

## “Il en faut un peu”: Farm Women and Feminism in Québec and France Since 1945

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### Article abstract

Certain farm women's organizations continue to represent the social feminist tradition of Canadian suffragism and the broader social Catholic feminism still influential elsewhere. Canadian historians have often criticized such groups in contrast with a more aggressive, equal-rights feminism found among urban and rural women in both waves of feminism. We argue that, far from being conservative, groups identified as social feminist serve to integrate farm women into public debates and political action, including feminism. We outline the history of the Cercles de fermières of Québec, founded in 1915, and the French Groupements de vulgarisation-développement agricoles féminins, founded since 1959. A comparison of members with nonmembers in each country and across the group, based on survey data collected in 1989 for 389 cases, suggests that club involvement has counteracted demographic characteristics expected to produce antifeminism. In general, we find less hostility to second-wave feminism than might be expected. Relying mainly on responses to open-ended questions, we argue that, for our subjects, feminism is tempered by distaste for confrontation. Issues supported by the movement for women's liberation are favoured by farm women, but the liberationist style and tactics are eschewed. Those of our respondents identified as feminists express preference for a complementarity modelled on the idealized family.

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GAIL CUTHBERT BRANDT AND NAOMI BLACK

## Résumé

*Certain farm women's organizations continue to represent the social feminist tradition of Canadian suffragism and the broader social Catholic feminism still influential elsewhere. Canadian historians have often criticized such groups in contrast with a more aggressive, equal-rights feminism found among urban and rural women in both waves of feminism. We argue that, far from being conservative, groups identified as social feminist serve to integrate farm women into public debates and political action, including feminism. We outline the history of the Cercles de fermières of Québec, founded in 1915, and the French Groupements de vulgarisation/développement agricoles féminins, founded since 1959. A comparison of members with nonmembers in each country and across the group, based on survey data collected in 1989 for 389 cases, suggests that club involvement has counteracted demographic characteristics expected to produce antifeminism. In general, we find less hostility to second-wave feminism than might be expected. Relying mainly on responses to open-ended questions, we argue that, for our subjects, feminism is tempered by distaste for confrontation. Issues supported by the movement for women's liberation are favoured by farm women, but the liberationist style and tactics are eschewed. Those of our respondents identified as feminists express preference for a complementarity modelled on the idealized family.*

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*Certaines associations de fermières poursuivent les buts traditionnels socio-féministes des suffragettes canadiennes et maintiennent un féminisme socio-catholique qui exerce toujours une influence ailleurs. Les historiens canadiens ont souvent critiqué ces groupes qui se sont détachés du mouvement féministe plus agressif, lequel s'est manifesté au cours des deux campagnes féministes pour l'égalité des sexes, tant chez les femmes de la ville que chez celles de la campagne. Nous croyons que loin d'être conservateurs, les groupes de tradition socio-féministe ont permis aux femmes de la campagne de participer aux débats publics et à l'action politique, y compris au mouvement féministe. L'article brosse un tableau historique des Cercles des fermières du Québec, constitués*

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The quotations that begin this paper, as with all those not otherwise identified, were drawn from surveys conducted in Québec and France in the spring and early summer of 1989. The translations from French are our own throughout unless otherwise identified.

We thank the Robarts Centre at York University as well as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funds supporting the surveys and the related archival work. The Faculty of Arts and Glendon College at York University also contributed to funding our research, as did the Vari Foundation. We thank as well our invaluable research assistants, Barbara Cooper, Michelle Payette-Daoust, and Jocelyne Praud. Marina Sakuta cheerfully and efficiently rendered our tables usable.

*en 1915, et des Groupements de vulgarisation-développement agricoles féminins établis en France depuis 1959. Une comparaison des membres et des non-membres dans chaque pays, faite au moyen de données recueillies en 1989 sur 389 cas, laisse entendre que l'existence de ces groupes a permis de contrebalancer les composantes démographiques qui devaient conduire à l'antiféminisme. En général, nous trouvons moins d'hostilité que prévu envers le second mouvement féministe. En nous basant sur les questions ouvertes de notre questionnaire, nous concluons que chez nos répondantes, le féminisme est tempéré par une aversion de la confrontation. Les buts du mouvement de libération de la femme sont bien accueillis par les fermières, mais le style libertaire et ses tactiques sont rejetés. Nos répondantes identifiées comme féministes préfèrent une complémentarité basée sur le modèle de la famille idéale.*

Feminism "goes a bit too far, but we need some of it" — farm woman interviewed in Lussac, France, 1989.

Feminism means "fighting to be recognized...we ought to talk to one another. I'm against placards" — farm woman interviewed in St-Anicet, Québec, 1989.

Feminism means "I'm for the equality of the sexes, but women should keep their femininity" — farm woman interviewed in St-Chrysotome, Québec, 1989.

In conventional accounts of Canadian history, farm women have been assigned a noble but essentially secondary role as the heroic, self-sacrificing help-mates of those brawny tillers of the soil who conquered the forests and settled the fertile plains. Even the development of women's history over the past two decades has not substantially altered this image. Until quite recently, farm women have not been the central focus of historians' research. When they have appeared in historical studies, it has often been as foils to urban, middle-class women whose economic, social, and political agendas were fundamentally distinctive from, and sometimes opposed to, their own.<sup>1</sup> For their part, Western Canadian farm women have been studied primarily in relation to the suffrage movement. Possibly as a result, their early organizations (the United Farm Women of Alberta and the Women's Grain Growers' Association in Saskatchewan) and leaders (Irene Parlby and Violet McNaughton) tend to be favourably portrayed as embracing progressive causes and embodying a form of women's rights activism that could perhaps be labelled agrarian feminism.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, farm women in eastern Canada, and par-

1. See, for example, Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto, 1983), Chap. 8.

2. Examples include Georgina Taylor, "'Should I Drown Myself Now or Later?' The Isolation of Rural Women in Saskatchewan and their Participation in Homemakers' Clubs, the Farm Movement and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation," in *Women: Isolation and Bonding. The Ecology of Gender*, ed. Kathleen Storie (Toronto, 1987), 79-100; R.G. Marchildon, "Improving the Quality of Rural Life in Saskatchewan: Some Activities of the Women's Section of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers, 1913-20," in *Building Beyond the Homestead: Rural History on the Prairies*, eds. David C. Jones and Ian MacPherson (Calgary, 1985), 88-109; L.J. Wilson, "Educational Role of the United Farm Women of Alberta," *Alberta History* 25:2 (Spring 1977): 28-36.

ticularly those in Québec, have been described as an essentially conservative social and political force. Their organizations, the Women's Institutes and the Cercles de fermières, have suffered from a variety of negative assessments, for they have been described both as pawns of the provincial governments who created and funded them, and as irrelevant social clubs.<sup>3</sup> Rural women and rural women's organizations in Québec have even been held responsible for helping impede the achievement of equality for women in Québec by organizing petitions against the enfranchisement of women in that province.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of interest in these older farm women's organizations and the low esteem they have been accorded may be attributed to a number of factors, including the dramatic decline in the size of Canada's agrarian population. In addition, it is generally assumed that farm women's social and political attitudes are outmoded, out of step with the times. According to standard accounts of modernization, a population "develops" as it moves from rural to urban, from farm to factory, and from religious to secular. It is also implied that, as modernization occurs, women will become more like men, who are considered to be more modern because of their higher level of participation in the labour force, in trade unionism, and in electoral politics. The lower level of participation of women in such activities, as well as their relative refusal to place themselves on a left-right scale of political beliefs, are seen as indicators of apathy or ignorance. Modernization will, most analysts assume, eventually produce levels of female employment and then political attitudes and behaviour resembling those of men.<sup>5</sup>

This model has had a considerable influence on how rural women have been perceived in capitalist societies. In a frequently cited study of the political behaviour of women in France, for example, Janine Mossuz-Lavau and Mariette Sineau have insisted on the importance of participation in the paid labour force for the politicization of women. In their discussion of married rural women, they distinguish between those who are or have formerly been in the paid labour force, and those who have not; without hesitation

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3. Bacchi, 128-29; Jean Letendre, "Les Cercles de fermières au Québec, 1915-31: Un exemple de l'encadrement politique d'un mouvement populaire féminin," MA thesis, Université de Sherbrooke, 1983.

4. Catherine L. Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada: The Start of Liberation, 1900-20* (Toronto, 1974), 256-57. The hostility of francophone rural women in Québec to the vote may well have been overestimated because of the successful antisuffrage campaigns of the church. There is a small amount of contrary evidence. L'Alliance canadienne pour le vote des femmes gathered signatures on prosuffrage petitions from rural women at the Marché Bonsecours in Montréal, at agricultural expositions, and at country gatherings. See Diane Lamoureux, *Citoyennes? Femmes, Droit de Vote et Démocratie* (Montréal, 1989), 181. Thérèse Casgrain, Idola Saint Jean, and Florence Martel all broadcast on suffrage themes, which may have had some effect in counteracting church pressures (Lamoureux, 56). Certainly Casgrain's organization, La Ligue pour les droits de la femme, believed that rural suffragism existed, because of the letters it received: "It is, after all, the woman who listens to us as she prepares dinner in some distant Gaspé farm-house..., whose voice will be the one to give its orders to the Legislative Assembly, which founds its attitudes of refusal on the belief that she does not care for the struggle that the women of the cities are chiefly waging"; Cleverdon, 240.

5. See Naomi Black and Ann Baker Cottrell, eds., *Women and World Change: Equity Issues in Development* (Beverly Hills, 1981).

they identify the workers and exworkers as both more politicized and more progressive or "modern."<sup>6</sup> The rankings implied by modernization place at the bottom, or at the back, the more traditional feminists of Canadian history as well as those contemporary farm women who remain outside the paid labour force and firmly committed to family and religious values.

Until fairly recently, the analyses of feminism put forward by Canadian historians have been shaped by this modernization model. Most Canadian suffragists, urban as well as rural, drew on women's specific experience and responsibilities in formulating their demands for improvements in women's rights, the conditions under which they worked, education, public health, protection from domestic violence, and even for an end to war. The ultimate goal of such "social feminists" was a society transformed by women's participation in civic affairs and the consequent incorporation of domestic values into public life.<sup>7</sup>

For Canadian suffragists, the characteristic form of organization was the separate, women-only voluntary group such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Young Women's Christian Association, the women's auxiliaries of the Grain Growers' associations, the Women's Institutes, and the Homemakers' Clubs. When these groups presented women's enfranchisement as a symbol of equality with men, they fitted comfortably into a framework of analysis that defined feminism as the achievement of equity with men, and that therefore judged "equal rights feminism" to be the only legitimate form of the women's rights campaign. By contrast, most historians have roundly condemned what they have identified as "maternal feminism" for limiting women's potential by defining them in relation to a domestic role thought of as necessarily subservient.<sup>8</sup>

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that analysts of contemporary feminism have viewed with suspicion, and even disdain, the present-day versions of traditional women's organizations. Unless such groups have goals that are readily recognizable as political in the conventional use of the word, they are dismissed as conservative and even retrograde. According to one writer, the Women's Institute (WI) is an organization "little more than an outlet for 'tea and trivia' that has failed to address issues relevant to the younger generation."<sup>9</sup> Several observers have gone so far as to insist that tradi-

6. Janine Mossuz-Lavau and Mariette Sineau, *Enquête sur les femmes et la politique en France* (Paris, 1983), 125-33.

7. Naomi Black, *Social Feminism* (Ithaca, 1989).

8. The negative assessment of "maternal feminism" has permeated most of the discussions of Canadian first wave feminism, especially the early work by women's historians. See, for example, Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?*; Veronica Strong-Boag, *The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1929* (Ottawa, 1976); Marie Lavigne, Yolande Pinard, and Jennifer Stoddart, "La Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste et les revendications féministes au début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *Travailleuses et Féministes. Les femmes dans la société québécoise*, eds. Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard (Montréal, 1983), 199-216; Linda Kealey, ed., *'A Not Unreasonable Claim': Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s to 1920* (Toronto, 1979).

9. Pauline Rankin, "The Politicization of Ontario Farm Women," in *Beyond the Vote. Canadian Women and Politics*, eds. Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster (Toronto, 1989), 324.

tional women's organizations, and in particular rural-based ones devoted to the preservation of the family, have impeded women's development and drive for greater equality. In France, for example, Andrée Michel and Geneviève Texier have argued that such organizations actually “oppose the advancement of women, attempting to maintain, even restore those masculine privileges that have been reduced by women's battles for recognition and dignity.”<sup>10</sup> In Canada, the charge has been laid that the “WIs' traditional views about the domestic role of the rural woman only perpetuate stereotypical images of the farm wife and constrain her political potential.”<sup>11</sup> The Cercles de fermières have a similarly tarnished reputation, as primarily devoted to the promotion of handicrafts and the perpetuation of familial and religious values. By contrast, more recent farm women's organizations such as l'Union des productrices agricoles (1984) and l'Association des femmes collaboratrices (1980) in Québec, Women for the Survival of Agriculture (1975) and Concerned Farm Women (1981) in Ontario, and the women's sections of the National Farmers' Union in several provinces, are generally considered to be more activist and more effective lobbyists on current agricultural issues.

It is our belief, however, that groups such as the Women's Institutes and the Cercles de fermières merit a closer examination for a number of reasons. To begin with, they continue to represent by far the largest groupings of farm women in Canada. In 1985, some fifty thousand women belonged to the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada, and another 71,700 to the Cercles de fermières.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, given the groups' reputation for being traditional and conservative, they afford an interesting opportunity to assess the extent to which their members correspond to the stereotype of rural women inherent in the model of development that still dominates much of social science theory. An extensive investigation of the Cercles de fermières before World War II, carried out under the direction of Yolande Cohen, has already stressed the importance of these organizations for articulating the economic and social role of farm women, and for connecting the private, domestic realm to public life.<sup>13</sup> The significance of the *cercles* for rural women in Québec has also been highlighted by sociologist Fran Shaver, who has described them as performing the same functions for their members as business men's clubs did for theirs.<sup>14</sup> Even the most vocal critics of the maternal feminism es-

10. Andrée Michel and Geneviève Texier, *La condition de la française d'aujourd'hui*, Vol. 2 (Genève, 1964), 73.

11. Rankin, 324.

12. Agriculture Canada, Regional Development Branch, “Farm Women's Groups Active in Canada,” October 1985, 4 and 7.

13. Yolande Cohen, *Femmes de parole: L'histoire des Cercles de fermières du Québec 1915-1990* (Montréal, 1990); Y. Cohen, “Les Cercles de fermières canadiennes-françaises,” *Pénélope* 7 (Autumn 1982): 87-94; “L'Association des Cercles de fermières au Québec: Sociabilité et influence sociale,” in *Femmes et Contre-Pouvoir*, ed. Y. Cohen, (Montréal, 1987), 135-54; Y. Cohen and Denis Béliveau, “Les Cercles de fermières à la conquête de l'Abitibi; essai d'ethnohistoire,” unpublished paper, Congrès de l'ACFAS, 1989; Y. Cohen and Suzanne Marchand, “Les Relations entre les Cercles de fermières et l'État à travers leur correspondance (1920-68),” unpublished paper, 1989; Ghislaine Desjardins, “Les Cercles de fermières et l'action féminine en milieu rural entre 1915 et 1944,” MA thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal, 1983.

14. Fran Shaver, *Farm and Non-Farm Women in Rural Quebec: A Preliminary Analysis*, Research

poused by the early women's organizations have acknowledged the importance of such groups in providing women with a collective voice, as well as the opportunity to acquire political skills that enabled them to enter with greater confidence and efficacy into public affairs.

Recent trends in the writing of women's history, particularly a certain degree of revisionism regarding first wave feminism, also suggest the usefulness of examining the evolution of organizations that had their origins in that movement. Elsewhere we have argued that Canadian feminism did not die during the interwar period; rather, status-of-women issues were to a considerable extent kept alive by the first wave women's organizations.<sup>15</sup> Other historians have also stressed the continuity between first wave and contemporary feminism, and the necessity to rethink our categories of analysis. The articles in the recent collection *Beyond the Vote. Canadian Women and Politics* demonstrate, in the words of the editors, "women's vibrant and varied political activities after 1920" and the necessity to develop "a much-enlarged concept of politics illuminating women's political activism at all levels of organization." We share their view that "women's groups espousing changes that affect both the private- and public-sphere experiences of women as well as women's relationships to state structures and state policies" are, by their very nature, political.<sup>16</sup> Janine Mossuz-Lavau, cited above, now sees in contemporary France something similar that she identifies as an "everyday feminism" related to women's own situation. She identifies also a motivation for women's voting that is distinct from men's: "they are first of all concerned about social justice and humanitarianism."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Veronica Strong-Boag has argued that prairie women redirected their energies more to the politics of the private sphere, a trend that gave rise to "a feminism of the workplace, of day-to-day life."<sup>18</sup>

Farm women and farm women's organizations can be seen, then, to play a role in politics – and possibly in the advancement of women. Certainly, farm women are intrinsically interesting for analysts concerned about the relations between public and private domains of human activity. To a much greater extent than is the case for urban women, such women's place of residence is also the site of the business in which they are involved. They also have a distinctive relationship with their spouses who act in the role of employers/coworkers. Stated more abstractly, there is no clear separation between reproduction and production for farm women, since their daily lives are characterized by a constant interaction between domestic responsibilities and involvement in market-oriented activities. It is not surprising that collective efforts of farm women, both past and present, have focused on winning public recognition of the economic

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Report No. 8, Projet Cap-Saint-Ignace, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University, Montreal, 32.

15. Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson, and Naomi Black, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto, 1988), 331-37.

16. Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, eds., *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto, 1989), 5 and 12.

17. Cited in Jacqueline Remy, "Electorat: Les 'nouvelles femmes' votent à gauche," *L'Express* No. 1847 (12 May 1986): 26.

18. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairie," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21:3 (Fall 1986): 34.

importance of women's unpaid work, relying on a model of gender relations based on complementarity rather than competition. Yet what role has been and is played in such activities, in such theorizing, by the allegedly conservative groups which represent not just farm women, but Catholic farm women? We would like to know to what degree there was, and remains, a feminist practice and discourse within organizations of rural Catholic women; we note also that recent research has documented the existence in France, continuously since the late-nineteenth century, of a significant Catholic women's movement led by individuals such as Marie Mauderet and Andrée Butillard.<sup>19</sup>

What follows is a summary of some of our observations from a cross-national study of the evolution and present reality of two sets of rural Catholic women's organizations, the *Cercles de fermières* that comprise Federation 12 in the Valleyfield area of Québec southwest of Montréal, and the *Groupements de vulgarisation/développement agricole féminins* (GF) in the Bordeaux area of France. We have deliberately selected populations and organizations that are normally expected to have an antimodern character: married Catholic women belonging to groups whose origins are rooted in Social Catholicism, founded originally with a clear intention of controlling women in the interests of the state and of modernizing agriculture. Since we were interested in assessing the role of women-only organizations in mobilizing and politicizing their members, we administered an extensive questionnaire designed to elicit information about social and political attitudes to approximately two hundred farm women in Québec and two hundred in France. About half of those interviewed in each region were members of the organizations we were studying, and the other half were not.<sup>20</sup>

In the section below we outline the evolution since the Second World War in the objectives, membership and programmes of the *cercles* and the GFs. We then provide an analysis of our respondents' views about feminism and a tentative assessment of the impact of organizational membership for farm women in the past and present.

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19. Steven C. Hause with Anne R. Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton, 1984); Black, *Social Feminism*.

20. A sample of 389 cases was composed of 100 rural members of the *Cercles de fermières*, 96 rural nonmembers in Québec, 102 members of GDFA or GVAF, and 91 nonmembers in France. Interviews were carried out in the spring of 1989 near Montréal (in St-Michel-de-Napierville, St-Louis-de-Gonzague, St-Étienne-de-Beauharnois, St-Timothée, St-Stanislas-de-Kostka, Ste-Martine, St-Urbain, St-Anicet, Ste-Barbe, St-Chrysotome, Ormstown, St-Paul-de-Chateauguay, Franklin, St-Antoine-Abbé, Howick, Valleyfield, and Godmanchester) and in Lussac, Bazas, and Monségur-Pellegrue near Bordeaux. The Québec areas studied are fairly uniform, characterized by relatively prosperous dairy farms of moderate size; cash crops are the next most productive sources of income. Lussac is a single-crop, prosperous wine-growing area near St-Emilion; Monségur and Pellegrue, located further to the south and east, are areas of mixed farming where wine, milk, fruit, and cash crops constitute the principal agricultural products. Bazas is the largest and most sparsely populated of the four *cantons* and the one in which agricultural communities face more directly the problems of insufficient farm income and rural depopulation. In this region, livestock production and corn and tobacco production predominate. By including areas with different types of agricultural production and problems, we attempted to gain a representative sample of farm women and of their associational activities.

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE CERCLES DE FERMÈRES

There have already been several detailed studies of the establishment of the *Cercles de fermières* in 1915 and their subsequent development in the interwar period.<sup>21</sup> These groups were initially created and financed by the Ministry of Agriculture in an attempt to stem the rural exodus that menaced Québec's traditional society. Their goal was to provide training and support for farm women in their homemaking and agricultural activities. By encouraging farm women to engage in revenue-generating activities such as bee-keeping and poultry raising, to acquire traditional domestic skills including spinning and weaving, and to learn new techniques designed to make the performance of their domestic duties more enjoyable and efficient, government officials hoped to keep women firmly attached to the land. Given that the farm wife was frequently better educated than her husband, kept the family account books, made a significant economic contribution to the farm through her unpaid labour, and acted as the closest advisor to her husband, she was considered a crucial element in the attempts by both church and state to sustain agriculture in the province.<sup>22</sup>

Because the initiative for these organizations came originally from agronomist Alphonse Désilets, who in his subsequent role as director of the *cercles* would grant official approval only to those groups supported by the local agronomist and *curé*, some observers have argued that the *cercles* remained under the close supervision of male authorities.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, although these groups were designed primarily with farm women in mind, membership was open to nonfarm women living in rural areas and in small urban centres. Consequently, it has been argued that the women of the village élite dominated the executive offices of the local *cercles*.<sup>24</sup>

The extensive research into the *cercles*, completed by the research team at the Université du Québec à Montréal, suggests a more complex reality and, therefore, more nuanced conclusions regarding their role and degree of autonomy. According to this analysis, although the first groups were created by Désilets, the initiative to establish more groups was quickly seized by francophone rural women as part of the larger organizational movement among women already underway throughout the province and the Dominion. At the time the first *cercle* was founded in 1915, there were already some thirteen Women's Institutes in Québec.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Yolande Cohen and her associates have argued that the nature of the relationship between the *cercles* and the government had evolved by the 1940s in the direction of greater autonomy for the women's organizations. They attribute this in part to the phenomenal growth of the movement which made it impossible for the Ministry of Agriculture to monitor closely local groups: by the early 1940s, there were over seven hundred *cercles* with a membership exceeding thirty thousand. The trend toward greater autonomy was also reflected in the changing

21. See n. 3 and n. 13.

22. Desjardins, "Les Cercles de fermières et l'action féminine en milieu rural entre 1915 et 1944," 204.

23. Letendre, "Les Cercles de fermières au Québec, 1915-31," 6, 25 and 29.

24. Letendre, 77.

25. Desjardins, "Les Cercles de fermières et l'action féminine en milieu rural, 1915-1944," in *Travailleuses et féministes*, 222.

structures of the organization, especially the creation of regional federations after 1941, which provided more opportunity for executive-level members to influence the movement’s agenda.<sup>26</sup>

The *cercles* performed several functions for their members, especially for farm women. To begin with, they provided the opportunity to escape from the geographical and psychological isolation experienced by women bound, for the most part, to their homes. By involving women in community activities and charitable works, they initiated them into public issues and concerns. Above all, the *cercles* were aimed at reinforcing the economic role of farm women, elevating their social status, and according their work the standing of a recognized vocation. The role of ‘‘artisanat’’ or handicrafts in *cercle* programming illustrates the various facets of women’s experience that the organization sought to validate. Domestic skills were valued because they enabled the farm wife to make a significant economic contribution to the family unit by cutting down on the necessity to purchase manufactured products. Moreover, her products could be sold to supplement the meagre income that most farm families earned, and some *cercles* eventually formed their own cooperatives to market the *fermières’* hand-made goods. Finally, spinning and weaving not only represented a financial bonus for the family, but were also highly regarded for their symbolic value in terms of both national traditions and women’s specificity. For these reasons, the *cercles* actively petitioned the government for the instructors and equipment necessary for mounting courses to encourage household production, and actively promoted domestic education for young women in Québec through the church-controlled *écoles ménagères et instituts familiaux*.

The relationship between the *cercles* and the clerical élite underwent a significant transformation in the 1940s. In the beginning, although the impulse for organization came from the government, it was rooted in the Catholic Social Action movement of the early-twentieth century. Before a *cercle* could be officially recognized by the provincial government, the local *curé* had to give his approbation, and many groups opted for a chaplain, who also had to be approved by the parish priest. With their motto ‘‘For the land and for the home’’ (‘‘Pour la terre et le foyer’’) and their emphasis on the importance of the rural family, the Catholic faith, and tradition, the *cercles* articulated a version of French-Canadian society closely modelled on that of the church. None the less, by 1944 the Roman Catholic hierarchy had moved to a position of officially opposing the *cercles* and launching its own rival organization, the Union Catholique des *fermières* (UCF). Inspired by papal encyclicals that stressed the importance for the faithful to belong to professional associations guided by the church and completely independent of the state, the Québec clergy grew increasingly critical of the *cercles* since they were created and financed by the state. It may well be that they also feared the growing autonomy of the *cercles* and their forty-nine thousand members, one-fifth of whom had joined during the Second World War.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the official opposition of the clergy, most Québec women had been ac-

26. Cohen and Marchand, ‘‘Les relations entre les Cercles de fermières et l’État à travers leur correspondance (1920-1968),’’ 9-11; Yvonne Riolland Morissette, *Le passé conjugué au présent. Cercles de fermières du Québec. Historique, 1915-1980* (Montréal, 1980), 135.

27. Desjardins, ‘‘Les Cercles de fermières et l’action féminine en milieu rural, 1915-1944,’’ 225.

corded the vote in 1940 by the government of a Liberal premier, Adelard Godbout, under whose administration the *cercles* also received a new official magazine, *La Terre et Le Foyer*, in 1941. Published by the Ministry of Agriculture and distributed free to the membership, this periodical was much more directly under government control than either of the earlier official *cercle* publications, *La Bonne Fermière* (1920-31) and *La Bonne Fermière et La Bonne Ménagère* (1931-33). The *cercles* were also very actively involved in programmes sponsored by the federal and provincial governments to support the war effort. The clergy obviously viewed these close ties, and perhaps the electoral support the *fermières* might accord a government to which they felt indebted, as problematic. Perhaps they also felt that even rural women were becoming too independent: one *curé* had opposed the establishment of a *cercle* in his parish from the beginning because he felt the monthly meetings would take the women away too frequently from their domestic duties.<sup>28</sup> The fact that the Cercles de fermières were affiliated with the Associated Countrywomen of the World, an international organization in which secular, anglophone women's organizations played a leading role, could have done little to reassure the Québec clergy. Finally, it has been suggested that the clergy hoped to increase the influence of the thirty-three thousand member Union des Cultivateurs Catholiques (UCC) by transforming the forty-five thousand *fermières* into auxiliary members of the Catholic farm movement.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the varying degrees of pressure exerted by parish priests on women to resign their memberships in the Cercles de fermières and to join the UCF, it has been estimated that only ten thousand members – approximately one in five – did so. Region 12, the area we studied, was one which was especially unresponsive.<sup>30</sup> According to one source, the vast majority of members refused to change their affiliation because they wished to avoid male control: "Did the UCC want the cake all for itself? ... After being taken to its bosom, the cercles would lose their autonomy, they would have to support the attitudes, the orientations and the demands of *these men*, and that would make for a pretty racket in the name of family unity if these women were not of the same opinion as they."<sup>31</sup> The dedication of the *cercle* members to their autonomous women's groups was still being tested as late as 1960 by priests whose tactics included refusing to say mass at conferences sponsored by the Cercles de fermières and inviting UCF chaplains to address *cercle* members.<sup>32</sup>

Even after the establishment of the UCF, membership in the Cercles de fermières continued to increase, especially during the 1950s despite another acceleration of rural depopulation. Although the official statistics after 1935 do not indicate what proportion of the membership continued to be farm women, there is little doubt that the percentage of nonfarm and urban members increased as Québec's agricultural population dwindled.

28. Cohen and Marchand, 5.

29. Morissette, 142.

30. Mme. Jeannette Bergeron, then-president of the region, interview, November 1987. See also Le Collectif Cléo, *L'Histoire de femmes au Québec depuis quatre siècles* (Montréal, 1982), 377.

31. Our emphasis. Morissette, 142.

32. Morissette, 144; Cohen and Marchand, 18.

For Region 12, 52 per cent of the members were urban dwellers, and 48 per cent rural residents in 1986.<sup>33</sup>

Despite these demographic transformations, the objectives of the *cercles* remained largely the same after World War II, although there were some noticeable shifts in priorities and in the language in which they were couched as the Quiet Revolution took hold. It is telling that in 1947, for example, the organization formally declared that it would openly address social issues, starting with a survey of the economic value of work performed by women in the home.<sup>34</sup> In 1955, the annual congress urged committees dealing with the reform of the Québec civil code to increase their efforts to improve the legal rights of married women in the province.<sup>35</sup> On several occasions in the 1960s, members were reminded of the importance of public involvement: ‘‘One can say that, directly or indirectly, all women will participate one day or another in public life. Naturally we interpret the term ‘public’ in the broad sense.’’<sup>36</sup> According to the provincial charter obtained in 1968, the *Cercles de fermières* were devoted to promoting the material, cultural, moral, and social development of women, along with family stability and the continued survival of worthy traditions.<sup>37</sup> By this time, issues regarding the status of women, especially a more-equitable division of labour between women and men, were identified by the future provincial president, Marielle Primeau, as extremely important for the association.<sup>38</sup> In addition, education became a major concern: the *cercles* favoured the retention of a religiously based educational system, and they also called for easier access to educational programmes at all levels for the rural population.

Increasingly, the issues selected by the membership for action resembled those of urban feminists and included child care, violence against women, pornography, sex education, protection of the environment, and pensions for homemakers. The major difference was that the *cercles* still situated their call for such reforms within the context of the family. In their response to the 1978 study prepared by the provincial Conseil du Statut de la Femme, they underlined their philosophical differences with the council’s political approach, which they characterized as oriented around the individual, rather than the family. They also criticized the council’s report for not paying enough attention to the social and economic disadvantages suffered by full-time homemakers, for not addressing the issues of the falling birth rate and the foetus’s right to life, and for omitting all reference to the Catholic, Christian traditions of Québec.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, the *Cercles de fermières* remained firmly opposed to liberalizing Canada’s abortion laws. A 1971 survey completed by over thirty-one thousand members revealed that 86 per cent were opposed to any liberalization, only 11 per cent were in favour, and 3 per cent were undecided. However, in their representations to both the federal and provincial

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33. ‘‘Procès-verbal,’’ Comité exécutif de la Fédération No 12 des Cercles de Fermières, 22 September 1986, 2.

34. Morissette, 151.

35. *La Terre et Le Foyer* 12:1 (January 1955): 25.

36. *La Terre et Le Foyer* 18:5 (September 1961): 3.

37. Morissette, 164.

38. Morissette, 171-72.

39. Morissette, 180-81.

governments, they consistently called for more family-planning clinics and for expanded support services for pregnant women.<sup>40</sup>

In recent years, provincial membership has been declining from a reported seventy-five thousand members in 1980 to sixty-eight thousand by 1987.<sup>41</sup> There is little doubt also that the average age of the members is increasing, as many younger women in rural areas are either too busy combining off-farm labour with their farm and domestic responsibilities to join women's organizations, or else joining those with a reputation for being more activist. The average age for members in Region 12 in 1986 was fifty-one years.<sup>42</sup> What remains constant is the primary motivation among farm women for joining the *cercles*: according to our own analysis of the Region 12 membership, two-thirds of the women who have been members for less than ten years joined to make contacts, the same proportion as among women who joined over twenty years ago. Despite the popular image of the *cercles* as being primarily devoted to handicrafts, only thirteen of the hundred members cited an interest in crafts among their reasons for joining.<sup>43</sup>

### LES GROUPEMENTS DE VULGARISATION ET DE DÉVELOPPEMENT AGRICOLE FÉMININS

Although the rural women's organizations that grew out of the Groupements de vulgarisation agricole were established several decades after the Cercles de fermières, the similarities between the two sorts of organizations – both past and present – are striking. The *groupements de vulgarisation*, first organized for men, were the result of attempts by government, social reformers, and farmers in France to restructure agriculture after the massive dislocation created by the Second World War. Their origin, also, is to be found in the doctrine of Catholic Social Action, as embodied in the Jeunesse Agricole Catholique (JAC) movement.<sup>44</sup> *Jacistes* were committed to organizing farmers into professional associations and to popularizing new agricultural techniques in order to prevent the proletarianization of the French peasantry. This orientation was formalized in April of 1959, with the promulgation of the *Charte de Vulgarisation*, the central theme of which was the necessity to raise farmers' living standards by increasing their productivity. The vehicle to achieve this goal was the "popularization group," (*groupe-ment de vulgarisation*) which was to bring together the most progressive farmers under the direction of a government-appointed technical advisor, and so serve as "l'Université du monde paysan."<sup>45</sup>

It was not long, however, before the farmers themselves started to question the efficacy of this policy, with its heavy emphasis on technical innovation and its formal

40. Morissette, 166.

41. Morissette, 173; Cercles de fermières brochure, c. 1986, n.d., n.p.

42. "Procès-verbal," Comité exécutif, 2.

43. Only two listed it as the first or only reason for joining.

44. Tiema Agathe, "Des Groupements de Développement Agricoles en Indre-et-Loire: Le GDA du Grand-Pressigny," Master's paper, Université François Rabelais, UER des Sciences de l'Homme, Section de Sociologie, Tours. The JAC, founded in 1929, was joined in 1933 by the very successful JACF (Jeunesse agricole catholique féminine). See M. C. Cleary, *Peasants, Politicians and Producers* (Cambridge, 1989), 90 and 162.

45. Agathe, 13.

hierarchical structure that favoured the imposition of decisions from above. What the farmers’ associations sought was a more comprehensive approach to their situation, one that would take account of their social and political concerns as well as their economic situation. They also wanted to assert greater control over the process of change and to make the government more responsive to their point of view. As a result, the concept of *vulgarisation* was superseded by that of *développement*.<sup>46</sup> Farmers were to use collective structures to go beyond the limited goal of a rise in productivity and to direct agricultural development in their own region. The *groupement* remained the linchpin of the programme, but in most cases the name was changed from *groupement de vulgarisation* to *groupement de développement* to reflect the new orientation.

The women’s *groupements*, like the Cercles de fermières, were born from the government’s need to incorporate farmers’ wives into the modernization of agriculture.<sup>47</sup> In general, the *groupements féminins* responded to the desire of farmers’ wives to gain professional status for their work. This was among the major concerns expressed in 1977 by a thousand farm women surveyed in the Gironde. As one participant summarized, “Like a lot of farmers’ wives, I would like to have a status that recognized our work. For several years the elimination of hired men has made us into *agricultural workers*. In this capacity, as in that of the mother at home, it would be completely fair if we were no longer ‘without profession’.”<sup>48</sup> The women also wanted to gain access to modern technology, to learn new techniques to make their own work more efficient and rewarding, and to improve the quality of life in rural areas. According to the same 1977 study, only 52 per cent of their homes had indoor toilets, 42 per cent had telephones, and nearly 40 per cent of women who milked did so by hand.<sup>49</sup>

The three French rural women’s organizations that we have included in our study are all located in the Gironde, in the area near Bordeaux. The oldest of them is the Groupement féminin de vulgarisation agricole et ménagère du Bazadais, which was established in 1962. According to its first president, the group originated from a homemaking course initially organized by the Jeunesse Agricole Catholique. By the end of the Second World War the direction of this women’s group had passed to the state-supported agricultural agency, the Mutualité Sociale Agricole (MSA). The women participants were soon dissatisfied with the homemaking courses, for they did not address the farm women’s principal concerns. Convinced that “the women really had nothing,” a handful of determined women met to create their own *groupement* with the assistance of the *mutualité*.<sup>50</sup> According to the agreement signed in 1964, the *mutualité* made a

46. Paul Spinat, *Fondements théoriques des actions de vulgarisation et développement agricoles*, (Trie-Chateau, 1981), 76.

47. In the Gironde region, the men’s *groupements* no longer exist since they have been replaced by other structures, but the women’s flourish. This is the only *département* to have such a situation.

48. “Sans profession” is the French census denomination for housewives. Fédération Départementale des Groupements de Vulgarisation du Progrès Agricole (Section Féminine), Mutualité Sociale Agricole, “L’Agricultrice Dans Sa Famille & Son Exploitation,” Département de la Gironde, 1977, 26.

49. “L’Agricultrice Dans Sa Famille & Son Exploitation,” 21.

50. Interview with Mme. Marie-Jeanne Duffau, Bazas, France, May 1988.

commitment to provide the services of a *conseillère* or technical advisor in order to help raise the standard of living for farm women. Membership fees were set at five francs (approximately one dollar) a year.

One of the first projects undertaken by the Bazas women's group was a feasibility study of poultry-raising as a means of providing farm wives with their own revenue. Subsequently a number of the women formed a poultry cooperative to provide support for the members who undertook new ventures, such as the production of foie gras. While their primary objective was economic, the women also wanted to prove to their spouses that they were capable and thereby gain some recognition for their role as farm wives.<sup>51</sup>

The Groupement féminin de vulgarisation agricole et ménagère de Pellegrue-Monségur was founded the next year, when thirty-five farm women met in January 1963 to discuss common concerns. These women were already aware of the *vulgarisation/développement* movement as a result of their husbands' involvement. The official minutes of that meeting indicate that the discussion focused on the lack of progress and the absence of modern conveniences in the rural areas. By the end of the meeting, twenty-seven had signed membership cards, but the others refrained from doing so before consulting with their husbands.<sup>52</sup> This reluctance to act independently appears to reflect the subordinate role of French farm women at the time.

The Lussac group is of much more recent origin than those of the Bazas and Monségur-Pellegrue; it dates only from 1979. In addition, it is the only one of the three groups whose title refers to *développement*, not *vulgarisation*. In spite of these small differences, however, the three groups perform essentially the same function for their members: that is, they provide an opportunity for farm women to validate their role and experiences, to be informed about new technologies that have the potential to transform their work, and to exchange information and ideas. These objectives are clearly reflected in the programming for their monthly meetings, developed by the members of each *groupement* in conjunction with the MSA advisor. By the 1980s, the three groups were regularly sponsoring training courses in areas such as farm accounting, communications, and the legal, financial, and social status of spouses. The longer courses sponsored by the GFs are normally open to nonmembers as well, and are clearly a response to needs identified by farm women. Particularly popular are the two-hundred-hour courses in accounting, for in France as in Canada, farm women are increasingly involved in keeping the farm accounts and in preparing essential financial documents.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, more traditional preoccupations and interests, such as sewing and cooking, continue to be included in the Monségur-Pellegrue group's activities.

51. Ibid.

52. Groupement féminin de vulgarisation agricole et ménagère de Pellegrue-Monségur, Procès-verbal de l'assemblée constitutive, 1963, 2.

53. According to the 1977 survey of farm women in Gironde, nearly 60 per cent of the respondents looked after bills and oversaw bank transactions. In a national study carried out in 1984, 88 per cent of those surveyed organized the farm's paper work, 89 per cent looked after paying the bills, and nearly half did double-entry bookkeeping. FDGVPA, *L'Agricultrice Dans Sa Famille & Son Exploitation*, 23; Institut Nationale Agronomique Paris-Grignon et Fédération Nationale des Groupes d'Études et de Développement Agricoles, *Agricultrices, Votre Avis Sur Le Secrétariat Et La Comptabilité*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1984), 13.

Overall, then, there are many striking similarities between the GFs and the Cercles de fermières. Both are deeply committed to the support of the family farm and the related way of life, and the members of both are basically contented. In the words of one farm woman, “In spite of all difficulties, I love my [farm] work and I love my household work just as much, so life is as agreeable as possible.”<sup>54</sup> At the same time, from their earliest days, both groupings have been dedicated to gaining public and legal recognition of farm women’s economic and social contribution, and a concomitant improvement in the material conditions of these women’s lives. The recognition and support of the economic contribution represented by women’s traditional handicrafts have contributed to professionalizing the exercise of those skills and easing women’s access to public life. As Yolande Cohen puts it, “The talents belonging to women thus become knowledge worthy of being recognized and defended. The women who have them have the right to gather in an association. Furthermore, they are recognized as having the power of a separate class and of a social status, that of *fermière*.”<sup>55</sup> Reflecting the differences between the political culture of France and that of Canada and Québec, however, the *cercles* have historically been much more widely involved than the GFs in public-policy issues, articulating collective positions on controversial topics such as birth control and other reproductive issues as well as women’s rights in general.

### FEMINISM AMONG FARM WOMEN IN QUÉBEC AND FRANCE

Our current survey research is based on the conviction that, now as in the past, traditional rural women’s organizations have the potential for influencing their allegedly conservative members. Accordingly, we expected that the present members of the *cercles* and the GFs would be more feminist and activist than the corresponding nonmembers, and we expected also that the members of the Cercles de fermières would be the most feminist as well as the most activist of the four contemporary categories that we have studied.

We define feminism as the desire for an increase in women’s autonomy. We would specify also that (1) feminism recognizes the differences in the situation of women and men, both historically and in the present; (2) feminism insists that women not be judged inferior by male standards or in comparison to men; and (3) feminism has as a minimum policy goal, that women not be disadvantaged because they are women. Differing versions of feminism focus on differing analyses of the causes of women’s situation and differing remedies; however, they share these assumptions.<sup>56</sup>

In our study, carried out early in 1989, respondents were asked explicitly if they consider themselves feminists. They were also asked what they meant by this term, a question no one seems to have asked in a survey before. In addition, we asked our respondents about their opinion of the existing groups that were commonly identified as feminist, including both the Women’s Liberation Movement (le Mouvement pour la libération des femmes, or MLF) and those groups concerned to make women’s roles similar to men’s. In our analyses, we contrasted club members with nonmembers and,

54. FDGVPA, “L’Agricultrice Dans Sa Famille & Son Exploitation,” 26.

55. Yolande Cohen, “Des paysannes aux fermières: L’Association des cercles de fermières canadiennes-françaises,” 90.

56. See Black, *Social Feminism* and Prentice *et al.*, *Canadian Women: A History*.

**Table 1**  
**Possible Predictors of "Conservatism"**

	<b>Cercle members (N = 100)</b>	<b>Québec nonmembers (N = 96)</b>	<b>GF members (N = 102)</b>	<b>France nonmembers (N = 91)</b>
<b>A. Age (yrs)</b>				
median	52.5	37.5	46.5	39.5
<b>B. Farmer's Daughter (%)</b>				
Yes	75.0	63.5	72.5	56.0
<b>C. Number of Children (%)</b>				
Four children or more	51.0	26.0	22.0	11.0
<b>D. Level of Education (%)</b>				
Less than primary	8.0	5.2	6.9	4.4
Primary completed	29.0	13.5	(CEP) 50.5	31.9
Some secondary	17.0	17.7		
Secondary completed	29.0	35.4	(BEPC & BAC) 33.6	50.6
Post-secondary began	4.0	10.4	} 8.9 { ÉTUDES SUPERIEURES }	13.2
Post-secondary completed	11.0	17.7		
Other	1.0	—	—	—
<b>E. Frequency of Attendance at Mass (%)</b>				
Once a week	74.0	42.7	30.4	17.6
Once or twice a month	10.0	21.9	16.7	15.4
Occasionally	8.0	27.1	31.4	31.9
Special occasions (baptisms, weddings, funerals)	6.0	8.3	17.8	30.8
Never	—	—	2.9	4.4
<b>F. Employment (%)</b>				
Off-farm, current	17.0	13.5	6.9	12.1
Off-farm, previous	67.0	77.1	48.0	56.0

when possible, the wider groups consisting of the women of France and of the European Community; there are almost no Canadian comparisons available.<sup>57</sup>

What we discovered was more complex and more interesting than what we expected. In fact, there are few differences between members and nonmembers, and the systematic pattern we expected was not present. Yet our demographic data show that

57. The questions we used – with the exception of the requests for definitions – were drawn from a variety of recent surveys, most of them carried out for the European Community as part of Eurobarometer, the ongoing surveys of public opinion in member countries. For 1975, Inter-

**Table 2**  
**Feminist Self-Identification (%)**

	<b>Cercle members</b>	<b>Québec nonmembers</b>	<b>GF members</b>	<b>France nonmembers</b>
Yes, I am a feminist	26	16.7	33.3	35.2
Feminist = feminine	3	—	17.6	5.5
Feminists	23	16.7	15.7	29.7

the members of the clubs, especially the members of the *cercles*, were older and less well educated, had larger families, were more likely to be farmers' daughters and, of particular interest, were far more diligent in their religious practice than the comparable groups of nonmembers (see Table 1). Our *cercle* members were, indeed, women whom conventional academic wisdom would expect to be more conservative and inactive and certainly less feminist than the nonmembers. Yet their level of political awareness and involvement was, if anything, higher and the same is true of their feminism, our topic here. This would suggest that their organizational involvement had served effectively to counteract the predicted tendencies.<sup>56</sup>

We have been able to find only two Canadian studies in which any substantial number of women were asked if they considered themselves feminists. In 1979, 42 per cent of urban Canadian women in a national survey were prepared to identify themselves as feminists. It should be noted that about 60 per cent said that they supported the “women’s movement,” a vaguer and less-alienating term.<sup>59</sup> Seven years later, 47 per cent of *Chatelaine* readers said they would call themselves feminists.<sup>60</sup> By comparison

national Women’s Year, a special series was commissioned: Commission of the European Communities, *European Women and Men: A Comparison of their Attitudes to Some of the Problems Facing Society* (Brussels, 1975). A follow-up of the survey was inserted into 1977’s Eurobarometer, responding to concerns of the representatives of women’s groups who had reviewed the 1975 study; there were additional follow-ups in 1983 and 1987. These are reported in Commission of the European Communities, *Femmes et Hommes d’Europe en 1978* (Brussels, 1979); Commission of the European Communities, *European Women and Men in 1983* (Brussels, 1983); “Femmes et Hommes d’Europe en 1987,” *Femmes d’Europe*, Supplément No 26 (December 1987). These will be cited as EC 1975, 1979, 1983, or 1987.

It should be noted that, since our interviewees were local women of the same milieu, age, and experience as those interviewed, we had a higher response rate and more candour than we could even have hoped for. We also had a relatively ample amount of detail and comments, even on such potentially alienating topics as feminist identification.

58. In relation to abortion, the club members’ Catholicism shows and they are more hostile than the less religiously active nonmembers. Yet the members of the *cercles*, the most religious of all, surpass even the French nonmembers in their willingness to join in a campaign for a centre to dispense information on contraception.

59. “The Weekend Poll: Women’s Lib,” *Weekend Magazine* 29:3 (3 March 1979).

60. “Womanpoll: Women’s role and rights,” *Chatelaine* (May 1986): 41. In 1986, 56 per cent of US women questioned gave this answer. Cited in Mary Fainsod Katzenstein and Carol McClurg Mueller, eds., *The Women’s Movements of the United States and Western Europe* (Philadelphia, 1987), 9.

with these figures, relatively few of our rural women saw themselves as feminists. The responses given had to be discounted further because a considerable number of them thought that the term meant something like femininity. For example, to one woman, feminism meant "a sexy woman, cover-girl style." Another said, "to go to the hairdresser, to dress oneself well," while a third stated that "a woman is always feminist when she is charming (coquette)." In Québec, only a negligible number of *cercles* members made this mistake and none of the nonmembers; in France, we found approximately one-sixth of GF members were confused, though fewer of the nonmembers. Table 2 presents the results: in both countries, about one-fourth of members both identified the concept accurately and applied it to themselves.

We believe that these very low totals reflect something pervasive among our respondents: a reluctance to be aggressive or militant, a rejection of the excessive and unreasonable. Today, in the second wave of feminism, these preferences for moderation are accompanied by the belief that "feminists" are militant and extreme. When we asked for definitions of "feminism," the many critical or hostile responses that we gathered focused on such characteristics. "They exaggerate," we were told over and over again. Other comments giving the same message included: "the true feminists are too extreme," "I am realistic rather than feminist," and a feminist is "a militant who needs to show extreme situations in order to change things." Such responses correspond to another characteristic of many of our respondents, an unwillingness to be insistent or confrontational.

We first became aware of this trait when we were pretesting our questionnaire in Québec. We wished to use a Eurobarometer question that is worded, in English, "Do you agree or disagree with women who claim that there should be fewer differences between the respective roles of men and women in society?" In French, the key phrase is "les femmes qui réclament..."<sup>61</sup> Those present, a *cercle* regional president and her daughter and daughter-in-law, objected to the wording and its implications about processes, although they agreed with the goal. We finally changed the wording to "veulent" – want – which seems to us to have more of the resonance of the English version.<sup>62</sup>

Superficially, this question sounds like a query about role change, and analysts of feminism have suggested that feminism encounters obstacles when it can be perceived to promote an enlargement of women's roles.<sup>63</sup> However, the Eurobarometer question may have been read as implying giving equal value or credit to women's roles. The Community commentator in 1983 implied as much, discussing the question under the heading of "agreement with the claim for equality of roles for men and women in society."<sup>64</sup> This question was asked in the European Community in 1975 and 1983 and has consistently had a "massive approval."<sup>65</sup> All of our subjects gave positive responses

61. Our emphasis.

62. An English analysis of the 1983 survey issued by the Community refers to women who "think" there should be more role resemblance. EC 1983, 37.

63. Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley, *Women and Public Policies* (Princeton, 1982).

64. EC 1983, 39 and 40; emphasis added.

65. EC 1975, 49, n. 1. As the Community commentator on the 1975 study noted, questions have never been asked about "specific actions of such and such a feminist group."

**Table 3**  
**Support of Role Equality (%)**

Cercle members	Québec non-members	GF members	France non-members	France women 1975 <sup>a</sup>	France women 1983 <sup>b</sup>	E.C. women 1983 <sup>c</sup>	Role-sharing France women, 1987 <sup>d</sup>
80	83.3	81.4	79.1	75	76	65	47

a) EC 1975, 53.

b) EC 1983, 39.

c) EC 1983, 37.

d) EC 1987, 60.

For all but column (d), the question was: “Do you agree or disagree with women who claim that there should be fewer differences between the respective roles of men and women in society?”

For (d): “People also discuss the distribution of roles in the family. Of these three alternatives, which corresponds the best to your ideas about the family?”

to role equality – the milder version of feminism – slightly more frequently than French women in general (Table 3).

That the role-equality question corresponds to a relatively moderate, nonconfrontational version of feminism seems likely when we contrast it to a later question that asked explicitly about redistribution of work in the household. The egalitarian answer proposed for this new question, asked in both 1983 and 1987, suggested the model of “a family in which both husband and wife have equally absorbing tasks and in which household tasks and looking after the children are shared equally between husband and wife.” This proposal, which might well be the actual goal of those who want to make roles more similar, got approval from only just under half of French women in 1987, although three-quarters of them supported role equality (Table 3).<sup>66</sup>

Our interviewers also disliked the wording of a Eurobarometer question that asked respondents what they felt about membership in one of “the movements which have come about recently and whose aim is the liberation of women.” The most hostile response, “completely against being a member,” is in French the even stronger “ne voudrait absolument pas en être membre,” and the interviewers objected to demanding so absolute a judgement. This reluctance fits with another finding: many of our respondents felt that they could not convince others of strongly held opinions. This is not a trivial point, since this question is thought to measure both self-confidence and com-

66. EC 1987, 60; four years earlier, the French figure overall was 40 per cent; EC 1983, 30. The question read: “Role distribution within the family is another much discussed subject. Here are three arrangements. Which one of them corresponds most closely to your idea of a family?” The other possible answers were: “A family in which the wife’s work is less absorbing than the husband’s, and in which she takes on more of the household tasks and looking after the children,” and “A family in which the husband only works and the wife runs the home.” This is the 1987 wording; 1983’s differs slightly.

**Table 4**  
**Frequency of Convincing Others (%)**

	Cercle members	Québec nonmembers	GF members	France nonmembers	EC <sup>a</sup> women 1987	EC <sup>a</sup> men, 1987
Convince others often & convince others sometimes	55	55.2	26.5	46.2	48	58
Never convince others	13	17.7	42.2	36.3	23	17

a) EC 1987, 38.

petence and is widely used as a component of calculations of political efficacy or political participation. Thus, for the 1983 Eurobarometer, convincing others of an opinion was one component of a composite taken to measure "involvement in different kinds of social and political activities."<sup>67</sup> As Table 4 shows, in respect to persuasiveness, our Québec women resemble European men rather than European women, while our French women appear much less self-confident.

When we look at the percentages for *never* convincing anyone, the figures for our French respondents are noticeably higher than for any other group. That is, members or not of GFs, they are the most likely to report that they fail to persuade their associates to accept even the views they hold strongly. Comments recorded by our French interviewers suggest an explanation that echoes the resistance we have reported to the words "réclament" and "absolument." One of our French nonmembers explained that she "never" convinces anyone because "I respect the opinions of others." She defines the Right (which she supports) as those who "respect others' ideas" and the Left as those who "confuse [social] commitment and socialism and [therefore] do not respect others' opinions." It seems possible that other women share such views, though without necessarily sharing the ideological orientation.

The European Community commentator interpreted the questions about persuasion as tapping "influence in their circle of acquaintances," even though in some surveys it was worded in terms of attempting to convince rather than convincing.<sup>68</sup> We now doubt if this is the proper interpretation of the question. We are dubious about this question's reliability as an indicator of women's efforts or success in imposing their ideas, and

67. EC 1983, 156, fn. 1. We may note that propensity to vote was left off this scale because of compulsory voting in some Community countries, as was membership in clubs and organizations, because of "heterogeneity." The measure is included in the Community studies' "indice de leadership," which also incorporates yet another measure on which women are consistently lower, the propensity to discuss politics with friends. EC 1979, 171. Cf. the discussion of social issues, something women do as often or more often than men. EC 1987, 37-38.

68. EC 1987, 38.

even more dubious of its value in measuring women’s political competence or involvement. Rather, the seemingly timid responses to this query seem to represent, at least in some cases, the feeling that insistence or even overt efforts at persuasion are somehow rude and disrespectful of others. It is less a question of *can* you persuade anyone than *should* you make explicit efforts to do so.

Surprisingly enough, our subjects turned out to be relatively favourable to the one clearly identifiable sort of feminism asked about by Eurobarometer: the Women’s Liberation Movement (MLF), which also happens to be the most confrontational. Eurobarometer asked two sets of questions about the MLF, both of which we adopted: how women felt about being members, and what their opinion was of such groups. Table 5 includes the responses to both. Our overall figure of 13 per cent who would consider joining a women’s liberation group is approximately at the same level as that for women in the European Community five years earlier, while our French respondents are pretty much at the national level of that time. Comparing France to the rest of the European Community in the Eurobarometer figures, French women as a group appear the most hostile to identification with the MLF and also the most favourable to the more moderate feminists. Our own respondents, French and otherwise, show much the same pattern, although they seem to be somewhat less hostile.

It is possible that our respondents, whom we know to share many of the goals of the women’s movement, were reluctant to rule out any supportive measure with finality.

**Table 5**  
**Attitudes Towards the MLF (%)**

	Cercle members	Québec nonmembers	GF members	France nonmembers	France women	EC women
Could be a member	16	18.8	7.8	7.7	7 <sup>(a)</sup>	12 <sup>(a)</sup>
Completely against being a member	72	74	70.6	63.7	85 <sup>(a)</sup>	73 <sup>(a)</sup>
Very high opinion & quite a good opinion	66	59.4	47.1	50.6	57 <sup>(b)</sup>	47 <sup>(c)</sup>
Rather poor opinion & very bad opinion	27	35.4	29.4	19.8	31 <sup>(d)</sup>	33 <sup>(c)</sup>
Don’t know	7	4.2	23.5	27.5	—	—

a) EC 1983, 47.

b) 1977 figure, EC 1979, 17; see EC 1983, 44 for the insignificance of changes in France, 1977-83.

c) EC 1983, 41.

d) (All French, 1977), EC 1979, 18; see EC 1983, 44 for insignificance of changes in France, 1977-83.

N.B. Less than 6 per cent average difference between men and women in each country in 1977 (EC 1979, 19, n. 1).

Certainly many of them defined feminism in a way that focused explicitly on feminist issues, as did the woman who said “[Feminism] is simply to wish to reduce the inequalities in the roles of men and women in society (salaries, forbidden occupations, etc.)”

The request for opinions about the MLF produced slightly different results. Table 5 groups those women who have a very high opinion or quite a good opinion of “the movements which have come about recently and whose aim is the liberation of women.” We find that the members of the *cercles* have the most positive views, while the French members of our sample are less favourable than the bulk of French women but at about the Community level. For our respondents more generally, hostility to the MLF as expressed in this second context is on the low side of the various scales. We should emphasize once more that the population we are studying is one that is expected to be more conservative and certainly less feminist than women in general.

For France, we have one more source of data on women’s reactions to the MLF, included in a survey of women’s views about politics carried out in 1978. Mossuz-Lavau and Sineau’s results are reproduced here in Table 6. Again, our supposedly conservative women, as shown in Table 5, seem less hostile and no less favourable than these additional French comparison groups.

**Table 6**  
**Opinions About the MLF, France, 1978 (%)**

Do you support the activities of feminist groups (MLF, “Choisir”, etc.)?	Workers, men %	Workers, women %	Ex-workers women %	Housewives %
Strongly support	5	8	6	1
Support somewhat	34 } 39	33 } 41	32 } 38	23 } 24
Oppose somewhat	24	23	24	31
Strongly oppose	11 } 35	12 } 35	13 } 37	12 } 43
No opinion	22	21	20	27
That depends on the group	4	3	5	6

Source: Mossuz-Lavau and Sineau(1983), 75, Tableau 8.

At this level, our material does not add much to previous analyses, except to show our respondents to be rather less antifeminist than was predicted. We are able, however, to go a little further, and to interpret somewhat more effectively the feminism of our respondents – a feminism, we would argue, typical of rural women, of social feminists in general, and possibly of a wider population. We have commented on how our interviewers and respondents rejected the wording of questions in a way that implied con-

frontation. When we asked our farm women to define feminism, their preference for the noncoercive and the nonimpositional was frequently reflected by expressions of distaste for the tactics pursued by the MLF. In this respect, the members and nonmembers shared views. Women's liberation groups were often identified in a negative fashion. “If it's a matter of the MLF,” said one woman, “I think they really scream too loudly, [they're] aggressive and often stupid.” Members of the MLF were seen as hostile and antagonistic to men: “those harpies who eat men raw all day.” They cause “disturbance” (*chambardement*). They brandish placards (or, as one respondent put it, their bras). “[Feminism is] certainly not the MLF with placards in hand and street demonstrations,” said another, who was prepared to make finer distinctions than most. “I don't like women protesters,” declared yet another respondent. One woman added, more kindly, “I think unhappy women take part in an organization like that one.” These women recognized, and often agreed with, the goals of the MLF, but they did not like their methods. In particular, they were drawn towards a model of male/female complementarity: “to improve the position of women so that she can reach positions of power, but without reversing roles.” We could sum up the most common position by one particular statement recognizing feminist goals but disavowing any personal identification: A feminist is “a woman who wants her rights recognized but does not respect the opinions of others.”

## CONCLUSION

As we have noted, there is a tendency on the part of academic analysts to view feminism as nonpolitical unless, like the MLF as a central example, it adopts the competitive, even conflictual, mode of “normal” politics. Such scholars are correct in concluding that politics, interpreted in this way, differs from the family, especially that version of the family used by maternal and social feminists as their model. For such feminists, the family represents a situation from which all participants ought to benefit. Recent discussions of the family have pointed out that it is hardly the idyllic haven it has been described as and urged to be. At the same time, the family continues to embody certain ideals. Its rejection of competitiveness has not prevented it from generating an influential version of feminism and a potential role for women in public life.

Our analysis of the *Cercles de fermières* in Québec and the *Groupements féminins* in France has confirmed our belief that social scientists need to consider very carefully the conceptual frameworks they impose on women's experience, both past and present. There is no doubt that these Catholic rural women's organizations continue to hold certain views, especially those regarding reproductive rights, that set them apart from many self-identified feminists. In general, their members continue to find the term “feminism” a problematic label. Specifically, they reject the aggressive, conflictual attitudes and actions, hostile to men, that for them characterize the women's liberation movement. Yet, in their own way, they are committed to the increase of women's autonomy through the recognition of women's specificity and rights. The responses of the *cercle* members in particular support our suggestions about the impact of their organizational membership in counteracting an expected passivity and conservatism. Over time, such organizations can play a significant role in integrating rural women into public debates. The causes their organization has embraced over the past several years clearly place them in the camp of social feminists.

Social feminists have urged entry into public life as a way to make politics itself less competitive. This may well have been unperceptive, in that their demand for women's entitlement is necessarily conflictual, at least in the short run. Nevertheless, it seems clear that many women who wish to increase the autonomy of women prefer not to see this activity as conflictual. Social feminism, growing out of domestic values and activities, is particularly likely to see its goals as ones that men would benefit from and, therefore, ought to be able to accept. It is in this context that we find our farm women to be more feminist than they themselves are prepared to claim. Their "little bit of feminism" accepts the women's movement's goals even if it rejects the techniques and, above all, the rhetoric of women's liberation.<sup>69</sup>

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69. Trudy Haffron Bers and Susan Gluck Mezey came to similar conclusions in a 1981 study of board members of women's groups in a Chicago suburb; their subjects included women's groups of Catholic churches. "Support for Feminist Goals among Leaders of Women's Community Groups," *Signs* 6:4 (1981): 737-48.