Gender, Place, and Region: Thoughts on the State of Women in Atlantic Canadian History

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that the impact of feminism on Atlantic Canadian history has been limited as a result of the often uneasy relationship between gender and region. Traditionally Atlantic Canadian history as been focused on political and economic themes while the extensive scholarship on women and gender has contributed to our understanding of social and cultural themes.

RESUMÉ
Cet article soutient que l'impact du feminisme sur l'histoire du Canada Atlantique a été limité à la suite de la relation souvent difficile entre les sexes et la région. Traditionnellement l'histoire du Canada Atlantique s'est concentrée sur des themes politiques et économiques tandis que l'érudition considérable sur les femmes et sur les sexes a contribué à notre compréhension des themes sociaux et culturels.

The spring 1995 issue of Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region, included a 39-page bibliography on women in Atlantic Canada compiled by Janet Guildford and myself. At the time, I was struck by the predominant response from this project: the comment that readers were surprised by how much work on the topic was available. The contradiction between the abundance of scholarly work that continues to be produced on women in this region and its relative invisibility within both Atlantic Canadian history and Canadian women's and gender history is complicated. This discrepancy cannot be dismissed as only a successful misogynist conspiracy of silencing women nor as an intense Ontario bias of Canadian history, but rather, reflects the difficulty of reconciling the study of gender to a regional framework. As Deborah Gorham (1999, 119) has pointed out in a recent review essay, region and women's history have often been twinned in larger Canadian historiographical debates around traditional "national" history and a more diverse and inclusive version. Less often, it has been acknowledged that region and gender may be an unhappy (or at least complicated) marriage, for while they share a common impetus, their goals are often distinct.

Research and writing on women's and gender history in the Atlantic region is flourishing but to a remarkable degree retains its marginal status both within the region's historiography and within Canadian women's history. Indeed with the possible exception of Québec, Canadian women's history has not dealt with the conception of region or place beyond broad demographic, colonial, and economic characteristics. (The case of Québec has developed not so much as a testament for region or place but rather English Canadian women's history often-unconscious acceptance of Québec as a distinct nation.) The difficulty of reconciling place with the theoretical concept of gender is compounded by the ongoing marginalization of Atlantic Canada from the dominant Canadian national narrative. The historical experiences of Atlantic Canadians, like those of women in general, are still frequently regarded as outside the mainstream of the Canadian national story. As a result, Atlantic Canadian women have rarely been included in either the Canadian national story or the region's dominant narrative of economic underdevelopment and political marginalization. This is not to argue Atlantic Canadian women have been ignored. Indeed, most writers of undergraduate surveys and compilers of anthologies have been conscientious (and generous) about including Atlantic Canadian examples. However, this inclusion rarely rises above "tokenism" as the context surrounding these eastern examples is seldom explained or explored. This article will survey the impact of feminism on Atlantic Canadian
history, the influence of Atlantic Canadian women's and gender history on its Canadian counterpart and the inadequacies in the dominant understandings of gender in addressing the concept of place.

Women and gender are now legitimate subjects of historical investigation but the topic itself does not necessarily lead to a feminist perspective. This important point notwithstanding, feminism is shaping our current understanding of the Atlantic Canadian past. At the most obvious level, it has put women and gender on the historical agenda and in doing so is contributing to what in another context Veronica Strong-Boag (1998, 55) has described a "more innovative, more complex, and, above all more inclusive and realistic" vision of the past. The questions that have driven feminist scholarship and its desire to uncover the nature, experience, roots, and perpetuation of patriarchy have by and large contributed to our understanding of the social and cultural history of the region. However, these are not the questions, the issues, nor the fields, which have driven regional history over the last 25 years. With the important exception of work on women in the fisheries, which Linda Kealey (1993, 5) has noted in the case of Newfoundland was likely to be undertaken by sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists rather than historians, gender and the questions raised by feminism have been unable to breach the central narrative of the region's economic and political history and its still dominant paradigm of underdevelopment. Again, this claim is not so much a comment on the paucity of women's history in Atlantic Canada as a reflection on the fact that the region has been traditionally defined in terms of geography, economics and formal politics. Even though its power is ebbing, a paradigm of regional underdevelopment with little regard to society or culture continues to overshadow the understanding of Atlantic Canada's past. This underdevelopment model with its emphasis on the metropole and the hinterland and the power of capital has been unable to integrate or recognize the role and experience of women or gender in this process. The focus on male-dominated resource extractive wage-industries such as mining and forestry and, with important exceptions, the under-investigation of household-based primary producers has led to women's economic participation in a resource economy being undervalued and obscured. As noted by Kealey, this lacuna is especially apparent among historians, with the exception of Sean Cadigan (1995) and Miriam Wright (1995). Historical scholarship on women in the fisheries and fishing households has been conducted by economists and sociologists such as Martha MacDonald and Patricia Connelly in the case of Nova Scotia and by sociologists and anthropologists such as Marilyn Porter, Donna Lee Davis, Barbara Neis, and colleagues associated with Memorial University's Institute of Social and Economic Research on Newfoundland.

Although the political/economic model remains closely associated with the core of Atlantic Canadian history, women's history and feminist theory (as in the case of other forms of social history) is associated with fragmentation and the loss of a common or central regional problème. Women's history and feminism in Atlantic Canada, like Canadian national history, remind us that there is not one central, all encompassing narrative. This insight should not alarm Atlantic Canadian scholars who recognize that within Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island there were in fact two distinct realities, one urban and industrial, the other rural and grounded in a resource economy. But, recent theoretical insights have challenged the idea of region itself so that Atlantic Canada is no more than an "imagined community" constituted around the traditional economic and political history that women's history has appeared to threaten (Fingard 1989). The Atlantic region thus becomes something that is constructed by the dual forces of internal self-definition and external depiction. The tension and confusion around the idea of region within Atlantic Canada are not new and have been long apparent in the difficulty so-called regional historians have in crossing the Gulf of St. Lawrence to include Newfoundland with the Maritime Provinces.

If the idea of region itself is questioned, its validity is further endangered by the tension between analytical and theoretical categories such as gender (or class and race) and their emphasis on the universal and the particular specifics associated with place. What has been distinctive to women's experience in Atlantic Canada? Sexual divisions of labour and unequal access to economic, political, and social power through patriarchy are universal phenomenon. What is the value of writing regional history if we are dealing with systemic forces
associated with broader structures such as capitalism, colonialism, or patriarchy? The particular form this issue has taken in Atlantic Canada is that historians, borrowing from international trends in scholarship, have argued that Atlantic Canada is and was a "normal society" not to be bound, characterized, nor dismissed by some petrified conservatism. McKay (1998, 3-4) has identified this approach as a parallel example to Ronald Rudin's observation of the way the preoccupation with normalcy has shaped Quebec history over the last thirty years. My own book, *Ideal Surroundings: Gender in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s*, where I even managed to obliterare place from the title, typifies this trend but is by no means unique. The masterful two volumes *The Atlantic Region to Confederation* and *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, which brings together 26 authors, is another excellent example. Here, there is an obvious intention to include women's experience in both volumes. However, I came away from both books not at all certain if there was any aspect of women's experience in Atlantic Canada that might be unique or specific to place. Deborah Stiles (1998), in her fascinating article "Martin Butler, Masculinity, and the North American Sole Leather Tanning Industry: 1871-1889," explores the rural, working-class masculinity of one individual but argues that this identity "to some degree is representative as well of the countless unnamed and unknowable New Brunswick (and other Canadian) men who went to the tannery towns in this period."(91) For Stiles, as is the case with most Atlantic Canadianists, rurality and class matter more to the construction of gender than region. So the big question that emerges is how do historians employ gender as an analytical tool and adapt its use to acknowledge the extent to which place or context contributes to its construction?

The theoretical difficulty of linking gender and place runs contrary to some empirical observations that suggest place mattered a great deal. There are broad characteristics that define the region beyond the provincial boundaries of New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. Atlantic Canada, in general, can be characterized by uneven development, ethnic and sectarian enclaves, intense localism, a culture of paternalism and gender inequality. While the resource economy until relatively recently excluded most women's formal or paid labour, women in Atlantic Canada played an important role in creating stable communities and households when the economic structure of the region necessitated that many men were often absent working on the boats, in the woods or in other waged-labour activities away from home. For most women, their labour took place within the context of independent household-based commodity production that supported and reinforced extant patriarchal structures and played a particular role in perpetuating unequal power relationships. Here I use the notion of patriarchy as articulated by Linda Gordon in her 1996 Berkshire Conference presentation, which emphasised patriarchy's power as legitimized not only on the basis of gender but also age. This combination of gender and age coincided in the ownership of property. The paradox as noted above is that while household-based production held the potential for rigid patriarchal control, this power was mediated by possible opportunities for autonomy when women were left in charge. Offshore fisheries, seasonal forestry work, out-migration, and international carry trades meant that many men worked for sometimes long periods of time away from their families. In this particular example, the categories of gender, class, and traditional definitions of region overlapped neatly. Moreover, what geographers have referred to as the "spatial division of labour" had implications for how gender was experienced. A weak manufacturing sector for most of the twentieth century meant that until after the Second World War, regional opportunities for women in the formal paid labour market outside the service sector were relatively few, with the exception of a few weeks employment in seasonal local manufacturing such as a lobster cannery or less casual labour in one of the regional textile or food processing factories in Marysville, St. Stephen's, Yarmouth, Halifax, Truro or Windsor. But even in factories, the persistent and pervasive influence of paternalism and its complex culture of reciprocal relationships, responsibilities, and roles constructed a particular gender experience. Nevertheless, while local opportunities in the formal paid labour force may have been limited, Elizabeth Mancke (1995) suggests that Atlantic Canadian women in the late eighteenth-century at least (and presumably longer)
may have been unusually situated to take advantage of the international trade which was being conducted literally at their front doors.

Demography and residential patterns in Atlantic Canada also fostered a distinct community. An older and long-settled population meant that there was demographic parity between men and women, unlike the western provinces or other resource frontiers. Although, as in the case of cities across North American, women predominated in urban centres, one of the aspects of Atlantic Canadian life to the present-day is the ongoing demographic importance of the rural and small town experience. The general urban bias of contemporary historians has created a distorted version of the past which may be particularly warped in a region that was slowest to urbanize. While the urban research conducted thus far is important and useful, women's and gender history must now enter the world of the countryside, which has frequently been gendered as male (Samson 1994, 1).

Older and relatively stable populations fostered intense localisms and bonds of community and kinship, that were reinforced by settlement in ethnic and sectarian enclaves. Community ties were both empowering and restrictive for women. Anonymity was rare and difficult to maintain even in the region's relatively small cities. This meant that women carried an especially important burden as the arbitrators and guardians of family reputation through sexual propriety, hospitality, housekeeping, mothering, and respectability. In communities where people were likely to know each other gossip may have been a particular source of power and vulnerability.

Weak provincial governments and underdeveloped municipal structures also had specific effects on women. Women and their responsibilities for child bearing and child rearing experienced a greater impact from non-existent or meagre welfare services and were particularly affected by the inability of provincial governments to participate in federal cost sharing programs. At least in the years surrounding the Second World War in Nova Scotia, this developing state could provide special (if precarious) opportunities for women in the provincial bureaucracy. Mary Black (Supervisor of Handcrafts in the Department of Industry), Margaret Perry (Provincial "Film Officer") and Dr Elizabeth P. Bisson (Provincial Psychiatrist) are all such examples, along with the countless urban, small town, and rural women employed as teachers and nurses throughout the region and beyond.

Work on women and gender in the Atlantic Region has approached the issue of place in two distinct manners. Attention to gender in the work of Janet Guildford (1995; 1997) and David Sutherland (1994) has meant that Atlantic Canadian history (or at least Halifax history) is at the forefront of studies into nineteenth-century middle-class formation and the way in which this was a gendered process. Similarly, Judith Fingard's work on marginal women, such as prostitutes (1989), female students and faculty members (1984-85, 1989) broadens our understanding of systemic discrimination in both the Halifax urban underclass and established institutions such as Dalhousie University. Steven Penhold (1994) explores the particular construction and experience of masculinity in a specific context of Cape Breton coal towns. In Rusty Neal's *Brotherhood Economics: Women and Co-operatives in Nova Scotia* (1998), we gain insights into the ways in which gender shaped the co-operative experience in Cape Breton and Antigonish. The work of Sutherland, Guildford, Fingard, Neal, and Penhold explores gender so usefully because of the specific locality or context within which they situate their research. But, this very specificity raises the issue of whether or not this body of work tells us anything of the larger region or if the conclusions relate specifically to Halifax or the Cape Breton coal towns.

The research of Colin Howell, Sheila Andrew, and Ian McKay offer another model in which the research is located less specifically in a particular community. Colin Howell's (1995) work on baseball offers insights into Maritime working and middle class masculinity (and to a lesser extent femininity) in both cities and small towns through exploring sport. Sheila Andrew (1997) in the examination of written jokes in nineteenth century Acadian newspapers argues that the frequency and form of jokes directed against women or at marriage in general can tell us something about the level of anxiety around changing gender roles within the Acadian community. In *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (1994), McKay examines how
a group of middle-class urban cultural producers imprinted their image of "the ruggedly virile men, the virginal but accessible women, the romantic courtships, the happy families" (263) on the province as they constructed "Nova Scotia as a therapeutic space for anti-modernists." The complexity of this projection is evident in the way their "Nova Scotian folk" simultaneously exalted "traditional 'family values' and gender ideals" and a natural sexual primitivism (251; 253). McKay's fascinating characterization of a geographic space speaks to a province but still does not address the region.

As I have argued elsewhere with Janet Guildford (1994), women's history was an important aspect of the awakening of regional history which began in the 1970s. At the centre of this female renaissance were individual scholars who have spent their careers in the region such as Linda Kealey, Margaret Conrad, and Judith Fingard and the journal *Acadiensis* which in turn outlined the state of women's history in the region in three important reviews published in 1977, 1983, and 1990. What is striking about the first review written by Ruth Roach Pierson (1977), who was among an impressive list of feminist scholars such as Wendy Mitchinson, Tamara Hareven, Christina Simmons, and Sylvia Van Kirk who taught in the Atlantic Canada before establishing careers elsewhere, is how very little scholarship had been done. When Margaret Conrad wrote the second in 1983, "Canadian" work was appearing at an impressive rate but "women were only beginning to emerge from the grey mists of neglect in Atlantic Canada" (1983, 156). Conrad pointed to a few monographs but highlighted available documentary evidence, memoirs, and biographies. She, along with co-editors Donna Smyth and Toni Laidlaw, did much to heighten the visibility of women's history even outside the academy with the 1988 publication of *No Place Like Home: The Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women* which had considerable sales among the general public. By 1990, when Gail Campbell published the third in this series she was at least able to describe the state of women's history in Atlantic Canada as "promising" but "lamentably slow" (185). Campbell drew attention to both the works being produced about the region and the inclusion of Atlantic material in national studies. She correctly identified the broadening of the research agenda in women's history and made a largely unheeded call for comparative work with other regions. There is no question that the volume of work produced in the 1990s was impressive but it is less certain what it may mean. For despite the wealth of fascinating material generated, it is clear that women's history and feminist theory has not yet affected the ways in which Atlantic Canadian themes are examined. Women and gender have been included in the region's history but they have not fundamentally altered the way it is understood.

A related question is to identify the impact and question the integration of Atlantic Canadian women's and gender history on the writing of Canadian women's and gender history. As Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman noted in their 1986 introduction to *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, there is an abundance of "good readable material" (5) available from Atlantic Canada. Undoubtedly some of it would hold a visible part of "the Canadian Women's History Canon" should one be identified. Margaret Conrad's 1984 article "'Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home': Time and Place in Canadian Women's History" (and although not so obviously shaped by her feminism I would add Judith Fingard's 1974 article "'The Winter's Tale': The Seasonal Contours of Poverty in British North America, 1815-1850,") force us to think about "women's" time and seasons from a perspective not shaped by the usual forces of the market, state institutions, or war. Neither of these important articles reflected a distinctly Atlantic Canadian experience in itself, but each was rooted in a societal perspective formed by early European settlement and a population that experienced no large scale immigration after 1850. The similar point can be made about two influential articles on early, nineteenth-century women's participation in politics. Gail G. Campbell's "Disenfranchised But Not Quiescent: Women Petitioners in New Brunswick in the Mid-19th Century," (1989) and Rusty Bittermann's "Women and the Escheat Movement: The Politics of Everyday Life on Prince Edward Island," (1994) explore the theme of women's involvement and exclusion from the political sphere. This, of course, was not a distinctly Atlantic Canadian phenomenon but these articles emerged in this particular region as a result of its relatively early European settlement and its
accompanying records. Here, only Québec offers comparable possibilities. Since these long-established communities created various institutions, we know more about Atlantic Canadian women's institutional life in universities and the church than in other regions outside Québec. It is significant that in Paul Axelrod and John Reid's 1989 anthology *Youth, University and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Education,* for example, four of the fourteen articles are based on Atlantic Canadian universities.

The historic attention to universities is a fitting reminder of how contemporary structural and institutional constraints may hinder research on women and gender within (and outside) Atlantic Canada. Intellectual trends are influenced by the material reality of resources not available for graduate student support or faculty replacement positions. Although all Canadian universities suffered under government cuts in the 1990s, the under funding of Atlantic Canadian universities has been especially difficult in light of their often struggling provincial economies and smaller populations. The lack of funds available to attract and support graduate students interested in gender or women's history means that these students do not continue their studies or leave the region (and possibility regional topics). Everywhere graduate students face rising tuition costs, the disappearance of "thesis only fees," and government funding formulas which encourage many universities to introduce (or enforce) rigid time completion requirements for graduate degrees. As a result, the all too real financial and time restraints restrict the scope of projects that can be undertaken. This is especially the case in the adoption of innovative methodologies or topics. New (or more precisely ignored) areas such as rural research may require additional time, especially if one is living some distance from his or her sources. Despite these important structural challenges, excellent graduate work in Atlantic Canadian women's and gender history continues at Memorial, Université de Moncton, University of New Brunswick, St. Mary's, and Dalhousie (and outside the region at York, Queens, Carleton, Laval, Université de Montréal, and McGill) but we need to recognize that current institutional obstacles have an impact on the present and future field. As someone who has been extremely fortunate in finding work, I am very conscious that other historians interested in gender in the Atlantic region face unemployment or underemployment and do not share my privileged position. The regional literature is poorer for their inability to pursue their interests on a full-time basis and especially frustrating as the "first" generation of historians who explored women and gender move towards retirement and are not necessarily replaced.1

There is no contradiction in acknowledging the importance of institutional health and recognizing that a vital current of feminist history has always been located outside the university or at least has had community collaboration as a general principle. Indeed, the feminist movement, in its largest sense, has been the explicit inspiration behind such works as Marilyn Porter, *Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women* (1993), and Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter, editors, *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador: a Collage* (1995). This journal, *Atlantis,* has itself played an important role in the formation of the field with the publication of E.R. Forbes' 1985 review essay on Carol Bacchi's *Liberation Deferred* and Donna Smyth's guest-edited Volume 20 (1995) on the cultural and literary traditions of Maritime women.

Current feminist concerns also set an agenda for future work. Areas where work must be encouraged reflect both what is happening in international scholarship and specific characteristics of Atlantic Canadian society. Much more needs to be done on the region's ethnic diversity with particular attention to the experiences of "Africadians," post-expulsion Acadians, and Aboriginal populations. Work on the experience of Black women in Nova Scotia has been begun by Sylvia Hamilton, most importantly in film but also her 1994 article, and by Morton (1993). Scholarship on post-expulsion Acadian women has focussed on their institutional contributions through religious orders and demographic research on family structure while the meagre offerings on Aboriginal women are likely to be in the form of memoirs or biography such as Mary Olga McKenna, *Micmac by Choice: Elsie Sark-an Island Legend,* (1990); Johanna Brand *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash* (1993); and Isabelle Knockwood with Gillian Thomas, *Out of the Depths: the Experiences*
of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia (1992). The strong urban bias of the historical literature compounds the historical experience of racism and marginalization and lends to the ongoing invisibility of these often rural populations.

Contemporary interest in the process of colonialism also lends itself to the Atlantic region. Questions around British, French, and American colonial identities can be brought to understandings of gender as these three empires overlapped in Atlantic Canada. Virtually no work has been undertaken on the history of sexuality and its community regulation, which may be particularly interesting in light of the important of rural and small town residency, population stability, and family. The investigation of the relationship between women and the state is also an obvious lacuna. Atlantic Canadian women experienced both an underdeveloped state in the years up to the Second World War and a postwar welfare state that played an unusually prominent role in their lives as both an employer and provider of direct income support. Certainly the breadth of individual Atlantic Canadian women's experiences with the state is suggested by recent biographies such as Douglas Baldwin's (1997) work on Prince Edward Island public health nurse Mona Gordon Wilson, She Answered Every Call: the Life of Public Health Nurse, Mona Gordon Wilson (1894-1987) (1997); Clary Croft, Helen Creighton: Canada's First Lady of Folklore (1999), and Marion Douglas Kerans, Muriel Duckworth: a Very Active Pacifist: a Biography (1996).

To highlight what is specific to the construction and process of gender in Atlantic Canada, I would echo Gail Campbell's earlier call for comparative studies where place can be utilized as a variable. Canadian or international comparative studies in women's history and feminism are rare and, when they do exist, Atlantic Canadian examples are rarely employed. Yet even in sophisticated studies where Atlantic Canadian research is utilized, it is extremely difficult to explore the significance of place or region. In Kathryn McPherson's Bedside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-1990 (1996), she uses Halifax, along with Winnipeg and Vancouver as local sites to ground her national project. This book deftly juggles the ways by which the process of gender, class, sexuality, and race shaped nurses and their work experience but, despite the obvious intention to highlight various locals, the regional ball gets dropped. I make this as an observation, not at all certain how one could avoid this dilemma and all too aware of the same difficulties (and probably the same result). I duplicated this problem in my own comparative work on gambling. Perhaps we also even need to acknowledge, if this is not some form of heresy, that there are some areas where the connection between gender and region are simply not as important.

Another approach to link gender and place is suggested by following history's linguistic turn. The centrality of place in forming specific gender attributes is forcibly presented by Karen Dubinsky (1999) who in another context has explored the "imaginary geography" or how the physical environment is invested with discursive meaning for the case of Niagara Falls. An exciting example of the kind of insights this direction can produce around gender, race, and place exists for the prairies in Sarah Carter's (1997) Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West. So far, nothing comparable has been written about the east.

The challenge of the present agenda is to borrow the theoretical insights from women's history and feminism and apply them to the specifics of the Atlantic Canadian context. This means less emphasis on cities, and the obvious acknowledgement that St. John's, Halifax, Charlottetown, Saint John, and Fredericton are not the same as New York, Chicago, London, or even Toronto or Montréal. It also calls for addressing the potential for oppression and autonomy offered by independent commodity production based at the level of the household and historical experiences rooted in small towns, villages, and the countryside. We need to be cognizant that there is a difference between work that is regional in nature and that which is local and why this matters. Halifax examples can not make claims for the regional level and not all questions or issues about gender may be appropriate or relevant to examine in terms of region or locality. Institutional and structural barriers notwithstanding there is much to be done. If a feminist understanding of gender is going to truly reshape our understanding of the Atlantic region and add to national narratives, we must adapt
its use to acknowledge how place or context contributes to its construction and experience. Finally, the chasm within Atlantic Canadian historiography between political/economic history and social/cultural studies (where women have generally been placed) needs to be bridged. Gender inequality is at the core of the Atlantic Canadian past and without attention to gender, no understanding of this region is complete.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
I wish to thank Janet Guildford, Shirley Tillotson, Danny Samson, and the Atlantis reviewers for their comments. I alone am responsible for the conclusions.

ENDNOTES
1. This is not unique to Atlantic Canada as I witness a parallel situation in Québec where women’s history specialists such as Micheline Dumont, Nadia Fahmy-Eid, and Andrée Lévesque have not been replaced upon their retirement.

REFERENCES