



## ANTIFEMINIST BACKLASH: ASSERTING WOMEN'S GAINS

### WOMEN'S NETWORK IN BRIEF

This newsletter is a report on the activities and the subjects discussed at the last Women's network, held on November 20 and 21 in Quebec City. It is sent to all FIQ members to stimulate their interest in topics of current interest concerning women and society in general. Nearly 120 participants attended this meeting on the theme of *Antifeminist backlash: asserting women's gains*.

The Status of Women Sector and Committee put together a very stimulating meeting of the Women's Network, thanks to the participation of renowned speakers, such as Francine Descarries, sociologist and professor at UQAM, Jeanne Maranda, President of *La Meute MédiAction*, Martin Dufresne of the *Collectif masculin contre le sexisme* and Johanne Fontaine, feminist, actress and facilitator with *Centre Rayons de femmes*.

Different workshops also gave participants the opportunity to exchange ideas and comprehend the concepts discussed.

For the 2007 Women' Network, the Status of Women Sector selected the theme of antifeminism. This choice is essentially explained by the observation of a clear increase, over the past few years, in negative comments against feminism.

A growing number of antifeminist groups are appearing on the Internet and their websites are full of hateful comments against women. Some go so far as to intimidate, harass and fill lawsuits against feminists, whom they accuse of every evil. In 2006, for example, Andy Srougi of the group *Fathers 4 Justice* filed a defamation suit against the activist Barbara Legault and the magazine *À bâbord!*

The media, which pick up this kind of news, repeat the erroneous messages of these groups: "equality between men and women has been achieved", "men should have the right to decide whether or not there is an abortion", "male identity is being lost", "men commit suicide more than women", "boys don't do as well as girls in school."

These groups omit certain important facts: women are generally the poorest members of society and the greatest victims of violence; men hold the most prestigious and best paying jobs; men control the economy and hold the majority of political offices. Equality between men and women unfortunately has not been achieved.

It was therefore essential for the Status of Women Sector to sensitize the participants in the Women's Network to the effects of the statements made by antifeminists and equip them to spot these statements and respond to them. ■



### SEXY INC.

The members of the Réseau were invited to the launch of the documentary on hypersexualization, *Sexy inc. Nos enfants sous influence*, which took place on November 20 at the *École nationale d'administration publique*, in Quebec City.

Produced as part of a project to equip young people against hypersexualization, "*Outiller les jeunes face à l'hypersexualisation*", Sophie Bissonnette's film denounces the unhealthy culture that bombards children with sexualized and sexist images. A very interesting discussion followed the screening.

This documentary, which should be viewed by parents and children, proposes ways to fight this disturbing phenomenon.

# EVOLUTION OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN QUEBEC

To give activists a clear understanding of the theme of the 2007 Women's Network 2007, it was essential to review the evolution of the women's movement in Quebec. This historical overview reminded participants that women's gains are recent, that they were obtained by long and difficult struggles and that the gains are still very fragile, even today.

Francine Descarries, sociologist and professor at UQAM, outlined the history of women in Quebec. She particularly noted the comments made, not so long ago, by certain male politicians. Her quotations from Henri Bourassa undoubtedly stirred the strongest reaction among activists. For example, he once said that:

*"The introduction of feminism in its most noxious guise, the woman voter, who will soon spawn the woman-lothario, the woman-vote telegrapher, the woman-election supporter and then the woman-M.P., the woman-Senator, the woman-lawyer, or in a word, the female man, that hybrid and repugnant monster who will kill off the motherly woman and the wifely woman."*

Over the years, women were able to assert their rights, but this was a long and difficult struggle. Among other gains, they obtained the right to higher education in 1911, the right to vote in 1940, recognition as "persons" under the law in 1964, recourse to divorce in 1968 and the right to abortion in 1988.

Ms. Descarries' presentation was warmly welcomed by the members of the Women's Network. She clearly described the fragility of women's gains and the importance of maintaining solidarity with each other. All women must continue to fight to preserve these gains and achieve equality with men. To achieve this, it's essential to know history. ■

## WOMEN AND ADVERTISING

The members of the Women's Network had the opportunity to welcome Jeanne Maranda, President of *La Meute MédiAction*, a non-profit organization opposed to the commoditization of women's bodies.

Ms. Maranda presented nearly fifty hard-hitting images from television, billboards and magazines. What they have in common is the exploitation of women's bodies to sell a product.

### STRIKINGLY SEXIST CODES

This presentation allowed activists to realize the degree to which companies exploit women's bodies in their advertising and apply sexist codes to the extreme. For example, women are often presented in the home, stripped of their clothing, with a passive attitude and in positions inviting sex. But men are dressed appropriately, in an active role outside the home. Ms. Maranda demonstrated this situation by presenting two ads for the same product: one with a woman as the protagonist and one with a man.

The participants reacted strongly to these photos. They became aware of the omnipresence of sexist advertising, which no longer generates strong reactions due to this overexposure. The images proposed accentuate stereotypes and hypersexualization, a phenomenon denounced by *La Meute MédiAction*.

ON THE COVER PAGE, the Status of Women Committee (from left to right) : Julie Lejeune, union consultant, Michèle Boisclair, executive officer in charge, Annie Pinard, Sylvie Lachance, Annie Aspireault, Isabelle Pouliot (absent): Nicole Flynn and Michelle Poirier)

1. Francine Descarries, sociologist and professor at UQAM
2. Jeanne Maranda, President of La Meute MédiAction





Johanne Fontaine, actress, feminist and facilitator with the *Centre Rayons de femmes*, and Martin Dufresne of the *Collectif masculin contre le sexisme*

## REACTIONS TO THE ANTIFEMINIST MOVEMENT

In a joint lecture on the antifeminist backlash, Martin Dufresne of *Collectif masculin contre le sexisme* and Johanne Fontaine, actress, feminist and facilitator with the *Centre Rayons de femmes*, proposed action strategies to counter this movement for the activists in attendance.

### A FIRST FOR THE WOMEN'S NETWORK

For the very first time, even though the Women' Network is a women-only forum, the Status of Women Committee invited a male speaker. This is because Martin Dufresne represents a men's group which fights against sexism.

Mr. Dufresne reviewed the creation of *Collectif masculin contre le sexisme* and explained that it was due, in part, to the explosion of the sex industry and its perverse effects on the status of women. He also denounced certain messages conveyed in the media regarding male suicide and suffering, and the academic failure of boys. A correlation is being made between the changes in the role of women in society and the difficulty men have in finding the place they deserve. These statements, harmful to the advancement of feminism, are so present in society that even some women repeat them.

The guest speaker recalled the tragic events that occurred nearly 20 years ago at *École polytechnique de Montréal*. This tragedy reminds us that violence against women is not a new phenomenon. It simply takes different forms in today's world.

In conclusion, Mr. Dufresne invited activists to be prudent, because the current rise of the right threatens women's fragile gains. He bases his concerns on the recent debates concerning support payments, the right to abortion and privatization of health care, among other issues.

### THE RIGHT TO BE ANGRY

Johanne Fontaine, with all her characteristic energy, focused her presentation on the right of women to be angry at the proliferation of antifeminist statements and acts. She emphasized the importance of denouncing these situations, having self-confidence and being assertive.

After giving activists an opportunity to talk about incidents that have occurred in their work environment, Ms. Fontaine also talked about situations experienced by women, disillusioned and without resources, with whom she deals at Centre Rayons de femmes. The members of the Network made many interventions and certainly appreciated this lecture, despite the personal accounts that were amusing but disturbing. ■

### WOMEN AND ADVERTISING

(cont'd from page 2)

The CD on advertising codes, *Les codes de la pub*, used for Ms. Maranda's presentation, was distributed to a representative of each local team. This wide distribution will make a greater number of people aware of this sad reality. The members were also invited to support *La Meute MédiAction* individually or through their union. Information is available at <[www.lameute.org](http://www.lameute.org)>.

### QUEBEC COALITION AGAINST SEXIST ADVERTISING

Recently, a new Quebec coalition against sexist advertising emerged: the *Coalition nationale contre les publicités sexistes*. The activists were invited to join this new organization, which has the mandate to denounce sexist advertising publicly and demand its withdrawal. The FIQ joined this coalition last October. For more information: <[locat.chantal@csq.qc.net](mailto:locat.chantal@csq.qc.net)>. ■

## A hard-hitting film

The film *In Nomine Patris - Ce que veulent les mouvements de pères*, was presented to the members of the Women's network. This German video shows excerpts from interviews with men in Europe and Quebec, including members of fathers' rights movements, who adopt a very antifeminist line. Others, happily profeminist, explain what the advancement of feminism has changed in their role as fathers.

During the screening, activists were invited to note the antifeminist statements they heard in the film. Thus, some men go as far as accusing feminism of putting them in extreme situations, justifying that some decide to kill their children and their ex-spouse when they separate. These men claim that the right to divorce and financial autonomy of women are causal factors in the fact that the children of separated couples do more poorly in school and become delinquents, that there is a high suicide rate among men, and that some men feel inferior to women.

On the other hand, some men who are members of profeminist movements point out that, thanks to feminism, the traditional role of "male provider" is tending to disappear and that they can now look after their children and thus play a more important role in their lives. They also denounce the strategies of the antifeminists, explaining that their goal is to exercise power over women.



# FÉDÉRATION DES FEMMES DU QUÉBEC

The FIQ is a member of the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* (FFQ), “an independent feminist organization which works, in solidarity and in alliance with other groups, to transform gender social relations in all human activities in order to promote the development of full autonomy for women and real recognition of all of their contributions to society”.

## FFQ COLLOQUIUM

At the FFQ Colloquium last September, the theme was *Québécoises toujours debouttes!* (Québécoises still standing up!), with the objective of affirming and promoting feminism and women’s right to equality.

During this weekend, several guests held workshops on various topics of current interest, particularly reasonable accommodation, women’s poverty, hypersexualization and trafficking in women. The participants were able to discuss the difficulties they are experiencing while broadening their knowledge of these issues.

## IDOLA SAINT-JEAN AWARD

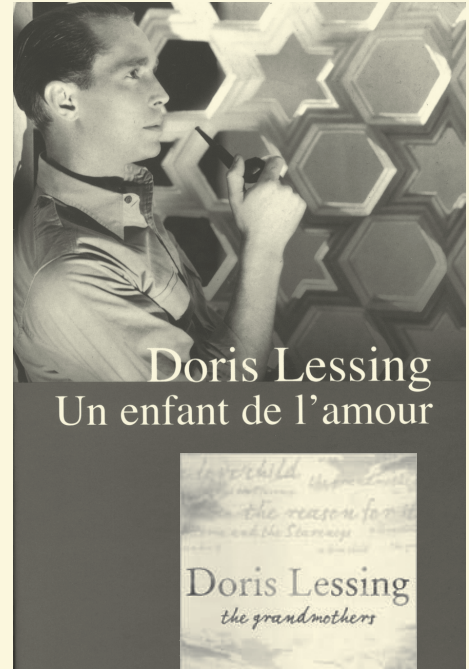
Every year, the FFQ presents the Idola Saint-Jean Award to mark the outstanding contribution of a woman or a group of women to the improvement of the status of women and the advancement of feminism. This year, the prize was awarded to the *Intersyndicale des femmes*, of which the FIQ is a member. For the very first time, a group of

women working in the labour movement received this trophy.

The *Intersyndicale des femmes*, which celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2007, includes the APTS, CSD, CSQ, FAC, FIQ, SFPQ and SPGQ. It is important to mention the considerable contribution of Lucie Girard, the recently retired former consultant for the FIQ’s Status of Women Sector, who was part of this coalition for over 20 years.

## A HISTORICAL NOTE: WHO WAS IDOLA SAINT-JEAN (1880-1945)?

Idola Saint-Jean was an exceptional woman who achieved considerable progress for the women’s movement. She was a feminist pioneer involved in various causes, including the right of women to vote, the reform of the Quebec Civil Code and the unionization of rural women teachers. She advocated full equality for women. ■



## THE WOMEN NETWORK’S FAVORITES

*This year, the Status of Women Committee’s favorite is more for the author than for her latest book.*

In 2007, British novelist Doris Lessing, with over 20 novels to her credit, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. She is the 11<sup>th</sup> and oldest woman to receive this honour.

The works of this feminist writer, recognized for her political involvement, clearly reflect her path in life, her passions and her convictions. Racial injustice, cultural conflict, violence and children are all themes discussed in her books, which take a critical approach to life.

In her last novel, *A Love Child*, Doris Lessing tells the story of a nightmare voyage to India in 1939. Everything changes when the main character, James Reid, discovers the ideal woman. ■

