

FEMINIST MOBILISATION AND FAMILY CHANGE

A Case Study of a Grassroots Women's Organisation in Quebec: The AFEAS (1966–1989)

Anne Revillard

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Family issues are a target of mobilisation for various organised groups within civil society. Some explicitly label themselves as 'family movements'. Others, such as some women's groups, tackle family issues without identifying themselves primarily as family based. The focus of this chapter is on the border between family movements and feminist movements. While familialism and feminism are often theoretically defined as contradictory values (Commaille 1993), my aim is to shed light on their possible coexistence in actual social movements. A single women's organisation may shift from a conservative promotion of family values to a defence of women's rights as individuals, as the example of the *Association Féminine d'Éducation et d'Action Sociale* (AFEAS) in Quebec shows us.

The AFEAS, a federation of grassroots women's groups created in 1966, has a twofold mission of permanent education and 'social action', which implies both community-level activities and political mobilisation aimed at state intervention, mainly on family-related issues. As a women's group focused on family issues, the AFEAS was for many years the site of a dilemma over its definition as a 'family' or a 'women's' organisation (Lamoureux, Gélinas and Tari 1993: 74–78; Lemieux and Comeau 2002: 9). Along with other women's organisations which value the family and domestic labour, AFEAS is often seen by more radical feminists as a rather traditional, conservative organisation (Cohen 1992). Yet, I argue that under the seemingly unchanged surface of the family-values rhetoric used by the AFEAS since its creation, a revolution has taken place. The meaning of this focus on the family has dramatically changed over the years. Under strong Catholic influence, the AFEAS originally promoted conservative family values that did not favour women's autonomy. However, throughout the years, it gradually asserted a more feminist stand, using the same rhetoric to make claims for reforms that, while still in the field of family policy, resulted in improving women's rights.

Beyond the description of this evolution, the aim of this chapter is to suggest an explanation for this discreet but revolutionary transformation of this women's organisation, in relation with family change. My claim is that the experience of divorce is one of the elements that spurred the development of a feminist consciousness among AFEAS members, leading to a shift from a collective identity grounded on the family to a collective identity primarily built

upon the defence of women's autonomy. This case thus provides an example of the dynamics of family change and mobilisation processes within civil society. Further, these phenomena (family change, mobilisation processes and the definition of collective identities within civil society) do not happen in a political vacuum. The state is ubiquitous in these dynamics, and its role will be stressed throughout this chapter, notably through the role of the law as both an influence on social change and a target of political mobilisation.

First, I will define the key concepts of this study, and present the general organisation of the AFEAS. Then I shall describe its evolution from familialism to feminism, before showing how the claims made by the organisation favour my assumption of the role played by the experience of divorce in this evolution.

Conceptual Framework

The present analysis of the AFEAS ideological shift over the years will draw on the concepts of feminism, familialism and maternalism in order to account for the change in the frame of collective action, as well as the concepts of gender consciousness and feminist consciousness, in order to seize this cognitive dimension at a more individual level (Snow et al. 1986).

Familialism, Feminism and Maternalism

In order to make sense of the way the AFEAS frames its actions and grievances, I will resort to three concepts: familialism, feminism and maternalism. While these are the subject of important debate over their definition, for the purpose of this study, I will use Jacques Commaille's heuristic opposition between familialism and feminism (1993), and Sonya Michel and Seth Koven's definition of maternalism (1990).

Commaille theorises an opposition between the values of familialism, or the defence of the family as an institution, and feminism, broadly defined as the defence of women's rights and interests as individuals (1993). While these concepts, so defined, help us understand the potential conflict between these two components of the AFEAS collective identity, the concept of maternalism enables us to analyse how these they may combine in a less conflictive manner.

Based upon the study of women's movement activism in Western countries at the turn of the twentieth century, Michel and Koven developed the concept of 'maternalism' to refer to 'ideologies that exalted women's capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance, and morality. Maternalism always operated on two levels: it extolled the private virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women's public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace' (1990: 1079).

This concept is particularly heuristic for analysing the possible non-conflictive defiance of family values and women's interests. This theoretical innovation indeed has been crucial to the study of some women's movements initially neglected by feminist scholarship because of their reluctance to challenge the gendered division of labour.¹ While stressing the importance of the family for these movements, research on maternalism has shown their potentially feminist

character, insofar as women used the defence of traditional values as a stepping-stone to enter the public sphere and claim for their rights. As will be illustrated below, AFEAS discourse, which mingles women's interests and family values, provides us with a good example of maternalism. Further, its evolution reflects the diversity of maternalism, ranging from a prevalence of family values at the detriment of women's interests (in this case, maternalism takes a familiarist tone), to a defence of women's interests within the family (i.e. the feminist frame prevails). At stake here is the rise of a feminist consciousness among AFEAS members.

From Gender Consciousness to Feminist Consciousness

Feminist consciousness was initially defined by Ethel Klein as a form of group consciousness resulting from a three-stage process, enabling mobilisation to occur: the 'recognition of group membership and shared interests', the 'rejection of the traditional definition for the group's status in society' and the blame for the consequent problems put on the system instead of individual responsibility (1984: 3).

Later works insisted on the need to distinguish gender consciousness from feminist consciousness, in order to account for the possibility of a gender identification that does not necessarily entail feminist opinions (Tolleson Rinehart 1992). While gender consciousness, or the 'awareness of one's self as having certain gender characteristics and an identification with others who occupy a similar position in the sex-gender structure' (Chow 1987: 285), may be a 'precursor' of feminist consciousness, the former does not necessarily entail the later. Identifying the conditions that favour such a shift is an important task in view of the broader understanding of women's movements.

While gender and feminist consciousness are generally measured by means of quantitative methods, a qualitative approach enables a more detailed analysis of the processes by which one can turn into the other (Klatch 2001). Hence this study of the AFEAS shift from familialism to feminism is based upon the content analysis of the AFEAS archives, comprised of news bulletins, research and advisory reports, as well as information leaflets, from 1966 to 1990. Jocelyne Lamoureux, Michèle J. Gélinas and Katy Tari's monograph of the association (1993) has also been a very useful second-hand resource for this research.

The AFEAS and its Women

Quebec is a great 'laboratory' for studying the interaction between family change and civil society. Indeed, family change has been particularly quick in Quebec in the past forty years, with for example the divorce rate rising from 8.8 per cent in 1969 to 51.2 per cent in 1987, the total fertility rate dropping from 3.8 in 1960 to 1.4 in 2000 and women's employment rate rising from 25.3 per cent in 1961 to 51.8 per cent in 2001 (Institut de la Statistique du Québec). This rapid social change coincided with growing state intervention, as well as the development of a dense network of 'community groups' (*groupes communautaires*) targeting, at the local level, a broad range of social issues such as education, health, employment or consumption (Bélanger and

Lévesque 1992). Prominent in this dynamic civil society are women's groups, which constitute a strong women's movement (in terms of membership, resources and political influence) (Collectif Clio 1992; Corbeil and Descarries 1997; Dumont 1992; Lamoureux 1986, 2001).

AFEAS is one of the two main national women's organisations in Quebec, along with the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* (FFQ). It was created in 1966 by means of the merger of two women's organisations initiated by the Catholic Church, the *Union Catholique des Femmes Rurales* (Catholic Rural Women's Organisation; UCFR) and the *Cercles d'économie domestique* (Household Economics Circles; CED).² The AFEAS is a mass organisation: its membership has been steady at around 35,000 members, at least between the end of the 1960s and the end of the 1980s (which is the time period I shall focus on in this study). According to a 1981 poll conducted with 932 members (Houle and AFEAS 1981), women of all ages belonged to the organisation, with an over-representation of women aged 35–55. Also, 86.4 per cent of them were married; the majority of them (56.8 per cent) were full-time homemakers; and only 9.5 per cent were working full-time in the labour market. Half of the members (49.1 per cent) lived in a rural area, and three-quarters of them lived in cities of 16,987 residents or less. Therefore, its membership departed from the profile commonly associated with the women's movement: AFEAS women were not urban professional women, but farmers, homemakers or women working for their husbands' businesses in the crafts or retailing.

In 1967, AFEAS was comprised of an executive board and eight provincial committees: urban, rural, education, finance, propaganda and advertising, homemaking, popular education, resolutions (AFEAS 1967b: 9). The structure of the organisation was pyramidal: the AFEAS was composed of an 'association' at the provincial level, thirteen federations at the level of the main cities in Québec, and around six hundred 'circles' at the local level. Given this type of structure, there was of course a top-down dynamic in the flow of information: the executive board exerted some influence on the members at the local level, notably by means of the organisation's 'educational' mission. The AFEAS news bulletin played a key role in this respect, defining the topics of discussion and providing educational material for the local groups' meetings. Yet the dynamic was not only top-down, but also, to a large extent, bottom-up. Indeed, members of the AFEAS provincial executive were concerned about the compliance of their statements with local members' aspirations and opinions, which were channelled to them by delegates chosen in each local circle. The AFEAS also often organised polls and surveys among its members on the different subjects it tackled. Therefore, the AFEAS was strongly linked to its members: the provincial executive was cautious not to be perceived at odds with its local members' aspirations, while conversely playing a crucial consciousness-raising role by means of its educational mission.

From Familialism to Feminism

The First Years (1966–1972): The Hold of Religion and Traditional Family Values

The AFEAS's link to the Catholic Church, and religious preoccupation, was initially very strongly asserted. This can be illustrated by the role played by the clergy in the association, the official ties to other catholic organisations, the religious tone of the discourse and the nature of the values endorsed, and especially the defence of traditional family values.

Up until 1972, the Church had a very important role in the everyday life of the association. A priest (the only man in this women's-only organisation) attended to the AFEAS meetings in each federation (AFEAS 1967a: 12–13) and gave moral advice. It was also a priest, George-Etienne Phaneuf, who signed the leading article of the news bulletin every month. Similarly, each meeting of AFEAS members at all levels had to begin with a prayer (AFEAS 1967b: 11–13). Moreover, the AFEAS was affiliated to the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (AFEAS 1968: 3).

In compliance with the role of Catholicism in the identity of the AFEAS, the defence of traditional family values was one of the first political standpoints adopted by the association: in an article entitled 'The mutual rights and duties of family and society', Cécile Bédard, 'general propagandist', asserted the need to fight 'for the defence of the family and the recognition of its rights', referring to a 1958 press release by the religious authorities which denounced the damage caused by the increase in divorce rates and women's work outside of the home (Bédard 1967). The AFEAS consequently asserted a certain number of 'family rights', among which are 'the right to unity', 'the right to fertility', 'the right to educate its children and supervise their education' (parents being attributed a primary role over teachers) and 'the right to economic security, grounded on its members' work, and mainly the father's' (Bédard 1967: 12–15). This stand clearly was familialist, in the sense that the AFEAS promoted the family as an institution, in a specific way that may turn out at the expense of individual rights (for example, the 'family rights' described above tend to imply a stand against women's reproductive rights, against divorce and against an autonomous income for women).

Nevertheless, in a typical example of maternalism, women were assigned a primary role in this defence of family values. Moreover, the organisation's conservatism was not inconsistent with some form of gender consciousness, based upon the defence of a particular vision of women's identity, the homemaker. Indeed, homemaking was, along with religious and educational issues, the main topic of the news bulletin, be it in the form of knitting, cooking, or decoration. In 1967, the AFEAS justified the need for a homemaking committee by stressing 'the importance and wealth of her mission as a homemaker' (AFEAS 1967a: 15). However, because it was not accompanied by a questioning of relationships of power between men and women, this gender consciousness was not, at this stage, a feminist consciousness.

The Gradual Rise of a Feminist Consciousness

In the first years of its existence, the AFEAS was confronted with the very fast social changes that occurred in what is commonly referred to in Quebec as the ‘quiet revolution’, which included, beside the very fast demographic changes mentioned above, a fast secularisation of society. Along with these changes came the rise of the second-wave women’s movement, and the institutionalisation of women’s interests in Quebec, in Canada and worldwide. At the federal level, a Royal Commission on the Status of Women was created in 1967 to investigate women’s social and legal status. This Commission, chaired by journalist Florence Bird, had an important effect in structuring the women’s movement’s thinking and action (Collectif Clio 1992: 469). In Quebec, a Council on the status of women (*Conseil du statut de la femme*) was created in 1973. Finally, at the supra-national level, the activities surrounding the 1975 United Nations International Women’s Year had an important influence on the AFEAS’s rising awareness of women’s rights issues.³

These social and political changes converged in promoting a new image of women as autonomous, working on the labour market – an image of which the AFEAS was ambivalent. On the one hand, it opened the possibility of improving women’s rights and status, a focus that was initially secondary for the AFEAS, but yet corresponded to the interests of its constituencies. On the other hand, the value put on women working outside of the home tended to discredit the homemaker. This put the organisation on the defensive, since the very identity it was built upon was questioned. This ambivalence was well reflected in the AFEAS’s participation on the Bird Commission. Although it had been asked to document ‘woman’s work outside of the home’, the AFEAS, in its final report, promoted women’s role as homemakers: ‘We shouldn’t neglect the problem faced by a woman who has chosen to stay home; she has the right to be taken care of. Isn’t the real woman, above all, a wife and a mother who devotes herself entirely to her family and her home? Doesn’t her contribution to society deserve to be highlighted?’ (Bédard 1968). Another example of the AFEAS’s disagreement with the new women’s movement of the 1970s is its opposition to any furthering of abortion rights (AFEAS 1973; Marchand 1974b).

While these stands may seem in clear opposition to feminism as it redefined itself in the 1970s, the organisation’s relationship to feminism was in fact more complex. For example, in a 1974 editorial, AFEAS president Azilda Marchand denounced women’s ‘independence crisis [as a] teenage crisis’, and yet asserted that

coming to terms with one’s condition does not mean accepting injustice. . . . To achieve this human and spiritual development, a woman needs to be helped by favourable laws, that depend more on the environment than on individuals. No one can be liberated without legal and institutional stability, without sufficient security in everyday life, without economic ease, without a family and work spirit. All economic injustice, all social discrimination against women, is an assault against justice and peace. Even if women are non-violent, they can and will become aggressive to defend their rights and make sure justice is ensured. (Marchand 1974a)

This denunciation of injustice and discrimination appears in stark contrast to the previous ideal of a subordination of women to the good of their families. This shift from gender consciousness to feminist consciousness went along with a gradual secularisation of the association. In its ‘constitution’, the article regarding the priest’s presence was subtly changed from ‘the association *must* ask a priest for advice’ to ‘the association *can* ask a moral counsellor for advice’ (AFEAS 1972, emphasis added). In September, 1972, the AFEAS bulletin takes on a ‘new profile’ (Marchand 1972), which results in a decrease in the space allocated to Church discourse⁴ and homemaking advice, to the profit of information dealing with the organisation’s political action. How can we explain this gradual shift from familialism to feminism?

Explaining the Shift

The choice finally made by the AFEAS to endorse feminist ideas was not an obvious one. As some aspects of its discourse show, the organisation might as well have reacted defensively, reinforcing its conservative agenda and rejecting feminism as a whole.⁵ In order to explain the feminist shift, it is essential to analyse how AFEAS feminism expressed itself: What type of gender issues did the organisation fight for, and what do these struggles tell us about the roots of feminist consciousness within the organisation?

The AFEAS’s Fight for the Recognition of Women’s ‘Invisible Labour’

The red thread of the AFEAS feminist agenda ever since the 1970s has been the demand for recognition of women’s ‘invisible labour’ – that is, all the work that is performed by women within the family, be it care work, domestic labour or work performed for the family business.

The AFEAS started by questioning the lack of social, economic and legal recognition of the labour accomplished by women working for their husbands’ businesses (in farming, as well as in the crafts and retailing). Thanks to a 1974 survey among 1,800 AFEAS members, the provincial executive realised how little these ‘*femmes collaboratrices*’ knew about their rights, and launched legal information campaigns within the organisation while lobbying in favour of an improvement of these women’s social rights. This entailed a broader questioning of women’s work within the family, which was at the basis of other campaigns that aimed at improving homemakers’ rights. After its unsuccessful claim to retirement benefits for homemakers, the AFEAS received some form of compensation from the government by means of a 1989 family law reform that imposed equal sharing of property and belongings commonly used by the spouses (the ‘family patrimony’) in case of divorce or death of one of the spouses (Revillard 2006).

These claims made by the AFEAS in favour of a recognition of women’s ‘invisible labour’ in family law and social legislation had one thing in common: they all tended to insure some form of economic individual security for women in case of divorce (by ensuring individual entitlement to social rights, or through the sharing of the family patrimony). Beyond those claims made in favour of recognition of domestic labour, it should also be noted that the AFEAS was a

leader in the campaign in favour of an improvement in the child support system, by means of a demand for a system of automatic perception of child support as early as 1975. Therefore, it would seem rational to hypothesise that the experience or the fear of divorce was one of the key motivations behind the claims that crystallised the AFEAS's new feminist identity. How can we validate this explanation?

AFEAS Women Facing Divorce: Family Change and the Rise of a Feminist Consciousness

Up until the end of the 1960s, divorce was very rare in Quebec, partly because it was legally very hard to obtain: the only way to get a divorce was by means of a federal private bill. In 1968, a federal decision created provincial divorce courts and extended the available motives for divorce, thereby removing the previous legal restrictions (Dandurand 1988: 30). In a context of fast social change, a sharp increase in the number of divorces followed, with the divorce rate rising from 8.8 per cent in 1969 to 36.1 per cent in 1975 (Institut de la Statistique du Québec).

However, in compliance with the AFEAS's endorsement of traditional family values, the need to improve women's economic independence in a context of rising divorce rates was not a prominent argument in the organisation's claims. When divorce was referred to, it often was mingled with other rationales. A good illustration comes from the 1976 report on the status of women working for their husbands' businesses: 'For the past few years, the AFEAS has been witnessing the hardships endured by many women who take part, with their husbands, in the well-being of the family business. These women, after working hard and with practically no pay for many years, often find themselves very deprived when the business is sold or in case of bankruptcy, or when the husband dies, or, more and more frequently, in case of parting or divorce' (Gervais 1976: 6).

Here, divorce was mentioned along with many other reasons for the rising awareness of women's 'hardships', but it was the only phenomenon that had evolved significantly among the different ones that were referred to. Therefore it can be assumed that the increase in divorce rates played a significant role, even though, because of their attachment to a traditional vision of the family, AFEAS members did not easily admit to it at the time.

Hard to demonstrate solely based on the organisation's archives, this assumption finds clearer validation in interviews with AFEAS leaders. For example, Lamoureux, Gelinias and Tari quote former president Lise Drouin-Paquette:

We became aware of women's poverty. . . . We lived those years when there were many divorces of women of our age: finding themselves naked on the street because of our marriage contracts under separate ownership of goods. We became aware of the fact that we did not have any financial security. That was a big shock. Every single woman in the AFEAS experienced it: her sister, her sister-in-law, her neighbour. . . . We thought: we've always been virtuous, love recognition, emotional recognition. . . . But we had never thought, or at any rate we hesitated to think, that it could happen to our relatives as well. (1993: 111–112)

This quotation, with its focus on the ‘relatives’, suggests that members themselves were not that affected by divorce. In fact, according to the 1981 poll, only 1 per cent of them were divorced (Houle and AFEAS 1981: 3). However, this figure should be taken cautiously since some divorcees might not have answered, given that divorce was still seen in rather negative terms. Moreover, the divorce rate within the AFEAS may have increased during the 1980s. This should be the subject of further inquiry. At any rate, the fear of divorce, derived from the experience of relatives and neighbours, definitely had a consciousness-raising effect. A former local AFEAS leader I interviewed also mentioned the impact of divorce on the AFEAS’s claims:

[AFEAS women] are at the origins of a very progressive law, the law on the family patrimony. They started off with very concrete examples; and the first examples that came up were always a type of story with a farm on which a woman had spent all her time, all her energy, and one day the husband decided he had had enough, and he ditched her without anything. So all the examples that came up were examples of women working for their husbands in the family business. This movement really came from the regions, the countryside.

Of course, more interviews should be conducted to really establish this explanatory link between the experience of divorce and the rise of a feminist consciousness. Moreover, it should be stressed that the rise in divorce rates in itself did not mechanically entail the mobilisation (such was not the case in other countries where the divorce rate increased). Mobilisation happened only because there was a grassroots structure – the ‘local circles’ of the AFEAS – that enabled women to share their experience of divorce, or their fear of it, and translate it into political terms, with the help of the cognitive frame provided by the AFEAS provincial executive which read the experience of divorcee women in terms of injustice, lack of recognition of domestic labour and denial of women’s rights, and promoted the right to autonomy for women. In this perspective, another aspect that should be the subject of further inquiry is the extent of the role played by the AFEAS provincial executive, relative to the initiatives coming from the ‘basis’ of the organisation.

Conclusion

The evolution of the AFEAS provides us with a good example of the dynamics of family change and political mobilisation. While the organisation has always defended family values, the meaning of this endorsement has shifted over time, along with the gradual rise of a feminist consciousness. Traditional family values were initially promoted to the expense of women’s rights, but in a way that still enabled some form of participation of women in civil society, based on their role in the family. In a broader context of assertion of women’s individual rights, and by means of a questioning of the status of the work performed by women within the family, the AFEAS gradually endorsed a demand for women’s autonomy within the family. I suggest that the experience of divorce, or the fear of it, played an important role in this rise of a feminist

consciousness. However, divorce in itself was not enough to foment a mobilisation. It yet had to be read in terms of gender inequality and the need for women's autonomy, a cognitive frame that was provided by the head of the organisation, and was made available to these women because they were initially members of local AFEAS circles. Therefore the existence of a very dense network of grassroots women's organisations in Quebec is a key factor that enabled the link between family change and feminist consciousness and mobilisation to be made. This resulted in a strong feminist intervention on family issues. Expressing themselves from their particular standpoint – that of rural women working in the 'private sphere' and attached to family values – AFEAS women defined their own kind of feminism. While deeply attached to the family, their claims tried to make it more 'civil'.

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Online resources

AFEAS: <http://www.afeas.qc.ca>

Institut de la Statistique du Québec: <http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/>

Archives

AFEAS archives, which can be consulted at the organisation's headquarters in Montreal, have also, for the most part, been scanned and are available online at the Bibliothèque virtuelle du patrimoine documentaire canadien francophone: <http://www.bv.cdeaf.ca>

Notes

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1. For a recent example of a study of such movements in France and Italy, see Della Sudda 2007.
 2. The Catholic Church initiated these two organisations in the 1940s in order to take hold of local women's groups that had spread throughout Quebec since the beginning of the century, the Cercles de fermières, or Farmers' Circles (Cohen 1990). Upon incitement and, in some cases, threats from the parochial hierarchy, many women left the Farmers' Circles to join the UCFR and CED. As a result, there were in 1966 two main rural women's organisations, the secular Cercles de fermières and the Catholic AFEAS.
 3. During 1975, a column was devoted to this event in every issue of the AFEAS's news bulletin.
 4. The priest who had a leading article in each issue does not publish his own work anymore.
 5. In the rest of Canada, the organisation 'REAL women' (Realistic, Equal, Active, for Life) represent such a stand.