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Special Edition: Fighting Feminism – Organised Opposition to Women’s Rights

Guest Editors’ Introduction

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This special issue presents a series of papers by scholars who participated in a workshop entitled ‘Men’s Groups: Challenging Feminism’,¹ which was held at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada, 26-27 May 2014. The workshop was organised by Susan B Boyd, Professor of Law and Chair in Feminist Legal Studies at the UBC Faculty of Law, and was sponsored by the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at UBC, the Peter A Allard School of Law, the Centre for Feminist Legal Studies at UBC, and the *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*. The aim of the workshop was to bring together feminist scholars from multiple disciplines and multiple national contexts to explore a source of resistance to feminism that has been largely overlooked in scholarly research: the growing number of nationally situated and globally linked organisations acting in the name of men’s rights and interests which contend that men are discriminated against in law, education and government funding, and that feminism is to blame for this. This special edition presents eight papers inspired by the workshop, authored by scholars from Canada, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden and the United States. A second special issue comprised of eight other papers inspired by the workshop was published in the *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* as volume 28(1) in 2016.

Antifeminist men’s rights activism (MRA) has been the subject of considerable media attention in recent years, instigated by events such as Elliot Rodger’s misogynist motivated shooting of 20 people in the US state of California in 2014 (see, for example, Blake 2015; Goldwag 2012; Marcotte 2015; Ortiz 2015; Potok and Schlatter 2012; Serwer and Baker 2015; Sharlet 2014). However, notwithstanding ample historical and cross-national evidence of connections between mass murders and antifeminist ideology, often explicitly spelt out in manifestos and diaries, there has been relatively little scholarly attention to the implications of MRA and rhetoric to such events. This connection was explicit in the case of Marc Lépine’s massacre of 14 women in Canada in 1989, George Sodini’s shooting of 12 people in the US state of Pennsylvania in 2009, Anders Behring Breivik’s mass murder of 77 people in Norway in 2011, and Elliot Rodger’s shooting of 20 people in California in 2014.

At the 2014 workshop, a few dozen scholars involved in this area of study from around the world came together to discuss manifestations and impacts of antifeminist men’s activism. As previous research has documented, antifeminist men’s groups have organised around a variety of social and legal issues across various jurisdictions, ranging from opposition to child custody

and child support (Boyd 2004; Mann 2005) to opposition to domestic violence services (Dragiewicz 2008, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Girard 2009; Lodhia 2014; Mann 2003, 2007, 2008; Menzies 2007; Rosen, Dragiewicz and Gibbs 2009), shifting the focus of their protest activities in response to local developments in law, policy, practice and public opinion. While there are variations in their foci, antifeminist men’s groups and Internet forums, identifiable by acronyms such as MGTOW,² PUA,³ FR⁴ and #Gamergate, are united by complaints that feminism is the source of men’s personal and professional problems and a threat to civilisation. While it is easy to dismiss MRAs as a fringe voice, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate, their arguments are echoed in positions advanced by antifeminist professors, judges, journalists, child custody evaluators and politicians. In short, MRA activities, interests and rhetoric are in line with mainstream antifeminism, and have had serious negative ramifications in contexts important to women’s lives. Moreover, in many countries, antifeminist activism is tied in with nationalist movements that promote racist and xenophobic as well as patriarchal agendas.

Michael Messner opens the special issue describing the evolving historical and political contexts which produced multiple varieties of US feminism and the men’s feminist and antifeminist organising which grew up in response to it. His article ‘Forks in the Road of Men’s Gender Politics: Men’s Rights vs Feminist Allies’ raises concerns about the ways ‘postfeminism’ and neoliberalism obscure persistent inequalities via individualising and decontextualising framings of gendered social problems such as violence and abuse. Messner calls for a repoliticisation of antiviolence work in particular, drawing from intersectional analyses of concurrent and interrelated forms of oppression.

Francis Dupuis-Déri’s translation of ‘State Antifeminism’⁵ investigates how antifeminism has taken root in Belgium and Canada in state legislatures, civil service, and quasi-public bodies. In the absence of explicitly antifeminist polices or laws, antifeminists in the state draw upon a repertoire of tactics reflected elsewhere in this special issue such as claims of gender-symmetry, attacks on laws and polices that address violence against women, and calls for ‘balance’ that position feminism and antifeminism as similarly valid.

Picking up on this same theme, **Katarzyna Wojnicka’s** article ‘Masculist Groups in Poland: Aides of Mainstream Antifeminism’ examines the discourses and influence of antifeminist groups in Poland on issues such as abortion reform, law reform on violence against women, and the trivialisation of rape. Wojnicka discusses the interplay of media, government and religious narratives in opposition to women’s rights, noting the importance of claims of gender symmetry to antifeminist resistance.

Ruth Mann’s article ‘The Harper Government’s New Right Neoliberal Agenda and the Dismantling of Status of Women Canada and the Family Violence Initiative’ examines the place of antifeminism within the neoliberal agenda. Mann demonstrates how state-supported manifestations of feminism were undermined as part of a broader retrenchment of social justice programs in Canada under the Harper government.

The next two articles deal with harassment campaigns by antifeminist groups against individual feminist scholars. **Lise Gotell** and **Emily Dutton** analyse the backlash against the recent political and legal successes of antirape feminism in Canada in ‘Sexual Violence in the “Manosphere”: Anti-feminist Men’s Rights Discourses on Rape’. Their article describes antifeminist attacks on anti-rape education on university campuses in Canada. Gotell and Dutton suggest that antifeminist activism has shifted towards rape as developments in campus reporting and education have gained public attention.

Elizabeth Sheehy’s commentary reflects on public discussion of abused women who kill batterers in self-defence in ‘Defending Battered Women in the Public Sphere’. Sheehy found herself in a maelstrom of bizarre media attention after publishing *Defending Battered Women on*

Trial: Lessons from the Transcripts, a scholarly book on domestic violence cases where women had killed their abusers. Sheehy shows how the claims of antifeminist groups were adopted by mainstream media, reversing the focus of the book on battered women to claims that Sheehy is advocating for the killing of men.

Maria Edström extends the analysis of public harassment to journalists and other women in the public sphere. Edström’s article ‘The Trolls Disappear in the Light: Swedish and Nordic Experiences of Mediated Sexualized Hate Speech in the Aftermath of Behring Breivik’ links Behring Breivik’s mass killing and manifesto to the commonplace experience of harassment for female journalists via threats and trolling on social media. Edström argues that the harms to women and society extend beyond the victims of individual violent incidents. She shows how female and especially feminist journalists are targeted with harassment and threats when they resist the erasure of gender from public discussions about violent events.

Vivienne Elizabeth uses an analysis of newspaper representations of two custody abductions and one filicide-suicide to explore what they show about the influence of the pro-father discourses derived from the fathers’ rights movement on news representation of separated fathers in New Zealand. Her article, ‘“I’d just lose it if there was any more stress in my life”: Separated Fathers, Fathers’ Rights and the News Media’, indicates the limits of antifeminist narratives about fathers, indicating a border where men’s behaviour crosses the line to become repugnant.

Catherine Cerulli’s review of Kristin J Anderson’s book *Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era* (2014) concludes the contributions collected for this special issue addressing antifeminist activism.

As the articles in this special issue show, the shape of antifeminist activism is specific to the historical, regional and political contexts in which it arises. However, like much of the feminist action it opposes, antifeminist organising is clustered around two central issues for women’s rights: gendered violence and the family. The pieces collected here indicate that these locations continue to be central to the oppression of women, highlighting the ways that the state, traditional and new media, and the law function as key locations of struggle in the fight for women’s rights. The articles in this collection identify points of continuity between the mainstream antifeminism of politicians and courts and the extremist views of antifeminist men’s groups organising on the Internet. Despite frequent claims that patriarchy is dead and therefore feminism is obsolete in Western countries, the research in this special issue indicates otherwise, pointing to ongoing efforts to erode women’s status. Ironically, the upsurge of antifeminist activism can be read as a sign of feminisms’ power. After all, if it were truly dead or obsolete would there be so much effort poured into attacking it? The sites of struggle are precisely where there have been feminist victories, or the promise of them.

The articles in this special issue contribute to the small but growing research literature on antifeminist organising that can be used to resist it. They also illuminate the contours of contemporary patriarchy around the globe. We hope that the research and issues raised in these articles will inspire greater attention to the impact of antifeminist backlash in academia and beyond so that we can continue working to secure women’s human rights.

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¹ A summary of key themes from the workshop can be found at <https://blogs.ubc.ca/cfls/key-themes-insights-mens-groups-challenging-feminism/>

² Men Going their Own Way <https://www.mgtow.com/>

³ Pick up Artist <http://www.pick-up-artist-forum.com/>

⁴ Fathers Rights <http://www.fathersrights.org/>

⁵ Previously published in French as Francis Dupuis-Déri (2013) L’antiféminisme d’état. *Lien Social et Politiques* 69: 163-180.

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