

WOMEN'S SPIRAL-LIKE JOURNEYS THROUGH THREE DECADES OF COMMUNITY  
ACTIVISM IN A WORKING-CLASS MONTREAL NEIGHBOURHOOD

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**Abstract**

Building on the literature on class and gender in community organising, read through the conceptual lens of “translocational positionality” (Anthias 2002), I share the story of ten long-time women activists. Although all the women were first involved in citizens’ committees around practical needs such as housing, welfare, urban renewal and education, most of them, stimulated by feminist *agitators*<sup>3</sup> in their midst, came to *new awareness* about gender inequalities, to new and deepening *analyses*, and to individual and collective *actions* around strategic gender needs. Part and parcel of this *spiral of change* were the *tensions* that emerged with their families, friends and neighbours, and even with the agitators themselves. Out of this process came *transformations* at the macro level – community, public opinion and government, at the meso level – organisational structures and cultures, and at the micro level – family and selves.

## Women's spiral-like journey's through three decades of community activism in a working-class Montreal neighbourhood

Point St. Charles, a Montreal working-class neighbourhood, is widely heralded as a leader in the Quebecois community movement. Less recognized, however, are the experiences of neighbourhood women who form the backbone of the movement. In this article, I share the findings from a participatory history-making project on the history of community organizing as told through the life stories of women who have been activists for over 25 years. I begin with a brief overview of the literature on women and community activism. Next, I describe the participatory history-making methodology which bridges feminist historical approaches and community organizing practice. After a brief overview of the birth of the community movement per se in Point St. Charles, and of the second generation of the feminist movement in Quebec, I present, using the concepts of differentiation and stratification developed by Floya Anthias (Anthias 1998), the journeys of project participants – as women – on gender-specific issues.

### **Women, the backbone of neighbourhood organizing**

It has been demonstrated, time and time again, that women are the backbone of community, and that they form the majority of members in community organisations in the western world (Payne 1990), and this, across time (Rabrenovic 1995), and, irrespective of ethnicity/"race" or class (DeSena 1998). Notwithstanding this overwhelming evidence, it is only recently that scholars have begun recognising and problematising the gendered, classed, and racialised "nature" of community organizing. In fact, Doug McAdam, admitted that social movement theorists, in their concern with :

teasing out the *generic* dynamics of individual activism [...], have almost totally ignored gender's impact. In doing so, [they] have perpetuated a fiction: that recruitment to, participation in, and the consequences of activism are somehow experienced in the same way by all participants. Clearly, this is false" (McAdam 1992 :1214, 1234, emphasis mine).

Moreover, social movements' theories, in focussing most attention on formal politics or broad-based social movements located outside the community sphere, have perpetuated the myth that women, especially those positioned as low-income, whose politics are often of the community sphere are not "political".

Community organizing theory has perhaps fared better than social movements' theories in recognising the complex social relations and processes active in community. However, although a number of scholars deal specifically with gender, class and ethnicity/"race" in community organizing (Callahan 1997; Dominelli 1995; Gutiérrez and Lewis 1994; Ng 1990), the approaches and models still prevalent today are either gender-blind or gender specific, dealing with women-only organizing. Gender, class and ethnicity/"race" relations are ubiquitous in society, and by default in community and community organizing, and need to be problematised at all times, not only when women or people of colour are at issue (Callahan 1997; Hyde 1996). Feminist researchers have perhaps had the most to contribute to the analysis of the gendered community, and more recently to the intersectionality of gender, class and ethnicity/"race" in community and community organizing (Afshar and Maynard 2000; Naples 1998; Haywoode 1999) .

Quebec is no exception, and apart from a few magazine articles written mostly in the 1980s (e.g., D'Amours 1985), a couple of articles problematising the role of women in groups in Quebec (e.g., Panet-Raymond 1981), most of the writing on women's activism has been about the women's movement per se (e.g., Le Collectif Clio 1982; Dumont and Toupin 2003; Descarries 1997; DeSève 1994). Moreover, most of the historical literature on community organizing has been written by men, mostly organiser-academics, and from the perspective of the organizers/animators (e.g., Shragge 1999; Panet-Raymond and Mayer 1997; Doucet and Favreau 1991). To my knowledge, there is no comprehensive review of the experiences of women activists in mixed-gender community groups in Quebec.

Documenting the point of view of women in community groups is important, however, because the experience of members may be different than that of organizers or that of women in the "feminist movement". Sharing these stories will not only lead to new and perhaps different avenues for organizing, but these different voices, released into the historical landscape, will also change the collective narrative that is history. Moreover, in documenting the experiences of these women, whose voices are often barred from history-making structures because of gender *and* class, they come to identify themselves as *historical actors* and others who read this history, are reminded that everyone is a maker of history, irrespective of class, gender, "race"/ethnicity.

### A participatory history-making methodology

The methodology that underlies the project borrows from feminist community organizing practice (Gutiérrez and Lewis 1994) to deal with the many ethical dilemmas inherent to feminist life history methodology (Geiger 1990). In line with the notion of “translocational imaginings in dialogue” (Anthias 2002), the project was conceptualised to pre-figure *power-with* (Starhawk 1987) in order to construct narratives of belonging that break with processes of differentiation and stratification (Anthias 1998). The project is about doing community history *with* the people who make that history (see Kruzynski 2004 for further explanation of methodology).

Concretely, the project is a collaborative effort between myself, academic-activist, and “Les Archives populaires de Pointe St-Charles”, a neighbourhood organisation dedicated to the preservation of community group archives, and to the use of history as a tool for mobilization in the present. Two groups of women<sup>4</sup>, one from each of the two principal linguistic groups, have been meeting for over four years to document together a history of community action in Point St. Charles. All these women have been involved for over 25 years, were first motivated to activism by personal need, and still live in and around the neighbourhood. During these monthly meetings, the women have been sharing their activist experience, and doing the readings of their narratives, with the ultimate goal of weaving their different voices into a quilt of stories that represents a picture of organizing efforts.

The participants, and community residents working<sup>5</sup> or volunteering at the Archives, have been involved in every step of the process, from the identification of the problem or issue of study, to the choice of participants, to the setting of goals, to the doing of the background research and analysis, to the interpretation of the narratives, and to the production and distribution of the final products. The quilt of stories has been transformed into a “coffee-table” book<sup>6</sup>, my doctoral dissertation, and a number of academic articles, and will be used in the future as the basis for a documentary film, a manual for groups wanting to “do history” in this way, and workshops for new arrivals to the neighbourhood.

### **The empowerment of a neighbourhood**

The Western world of the 1960s was in ebullition, from the student movements, to the struggle against the war in Vietnam, to Black civil rights organizing and the “war against poverty” in the United States (Mayer, Lamoureux, and Panet-Raymond 2002). Quebec and Canada were no exception. During this period, as power was transferred from the local elites and the Church to the State, there was an ideological shift from a moralistic charitable discourse to one of social justice and rights (Lesemann 1981 : 27). These reforms and the changing mentalities that accompanied them opened up the space for emerging movements, and new ways of organizing (Kruzynski and Shragge 1999). Already in the latter part of the 1960s, students active in their unions were taking to the streets, and by 1968 the movement, following the times, had become radicalized in its tactics and demands (Mayer, Lamoureux, and Panet-Raymond 2002). During this time as well, nationalism was on the rise, and the issue of a sovereign Quebec would be

catapulted into the public agenda in the coming years. It is in this context of effervescence that what is now referred to as the “autonomous community movement” was born.

This wind of change also swept through Point St. Charles. From a neighbourhood controlled by the Church and its local elite, the neighbourhood became, by the late 1960s, a symbol of active citizenship throughout Quebec. From the faith-based organizing of the Action Catholique, led by the Fils de la Charité, an order of progressive priests, and the citizens’ committees of the early 1960s, led by social animators, emerged a “power to the people” movement. During this time, women demanded better education for their children and citizen-advocates denounced repressive welfare practices and the slums of local landlords. Committees set-up a citizen-run health clinic, a legal aid clinic, an adult education centre, a daycare centre, a buyers club, a number of housing cooperatives, to name a few.

Although certain agitators tried, with mitigated success, to stimulate the interest of citizens in municipal politics, during this period, most energy was focussed on the setting-up and consolidation of alternative service and advocacy groups. For most, “power to the people”, did not yet mean *political power*; instead, people-power was about developing their own services and groups, putting into practice, through *pre-figuration*, the kind of society that they were seeking to build. The leadership was now, more than ever, in the hands of “ordinary citizens”, and those to advocate on behalf of people living



in poverty were more often peers, not organizers. To a certain extent then, by the end of 1972, the original objectives of the *first wave* of social animation – to give the “voiceless” a voice, to help people living in poverty have more control over their own lives, and to reform the institutions to reflect the needs of those who use them – were attained (see McGraw 1978).

By the early 1970s, citizens active in the groups began seeing the limits of their activities, especially in terms of fundamental social change. In light of this, many groups began changing strategies, working on street organizing – closer to the people – and, at the same time, attempting to do explicit political education. A faction of activists, building on their emerging class analysis, became members of Marxist Leninist (ML) groups during this period, and began agitating for the creation of a revolutionary workers party that would build a socialist Quebec.

### “Québécoises debouttes!”

Although organizing around strategic gender needs *per se* did not emerge in Point St. Charles until the mid to late 1970s, feminists elsewhere were active in the burgeoning Second Wave Feminism movement in the late 1960s. At this time, women all over Quebec, not buying the liberal feminist discourse that equality was attained through the vote in 1940 and the abolition of the notion of “judicial incapacity” of the married woman in 1964, took to the streets to demand “autonomy, self-definition and equality of the sexes” (Le Collectif Clio 1982 : 477). Feminists involved with the Montréal Women’s Liberation Movement (1969), and a bit later, the Front de liberation des femmes du

Québec (1970) brought into the public arena, for the first time, demands around women's bodies: they organized against the objectification of women, demanded free and accessible contraceptives and abortions, and denounced violence against women.

In the early 1970s, women within mixed groups, be they unions or community organisations, influenced by these radical groups, began regrouping and discussing the specific oppression of women. Many of these feminists went on to create permanent "status of women" committees in unions, and fought for daycares (e.g., Collectif intersyndical des femmes 1984). They also took on their peers on the Left, within unions and within socialist groups, charging that the sexism in the groups needed to end (Le Collectif Clio 1982 : 483).

During these early years, this feminist discourse was not, by any means, taken up by the majority of women in Québec. However, with the increasing militancy of the Fédération des femmes du Québec and the UN's decree that 1975 was the international year of women, women all over Québec, and especially those already involved in movements, be they student or community, began to espouse the feminist cause. After this, many feminists went on to set up autonomous women's organisations (Lamoureux 1986), such as women's health centres, battered women's shelters, rape centres, self-defence groups (Lacourse 1984), "organised as women-defined, women-controlled resources" and "established as 'women's responses' to what were seen as problems and needs that were specific to 'women'" (Masson 1999 : 51). Thus by the end of the 1970s,

although the radical edge to the movement had all but disappeared, feminist agitators present in community groups participated in a decentralisation of the movement into neighbourhoods, homes, workplaces, rendering the later more difficult to document (Lacourse 1984).

### **Taking a stand as women in Point St. Charles**

During these early years of the feminist movement, most women in Point St. Charles did not take on – explicitly – the feminist cause. That is, like many activists in the neighbourhood, project participants were first motivated to activism by practical gender needs (that is “bread and butter issues”) and were involved for the most part in mixed-gender groups. In fact, because it deals with “women’s stuff”, community activism in Point St. Charles is, in large part, the domain of women, as is the case all over North America. This overrepresentation of women is explained by their positioning within a context where resources are allocated based on gender, class and ethnos<sup>7</sup>, and within which, because of processes of hierarchisation and inferiorisation, women are “limited” (and “limit themselves”) to the community, extension of the patriarchal home. Notwithstanding this, it is through exposure to the ideas of feminist agitators in their midst, and through discussions with other women in the groups, that all of them came to identify and act on strategic gender needs (that is body and women specific issues) (Moser 1989), without taking on the feminist label.

From new awareness...

Like their counterparts elsewhere in Québec, women noticed that many men, especially the university-educated ones, tended to take up most of the space in the groups and had more influence than them, even though the women were doing much of the work, often behind the scenes:

Marguerite We women hadn't been talking to each other for very long. We cooked, we talked about food and diapers. In public, we were pretty quiet! We realised that even if there were only two men at an assembly, they would take the mike! They would come in and take up all the space... Even when they didn't really have anything to say! Every time, the men would translate what we said! We have the ability to analyze, we're not helpless! And who had set things up, who was doing the work? We were! They had a gift for showing up when the job was almost done.

Moreover, in sharing their personal experiences with others, they realised that women were often blamed for the plight of their children, for unhappiness in the home, and even for the beatings that they suffered:

Marguerite People think that when a couple separates, it's because of the woman. If the guy drinks, "it's because of her!" The phenomenon of battered women, right off the bat, "it's the woman's fault". "She was asking for it!" [...] If a guy was unfaithful to his wife, it was because he'd married a woman who wasn't any good! So what would you expect? "Of course he was

unfaithful to her!”

Louise Women would say it: “I deserved it.”

They began, often for the first time, talking publicly about the violence that women were subjected to by their husbands, and with the help of feminist agitators in the groups, were able to begin to break with processes of inferiorisation, and shift their understanding of the root causes of violence:

Anonymous Most women submitted sexually, it had to be when the man wanted it, and it was to serve him. Often the men thought the woman was always ready. It was our duty to be ready. I’ll never forget how I said to my husband: “In the future, I’d like to agree to it too”. “Oh really! So now it’s going to be when madam likes!” He thought I had a screw loose! He thought what I was saying was pretty over the top. It wasn’t easy. I was able to laugh about it but some women were never able to get to that point... It took women’s groups to discover that.

Also, they realised that the roles that they played in the home, that of homemaker and caregiver, were less valued than the role of breadwinner, played by their husbands:

Maureen The attitude was, “I go to work, I come home...”

Donna “I want supper.”

Maureen “Everything must be laid out for me. The kids are yours” [...] “Later if I feel like it, I’ll go out with the boys for a beer. I have a life. I have a right, because I work.”

Myrna        “Like a man”.

Maureen     Like, “what you do in the house is not work” [...]

Myrna        Even if it was a welfare family, he had special status.

Frances      Yeah, he was the man.

Applying Anthias to this, as the women gleaned new awareness of their own oppression, they were actively reconstructing their own narratives of belonging, shifting their beliefs and practices, not only around gender, but also around class. They put into question many dichotomies (processes of relationality) that oppressed them: women are responsible for the children/men for bringing in the revenue; women are sexually passive/men are sexually active; women are dependent/men are independent; women are the doers/men are the sayers. Through the sharing of their experiences, the new information, and analyses, in the groups, the women put into question the idea that these dichotomies were somehow “natural” (processes of naturalisation). Instead, they came to see that they were in fact social constructions of an unjust society. They noticed that their role, for example, as homemakers, and their work in the community – an extension of the home – was less valued than men’s work (processes of hierarchisation), and that they ended up with less resources – be they material (financial dependency), political (less say on public issues), cultural (less opportunities) than men (unequal resource distribution). They came to the conclusion that they had internalised these ideas (processes of inferiorisation), and that to fight them, it meant working to de-

construct them not only within themselves, but also within their friends, their families, and the public opinion.

### To collective and individual action

Women went on to set up a daycare to free up mothers' time and to be able to engage in wage labour, and in doing so, participated in shifting ideas about care giving as the sole responsibility of women. They created spaces of their own in mixed groups, as well as women-only groups, in order to have a place to “make the personal political”, to increase self-confidence, and to organize amongst women:

Thérèse      It's up to women to empower themselves.

Marguerite    Otherwise, the men wouldn't have left us any room. We had to make room for ourselves. We would say “We want to be with you!” But we'll start among ourselves to get stronger, to be able to say and understand what's going on. And especially to be able to express our opinions clearly.

When you prepare, you're not alone anymore, it's not the same.

They created jobs for women, took on sexism within State institutions, and brought women's issues to the fore by celebrating annually International Women's Day.

In and throughout these actions, participants and women around them, empowered by their journeys, began taking a stand – individually – on strategic gender needs. With great courage, some took to writing editorials in local newspapers, publicly questioning differentiation and stratification in the realm of gender. Others took on men in positions

of authority – be they Church Ministers, police or welfare officers – often surmounting great fear. Finally, most of the participants took their new awareness into the home, demanding changes in traditional gender roles, some, faced with the refusal of their husbands to change, took the ultimate step – divorce.

### And the tensions

Because they were questioning, through their actions, processes of differentiation and of stratification they were shaking up the status quo, and therefore elicited reactions from people around them. In this case, through processes of hierarchisation, men benefit at the expense of women because resources are unequally distributed in the domain of gender, therefore they may feel that they have “something to lose” by women’s emancipation. Moreover, through processes of inferiorisation, many women have internalized the status quo, and therefore react to others who are attempting to deconstruct and shift the boundaries that oppress them.

Louise     But when you start to make demands, you’re seen as the one who’s stirring up trouble because you have an impact on other women. Do you see what you can trigger around you – homes breaking up, women going back to work to get out of the house? You’re disturbing people! The moment a woman realizes that she has the same problem as you and that you’re responding to it, then she has to respond too.

Because of this, tensions emerged from all sides: families, teachers, social workers, neighbours, and even the agitators in the groups.



In the home, for some, their children reacted negatively to their reduced presence in the home. And some of the participants were faced with knee-jerk reactions from their husbands, understandable perhaps given the fact that these kinds of feminist demands were only beginning to become part of the public discourse. Some denigrated their work in the community, others refused to share household tasks even though their wives now had commitments outside the home:

Anonymous In the beginning, you didn't have the support of your husband or your family. I said once that "I was allowed to work in the community". I only went during school hours. That was the arrangement because if there was anything more than that... My husband never did want to participate. That was because it was for the children, anything pertaining to education, the children, health, all that concept, that was "women's stuff". And I'm positive that was thought out there in the Point, that wasn't just our household.

Anonymous With my husband it was the same attitude too: "This is women's stuff. You do what you want honey, just don't bring it home. If there are any problems that happen, that does not come to the house. If you want to go out and organize, that's okay, just don't cause no trouble at home".

Anonymous As long as it didn't interfere with supper!

Anonymous He would let me know when he was getting annoyed. If it was too much,

he would say “Are you doing that again?! What about your kids?”

Anonymous After all, they were your kids [...]

Anonymous He would say, “I’m stuck babysitting, again”.

Anonymous How come it was always babysitting for them but it was okay for us?

Moreover, some of the participants were confronted with the contempt of teachers, social workers and other professionals, as they took on roles that were generally not those of mothers, and especially of women with no formal post-secondary education. They also faced negative reactions from neighbours – and of other women – often having to live with name-calling in the streets.

Maureen We lived a lot of pressure. Even from the community. The other women in the community. We’ve all been through stages where we thought the activists were nuts. Myrna thought we were nuts! And I remember going up the street, and one of our neighbours, with three other women, was walking behind me. She would be calling out to me, in a mean way : “There goes the leader of the rat pack”. I was with PACC -- the Point Action Citizens’ Council. This same woman ended up joining our movement. And many years later she was honoured as an activist in the community.

Myrna The other thing that was often said, and it wasn’t very nice, and nowadays we wouldn’t say that because it’s discrimination. “Oh I know why you like going to St. Columba house! It’s a bunch of lesbians! That’s why you like going over there”. People used to say that all the time. [...] When you stand

up for yourself people will say anything if they think they can get a rise out of you.

Finally, some even ended up having conflict-ridden relations with the agitators who had helped jumpstart their spiral-like journeys. As they gained self-confidence, they began to question the disparities between discourse and practice of some of the organizers, leading to tensions within the groups.

### **Transformations at all levels**

What kind of impacts did all these actions around strategic gender needs have? Some have and might continue to dismiss many of these activities as not effecting real social change because of the lack of coordinated political vision and/or the refusal to claim themselves of the “feminist movement” (see Nicole Tremblay, cited in Bouchard 1984). In fact, after all these years of organising, women are still being beaten by their partners, harassed by their bosses, raped by their dates. Pornography is still rampant. Women are still paid less than men for equal labour. Women are still underrepresented in the political sphere. Women still do the majority of housework and childcare. Women are still over-represented in community groups and still do the house-keeping tasks of those organisations. How is all this liberating?

Although less sexy than the “bra-burning”, radical feminism that makes the news, the kind of activism the participants are involved in is grounded in communities, and is essential to neighbourhood democracy, and local empowerment (see Kaplan 1997). In fact, according to the participants, there are significant impacts, not only at the macro-

level of society and community, but also at the level of individual empowerment, and organisational culture.

#### Impacts on community, public opinion, government

Most obviously, are the new service and advocacy groups that were set-up to meet women's practical and strategic gender needs in the neighbourhood, and that continue to contribute to quality of life for everyone, especially women. Many of these groups have survived over the decades, and are still run by women from the neighbourhood. Moreover, building on the gains of the past, other groups that respond to strategic gender needs have since emerged in the neighbourhood, including several other daycares, a battered women's shelter, and a group for young parents (mothers). Also, International Women's Day continues to be celebrated yearly, and many women from various groups in the neighbourhood participated in both women's marches, "du pain et des roses" in 1995, and the World March of Women in 2000. Women from the neighbourhood also participated in the feminist action against globalisation at the Summit of the Americas on the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) in Québec City in 2001. In the last decade, as elsewhere in Québec, the issue of violence against women in the home, in québécois society, but also internationally, is ever more present in the public arena.

These experiences, are part of a larger Québec-wide movement, and have contributed to the consolidation of alternative service and advocacy groups over the years, and to the increased recognition of strategic gender needs as important, not only by other women, but also by the general public and by governments. As the grassroots of the Federation

des femmes du Québec, and the Marches, these local groups have helped ground the demands of the broader feminist movement around violence and poverty. Collective responsibility for childcare and education, violence against women, unequal resource distribution based on gender, to name a few issues, although most definitely not the highest priority, are nevertheless present on the public agenda. Over the years, the provincial government has, to some degree, operationalised certain demands of the movement in government policies, and in deciding to use taxpayers money to fund these kinds of initiatives (e.g., less expensive daycare, funding for women's centres, status of women councils, salary-parity).

#### Impacts on organisational structures and cultures

Beyond the obvious – the existence of groups that improve quality of life, however, are the impacts of women's activism on organisational structures and cultures. By their very actions, these activists showed everyone that “women can do it”. By the very fact that they were *acting* outside the home – as activists – they were breaking with the idea that *all* women are naturally homemakers, *all* men all naturally breadwinners (processes of homogenisation). In taking on leadership roles, in becoming media spokespersons, in negotiating with elected officials, they were also shifting their positionalities away from the “behind the scenes” roles that are generally assigned to women.

As they spiralled through their journeys, through constant pressure, they forced members, men and women, as well as organisers/animators to question their own internalised sexism and “classism”, and change their behaviours, bringing the personal

into the political (and vice versa). They also contributed to the deconstruction of traditional hierarchies within organisations. If by no means wide-spread, the idea of women wanting to organize into caucuses to discuss their common concerns, the inclusion of a feminist analysis, the notion of gender parity on Boards or in staff composition, and the use of male-female speaking lists, are not completely foreign to the functioning of the movement. Although men continue to dominate on assembly floors, and continue to be the preferred formal representatives, there are many more women in positions of power in groups (e.g., coordinators of organisations, in executives of boards).

In addition to this, project participants among others have contributed to the genesis of non-hierarchical approaches to organizing. In fact, through their critical analysis of the history of organizing in the neighborhood, the participants draw a very important lesson: that to effect real social change, the organizing style had to be *faire, faire avec, faire faire*, and not *faire pour*, or in a language more common to feminist organizing, doing *power-with*. That is, the people involved in a community struggle must be involved in decision-making processes from beginning to end. Organizing must begin with a sharing of experience, information sharing and collective analysis. This kind of organizing, they argue, works best in the small group, in which people have an easier time expressing themselves, which allows for a building of trust, and is informal enough to provide occasions for fun and games. An action which emerges from this kind of organizing, they argue, can and does lead to personal and collective empowerment, and

to long-term commitment : “When you’ve once experienced commitment, it becomes so much a part of you, you can’t stop. It’s impossible, it’s who you are!”

In fact, the participants, and many other activists, have continued to experiment with the *power-with* approach to organizing. All of the participants are now staff or volunteers in community groups; they have become agitators themselves (albeit oftentimes quiet ones!), and are constantly influencing the groups and their members through their continued involvement. And several groups in the neighbourhood are widely recognised as exemplary experiences in non-hierarchical organising.

#### Impacts on family and selves

At the micro-level the impacts are perhaps the most significant. All of the women broke with traditional gender roles in and through their journeys. For some, their husbands changed their mentalities and behaviours regarding gender roles:

Marguerite When my husband realized that he had to do his part in sharing tasks, he made some changes. He did the laundry. He learned to fold! His laundry was whiter than mine! We had family meetings every six months to share tasks, with the whole family. The children too!

Others, faced with their husbands’ refusal to change, liberated themselves through divorce, thereby paving the way, with other women, for their daughters:

Myrna When the kids started to go to school, we would meet other women and find out that we weren’t the only ones in that situation. [...] And you know

there was some support around if we were stuck, because I mean that was a long time ago. And it was a scary thing to go through. [...] I was divorced six months before my mother knew I was divorced. Well separated, I shouldn't say divorced.

Maureen And it wasn't considered right. There was a high percentage of people who were Catholic, and divorce is a no-no. So that I think it took the groups and women's groups. Women were getting out of the home and talking to each other about these kinds of things. They came to realize that they were entitled to a life of their own.

For many, because of their constant exposure to activism, their children developed a critical mind, an awareness of injustice, and some have even followed in the footsteps of their mothers:

Marguerite Instead of playing "house" or "going to the store", my daughters played at "meetings"! They had their themes: here there was exploitation, there it was too expensive... They put on wigs and played at being ladies, but they were ladies having meetings!

Most of the participants would never go back to how they were before their involvement in community activism, recognising that the strong, self-confident women they are today is in a large part due to their journeys through history:

Donna I probably would have ended up nowhere [...] I would have learned no skills, educational skills. If I look at my life today, I feel very rich, maybe



I'm not financially better off, but with all the experiences I've had, I'm that much richer [...] I got to meet people, be involved with people, learn more about my community, being involved with my children, other people's children. The life experiences that I have learned. I have a high school education, that's it. But I feel that in terms of life, I've gained so much! I got to go to Guatemala! Mexico! I got to write a book, two with this one included! Those are things I would have missed out on! So, I'd never trade it for the world!

Frances St. Columba House brought me a future. My life was dead. St. Columba House and the Clinic got me into the groups. A long time ago. At meetings, on the Board, and in the clothing room, and at kitchen meetings. Having a big family, they were my friends, people to talk to. [...] I got a job. I've been there thirty years [...] I wouldn't have got the job if I wasn't involved. Because I wouldn't have gone for it. Eight children at home. I didn't think I had time to be away from the house. My place was to cook and wash, like lots of women do. And when I started volunteering, all of a sudden, they opened the job, and I went for it! [...] When I came here, I never thought I would go any further than, go out the door, saying "Bye kids, have a good day in school", then come in [...] I would have been a housewife. I never thought I'd work! [...] I love it! I'm still there! After 30 years [...]

Maureen I think I would be a homemaker, working periodically, when it was necessary, in offices or whatever. Raising the children. Being very frustrated. And, I don't think, like Frances, when the job came up at St. Columba House, I would never have applied. There were men applying! It's true! I would've thought, "I don't have a chance! They are the leaders of anything that was going on anyway!" [...] I think it would've been dull. Because, in the fighting, in the fighting for justice, fighting for your kids, fighting for better life, made me feel like I was alive! It was exciting!

Denise I was a woman living in a man's world. I didn't accept that. When I married, I didn't stay at home, like women were "supposed" to do at the time. I was working. I was doing my own thing. I stood up for myself : I wasn't a Susie Homemaker. People criticized that. It was unacceptable to act the way I did. When I got involved in community and activism, it was different. People accepted me for who I was. It was okay to fight the government. It was okay for a woman to be spunky. I had found my home.

Myrna It would've been dull! Wouldn't have done all that foolishness! Demonstrations! I think you are a stronger person for what you learn. I wouldn't stand up for what I believe. I think I'd still be pushed around. Cause I wasn't a strong person. [...] Self-esteem, self-confidence. After all this time, I should! But if I really believe in something, I have no qualms in

saying it [...] There are many people who aren't involved. I wouldn't want their life. I do envy it sometimes, because they aren't in the hustle and bustle. And most of them have husbands, and they have security. That part of the deal, I like. I am alone still. But all the other part, no. That life is dull. What are you going to talk about every day? "How are the kids?" "They're fine". "What did you do today?" "Washed my floors. Bought a new dress".

Maureen "You need to try liquid Tide".

Thérèse I'd be in a rocking chair [...] Totally submissive. [...] Household economy and its teachings, that was me. In 1960, I'd already been married ten years. That's what I got from my mother. "You have to do this, you have to do that for your husband. Even if he drinks, even if he does all kinds of things, don't forget he's your husband. He's the boss. He gives you food to eat. And he decides. You do what he does. He's responsible. He's the one who pays". So I was part of that gang. [...] For me, it really boosted my self-esteem when I started going out into the neighbourhood. I had the right to say what I thought. Even if I'd only finished fifth grade, I sounded okay when I talked, since people listened to me. [...] That changed my life, my vision of a woman taking control of her life. [...] I said: "I'm not going back into the kitchen!" I went to high school at 40.

At 50, I went to cegep and at over 60, I went to the Université du Troisième Âge! [...] If I hadn't done that, I'd be sitting in my rocking chair, waiting for my children to come and see me.

Louise I'd have been at home, but it wouldn't have been difficult. I had an easy life, I didn't have to fight for things at home. I'm not a woman who makes demands or defends things publicly. It was community organizations that got me back into the workplace. That allowed me to stand up for the beliefs and values I already had, and to assert them more than if I'd stayed at home. I think I've helped a lot of people move forward as individuals. I was able to help women take charge of their lives, and I wouldn't have been able to do that if I'd stayed at home. Of course, I'm proud of that. I found it very enriching, in the sense that I learned a lot. It gave me a culture I didn't have. About health, for one thing, when I was on the Board of the Clinic. And about the Marxist-Leninists too, even though I was never a member! I acquired a whole culture that I didn't have.

Marguerite I'd have gone into a depression. [...] It brought me to life, it's incredible! Everyone at home benefited. Even if you don't always win, you learn so much. In the street, at home, with your kids, there are always little steps. I find it makes me feel good about myself [...] For me, it's sad when I

can't go to a demonstration. We need to be together. [...] Being at home with my pots and pans, that's awful! There's no life there for me! What would I have done at home? I'd have gone around in circles. [...] What helped me was when we got involved in the citizens' committees [...] Before, life was very difficult [...] The kids will say they started to have a better life when we came to the Point and I went to work to start a day care centre. [...] It gave me strength. [...] And it gave the children something because I had something to say. We talked a lot at home. But it was even more interesting because I was outside and I brought other ideas [...] Knowing you can do something that's not washing diapers or talking about babies. We're not children. We're involved in society. We're not just at home, as if we weren't able to learn, to become more aware and to handle responsibilities. You become a more independent woman. The whole person I am today comes from my activism.

In line with the literature, these findings show that with collective transformation comes individual transformation. These findings confirm : “how impossible it is for a woman to split off her outward action from her domestic life and relationships [...] if she gets involved in class struggle, it drags her unwittingly onto a new courses as a woman, affects all that she is as woman (Cockburn 1977 :69). Krauss concurs, arguing that women's : “single-issue community protests led them through a process of politicization and the broader analysis of inequities of class and gender in the public arena and in the family. Propelled into the public arena in defence of their children, they ultimately challenged

government, corporations, experts, husbands, and their own insecurities as working-class women” (Krauss 1998 : 130).

## Conclusion

The participants were involved in activism in the neighbourhood, doing “women’s stuff” in a sphere that is constructed as an extension of the patriarchal home, motivated initially by practical gender needs related to their responsibilities as mothers and care-givers. Notwithstanding the latter, as they journeyed through the making of history, from being involved in groups because of their practical gender needs, to gaining new awareness, often stimulated by the agitators in the groups, to taking collective action, as well as action within the home, the women were not only transforming themselves and their groups, but also their community and society in general. It is the heartfelt wish of project participants that the sharing of their journeys will be inspiring for young women who are struggling to find a voice in the current context.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Kruzynski is professor at the École de service social at Université de Montréal. Her current research aims to document the practises of self-managed political, social and economic organisations working at the margins of mainstream movements. Long-time feminist activist, she is currently active in a social ecology collective that is working towards the self-management of her neighbourhood, Point St. Charles. Email: [anna.kruzynski@umontreal.ca](mailto:anna.kruzynski@umontreal.ca)

<sup>2</sup> A shortened version of this article, in French, “Trajectoires de militantes dans un quartier ouvrier de Montréal : trente ans de changement(s)” has been published in *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 2005, 24(3), 86-104. My heartfelt thanks to Francine Descarries, Eric Shragge and Jean Panet-Raymond for their comments on previous versions of this text, to Catherine Browne who translated most of the excerpts from the French group.

<sup>3</sup> The term “agitator” is used here to denote a person who, through critical analysis shared with others, contributes to a “shaking up” of the status quo.

<sup>4</sup> Denise Boucher, Thérèse Dionne, Louise Lanthier, Donna Leduc, Marguerite Métivier, Madeleine Richardson, Myrna Rose, Maureen Ryan and Frances Vaillancourt. Michèle Soutière withdrew from the project in February 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Isabelle Drolet, staff member of the Archives and long-time activist, co-coordinated the project with me from the beginning.

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<sup>6</sup> CourtePointe Collective (2006). *The Point is... Grassroots Organizing Works! Women from Point St. Charles Sharing Stories of Solidarity*, Montréal, Québec: Les Éditions du remue-ménage.

<sup>7</sup> I use “ethnos” here following Floya Anthias (1998). Anthias claims that gender, class and ethnos are the main social divisions in Western societies. *Ethnos*, which combines the concepts of ethnicity and “race”, is linked « to production and reproduction of bonds, sentiments and solidarities relating to collective origin and belonging » (513, 523).