

# A province stuck in time? Award-winning film highlights barriers to reproductive choice in NB

By TOMI GBELEYI

Fredericton – A nationally acclaimed film that features the work of two Fredericton women emphasizes the dividends and continued relevance of feminism in Canada by contrasting the accomplishments of past feminist demands with the status of women today.

From the depiction of the laughter and jeers which greeted the suggestion of spousal abuse as a serious societal issue in Canada at the House of Commons in 1982 to a declaration by a pro-life activist that selfishness and greed is the underlying cause of abortions, *Status Quo?: The Unfinished Business of Feminism* is a provocative movie by Montreal filmmaker Karen Cho that does not shy away from controversial issues.

Archival information about past feminist movements, personal accounts from women and experts in the film create a compelling tale which zeroes in on key concerns such as continued domestic violence against women, barriers to accessing abortion and the soaring costs of childcare in Canada.

The segment of the film that addresses the dynamics of reproductive choice in Canada centers on the Morgentaler Clinic in Fredericton.

In the film, Simone Leibovitch, Manager of the Morgentaler Clinic in Fredericton, explains that the provincial Medical Services Payment Act, that requires the approval of two doctors before a woman can have a publicly funded abortion is a huge barrier. For women who don't have a doctor or whose doctor is anti-choice, their only option is to seek the services of the clinic.

"Audiences of the film will learn why so many women in this province have no choice but to terminate their unplanned pregnancy at the clinic and pay for it themselves. The unanswered question in this film is why the New Brunswick government, whether Conservative or Liberal, continues to shamefully ignore the rights of the women of New Brunswick who are entitled to abortion services covered by Medicare," says Judy Burwell, a member of the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada and former Manager of the Morgentaler Clinic.

Although the Morgentaler clinic provides a valuable alternative to the limited resources for abortion within the health care system, women seeking a safe and legal abortion at the clinic have their access to abortion

compromised by lack of support and privacy.

A doctor featured in the film had to remain anonymous due to the real threat of harassment and intimidation that abortion providers regularly face at their place of work or elsewhere in the community. Women seeking abortions and abortion providers are often treated with disdain in the community as evidenced by the opinions of anti-choice activists depicted in the film.

Celebrations over the reduced number of abortions in the province were contrasted with questions about the undocumented number of women who may have turned to self-treatment and unsafe methods in light of the varying obstacles.

Peggy Cooke, a Fredericton native now living in Toronto and author of the blog, *Anti-Choice is Anti-Awesome*, is featured in the movie. She worries about the many barriers facing women in accessing a safe and legal abortion.

"If I wanted an abortion, I could get one safely, but it's only because I live in a large urban centre with many clinics, I have a valid Medicare card, I am a Canadian citizen (with white skin), I can afford to live close to the downtown core with good access to transit, I speak English, I know my rights, I am not in an abusive relationship, I am an adult, and on and on. Take away any one of these things and you have a barrier," says Cooke.

Cooke notes that abortions done outside a safe and legal space often mean serious medical complications and sometimes death for women. "Attempting to perform an abortion on oneself is dangerous. And having someone else do it, someone who is not trained in the procedure or licensed to do it, is extremely risky as well," says Cooke.

Even if a woman is able to access a safe and legal abortion despite the barriers, Cooke notes that the experience overcoming those barriers can lead to anxiety and depression. "When I worked at the clinic in Fredericton we would see many patients who were perfectly fine with their decision to terminate the pregnancy, but who required a great deal of counselling and comfort because they had been traumatized by the protesters outside, or by the ordeal of getting to that point," adds Cooke.

Fear of pro-life picketers alone can be enough to prevent a woman from getting an abortion. "The fear of those people is very real, and I sympathize with anyone who is to overcome by the sight of them while trying to enter a clinic. They may be harmless, but how is a patient supposed to know that? After Dr. Tiller was shot I think a lot of people were especially



Fredericton native, Peggy Cooke, is featured in the film *Status Quo?: The Unfinished Business of Feminism*. She is worried about the many barriers facing women seeking safe and legal abortions. Photo by Judy Burwell.

unnerved by the presence of the protesters outside of clinics. How are you supposed to trust that people won't attack you, since they're already holding signs and screaming at you and you know they think you're a murderer?" says Cooke.

Cooke has many suggestions for overcoming obstacles to abortion in New Brunswick, including free and accessible birth control, comprehensive sexual education, a national daycare program, better paid doctors and nurses and more sexual health clinics. She adds, "We also need to make abortion a thing we can talk about without shame; we need to stop stigmatizing it and whispering about it. Someone you know has had an abortion, whether you know it or not. It's not that big a deal."

*Tomi Gbeleyi is an intern at NB Media Co-op, a fourth year University of New Brunswick student doing a joint honours in international development studies and psychology, and president of the African Student Union.*



Marlene Giersdorf and Lori MacKay, President of CUPE PEI (left to right) outside MP Gail Shea's office in Summerside, PEI, at the launch of Common Causes. Photo by Marian White.

Marlene Giersdorf, a 30-year-old single mother from Lower Montague, PEI launched a month-long protest against the Harper government's changes to the Employment Insurance program after being refused EI insurance benefits. She was denied her claim because she was unable to travel the now mandatory hour-long distance to Charlottetown in order to seek employment. On Feb. 11th, her claim was reinstated after her protest garnered national media attention. Regional committees against the EI changes have formed in New Brunswick. Hundreds have rallied against the EI changes in Moncton and small northern communities such as Inkerman and Richibucto.

## In Brief...

- Workers at the **Colombian mine** that provides coal to NB Power's plant in Belledune are on strike as of Feb. 7th. Sintracarbón, the union representing workers at the Cerrejón mine, the world's largest open-pit coal mine, in La Guajira, Colombia, is demanding dignity for subcontracted workers and expressing concern over how the mine affects workers' health. Cerrejón, owned by mining multinational giants Glencore-Xstrata, Anglo American and BHP Billiton, has approximately 13,000 workers of which 60% are subcontracted, working for over 300 contractor companies. The subcontracted workers earn on average 30% less than those directly employed by the mine. They work 12 hour days and are prevented from organizing unions. Seven hundred workers are reporting serious health problems including blood lead poisoning, black lung disease and spinal injuries. Coal from Colombia has been dubbed "Colombian blood coal" because of violent displacement of communities and assassinations of union leaders at the country's coal mines. Unsafe working conditions claimed 14 lives in the first 11 years of Cerrejón's operations. All of the coal extracted from Cerrejón is exported to meet the energy demands of New Brunswick, the northeastern U.S. and European countries.
- The deaths of at least 3,000 Aboriginal children at **residential schools** in Canada have been confirmed, according to a review of government, school and other records by the Missing Children Project.
- Canadian special forces are in **Mali**, where over 2,500 French troops are stationed, under the pretenses of defending the capital, Bamako, against al-Qaeda operatives. The Canadian Peace Alliance is calling on the Harper government to not participate in the France-led mission, stating, "The real reason for NATO's involvement is to secure strategic, resource rich areas of Africa for the West. Canadian gold mining operations have significant holdings in Northern Mali as do many other western nations. Canada's new interventionism, which includes the building of three military bases in Tanzania, Senegal and Kenya, is therefore primarily about securing the area for further plunder."

## University Pay Raises

(continued from page 1) ...inflation, over the past two decades.

These trends in compensation are just one among several phenomenon that indicates a shift in post-secondary education toward a more corporate and privatized model. A short-list of other recent developments conforming to this trend at Mount Allison includes the following: recurring tuition increases, which represent a form of privatization and consumer culture at the institution; a branding campaign that markets the University and education as a product rather than a public good; the naming of buildings and academic departments after corporate philanthropists; and finally, the President was named one of *Atlantic Business Magazine's* top 50 CEOs for a second year running in 2012.

*Dave Thomas is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the International Relations Program at Mount Allison University.*

## Community Calendar

For details and updated event listings, visit [nbmediacoop.org](http://nbmediacoop.org). To list your event, email: [community@nbmediacoop.org](mailto:community@nbmediacoop.org).

**NB Media Co-op Story Meetings.** Join us at our monthly story meetings in Fredericton where we discuss politics and current events and decide what to put in this paper every month. To find out the meeting time and venue, email [info@nbmediacoop.org](mailto:info@nbmediacoop.org).

**Kent County Frack-Free Speaker Series.** Third Tuesday of the month at 6:30pm at Bass River Hall. March 19: NB's Energy Policy for Our Changing World with Jim Emberger, Taymouth Community Association. April 16: Water Matters with Stephanie Merrill, Conservation Council. All presentations will be in English. Storm dates: Fourth Tuesday of the month. Donations encouraged. Contact Johanne at 785-4683, Nancy at 785-2258 or email [upriverwatch@gmail.com](mailto:upriverwatch@gmail.com). Hosted by Upriver Environment Watch.

**Water is More Precious Than Gold.** El Salvador is caught up in a monumental battle to protect water and communities from industrial mining projects, as it seriously considers becoming the first country in the world to ban large-scale metals mining. Hear Sandra Carolina Ascencio of El Salvadoran National Roundtable Against Metallic Mining (the Mesa) speak about the dangers of gold mining in El Salvador, the ways Salvadorans have organized to confront these projects, and how Canadian mining companies are trying to punish the Salvadoran government in international trade tribunals for responding to its citizens' outcry. When: Thurs, March 28, 7:00pm. Where: Wilmot United Church parlour, corner of Carleton & King, Fredericton. Contact: [info@frederictonpeace.org](mailto:info@frederictonpeace.org).

**Les Hay Babies headlining Conservation Council's Annual Fundraiser.** The Acadian indie-folk trio, Les Hay Babies, will perform and local eco-heroes will be celebrated at the Conservation Council's annual fundraiser on Sat., April 27th at 8:00pm at Memorial Hall, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton. Featuring an auction and appetizers. To reserve tickets, contact [info@ccnbaction.ca](mailto:info@ccnbaction.ca).

**Cinema Politica** believes in the power of art to not only entertain but to engage, inform, inspire, and provoke social change. Cinema Politica is the largest volunteer-run, community and campus-based documentary-screening network in the world. In Fredericton, films are screened on Fridays during the fall and winter at 7:00 pm at Conserver House, 180 St. John St. In Moncton, films are screened the first Monday of the month at 7:00 pm at the United Way Boardroom, Suite T210, 22 Church St. In Sackville, films are screened monthly on Wednesdays at 7:30pm at Mount Allison University. Check out film schedules of the locals or start your own chapter at: [cinemapolitica.org](http://cinemapolitica.org).

got a story to tell?  
email [info@nbmediacoop.org](mailto:info@nbmediacoop.org)!