key to women's increased social activism, particularly during the 1960s.² His discussion of privilege and the heightened expectations of the baby boomers implies that women, as part of this uniquely young and irrepressible group, merely kept up with the pace of change in the rest of society: "...the ideology and attitudes of modern feminism owes much to the mood of the 1960s."³ For Owrarn and others, institutional activities like the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) are representative of the second wave woman's derivative (albeit important) 'place' within a

²Doug Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 273.

³Owrarn, 273.

larger movement.⁴ This is a convenient perspective for Owram as he locates the sexual revolution and women's resulting interest in society as "the pre-eminent political issue of the baby boomer's lives."⁵ Significantly, he does not view women's subjugation as central to the rise of their movement. He comments that, "Revolutions, as the old historical argument goes, are not the result of oppression, but of rising expectations."⁶

In a similar way, *Canada Since 1945: Politics Power, and Provincialism* by Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond and John English, links women's activism to student peace activism, declining birth rates, and women's entrance into paid work. The authors describe the women's movement and other social movements as fads (like jogging and anti-pollution trends) and as "secular religious substitutes".⁷ The authors are dismissive noting that: "Under all these headings there were certainly injustices to be remedied and wrongs to be put right. But it was regrettable that the new votaries so often lacked either sense of humour or sense of proportion."⁸

The type of analysis offered by Owram, Bothwell, Drummond and English, has been meaningfully challenged by feminist academics including Sherene Razack. In her

⁴Ibid., 272.

⁵Ibid., 279.

⁶Ibid., 273.

⁷Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond and John English, *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics and Provincialism*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 419.

⁸Ibid. 419

study of a key second wave institution, the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), Razack points out that LEAF challenged the liberal notions of equality that decontextualize individuals, resulting in "...a framework that effectively shuts out opportunities to propose new relationships not predicated on the concept of individuals in competition for pieces of the pie."⁹ In other words, Razack recognized that within feminism there were elements of radicalism that had more lasting impact than fads and that feminism is at once more specific and complex than an amorphous social and cultural change. Certainly, Antigonish provided a venue for activism somewhat unmoved by the momentum of feminism and other social changes, such as secularization. This circumstance is unique in the history of rural feminism in that feminists in Antigonish were struggling against, rather than engaging with, the cultural and social sentiments of the community.

Feminist historian Naomi Black's article "Ripples in The Second Wave: Comparing the Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada and the United States" also discusses the way in which women's political activity is marginalized by mainstream history as part of a greater 'social movement' history.¹⁰ Fortunately, the tendency Black identified is supplemented by useful accounts of rural organizing. Histories of rural women's organizing tell of a capacity to merge with and detach from the larger second

⁹Sherene Razack, *Canadian Feminism and the Law: The Women's Legal Education and Action Fund and the Pursuit of Equality* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1991), 16.

¹⁰Naomi Black, "Ripples in The Second Wave: Comparing the Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada and the United States," in *Challenging Times*, 97.

wave in strategic ways, depending upon the context of their situation. For example, in recognition of many rural women's scepticism about the women's movement, Concerned Farm Women (CFW), a rural women's organization formed in 1981, reassured their membership that their interests lay in farm and family - not in feminism. Pauline Rankin, who has studied this organization, explains that:

A resolution passed at their introductory meeting states that CFW would not allow itself to be described as part of the women's movement; the original intent was to operate in an ancillary role with male-dominated rural groups, providing emotional support for families who were facing farm closures.¹¹

Historian E.A. Cebotarev confirms that "few farm women wished to be associated with the feminist label."¹² Angela Miles, in a much different analysis, noted that,

Many women in Antigonish, who are under extreme individual pressure in private and whose traditional public role is being lost, are open, even welcoming, of an analysis which affirms their specific existence and importance as a group and their general subordination.¹³

Still, economic change would create opportunities for mainstream (largely urban) feminism and rural women's organizing to benefit from each other. And in spite of the connection between the two, the strategy of denying any sympathy with feminism permitted much woman-centered work to proceed.

Historical accounts of rural women's role in the second wave share a tendency to

¹¹Pauline Rankin, "The Politicization of Ontario Farm Women," in Kealey and Sangster, eds., *Beyond the Vote*, 322.

¹²E.A. Cebotarev, "From Domesticity to the Public Sphere: Farm Women, 1945-86," in Joy Parr ed., *A Diversity of Women*, 212.

¹³Miles, *Women's New Knowledge*, 24.

oversimplify and make assumptions about rural life. Rankin's contribution to the history of farm women's activism questions one trend common to accounts of the second wave. Rankin explores how rural women are, in a political sense, not necessarily aligned with one another. She notes, "Farm women's political voices have also been muted by what has been termed the 'myth of rural cohesiveness,' which conceals the many cleavages within the hierarchical nature of rural society."¹⁴ Angela Miles depended upon this mythic cohesiveness, particularly in terms of women's 'values', to maintain a feminist movement in Antigonish.¹⁵ If we extend this notion of cohesiveness to include perceptions of rural *feminists*, a picture of how the AWA/RC may have been perceived by the community, and in turn by its membership, begins to develop.

Organized feminism emerged in Antigonish during a time of economic and social instability in the community. This influenced community reactions to the AWA/RC. The chronology of rural women's entrance into feminism tends to identify economics as a critical factor. Evidence of sustained women's organizing throughout the 20th century suggests that other factors, including dissent among rural women about the significance of economic change, also influenced the direction of rural feminism.

The narrative of emergence that characterizes accounts of rural women's organizing tends to link rural women's activism with modes of production and with the introduction of feminist ideas into rural areas from the city. Angela Miles's description of

¹⁴Rankin, 312.

¹⁵Miles, *Women's New Knowledge*, 25

Antigonish feminism does not stray far from this analysis. She credits economic changes with creating an inarguable “major shift in women’s role in the local community.”¹⁶ More problematically, Miles credits the both the non-rural origin and lifestyle choices of Antigonish feminists ‘from away’ with having significant influence over the impact of the second wave in Antigonish. She notes, of Antigonish’s feminists, that “Even in the absence of movement organization (they) have played an important role in the examples of their own lives.”¹⁷ In contrast, Louise Carbert’s *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women* rejects the idea that economic crisis, along with philosophical leakage from urban feminists, explains rural women’s entrance into feminist activity.¹⁸ Instead, Carbert traces a long, and somewhat independent history of rural women’s political activity.¹⁹ Attention to this is critical to understanding the history of political activism of women in Antigonish. While economic distress was not uncommon in this community, women’s social and political activities were ongoing throughout good times and bad. In addition, the second wave, though often linked to other social and political movements, has an independent record of existence in *both* urban and rural settings in general. Still, accounting for the dynamics that created a shift to more radical women’s

¹⁶Miles, *Feminism and Women’s Community Action*, 19.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁸Louise Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995).

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 6.

activities in Antigonish and elsewhere presents a challenge.

The contention that feminist organizing was limited to middle class, white women's issues is discussed by the authors of *Canadian Women: A History*. The authors attempt to show the broad scope of women's organizing leading up to and during the second wave and they include women's work with refugees, rural women's organizations, and churchwomen's groups.²⁰ By focusing on groups and projects which span the decades of the 1950s and 60s they demonstrate the link between post-war women's organizing and second wave activities. However, the picture they present is thinly developed in its explorations of how more conservative organizing gradually became more radical.²¹ Similarly, the paradigmatic shift from 'women's issues' to 'feminist issues' in Antigonish has never been fully explained - except as a function of social changes in other places. The question that remains is how, if secularization had such a difficult time taking hold in Antigonish, did feminism find a home there? In Roberta Hamilton's discussion of lengthening educational requirements, new ideas about child rearing - including an increased demand for day care, and the ever rising cost of living in the face of massive social spending cuts, she clarifies some of the circumstances influencing the development of women's thinking around feminism. In *Gendering the Vertical Mosaic: Feminist Perspectives on Canadian Society*, Hamilton, like Miles, sees economic shifts as a critical

²⁰Prentice et al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 331-337.

²¹Ibid., 337.

aspect of the changing foci of the second wave women's movement.²² However, in the absence of detailed histories of the impact of social and economic change on rural women, it is difficult to assess the impact of such changes on their politics.

Connecting rural feminist work to the larger story of the second wave by looking at specific organizing strategies is one way to account for the impact of economic uncertainty on feminist projects. Hamilton and Carbert have each contributed to this approach. By locating connections between women's social and economic status and their politics, Hamilton and Carbert begin the task of politicizing processes. However, organizing strategies also influenced the inclusiveness of feminist groups in important ways.

In what is a relevant criticism for the thesis presented in this chapter, that trying to create a diverse organization presented problems, Chris Gabriel and Katherine Scott's history of the Women's Press contends that in attempting to keep their organizations free of dissent the feminists in that organization created spaces which "proved to be exclusionary or silenced many women of Colour."²³ Drawing a link to the second wave they claim that "the politics of the press have been neither better nor worse than those of the movement it claims to represent."²⁴ Furthermore, Gabriel and Scott argue that

²²Hamilton, 40.

²³Ibid., 39.

²⁴Chris Gabriel and Katherine Scott, "Women's Press at Twenty: The Politics of Feminist Publishing," in *And Still We Rise: Feminist Political Mobilizing in Contemporary Canada* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1993), 26.

although the Women's Press attempted to use egalitarian selection processes,

In any organization the key decisions about organizational form, however, are always over-determined by the political analysis and the purpose of the organization...Thus, a small group of white women came together to create a mechanism to foster and spread women's writing, a mechanism that ultimately reflected their own world view and position in society.²⁵

The Antigonish case also reveals that good intentions did not necessarily result in a diverse organization. The exclusion or marginality of women of colour was not only in practice in many second wave organizations; it has also characterized most accomplishments of organizing in the movement. In *Feminism In Canada: From Pressure to Politics*, Geraldine Finn and Angela Miles state unequivocally that gender oppression is "the deepest division of humanity within itself, upon which all other fragmentation and domination has been built."²⁶ In their valorization of the idea of an 'integrative feminism', Miles and Finn assume that the development of an overarching politic that cuts across categories of difference is desired by all.²⁷ This assumption overlooks populations of women who refuse to either separate or subsume their race. In her stirring essay "The Violence We Women Do: A First Nations View", Patricia A. Monture-Okanee insists that her racial 'difference' be fully recognized:

²⁵Ibid., 38.

²⁶Geraldine Finn and Angela Miles eds. *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics*. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982), 9.

²⁷Ibid., 57.

You cannot ask me to speak as a woman because I cannot speak as just a woman. That is not the voice that I have been given. Gender does not transcend race. The voice that I have been given is the voice of a Mohawk woman and if you must talk to me about women, somewhere along the line you must talk about race.²⁸

Women speaking from various positions of difference, such as ability, sexuality and country of origin, have noted the tendency of second wave histories to ‘white wash’ diverse contributions to feminist causes. The invisibility of First Nations women and Black women is particularly noticeable, and no more so than in the story of Antigonish feminist organizing. Tellingly, the social nuances that complicate rural feminist activism have received inconsistent attention from second wave historians.

Why is the role of First Nations women largely overlooked by historical accounts of the second wave? It is clear that where those accounts do exist, they complicate and are critical of an otherwise happy history of social progress. Accordingly, where First Nations women are included, as in *Canadian Women: A History*, the treatment is partial at best. The authors note that First Nations women’s ‘problems’ seemed remote to most Canadian women.²⁹ In Antigonish, women in the Mi’kmaq community of Afton have remained curiously absent from the agenda of AWA/RC activities. Though critical women’s struggles, including a significant land-claims conflict, occurred in Afton during the 1980s,

²⁸Patricia Monture-O’Kanee, “The Violence We Women Do: A First Nations View,” in *Challenging Times*, 194.

²⁹Prentice et al., 398.

the AWA/RC did not become involved in or attempt to support such issues.³⁰ This reflects the character of other approaches to First Nations women. Second wave histories tend to discuss the highly publicized Section 12 court cases of Lavell and Bédard (which challenged a sexist section of the Indian Act) and usually comment briefly on the complexity and separateness of First Nations women's organizing. Historians often limit their analysis of First Nations women's experiences and participation in the second wave to their impact on national constitutional matters.³¹

One exception to this tendency is Lilianne Ernestine Krosenbrink-Gelissen's *Sexual Equality as an Aboriginal Right*.³² Through her telling of First Nations' women's organizing for constitutional change, Krosenbrink-Gelissen is careful to point out that while the women's movement created a climate suitable for First Nations' women's participation in constitutional change - ultimately it "gradually became clear to Indian women that they had to seek a political niche for themselves in order to seek their rights."³³ The author begins the process of locating First Nations women in an important second wave role, one in which legal and social changes are accomplished. Furthermore,

³⁰Danile N. Paul, *We Were Not the Savages: A Micmac Perspective on the Collision of European and Aboriginal Civilization* (Nimbus Publishing: Halifax, 1993), 231-235.

³¹Ibid., 396-398.

³²Lilianne Ernestine Krosenbrink-Gelissen, *Sexual Equality as an Aboriginal Right: The Native Women's Association of Canada and the Constitutional Process on Aboriginal Matters, 1982-1987* (Germany: Verlag breitenbach Publishers, 1991)

³³Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 77. In June 1985, First Nations women won the right to retain First Nations status in marriage to a non-Native.

in describing the different social and political circumstances of various groups (such as on-reserve vs. off-reserve Indians, and Metis vs. Innu etc.) Krosenbrink-Gelissen demonstrates the inadequacy of any analysis that overlooks these distinctions.

The record of activism of women of colour during the second wave shares these characteristics. The activities of specific communities of women, such as African Nova Scotian women, are overlooked in favor of a broad picture of the ‘separateness’ of women of colour from mainstream feminist organizing. In a discussion of activism against violence, Marina Helen Morrow describes the way in which this approach to the history of feminism is reflected in feminist organizing practices:

Some feminists have tried to develop a “politics of difference” by designing collectives that attempt to allow for the participation of all members of the group, or by having a structure that allows for the formation of caucuses that meet separately and bring their concerns to the larger group...Although sometimes effective, these structures do not always allow for incidents of exclusion to be adequately addressed. This is primarily because of assumptions that each group within a collective has equal power to bring its concerns forward, which ignores the structures of hidden power that exists in any group.³⁴

Feminists M. Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty identify a further problem in the history of women’s organizing that stems from this inattention to specificity: the appropriation of the work of women of colour by white feminists.³⁵ They

³⁴Marina Helen Morrow, “Feminist Anti-Violence Activism: Organizing for Change” in Somer Brodribb, ed. *Reclaiming the Future: Women’s Strategies for the 21st Century*. (Charlottetown PEI: gynergy books, 1999) 237-257.

³⁵M. Jaqui Alexander & Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xvii.

contend that “token inclusion of our texts without re-conceptualizing the whole, white, middle-class, gendered knowledge base effectively absorbs and silences us.”³⁶ The place of immigrant women in the story of the second wave has been similarly overlooked. In spite of useful contributions, such as Roxanna Ng’s “The Social Construction of Immigrant Women in Canada,” most second wave narratives overlook the place of immigrant women in Canadian society and in feminist activism altogether.³⁷ Even Ng’s thesis, which describes the creation of ‘immigrant as commodity’ within state processes, depends more upon a Marxist analysis of productive relations than of immigrant women’s lived realities, and their role in addressing social inequity.

In Kealey and Sangster’s *Beyond the Vote*, although immigrant women are included in the chapters on the history of feminist organizing, few examples of contemporary immigrant women’s activities are included. This oversight places immigrant women’s feminist activities in the hazy past - hovering between the first and second wave of organizing - bridging but not necessarily belonging to the women’s movement.³⁸ Franca Iacovetta’s contribution, titled “Remaking Their Lives: Women Immigrants, Survivors, and Refugees”, is a notable exception. The author recounts the

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Roxanna Ng, “The Social Construction of Immigrant Women in Canada” In *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism*, (Montreal: Book Centre Inc., 1986).

³⁸Kealey and Sangster, eds., *Beyond the Vote* (1989) includes chapters on Finnish, Ukrainian and Jewish women, by Varpu Lindström-Best, Francis Swyripa, and Ruth A. Frager respectively.

experiences of immigrant women from numerous, and detailed perspectives.³⁹

Previous accounts of organizing in Antigonish have done little to reveal the role of immigrant women in organizing, or to address the absence of women of colour and First Nations women from the leadership of the AWA/RC. Such omissions call into question the ability of individuals in positions of power to accurately assess their own capacity for inclusiveness.

In a telling example, Becki L. Ross's book on the history of the Lesbian Organization of Toronto (LOOT) discusses the way in which privileging one identity, lesbian identity in this case, resulted in numerous exclusions from a prominent women's organization. Ross states:

I argue that no movement for gender and sexual liberation can afford the evacuation of male-to-female lesbian transsexual, a leather dyke into s/m fantasy, a lesbian (or any woman) who is HIV+, a softball playing and factory working gay woman, a rural lesbian who has never heard of Susie Sexpert, *or a lesbian of colour who refuses to splice herself into identity-pieces with lesbian on top.*⁴⁰

More typically though, it is white, middle-class heterosexual women who are identified as the 'privileged' voices of the women's movement within second wave historiography. Though this group had greater access to resources and institutions, and were privy to the language and practices useful for dealing with those in power, marginalized women argued that their own resources were equally valuable but consistently overlooked. To

³⁹Franca Iacovetta, "Remaking Their Lives: Women Immigrants, Survivors and Refugees," in *A Diversity of Women*, 135-167.

⁴⁰Becki L. Ross, *The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 228. Emphasis added.

return to Monture-OKanee for a moment, the way in which white women constructed and defined women's issues did not always rest easily with First Nations women. The example Monture-OKanee discusses is violence against women:

The mistreatment that First Nations women confront is not only continuous - it is inescapable. I believe such experiences across women as a group to be unique to First Nations women (and perhaps our sisters of colour). I do not believe the continuity of the abuse or its inescapableness are attributes of abuse confronted by white women. Yet, white women are the ones who have had the power to set the definitions under which the discourse on violence against women operates.⁴¹

Monture-OKanee's perspective highlights the depth of inequity that existed in feminist organizing. Presupposed definitions and constructions of oppression conflicted with the subjective experiences of some women, and particularly minority women. These assumptions are reproduced throughout the historiography of the second wave, but also through the organizational practices of second wave organizations.

Organizational practices and policies reveal the way in which organizations deal with diversity. The overarching critique in the history of feminism is that in their haste to right the wrongs of society, feminists trampled on the perspectives and experiences of many women. Inasmuch as the AWA/RC was located in a socially diverse community, it will be useful to revisit this critique.

In Nancy Adamson's article about the Women's Liberation Movement of Toronto, the author uses the experiences of one discrete group of feminist organizers to discuss

⁴¹Monture-OKanee, 199.

topics with broader implications for the second wave movement in general.⁴² She notes that: “Wherever women came from they were determined that their new organizations would not recreate the inequities they had previously experienced.”⁴³ However, her work also acknowledges the difficulty of achieving such a lofty goal. Roberta Hamilton’s *Gendering the Vertical Mosaic* presents an explanation that clarifies the problem of power, representation, and subjectivity. Hamilton states: “The powerful are equally dependant on the powerless, although their inability to acknowledge this dependance leads to tyranny.”⁴⁴ Hamilton argues that because women’s contributions to other social movements, including labour and peace movements, were often overlooked, the inability of the women’s movement to come to terms with its own omissions is particularly unfortunate. This lack of self-criticism by feminists is pervasive in the history of the second wave. Hamilton further notes that the movement’s tendency to cringe at dissent, and its reluctance to challenge the status quo in order to secure government funding, resulted more in a reactive politic than in social revolution:

Although organizers struggle to maintain their decision-making autonomy, the pressure to rationalize the organization, produce a hierarchically organized staff that is ‘accountable’, and keep countless records has taken its toll. From the outside, many [women’s] centres now look like way stations for the destitute run

⁴²Adamson, in *A Diversity of Women*, 252-280.

⁴³Ibid., 270.

⁴⁴Roberta Hamilton, *Gendering the Vertical Mosaic: Feminist Perspectives on Canadian Society* (Toronto: Copp Clark Ltd., 1996), 183.

by a staff of poorly paid professionals.⁴⁵

The gap Hamilton has identified, between autonomy and cooperation, was created in part by bureaucratization. This element is critical for understanding the historiography of the second wave. Torn between celebrating the achievements of Canadian feminists, including the establishment of women's centres and organizations, and calling into question the inclusiveness of a movement that supposes inclusion (at least ideologically) but does not seem to have prioritized it, some historians have created either over-simplified or convoluted histories. Gillian Walker's discussion of the ways in which the issue of wife beating became "transformed and absorbed" by feminist complicity with state structures illustrates the problem.⁴⁶ Her work challenges the idea that social change can be clearly accounted for within overarching critiques of feminist engagement with the state: "As we work to understand the relationship between women, the women's movement and state practices, it becomes increasingly evident that one-dimensional views of the state as a monolith, with either benign or hostile intentions toward women, are not adequate."⁴⁷

An area of feminist history that seems particularly prone to either/or analysis is found in discussions of the interaction of activists with different levels of government.

⁴⁵Ibid., 176.

⁴⁶Gillian Walker, "The Conceptual Politics of Struggle: Wife Battering, the Women's Movement and the State" in eds. Patricia M. Connelly and Pat Armstrong, *Feminism in Action: Studies in Political Economy* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1992). 40.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Dorothy Smith's work deals with the problem of co-optation through government support and policy-making, noting the trend of a 'concealed standpoint' in theorizing that implies inclusion, but ultimately serves to obscure and maintain dominant structures.⁴⁸ In contrast, Janine Brodie's contribution is to acknowledge, albeit warily, the political spaces that were created when second wave activists engage with the state.⁴⁹ Women's increased participation in government, as well as the founding of women's centres and the like are just two examples. The complicated relationship between feminist organizations and the state is reflected in the story of the AWA/RC. Feminist organizations also attempted to overcome the notion that feminism itself was 'sexist'. By focusing on 'women' as a group feminists encountered major criticisms. Most significantly, the idea that the category 'women' perpetuated negative stereotypes threatened the core of feminism.

In Denise Riley's *Am I That Name?* (1988) it is suggested that feminist work was hampered by the apparent need to use the problematic category of 'women'.⁵⁰ Put simply, Riley's view was that feminists at once ran from, and embraced the identity 'woman', creating tension and instability within their ranks and conflicting tendencies in movement strategies. The category 'women' seemed a necessary part of feminist organizing: the group feminists defended seemed to be women. But grouping a diverse set of human

⁴⁸Dorothy Smith, "Feminist Reflections on Political Economy" In *Feminism in Action*, 1-21.

⁴⁹Janine Brodie, *Politics on The Margins: Restructuring and the Canadian Women's Movement* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995), 40.

⁵⁰Denise Riley, *Am I That Name?* (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis, 1988).

beings into one category for political purposes was dangerously similar, Riley argued, to the historical processes that in the west throughout the nineteenth century linked biological femaleness with a limited set of capacities and traits. The growing recognition in feminism of the diversity of women's lives seemed to promise to enlarge feminism's goals beyond the scope of this problem. But even so, Riley has pointed out, the category 'women' remained a key element in feminist organizing, and the paradox of using an oppressive category to end an oppression organized on the basis of that category remained.

As a result, writing the history of a feminist organization requires attention not only to women's responses to society - but also to the way in which those responses challenged or reproduced the status quo. Ultimately however, some authors bemoan the loss of "heady earlier days of feminist organizing", even while they recognize the problems that this type of approach creates: "...since the mid-seventies it has often seemed that the main issue facing the grass-roots women's movement was how to recapture some of the early momentum and unity - and with it some of the earlier sense of certainty about change."⁵¹ In Antigonish, we will see that the AWA/RC experienced a similar shift.

Some accounts of the second wave reveal how feminist organizers repositioned themselves according to the goal or project at hand in order to be more effective.

⁵¹Adamson et al., 259

Alexandra Dobrowolsky's work on the women's movement exemplifies this approach.⁵² Dobrowolsky discusses how, during the 1970s and early 80s, feminist organizers took advantage of their increased access to funding through the Secretary of State Women's Program to initiate groups and projects across the country. While the funding provided was not without conditions (abortion activism and "activities related to sexual orientation" were prohibited), organizations gradually discovered mechanisms that would allow them to pursue their own agendas, such as separating service groups from advocacy groups if only for the purposes of fund-raising.⁵³ These tactics were embraced by Antigoneish feminists. The notion that women's organizational strategies emerged *out of* circumstances (rather than, for example, creating those circumstances) is typical in narratives that explore the changing political economy of women in Canada throughout the second wave.

In this chapter I have attempted to accomplish, in part, the very thing that I critique. Compiling a convincing, representative sample of the chronicle of the history of second wave organizing threatens to represent thinly and simply what was a dense and diverse phenomenon. I have sought to provide examples from a reasonable number of historical and feminist perspectives in order to create at least a sense of the movement and its historical significance. As well, I have attempted to use examples that are relevant to

⁵²Alexandra Dobrowolsky, *The Politics of Pragmatism: Women, Representation, and Constitutionalism in Canada* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵³*Ibid.*, 21.

the history of feminist organizing in Antigonish. In particular my examples have emphasized challenges to the cohesiveness of the women's movement such as diversity, and co-option. I will return to some of the examples in following chapters. The scope of this thesis, or perhaps any thesis, could not contain the whole of the second wave story. However, as I begin in Chapter Three to characterize the Antigonish case in detail, its particularities (peculiarities?) and chronology will contribute to our understanding of how this women's organization developed, and how it affected the ideology of feminism in a rural community. By looking at the important second wave issue of abortion, a detailed story results and contributes nuances to other local stories of the second wave.

Chapter Three

The Abortion Debate and Disengagement as Strategy

No second wave issue has evoked more open hostility and confusion than the abortion debate. Second wave feminists, for better or worse, have been characterized by media and by the pro-life contingent as the primary leaders in the pro-choice movement. This association has affected the public's perception of feminist organizations, no more so than within essentially conservative rural communities.¹ For some Canadian feminists, like Kathleen McDonnell, the abortion debate represents "the forgotten issue of the women's movement."² While it is true that by the mid-1980s in most of Canada the topic of reproductive choice was dropped both in the media and by feminist activists, in Antigonish the linkage between feminism and the struggle for reproductive choice was never 'forgotten'. In Antigonish the women's movement was perceived by many as preoccupied with reproductive choice, and with accessing abortion rights in particular. The AWA/RC board's responses to the public's perceptions of the organization as pro-choice reveals some of the ways strategic publicity and policy making was used by the group during the second wave. This chapter will show how the AWA's decision to disengage from feminism's struggle for reproductive freedom resulted in a strategic avoidance of this contentious and potentially polarizing issue.

¹Cohen, 18.

²Kathleen McDonnell, "Claim no easy victories: The Fight for Reproductive Rights," in Fitzgerald et al. eds., *Still Ain't Satisfied: Canadian Feminism Today* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982), 33.

Beginning by placing the abortion debate in the context of second wave activism during the 1980s, this chapter provides a contextual foundation for the specific circumstances in Antigonish. Then, looking in detail at the abortion debate in Antigonish during the 1980s, I establish the specific social and political context affecting the AWA's approach to abortion. These will include the role of religious organizations, especially the Catholic church, the varied perspectives on reproductive choice within the membership of the AWA/RC, and the role of other community organizations. *How* the organization worked - its processes and structure - will become evident as I trace the AWA's handling of the abortion question.

Evidence exists that throughout the latter half of the twentieth century many women without access to methods of preventing unwanted pregnancies viewed abortion as an option, and actively sought abortion information and services.³ In urban settings the issue of abortion, and of providing women with the opportunity to choose whether or not to proceed with a pregnancy, was viewed as just one facet of a larger women's movement. Ultimately, family planning advocates, including many second wave feminists, encouraged the Canadian federal government to decriminalize contraception.⁴ Though they achieved this goal in 1969, feminists found themselves lacking government support

³Ibid., 44-45.

⁴McLaren and McLaren, 135.

for important family planning initiatives, including access to abortion.⁵ Throughout much of Canada, although numerous groups met and discussed reproductive issues, the history of abortion during the 1970s and 80s was marked by the efforts of a single physician, Dr. Henry Morgentaler. A survivor of Nazi concentration camps, this pro-choice advocate began lobbying for free and legal access to abortion in the late 1960s. Up until that time Canada was the site of tens of thousands of illegal and dangerous abortions each year.⁶ Morgentaler fought to open and operate health clinics providing abortion services in cities across Canada hoping to remedy the situation, and continued to struggle with courts over the illegality of his clinics throughout the 1970s and 80s. Some of the greatest opposition to his activities occurred within Nova Scotia.

Within the community of Antigonish the question of woman's right to control her reproduction became a key focus of the community's response to a feminist organization in its midst. For the AWA/RC the consent (if not support) of the Catholic community was critical to the continuation of funding for the organization. In Antigonish, although abortion was no longer against the law, an attitude persisted that abortion was lawless behavior and that the pro-choice position was morally corrupt.

For small Catholic communities, the emphasis was on persuading individuals to have large families in order to strengthen the influence of the church in an increasingly

⁵Ibid., 189. The author notes that Trudeau's comment was originally made in the context of "debate over sexual offences".

⁶Joyce Arthur, *Abortion in Canada: History, Law, and Access*. October 1999. <www.prochoiceactionnetwork-canada.org/Canada.html>

secularized culture. Though Antigonish itself was predominantly Catholic, larger cultural influences around sexuality and reproductive freedom had had an impact on life in the community. Secularization, such as was taking place in Protestant congregations, threatened to overwhelm the Catholic church, and as Peter L. Bèger described in *A Rumor of Angels*:

The Catholic situation is different, at least in part because Catholicism has viewed the modern world with much more suspicion from the beginning and, as a result, has managed to keep up its cognitive defenses against modernity more effectively and until a much more recent date.⁷

One way in which this ‘cognitive defense’ was accomplished was through the refusal of Catholic leadership to condone the use of oral contraceptives. This demonstrated the depth of their fear of change and of the potential empowerment of women. By continuing to regard reproductive freedom as a threat to salvation, church leaders created a paradigm in which dissent was linked with immorality. This attitude lent tacit approval to church interference in women’s reproductive choices.

Catholic birth control *advocates* in Antigonish sought to manipulate women’s choices through promotion of very specific and controlled information. For example, with the sanction of the Catholic church, the SERENA (rhythm) method was widely promoted.⁸ In order to maintain their anti-abortion/anti-contraception position without alienating more progressive parishioners, Catholics had to find ways of limiting births

⁷Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (New York: Doubleday, 1969),15.

⁸Advertisements for SERENA workshops appeared in *The Casket* newspaper throughout the 1980s.

that could be interpreted as falling in line with the Papal dictate. One solution was the SERENA method. This form of ‘conception management’ utilizes an analysis of peak times for conception, according to a woman’s monthly cycle, to predict the best times during a month for copulating without conception. With the development of the birth control pill, Catholic leadership in Canada went against the 1968 *Humanae Vitae* of Pope Paul VI, which sought to end use of all ‘artificial’ means of contraception, and gave their approval to decriminalization.⁹ However, the traditional rhythm method continued to be promoted and encouraged in conservative Catholic communities, including Antigonish.

The impact of ‘expert’ opinions including those of physicians reverberated throughout the course of the abortion debate, and were much cited by those on either side of the argument long after the law had been struck down. For example, in 1984, Nova Scotia’s Council For Life hosted a Pro-Life ‘Conference’ featuring a congressman, a registered nurse, and a reverend among other ‘experts’.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the question of access to services is important in understanding the situation in Antigonish. Films and lectures presenting an anti-choice position also received significant attention by the Antigonish press, and the idea of limiting births remained anathema in Antigonish.¹¹

⁹Ibid., 132.

¹⁰“NS Pro-Life Conference Set” *The Casket*, March 14, 1984. Section C, P.1.

¹¹St. Francis Xavier University’s student newspaper, *The Xavierian Weekly*, promoted the anti-choice position by featuring articles by the St. FX Pro-Life Society, as well as weekly advertisement for Birthright, an anti-choice counseling service for women. See for examples *The Xavierian Weekly*: Letters to the Editor November 26, 1981, “Aborted Love” November 5, 1987, and “Birthright Aids Women in Distress”

In 1969, the Canadian Criminal Code was amended to make provision of contraception and abortion (under specific circumstances) no longer illegal activities.¹²

Section 251 specified that,

“...the abortion must be performed in a hospital, with the prior approval of the hospital’s therapeutic abortion committee consisting of three physicians who had to unanimously agree that the woman’s continued pregnancy would or would be likely to endanger her life or health.”¹³

The impact of this caveat created increased support for abortion on demand. In Antigonish however, the situation did not lend itself to compliance with this new Section. The local hospital, St. Martha’s, never convened a TAC or provided therapeutic abortion services to anyone.¹⁴

In any case, the 1971 report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) noted the limitations of the ‘liberalized’ abortion law that required a hospital-based committee to approve an abortion.¹⁵ While the use of a committee seemed to promise a degree of accountability and access, the commission found that the use of

November 12, 1983 Also *The Casket*: “Film Shows the Reality of Abortion” November 23, 1987, “Abortion - An Election Issue”, Dialogue with Bishop Colin Campbell November 9, 1988, “A Reminder: Abortion” December 16, 1987, “Right to Life” September 26, 1984 and so on.

¹²McLaren & McLaren, 156.

¹³Paula Bourne, “Women, Law and the Justice System,” in *Canadian Women’s Issues*, 333.

¹⁴Mitra Foroutan, (e-mail correspondence), Guysborough Antigonish Strait Health Authority, January 2004.

¹⁵Gavigan, 271. Bill C-150, 1969, decriminalized contraception and abortion, but asserted control over the latter through the TAC process.

therapeutic abortion committees (TACs) in hospitals had resulted in a situation where it was:

...more difficult to obtain a therapeutic abortion than it was in the past. For this reason the procedure cannot be relied upon to reduce the number of illegal abortions or the maternal deaths or injuries that often follow improper medical practices... It is the commission's view that the present law has more bad effects than good ones and should be amended.¹⁶

In other words, the 1969 amendment had failed on a number of important fronts. It neither ensured freedom of access to services, nor did it guarantee that when services were provided they were safe and appropriate. Later, the Canada Health Act provided assurance that insured medical services would be universal, accessible, portable, and comprehensive. However, because hospitals required a doctor's referral to perform an abortion, and until 1989, the approval of a TAC, this 'universal' access was often decided upon by individuals with varying opinions regarding a woman's right to choose abortion. In Antigonish, where most referring physicians were staunchly anti-choice, the result was that abortion services could not be obtained by women in their own community.

Regardless, in Antigonish no pro-choice group existed, and the topic of abortion continued to be discussed from the anti-choice perspective almost exclusively.¹⁷ *The Casket* was blatant in its support of the anti-choice viewpoint. In September of 1984 an

¹⁶Canadian Association for Adult Education, *What's In It?* (Ottawa: Canadian Association for Adult Education, n.d.), 27-28.

¹⁷*The Xaverian Weekly* published letters to the editor expressing pro-choice views, as well as articles about contraception, throughout the 1980s.

article in the 'As We See It' weekly column noted:

“We are pleased to welcome as our neighbor at 86 College Street, the recently opened office of Antigonish Right to Life. We are pleased, also, that all religious faiths in the community were represented at the official opening, thereby signifying their approval and commitment.”¹⁸

The Casket also promoted resources and events aimed at limiting women's reproductive freedoms.¹⁹

Increasingly, feminists were becoming interested in the way in which the abortion debate played out upon women's bodies. In a critical analysis of the politics of the body, Ruth Roach Pierson has pointed out that the combined forces of medicine and law had created a situation in which a pregnant woman “was treated as a potential adversary of her own foetus.”²⁰ A unique Catholic feminist perspective was presented in a 1986 article in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. The article's author, Frances Kissling, reveals her desire to remain childless and comments that “In my journey towards personal integrity, moral agency, and ethical control of that procreative capacity, religious institutions (in my case the Roman Catholic church) played at best no role; at worst a

¹⁸“Right to Life” *The Casket*. September 26, 1984. 2.

¹⁹Examples are too numerous to list, but a 1987 review of the film ‘Eclipse of Reason’ is typical of their approach noting “The film exposes the violence of abortion in no uncertain terms”. See “Film Shows Reality of Abortion” *The Casket*. November 13, 1987. 6.

²⁰Ruth Roach Pierson, “The Politics of the Body,” in *Canadian Women's Issues Vol.1*, 104.

prohibitive and censorious one.”²¹ The suggestion that women’s bodily integrity was under attack by anti-choice organizations motivated much of feminist discourse and activism, particularly during the 1970s and early 80s. However, in spite of its availability, Antigonish feminists did not employ Catholic pro-choice rhetoric. Perhaps an oversight, this was unfortunately just one of many opportunities missed by the AWA/RC to engage with the question of choice in a potentially progressive way.

Kathleen McDonnell, a feminist writing about the partial success of the pro-choice movement, has noted that “the Right to Life Movement, much to our discomfort, is itself a ‘women’s movement’”.²² She draws on the work of U.S. feminists to show that, in Canada, anti-abortion leaders tended to be men, but the majority of organization members were women. This was reflected in the community of Antigonish, where anti-choice proponents were most often women led by men, and priests in particular. Catholic opposition to contraception in any form was made clear in the 1930 letter of Pope Pius XI called *Casti Connubi*.²³ This document charged Catholics with the *duty* of unchecked procreation (or chastity, if preferred). Whether practicing Catholics viewed this directive as a defensive response to a rise in the popularity of Protestantism, or as a direct challenge to the eugenics movements, the results were the same. Still, it is important to note that

²¹Frances Kissling, “Religion and Reproductive Freedom: Toward a Feminist Ethic of Rights and Responsibility,” in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* Volume IX, Number 1 (Colorado: University of Colorado, 1986).

²²McDonnell, 36.

²³McLaren and McLaren, 129.

even within the anti-abortion movement there was also dissent.²⁴ Attitudes persisted that under specific circumstances, such as a pregnancy occurring due to a rape, a woman should be able to have an abortion.²⁵ However, in reading through the opinions of Antigoneish pro-life proponents, I found little support for abortion even in this extreme circumstance. The following example is typical:

“When doctors are willing to become social executioners for millions of babies, we must examine what motives are used in justifying their actions. Usually, reasons given include preserving the life of the mother, the expectation of the defective child, rape and incest. *Even if these were valid reasons*, they would account for only three percent of all abortions.”²⁶

Since 1982, Canadian legislation on contraception and abortion has been tested against the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and its ideology of equality. As a number of feminists have pointed out, the idea of equality disguises the material, or ‘real’ conditions of women’s lives.²⁷ In North America, as the rhetoric of equality between women and men proliferated, it became increasingly difficult for second wave feminists to identify and articulate the restrictions on women’s lives. Popular culture in its myriad forms, introduced the notion of a ‘superwoman’ who was both career oriented *and* an ideal mate and mother.²⁸ She was a figure who seemed ‘equal’ in that, unlike women of previous

²⁴Ibid., 21.

²⁵Prentice et al., 363.

²⁶“Abortion Effects Like Falling Dominoes”, *The Casket*, November 19, 1986. Emphasis added.

²⁷Gavigan, 266-267. See also Tove Stang Dahl and Annika Snare (1978).

²⁸Adamson et al., 6.

generations, she appeared to have equal access to education and work, and was not *required* to give up family life to succeed. The actual economic and social circumstances of most Canadian women were far different from this ideal. The realities of trying to combine marriage and children with a career proved more challenging than equality rhetoric acknowledged.

In Antigonish, feminists found themselves caught in this ideological bind. Finding a means of assisting women to achieve a degree of autonomy within a largely patriarchal community, while at the same time taking care not to offend individuals and groups in positions of power, was challenging. In journals and books second wave theorists began to offer analyses to explain how women, in spite of achieving supposed “equality”, were continuing to experience social, economic and cultural oppression. Abortion and contraception provided ways of dealing with the incompatibility of the ideal woman and the reality of increased sexual freedom and unplanned pregnancies. Hamilton summarizes: “Feminist critiques of a capitalist society draw attention to the absurdity of an economic system that makes no provision for the exigencies of human reproduction and childhood dependence.”²⁹ Others have argued that formal equality (equality enshrined in law) does create the potential for emancipation. However, as Shelley Gavigan has explained, formal equality has not guaranteed actual equality for women.³⁰ In spite of the Canada Health Act’s provisions for equal access, and of the contributions of feminist

²⁹Hamilton, 173.

³⁰Gavigan, 267.

theorists, women in rural Atlantic Canada have never enjoyed access to abortion services equal to the rest of the country.

A closer look at the resulting options and limitations facing Antigonish feminists will expand our understanding of the decision wrested from the AWA. The arguments for and against access to abortion, and the blatant media support for the anti-choice position, characterize the situation in Antigonish and give a sense of what feminists were up against.

In an extreme application of the equity approach, anti-choice advocates have assigned the status of rights-bearing 'individual' to the unborn. This attempt to personify the foetus is evident in the following quote from a 1984 Antigonish newspaper column called 'Words on Wednesday' in which the National Action Committee's (NAC) position on abortion is described as "an unequivocal pro-choice one, with not even a tear of regret for the vanquished." Invoking high profile anti-choice proponents such as Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa, the author of this particular stand against reproductive freedom argued in terms of moral (Catholic) superiority and dramatic rescues of the unborn.³¹ An excerpt from a letter to the editor of Antigonish's local paper during the 1980s overflows with 'rights of the individual' rhetoric. The following is from a lengthy letter to the editor by Terry Ryan, Antigonish, NS:

I can, in a way, hear the beat of the death drums seeping from the walls of our hospitals and slaughter houses they call 'abortion clinics'. The same tune, I assume, seeped from the walls at Dachau in Germany and echoed from there and

³¹*The Casket*, "Abortion and Feminism: Some Thoughts,"(Sept. 3, 1984), 3.

many other places of slaughter...There is a curious avoidance of the scientific facts, which everyone really knows, that is that human life begins at conception. Let us join together in prayer with Mother Teresa that the tenderness and the love of God will penetrate our hearts and that we may put the tender love of God into loving action by helping the unborn child to come, to be loved, to be wanted.³²

This example demonstrates the attempt on the part of anti-choice activists to foreground the ‘unborn child’ as an individual and a victim. In a similar vein the following appeared in a 1984 letter to the editor:

The human heart begins to beat at three weeks after conception. By eight weeks after conception the tiny baby is completely and perfectly formed and reacts to painful stimuli....Are we going to allow the denial of rights for those human beings or are we going to demand action from our elected representatives in government to work for legislation to stop this holocaust?³³

Many of the letters and articles on choice issues in *The Casket* contain descriptive passages using graphic and inflammatory language, such as the following from a 1988 letter: “...that infant, in segments, would readily flush down the drain to the cesspool of unwanted humans; the mother stands neutral before the law; the media rest in interested innocence...justice does have mortal silence! as in the life of the unborn.”³⁴

That same year Bishop Colin Campbell offered the following commentary:

The victim of abortion has no time to put his or her life together. She or he is dead. She has been killed by a butcher who says that she was inconvenient. Her life has ended before it has come to the light of day...Protection of the rights of the most

³²*The Casket*, Letter to the Editor. Terry Ryan, Antigonish, NS. (March 12, 1986), 2.

³³*The Casket*, Letter to the Editor. Betty Watts, Port Hood, NS. (Aug. 23, 1984), 2.

³⁴*The Casket*, Letter to the Editor. A.F. O’Neill, Mulgrave. (Aug. 15, 1984), 2.

defenseless in our society is a magnificent act of love.³⁵

The influence of the church resonates throughout the abortion rhetoric published by *The Casket*. In 1987, Rev. J. H. Gillis's article "Reminder: Abortion" made the following claims:

...human beings were created in the image and likeness of God...(He) implanted a spiritual soul in each of them...The human being is therefore a creature of God who can never be put in a class with any other creature in the universe. Abortionists refuse to be guided by the teachings of our Faith, and so it is inevitable that they will consider human life as something they can use for their own selfish purposes.³⁶

The editorial staff of *The Casket* were plainly anti-choice. The following editor's note appeared prior to an anti-choice article by C. Everett Koop called "Abortion Effects: 'Falling Like Dominoes':

Editor's Note: The author is now Surgeon General of the U.S..., before joining the Reagan Administration (1981), he was a pediatric surgeon with an international reputation. This article is taken from publications before joining the government. They are as timely today as when written. Dr. Koop's maternal grandmother was a native of Nova Scotia, and he has often visited the province. This article was compiled by Peter Eldridge, vice-president of Council For Life Nova Scotia.³⁷

In addition to the editor's praise for and pride in Koop, another sign of *The Casket's* perspective is that no articles in support of access to safe abortion services appeared in *The Casket* between 1982 and 1989. Nor were any pro-choice letters to the

³⁵*The Casket*. "Abortion: An Election Issue." Bishop Colin Campbell (Nov. 9, 1988).

³⁶*The Casket*, "A Reminder: Abortion," Rev. J.H. Gillis (Dec. 16, 1987), 4.

³⁷*The Casket*, "Words on Wednesday: Abortion Effects : 'Like Falling Dominoes'." (November 18, 1986), 23.

editor published. With the exception of information about SERENA (a non-denominational group that promotes the rhythm and sympto-thermo methods of family planning), neither do any articles about contraception appear during this period.³⁸

Evidence also exists of anti-choice bias in the community. In 1987, St. Francis Xavier University, the most important public institution in the town, hosted a talk by Beverly Hadland, Director of Choose Life Canada. Hadland's visit was sponsored by Antigonish Right to Life.³⁹ Throughout the 1980s St. Francis Xavier University supported the anti-choice side of the debate, both overtly, as above, but also in more subtle ways. Information about contraception and abortion was difficult to access on campus throughout the 1980s. Attempts by the Nursing Department and the Student Union to set up information displays about reproductive health were thwarted by the university's administration.⁴⁰ But other, even more powerful voices, also influenced the community. A 1988 letter in the regular column of Bishop Colin Campbell of the Diocese of Antigonish and Chancellor of St. Francis Xavier University, addressed the issue in his attempt to sway voters in an upcoming election. He was unequivocal in his condemnation of women

³⁸*The Casket*, "Serena Group Convenes" (April, 23, 1986). Also *The Casket*, "Dialogue: Serena and Life", Bishop Colin Campbell. (Oct. 21, 1987).

³⁹*The Casket*, "Pro-Lifer to Give Talk" (October 21, 1987).

⁴⁰During the 1990s the St. Francis Xavier University's Student Union ran a yearly Health Fair on campus. During one of the final years of this event (the exact date has been difficult to pinpoint), a display of information about sexually transmitted diseases, including information about condoms, was removed from the Health Fair at the request of the university's administration. Telephone interview with Colleen Campbell, Nursing Department, St. Francis Xavier University, July, 2003.

seeking an abortion:

Some people who years ago were saying that abortion is just a clinical intervention are now saying the truth. A member of the cabinet said recently that abortion was the killing of the unborn child...The debaters are then saying that it is correct that we should be able to kill a child for our convenience. If the mother is single - kill the child; if the mother is married - kill the child, if the mother is ill - kill the child; if the mother is working - kill the child; if the mother is out of sorts - kill the child.⁴¹

In characterizing any pregnant woman as a ‘mother,’ as opposed to a ‘woman’ or an ‘individual,’ Bishop Campbell signified the foetus as the primary individual in a pregnancy. This resulted in the rhetorical removal of a woman’s right to choose the role of mothering. The far-reaching influence of this tactic should not be underestimated. In fact, in the debate over the moment when life begins, Roman Catholic ethicists have waded through a muddle of positions, none of which include any consideration of the woman who is pregnant.⁴²

The CWL in Antigonish was another powerful force for the anti-choice campaign. Their ‘Walk for Life’ in 1985 raised over \$20,000 to support specifically “prolife [sic] groups within the diocese and Alliance for Life.”⁴³ In 1987, the takings from that year’s event were published in the newspaper. Collection amounts from specific parishes were noted, as was the CWL’s decision to send \$1,000.00 to the Alliance for Life in support of

⁴¹*The Casket*, “Dialogue: Abortion - An Election Issue”. Bishop Colin Campbell. (November 9, 1988).

⁴²*The Globe and Mail*, Peter Steinfelds, “Debating When Life Usually Begins” (January 14, 1986).

⁴³*The Casket*, Advertisement (May 7, 1986), 8.

a “pro-life TV program.”⁴⁴ The willingness of the CWL to make public the amount of support received per parish demonstrates the kind of tactics used to pressure the community to support the anti-choice position. When the influence of the town’s newspaper, the Bishop, and the town’s major employer were all deployed in support of the anti-choice movement, it is easy to see that potential participants in a public debate might have had some difficulty in raising arguments that challenged this apparent consensus.

Did the weight of this community perspective determine the strategies of the AWA board? Does it explain their decision not to become a part of the pro-choice movement? Not entirely. But the power of this perspective may explain why former board members were reluctant to discuss with me their personal views on abortion. When asked to describe significant issues in the creation of a women’s centre, they tended to side-step the topic of abortion. In fact, only one out of fifteen questionnaire respondents discussed her personal, pro-choice views on abortion, and she is presently living outside of Nova Scotia. And yet, alternative explanations for the AWA position on abortion seem necessary: fear of community opinion is not sufficient. After all, as participants in an ‘officially’ feminist organization, the AWA had already demonstrated a willingness to confront majority opinion on a number of issues. Two other explanations are possible. As much as from a fear of the community consensus, the AWA board avoided this issue out of a desire to avoid internal conflict as much as possible. Secondly, the desire to maintain

⁴⁴*The Casket*, “\$15,066 for Pro-Life” (October 7, 1987).

community and financial support for the women's centre ultimately outweighed the board's interest in reproductive rights.

It is not clear how informed the AWA board was regarding access to abortion in Antigonish. It is therefore plausible that the board prioritized its reputation in the community without full knowledge of the implications of the limited reproductive choices available women. Still, some of the critical aspects of the abortion debate would surely have been apparent. The practicalities of obtaining abortion services could be complicated by the rural circumstances of communities such as Antigonish. Rural communities have few doctors and, in a largely Catholic community like Antigonish, it was more difficult than in other small towns to find a referring physician, let alone a sympathetic Therapeutic Abortion Committee, both of which were required to access abortion services. Similarly, funding for women's health clinics varied according to provincial proclivities. In Nova Scotia, for example, the funds available to open or maintain women's health clinics were significantly less than in most other regions of Canada.⁴⁵

Many scholarly works discuss the second wave in terms of urban experiences and urban impacts. This tendency towards urban perspectives has ignored topics of importance to the rural situation, including financial and social support for feminist organizing . These topics include farm women's triple workload, religious and service club affiliations, and family size, among others. Greater availability of records may in part

⁴⁵Nancy Bowes, Varda Burstyn, and Andrea Knight, *Access Granted, Too Often Denied: a special report to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the decriminalization of abortion* (Ottawa: Canadian Abortion Rights Action League, 1998), 33, 36.

explain the predominance of studies situated in the urban setting. However, it may also be the case that *rural feminist activism* has been less likely to be identified as such, due to the threat that such identification poses to the continued economic and social support for change in rural settings. The board of the AWA met yearly to discuss aims and policies. In 1985 it was noted that, “In a city women don’t have to worry about presenting an image of the “movement” its just there.”⁴⁶ Popular coverage of the abortion debate implied that feminism and pro-choice movements were one and the same. Indeed, many Canadian feminists at the time agreed. Kathleen McDonnell exemplifies the typical feminist position: “Where feminists part company with the Right to Life, however, is in our belief that abortion, if kept distinct from such repressive ideologies and controlled by women themselves, can be both a humane, moral alternative and a tool of human liberation.”⁴⁷

Because of the pressures placed on the AWA and its members by Catholic individuals (both within and external to the organization) and groups like the CWL, it did not seem possible for the AWA to address reproductive freedom in addition to the abuse and impoverishment of women; the priorities of their women’s centre. Therefore, a choice of sorts had to be made. In 1990, AWA member Katherine Reed wrote about the organization’s experience with the abortion debate:

We had to tread lightly on the issue of choice. Abortion is a divisive issue (82% of the population here is Catholic). Despite intense and heart-wrenching discussions on abortion, we stayed together; not one original member has left. As for policy,

⁴⁶AWA Board Meeting Minutes. August 1, 1985. Note No. 4.

⁴⁷McDonnell, *Still Ain’t Satisfied*, 37.

we decided that to take a stand on either side would polarize us and lead to our demise.⁴⁸

It is difficult to pinpoint the date of the decision by the board to take no formal position on abortion. Furthermore, the minutes of AWA board meetings from the period reflect very little in the way of how this decision was made. However, in October of 1983, five months after the formation of the AWA and just one month before the official opening of the AWRC, the following note appears in the board meeting minutes: “{an individual} said she would like to hear the organization’s opinion on abortion before deciding whether she will serve on the board. Avon Burkholder will inform her about the organization’s policy.”⁴⁹ The following Statement On Abortion, undated, clarifies their policy:

The AWA is a feminist organization. The diversity of our membership strengthens and enriches the AWA in our capacity to carry out our vision statement. There is consensus among our members around the need to work for justice and equality for women. Unwanted pregnancy leading to the potential for abortion is one of the symptoms of a society that devalues women and children. Abortion is a spiritual, emotional, personal and political issue. There is a diversity of opinion among our membership about whether abortion is an acceptable resolution to unwanted pregnancy. We respect the right of each woman to hold her own views on abortion. There are organizations whose mandates focus specifically on this issue and we encourage our members to address it through them. We have agreed not to let this issue define our organization. We will continue to work together on the root causes of the inequities in our society.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Reed, 30.

⁴⁹AWA Board Meeting Minutes, (October 30, 1983), 2. Where possible I have attempted to protect the privacy of individuals, particularly individuals who are named in records but were not necessarily board or association members.

⁵⁰AWA Institutional Records. Statement on Abortion.(n.d.).

In this statement there are hints of five problem areas that the AWA struggled with: community perceptions of the organization, achieving consensus decisions within a divided board, negotiating relations with the larger Nova Scotian feminist movement, coping with attitudes towards outsiders, and achieving an inclusive feminist organization. In each of these areas, the AWA/RC shared some common experiences with second wave feminists elsewhere, but each also had distinctively local and rural elements.

Confusion over the AWA's philosophy and policies has characterized the community's response to the organization throughout its history. An early board member noted that the "community considered [the AWA/RC] to be a very radical organization and were not supportive."⁵¹ The decision of the AWA to distance itself from the issue of reproductive choice did not necessarily result in community support for the organization. As one former board member and questionnaire respondent noted the "local CWL [was] very vocal in their disapproval because an anti-abortion stance was not taken [they] would not listen to why we chose not to take a stand either way."⁵² By the time that the AWA took this decision, however, it had adopted a method of decision making that would have made it impossible to have met the CWL's demand.

From the beginning, the board members of the AWA were interested in maintaining a deliberate consciousness (though not necessarily a record) of the processes they used in organizing and decision making. Throughout the 1980s the board members

⁵¹Research Questionnaire. 01, April, 2003.

⁵²Research Questionnaire. 03, April, 2003

tried a number of different approaches to the structure of meetings and to board responsibilities. At its inception, the AWA board was structured on surprisingly traditional lines. A president was nominated, and Robert's Rules of Order were observed (albeit somewhat haphazardly as the minutes attest). Mainstream or institutional practices such as the use of Robert's Rules of Order, and hierarchical power structures, were often the norm within start-up feminist organizations. Later, the board tried a number of alternative ways of organizing meetings and making decisions "by discussion and consensus."⁵³ Feminist process, including the promising notion of decision by consensus, did not nullify the impact of strong leadership. Within any group there are individuals who have particular influence, and the AWA/RC was no exception. Sometimes this occurs because one or more of the participants have had prior experience or knowledge that others look to for guidance. In other instances, it is the capacity of an individual to make use of an organizational structure that makes the difference. It is apparent that each of these influences were present within the organization.

Many women new to political activism could not conceive of a feminist way of doing things and sought to legitimize their efforts through adherence to traditional (male) rituals of organizing. Frustrated by lengthy and arduous attempts at power sharing and consensus-based practices, some reverted to traditional institutional methods in order to 'get on with it.' In a comment that reflects the conditions in other second wave organizations, a former board member noted that the AWA board "did better at agreeing

⁵³Research Questionnaire. 02, 2003.

than disagreeing.”⁵⁴ Perhaps their decision to side-step the abortion debate reflects this. However, *feminist process*, as it came to be called, was a practice in development. By the 1980s, organizing models based on feminist principles were refined and used by many national and regional women’s organizations. These principles, described by another former board member, included “rejection of the notions of hierarchy and leadership, an emphasis on personal experience, and belief in the importance of process.”⁵⁵

A specific example of how amorphous organizational practices impacted decision making reveals the degree of the problem. What were some of the decisions regarding the abortion issue that needed to be made? Elections in both 1984 and 1988 saw abortion as a central issue in Nova Scotia. As such, the election presented an opportunity for feminists to interact with the larger community. In 1988 NAC distributed information packages regarding their Women Vote Day campaign intended to inform women of issues they might consider before going to the polls. The following note in the board minutes reveals the difficulty this campaign represented for the AWA:

Oona (*a board member*) reports on ‘Women Vote Day’ ideas from NAC. Susan Hyde will be providing us with lots of information on the four issues affecting women in Canada. They are Free Trade, Violence Against Women, Reproductive Choice, and Child Care. Women Vote day will be November 5. We will plan a public activity for dispensing the NAC information and raising public awareness. Oona would like some rural women to do some distribution and awareness-work. Reiky (*a board member*) asks how do we want to handle the issue of distributing information about abortion which will be included in the NAC material?
...discussion... We will wait and see if the material containing abortion issue

⁵⁴Research Questionnaire. 06, April, 2003.

⁵⁵Adamson et al., 234.

information can somehow be separated out. If it can't be separated we will have another meeting to decide how to proceed.⁵⁶

No meeting minutes exist for another discussion of the matter. There is no record of how this problem was resolved. By 1989 very little had changed in terms of the way the board chose to handle information about abortion. The problem of managing the abortion issue was still not resolved as evidenced by this note found in the board meeting minutes:

Discussion about what our organization can say about abortion. Decided that we would help individual women covertly by telling them about Pictou as well as mentioning Social Services as another resource. In regards to press, answer questions generally ie: from what we have heard... Present facts but not take a stand. Decided we should not hand out any pamphlets (sic). Birth control seminar discussed but it was agreed by board that it should go ahead and we will back Lucy and Katherine on this.⁵⁷

This indicates that at least some members of the organization supported access to abortion services. In fact, one month later it appeared that a gradual turn towards full AWA/RC support for reproductive choice may have been on the horizon. The Director of the AWRC, Lucille Harper, had been asked to sit on the board of Planned Parenthood. Already, two other Nova Scotia women's centres were officially affiliated with the organization. In neighboring Pictou County, Planned Parenthood had the complete

⁵⁶AWA Board Meeting Minutes. October 6, 1988. Pg. 2-3. Submitted by Katherine Reed. (Authorship of AWA board minutes is inconsistently recorded, but will be included where possible.)

⁵⁷AWA Board Meeting Minutes. May 4, 1989. Lucille Harper and Katherine Reed, referred to in the minutes, made up the staff of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre at the time.

support of the Pictou County Women's Centre as early as 1979.⁵⁸ Affiliation, as Lucille Harper discovered, came with a small financial incentive to enable women's centres to distribute health information about reproduction and birth control.⁵⁹ The June 1989 minutes contain the following note: "We have been requested to become an affiliate of the N.S. Planned Parenthood Association. The idea was discussed and the process of becoming an affiliate will be started - i.e., what are the guidelines, etc? This may mean a possible job for someone in the future."⁶⁰ Significantly though, the organization never did formally affiliate with Planned Parenthood Nova Scotia. At some point it was discovered that new affiliates were no longer receiving funding. Furthermore, the degree to which Planned Parenthood represented a threat to the continuation of the Antigonish women's centre activities became clearer. One former board member stated: "the longer I worked in the community the better I began to understand the depth of contempt and fear attached to Planned Parenthood."⁶¹ This demonstrates one of the challenges involved in maintaining a connection to other Nova Scotian feminist organizations. Though the AWRC Director had the support of the AWA board to pursue information about affiliation with Planned Parenthood, ultimately the potential cost of affiliating was deemed too high.

⁵⁸Planned Parenthood Pictou County (PPPC). (n.a., n.d.)
<<http://www.pppc.ca/toolkit/english/pdfs/PPPC.pdf>>

⁵⁹Pictou County Women's Centre initially received \$2000.00 for research on family planning needs, and continues to receive modest operational funding from Planned Parenthood. *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁰AWA Board Meeting Minutes. June 1, 1989. Note no. 8.

⁶¹Research Questionnaire. 15, 2003.

The impact of the relationship between long-time community members and the relatively 'new' AWA helps to explain some of the contradictions emerging in this narrative. It might be suggested that the AWA inadvertently supported the pro-choice position through selective activism against anti-choice organizations. In particular, in 1989 a letter-writing campaign to the Secretary of State was mounted by AWRC staff members Lucille Harper and Katherine Reed. Their objection to government support for the national conservative (and anti-choice) group called REAL Women (Realistic, Equal, and Active for Life), and to REAL Women's position on funding of feminist activities, was echoed by other women's organizations across the country.⁶² However, local anti-choice groups, including the CWL, were not targeted by similar activism. The difficulty of engaging in potentially inflammatory debates within a small community cannot be overstated. Members of anti-choice groups in Antigonish, the CWL and the Respect Life Centre in particular, were friends, neighbours, employers, landlords, and sometimes members of the same parish as women involved with the AWA. The impact of creating tension where social and economic relationships are so tightly linked outweighed the urgency of the struggle to achieve reproductive freedom. Also, situating those who recently moved to the community in a contest with local attitudes promised to increase the antagonism of the community. Critiques of the community by 'outsiders' threatened to

⁶²AWRC Staff Evaluations. May 1989. Page 2, Note no. 7

spark attacks on the organization.⁶³

As we have seen, the public's perception of an association between 'radical' women and issues like abortion has threatened the objectives of feminist organizing throughout its history. One former AWA board member noted that "even my daughter was against the group."⁶⁴ Another noted that "as a member of a religious group I was treated very unfairly because of my relationship to the Women's Association and the 'pro-abortion' centre."⁶⁵ These comments demonstrate the complication of close social ties that rural living creates. As well, these comments show that the AWA/RC's effort to avoid community criticism by not taking a stand on abortion was not entirely successful. It seems that the impression the community had of feminists carried much greater weight than any policy decisions the AWA might make.

The social and economic stratification of Antigonish was not limited to the insider/outsider situation, though this was perhaps the most significant. Class and culture also played a role. These too are relevant to the fifth major challenge for feminist organizers: creating an inclusive organization. Was the desire of the AWA to avoid

⁶³The following comment describes an incident that demonstrates the willingness of other Antigonish organizations to sabotage AWA efforts: "At one point, the bulletin in one of the local churches, suggested parishioners not participate in AWA events, as the AWA was affiliated with Women's Health Education Network (WHEN) which provided information on all women's health issues. Guilty by association." Research Questionnaire, 13. April, 2003.

⁶⁴Research Questionnaire, 2. April, 2003.

⁶⁵Research Questionnaire, 9. April, 2003.

tensions particularly focused on relations within particular social strata, or was the concern more directed to minimizing negative reactions from specific townspeople? Former board members were asked to describe their perceptions of class stratification in Antigonish. Typically, they noted the tension in Antigonish between ‘old families,’ and newer members of the community. In all but one of the returned research questionnaires, respondents noted the division between those whose families had resided in Antigonish for multiple generations, and those who were newcomers. Class structure, according to one respondent was determined solely based on “how long your family had lived in Antigonish.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, the respondent notes, the opening of the AWRC met with “very many negative reactions from the ‘old guard,’”⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that individuals of Mi’kmaq ancestry were not mentioned at all within the context of community stratification (despite, presumably, centuries of ‘residence’ in the area). Indeed, the M’ikmaq community was only mentioned by one questionnaire respondent. Instead, former board members recalled the division also between new-money professionals and old-money, independent business owners and administrators of the community. The poor and working-class families in Antigonish were characterized by survey respondents as potential women’s centre clients. This indicates that, within the context of feminist organizing, the board members were contending with those in positions of power, and those for whom they planned the centre, in very different ways.

⁶⁶Research Questionnaire, 3. April, 2003.

⁶⁷Ibid.

In Antigonish, as elsewhere, class stratification had an effect on second wave organizing techniques and also impacted the way in which the abortion debate was handled. Middle and upper class women, including those connected to the AWA, had much greater access to the language, and the ‘playing fields,’ of male bureaucracy. Within feminist organizations that access resulted in feminist ‘leadership’ that excluded, albeit unintentionally, those without such access.

Another significant distinction among Antigonish residents was religious affiliation. Clearly, the difficulty of trying to advocate for women’s issues within a Roman Catholic community is critical to understanding the process and policies of the Antigonish Women’s Association, and their decision to stay out of the abortion debate. The AWA made an effort to include Catholic women on the board and in their membership. Sister Mary McLeod, of the Antigonish Sisters of Saint Martha, was an early board member and an influential force within the community on behalf of the AWA. Another early AWA board member commented that “when looking at board chairs (we) deliberately chose women who would be perceived in the community as well respected and non-threatening (not too radical).”⁶⁸ This strategy resulted in “gradual acceptance by the community, particularly as the Board was recruited to include various key sub-sectors of the community.”⁶⁹ It seems likely that the exclusion of racially defined groups served a similar purpose.

⁶⁸Research Questionnaire, 3. April, 2003.

⁶⁹Research Questionnaire, 5. April, 2003.

Perhaps the most significant critique of second wave feminism is that women of colour and women who identify with a variety of categories of difference (ability, sexuality, etc.) were excluded and silenced within feminist organizations. In Canada, Himani Bannerji has written about the links between colonialism, systemic racism, and feminism. She says "...in its omissions and commissions racism is an essential organizing device of European (white) feminist discourse as much as of any other type of discourse."⁷⁰ Second wave feminism, partly as a result of the racism Bannerji talks about, experienced a splitting off of identity-based activist groups. In particular, the separate organizing of women of colour (including First Nations women mentioned earlier) in Canada required that second wave feminists re-examine their strategies in terms of inclusiveness. In reality, integrating women of colour into predominantly white feminist organizations was beyond the capacity of many groups, including the AWA.

Significantly, a number of what might now be called 'alternative feminist positions' on abortion were held by First Nations and Black women during the second wave. Carolyn Egan and Linda Gardner, writing about the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics, sought to raise the priority of race (and class) in the pro-choice movement: "We believe that it is only through the ongoing development of an anti-racist, class perspective with the participation and leadership of women of colour and working class women that

⁷⁰Himani Bannerji, "Introducing Racism: Notes towards an anti-racist feminism," *Resources for Feminist Research: RFR*. V. 16 Issue 1 (1987),10-12.

the opportunity to win full reproductive freedom for all women exists.”⁷¹ More typically though, feminists of colour and anti-racism feminists have rejected white feminist characterizations of the universal need for access to abortion services. For example, Sunera Thobani has described the notion of ‘choice’ as a myth used to increase and perpetuate colonization of the reproductive abilities of women of colour.⁷² The reluctance of visible minority women to focus their activism on the struggle for abortion access makes sense given the history of forced sterilizations visited upon many non-white peoples. “Institutionalized cultural genocide” was seemingly reflected by the concrete practices of limiting births and ending pregnancies, and, as such, held limited appeal for many women of colour.⁷³

Did the AWA/RC take this into consideration when deliberating about policy on abortion? No evidence exists to suggest that they did. However, the following comment by a former board member is revealing about the organization’s attempts to include women of diverse backgrounds:

I think we’ve done a fairly good job of trying to include women from the African-Nova Scotian community and the First Nations community, but they have not been very interested in the AWA/RC because of many factors, especially that they have their own organizations to work through which are more tailored to their specific

⁷¹Carolyn Egan and Linda Gardner, “Race, Class and Reproductive Freedom: Women must have real choices!” *Canadian Woman Studies*, Volume 14, Number 2, 98.

⁷²Sunera Thobani, “In Whose Interest?” *Healthsharing* (Fall 1991), 15-18.

⁷³See Christine Miller and Patricia Chuchryk, eds., *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom and Strength* (Manitoba Series in Native Studies IX, 1996), 128.

objectives. Come to think of it though, this effort only began in the 90s.⁷⁴

However, the organization actively sought to establish a connection with women from developing nations attending programs at the Coady International Institute.⁷⁵ The tradition of a yearly social event, established in the fall of 1983, nurtured a relationship between the AWA/RC and female Coady students throughout the 1980s and beyond.

Unfortunately, the organization's invitations to Annual General Meetings and other formal AWA/RC events remained the primary focus of their contact with other cultural groups and communities in the area and resulted in little response. As a result, the organization's board and staff members tended to be Anglo-Celtic and middle class.⁷⁶

Returning to the topic of organizational practice may help to explain this problem. In *Feminists Organizing for Change*, the authors argue that the 'ideology of change,' how change is thought to take place in our culture, presents a stumbling block for feminist organizations.⁷⁷ The authors discuss four main features of this ideology, two of which can be linked to traditionally bourgeois, or upper class priorities. These features include the belief that individual will can overcome structural discrimination, and that the democratic process is inherently fair and offers equal access to all.⁷⁸ It is not difficult to imagine how

⁷⁴Research Questionnaire, 4. April, 2003.

⁷⁵AWA Board Meeting Minutes. August 21, 1983.

⁷⁶With only one exception, former board members identified themselves as either middle class or CFA (come from away).

⁷⁷Adamson et al.,140-159.

⁷⁸Ibid., 140.

the application of such beliefs within an organization in formation might limit the participation of some individuals.

In Antigonish, the newly formed AWA struggled to find an organizational process that worked efficiently and fairly. The longevity of the organization is partly due to the continual reworking of processes to suit particular problems. One questionnaire respondent noted, “Over time we developed more clarity about roles and task division, clarifying decision making processes.”⁷⁹ However, not all participants always felt empowered by the process:

The clash of my views with the religiosity of Antigonish made it difficult to be a big participant. The biggest issue was, of course, the abortion issue. It was not addressed by the AWA. There was a recognition by the group that any community support would be lost if this became a prominent issue. This was difficult for me as I believed then, and still do, that until women have a right to choose and easy access to abortion, few gains will be made in other areas.⁸⁰

In an effort to share leadership and responsibility, the AWA used a rotating chairperson at each meeting for its first year. However, by March 1984 the board minutes record that “It was moved that we discontinue the rotating chairperson and have a permanent chairperson.”⁸¹ One year later, the board again tried to restructure the board and board meetings. At this time a number of inactive committees were dissolved, the number of board members was reduced, and the duties of chairperson and the board

⁷⁹Research Questionnaire. 05, April, 2003.

⁸⁰Research Questionnaire. 08, April, 2003.

⁸¹AWA Board Meeting Minutes. March 21, 1984.

executive were formalized.⁸² The re-visioning of process reflects the evolution of concerns that were taking place in the women's movement. Once a public awareness of women's status was established, second wave feminists began the process of seeking redress and of creating concrete as well as philosophical changes in society's attitudes towards women. The methods used to effect these changes, as previously discussed, differed. Strategies were sometimes linked to theoretical positions and were partly determined by access to resources. Although different approaches sometimes resulted in a splintering effect, particularly where women of colour were concerned, where they converged was in the desire to re-arrange the injustices of society.

It is not surprising that lesbian women in Antigonish may have encountered similarly complex economic and personal circumstances, particularly in relation to the new organization. However, the link of lesbian feminists in Antigonish to the abortion debate is more difficult to demonstrate. For lesbian feminists, reconciliation with mainstream feminism would not be realized by the second wave. For example, there are no records that indicate the AWA/RC attempted in any way to facilitate the inclusion of lesbian women in their projects or activities. This may be accounted for, in part, by the dearth of 'out' lesbians in the community. Still, as with other identity-based feminist groups, lesbian feminists in Canada contributed significantly to developing feminist analysis as a whole. In the 1980s lesbian women became increasingly vocal about their rights to parent, via pregnancy or adoption. It would seem that lesbian feminists might

⁸²AWA Board Meeting Minutes. April 17, 1985.

therefore have a stake in ensuring reproductive freedom for all women. Regardless, little evidence exists of lesbian participation in pro-choice activities. Rather, lesbian efforts tended to focus on the homophobia of family courts in custody cases, and equal access to New Reproductive Technologies. The records of the AWA reflect, by omission, the role of lesbians in the abortion debate in Antigonish. AWA organizers made few, if any attempts to ensure that lesbians and bi-sexual women were equally represented, either on the board or in the membership and no discussion of their inclusion appears anywhere in the institution's records. Perhaps lesbian feminists were not necessarily eager to participate in a movement that they perceived as inadequate. It is significant that at the time no credible or 'mainstream' feminist group was thought to address lesbian concerns in a comprehensive way. As one researcher notes: "...many women's centres felt they had to avoid identifying themselves within a particular politic within the women's movement."⁸³ The effect of the inability of mainstream feminist organizers to embrace all women reverberates through the concerns addressed by the second wave and is similarly reflected in the case of feminism in Antigonish.

The development during the second wave of the concept of 'sisterhood,' which holds that all women share a common oppression, that of being female, seemed for a time to be the answer to the complex problem of reconciling differences among feminists. It is clear now that differences, whether of culture, class, or sexuality, determine in part the

⁸³Adamson, in *A Diversity of Women*, 267.

form and character of oppression.⁸⁴ While AWA organizers have taken pride in their creation of a ‘sisterhood,’ the appealing notion ultimately proved ineffective for creating greater unity among diverse communities of women. In fact, some groups went out of their way to distance themselves from the second wave women’s movement in order to focus attention on their specific areas of difference. This defiance threatened the ‘unity’ sought by many (white) feminists, including early AWA board members like Angela Miles, whose work valorizes the notion of an ‘integrative feminism.’⁸⁵

The *ideological* form of sisterhood - the view that our shared oppression as women is primary to our experiences - quickly loses liberatory potential in the face of *organizational* forms of sisterhood. Though feminist organizations were well-intentioned in terms of their inclusiveness, their methods often limited the capacity to embrace differences. Second wave feminist’s assumptions about liberating reproductive choice through enhanced abortion services flew in the face of African Canadian and First Nations perspectives. For many non-white women an approach to reproduction enabling them to bear and adequately support children was an equally important goal. As a result, second wave feminists unwittingly created organizations that were often perceived by women of colour as contrary to their own needs and issues. The confusion over the abortion policy of the AWA/RC probably contributed to their difficulty in achieving diversity.

⁸⁴Adamson, Briskin and McPhail, 198-228.

⁸⁵Miles, *Reflections*, 57. Miles argues that women’s common bond is political rather than biological.

The abortion issue in 1980s Antigonish shaped the AWA/RC's organizational practices with regard to inclusion of diversity. The organization's choices were affected by community perceptions, and by the demands of working with other organizations. The attempt to practice consensus decision making largely limited the center's range of options on reproductive choice issues. These strategies, constraints and considerations explain the suppression by the AWA/RC of the reproductive freedom initiative going on elsewhere in Canada.

As we turn in Chapter Four to the topic of pornography we will see that during the 1980s it was critical for the AWA/RC to identify an issue that the larger community *could*, and would feel *compelled* to embrace. Whereas the abortion debate threatened the existence of a women's centre in Antigonish, the board's active interest in the anti-pornography movement attracted community-wide support.

Chapter Four

The Pornography Issue: Opportunities to Engage

“An internal contradiction is always more menacing than a communist invasion.”

Bernard Arcand

In this chapter I will discuss the AWA/RC's interest in, and approach to supporting, the widespread campaign against pornography. During the 1980s pornography became an increasingly visible 'feminist' issue. The topic of pornography is particularly useful to this thesis because the anti-pornography position was embraced not only by many feminists but also by the religious right. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a proliferation in the scope and availability of sexually explicit materials, including videos and magazines, coincided with feminist analysis of sexual violence as an expression of male power, as well as with a conservative backlash against perceived 'immorality'. Therefore, demonstrating the relationship between pornography and violence, and attempting to limit access to pornographic materials, the AWA/RC could make a engagement with the community of Antigonish.

Historically, feminist responses to pornography changed in relation to changes in the women's movement itself. In the 1980s the idea of 'feminist consciousness' provided a tool that enabled activists to ensure, to some degree, the participation of feminists in the anti-pornography campaign. As demonstrated in Chapter Three, the methods of activism that Antigonish feminists selected, including the deployment of the consciousness argument, reflected both the make-up of the board, and the board's desire to interact meaningfully with the community of Antigonish. A brief account of pornography trends

and legislation will be a sufficient backdrop for a discussion of Antigonish feminists' approach to the issue.

During the late 1940s sexually explicit materials, particularly inexpensive 'nudie' magazines and graphic novels, proliferated in Canada.¹ Within a few years, the Senate Committee on Salacious and Indecent Literature (1952) was created to find ways of limiting access to these materials, particularly by youths.² Efforts to protect 'the family' from the dangerous influence of pornographic materials through legislation were widely supported.³ Legislators initially sought to identify materials they deemed obscene, in order to be able to suppress specific materials. In 1959, parliament settled on a new, and somewhat vague, definition, and amended the criminal code (section 15) accordingly, describing as obscene "...any publication a dominant characteristic of which is the undue exploitation of sex, or of sex and any one or more of the following subjects, namely, crime, horror, cruelty and violence."⁴ Later, legislators would look to 'community standards' to determine what constituted obscenity. In an attempt to synthesize research on the effects of pornography, Thelma McCormack learned that this factor did not always serve the interests of women or feminists. In her own words: "Policing obscenity would

¹Brenda Cossman, Shannon Bell, Lise Gotell & Becki L. Ross, *Bad Attitude/s on Trial: Pornography, Feminism, and the Butler Decision* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997),14.

²Ibid., 15.

³Ibid.

⁴Section 150(8). Criminal Code of Canada. (Currently Section 163(8))

be complicated where community standards may include sexist criteria..”⁵ We will see that, even within feminism, definitions of pornography changed over time, necessitating a change in strategies for organizing on the issue.⁶

Initially, it was the concept of men’s power over women, represented in pornographic images, that motivated second wave feminists to seek to reduce access to pornography through legislation or other means.⁷ In the 1970s, pornographic magazines demonstrated, in the words of Mariana Valverde, “a trend toward stark, violent images, and away from the harmless playmates of the 1950s.”⁸ This created concern for the potential adverse moral impact of pornographic materials.⁹ Radical voices of North American feminism, such as Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, and Catherine MacKinnon contributed numerous books and essays on the topic. Most made their case against pornography in no uncertain terms, as exemplified in the following quote from Dworkin:

⁵Thelma McCormack, *Making Sense of Research on Pornography* (Department of Sociology: York University, n.d.), 2.

⁶Rubin, 24.

⁷MacIvor, 378. Heather MacIvor notes that over 95% of pornographic materials available in Canada have been imported from elsewhere. Not surprisingly, feminists in Canada tended not to concentrate their activism on the *production* of pornography. Rather, they sought to limit its availability.

⁸Mariana Valverde, “Pornography,” in *No safe Place: Violence Against Women and Children*, (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1985), 132.

⁹James V.P. Check, “The effects of Violent Pornography, Nonviolent Dehumanizing Pornography, and Erotica: Some Legal Implications from a Canadian Perspective,” in *Pornography, Women Violence and Civil Liberties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 350.

“Pornography reveals that male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting; that sexual fun and sexual passion in the privacy of the male imagination are inseparable from the brutality of male history.”¹⁰ Bernard Arcand, an important voice in the discourse on pornography, speaking in somewhat more complex terms, reminds us that:

Every human community, each social group, even the most revolutionary or anarchical, is founded by censoring at least those things that represent its own negation, and thus finds itself obliged to oppose limits beyond which an act must be declared antisocial or inhumane. But at the same time, censorship is always violent because it negates a part of human experience by declaring a thing to be unthinkable, or “insane”, which otherwise would be possible.¹¹

Unlike Dworkin, whose focus on male pleasure vs. female pacifism might promote unhelpful stereotypes that position women as victims, Arcand poses an important question about the overarching structure of human interaction: who or what exists in western culture that “represents its own negation,” and thus evokes censorship arguments? A feminist reading might insist that the supreme threat to a patriarchal society (one disproportionately influenced and controlled by men) consists of the empowerment of women. By contrast, pornography that reinforces women’s subjugation is a helpful tool in maintaining male-led culture. Clearly, not all opposition to pornography was rooted in the notion that women required protection. Conservative

¹⁰Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Possessing Women*, (New York: Perigree Books, 1979), 69.

¹¹Bernard Arcand, *The Jaguar and the Anteater: Pornography and the Modern World* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 53.

arguments for limiting access to pornography seemed more focused on preserving the status quo, than in improving representations of women, or ensuring ‘safety’ either from violence, or even moral corruption. For women in communities like Antigonish, where traditional roles and morality are constantly policed and enforced through institutionalized social control, increased access to pornography was anathema. Furthermore, punitive responses to pornography fit neatly into the traditional Roman Catholic characterization of women: servant to man, sinful nature, seductiveness, and the non-sexual nature of ideal women.¹² This enhanced pro-censorship arguments regardless of the fact that many examples of pornography seemed to echo these sentiments. Not surprisingly, ultra-right Christian groups like REAL Women embraced the anti-pornography campaigns of the 1980s in spite of this contradiction.¹³

As I explore feminist responses to pornographic materials, it will be useful to remember that expression of any kind is a function of privilege. In patriarchal societies, access to both production and consumption of pornography reinforce this idea. The following quote from the book *Women Against Censorship* explains further that:

...most women feel that for them freedom of expression is largely an abstraction. In fact, when freedom of expression is measured in terms of the capital it takes to start a non-commercial magazine, radio or television station; in terms of the money it takes to mount campaigns that reach a fraction of the people that advertising reaches; in the time and money it takes to make successful films or to run for Parliament - women’s sense of disenfranchisement is substantively

¹²Burstyn, 17.

¹³REAL Women maintains a website containing briefs and research papers on pornography. < <http://www.getset.com/realwomen/porn.html> >

correct.¹⁴

However, the economic realities of access to (and production of) forms of expression like pornography, were not viewed as effective means of raising public concern by anti-pornography activists. Instead, the rapid dissemination of information about the scope of violence against women that occurred during this period bolstered activism, feminist activism in particular, against pornography.

Tellingly, throughout the 1970s and 80s campaigns responding to violence against women (and children) achieved wide support, even from non- or anti-feminist factions.¹⁵ Understanding pornography as violence achieved a critical separation in the minds of otherwise liberal feminists; a retreat from questions of morality and free will into the righteous language of safety and equity.¹⁶ While dissenting feminist voices, like that of Mariana Valverde, argued that it was a mistake to try to draw a “causal link between pornography and male abusive behavior,” hundreds of studies were undertaken to attempt just that.¹⁷ When Thelma McCormack’s 1983 study of the connection between pornography and sexual aggression revealed that in some instances pornography could provide a cathartic outlet for men, contributing to the prevention of rape, her work was rejected and re-assigned to an anti-pornography researcher, whose work produced more

¹⁴Burstyn, 22.

¹⁵REAL Women is just one anti-feminist group who participated in anti-pornography activities.

¹⁶Cossman et al., 18.

¹⁷Valverde, 133.

palatable results.¹⁸ An accomplished scholar in the area of pornography, Varda Burstyn, helpfully explained that “Like rape and battering, pornography, in the view of radical feminists, encouraged both men and women to think of women as weak, submissive, and taking pleasure in being mastered. They accordingly argued for drastic controls on the availability of such material.”¹⁹

Beginning in the 1970s, as the women’s movement in Canada became primarily concerned with violence against women, pornography came to be identified by some feminists as not only a representation of men’s violence against women, but an act of violence in and of itself.²⁰ Writers of anti-pornography rhetoric invoked a number of influential strategies to reveal the conspiracy of violence against women that they believed pornography represented. Mary Daly, writing in 1984, warned other feminists of “the pornographic lie”: that women want to be raped.²¹ As Andrea Dworkin said: “The most enduring sexual truth in pornography - widely articulated by men to the utter bewilderment of women throughout the ages - is that sexual violence is desired by the normal female, needed by her, suggested or demanded by her.”²² At the same time, problematically, they argued that some women were, in fact, willing, if unconscious,

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Prentice et al., 362.

²⁰Pierson, in *Canadian Women’s Issues*, Vol. 1, 98-122.

²¹Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 55.

²²Dworkin, 106.

participants in pornography. Dworkin, Daly, and other well known feminist theorists were responding to anti-censorship positions with the potent charge of false consciousness. The idea that some feminists were genuinely liberated, and some only *thought* they were liberated but were actually pawns of the dominant (male) culture, intensified much of the feminist discourse about sexual matters during the second wave.

In one of the earliest feminist critiques of the anti-pornography position, Ellen Willis writing for the Village Voice in 1979 commented that “Sex in this culture has been so deeply politicized that it is impossible to make clear cut distinctions between ‘authentic’ sexual impulses and those conditioned by patriarchy.”²³ This sentiment is at the core of the charge of *unconsciousness* on the part of feminists in support of pornography.

Although civil libertarians insisted that women’s sexual independence could potentially be enhanced, rather than diminished, by access to sexually explicit materials, many feminists suspected that the potential ‘benefits’ for women (freedom of expression? enhanced sexual awareness?) were negligible, and that women were duped into supporting the sexist pornography industry. The growing recognition of date rape, and a feminist analysis of heterosexuality itself as a potentially oppressive institution shaped the second wave in its approach to sexual freedom. Once the glow had worn off the free love era of the 1960s, feminists experienced some confusion over the paradox of ‘free love’.

²³Ellen Willis, “Feminism, Moralism and Pornography,” *Powers of Desire: the Politics of Sexuality*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 463.

The realization that increased sexual freedom did not necessarily enhance women's lives, but rather complicated and reinforced sexual expectations held by men created a conundrum. Janice Raymond, a professor of Women's Studies and Medical Ethics at the University of Massachusetts has argued that inasmuch as pornography is limited to "old forms of sexual objectification, subordination and violence... It is a male-constructed sexuality in drag."²⁴ In other words, even when pornography purports to be 'for' women, it continues to rely upon sexist and oppressive concepts. Second wave feminists wanted to embrace the new sexual knowledge that came with other changes in the culture, like the availability of the pill and of explicit sexual fiction (like *Fear of Flying*) and sexuality-related non-fiction (like *The Joy of Sex*). However, in doing so they posed a threat to men's sexual power, and in turn to themselves. According to feminist commentator Susan G. Cole, "As pornographers defended their expression and the decency contingent fought for repression, women began to notice that whichever side won the day, it would spell oppression for us."²⁵ Cole's work identified a key feature in the anti-pornography campaign, and one that seems contrary to feminist ideology: the insistence that women would require legal protection from the impact of pornography.

We can assume that, inasmuch as feminist organizations prided themselves on social and personal 'awareness', participants avoided the possibility of appearing falsely

²⁴Janice Raymond, "Pornography and the Politics of Lesbianism" In *Pornography, Women Violence and Civil Liberties*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 168.

²⁵Susan G. Cole, *Sex, Violence and Pornography* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995), 13.

conscious among peers. This might explain why feminists who were civil libertarians in regard to other causes (freedom of protest, racial integration etc.) became agitated by, and active against, pornography. Unlike those other topics, one's position on pornography in part determined one's feminist 'credibility'.

In an example that links violence and consciousness, feminists Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin drafted an anti-pornography ordinance in 1983 that would give courts that power, and individuals the right to sue for porn-related damages. This much-cited Minneapolis Ordinance used a civil rights approach that placed the issue of violence in the foreground, supposedly leaving First Amendment (freedom of speech) issues behind. However, as many critics have since noted, their insistence that within patriarchal society it was not possible for women to 'consent' to participation in pornography, and that all participants were in fact coerced, was demeaning to women. Problematically for MacKinnon and Dworkin, many sex trade workers articulated dissatisfaction with this characterization of them as helpless dupes of male exploiters.²⁶ The definition of pornography later developed by the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women neatly avoids implicating women in particular as 'unconscious'. It describes pornography as "verbal or pictorial material which represents or describes sexual behavior that is degrading or abusive to one or more of the participants in such a

²⁶Wendy McElroy, *Banning Pornography Endangers Women*, (ISIL Pamphlet, n.d.).
<<http://www.zetetics.com/mac/isil.htm>>

way as to endorse the ‘entertainment’ with such anti-social consequences.”²⁷

Were there any challenges to the anti-porn stance within feminist contingents? In *Feminists Organizing For Change* the authors attempt to clarify the feminist anti-censorship position:

Some argue that condoning censorship at any level risks giving undue and dangerously repressive power to the state. The possible - some would argue, highly probable - ramifications include suppression of erotic as well as pornographic material, and a boost to the power of the right-wing in its attempts to define sexuality in strictly monogamist, marital, and heterosexist terms.²⁸

Indeed, one of the unintended results of anti-pornography legislation in Canada was the targeting of gay erotica.²⁹ Consequently, some lesbian activists became disconnected from the women’s movement over the issue of censorship.³⁰ Arguing for caution, Varda Burstyn narrates the threat censorship posed to attempts at revolutionary change: “We can’t do needlework with a sledge hammer; we cannot use the controlling, punitive and top-down structures of the state to mend and reweave the delicate fabric of

²⁷William Morse, “Prevention of rape hindered by pornography,” *The Chronicle-Herald*, (Monday, January 14, 1991), A7.

²⁸Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 169.

²⁹Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 125.

³⁰The impact of censorship on gay erotica became a national story when, in 1992, policed seized so-called obscene materials from Toronto’s Glad Day Bookstore. Wendy McElroy, “A Feminist Defense of Pornography,” in *Free Inquiry Magazine. Volume 17. No. 4*, (1996), 4.

sexual life.”³¹ Sara Diamond, another anti-censorship feminist, offers alternatives to censorship in her presentation of the conundrum:

Feminist support for state censorship will lead us at a dead run into a dead end. We will find the exit blocked by highly organized conservative governments and male-dominated courts and police and the sexual freedom and control we require will be lost. Instead we must work to repossess our sexuality, through sex education and the production of sex-positive imagery, and through changing the economic and social position of women and men - steps that will undermine the demand for sexist sexual imagery.³²

The AWA/RC pursued two of the three alternatives suggested by Diamond:

education and socio-economic intervention. Institutional records reflect that, unlike the abortion debate, there was little or no dissent regarding the AWA’s taking up of an anti-pornography position, within the organization or otherwise. As I look at the strategies of the AWA/RC, the themes of violence against women, and of feminist consciousness are evoked.

The AWA employed three specific strategies in their anti-pornography activism. They introduced their membership and the public to the pornography debate through the use of the controversial documentary film *Not a Love Story*, they participated in the 1984 Fraser Commission’s consultation process, and they offered educational workshops on the subject of pornography to community groups. I will look at each of these approaches and explain why engagement with the anti-pornography sentiment was central to legitimizing

³¹Varda Burstyn, “Political Precedents and Moral Crusades: Women, Sex and the State” In *Women Against Censorship*, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985), 16.

³²Sara Diamond, “Pornography: Image and Reality,” in *Women Against Censorship*, 40.

the existence of the AWA/RC in Antigonish.

In the community of Antigonish, and across Canada, feminist attitudes about pornography were influenced by the popularity of a documentary film. *Not a Love Story*, produced by the National Film Board Of Canada in 1981, introduced audiences to the distasteful existence of sex-trade employees, and sad, desperate, and misogynist users of pornography. Combining disturbing vignettes from the red light district in New York City, 'expert' interviews, and the mini-biography of a female sex trade worker who comes to recognize pornography as a sexist, capitalist endeavor, the film was graphic, disturbing, and influential. Critics of the film have said that the selection of venues and circumstances it presents "...display a completely unrepresentative sample of pornography in order to 'demonstrate' its ostensible violence."³³ Also, critics argued that by introducing advertising and fashion industry imagery into the film, the makers draw an unsubstantiated link between pornography, sexism and capitalist projects in western culture. However, in their own discussion of pornography the AWA board concurred with this approach stating: "...we are concerned about the general increase in all objectifying, degrading and demeaning images of women, not only those that are explicitly sexual or overtly violent."³⁴ The Pornography Resource Binder located in the

³³Gayle Rubin, "Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong: An Analysis of Anti-Pornography Politics." In *Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to Reclaim Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1993), 18-40.

³⁴AWA. *Statement on Pornography (The Sex Industry) To The Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution* (Halifax, 1984).

AWRC resource library contains a *Globe and Mail* film review Jay Scott that takes note of the connection between feminism and conservatism with marked hostility. For Scott, *Not a Love Story* is “another salvo the strange alliance between radical feminism and moral majority: it’s an example of bourgeois feminist fascism.”³⁵ In spite of these criticisms, anti-pornography feminists used the film to support their campaigns.

One of the difficulties for feminists working to censor pornography was the ignorance on the part of many women about pornographic materials. The film, though perhaps flawed in some ways, provided a legitimate opportunity for women to watch pornography and discuss it with each other. This circumstance had not existed for most women in communities like Antigonish prior to the release of the film.

In 1984, the Social Action Committee of the AWA arranged to show the film to individuals and social agencies in the community. In a report to the board, Angela Miles revealed that this was not the board’s first presentation of the film and that this time “many more people will be contacted to attend.”³⁶ In fact, the film was presented by the AWA at least three times during 1984. The organization had become comfortable in their role as ‘educator’ on the topic of pornography. One year later, on May 9, 1985, the committee, which at the time included Lucille Sanderson, Joyce Daigle, Donna Woolaver, and Pat Alpert, presented a brief on pornography to the Fraser Commission on

³⁵Jay Scott. “Not a Love Story: sleazy peek at women and porn.” *Globe and Mail*, Sept. 7, 1983.

³⁶AWA Board Meeting Minutes. May 30, 1984. P.2.

Prostitution and Pornography³⁷ in Halifax, and again presented the film to “different organizations and to the public, with discussions following” as part of their participation in the consultation.³⁸

The AWA brief contained information about pornography in Antigonish, and the AWA’s recommendations for action. In the opening paragraph, the authors describe the context for a discussion of pornography in their community, revealing the increased involvement of women:

Twenty-five years ago most women in Antigonish saw almost no pornography. Our exposure was limited to the occasional disconcerting view of calendars on the walls of gas stations. Today pornography is almost impossible to avoid. “Men’s” magazines in the general stores, lurid movie posters, advertisements easily as pornographic as the earlier hidden cheesecake are widespread. Late night movies, and now pay T.V. and the increasing purchase of pornographic magazines by our fathers, husbands, brothers and sons mean that this material is also finding its way into our homes.³⁹

While the AWA brief did not condone censorship, at least in so many words, the thrust of their recommendations was unequivocal in its condemnation of pornography “with its ugly connotations of sex, violence and cruelty... .”⁴⁰ The AWA brief recommended

³⁷The Fraser Committee was instigated to supplement the Badgley Commission on sexual offenses against children, particularly juvenile prostitution and child/youth access and involvement in pornography. The Fraser Committee report, published in April 1985, focused on problems regarding prostitution and pornography “with special concentration on adults”. Government of Canada Discussion Paper. “The Report of the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution”. Department of Justice Canada, 1985.

³⁸AWA Annual General Meeting Minutes, (May 24, 1985),1.

³⁹AWA, *Statement on Pornography*, 3.

⁴⁰Ibid., 11.

increased funding to women's groups as a solution to the problem of pornography in communities. Their approach partially agreed with that of Varda Burstyn who stated that "Sexist pornography is a product of the economic and social conditions of our society - not vice versa....It follows that these are the conditions we must change if we want sexist pornography to disappear."⁴¹ Still, Burstyn, and others, like anthropologist Carol Vance, are wary of the tendency to view pornography as a medium of danger alone. In 1984 Carol Vance was arguing that feminists must also explore the potential for pleasure that pornography represents.⁴² However, this notion was not part of the AWA's analysis of pornography.

In an AWA newsletter the month following it was noted that the brief to the Fraser Commission was well received and that copies of the presentation were requested by a number of individuals.⁴³ Also, the brief was made available to anyone in the community of Antigonish.⁴⁴ By 1985, community perceptions of the AWA's expertise on the topic of pornography was acknowledged when the United Church Women (UCW) of St. James United Church requested an information workshop on pornography. Star Levatte O'Neil, then coordinator of the AWRC, noted that "A [pornography] workshop is planned for

⁴¹Burstyn, 24.

⁴²Carol Vance. "Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in Carol Vance ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 23.

⁴³AWARE Newsletter Vol.1 No. 6. (June, 1984), 3.

⁴⁴*The Casket*, "AWA Brief Scores Pornography" (May 16, 1984), 1.

February which will hopefully involve the UCW and the CWL.”⁴⁵ No further indication is provided about whether the CWL participated in this workshop. However, the AWA continued to work with United Church groups, including Trinity United Church in neighboring New Glasgow.⁴⁶

The workshops must have been favorably received as one year later Dorothy Gilson, another member of the Social Action Committee reported that she and Star Levatte O’Neil were planning workshops on pornography to be given at St. Francis Xavier University.⁴⁷ The workshops they planned included presentation of *Not a Love Story*, as well as discussion. An announcement in *The Casket* about the workshop describes it as “an opportunity to examine the standards of the local community with regard to this very real problem and to look at what is or is not acceptable.”⁴⁸ This reflects the national approach of attempting to assess community standards in determining legislative measures to restrict pornography. Also in 1986, another workshop co-sponsored by the UCW and the AWA presented current research by Adele McSorley, a lecturer at Mount Saint Vincent University. Her study, of women’s attitudes in the Dartmouth/Halifax area, found that 92% of women polled believed that pornography has a “negative effect on male/female relationships in that it puts pressure on women to do

⁴⁵Star Levatte O’Neil, *Report to the AWA Membership*, (December 17, 1985), 2.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷AWA Board Meeting Minutes, (November 6, 1986), 2.

⁴⁸*The Casket*, “Film Denounces Pornography,” (July 4, 1984), 10.

things that they do not want to do.”⁴⁹ She concluded that pornography resulted in an isolation of women, from themselves, from heterosexual partners and from society.⁵⁰ Subsequently, the AWA made Ms. McSorley’s work available through the AWRC.

In 1989, a workshop titled *Pornography Hurts!*, facilitated by Bernadette MacDonald of the Pictou County Women’s Centre, was co-sponsored by the AWRC.⁵¹ The message that pornography was a form of violence was reinforced at a 1984 Women’s Health Education Network (WHEN) conference in Truro, NS, attended by AWA board member Peggy Hinch. She comments in her report on the conference that in the keynote address, Lorrene Clark, a lawyer and anti-pornography spokesperson “pointed out that porn is one of the worst forms of violence against women because it is so insidious and far reaching and underlies and depicts all aspects of violence against women.”⁵²

How significant was the topic of pornography to members of the AWA/RC? Certainly, the amount of time and resources given over to organizing workshops, writing letters, articles, and the Fraser Commission brief, would indicate that feminists in Antigonish were outraged by the proliferation and intensification of violent pornography in the community. When asked to recall issues of significance to the formation of the

⁴⁹*The Casket*, Dawn Currie, “Talk on Pornography Draws Local Interest,” (March 5, 1986).

⁵⁰AWA Information File on Pornography. Adele McSorley. “Pornography and the Social Isolation of Women,” (n.p., n.d.), 3.

⁵¹AWA Staff Evaluations (1989), 1.

⁵²AWARE. Newsletter. May 1984. Vol. 1 No. 5. P.2.

AWRC, a number of board members cite pornography, among other topics, as the following example demonstrates:

I know the key ones, pornography, women's culture (The Dinner Party), Rape and Sexual Harassment, Wife Beating, Health Care, Drug dependency (Valium etc.), aging, art and media images, women's work. All of these topics were riveting. We were ready. We were enraged. We were aflame with power to change the world.⁵³

Another former board member cited "standing together against pornography and violence against women" as a significant aspect of the organization's mandate.⁵⁴

Increasing interest on the impact of other kinds of media developed within the organization throughout the 1980s. In 1984, the film *Killing Us Softly* which revealed the advertising industry as a sexist, and misogynist reflection of western culture, was presented at the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre seven times in the course of one week.⁵⁵ But the pornography debate was also important to the organization from a strategic perspective. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, the conservative attitudes of much of the community presented a problem for feminists seeking to introduce progressive, pro-woman, non-sexist ideas and projects into their midst. The anti-pornography discourse present during the 1980s enhanced the potential for cooperation, agreement, and mutual respect that the AWA needed to be fully integrated into the community of Antigonish. Unfortunately, the attempt to partner feminism with

⁵³Research Questionnaire.10, April, 2003.

⁵⁴Research Questionnaire. 09, April, 2003.

⁵⁵*The Casket*, "Film on Women Scheduled," (April 4, 1984), 14.

establishment ideals through shared attitudes about pornography was not always successful.

In 1984, the Social Action Committee of the AWA prepared letters in opposition to the display of pornographic materials in local shops. Although the letter was endorsed by numerous community groups, and even published in *The Casket*, the CWL refused to endorse it.⁵⁶ This is surprising considering that the CWL and the AWA were both involved in anti-pornography activism.⁵⁷ It demonstrates that the CWL was not interested in supporting any AWA activities - even those that coincided with their own. Interestingly, in spite of the insistence that pornography was a form of violence against women, the Naomi Society, Antigonish's organization for women and children victims of violence also formed in 1983, was not overtly involved in the anti-pornography campaign.⁵⁸ However, the result of the AWA-led letter writing campaign was that many Antigonish merchants relocated sexually explicit materials out of the reach of children.⁵⁹

In an interesting contribution that ties the topic of abortion irrevocably to

⁵⁶AWA Board Meeting Minutes, (December, 1984), 1.

⁵⁷The CWL's activism consisted mainly of passing resolutions and letter-writing.

⁵⁸The Naomi Society developed as an off-shoot of the AWA to deal specifically with violence against women. The community of Antigonish has continued to struggle with accepting the 'separateness' of these groups, and the activities of one are often mistaken for those of the other.

⁵⁹AWA/AWRC, *Herstory*, (n.d.), 2. This document appears to be a draft version of the AWA's contribution to a Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) project initiated in 1989. The project was intended to culminate in an anthology of the history of women's groups in Nova Scotia.

pornography, feminist author Twiss Butler invokes the double bind of equality measures.⁶⁰ She explains that in the same way that enforcing equality (through, say, quotas) is a debatable strategy, attempting to enforce healthy sexuality through censorship of pornography echoes anti-abortion positions that would have all women ‘wear’ their illicit (non-procreative) sexual activity on their bodies in the form of a pregnancy. She calls this a ‘gotcha’ and cites the smug certainty of Harvard University law professor Alan Dershowitz: “In the abortion debate, most feminists insist on the right to choose. In the current debate... some feminists would deny that right to those who choose pornography.”⁶¹ For Antigoneish feminists, choices about what women should and should not be exposed to, were critical in establishing the position of the organization, and the AWRC in particular, in the community. By landing squarely on the anti-pornography side of the debate, the AWA/RC once again demonstrated the importance of alignment with at least a portion of conservative, and religious community leaders.

As amply demonstrated, much of the history of the AWA/RC is characterized by the attempt to gain acceptance in the community. In 1986, a board discussion of the goals of the organization listed financial stability and increased understanding and acceptance in the community as significant.⁶² To that end, a number of meetings and invitations were

⁶⁰Twiss Butler, “Abortion and Pornography: The Sexual Liberals’ “Gotcha” Against Women’s Equality,” in *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), 114-122.

⁶¹Alan Dershowitz, “Feminist Fig Leaves,” in *This World 19* (July 8, 1984), 122.

⁶²AWA Board Meeting, Orientation Session Notes, (September 4, 1986).

planned. In May, 1987 for example, the minutes contain the following note: “Star (LeVatte O’Neill) had a meeting with Bishop Campbell to explain the role of the Women (sic) Resource Centre in the community.”⁶³ Other means of obtaining acceptance were also attempted. Board members Avon Burkholder and Vicki Maclean conducted a telephone questionnaire in order to “receive direct input by Board members relating to (their) expectations, ideas and concerns about the functions and operations of the resource centre, to provide us with a greater awareness and ability to direct the future course of programs and activities.”⁶⁴ In response to a request for comments on the organization’s public image, one board member stated that “there’s a certain segment we’ll never reach - just ‘write them off’”, and another suggested that the organization should “give people a less ‘harsh’ view of [the] centre as ‘those women’.”⁶⁵ Although the organization was officially ‘feminist’, some confusion existed, apparently even among members, about how that designation might affect the day to day running of the centre. The following summary, included in a 1987 report to the board from Star LeVatte O’Neill, AWRC coordinator, indicated that tensions around the issue were palpable:

I have deviated from the normal format of monthly reports in response to queries about the activity of the Centre. I have attempted to provide a qualitative rather than a quantitative assessment for the month of November. I realize for many of you, the information will be redundant. Nevertheless, I feel it is important to reiterate the obvious. Myself and Diane operate a general service to the women of

⁶³AWA Board of Directors, Minutes, (May 6, 1987), 2.

⁶⁴Vicki MacLean and Avon Burkholder, Memo to the AWA Board of Directors.(n.d.)

⁶⁵Ibid., 4.

the town and county of Antigonish; under the aegis of the board. Many of the women who use the centre are not feminists, nor care to be, they come to the Centre for a purpose and once the purpose has been accomplished return because they feel comfortable at the Centre. Diane and myself do not preach, nor do we proselytize, we attempt to help individual women and in doing so improve the condition of all women. We do this hopefully, with the board's approval and support and according to the stated premise under which the grant application was submitted to the Secretary of State.⁶⁶

Although one of the main reasons for the development of the women's centre project was to create a separation between political activism and social service for the purposes of accessing funding, the two mandates overlapped throughout the 1980s. Sometimes this resulted in increased tensions between board members and centre staff. In 1984 a yearly board retreat was established to discuss the relationship between the association and the centre, and to clarify or change policies as necessary.⁶⁷ In order to provide some clarity on their political activism, the Social Action Committee of the AWA was created to work on specific political activities - including the Pornography Brief.⁶⁸ A Policy Committee, made up of Barbara MacDonald, Madeline McGowan and Peggy Hinch was appointed to make decisions on policy issues.⁶⁹ Also, a Personnel Committee was devised that would "facilitate dialogue around difficulties and disagreements in the working relationships of AWA members and/or personnel" and to "review and rule on formal complaints about

⁶⁶Star LeVatte-O'Neill. Report to the AWA Board of Directors, (December 7, 1987), 3.

⁶⁷AWA Board Meeting Minutes, (May 30, 1984), 2.

⁶⁸AWA Board Meeting Minutes, (May 16, 1984).

⁶⁹AWA Board Meeting Minutes, (June 6, 1983).

any aspect of the work of any of the above people brought by any others.”⁷⁰ In spite of the inclusion of AWA ‘personnel’ in the mandate of the Personnel Committee (meaning, presumably, AWRC staff) the procedures did not include a staff person as a required member of the committee. One year later, in 1985, the personnel committee was dissolved, along with the resource, building and hiring committees with the intent to create ad hoc committees as the need arose.⁷¹ The frequency of major procedural changes during the 1980s, occasionally accompanied by resignations, attests to the growing pains of an organization in formation. The board struggled to be selective in its membership but was not always successful, as the following comment from a former board member demonstrates: “Sometimes we allowed negative elements to come into our organization by being too open-minded to all women even when our instincts told us ‘she is bad news, keep this woman out.’ But we learned the hard way.”⁷² However, as Adamson, Briskin and McPhail have explained, attempts to limit membership were problematic for many feminist organizations: “The fear of excluding interested women also made feminist organizations reluctant to require all members to agree with a specific list of political statements.”⁷³ Whereas with respect to the abortion debate, the agreement between members was not to take any position and risk alienating the organization, the anti-

⁷⁰Vicky Maclean and Joyce Daigle. AWA Personnel Committee, Proposed Procedures, (October, 1984).

⁷¹AWA Board Meeting Minutes - Notes. (April 17, 1985), 3.

⁷²Research Questionnaire. 10, April, 2003.

⁷³Adamson, Briskin and McPhail, 240.

pornography debate, on the other hand, had the potential to entice diverse women into active participation with the organization.

Unfortunately, the AWA's engagement in the anti-pornography debate represents a missed opportunity in the history of the organization. While pornography certainly entailed sexism, it also embraced racist ideology. This is not surprising according to Dworkin who noted that "Conquest, the subterranean theme of both rape and romance, is carried in pornography, at some point of satiation, inevitably into the racial realm."⁷⁴ Studies of pornography show that women of colour are exploited by pornography, both in terms of representation, and materiality, due to pre-existing economic and social conditions.⁷⁵ In terms of representation, Alice Walker has noted that "where white women are depicted as objects, black women are depicted as animals."⁷⁶ However, neither the AWA brief, nor their other activities reflect an interest in this aspect of the issue. Unlike the abortion debate, pornography presented terrain upon which women of colour and feminists might meet and work together.

However, lesbian analysis of pornography varied. Where it was damning, lesbian objections to pornographic exploitation presented an opportunity for second wave coalition building. The manner in which lesbian sexuality is represented by mainstream

⁷⁴Dworkin, 177.

⁷⁵Aminatta Forna, "Pornography and Racism: Sexualizing Oppression and Inciting Hatred," in *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*, 105.

⁷⁶Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 103.

pornography was intended for a male audience, and as such was found to be highly offensive to women-identified women. Appropriated and manipulated, pornographic images of women together tended to perpetuate hetero-sexist stereotypes about lesbians. Most offensive to many lesbian feminists was the repeated portrayal of lesbian lovers being unfulfilled without the participation of a man.⁷⁷ In withholding support for lesbian-positive pornography feminists missed another potential opportunity for coalition building.⁷⁸

Within the organization itself, we must assume that some dissent existed. We know that pro-choice board members ultimately agreed to the AWA's policy, or, in some cases, left the organization.⁷⁹ It is highly likely that anti-censorship feminists were also required to go along with the organization's campaign against pornography for the sake of maintaining a unified front. How such a thing happens in an organization that makes a conscious effort to be inclusive, egalitarian, and to support *all* women, is critically important to understanding second wave feminist organizing in Antigonish, and the rest of Canada. In the concluding chapter I will discuss the impact of specific organizing techniques and practices on the AWA/AWRC. I look briefly at how the organization sought to educate its own members. This seems to me significant as so much of what the

⁷⁷Charlotte Bunch, "Lesbianism and Erotica in Pornographic America," In *Take Back the Night*, 92-93.

⁷⁸Gotell, 289.

⁷⁹Research Questionnaires, 09 & 15, April, 2003.

organization ultimately sought to achieve was influenced heavily by the approach and ideology of women who came to the community with ideas and attitudes drawn from second wave activities in other places. I will also return to the question of chronology, and suggest the usefulness of recasting the 1980s as solidly 'second wave', particularly in rural communities. I conclude by summarizing the changes that took place within the organization throughout the period of the 1980s. As well, I reiterate the central theme of this paper: that of the strategic fusing of the organization (with the community, with individuals, with ideologies) and the severing of links as warranted by circumstances.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

“ In order to get what is important to us, it might be necessary to lose everything else.”

Bernadette Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*

This study of rural feminist organizing in Antigonish during the 1980s demonstrates two significant strategies in the development of a new women’s organization: engagement and disengagement. By looking at the context in which a feminist organization emerged, I discern the subtle connections and ruptures that characterize this case. I also examine the methods employed by the organization, including tactical selection of issues, management of dissent, and their capacity for diversity of membership. Finally, by contrasting the typical chronology of second wave developments with those that took place in Antigonish, I show that local factors can fundamentally change the meaning of particular issues, and thus change the order in which those issues are resolved.

We have seen that feminist organizing in rural communities took a different form than in urban centres. The intensity and importance of social and political connections in Antigonish is one example. The AWA/RC, created largely by women from elsewhere, worked hard to assimilate with the community, and adjusted their goals accordingly. When I first arrived in Antigonish in 1999 and discovered that abortion was not an issue addressed by the AWA/RC, I assumed that this could be attributed to rural feminism

lagging behind feminism in the rest of Canada. I have learned that this stereotype is inaccurate. Different modes of women-centered work, like that of auxiliaries and other women's organizations, were present in Antigonish throughout the second wave. Similarly, while feminist radicalism seemed to increase in much of the rest of Canada during the 1980s, in Antigonish radical ideas had to be manipulated in ways that local groups and individuals in power could find acceptable. Funding for the women's centre depended upon this compromise. To accomplish this negotiated position, it seems two different types of individuals were necessary to the organization. First, women who had insight into women's issues and were able to inspire others to recognize sexism and be willing to take action were essential. A number of the women who had come to Antigonish from places beyond rural Nova Scotia fit this description nicely. The second necessary element was the involvement of women who were familiar with the intricate, potentially punitive, political structure of the small community. While many of the original members of the AWA had resided in Antigonish for at least five years at the time of the organization's formation, it became apparent that involving not only strong feminists, but established local women was essential.

A third, but equally influential aspect of feminist organizing during the period was the development of an 'institutional culture.' The direction of the AWA/RC organization was influenced in significant ways by the processes it embraced. How important was the fact that the initial leadership of the organization, mainly in the person of Angela Miles, was an academic, and without prior connections to Antigonish networks? Certainly, we

can assume that some of the structures set in place by the organizers were guided by non-local experiences and techniques. A revealing comment by a former board member summarizes the problem as it relates to long-time AWRC coordinator/director Lucille Harper (also relatively new to the community):

Our main weakness has been the lack of leadership and initiative on the part of most board members who have left a few to do all the work and take all the responsibility. Lucille has really been a target for this since she got involved and then became AWRC coordinator. She was always so strong and brave and articulate, so most board members just let her take on most of the responsibility. Sometimes this worked to her advantage and she had lots of control, but mostly I think it was a huge burden and a frustration to her and to many of us.¹

The sociological homogeneity of the women who did the strategizing and goal-setting of the AWA/RC organization forces a consideration of the presence of elitism, racism, and heterosexism within the organization's leadership. While many feminist supporters could get behind the somewhat benign idea of equality as a goal, the organization seemed unprepared to risk their own advantage (a *funded* women's centre) for the sake of including women of colour, lesbian women, or women with disabilities (or, for that matter, women seeking not just information about abortion services, but also moral and intellectual support for their choice). This position was maintained regardless of the fact that clearly more than 'equal' measures of change would be required to improve the status of diverse women in the community. This is not to say that the AWA/RC had negative intentions regarding women, socially unlike themselves, in the

¹Research Questionnaire. 04, April, 2003.

community. Rather, it attests to the unconscious marginalization of women who were already isolated, and in many ways invisible, within Antigonish. Tom Warner's history of gay activism in Canada describes how life in a small community is particularly hard for gays and lesbians: "The isolation, social ostracism and hostility experienced by lesbians, gays, and bisexuals living in small communities can be severe."² One way that this isolation from the activities of the AWA may have been perpetuated was via the informal way in which members of the AWA core group commiserated with each other outside of formal meetings: "We met in the tavern after classes and had heated discussions and woe betide the man who tried to bother us or come on to us!! We were possessed of the fire of Kali/ Just mess with us..."³ While it is difficult not to admire the enthusiasm of such sentiments, the way in which such an approach to feminist decision-making might have limited participation is apparent.

The inability of the organization to manage dissent in a productive way resulted in inertia. Rather than creating useful mechanisms, feelings were spared. The problem of boundaries, both emotional and political, so common to the history of second wave organizing, was no stranger to feminist organizers in Antigonish. In this community, the personal was profoundly and publicly political - whether one wanted it to be or not.

For immigrant women, as an example, belonging to the community of Antigonish meant being identified as an outsider, and therefore categorized alongside women from

²Warner, 306.

³Research Questionnaire. 10, April, 2003.

other parts of Nova Scotia, and Canada. The immigrant experience was perhaps perceived as less meaningful under these circumstances. Even many second generation Antigonish residents were considered outsiders. This created a situation in which asserting special interests, on the basis of place of origin, had little impact.

Regarding the AWA strategy on abortion one former board member commented that “right from the beginning it was decided not to take a stand for or against abortion - this was an agonizing process but in the end all felt very good about the decision.”⁴ Who exactly ‘felt good’ and for how long is unclear. Certainly we will never know how many other feminists in Antigonish steered away from the organization because of this position. One former board member was clear about her limitations:

The biggest issue was, of course, the abortion issue. It was not addressed by the AWA. There was a recognition by the group that any community support would be lost if this became a prominent issue. This was difficult for me as I believed then, and still do, that until women have a right to choose and easy access to abortion, few gains will be made in other areas. I was willing to work in this atmosphere for two years, but at the end of my position (my partner) and I moved...⁵

Another local board member also had to make a difficult choice between continuing her involvement and possibly losing friends. She describes how, in the end, she “fell under the pressure from people against the AWA.”⁶ The organization’s

⁴Research Questionnaire. 03, April, 2003.

⁵Research Questionnaire. 08, April, 2003.

⁶Research Questionnaire. 09, April, 2003. This respondent resigned from both the AWA and the CWL due the pressures placed on her by the community and by family members.

relationship with government funding agencies created a situation in which feminist ideology had to be secondary to conformity (at least on paper) to the requirements of those agencies. As Adamson, Briskin and McPhail said of their own study of the second wave, "In trying to assess the women's movement we have recognized a tension between criticism of our own actions and a realistic appraisal of the material conditions that limit the movement's potential."⁷ Another influence on the direction and effectiveness of many feminist organizations in the 1980s was the involvement of state agencies in funding feminist projects. As early as 1988 researchers like Lisa Price of the Women's Research Centre in Vancouver were clarifying the problem:

Co-optation, then is a process of silencing by inclusion. It is a testament to the flexibility, adaptability and resiliency of the state that it is able to absorb its critics without fundamentally shifting the status quo. It is an expression of hegemony, the ability of the ascendant class to persuade other classes that their interests can be promoted by promoting its own.⁸

In a study of the relationship between women's centers in Nova Scotia and their main funding agency, the Women's Program of the Secretary of State, Andrea Currie described how the connection impacts programming decisions.⁹ She commented that

Program staff sometimes suggest directions a woman's centre could take that they

She states that her husband's business was in jeopardy over her participation in the AWA.

⁷Adamson, Briskin and McPhail, 21.

⁸Lisa S. Price, *In Women's Interests: Feminist Activism and Institutional Change* (Vancouver: Women's Research Centre, 1988), 48.

⁹Andrea Currie, *The Women's Program and Women's Centres in Nova Scotia: A Discussion Paper* (Nova Scotia: Department of the Secretary of State, 1989).

assess as appropriate for the centre, and they now would be eligible for funding. While it is certainly not ideal that the program of a women's centre be initiated by their funding body, an interested and sensitive fieldworker can see the connections between what a centre is trying to respond to in their own community, and what the Women's Program funds. Some centres find this difficult. If a centre feels that its funding depends on it, a project can be undertaken that may not reflect what women's centre members have identified as a pressing need in their community.¹⁰

Still, disengagement from the abortion debate had little impact on the public's perception of the AWA/RC. The potential to forge new relationships, with women of colour for example, was an opportunity missed. In hindsight, I wonder that the organization did not, at some point, discuss the idea of embracing the pro-choice position. The community believed that this was the position held by the organization, regardless of any statements they made to the contrary. Their Statement on Abortion included the following advice: "There are organizations whose mandates focus specifically on this issue and we encourage our members to address it through them."¹¹ Unfortunately, in Antigonish there was no such organization. Regardless, the evidence I have available suggests that AWA/RC continued to insist upon their disengagement from the issue of abortion throughout the 1980s, and indeed, until the present. As one board member summarized: "the Catholicism in Antigonish permeated everything."¹²

Similarly, inasmuch as the pornography debate may have solidified AWA

¹⁰Ibid., 2.

¹¹AWA, Statement on Abortion.

¹²Research Questionnaire. 08, April, 2003.

relations with conservative elements of the community, we cannot know who their approach may have alienated. Again, the unique conditions of the community of Antigonish contributed to the creation of a specific form of feminist organization. Although the form did not always reflect second wave priorities in the rest of Canada, the organization managed to create a space for feminist work in a potentially hostile arena.

The responses to my research questionnaire elicited some longing for the organization's early days - when feminism presented possibilities, and change seemed not only possible, but inevitable. Academic reflections on the second wave also share this nostalgia for the way things used to be done. Historian Joan Scott has raised the critical question of whether women's history will act as a 'rescue' of lives lived from a narrow political aim, or as a 'retreat' into a safe world of academic bantering where little is ever said and nothing is ever done.¹³ This question is important as it applies to the history of feminist organizing, particularly in rural contexts. How we identify the origins of women's oppression, and women's responses, tends to form the substance of our prescriptions for change. Ways in which our assessments will be consumed and reproduced will comprise, in part, the nebulous third wave. In Antigonish, feminists have continued to pursue their distinct goals, all the while managing the constant threat of cancelled funding and withdrawal of community support. In doing so they have contributed a unique example to the history of rural feminist organizing.

¹³Peter Burke, ed. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 43-44.

Appendix: Questionnaire

Re: Antigonish Women's Association History Research Project

Dear Participant,

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out information about the formative years of the Antigonish Women's Association and the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (1982-1989). Please answer only those questions relevant to your personal experience as a board member. Use as much or little of the space provided as you require and use additional paper if necessary. If you wish to remain anonymous please indicate below.

I _____, wish to remain anonymous. Yes No
(name)

Appendix cont.

(*Note: Space provided for responses has been condensed for the purposes of this appendix)

Questionnaire

Demographic/Biographical Information

The following questions will help me to describe the membership of the AWA board in terms of their places of origin, interests, and positions in the community of Antigonish.

Place of birth:

Date of birth:

Religious Affiliation:

If 'from away', please provide the date of your arrival, and your reasons for moving to Antigonish:

Occupation/s or positions held during the period of 1982-1989:(Please include homemaking, child/elder care, etc. as it applies to you).

Please list any other community organizations or groups you were involved with during this period (political parties, services clubs, volunteer organizations etc.):

Describe the community of Antigonish in terms of class structure. Which classes existed in the community? How would you describe your own position within the class structure of Antigonish?

Appendix cont.

Questions about the AWA/AWRC

1. Briefly describe your involvement with the AWA and/or the AWRC - include specific positions held, dates, project development, committee work, etc.

I don't know, or can't remember. (Skip ahead to next question.)

2. What do you feel were the most significant topics motivating the development of a women's centre for Antigonish?

I don't know, or can't remember. (Skip ahead to next question.)

3. Which of the following organizing strategies/methods do you feel were the most effective for the Antigonish Women's Association? Check all that apply.

membership drives

brown bag lunches

community events (Coady picnic etc.)

visiting speakers

film showings

other _____

don't know

4. Please describe the procedures of a typical AWA board meeting. How were decisions made? What processes were used to organize and facilitate board discussions and decisions, and how did these processes come about?

I don't know, or can't remember. (Skip ahead to next question.)

Appendix cont.

5. Do you have any additional comments you would like to make about the organizing strategies, principles, or practices of the AWA?

6. What are your memories of the response of the community of Antigonish to the opening of a women's centre?

I don't know, or can't remember. (Skip ahead to next question.)

7. If you are no longer an active member of the AWA, please discuss your reasons for leaving the organization. *Reminder: All questions are optional.

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