

"Reasonable Accommodation": A Feminist Response

As anti-racist, anti-colonial feminists in Québec, we have serious misgivings about the Commission de Consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles. The Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec (CSF) has proposed that the Québec Charter be changed so as to accord the right of gender equality relative priority over the right to religious expression and to ban the wearing of "ostentatious" religious symbols in public institutions by public employees. Our concern is that the Commission and the CSF's subsequent intervention pave the way for legislation that will restrict rather than enhance the rights of women. We invite you to join us in questioning the exclusionary structure of the Commission, the assumptions it supports, and the negative impact it is likely to have on women's lives.

So, why call into question the legitimacy and the effects of the Commission?

1. because although we see the urgent need for dialogue about racism and sexism in Québec society, we object to *how* this consultation process has been undertaken. Listening to people "air out" their racism is not conducive to promoting critical reflection and dialogue, but instead creates a climate of fear-mongering and moral panic. Furthermore, in asking whether or not "difference" and "minorities" *should be* accommodated the commission assumes and perpetuates "commonsense" racist understandings of some "cultures" as homogeneous, backward and inferior. In addition, the Commission's reliance on the notion of "reason" must also be critically examined. Historically, white men have been positioned as the exclusive bearers of reason, and the Commission runs the risk of reproducing this in a context of ongoing social inequality.
2. because the design of the Commission and the language of "accommodation" assumes and perpetuates a system of power whereby western "hosts" act as gatekeepers for non-western "guests." A better consultative process would start with the recognition that Canada is a white-settler state, and that its history is one of colonial and patriarchal violence against Indigenous people.
3. because the public debates that the Commission has sparked construct certain ethno-cultural communities as perpetual outsiders and as threats to Québec identity rather than as integral to it. Concerns about ethno-cultural others as socially regressive obscure the everyday homophobia, sexism and racism that pervade Québec society.
4. because the ways that the Commission has been represented in mainstream English media promotes the idea that racism is a feature exclusive to Québec society and is not a problem -- or is less of a problem -- in the rest of Canada.
5. because the preoccupation with veiled women serves to deflect from the sexism and racism that has historically pervaded Québec and Canadian society. As feminists, we must challenge our complicity with the state's violence against women both in its colonial relations with Indigenous people and in its use of the figure of the veiled woman as an alibi for imperialist war and occupation in Afghanistan.

6. because appeals to secularism as a guarantor of gender equality effectively function to promote Christian culture as the norm and to scapegoat Muslims as inherently sexist, erasing secular forms of sexism.
7. because although it is still underway, the Commission has already prompted the proposal of laws that could restrict, regulate, and otherwise impede the lives of immigrant and racialized people in Québec.
8. because regulating women's public religious expression is gender discrimination insofar as it takes away women's freedom and inhibits their civic participation.
9. because the CSF is failing to meet its mandate of "defending the interests of women." The CSF would better serve the interests of women in Québec by focusing on the conditions of poverty, violence, criminalization and racism that many of us face, and not on what women wear.

Signed: The Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University, November 2007

A list of further readings which explores the connections between gender and race can be found on the Simone de Beauvoir Institute website: <http://artsandscience1.concordia.ca/wsdb/>

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