



“What can the women do?” Women in the Antigonish Movement (1930s–1950s) in northeastern Nova Scotia, Canada

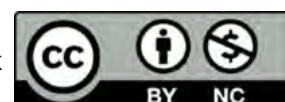
Robin Neustaeter

The Antigonish Movement combined popular adult education and economic development via co-operatives in rural northeastern Nova Scotia, Canada, starting in the early 1900s. The movement grew out of the dire economic and political conditions, including intergenerational poverty, significant out-migration, and citizen apathy. While the success of the movement required women's involvement, women have largely been minimised in the written history of this movement. Building from the feminist archival case study *What Can the Women Do?* this article highlights the key roles, volunteer and paid, that women held in the Antigonish Movement, the gendered nature of the movement, and the importance of recognising the complexities of building “a full and abundant life for all”.

Introduction

Mary Laben (1910-2005) of Reserve Mines, Nova Scotia, Canada, understood co-operatives not hypothetically from books or classes, but extensively and personally from life experience. In the 1930s, her homes, first the company house she and her husband Joe rented from his employer, the Dominion Coal Company, and then the co-operative house Mary and Joe built, were gathering points for people who studied, planned, established, and ran co-operatives. It was in the company house that Mary hosted the study clubs that established the first chartered credit union in Nova Scotia, and then the study club that built the co-operative housing of Tompkinsville (Arnold, 1940; Laben, 1989). Mary Laben was one of hundreds of women involved in the study clubs and co-operatives of the Antigonish Movement when it expanded exponentially in the 1930s and 1940s. The Antigonish Movement (also referred to as the Co-operative Movement or Extension Movement) combined popular adult education and community economic development, via co-operatives, to address the growing economic concerns influencing the everyday lives of people in Pictou, Antigonish, and Guysborough counties on the mainland of Nova Scotia and across the island of Cape Breton, beginning in the early 1900s. The Extension Department at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX) in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada, supported this movement to build the “abundant life for all” (Coady Institute, 2026; Dodaro & Pluta, 2012).

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 License, which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Creative Commons website and the Journal of Co-operative Studies re-use guidelines.



Considering women's roles in homes and communities, their participation in this co-operative movement was intentional and necessary. The success of the movement depended on women's "energy, loyalty, and commitment" (Dodaro & Pluta, 2012, p. 72). A report on women in the Antigonish Movement emphasised their involvement as integral and integrated: "Women in the Extension Movement do not really form a separate group, and in this respect, they differ from most women's organizations. In the general plan of the Extension programme, women have an important part to play" (Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University [Extension], n.d.a, p. 1). Sister of the Congregation of St. Martha Irene Doyle, who worked with the StFX Extension Department, declared women "the backbone of the movement" (1996, p. 2). In May 1975, at a regional conference marking International Women's Year, Fr George Topshee, Director of the Extension Department, stated, "The Antigonish Movement has been successful largely because of many great women" (Topshee, 1975, p. 9). Others noted these women were "most original and creative" (Laidlaw, 1961, p. 88) and that this movement "would not have flourished as it has without the talents and incredible devotion of women" (Laidlaw, 1961, p. 12). Women's involvement, in formal and informal roles, in these co-operatives, is part of the significant and often overlooked community work women have done for centuries and continue to do to sustain and improve the lives of families and people in communities.

Drawing from the study, *What Can the Women Do? Women and the Antigonish Movement*, this article examines women's involvement in this movement from 1930 to 1950. After introducing the study and context, the article profiles three key women: Mary Laben, Sr Monica Doyle, and Kay Thompson Desjardin. The discussion shifts to women's paid and volunteer work in the movement more broadly and the socio-cultural tensions of women's inclusion in the movement. The article concludes with three reflections.

The Study: Sifting Through Time

The feminist archival case study, *What Can the Women Do? Women in the Antigonish Movement* centres women and their work in this movement to explore women as actors in co-operative, community development, and adult education histories. The study builds on scholarship of and by women in the movement to complicate dominant movement narratives and to enrich understandings of the movement, movement actors, and the complexities of everyday economic and social change through a feminist lens. Its title is taken from Extension's pamphlet, *What Can the Women Do?* written by Sr Irene Doyle (n.d.) to clarify the roles and significance of women in the co-operative movement generally and the Antigonish Movement in particular.

This study draws from institutional and community archives to piece together a complex understanding of women's involvement in the Antigonish Movement from 1930 to 1950, in northeastern Nova Scotia, Canada. As "fragments of the past", archives are powerful and "complex fields of meaning" (Subotić, 2021, p. 342). Recognising the decisions and biases inherent in the creation and maintenance of archives (Chaudhuri et al., 2010; Manoff, 2004) acknowledges that data found in archives tell a history, rather than *the* history. Critical examination of archives requires observing the presence of power, such as who is included, how they are included, and who is excluded (Carter, 2006) and recognising whose narratives are faint, marginalised, or silenced.

Here, attention to power considers gender, noting how archives often favour the masculine narrative.

Archives are often regarded as a masculine preserve. Just as men have dominated historical narrative construction, so have they dominated the sorts of cultural and political positions that typically mark papers and other artifacts as worthy of preservation and scholarly interest. (Martin, 2018, p. 455)

In archival documentation analysed, 'men' is used as an inclusive default and gender specific term. Many married women are identified by their husband's initial(s) or first and last name; effectively displacing the woman's individual identity.

This study focused on the archives at StFX, the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University in Sydney, Nova Scotia, and the archives of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha in Antigonish. While institutional archives are rich, their mandates often prioritise their institutions' profile, personalities, and priorities. Complimenting institutional archives are community museums which hold documentation deemed relevant by their communities. In this study, thirteen community museums in the research area were visited. Attention was given to community women who were leaders and organisers, women who worked for Extension in the main office at StFX or in the field offices, Sisters of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha, and other religious sisters, and women who worked with adjacent government offices and other agencies and organisations. This analysis highlighted a broad scope of women and their roles in the movement.

Centring Women

Over centuries, women's traditions of care and community work remain necessary and relevant. Often assumed and considered mundane, this usually invisible work exists in the quotidian (Neustaeter, 2015). Yet, their community care work, in paid and formal and informal volunteer roles, is significant to individual, familial, and community wellbeing; creating and sustaining the communities in which people want to live (Dominelli, 2019). This work by women is informed by the local gender, political, social, cultural, and economic contexts of women's lives (Neustaeter, 2015).

Previous research on women's community involvement in rural Manitoba, Canada, highlighted that women's community involvement, "is not the icing, it's the glue" (Neustaeter, 2015, p. 207). Similarly, Boulding (1995) emphasised:

What tends to be ignored is the historical reality that women's work of feeding, rearing, and healing humans and of building and rebuilding households and communities under conditions of constant change — including war, environmental catastrophe, and continual push-pull migrations — produced resources and skills within women's cultures that have been critical not only to human *survival* but to human *development*. (p. 410, original emphasis)

Considering women's rich tradition of community work (Boulding, 1995; Dominelli, 1995, 2019), women's community involvement in associations, guilds, aid societies, and more (Neustaeter, 2015) and the work women did to support and care for their families managing households, it is not surprising that women were involved and significant to the Antigonish Movement — a movement centred on improving the lives of families, communities, and individuals.

The Antigonish Movement — Early 1900s

People in the scattered towns, farms, fishing and shipbuilding communities, and industrial areas established around coal mines and steel plants, faced significant economic and social challenges, including systemic poverty and out-migration (Alexander, 1997; Dodaro & Pluta, 2012). Noting the dire economic conditions leading into the 1930s and the organisation of the early study groups, Ida Delaney wrote, "The people who formed the first study clubs were poor but they had not suddenly become poor with the market crash. Their poverty was rooted in the conditions that had prevailed in preceding decades" (1985, p. 13). These conditions contributed to regional depopulation.

In the coal towns, a feudal relationship between the mining companies and the miners resulted in miners' perpetual indebtedness to the mining companies. Many of these company workers lived in company houses, shopped at company stores, purchased company coal to heat their homes, while all expenses were deducted from their weekly pay cheques. A miner's pay could be mere cents or in the negative (Delany, 1985; Frank, 1983). The cycle of debt was not isolated to miners; farmers and fishers were caught in it too. Many people survived on credit to purchase groceries, household and personal items, farming and fishing supplies and equipment. Delaney (1985) emphasised:

In pre-credit union time people needed credit because they had no cash at all. They absolutely *had* to defer payment until cash became available and, in the meantime, they needed credit. This almost total dependence on credit kept some people in a sort of slavery to those who 'carried' them. (p. 67, original emphasis)

Savings and cash, as Delaney (1985) notes, were luxuries. Given this reality, it is not surprising that credit unions were the first co-operatives established through the Antigonish Movement.

Laidlaw (1946) clarified that the challenge to successful social change was to break the apathy, despair, and defeatism of the people, not through 'armchair-theories' but by people's informed actions. Essential to this shift was supporting people to understand themselves and their circumstances to become the leaders to imagine, create, and sustain the change necessary to improve their wellbeing and build a better society (Coady, 1939; Laidlaw, 1946). The key to this shift was adult education — popular, nonformal adult education. University extension programming through StFX, such as study clubs, conferences, and people's schools, and a regular newspaper column, began in the 1920s (Lotz & Welton, 1987). In November 1928, the StFX Extension Department was established to coordinate the movement (Coady, 1939). Extension began with minimal staff, including women, who provided administration, coordination, advocacy, education support, and more (Cameron, 1996). While the study clubs, people's schools, and conferences continued, education expanded into mass meetings and short courses, as well as the Extension Bulletin newsletter (1932-1939), which later became *The Maritime Cooperator* newspaper, radio, television, and film (Coady, 1939; McGowan, 2012). Education focused not solely on the potential, theories, logistics, and management of co-operatives, yet also on the economic and political systems and ideas that created the circumstances people found themselves in, democracy and civics, and topics selected by the people (Coady, 1939; Laidlaw, 1946, 1971). Mrs J. L. MacNeil (1937) recalled first hearing about study clubs in a sermon by Rev. Dr J. J. Tompkins:

He said, 'Don't wait for some great statesman to come along and solve your problems. Get organized into study clubs and solve your troubles yourselves.' He said if people would get together in small groups and do some worth while thinking, they could examine their industrial and social future and then put into practice plans for the good of the community. (p. 1)

The movement was not only about economic development through co-operatives, it was also about individual and collective empowerment and wellbeing, and social change.

Extension organised community mass meetings where speakers, including Extension workers, would inspire attendees by "throwing out ideas and move people to think" (Laidlaw, 1946, p. 176). After the speeches, a call for study club leaders was made, and small study clubs of five to 15 people, with the average being 10, formed and explored subjects relevant to the circumstances of their lives (Alexander, 1997; Coady, 1939; Delaney, 1985; Laidlaw, 1946). Study clubs met in homes, community halls, schools, or other convenient spaces (Extension, 1935). Clubs were often supported by community leaders, such as parish priests, and relevant reading materials, such as books, pamphlets, and brochures, were supplied by Extension. From 1932 to 1938, the number of study clubs grew from 179 to 1,110, with membership increasing from 1,500 to 10,000 (Alexander, 1997, p. 88).

From the study clubs grew buying clubs, credit unions, and consumer and producer co-operatives. From 1932 to 1939, credit unions increased from 8 to 170, reaching 30,000 members. In the next decade, they grew from 199 credit unions with 27,941 members in 1940 to 219 with 38,883 members in 1949, reaching assets totalling nearly CAD 4,256,000 (Dodaro & Pluta, 2012). These early credit unions resembled small savings and loans associations to which members regularly deposited membership fees determined by each group (Dodaro & Pluta, 2012). For example, the fee for the Coady Credit Union was 25 cents a week (Delany, n.d.). Women were members, presidents, and treasurers of credit unions (Neustaeter, 2025).

Beyond credit unions, the number of consumer co-operatives increased from two to 43 between 1932 and 1938 (Alexander, 1997). Co-operative housing began in 1938 with Tompkinsville,

followed by Reidville in 1943 (Alexander, 1997; Arnold, 1940; Coady Institute, 2012). In 1947, there were 241 built or under-construction co-operative houses, and in 1949, 295 (Dodaro & Pluta, 2012). For the most part, these co-operative houses were built through the sweat equity of the families moving into them and neighbours (Arnold, 1940; Dodaro & Pluta, 2012). Study club and co-operative memberships highlight that thousands of people were involved in the Antigonish Movement at this time (Dodaro & Pluta, 2012). The Antigonish Movement existed because of the active engagement and support of community members, including women (Delaney, 1985; Doyle, 1982; Neal, 1998).

Profiling Three Women

Examining archival data of women in the Antigonish Movement reveals a complicated picture. One can find the women who worked for the Extension Department office in Antigonish in its first decade. Women fieldworkers who worked in communities across the study's region and women community leaders are under-represented in the archives. Recognising the multiplicity of women in the Antigonish Movement reveals that there is no universal narrative of 'women-in-the-movement' or women's movement experience. Centring women requires understanding women who were the community leaders and actors, as well as the Extension staff. As a means of introduction to women in the Antigonish Movement, three women are profiled here: Mary Laben, community leader, Sr Monica Doyle, who served in communities, and Kay Thompson Desjardin, Extension staff. These women are examples of the involvement of women in industrial and fishing communities and women working for Extension, as well as lay women and women religious.

Mary Laben

From the earliest developments of Reserve Mines Credit Union and the Tompkinsville housing co-operative, Mary Laben led through hospitality (Laben, 1989). She was born in Reserve Mines, one of eight siblings, and had a formal education up to the twelfth grade. She used her knowledge to uplift others, teaching her miner husband writing and arithmetic so that he could continue to learn independently from the library (Laben, 1989). The Labens were one of the founding members of the Tompkinsville housing co-operative. They moved into their unfinished house ahead of the other Tompkinsville residents so that the electric company would connect electric power to their housing development. Mary got to work immediately, preparing a stew, bread, and apple pie for the men out working on the homes, serving the first hot meal in Tompkinsville (Laben, 1989). She and Mabel Reed, alongside the other women of Tompkinsville, embodied the spirit of co-operation and made sure their community was fed as there was very little money to go around (Laben, 1989). They worked on their houses while their husbands worked in the mines (Laben, 1989). The women of Tompkinsville organised co-operatively, frequently pooling their skills and resources to make quilts and clothing, as well as putting together CAD 1.50 to go into neighbouring Sydney and watch *Gone with the Wind* at the movie theatre (Laben, 1989).

Mary took an active role in turning the co-operative housing development of Tompkinsville into a tight-knit community, coming together with the rest of the women to create an inviting and hospitable community full of familial support. Despite her significant contributions, she rarely spoke of her own importance, always celebrating the group actions of Tompkinsville or highlighting her husband's work on the development of co-operative housing and his later work with Extension. Her commitment to the co-operative movement was remarkable, continuing her support by eagerly sharing her experience as a pioneer of the Antigonish Movement with visitors to Tompkinsville (Laben, 1989).

Mary's leadership and community work were not exclusive to co-operatives. She continued her community involvement through the Cape Breton Miners Museum, St. Joseph's Parish, the Pensioners' Club, the Reserve Mines Fire Department Ladies Auxiliary, and other associations (Find a Grave, 2005).

Sr Monica Doyle

Sr Monica Doyle was born in Enfield, Nova Scotia, in 1903, the only daughter of six children. She worked as a milliner in Inverness before becoming a Sister of St. Martha in 1931 (The Marthas, 1991). She was called to her first mission by Fr Jimmy Tompkins in 1933 (Doyle, 1989). On a cold day in January, she travelled by boat to the isolated fishing community of Canso on the edge of rocky land and the sea, and then to the community of Dover, further down the coast (Doyle, 1989). Left with only a handkerchief and a rosary in her pocket, she was welcomed by a family in Dover for a week as she collected information about the needs of each household in the community (Doyle, 1989). She was a resourceful woman, managing to scrap together tools from what she could find in the community to share her creative handicraft and cooking skills and teach the people of Dover and Canso to help themselves (Doyle, 1989). Through hard work and dedication, she organised twenty-three knitting groups and taught both men and women the skill of weaving, with this, they could make textiles for themselves and earn some money through sales (Doyle, 1989). In Canso, the children called her the 'Jolly Sister' in response to her "good cheer and easy and homey interaction" (The Marthas, 1991).

During her twenty years of service in Canso and Dover, Sr Monica also spent two years in Margaree Forks, where she taught handicrafts and sewing (Doyle, 1989). She oversaw the use of the new pressure cooker and sealer for canning that had been purchased through a savings club (Chiasson, 1998). One year, she oversaw production of over 3,800 cans using this new tin can method (Doyle, 1989). Later, she was one of the first sisters to participate in an outreach programme where she taught crafts and religion and served soup made from anything available in Lincolnville, an African-Nova Scotia community (The Marthas, 1991). In 1968, she was asked to serve at St. Martha's Convent in Antigonish, where she spent the rest of her life continuing to use her skills as a seamstress to serve her community (The Marthas, 1991).

Kay Thompson Desjardin

Kay Thompson Desjardins was the first person hired by Extension in 1931. She graduated from Mount Saint Bernard College in Antigonish and pursued a brief career in education (Desjardins, 1990). While working in New York as a governess, she was recruited to Extension by StFX university president Monsignor H. P. MacPherson (Desjardins, 1991). Although she was hired as a secretary, her role at Extension went beyond that. She was a skilful mediator and talented writer and editor (Masters of Their Own Destiny, 2026a). She produced many pamphlets and study materials that responded to the needs of the study clubs (Desjardins, 1991), including *Maritime Techniques in Consumer Cooperation* (Extension Department, 1939; Masters of Their Own Destiny, 2026a) which transposed broader ideas of consumer co-operation to the regional context. When the Extension office in Sydney opened, she moved there for a change of scenery and began writing the labour pages for *The Maritime Cooperator* (Desjardins, 1991).

Kay later returned to Antigonish to take on her new role as managing editor of *The Maritime Cooperator* where she continued promoting co-operatives. She held this position until her retirement in 1970 and did not sway from her steadfast beliefs regarding co-operation and women's involvement in labour (Desjardins, 1991). She faced criticism from big news companies and politicians; however, she did not allow these complaints to get under her skin (Desjardins, 1991). She knew that to keep publishing her punchy editorials, she had to be certain that everything she wrote was backed by sound research (Desjardins, 1991). Her contributions to *The Maritime Cooperator* and other local literature on co-operation communicated the movement's mission to larger audiences, allowing them to take their education into their own hands, and learn through informed action.

At a time when professional, working married mothers were not typical, Kay balanced motherhood and career (Desjardins, 1990). As editor of *The Maritime Cooperator*, she built a schedule suited to her lifestyle (Desjardins, 1990). With the help of the full-time housekeeper, she could go into the office when her children were in school and work from home (Desjardins, 1990). She spoke very highly of her Extension colleagues, notably Zita O'Hearn Cameron and

Ida Gallant Delaney, who remained some of her closest lifelong friends (Desjardins, 1991). Reflecting on her time with Extension, she stated, “It developed all of us who were in the program into people who were thinking people and caring people” (Desjardins, 1991). Her commitment to her career and the promotion of co-operation were remarkable.

Mary Laben, Sr Monica Doyle, and Kay Thompson Desjardins are three of hundreds of women who applied their strengths, values, knowledge, skills, and lived experience to the Antigonish Movement, thus becoming part of community, social, and economic change.

Women of the Movement

Speaking on women in social and economic change on 31 July 1951, Dr Moses Coady stated:

Women are full-fledged citizens today. They have to be interested in all that men are interested in, and a great deal more besides. They should be interested in knowing the adequate formula for the reconstruction of society, whether they are living in a fishing or farming community. It is foolish to expect that women are going to get enthusiastic over reconstructing society on a philosophy of sewing and cooking with a little art thrown in. (Laidlaw, 1971, pp. 69-70)

Recognising women as full-fledged citizens acknowledges their everyday agency, the ordinary and extra-ordinary, within their socio-cultural and economic realities. Women negotiated multiple roles in their homes, communities, and workplaces. Evidence of women’s work as teachers, nurses, telephone operators, stenographers, store and bank clerks, entrepreneurs, and more challenged the idea of rural women in this region as *only* housewives. During World War Two, women worked in shipyards and steel plants (Beaton, 1992; Parks Canada, 2018; von Stackelberg, 2018). The private and public spaces of women’s lives were integrated, as noted in an Extension report on women in the movement — “the home is so intimately connected with the community at large that to exclude one is to injure the other” (Extension, ca. 1938, p. 1).

Early on, Extension recruited and hired women for their knowledge, skills, and values, which aligned with the Antigonish Movement. Examining Extension’s annual reports from 1931 to 2021 identifies 140 women who worked for this department. Admittedly, this number underrepresents the total number of women who worked for Extension. For this study, it is difficult to identify all women employed by Extension, as not all early annual reports name staff; some report the number of full-time and part-time staff; and some report simply ‘secretaries’ or ‘fieldworkers’. Women, including Ida Gallant and Tat Sears, worked as Extension fieldworkers in the study area (Delaney, 1985; Welton, 2001). Women’s work with Extension cannot be determined by their job title. Like Kay Thompson, whose work with Extension went beyond secretary, Sr Irene Doyle (1982), hired to work with the Women’s Work Program and handicrafts, also supported credit unions, put on short courses in communities, worked as a fieldworker for short periods in different communities, wrote pamphlets, organised study club materials, typed minutes and manuscripts, and became an in-house graphic designer. The days were full of surprises, and adaptability was key. She noted “[t]o be a member of the Extension Staff in those days, as I experienced it, meant not knowing what you were about, or even being certain of what you were doing day to day” (Doyle, 1982, p. 1). Many of the women who worked for Extension, particularly in the early years, were from northeastern Nova Scotia, or rural communities in the Maritimes, had a post-secondary education (either a diploma, or Bachelors or Masters degree, often from Mount Saint Bernard College associated with StFX), and had training or work experience relevant to their roles in Extension (Masters of Their Own Destiny, 2026b). Of the five more known early women, Kay Thompson, Ida Gallant, and Zita O’Hearn, continued careers in the co-operative movement after working with Extension.

To support women’s involvement in the movement, Extension started the Women’s Work Program in 1933, run by Sister of St. Martha Marie Michael McKinnon, who was joined by Sr Irene Doyle in 1935. This programme recognised the diversity of women in the region, and thus the movement. The interests and concerns of women in fishing and farming areas were different than they were for women in industrial areas, and housewives had different interests than young

working women (Extension, n.d.b). The programme emphasised building relationships with Extension fieldworkers and women in communities, supporting spaces for women to gather, and understanding the nuances of women's concerns and interests in each group and community (Extension, n.d.c). Reporting study clubs in the first year of this programme, the StFX Academic Calendar (1934) notes:

Three hundred study clubs with an enrollment of 1500 have been organized during the past year for women and these have been supplied regularly with material on handicrafts, homemaking, dramatics, etc. As a result of their study, there is evident a revival of home industries in many communities. (p. 111)

By 1938, there were 350 women-only study clubs and some women attended both a mixed club and women-only club (Alexander, 1997; Delaney, 1985). In the 14 February 1938 issue of the *Sydney Post Recorder*, the Sunshine Study Club reported on their weekly meeting, at the home of their president, that there was one new member and the group read and discussed an article on the classification of food, and ended with making gloves (Study Club Meets, 1938). Across the region, through study clubs, women came together, typically in their homes, to learn from and with one another. Women, such as Mary Laben, hosted and participated in study clubs. Sr Monica Doyle supported study clubs with teaching weaving, knitting, dyeing wool, and other handicrafts.

Turning to credit unions, women held various positions at home and in public as volunteers and later as staff. In many households, it was women's budgeting expertise that ensured credit union membership fees could be deposited (Delaney, 1985). The hospitality of women, like Mary Campbell of New Aberdeen and Mary Laben, ensured study and credit union groups had welcoming meeting spaces (Delaney, n.d.; Laben, 1989). While Mary Campbell was not on the Coady Credit Union Board of Directors, she was a director by association as her husband, Michael, was both a director and the treasurer-manager. Previous experience working in a bank gave Mary Campbell relevant knowledge to support this credit union (Delaney, n.d.). Initially, women were not members of credit unions. As most households had a single income, it was assumed that women had no independent income, and there were concerns of families paying two weekly membership fees (Delaney, 1985; Welton, 2001). Delaney's (n.d.) history of the Coady Credit Union notes that the directors consulted with R. F. Bergengren, leader of the credit union movement in the US and supporter of this movement in Nova Scotia, on women's credit union membership, and once receiving his favourable response to women's membership in 1934, the Coady Credit Union allowed women to hold membership.

Women were treasurers and presidents of credit unions. In 1946, at least seven women were presidents and 49 were treasurers of the 200 active credit unions in Nova Scotia (Credit unions in Nova Scotia, 1946). In 1948, at least five women were presidents and 41 were treasurers of the 195 active credit unions (Credit unions in Nova Scotia, 1948). Thirty-seven of these women held their positions both years, including Mary Anne Parker, Treasurer of the Brook Village credit union, mother of eight, who ran a farm with her husband. A few credit unions had women presidents and treasurers, including the Mount Saint Bernard (MSB) credit union, established in 1944, at the all-girls school affiliated with StFX (Only all girls credit union, 1948). As credit unions expanded membership, established their own spaces, and hired staff, women were also employed in them. In 1937, the first women worked as tellers in the Coady Credit Union in New Aberdeen (Delaney, n.d.).

The question of women's membership in consumer co-operatives differed from credit union practice. To become a member of a consumer co-operative, one must purchase a share, and most households could only afford one share, which would be held by the 'head of the household' — of which men were the majority (Extension, 1944). As they were not recognised co-operative members, most women could not vote or sit on the board (MacKinnon & Delaney, 1942). While this structure reflected national practice (Alexander, 1997), it excluded women from decision-making. The woman consumer was essential to the success of consumer co-operatives (Alexander, 1997). Women understood their household's needs, finances, and

budgets, and studied consumer literacy, human nutrition, and home economics in study clubs and courses supported by Extension broadly and its Women Work programme specifically. Recognising women's significant role as consumers in ensuring the success of consumer co-operatives, the Antigonish Movement and the co-operative movement in Canada promoted women's co-operative auxiliaries (also called guilds) in the 1910s (Neal, 1997). The women's auxiliary of the British Cooperative Store began in 1919 (Neal, 1997). This board of directors (male) and women's auxiliary structure was replicated in the consumer co-operatives of the Antigonish Movement between 1930 and 1950. These auxiliaries never took off in co-operatives established through the Antigonish Movement, as many women viewed them as second-class (Neal, 1997).

Critics of this division within the Antigonish Movement, such as Zita O'Hearn Cameron (1990) and Ida Gallant Delaney (1985), argued for multiple members within a household and women's full engagement in co-operatives. This issue came to the fore on 22 and 23 July 1944, at the Congress of Nova Scotia Cooperative Societies' meeting in Antigonish, where increasing women's participation in co-operatives was on the agenda (Extension, 1944). While each society was specifically asked to send at least one woman delegate, only six attended, of whom two were co-operative society members (Extension, 1944). Leading up to this congress, a survey was sent to the Nova Scotia co-operative societies with 34 responding, and results indicating that "*only* 547" women owned shares and "*only* 314 of them as full-fledged members" (Extension, 1944, p. 2, emphasis added). To support women's participation in the co-operative societies, the attendees of this convention passed the following resolution: "That the union recommends that each Society amend its by-laws to permit the wife or husband of a member to become another member of the same standing as his or her partner by buying one unit of share capital" (Extension, 1944, p. 2). While this resolution addressed the one member per household concern, responsibility for implementing this change went to the societies without specifics on timeline, reporting, or accountability.

Discussion and Conclusion

Examining women in the Antigonish Movement highlights women's visible and invisible, paid and volunteer movement work, and the tensions regarding gender equality and relations. Women needed to see their interests in the long-term vision of the movement and engage in learning relevant to their everyday concerns and responsibilities, which this movement framed around the household and community (Extension, n.d.b). At this time, women in this region mainly "managed household resources, tended to too many children and generally held the hard-pressed communities together" (Welton 2001, p. 146).

Women were the managers of families, households, and communities (Welton, 2001). The Women's Work programme's focus on health, nutrition, and critical consumer education created opportunities for women to build knowledge relevant to these roles, engage in critical analysis, make informed decisions, and build considered strategies to advocate for familial and community wellbeing. Boulding's (1995), Dominelli's (2019), and Neustaeter's (2015) scholarship invite repositioning this work as significant, that women's knowledge and experience gained through these roles should not be displaced from decision-making spaces; specifically, because of their expertise, they should be at the decision tables. It calls for challenging the value and power assigned to this work. Within the movement at this time, Zita O'Hearn Cameron and Ida Gallant Delaney were advocating for gender equity in the movement — women's membership in consumer co-operatives and full participation on their boards because of their expertise, and challenging the existence of women's auxiliaries, which regulated them into secondary spaces (Neal, 1997).

Learning weaving, knitting, pottery and other handicrafts, and food preservation, supported women to create practical items for use by themselves and their families, to sell for cash to supplement their household budgets and access cash, all to improve their families' standard of living (Doyle, 1982). While the handicrafts programme is an example of women as producers

(Welton, 2001), the production was centred around the gendered roles of the household. The learning and making handicrafts were valuable to the women in ways beyond monetary. Women gathered to learn together, critically analyse, and discuss the circumstances of their lives, and imagine themselves as agents of change and the possibility of a different present and future (Delaney, 1985; Neal, 1997; Neustaeter & Gallant, 2026).

Contradictions exist between the ideals of the Antigonish Movement, including building the “full and abundant life for all” (Coady Institute, 2026) which the study suggests did not include gender equality, recognising and naming the necessity and significance of women’s involvement for the success of co-operatives while excluding women from co-operative structures and positions of leadership, for example, as directors. While the Antigonish Movement is primarily considered a movement focused on economic development, movements can create opportunities to perpetuate or challenge gender roles. The archives provide evidence of women’s involvement in the movement in multiple informal, formal, volunteer, and paid roles. The movement provided opportunities for women to build their economic agency through selling handicrafts for cash, saving money and accessing loans through credit union accounts in their own names, and employment opportunities in co-operatives and credit unions. However, women’s involvement, particularly in leadership roles, was still overshadowed by men. Analysis of the 1946 list reveals that at least 12 men named James were presidents of credit unions, which is more than the total number of women presidents the same year (Credit unions in Nova Scotia, 1946). By the late 1940s, discussions of women in the movement questioned the movement’s success in integrating women. *Let’s Mobilize the Women*, published sometime after World War Two opens with “[I]t is recognized that the co-op movement has been handicapped by its failure to take into account the possible contributions of the women” (Extension, n.d.a, p. 1). The pamphlet’s call for women’s engagement focuses on giving moral support, spreading the word about co-operatives in the community, organising auxiliaries, but it does not name becoming a co-operative director. Doyle (1982) notes that the 1950 report on women in the co-operative movement conducted by Kay Thompson Desjardin, Nadine Archibald, and Jean Munro, is explicit on the marginalisation of women:

We believe that up to the present time and in view of the information that we can obtain, one of the serious drawbacks to progressive development has been the omission of the full and equal participation of women in the cooperative movement. Up to the present time then we must conclude that men have dominated all phases of the movement, and that women have been on the outside looking in, with no invitation or very little incentive to enter and we believe this to be one of the major violations of the philosophy of the Cooperative Movement. (Doyle, 1982, p. 9)

The archives present a complicated narrative of women in the movement from 1930 to 1950. Their involvement demonstrates women’s active work for change, predominantly in community spaces and households, while broader movement and socio-cultural systems marginalised or omitted them as leaders and actors. As well, their involvement was focused on dominant gendered societal roles and division of labour — a division that maintained much of women’s movement labour as invisible.

Recognising that history provides lessons for the present, the following three takeaways are shared. First, a feminist analysis of the Antigonish Movement highlights that movements are gendered. Understanding the socio-cultural gender realities of movements and their contexts can build deeper critical understandings of what was happening, why, and the significance of the strategies, responses, successes, tensions, and failures. Building an understanding of the gendered nature of past movements, such as the Antigonish Movement, can lead to insights on how current movements are gendered. Second, women were always present, in many ways. Seeking and piecing together women’s roles and experiences in the Antigonish Movement forms a more complex and complicated understanding of co-operative history and a more accurate historical narrative. Expanding attention to movement actors beyond those in formal leadership roles more accurately accounts for the breadth and scope of who is involved and what is happening in movements. Finally, women’s involvement in the Antigonish Movement is an example of women’s continuous work sustaining community wellbeing and development over centuries (Neustaeter, 2015). What would the Antigonish Movement have looked like without

women's involvement? Leaders and organisers of the Antigonish Movement recognised that a movement for economic development required women to be effective. In many ways, visible and invisible, formal and informal, women are involved in their communities, including co-operatives and co-operative movements.

The Author

Robin Neustaeter is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Her research focuses on women's learning, work, and leadership in community development and peacebuilding. *What Can the Women Do?* is her current feminist historical case study.

References

- Alexander, A. M. (1997). *The Antigonish Movement: Moses Coady and adult education today*. Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Arnold, M. E. (1940). *The story of Tompkinsville*. The Cooperative League.
- Beaton, E. (Director). (1992). *Making steel* [Film]. Beaton Institute; National Film Board of Canada. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VBjILqCSTM>
- Boulding, E. (1995). Feminist inventions in the art of peacemaking: A century overview. *Peace & Change*, 20(4), 408-438. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.1995.tb00245.x>
- Cameron, J. D. (1996). *For the people: A history of St Francis Xavier University*. McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773565852>
- Cameron, Z. (1990, February 14). *Interview by D. MacInnes* [Tape recording]. (Fonds MG-97 Dan MacInnes fond item 28). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Carter, R. G. S. (2006). Of things said and unsaid: Power, archival silences, and power in silence. *Archivaria*, 61, 215-233.
- Chaudhuri, N., Katz, S. J., & Perry, M. E. (Eds.). (2010). *Contesting archives: Finding women in the sources*. University of Illinois Press.
- Chiasson, A. (1998). *Chéticamp: History and Acadian traditions* (J. D. LeBlanc, Trans.). Breton Books.
- Coady, M. M. (1939). *Masters of their own destiny*. Harper and Row.
- Coady Institute. (2012, May 15). *Living in Reidville with Evelyn MacDonald* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2992gn-Q3E0>
- Coady Institute. (2026). *Community Engagement*. <https://coady.stfx.ca/community-engagement/>
- Credit unions in Nova Scotia*. (1946). (Extension Department fonds, RG-30-3/4/1279). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Credit unions in Nova Scotia*. (1948). (Extension Department fonds, RG-30-3/4/1291). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Delaney, I. (n.d.). *25¢ a week: The Coady Credit Union's first 10 years 1933-1943*. Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University.
- Delaney, I. (1985). *By their own hands: A fieldworker's account of the Antigonish Movement*. Lancelot Press.
- Desjardins, K. (1990, January 31). *Interview* [Tape recording]. (Daniel McInnes fonds, MG 97). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Desjardins, K. (1991, June 11). *Interview* [Tape recording]. (Daniel McInnes fonds, MG 97). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Dodaro, S., & Pluta, L. (2012). *The big picture: The Antigonish movement of eastern Nova Scotia*. McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773587281>
- Dominelli, L. (1995). Women in the community: Feminist principles and organising in community work. *Community Development Journal*, 30(2), 133-143. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/30.2.133>
- Dominelli, L. (2019). *Women and community action: Local and global perspectives*. Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.56687/9781447341550>
- Doyle, I. (n.d.). *What can the women do?* Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University.
- Doyle, I. (1982). *Women of the Antigonish Movement, speech notes for Atlantic Institute*. Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha's Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Doyle, I. (1995, October 26). *Women in community development: The Antigonish Movement for women's history month symposium*, St. F. X. University. Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha's Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.

- Doyle, I. (1996). *What is the Antigonish Movement?* CBC interview by P. Gzowski. Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha's Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Doyle, M. (1989, December 20). *Interview* [Tape recording]. (Daniel McInnes fonds, MG 97). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. (n.d.a). *Let's mobilize the women*. St. Francis Xavier University.
- Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. (n.d.b). *A program for women must take in the following*. (Extension Department fonds, RG-30-3/30/450). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. (n.d.c). *To put over a program for rural women will require a variety of means*. (Extension Department fonds, RG-30-3/30/452). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. (1934). *Academic Calendar*. St. Francis Xavier University.
- Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. (1935). *St. F. X. Extension Work*. (Extension Department Fonds. RG 30-3/25/895). St. Francis Xavier University Archives. <https://stfx.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/816db3bc-6914-48d7-86b7-1de857be4413/content>
- Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. (ca. 1938). *Aims & achievements of women in the extension movement*. (Extension Department fonds, RG 30-3/30/68). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. (1939). *Maritime techniques in consumer cooperation*. St. Francis Xavier University.
- Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University. (1944). *Women and NS Cooperative Societies*. (Extension Department Fonds RG 30-3/30/735). St. Francis Xavier University Archives. Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Find a Grave. (2005). *Mary Sarah Steele Laben* [Obituary]. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/215481407/mary-sarah-laben>
- Frank, D. (1983). The miner's financier: Women in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, 8(2), 137-144.
- Laben, M. (1989, December 15). *Interview* [Tape recording]. (Daniel McInnes fonds, MG 97). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Laidlaw, A. F. (1946). The Antigonish Movement. *Blackfriars*, 27(314), 173-179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1946.tb07971.x>
- Laidlaw, A. F. (1961). *The campus and the community: The global impact of the Antigonish Movement*. Harvest House Limited.
- Laidlaw, A. F. (Ed.). (1971). *The man from Margaree: Writings and speeches of M. M. Coady*. McClelland and Stewart Limited.
- Lotz, J., & Welton, M. R. (1987). "Knowledge for the people": The origins and development of the Antigonish Movement. In M. R. Welton (Ed.), *Knowledge for the people: The struggle for adult learning in English-speaking Canada 1828-1973*, (pp. 97-111). OISE Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487571948-008>
- MacKinnon, M., & Delaney, I. (1942). *The woman speaks her mind*. St. Francis Xavier Extension Department.
- MacNeil, J. L. (1937, December 30). *Talk at public speaking class*. (MGN/184, G.). The Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Manoff, M. (2004). Theories of the archive from across the disciplines. *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4(1), 9-25. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2004.0015>
- Martin, C. (2018). Archival research as a feminist practice. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 16(4), 454-460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2018.1524965>
- Masters of Their Own Destiny. (2026a). *Katherine (Kay) Thompson Desjardins, 1906-1997*. Coady Institute. <https://coady.stfx.ca/collection/the-people/the-women-of-the-antigonish-movement/katherine-kay-thompson-desjardins-1906-1997/>
- Masters of Their Own Destiny. (2026b). *The women of the Antigonish Movement*. Coady Institute. <https://coady.stfx.ca/collection/the-people/the-women-of-the-antigonish-movement/>
- McGowan, M. G. (2012). The people's university of the air: St. Francis Xavier University Extension, social Christianity, and the creation of CJFX. *Acadiensis*, 41(1), 5-20.
- Neal, R. (1997). Women's participation in co-operatives: Evidence from the British Canadian Co-operative Society. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 30(1), 22-47.
- Neal, R. (1998). *Brotherhood economics: Women and co-operatives in Nova Scotia*. The University College of Cape Breton Press.

- Neustaeter, R. (2015). "It's not the icing, it's the glue": Rural women's volunteering in Manitoba, Canada. In M. P. Flaherty, S. Byrne, Tusso, H., & T. G. Maytok, (Eds.), *Gender and peacebuilding: All hands required* (pp. 195-212). Lexington Books.
- Neustaeter, R. (2025). More than credit: A historical exploration of women, credit unions, and change. In L. White (Ed.), *Conference Proceedings* (pp. 396-404). Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education.
- Neustaeter, R., & Gallant, S. (2026). Writing for their lives: Women and the Antigonish Movement. *Canadian Women's Studies Journal*, 38(1-2), 54-63.
- Only all girls credit union in America flourishes at MSB. (1948, November 6). *Xavierian Weekly*, p. 4.
- Parks Canada. (2018, September 29). *Women shipbuilders and Mrs. Martin (Malti)*. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/parks-canada/news/2018/09/women-shipbuilders-and-mrs-martin-malti.html>
- Study Club Meets. (1938, February 14). *Sydney Post Recorder*, p. 12.
- Subotić, J. (2021). Ethics of archival research on political violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 58(3), 342-354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319898735>
- The Marthas. (1991). *Sister Monica Doyle* [Necrology]. Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Topshee, G. E. (1975). *Women in transition*. (Extension Department Fonds, RG 30-3/30/486). St. Francis Xavier University Archives, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- von Stackelberg, M. (2018, September 30). "Trailblazing" female shipbuilders of the Second World War honoured. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/women-shipbuilders-honoured-1.4844179>
- Welton, M. R. (2001). *Little Mosie from the Margaree: A biography of Moses Michael Coady*. Thompson Educational Publishing.