

**GENDER, RACE AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY : A READER**  
**GENRE, RACE ET IDENTITÉ RELIGIEUSE : RÉFÉRENCES**

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Institut Simone de Beauvoir, Novembre 2007

**For further reading on this topic**  
**Références supplémentaires sur ce sujet**

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## 1) The Bouchard-Taylor Commission's Hijacking of 'Gender Equality'

By Anna Carastathis, December 2007

The Dominion - <http://www.dominionpaper.ca>

Last November, the West Coast LEAF (Legal Education and Action Fund) issued a report based on its Women's Equality and Religious Freedom Project (WERF). Some of the overarching questions that the Project explored were “What is the nature of religious discrimination experienced by women of faith? What are the ways in which women balance and navigate the experiences of discrimination and interlocking systems of oppression in their daily lives?” The report also addresses specific areas such as same-sex marriage; polygamy; use of religious arbitration in family law; and immigration law. The full report can be found [here](#).

The Taylor-Bouchard Commission on "reasonable accommodation" in Québec has prompted a great deal of commentary on the relationship between gender equality and freedom of religion. For instance, the Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec (CSF) has recommended that the Québec Charter of Rights and Freedoms be amended so that gender equality is given relative priority over the right to religious expression. In light of these developments, the Dominion interviewed Harsha Walia, who authored the report based on Advisory Committee discussions, to get an anti-racist and feminist perspective.

The Dominion: Why is religious freedom a feminist issue?

Harsha Walia: This is an important issue because the “religious freedom debate” actually has less to do with religion or secularism than it does with race. Particularly in the post 9/11 climate, religion is a highly politicized, racialized, and publicly constructed identity. For example, invoking a Muslim identity is not about defining the beliefs of a person of Muslim faith; rather, it is a euphemism for Arabs, Middle Easterners, and South Asians (who may not actually be Muslim). In the context of the “War on Terror” this racialized imagery is very important, as there is a need to have an identifiable ‘enemy’ who is supposedly threatening Western values. The use of such language and imagery is rooted in a colonial legacy; therefore fighting patriarchy is intrinsically linked to fighting colonization and racism.

This is also an issue for feminists because feminism is currently being, as it historically has been, co-opted by imperial and colonizing forces. Historian Leila Ahmed has written, “Whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe.” An increasing number of feminists have expressed concerns regarding various state interventions on behalf of the “disempowered foreign woman”. For example, feminists have questioned the use of “protecting women” as a rationale for the occupation of Afghanistan. Similarly, the discourse surrounding human trafficking taps into notions of victimized Third World women and justifies restrictive border controls.

Dominion: What do you think about the discourse of "reasonable accommodation" that has come to dominate public discussions in Québec?

HW: It is astounding how many people who identify themselves as pro-feminist are expressing the need to 'save women from the hijab' and how there needs to be 'limits to multiculturalism.'

First, it is hypocritical to talk about Canada's "over-tolerance" of multiculturalism when the very nature of the debate positions racialized immigrant communities as not belonging' to Canadian society; as "Outsiders" who need to be accommodated. It reveals the shallow self-congratulatory nature of Canadian multiculturalism under which rests a fundamentally white national consciousness. Second, such a debate aims to portray a sense of victimization where Canadian culture is being violated by "Outsiders." This process of demonization, 'othering' and racism that targets particular communities for greater scrutiny has very real consequences in the present day context, being used to sell illegal wars and occupations across the globe, and restricting the rights and civil liberties of migrants within these borders.

It is also problematic to talk about secularism in a seemingly neutral way as it ignores the foundations of Christianity within the Canadian state and the violent role that Christianity has played in colonizing and assimilating indigenous peoples for example. It is also ironic that many of those rejecting the "authority" of religion so readily accept the authoritative ideologies of capitalism, consumerism, and liberal secularism, which are far more normalized in Western societies.

The most damaging consequence of this debate is that it removes the capacity for women's agency by reinforcing the idea that being a 'Muslim feminist' for example is impossible; forcing women to accept narrower definitions of self, despite occupying multiple locations across citizenship, religion, class, sexuality, and race. Furthermore, discussions of gender inequality 'within' certain religions or cultures renders invisible the universal systems of patriarchy that all women contend with, while homogenizing and fossilizing religions in definitive ways.

Dominion: In the report, I found your critique of the distinction between polygamy and polyamory compelling. Can you elaborate?

HW: One of the major problems with the distinction between polygamy and polyamory is that it relies on and perpetuates racist assumptions. While polyamory is used to define a relationship based on mutual negotiation between "independent people," polygamy refers to a "cultural practice." Such a dichotomy reinforces assumptions that women in racialized cultures are being more exploited and less independent than "autonomous women" from dominant white cultures. This is not to suggest that polygamy cannot be critiqued; it is to highlight this double standard and how such differentiations are based on the premise that racialized cultures are inherently more hostile to women. The reality is that the practice of both polygamy and heterosexual polyamory exist within a global

context of systemic discrimination against women and girls. The current-day reality is that 99% of polygamous marriages are characterized by men having multiple wives. But it is dangerous to suggest that the roots of polygamy lie in 'religious culture' because cultures and religions do not offer homogenous narratives. Various conservative ideologies are on the rise across the globe because that is the socio-political context within which we are operating. Religion can be used to justify polygamy, but if we recognize that the current practice of polygamy is not about a particular religion or culture (which reinforces racism) -- it is, rather, a manifestation of a universal system of patriarchy -- then we can more readily reject those "freedom of religion" arguments that are used to prevent discussion about the effects on women in an anti-racist manner.

Dominion: How should feminists be addressing the issue of religious freedom as it intersects with the marginalization of racialized, immigrant, and indigenous women?

HW: We must contend with the reality that culturally-imperialist feminisms are being forced upon women across the world and the narrative of women's rights serves as a crucial tool in the pro-war and anti-immigrant propaganda machine. Such a theft of feminist principles is advancing everything but genuine equality for women. Instead, we must choose a path that is feminist as well as anti-racist, anti-militarist, pro-immigration, queer- and trans-positive, and class-conscious. This includes questioning and challenging the legitimacy given to state-based responses such as prisons as a solution to violence, border controls as a solution to trafficking, child apprehension as a solution to women and child poverty, and militarization as a solution to third world women's liberation.

It is important to avoid falling into the racist traps that infantilize racialized women, while at the same time maintaining a basic commitment to gender and sexual equality that cannot be breached by religious or cultural justifications. We must avoid a culturally imperialist feminism that seeks to impose Western notions of gender equality and 'sameness' onto other women. This does not imply that we become culturally relativist and begin to support any unjust practice. Cultural diversity or freedom of religion should not serve as a shield to scrutinize against gender-oppressive practices.

Walking this line requires us to pay attention to specific contexts, to listen to those women whose rights we purport to stand for, and to understand that we occupy different relationships of power and privilege. All oppressed women equally deplore sexism and misogyny, but women's liberation movements must be culturally sensitive and relevant so as to oppose patriarchal elements without attacking or destroying non-white cultures, religions, or identities. Women of colour and indigenous women have consistently pointed out that reducing their oppression to their 'culture' represents deeply colonial attitudes. The greater oppression that some women face is directly linked to policies of the state, histories of colonization, the nature of capitalism, and the powerful rise of global conservative ideologies. Most importantly, we must walk alongside those women who are on the front lines of their own struggles and who are agents of their own transformation. They do not need pity or charity, but solidarity and our respect for their leadership and agency.

## **2) I Am Not Asking for Your Approval -- Faith and Its Expression**

By Kameelah Janan Rasheed; March 26th, 2007 - Hot Coals

I have spun myself into a web of non-stop, albeit non-linear, intertextual journeys and discursive shadow boxing matches towards a coherent narrative about hijab. I feared that in writing about hijab that my thoughts would be so reminiscent of previous works, that my narrative would be surrendered to the museum of embalmed anachronisms and clichés. This fear kept me running as far as my short legs could carry me away from the oppression versus liberation paradigm, and hiding in a dark corner away from self-hating confessionals about the ugliness of Islam.

I am not interested in proving to anyone that I am in fact liberated or that by wearing hijab in America I am engaging in a radical feminist act. Just as I gave up the task of proving my blackness or womanhood years ago to those who were skeptical of my 'credentials', I do not plan to spend time here validating my humanity or agency. Such a task is a distraction. The task here is not to shuck n'jive or discursively gyrate towards a presentation of hijab and myself that will grant me entrance into the feminist or 'mainstream' community. I do not want to spend time convincing people that in fact my hijab is not surgically attached to my scalp.

Nor, do I want to spend energy arguing that there is not a tracker embedded in my hijab that screeches a pronounced 'haraam, haraam' when there is too great of a distance between the said hijab and my head. The task here is to share stories that if nothing else will illustrate that self-elected liberators who are convinced of my oppression are doing more to oppress me than my hijab ever could by fixing me in conceptual incarcerations. In telling me that as a hijabi, I can only represent and ever be seen as the epitome of oppression - the atavistic aberration, then you have succeeded in reifying the patriarchal structures you pretend to despise. You have held me hostage in your imagination and my only key to freedom is to surrender and corroborate your assumptions of my subjugation.

If I tell you that I am comfortable as a hijabi, and do not feel the least restricted, why do you still feel the need to speak down to me as if I am a child? Why do you feel the need to convince that I am living in a matrix where I have managed to confuse liberation with oppression? The question has never been so much 'is Kameelah oppressed'? because when this question is asked I do not believe that there is a genuine concern for my wellbeing. The question has always been twofold: 'Why do you feel it to be your right to tell me how I should live my life? And: 'Why do you even care?' My experiences, that are mine and not to be generalised for other hijabis, have illustrated that the concern is not my oppression, but the inaccessibility of hijabi bodies and a general discomfort with those who have no problems with visible signs of cultural and religious difference.

My childhood and adulthood, neither of which are completed life stages, were full of paradox and alienation as I attempted to navigate what seemed to be rough uncharted

territory of a nerdy short black Muslim girl suspended in time and spaces that just could not 'figure me out'. I am the daughter of two black working-class Muslim reverts. I grew up in a small city in northern California where you could count the number of Muslims on one hand. Because being starved at and having rude comments directed at me is a sadistic task I rather enjoy, I then spent four years at a private Catholic school where I was not only one of very few black students, I wandered about as the only Muslim student. Thinking it could not get worst then being called a suicide bomber, or Osama bin Laden's wife, I embarked on another four-year journey at a private liberal arts institution where the number of Muslim students was heartbreaking. While most comments at this institution were reserved for private discussions, the college experience as well as my time in Johannesburg, South Africa provide an opportunity to understand what literally annoyed people about my hijab.

While in Yeoville, a hybrid inner-city/suburb of Johannesburg, I was approached by a man who was intent on liberating me from not only my gender oppression, but from my racial confusion. Apparently, 'I am not free' in hijab and Islam is not an African religion.

I had committed not only the ultimate sin of embracing a faith that 'forced' me to be modest; I had chosen a faith that had no roots in Africa. Let's not bother with the contrary historical facts, as that is the least of our concerns. What I found of the utmost importance in this monologue (yes, because I was unable to get a word in edgewise) was that he conceptualised my channels of freedom via the ritualistic removal of my hijab and his penetration or sexual conquest. I never knew that my freedom toolbox included a penis and an instruction guide - I will keep this in mind.

As he continued to speak in a series of poorly phrased insults, I realised that this was no longer about gender oppression or black authenticity; it was about the politics of accessibility to certain bodies. He repeated almost in a hypnotic fashion, 'I cannot see you...I cannot see your essence'. In wearing hijab, it was his argument that I was making myself inaccessible to men, and particularly to him. Choosing to place myself off the radar was not a choice I could exercise. In fact, I was required to make myself available and accessible to his gaze as well as the gaze of other men.

Thus, the crime I had committed was not one of accepting my subjugation as a Muslim woman and 'confused African woman', but of refusing to situate myself in his myopic discourse of liberation that ultimately puts me at his mercy. If I was mistaken in this assumption, it was further validated by a number of men in Johannesburg and in America who have told me similar tales of my inaccessibility, as a reason why I should not wear hijab. They started with a narrative of genuine concern for my oppression and devolved into a shallow desire for a free pass to accessibility. It was not always about what was said, but the delivery of these diatribes. In many of these situations, these men used aggressive and paternalistic tones. They attempted to silence me by raising their voices. They worked to discredit my line of defense by telling me I did not know enough. Most of all they were surprised that I was able to put together a sentence and to give as good as I was given.



It was a reminder that the covering of my head is not a covering of my mind or my mouth. Now, my mama taught me that in a conversation that I need to speak up irrespective of the genitalia I assume the other person to possess. My dad taught me to do it with tact. I think that while I am better at the former than the latter, it was a necessary lesson. For me, this battle over hijab editorialised by patriarchal not feminist discourses has never been about my liberation or the liberation of Fatima or whatever common Muslimah name you choose to insert here. Really, can men and institutions that consider me less intelligent and inept be that concerned about the death of patriarchy? This battle has always been about the accessibility of certain bodies and a neurotic discomfort with difference. If I can be convinced or forced to unveil and assimilate my discourse and lifestyle someone else can feel comfort. Someone will assume greater access to my body. However, for someone else to feel comfort when they look at me, and secure greater dominion over me, some part of me has to be sacrificed.

I cannot make any conclusive remarks about hijab generally or in my personal experiences. What I can say is that as these discourses about my oppression reach a nauseous height and hegemonic preoccupation in numerous imaginations, I will continue to write. I will not write to prove my liberation, but write to assert my right to exist as I choose without harassment, intimidation and ridicule. People often say, 'well, if you don't want to be singled-out then just don't wear hijab'. I guess while I am at it, I should lighten my brown skin to reach a more appeasing colour? Or give my hips back to mama. Assimilation is not an option. The reality is that, yes, I wear hijab and no, I do not need your approval. While I do not need your approval, I would not mind a little respect.

### **3) RAWA: A Model for Activism and Social Transformation**

RAWA: a Model for Activism and Social Transformation

Adapted from : Sonali Kolhatkar; June 01, 2006 - Znet

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) rose to international prominence after the attacks on the US on September 11th, 2001. Despite interviews with Larry King Live, and promotion by Oprah, few mainstream media outlets examined the radical nature of RAWA's political vision and strategy, or their organizational structure. Sadly, many on the left have also overlooked the lessons we can learn from this extraordinary women's movement, choosing instead to relegate support of RAWA to mainstream feminist groups.

Within the context of on-going brutal war, that such a political organization of women exists and thrives, is reason enough to study RAWA. Additionally, their political vision is basic and non-sectarian, espousing universal human rights, women's rights, economic democracy, and a progressive education policy. They create and distribute their own media and have successfully harnessed new technologies to further their goals. RAWA is an extraordinarily resilient organization that uses a horizontal structure with an emphasis on the collective over the individual, and employs practical and democratic decision-making and internal conflict-resolution. In fact, RAWA has been operating in a manner that progressive political organizations in the West could only dream of. What can Western social movements learn from RAWA?

To answer this question I draw heavily from my own personal experience of working in solidarity with RAWA for the past 6 years, supplemented with information from the book, "With All Our Strength" by Anne Brodsky, (New York: Routledge, 2003).

#### Historical context

Afghanistan's brutal history of war naturally shapes RAWA dramatically. The 1970s were a time of intense student activism and protest. In 1977, a young Kabul University student named Meena founded RAWA to struggle for women's rights. RAWA was born into a nation on the brink of imperial war, occupation, and reactionary forces from which it has yet to emerge. A year after RAWA's formation, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and began a ten year long occupation. RAWA's initial goal of women's emancipation, was broadened to include national emancipation. They participated in the nation-wide non-violent resistance, or jihad, against the occupation. But RAWA was also seen as a threat by the fundamentalist, misogynist forces which the US chose to work with. In fact, RAWA's work was increasingly threatening to both Soviet imperialists and Islamic fundamentalists. In 1987, Meena was assassinated by a collaboration of both (the) forces (of) KHAD (Afghan secret police, controlled by the Soviet government), and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (the largest recipient of US financial aid).

Rather than destroying the organization, Meena's assassination drove RAWA underground and actually provoked them to broaden their goals even more. Since then, they see imperialism and religious fundamentalism as twin injustices to be resisted and eradicated. Meena is seen as a martyr by RAWA members. Her photograph adorns the otherwise bare walls of RAWA houses, classrooms, orphanages, hospitals, and clinics. Because RAWA members operate incognito, Meena's face has essentially become RAWA's face.

## Political Vision

RAWA's underlying philosophy sees women's rights as integral to the struggle for human rights, democracy, and national sovereignty. Because women are the main victims of war, religious fundamentalism, and economic globalization, women's rights are crucial markers of injustice worldwide. As in the US, leftist Afghan women like Meena realized that the men in their movements paid lip service to women's rights but did not see it as important as class, or other struggles. Women were told that their freedom would automatically follow from other social changes and that it was not necessary for women's rights to be central to their struggles.

RAWA has not adopted any specific economic or social ideology. They do advocate "economic democracy," and secularism. While most RAWA members are Muslim, as are the majority of Afghans, they have seen Islam being used as a political tool of oppression by fundamentalist warlords in government positions.

Excerpts from RAWA's Charter (twice revised since its inception, to address socio-political changes), define their main aim as:

- (1) women's emancipation, which cannot be abstracted from the freedom and emancipation of the people as a whole,
- (2) separation of religion and politics, so that no entity can misuse religion as a means for furthering their political objectives,
- (3) equal rights of all Afghan ethnic groups,
- (4) economic democracy and the disappearance of exploitation,
- (5) commitment to struggle against illiteracy, ignorance, reactionary, and misogynistic culture,
- (6) to draw women out of the incarceration of their homes into social and political activity, so that they can liberate themselves economically, politically, legally, and socially,
- (7) to serve and assist affected and deserved women and children, in the fields of education, healthcare, and economy,

(8) establish and strengthen relations with other pro-democracy and pro-women's rights groups nationally and internationally, with such relations based on the principle of equality and non-interference in each others affairs,

(9) support for other freedom and women's movements worldwide.

RAWA bases their struggle on universal principles of human rights and democracy, consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They are not bound by the inevitable dogma that results from sectarianism and "the party line."

Additionally, RAWA realizes the importance of connecting their struggle with those of other groups worldwide. They regularly express international solidarity in their statements, such as this one:

We declare our unequivocal and unreserved support and solidarity with the struggles of the people and the pro-democracy and progressive forces of Iran, Palestine, Kashmir, Kurdistan, Sudan and other fettered peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America fighting for their rights against reactionary and anti-liberty states and powers.

### Strategy

For the formation of a free, independent and democratic Afghanistan the joint striving and struggle of pro-liberty and democratic forces is indispensable. This objective can only be achieved through relentless struggle, not through compromise and capitulation.

--RAWA statement on 50th anniversary of (the) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 1998

RAWA's strategies, like their political aims, are broad. They are a balance of long-term and short-term strategies of political agitation and humanitarian aid.

### Education

Education is seen as part of RAWA's long-term struggle and is considered their most important strategy. Education of women in particular, is based on the understanding that when women are empowered through literacy and skills, they are more inclined and better equipped to fight for their rights. However, RAWA also educates boys, providing a practical alternative to the brain-washing of religious madrassas. They believe that male domination is a social phenomenon that can be eradicated through education for both boys and girls.

RAWA's educational projects range from full-fledged schools for girls and boys, all the way down to home-based literacy courses and skills training for adult women. Many women and girls who discover RAWA through these institutions choose to become members. Education also includes skills training for adult women who are struggling to raise families. RAWA teaches women embroidery, sewing, handicrafts, etc. They also

teach women farming skills like raising hens for eggs, fish farming, and goat farming. Such courses are labeled "income-generating projects." The goal is to enable women to become financially self-sufficient.

RAWA's educational policy (see Appendix A) evolved over the years through trial and error. It is based on principles of freedom, peace, non-violence, respect for the environment, as well as gender, ethnic, and religious tolerance. Anne Brodsky observes that Paolo Freire's groundbreaking work on emancipatory education speaks to some of the very same approaches that RAWA espouses. RAWA members are not familiar with the highly influential Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Freire and have developed their own methods based on an intimate understanding of their communities.

### Health Care and Humanitarian Aid

Despite much-touted progress, Afghanistan still suffers from shockingly high rates of infant mortality and maternal mortality. In 2005, Afghanistan ranked 173 out of 178 in the UN's Human Development Index. With so much suffering around them, it is impossible for RAWA to speak of human rights and women's political rights, without also addressing the lack of access to food and health care, which are prerequisites to other rights.

RAWA runs clinics and mobile health teams both inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan's refugee camps. In many cases, the people they serve have no other access to health care. When the need arises, RAWA conducts emergency relief operations alongside their political and educational work. They often assist refugees during harsh winter months with blankets, food, and medical aid.

Because of the large numbers of orphans in Afghanistan, RAWA runs several orphanages for boys and girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan. (They do not, however, offer Afghan children up for adoption in Western countries and urge instead Western supporters to sponsor orphans so that the children can remain in their own country while having access to education, shelter, etc.)

### Media, Documentation, and Technology

From their inception RAWA realized that they needed a means of spreading news from independent sources throughout the country, as well as a way to convey news of their activities and achievements.

Payam-e-Zan (translated as Woman's Voice) is RAWA's main publication: "a magazine that first published in 1981, only four years after they were founded. Payam-e-Zan started out being produced by hand, with several hundred mimeographed copies stealthily passed across the country. Some issues, produced during the most dangerous years, were published in miniature, to make them easier to hide. According to Brodsky, Payam-e-Zan "operates as an educational vehicle through which literacy skills as well as political consciousness are cultivated. The magazine is also a highly effective recruitment tool" for

RAWA, "serv[ing] as a place to document RAWA's concerns and standpoints, and as a vehicle to present these ideas to a wide audience."

As the casualties of US-backed fundamentalists mounted in the early 1990s, RAWA, realizing that the world had moved on from Afghanistan, decided to document the rampant human rights abuses through still photography and video. Photographs documenting the victims of the fundamentalists, or in some cases, violence in action, are published on their website and magazine, along side reports by the RAWA members with details such as the date, time, names of victims, and perpetrators, etc. Digital cameras have made RAWA's documentation much easier and also enabled RAWA to share the images of human rights violations more easily with an international audience via their website.

Videos of human rights abuses are circulated to news media and documentary film makers, and added to RAWA's own archive. The most famous example of RAWA's video documentation was the 1999 public execution of a woman named Zarmeena, by the Taliban in Kabul stadium. After 9/11, this video was viewed all over the world, despite the fact that it was more than 2 years old. When initially offered to news media in 1999, no one would touch the gruesome footage until it was politically convenient. The footage was also used in Saira Shah's widely acclaimed documentary, *Behind the Veil*, which was re-aired repeatedly on CNN after 9/11.

The advent of the internet catapulted RAWA into the international like no other new technology. Wisely seeing the potential for international solidarity, and drawing world attention to a forgotten crisis, RAWA launched <http://www.rawa.org> in late 1996. One member explained:

We never imagined the internet would bring such a positive result for us. It is very important and something that now we can't imagine we could work without! At the time I remember it was kind of amazing. The first email from the US that we got, we all called each other to come see this and our eyes were so big!

Most of the relations between RAWA and their international supporters have developed through their website and e-mail. I too first discovered RAWA through their website and wrote to them expressing my solidarity.

RAWA's website is the perfect portal for them to express their political views and publish their documents while preserving the anonymity of their members. Additionally, large amounts of material can be published and archived with little additional cost.

While Payam-e-Zan is still RAWA's primary outlet to reach the majority of Afghans - who live in a poor country with little internet access, RAWA's website is the main method of communicating with the outside world.

## Political Demonstrations

RAWA organizes public protests up to several times a year to mark various dates: March 8th, International Women's Day; April 28th, the "black day" when the fundamentalists entered Kabul in 1992; and December 10th, International Human Rights Day. According to Brodsky, "demonstrations are one of the large-scale non-traditional ways that RAWA educates and enlightens people." [4] They are usually held in Pakistan, as Afghanistan is still too dangerous. Thousands of women are bussed in from across the border to march with signs and banners. Sometimes the women carry sticks for self-defense, or are accompanied by male supporters who walk beside the march. The demonstrations often culminate in a rally in front of the United Nations Office in Islamabad and elsewhere.

One member of RAWA explains the importance of demonstrations:

When a demonstration happens, some in backward places can't even think a woman can stage such a thing. Our mission is to change that mentality and let women know they are human beings and equal to men.

RAWA's demonstrations also highlight events in Afghan history that either are forgotten or have been re-written. For example, the bloody events of fundamentalist infighting and civil war that followed April 28th 1992 are resurrected each year on RAWA's signs and placards.

The women in RAWA's demonstrations march militantly with faces uncovered and fists in the air. Their signs are explicitly pro-democracy and anti-fundamentalist. As such, the public demonstrations also challenge pervading assumptions among Westerners who were obsessed by images of mute, burqa-clad, helpless looking Afghan women, after 9/11.

## Organizational Structure and Decision making

While RAWA had adopted a committee structure from the beginning, their founder Meena operated as a de-facto President. Her tragic assassination in 1987 highlighted the organization's vulnerability with having a high-profile "leader" who could be easily targeted. After Meena's death, RAWA changed its structure so that no single member could assume a leadership role. Their goal was to "create a leadership structure that was democratic, collective, and as non-hierarchical as possible, thus promoting the equality and democracy that RAWA seeks for Afghanistan at large." This manifested itself in the form of a "leadership council" of 11 members. These members are elected every two years by the entire membership.

The election of the Leadership Council is to my knowledge, unique among "subversive movements." Because of RAWA's underground nature, its members are geographically dispersed and cannot communicate with one another frequently. Consequently there are no nominations or election campaigns. Members simply submit in writing 11 names of

members that they think ought to comprise the Council. The top 11 vote-getters are then elected.

Leadership Council members simply continue in their daily functions as RAWA members, while taking on the responsibilities of that particular committee. They meet several times a year to oversee RAWA's operations and author RAWA's standpoints and statements in a way that reflects the membership's sentiments by conferring with the spokespeople from all the underlying committees. Their names are never revealed outside the membership for security reasons. RAWA's structure is consistent with their philosophy of the collective being more important than the individual.

The remaining RAWA members join any one of the following seven standing committees

Each committee has a number of sub-committees focused on its various responsibilities. All committees, including the Leadership Council, are composed of an odd number of members to avoid deadlock in decision making.

Each committee has a "masul" -- which is Persian for "responsible person. The masul functions like a spokesperson for the committee, to whom members can turn for mediation, or to make complaints. They are also responsible for communication between various committees. Brodsky elaborates: "Overall, RAWA's committee structure can be thought of as having branches in which each masul is the sole connection between the committees and members she is responsible for and the next level up in the committee structure." This fosters the "relatively independent operation of each committee, and ensures projects that are "locally responsive."

As any serious activist knows, committees cannot function without regular meetings, and RAWA members have their fair share of frequent meetings. One of RAWA's most interesting type of meeting is a mechanism that enables them to deal with internal conflict: the "jelse entaqady" or "mistake meeting." This is an "evaluation and correction mechanism that operates at all levels of the organization in order to facilitate RAWA's distributed decision making style, and address mistakes, problems, and differences of opinion." Differences of opinion or disagreements are directly addressed with the people involved. The committee masul is often a mediator in such meetings, and an odd number of attendees ensure that there can be no deadlock.

Secrecy is a huge factor in RAWA's operations because of the dangerous nature of their work. As a result most members often know only a small number of other members personally at any given time. RAWA's dispersed committee structure, and its members' belief in the collective having more importance than the individual, ensures the organization's continued functioning.

Only Afghan women based in Afghanistan or the refugee camps of Pakistan and Iran can be RAWA members. Men are not allowed to be members. However, many male relatives of RAWA members are dedicated to supporting the organization in any manner available



to them. Male supporters often help with security at public events, escorting foreign supporters, passing out RAWA literature, etc.

### What we can learn from RAWA

RAWA's approach to activism is very practical and tailored to suit the needs of their situation. Their political vision is simple, yet adheres to some basic fundamental truths such as the universality of human rights and democracy. While this may make some Western leftist ideologues scoff, it is an approach that, at the very least, works in a country like Afghanistan which has lost so much and is struggling to preserve the most basic of rights.

However, RAWA's simple political vision enables it to be flexible to situations as they arise. For example, RAWA does not denounce capitalism. Rather they call for "economic democracy." This enables them to train women in marketable skills through their "income-generating projects." The practical short-term goal of enabling economic independence for a poor struggling, often illiterate woman, is achieved in this manner. RAWA does not engage in micro-lending however, preferring to grant women the basic foundation they may need to start up an operation, free of charge.

RAWA's organizational structure is also quite practical, having preserved the organization for nearly two decades after Meena's death. Rather than strain to achieve some idealistic but impractical notion of absolute participatory democracy, they have instead conceived a structure that has limited hierarchy (the Leadership Council), which is outweighed by ample democracy through simple and functional elections and committee membership.

RAWA's emphasis on the collective over the individual is also a philosophy worth aspiring to. Among Western activists we have seen an increasing tendency to valorize individual figures, at the expense of collective action.

#### **4) No One Is Illegal-Montreal statement on the racist Quebec debate about “reasonable accommodation”**

February 5, 2007

[Translated from the original French]

As racialized and migrant women, we are outraged by the slanderous, xenophobic and racist propaganda that is being expressed in the debate about "reasonable accommodation".

We assert our ability, as subjects not objects, to exercise our own capacity to self-determine our lives; we reject the repeatedly paternalistic, and fundamentally misogynist, discourse about the State that will supposedly save us from our own cultures.

We assert that such a discourse is both racist and sexist. It is racist, because it perpetuates the idea that our cultures are fundamentally backwards and cruel, in contrast with white Western culture, which is seen as the ultimate achievement of civilization. It is sexist because it derives from ideas that render women childlike, or viewed as simple victims incapable of struggling for their own wellbeing.

This idea of “civilization” is intrinsically linked to the colonial mentality that led to the genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. It is a genocide that persists when, by way of example, the disappearance of more than five-hundred indigenous women in Canada continues to be treated with contempt and indifference.

We reject the mass media’s simplistic and reductive conception of women’s “rights”. While we actively assert our "right" to freedom, safety and dignity as articulated in the traditional paradigm of "human rights", we also assert our "right" to the expression of our cultural and religious identities.

We celebrate the diversity and dynamism of our cultures and our identities – including our different sexual orientations as queer, lesbian, trans, straight, or other forms of self-identification -- and refuse the simplistic caricatures that reduce our multiple communities to homogeneous and uncontested representations of a monolithic tradition.

In this respect, we reassert the dynamic nature of the various manifestations of our beliefs or cultural identities, which express themselves within a larger social and political context.

In particular, we observe that the analysis of the oppression of women and gender inequality, as expressed in the mass media, as strictly a phenomenon internal to religions, explicitly ignores the external, universal systems of patriarchy and sexism which all women face, while also definitively homogenizing religion.

We denounce the role of the State and its structures in the marginalization of racialized

and migrant women, whether they are religious or not.

The actions of the State and the capitalism contribute to making the status of migrant women more precarious by increasing the barriers to obtaining legal status through various forms of systemic discrimination, and increasing the vulnerability of women by their criminalization.

We also denounce the complicity of the imperialist feminist discourse which, under the cover of supposed solidarity, imposes Eurocentric and assimilationist ideas about gender equality. We are critical of the dominant feminist paradigm that privileges the choices of Western women as the sole path towards liberation, despite the overpowering reality of daily sexism that Western women face.

We are conscious of the way in which this discourse continues to be manipulated and used by pro-war, anti-immigrant proponents. We recognize the historical continuity of the appropriation and manipulation of feminist discourse by colonial and imperialist movements throughout the world.

However, we are not supporters of cultural relativism that tends to justify oppressive and unjust practices in the name of the "difference". We remain vigilant so that the freedom of religion does not prevent us from fighting actively against oppression.

To show true solidarity, we must listen to the women that we claim to support in their struggle, and we must understand that we occupy different positions of privilege and power.

To do this, we must actively fight against the dehumanization of racialized and faith communities, and against the victimization of women. We must support the women who are on the frontlines of their own struggles for liberation, and subjects, not objects, of their own transformation. We must engage in this process not motivated by pity or charity, but by a true sense of solidarity and respect.

-- *No One Is Illegal-Montreal.*

## **5) Déclaration de Personne N'est Illégal en réponse au débat sur les « accomodements raisonnables»**

5 février 2007

En tant que femmes racialisées et migrantes, nous sommes outrées devant l'infâmante propagande xénophobe et raciste articulée dans le cadre du débat autour des « accomodements raisonnables ».

En tant qu'actrices à part entières, affirmant notre capacité à nous auto-déterminer, nous rejetons le discours paternaliste et fondamentalement misogyne répétant la nécessité que les structures de l'État nous protègent et nous sauvent de nos propres cultures.

Nous affirmons qu'un tel discours est à la fois raciste et sexiste : raciste, car il perpétue la notion que nos cultures sont foncièrement rétrogrades et barbares, en contraste avec la culture blanche et occidentale, envisagée comme forme ultime de civilisation et de progrès; et sexiste, car provenant d'une perspective qui tend à infantiliser les femmes, ou celles-ci sont perçues comme de simples victimes incapables d'oeuvrer à leur propre bien-être.

Cette notion de « civilisation » est intrinsèquement liée à la rhétorique coloniale qui a mené au génocide des populations autochtones des Amériques, un génocide qui perdure jusqu'à ce jour, alors que la disparition de plus de cinq cent femmes autochtones au Canada continue d'être traité avec mépris et indifférence, réduit à un simple fait divers.

Nous rejetons le modèle simpliste et réductionniste de conception des « droits » des femmes véhiculé dans les médias de masse. Alors que nous réclamons activement nos « droits » à la liberté, à la sécurité, à la dignité tels qu'articulés dans le paradigme traditionnel des « droits humains », nous réclamons tout autant nos « droits » à l'expression de nos identités culturelles et religieuses.

Nous célébrons la diversité et le caractère dynamique de nos cultures et de nos identités, notamment nos identités sexuelles – en tant que femmes, et en tant que lesbiennes, bisexuelles, transsexuelles ou toute autre forme d'auto-identification - et refusons la caricature simpliste et schématique réduisant nos multiples communautés à des représentations uniques, homogènes et incontestées d'une tradition monolithique.

À cet égard, nous réaffirmons le caractère dynamique des différentes manifestations de croyances ou d'identités culturelles alors qu'elles se recourent avec un contexte politique et social extérieur plus large.

En particulier, nous insistons que l'analyse de l'oppression des femmes et de l'inégalité des sexes telle qu'exprimée dans les médias de masses, c'est-à-dire comme phénomène strictement interne aux religions ignore explicitement les systèmes extérieurs universels de patriarcat et de sexisme auxquels toutes les femmes font face, tout en homogénéisant et en fossilisant les religions de manière définitive.

Nous dénonçons le rôle de l'État et de ses structures dans la marginalisation des femmes racialisées et migrantes, qu'elles soient de foi ou non.

L'action de l'État et du système capitaliste contribuent à rendre le statut des femmes migrantes plus précaire en multipliant les barrières à l'obtention d'un statut légal, en cautionnant les différentes formes de discrimination systémique et en décuplant la criminalisation des femmes, accentuent leur vulnérabilité.

Nous dénonçons également la complicité du discours féministe impérialiste qui, sous couvert de solidarité, impose des conceptions eurocentristes et assimilationnistes d'égalité des sexes. Nous sommes critiques du paradigme féministe dominant qui place les choix des femmes occidentales comme l'unique et ultime chemin vers la libération des femmes, malgré l'accablante réalité que les femmes en Occident font face à un sexisme quotidien.

Nous sommes conscientes de la manière dont ce discours a été, et continue d'être manipulé et instrumentalisé par la machine de propagande pro-guerre et anti-immigrante.

Nous reconnaissons la continuité historique de l'appropriation et de la manipulation du discours féministe par les mouvements colonialistes et impérialistes à travers le monde.

Toutefois, nous ne sommes pas partisans du relativisme culturel qui tend à justifier des pratiques oppressives et injustes au nom de la « différence » et restons vigilantes afin que la liberté de religions ne nous empêche pas de lutter activement contre l'oppression.

Afin d'adopter une authentique position de solidarité, nous devons écouter les femmes que nous prétendons soutenir dans leurs luttes et comprendre que nous occupons différentes positions de privilège et de pouvoir.

Pour ce faire, nous devons activement lutter contre la déshumanisation des communautés racialisées et de foi et contre la victimisation des femmes. Nous devons soutenir les femmes qui sont à l'avant plan de leurs propres luttes de libération et les actrices de leur propre transformation. Nous devons nous engager dans ce processus non pas motivées par la pitié ou la charité, mais animées d'un véritable sens de solidarité et de respect.

*-- Personne N'est Illégal-Montréal*

## **6) The “Reasonable Accommodation” Commission and Debate: Statement by No One Is Illegal-Montreal**

November 12, 2007

The “reasonable accommodation” debate in Quebec, and the related “Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences” (the so-called “Bouchard-Taylor Commission”), are fundamentally rooted in xenophobia, racism and sexism.

From the outset, the “debate” fails to recognize that Quebec and Canada are built on stolen Indigenous land, and constituted through the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples who have been forced into “accommodating” colonization. Moreover, it completely ignores the fact that racism and white supremacy were intrinsically tied to the creation of both Canada and Quebec, and throughout their histories, have been instrumental in defining who “belongs” and who does not.

The Bouchard-Taylor Commission was created in the context of xenophobia during an election campaign and has provided an uncontested platform for racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

Opportunistic politicians and corporate media have appealed to public fears and prejudices, and manipulated false controversies over religious practices and cultural differences to create a generalized hysteria, with little to no basis in fact. In its very framework it creates a binary of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’; the ‘us’ being made up of white people of European descent, and the ‘them’ being whichever non-white immigrant group is currently under the spotlight.

The supposed "debate" has made open bigotry publicly acceptable, using simplistic caricatures that render our communities homogenous, uncontested and monolithic. While we reject this offensive portrayal of our communities, we assert the diversity of our cultures and traditions as well as our multiple identities.

Insidiously, so-called progressives and feminists have used the Commission platform to promote their own sophisticated brand of racism, one that refuses to acknowledge the oppressions within Western society, and unquestioningly considers Quebec to be “pluralistic, democratic and egalitarian”.

While using rhetoric rooted in Islamophobia and sexism to justify war abroad, as is the case in the on-going military occupation of Afghanistan, Quebec has embraced the framework around the “rights of women” and the systematic dehumanization of Muslim cultures to justify intolerance *chez nous*. We reject the notion that women of faith need to be saved from their inherently oppressive and backward cultures, and instead we support the women who are on the frontlines of their own struggles for liberation, and subjects, not objects or victims, of their own transformation.

As the Bouchard-Taylor Commission begins its public hearings in Montreal, we are organizing to openly and publicly reject the commission process and framework. To engage the Commission process is to validate its fundamentally racist premise, which is to stand judgment of immigrant communities. This Commission, sanctioned by the state, is a process of submission, whereby minority populations are forced to justify their very existence in Quebec. The way this debate is framed ignores all the current intolerance and injustice faced by many migrant communities in Quebec, while forcing them to defend themselves as “good Quebecois”.

We declare: *Ni patrie, ni état; ni Québec, ni Canada!* We refuse to submit to any form of nationalism.

Instead, we organize by uncompromisingly putting forward a vision of social justice, rooted in day-to-day grassroots struggles. We acknowledge and support the self-determination and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples all over the Americas -- struggles that have once again been rendered invisible in the skewed “reasonable accommodation” debate.

We organize actively against poverty, precarity, racial profiling, police brutality, war, capitalism and gender oppression. We organize against borders, for free movement and status for all. We actively fight against state oppression and violence targeted at the most marginalized, while struggling against all forms of oppression, whatever their source.

In contrast to the faulty framework of “reasonable accommodation”, we assert “solidarity across borders”, in the spirit of mutual aid and support.

We call for a collective rejection of the entire Commission. The process of genuine dialogue and debate, and real pluralism, comes from our shared struggles against all forms of oppression. The “reasonable accommodation” debate has clouded and confused the unity and solidarity we share -- as workers, poor, women, queer and trans people, migrants, and others -- fighting together to achieve real justice.

We re-assert those struggles, by refusing the fundamentally racist and sexist premises of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, and by refusing to be submissive or fearful as we continue to practice self-determination and strive for collective liberation.

-- *No One Is Illegal-Montreal (November 2007)*

## **7) La Commission et le débat sur les "Accommodements Raisonables": Déclaration de Personne N'est Illégal-Montréal**

12 Novembre 2007

Le débat actuel sur les « accommodements raisonnables » au Québec, de même que la « Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles » - mieux connue sous le nom de « Commission Bouchard-Taylor », sont fondamentalement basés sur des préceptes xénophobes, racistes et sexistes.

De prime abord, ce « débat » ne reconnaît pas le fait que le Québec et le Canada sont des entités établies sur des terres volées aux Autochtones, et ce que ces entités se sont développées à travers la dépossession et le génocide de ces peuples, qui ont été forcés de « s'accomoder » au processus de colonisation. De plus, ce « débat » ignore complètement le fait que le racisme et l'idéologie de suprématie blanche font partie intégrante de la création du Canada et du Québec. Ces idéologies ont défini tout au long de l'histoire et jusqu'à aujourd'hui ceux qui sont « inclus » dans le concept de l'identité nationale et ceux qui ne le sont pas.

La Commission Bouchard-Taylor a été mise en place dans un intense climat de xénophobie, avec en toile de fond une campagne électorale en quête de boucs émissaires. La Commission a servi de plateforme incontestée pour l'expression du racisme, de l'islamophobie et de l'anti-sémitisme.

Des politiciens à l'opportunisme aigu ainsi que les médias de masse ont joué sur les peurs et les préjugés et ont manipulé de fausses controverses au sujet des pratiques religieuses et des différences culturelles, dans le but de créer un climat d'hystérie généralisée, qui au fond est basé sur peu ou pas de substance.

À l'intérieur même de sa structure, ce « débat » a créé une dichotomie fondamentale entre le « nous » et le « eux », le « nous » étant défini comme la population blanche de descendance européenne, et le « eux » s'appliquant à différents groupes d'immigrants racialisés. Ce supposé débat a permis l'expression publique et admise d'un sectarisme béat, dirigé contre les communautés immigrantes et religieuses, tout en faisant usage de caricatures simplistes pour les réduire à des blocs homogènes, monolithiques et figés.

Nous rejetons ce portrait à la fois simpliste et insultant de nos communautés, tout en réaffirmant la diversité de nos cultures et de nos traditions, ainsi que de nos multiples identités à l'intérieur de celles-ci.

D'une manière très insidieuse, ceux qui s'identifient comme progressistes et comme féministes ont utilisé la Commission afin de promouvoir leur propre forme - plus sophistiquée - de racisme. Un racisme qui ignore les différentes formes d'oppression à l'intérieur des sociétés occidentales et qui considère immanquablement le Québec comme étant de facto une société « pluraliste, démocratique et égalitaire »



Alors qu'une rhétorique islamophobe et sexiste est utilisée pour justifier la guerre à l'échelle mondiale, comme dans le cas de l'occupation militaire de l'Afghanistan, le Québec a emprunté une rhétorique semblable, centrée autour de ce qui est schématiquement désigné comme « les droits des femmes ». Cette rhétorique déshumanise systématiquement les cultures musulmanes, afin de justifier l'intolérance au sein de ce « chez nous ».

Nous rejetons l'idée que les femmes de foi aient besoin d'être sauvées de leurs cultures fondamentalement oppressives et rétrogrades. Nous les soutenons plutôt dans leurs luttes de libération, dont elles sont les sujets à part entière, et non pas les objets ou les victimes.

Alors que la Commission Bouchard-Taylor entame ses audiences publiques à Montréal, nous nous mobilisons afin de rejeter ouvertement et publiquement le processus et le cadre idéologique de la Commission. S'impliquer dans la Commission serait synonyme d'une validation de ses prémisses racistes et une approbation de sa fonction de juge des communautés immigrantes.

Cette Commission, créée et parrainée par l'État, n'est rien d'autre qu'un processus de soumission, à travers lequel des groupes minoritaires sont forcés à justifier jusqu'à leur existence même au Québec, à coups d'humiliantes enchères à « l'intégration ». La manière dont ce débat est articulé met de côté toutes les intolérances et les injustices subies par de nombreuses communautés migrantes au Québec, tout en les obligeant à faire la preuve qu'ils sont de « bons Québécois ».

Nous déclarons : Ni patrie, ni État; ni Quebec, ni Canada! Nous refusons de nous soumettre à tout forme de nationalisme.

Nous choisissons plutôt de militer en mettant de l'avant une vision de justice sociale sans compromis, basée sur des luttes populaires qui s'effectuent au quotidien. Nous reconnaissons et soutenons les luttes pour la souveraineté et l'autodétermination des peuples autochtones à travers les Amériques, luttes une fois encore rendues invisibles par le soi-disant « débat » sur les accommodements raisonnables.

Nous militons activement contre la pauvreté, la précarité, le profilage racial, la brutalité policière, la guerre, le capitalisme et le sexisme. Nous militons contre les frontières, pour la liberté de mouvement et pour un statut pour toutes et tous. Nous luttons activement contre l'oppression et la violence infligées par l'État aux plus marginaliséEs, tout en continuant à lutter contre toute forme d'oppression, quelle que soit sa source.

À la vision réductrice et malsaine véhiculée par le débat sur les «Accommodements raisonnables », nous opposons – et préférons – celle de la «solidarité sans frontières », dans un esprit d'entraide mutuelle.

Nous appelons à un rejet collectif de la Commission dans son ensemble. Le processus de dialogue véritable, le réel pluralisme et le vrai débat découlent de nos luttes contre toutes les formes d'oppression. Le «débat sur les accommodements raisonnables » a obscurci

l'unité et la solidarité que nous partageons – en tant que travailleurs(euses), pauvres, femmes, personnes queer et trans, migrantEs, et autres – en luttant ensemble pour obtenir une justice véritable.

Nous réitérons par la présente l'importance de ces luttes tout en refusant les prémisses fondamentalement racistes et sexistes qui sous-tendent la Commission Bouchard-Taylor. Nous refusons la soumission et la crainte, et continuerons à pratiquer l'autodétermination, dans une perspective de libération collective.

-- *Personne N'est Illégal-Montréal (Novembre 2007)*

## 8) Whose Reasonable Accommodation ?

Statement by the Immigrant Workers Center of Montreal

November 2007

The debate raised in Quebec on 'reasonable accommodation' is built on a number of false assumptions about the relationship between majority groups ('we') and minorities ('they') and what 'we' believe the correct behaviours of 'they' should be. It is the wrong debate. Reasonable accommodation should begin with the rights of workers.

Accommodating reasonably implies the protection of basic rights, decent wages, rapid recognition of credentials, and terminating 'guest worker' programs that deny rights. We have to remember that historically Canada/Quebec has been created and developed through the colonization of First Peoples on the one hand and the exploitation of migrant labour on the other, in order to build the 'nation'. These processes continue unabated.

The public debate on 'reasonable accommodation' remains how 'they' should modify their customs to accommodate 'us'. It assumes, dangerously, that there are common values, as though such things actually exist. We are writing this because we do not believe in this false consensus, this tendency to homogenize all things except food, custom and costume. 'Cultural accommodation' blinds the public to the realities of migration, and how the middle and owning classes of Quebec society benefit from the exploitation of the 'they'. The connections between immigration and labour are absent from the debate and we believe that it should be at its centre.

Let's briefly review some of the trends in immigration and labour over the past 30 years and ask ourselves is this 'reasonable accommodation'? Most immigrants arriving during this period are from countries in the South (Asia, Africa, Latin America) and therefore they are not white. The economic forces that push them out of their countries are the same ones that shape their conditions here. They are 'the other'. They have arrived with high levels of education and skills. Yet over that time, most have not had their skills and training recognized and therefore, they have been forced to take jobs that many "Canadians/Quebecers" reject. They do the work that remains hidden: the caring for children and the elderly, the services and cleaning that allows the 'we' to function. In these jobs, there is little protection. Minimal labour standards exist on paper, but are not posted in workplaces or in private homes for caregivers and domestic workers. There are few inspectors and where these standards are abused, it is incumbent upon the workers her/himself to challenge her/his boss. They are often isolated and with few other employees. For people who are struggling to raise children and send remittance payments to family members in their countries of origin, this is a great risk. It takes enormous courage to stand up for their labour rights when the chances of their winning anything and keeping their job is remote. You might say that this is a situation of 'reasonably accommodating' the class interests of employers by providing a pool of skilled, cheap labour (trained and educated elsewhere) who are prepared to work in almost any conditions as the price of migration to a better place. In addition, there is little evidence to support the myth that 'things get better for immigrants with time'.

Many Canadians and Quebecers are unaware that we have programs for ‘guest workers’, who are brought in for limited periods and sent back to their home countries when the work is done. This is the case of agricultural workers. Domestic workers, through the Live-in Caregiver Program, are brought in and if they comply as live-ins can apply as permanent residents. The federal government likes these programs and intends to increase their use because they allow labour to be brought in without any real ‘accommodation’ as strict rules regulate the conditions of exploitation. Workers in these programs have little recourse to protection from the laws and policies for ‘us’ and remain the ‘they’ of the labour market. Even worse off are the many workers without formal status- who remain hidden as cleaners, cooks, dish-washers and domestics, facing arbitrary and well-below the minimum wage and labour standards, not eligible to making any claims but available nonetheless to be exploited.

As the policies of the provincial and federal governments have been to open up markets and reduce ‘expensive’ state programs, immigrant labour has been one of the ways of filling the gaps left by the inadequacies of neo-liberal policies. We don’t need as many decent nursing homes if immigrant women, often trained as nurses, can provide cheap care at sub-standard private ones or in peoples’ homes. We don’t need as much public childcare if we can import nannies. We do not need to increase wages and improve working conditions if the international labour pool will continue to bring workers here who are pushed into sub-standard jobs. Accommodation implies justice for immigrant workers as a precondition for any other discussion.

-- *The Immigrant Workers Center (November 2007)*

## 9) Qui fait des « accommodements raisonnables »?

Déclaration du Centre des Travailleurs et Travailleuses ImmigrantEs

Novembre 2007

Le débat sur les accommodements raisonnables au Québec est construit sur un ensemble de fausses prémisses au sujet de la relation entre la majorité (le « nous ») et les minorités (le « eux ») et ce que « nous » pensons être le comportement correct pour « eux ». Il s'agit du mauvais débat. Les accommodements raisonnables devraient commencer avec les droits en milieu de travail. « Accommoder raisonnablement » signifie la protection des droits fondamentaux, un salaire décent, la reconnaissance rapide des compétences et l'abolition des programmes de « travailleur saisonnier » qui bafouent les droits des travailleurs. Il est nécessaire de se rappeler que le Québec-Canada a été historiquement créé et développé « grâce » à la colonisation des Premières Nations et l'exploitation des travailleurs migrants. Ces procédés se perpétuent impunément.

Le débat public sur les « accommodements raisonnables » continuent à demander comment « ils » devraient modifier leurs coutumes et traditions pour « nous » accommoder. Cette conception assume dangereusement qu'il y a quelque chose comme des valeurs communes. Nous écrivons cette lettre car nous ne croyons pas à ce faux consensus, cette tendance à tout homogénéiser sauf la nourriture, les vêtements et les coutumes. Les « accommodements culturels » aveuglent le public par rapport à la réalité de la migration et à l'avantage que retirent les classes moyenne et dirigeante du Québec de l'exploitation des travailleurs immigrants. La connection évidente entre l'immigration et le marché du travail est totalement absente du débat et nous croyons qu'elle devrait être au coeur de celui-ci.

Revoyons ensemble certaines tendances de l'immigration et du travail au Québec au cours des trente dernières années et demandons nous si cela constitue des « accommodements raisonnables ». La plupart des nouveaux arrivants sont issus des pays du Sud (Asie, Afrique, Amérique du Sud) et ne sont pas « blancs ». Ils sont le « eux », l'« autre ». Ils sont souvent très qualifiés et très éduqués. Cependant, les compétences de la grande majorité d'entre eux ne sont pas reconnues et incidemment ils doivent accepter des emplois que « nous » rejetons. Ils font le travail que personne ne veut faire et restent cachés : ils s'occupent des enfants, des aînés et du ménage ce qui « nous » permet de fonctionner. Dans ces emplois, il n'y a pas de sécurité. Les normes minimales du travail existent en principe mais dans les faits, elles ne sont pas respectées. Il y a très peu d'inspecteurs et dans les cas où il y a abus ou violation de ces normes, il incombe au travailleur lui-même de contester son traitement et son patron. Pour des immigrants qui doivent supporter leur famille et souvent envoyer de l'argent à l'étranger, s'en prendre à un patron peu scrupuleux est un très grand risque. S'attaquer à un patron demande énormément de courage et les réparations sont souvent insuffisantes en regard des dangers. Vous pourriez dire que le fait d'accepter au Québec-Canada un bassin d'employés qualifiés prêts à travailler dans n'importe quelle condition et à n'importe quel

prix constitue un exemple d' « accommodements raisonnables » de « nous » envers « eux ». Malheureusement, il y a peu d'information qui nous porte à croire que « leur » niveau de vie est beaucoup meilleur ici.

Plusieurs Québécois et Canadiens ne savent pas que nous avons des programmes spéciaux d'accueil de travailleurs « temporaires » ou « saisonniers ». Dans le cadre de ces programmes, un nombre important d'immigrants viennent travailler au Canada et sont renvoyés dans leur pays quand leur travail est terminé. Le secteur de l'agriculture est particulièrement concerné. Des travailleurs domestiques arrivent également au Canada et doivent travailler dans des maisons pendant 24 mois sur 3 ans avant d'avoir le droit de faire une demande de résidentes. Le gouvernement fédéral a à coeur ce type de programme et entend les utiliser de plus en plus car cela permet de faire entrer beaucoup de travailleurs sans avoir à les accommoder tout en définissant clairement les conditions de leur exploitation. Ces travailleurs ne bénéficient d'aucune protection et restent le « eux » du marché du travail. La condition des sans-papiers est encore pire! Ils travaillent au noir à nettoyer la vaisselle et à faire le ménage et font face à des conditions de travail arbitraires et de beaucoup inférieures aux normes du travail. Ils ne sont évidemment pas éligibles à aucune requête légale mais ils sont tout à fait éligibles à l'exploitation....

Comme les politiques récentes des gouvernements vont dans le sens d'un désengagement de l'État et d'une baisse concordante des services sociaux, les travailleurs immigrants sont une excellente façon de combler les trous ouverts par les politiques néo-libérales. Nous n'avons pas besoin d'autant d'infirmières si des travailleuses immigrantes (souvent entraînées comme infirmières dans leur pays) peuvent fournir des soins directement sur place à des prix ridicules-« cheap labour ». Nous n'avons pas besoin de monter les salaires si des immigrants viennent chaque année combler les trous dans le marché du travail. Les accommodements raisonnables impliquent la justice pour les travailleurs immigrants comme « précondition » à tout autre débat.

-- *Le Centre des Travailleurs Immigrants (Novembre 2007)*

## 10) "Reasonable Accommodation": A Feminist Response

Simone de Beauvoir Institute

November 2007

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.

-- *The Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University (November 2007)*



## 11) Les « accommodements raisonnables » : Une réponse féministe

Institut Simone de Beauvoir

Novembre 2007

En tant que féministes antiracistes et anticoloniales, nous avons d'importantes réserves à l'égard de la Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles. Par ailleurs, le Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec (CSF) a suggéré des modifications à la Charte québécoise afin de réclamer la priorité relative du droit à l'égalité des sexes sur le droit à l'expression religieuse, ainsi qu'une interdiction du port de symboles religieux « ostentatoires » dans les institutions publiques par leurs salarié-e-s. Le fait que la Commission, suivie de l'intervention du CSF, ouvrent la voie à des législations qui limiteront les droits des femmes plutôt que les améliorer, nous préoccupe. Nous vous invitons à sonder avec nous la structure d'exclusion de la Commission, les présomptions qu'elle avance et l'impact néfaste qu'elle pourrait avoir sur la vie des femmes.

Cela dit, pourquoi contester la légitimité et les effets de la Commission ?

1) Parce que malgré l'urgent besoin d'amorcer une discussion sur le racisme et le sexisme dans la société québécoise, nous nous opposons au procédé par lequel la consultation de la Commission a pris place. Écouter des gens exposer ouvertement leur racisme ne constitue pas un cadre propice à la réflexion critique et au dialogue, mais incite plutôt à un climat de peur et de panique morale. De plus, par le fait même de demander si la « différence » et les « minorités » devraient être accommodées ou non, la Commission tient pour acquis et perpétue une perspective selon laquelle certaines « cultures » sont homogènes, inférieures et rétrogrades. En outre, la notion de « raison » à laquelle la Commission a recours doit aussi être étudiée de manière critique. En effet, historiquement, les hommes blancs ont occupé la position d'unique détenteurs de la raison, et la Commission court le risque de reproduire cet état de choses dans le présent contexte d'inégalités sociales.

2) Parce que la conception de la Commission et le vocabulaire des « accommodements » tiennent pour acquis et perpétuent un système de pouvoir selon lequel des « hôtes » occidentaux doivent protéger leurs frontières des « visiteurs » non occidentaux. Un procédé consultatif plus rigoureux reconnaîtrait d'abord que le Canada est un état de colons blancs et que son histoire en est une de violence coloniale et patriarcale envers les peuples autochtones.

3) Parce que les débats publics engendrés par la Commission présentent certaines communautés ethnoculturelles comme de perpétuelles étrangères et comme une menace à l'identité québécoise au lieu d'admettre qu'elles en sont partie intégrante. L'inquiétude que les « autres » d'origine ethnoculturelle puissent être socialement régressifs occulte l'homophobie, le sexisme et le racisme prévalents au quotidien dans la société québécoise.

4) Parce que les médias francophones couvrent les débats de manière à légitimer un protectionnisme de l'identité québécoise et de la langue française qui autorise la peur de l'autre et le racisme au nom de la sauvegarde d'une culture distincte.

- 5) Parce que l'attention prêtée aux femmes voilées sert à détourner l'attention du sexisme et du racisme qui ont historiquement dominés les sociétés québécoises et canadiennes. En tant que féministes, nous devons refuser d'être complices de la violence envers les femmes que perpétue l'état, soit par ses rapports coloniaux avec les peuples autochtones, soit par son emploi de la femme voilée comme justification de la guerre et de l'occupation impérialistes en Afghanistan.
- 6) Parce que recourir à la laïcité, supposément garante de l'égalité des sexes, sert dans les faits à promouvoir une norme chrétienne et à faire des musulmans les boucs émissaires du sexisme, masquant ainsi les formes laïques de sexisme.
- 7) Parce que, même si la Commission est encore en cours, elle a déjà donné lieu à des propositions de lois pouvant restreindre, réguler et autrement entraver la vie des immigrant-e-s et des personnes provenant des communautés ethnoculturelles au Québec.
- 8) Parce que réguler l'expression religieuse publique des femmes constitue de la discrimination sexuelle, portant atteinte à la liberté des femmes et restreignant leur participation civique.
- 9) Parce que le CSF ne remplit pas son mandat, soit « défendre les intérêts des femmes. » Le CSF défendrait mieux les intérêts des femmes du Québec s'il mettait l'accent sur les conditions de pauvreté, de violence, de criminalisation et de racisme auxquelles bon nombre font face, et non sur ce qu'elles portent.

-- *L'Institut Simone de Beauvoir, Université Concordia ( Novembre 2007)*