

Le Réseau

NEWSLETTER OF THE FIIQ WOMEN'S NETWORK

Vol. 2, No. 1, December 2005



This newsletter is a summary report on the meeting of the Women's Network of the Federation, held on October 13 and 14, 2005, on the theme *Body image: denouncing stereotypes*.

On the agenda was the mobilization generated by the attempted introduction of Islamic courts and their impact on women's rights. The issue of electoral reform was also discussed. This question is especially important, since the government consultation will serve as a historic opportunity for women to make their voices heard. The objective was to offer activists a better understanding of the issues at stake in this reform and encourage their involvement in this major societal debate.

The Women's Network could not fail to discuss the mobilization around the World March of Women, just a few days before the arrival of the Women's Global Charter for Humanity in Burkina Faso, the final stage of its trip around the world. On the main theme, participants heard about the multiple pressures that confine women to a stereotyped and sexist image. They were invited to take part get involved in a vast public awareness and action campaign.

Good news

The Women's Network celebrates its 15th anniversary this year. This coincides with good news: from now on, the Newsletter, initially intended for the Network's activists and their union, will now be distributed to all members of the Federation to ensure that the discussions and work of the Network are circulated more widely.

At the 1990 Convention, delegates had adopted a resolution to set up the Women's Network, with a view to creating a forum for awareness-raising, solidarity and mobilization on which the members of the Status of Women Committee could rely in fulfilling their mandates. The Network includes committed activists, working in solidarity, who are concerned about putting an end to the inequalities that still affect women today and impede their access to equality.

On the menu are resource people who intervene on problems that represent issues for women; workshop discussions to discern

members' reality in relation to the themes raised; community dinners to strengthen bonds and share experiences; awareness-raising for solidarity and mobilization with women here and abroad; approaches and material promoting creativity and follow-up (video, reading kit, role-playing, book table, etc.). In short, the Women's Network is a privileged forum where the objective over the years has remained constant: vigilance on issues of

equality and a concern to ensure that members, as women and as health professionals, assume their power and exercise a determining influence where they are involved.



Here are a few themes that have been discussed at Women's Network meetings over the years. For each theme, a resource person was invited to develop and deepen the feminist thinking of the Network's activists. In some cases, the theme was taken up at a Federal Council in the form of a luncheon discussion or a lecture, so that delegates could share this reflection.

- November 1990 **Women and power**
- April 1993 **Caring every day: the business of women and nurses**
- November 1997 **Health and the shift to ambulatory care: the stakes for women**
- March 2003 **Nurses and leadership**
- November 2004 **Reconciliation of work and family: a challenge in the current context**



Islamic courts A first victory

The great concern aroused by the introduction of Islamic courts in Canada led the Women's Network's activists, last May, to start thinking about sharia law and women's rights. The debates and mobilizations that this issue triggered across Canada and in the rest of the world led us to discuss the situation with Élahé Machouf¹, founding President of the *Association des femmes iraniennes de Montréal*, who was deeply involved in the mobilization around this question.

The controversy was ignited by the possibility that such courts would be established in Ontario. The Ontario Government was thinking of going ahead with allowing the introduction of parallel courts to settle family disputes, which had the effect of exempting the Muslim community, especially women, from Canadian and Quebec laws. Would we accept the idea that Canada henceforth would have a

two-tier justice system? Would we accept that Muslim women no longer have access to the same rights guaranteed in the Canadian and Quebec Charters?

Organizing resistance

An international coalition, of which the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* was a member, was then formed to monitor the Ontario Government's decision closely and denounce these courts in the name of women's right to equality. This mobilization allowed Muslim women to be heard in their refusal to be subjected to sharia law, which places them under tutelage. Action across Canada and Quebec and in front of the Canadian embassies in several countries around the world finally prevailed over the decision the Ontario government was about to make, and Premier McGuinty reversed the process. This was a narrow escape: supposedly in the name of multiculturalism, Canada would have become the first non-Muslim country to recognize sharia law officially.

Quebec did not wait for Ontario's decision before acting. This May 26, the National Assembly unanimously adopted a motion unequivocally rejecting the introduction of Islamic family law courts in Quebec and Canada.

This is a great victory, not only for Muslim women who were the prime targets of Islamic courts, but for all Canadian and Quebec women for whom equality still remains an objective to be achieved. But this is also a great victory for women around the world who are subject to Islamic law. Many of them followed the situation closely, fearing the inevitable setbacks for them and for the struggles they are waging.

While this is certainly a victory, the utmost vigilance remains essential, because the offensive to call women's rights and human rights into question is not over. Given the rise of religious fundamentalism all over the world, it is essential to ensure that religion remains a private matter and that society remains secular, based on equal and universal rights. Up to



"As Quebecers, would we agree to have our family disputes settled by the Catholic Church?"

Élahé Chokrai-Machouf asked this question to the activists of the Women's Network. Food for thought...

now, solidarity with women here and abroad has prevailed. It is in the name of this solidarity that the activists of the Women's Network were asked to consider this question and that they will continue to be involved in it.

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1. Élahé Chokrai-Machouf is a retired nurse and former member of the FIIQ Status of Women Committee.

The Bureau Affair

The Federation strongly denounced the comments made by lawyer Lynda Bureau regarding the sentencing of one of her clients, Frédéric Dompierre. Here are the facts: Ms. Bureau, in a rape trial, tried to shift responsibility for the assault on the victim, a 14-year-old girl. Among other things, she declared: "I see a share of consent and responsibility. If you agree to go somewhere, you take a risk, whether calculated or not." In other words, blame the victims and make them bear the responsibility for the crime they suffered. There were thunderous reactions from groups and from the general public. The *Regroupement québécois des centres d'aide et de lutte contre les agressions à caractère sexuel (CALACS)* took the lead by publicly denouncing these offensive and sexist remarks and asking the *Barreau du Québec* to conduct an inquiry.

The Federation issued a press release and participated in a television interview. It also added its voice to the many groups supporting the CALACS in its request to the Bar. As women as well as health professionals, we will continue to denounce publicly the trivialization of violence against women and to protest against the prejudices that discourage them from complaining, and thus *breaking the silence*.

Say yes to bodily diversity!

The members of the Women's Network held a workshop to focus on the theme of body image. Basing the discussion on photos taken from women's magazines, they each chose one and expressed, in a phrase or a word, what these photos meant to them. Their first observation: the women are young and beautiful and don't look like us.

In fact, an improbable and inaccessible image has become the standard of beauty. Concerned about this troubling trend and convinced that sustainable social actions are necessary, the *Réseau québécois d'action pour la santé des femmes (RQASF)* launched a national action campaign last May, articulated around four main lines of intervention¹.

Denouncing the hypersexualization of preadolescent girls

Preadolescent girls have become the target of industry and unfortunately are less equipped to fight back. Representing 2.4 million individuals between the ages of 8 and 14 in Canada, tweens are the biggest demographic cohort since the baby boomers. Courted by the concert, clothing, food, television, education, sports and sexuality markets, they spend \$1.7 billion a year.

The RQASF thus proposes to sensitize women to the issues at stake.

The first step was to promote the content of the magazine *Audacieuses, le défi d'être soi*, which was inserted in last November's issue of *Châtelaine* and is also available on line. The second step is to reference the agents of influence with which preadolescent girls are confronted and which lead them to develop hypersexualized attitudes and behaviour, with a view to denouncing these influences.

Regulation of esthetic surgery practice

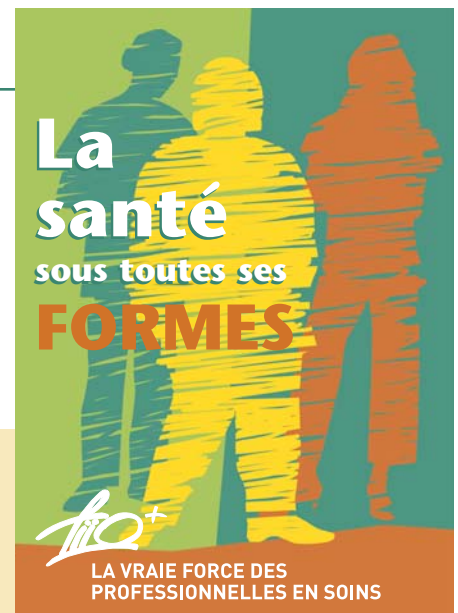
Women feel under increasing pressure to remodel their bodies. To be beautiful, they must be young, wrinkle-free, with no white hair, slim with a generous bosom and full lips. Women are thus urged to make efforts to get closer to this image: liposuction, breast augmentation, facelifts, etc. The body thus becomes something that can be modified and manipulated – a consumer product, in other words. It is difficult to estimate how many women have resorted to this type of operation, since surgeons aren't required to report acts related to esthetic surgery. However, we know that 80% of the people who undergo operations in the United States are women, and yet no register exists in Quebec of incidents related to esthetic surgery, although they may be numerous: phlebitis, embolism, edema, etc.

The RQASF thus proposes the creation of an official Quebec register to keep track of esthetic surgery and its effects.

Fighting sexist advertising

Sexist advertising has a major social impact. It promotes stereotypical values that convey physical and behavioural standards detrimental to women. Sexist advertising can also have an impact on women's physical and mental health by undermining their self-esteem. It must be

This FIQ ad appeared in the magazine *Audacieuses, le défi d'être soi*. The Federation also contributed financially to the publication of this magazine.



remembered that women do 80% of the shopping in North America and thus hold substantial economic power. Moreover, most of the magazines aimed at women are primarily consumer guides in which advertising accounts for 87% of the content. They can thus use this purchasing power to express their disagreement with the merchandising of women's bodies.

The RQASF invites women to denounce products and services that present a devaluing image of women and to **sign a petition²** to obtain government legislation overseeing advertising practices, as well as a law banning the exploitation of women's bodies as a promotional value in public events.

Regulation of the diet industry

In Quebec, nearly 50% of women of normal weight want to be thin, 70% of adolescent women make repeated efforts to control their weight and 30% of 9-year-old girls have already tried to lose weight. The quest for slimness leads one woman in a hundred to anorexia. Diet products rarely fulfill their promise.

The RQASF thus calls for the creation of a committee, which would have the mandate to identify the measures to be established to ensure better supervision of the diet goods and services industry. The purpose would be to guarantee better control over their effectiveness, safety, labelling and advertising.

Women's body image poses a major social problem and raises issues for women's health. This is why, in the months ahead, the members of the Federation will be invited, both as women and as health professionals, to participate in the RQASF's vast national action campaign and support their demands³.

To consult the issue of the magazine *Audacieuses, le défi d'être soi*: <<http://www.rqasf.qc.ca/AD660-AudacieusesMag.pdf>>

1. This campaign was presented by Lise Goulet, liaison officer at the RQASF, of which the FIQ is a member. For more information: <www.rqasf.qc.ca>.
2. The organization La Meute-MédiAction is responsible for the petition *No to the exploitation of women's bodies*. It can be found on their Web site: <www.lameute.org>.
3. This article is inspired by the RQASF's *Guide de mobilisation pour la campagne nationale d'action*.

To change the world A Global Charter



A **Global Charter** adopted in Rwanda in December 2004, a **relay** organized to take the Charter on a trip around the world throughout 2005, a solidarity **quilt** enriched by a fabric square in each country visited, **24 hours of solidarity** following the sun, at noon in every time zone, to mark the end of the Charter's voyage – this is a crazy idea that worked and that mobilized 15,000 people one fine Saturday in May, in Quebec alone. The *Women's Global*

Charter for Humanity was launched in Brazil on March 8, 2005, the starting point in its journey around the world. Everywhere in its passage, it would generate actions to challenge governments on demands likely to bring about more **equality, freedom, solidarity, justice and peace.**

The members of the Women's Network participated in this day of mobilization. They recounted their experience with great emotion, each recalling this historic

moment. How could a text written on a large sheet of fabric, passed from hand to hand from the Old Port of Quebec to Parliament, have been so moving? It was because it bore a dream, our own and that of thousands of women around the planet: **to change the world!**

As we go to press, the Charter has ended its voyage in Burkina Faso, on October 17, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. This day was also important for the Quebec women's movement. It was the deadline to obtain concrete responses from the government to the five demands tabled last March 8. Each of these demands conveyed the

hope of one more step in the fulfillment of the values proposed by the Charter. But typical of this government, the response was disappointing: two committees. These demands, the product of a wide consensus, could have improved the lives of many Quebec women. Does the government know that its arrogance, far from demobilizing women, encourages us on the contrary to continue relentlessly to propose alternatives to poverty and violence? The five demands are still on the agenda, and so is mobilization: because we believe that another world is possible.

For more information:

<www.marchemondialesdesfemmes.org>.



100 voices of women for democracy

For nearly 40 years, the electoral system has been under discussion in Quebec, but resistance to going off the beaten path has prevailed until recently. However, after the 1998 elections, there was pressure from a growing number of people to demand that the government propose an electoral reform *capable of strengthening and enriching Quebec democracy.* Organizations were established to raise public awareness of the stakes of such a reform. Estates General were convened in 2003 and nearly a thousand citizens participated. In the wake of all this ferment of ideas, the population is beginning to get the idea that a change is necessary and the popular will had enough impact that all the political parties included it in their platforms in the last election.

With Louise Paquet, coordinator of *Collectif Féminisme et Démocratie*, activists focused on the stakes of the draft legislation on the reform of the voting system, currently submitted to public consultation, and on the necessity for women to make themselves heard on the equal participation of women and men in all political decisions. We must remember that, over 60 years after obtaining the right to vote, women only represent 32% of the Quebec National Assembly in 2005.

This is a historic opportunity for all Quebec women to speak out and demand equal representation of women in the National Assembly. This is why the *Collectif Féminisme et Démocratie* is launching an operation aimed at tabling 100 briefs written by women and women's groups.

"It isn't every day that a society gives itself the opportunity to improve its electoral system. This is too important a moment to take half measures or settle for minor or mixed results. Democracy is being exercised without the voice of women. Let's make the voices of 100 women heard for democracy."

Collectif Féminisme et Démocratie



The Federation, which represents more than 50,000 women, will present a short brief at the parliamentary committee. This brief will be available on the FIIQ's Web site. The activists of the Women's Network have been invited to participate in the consultations that will be part of this vast operation of speaking out. Material was prepared to support those who want to take part in this vast operation.

For more information on the *Collectif Féminisme et Démocratie*: <www.feminismeetdemocratie.ca>.

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