

On an article of Toula Drimonis - “Free choice” to prostitute or wear the niqab: the same fight!

Monday 19 November 2018, by [GEADAH Yolande](#) (Date first published: 19 November 2018).

The text entitled “Quebec feminists maintain support for public sector hijab ban”, published on the site of Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières (ESSF) [1] criticizes the Fédération des femmes du Québec - FFQ (Quebec Federation of Women) for postponing the discussion scheduled in the agenda of its Assembly of October 28, concerning the wearing of religious symbols, including the wearing of the niqab [2]. This text is misleading and distorts the reality on several points that I will not take the time to refute here, preferring to keep to the essential.

The author deplores the postponement of the discussion of religious symbols, saying that this reflects a lack of unconditional support for Muslim women. In reality, the main reason for postponing this debate is the fact that another hotly debated proposal monopolized the entire time of the Assembly.

After a heated debate on prostitution, the FFQ abandoned the cautious position of “neutrality” adopted previously, to recognize henceforth “the agency [*l’agentivité*] of women in prostitution / sex industry including consent to their activities.” This new position, criticized by many feminists who consider prostitution an unacceptable sexual exploitation and not as a legitimate “choice”, stems from an unprecedented mobilization of some feminists who claim to be adherents of the theory of intersectionality and of postmodern and postcolonial trends.

It is clear that this stand legitimizes prostitution and paves the way to mobilization for the decriminalization of pimps and clients. Recall that the Canadian prostitution law, passed in 2014, is inspired by the Nordic abolitionist law that prohibits the purchase of sexual services, but decriminalizes prostitutes, considering that they are victims of prostitution. However, the author and the people cited in the article, far from denouncing the normalization of prostitution, rather denounce the double standard which, according to them, derives from a lack of courage and solidarity with Muslim women. This incongruous alliance between people supporting practices rooted in social groups that are at the antipodes of social morality, stems from a twisted logic.

According to this logic, any individual choice would be a fundamental right and deserves support in the name of the Charter. But a choice is not a right, and no freedom is absolute! This position obscures social issues and the negative consequences associated with certain individual “choices”. It is obvious, for example, that the freedom to pollute the environment the way one wants is not a right. Some individual choices are clearly against the collective interest. But it is still necessary to know if it is possible to speak of a choice of freedom with regard to prostitution and the niqab.

With regard to prostitution, does the fact that some women can benefit from this trade suffice to obscure the painful realities of prostitution? There are plenty of studies to illustrate the terrible consequences of this trade, which is destroying the lives of millions of women and children, who are among the most vulnerable. This is why the individual “choice” to prostitute oneself cannot be enough to dictate our collective choices as a society, nor especially our policies on prostitution.

As rightly pointed out by a survivor of prostitution, Valérie Tender, who denounces the position of the FFQ:

“On this account, the FFQ failed to protect women dragooned embarked into the infernal cycle of prostitution that is, in fact, nothing more than a relationship of domination on the part of pimps and abusers. It prefers to focus on a small number of women who say they do so by choice (including some in self-denying to protect themselves).” [3]

Besides, the parallel that some make between prostitution and wearing the niqab is not as incongruous as it seems at first sight. In 2009, the FFQ adopted a position of neutrality regarding the wearing of religious symbols, particularly with regard to the veil (hijab) which became a controversy, claiming to both defend the freedom to wear it and the right not to wear it. But with regard to the various proposed bills concerning the obligation for them to have uncovered faces of for public servants of the State to be uncovered, the FFQ had shown itself to be wary in favor of such a restriction, as long as it does not apply to the users of public services. Therefore, the current mobilization to push the FFQ to adopt a new position on this subject clearly aims to oppose any ban on the niqab, including for public servants.

In a recent text, the writer Kamel Daoud criticized the position of UN experts who condemned the ban on the niqab by France:

“We forget that we never saw women in burqa [4] demonstrate for the freedom of women who do not wear it, nor for women unveiled in the countries of the ‘South’. Freedom is one way. (...) The wearing of the burqa will indeed be a freedom when women will not be killed, harassed, raped, downgraded and insulted because they do not wear a veil or burqa outside Europe. (...) To come today to defend the freedom of the burqa in the West is to defend the obligation to wear it in the ‘South’. (...) We forget that we thus consolidate a dreadful normalization of the renunciation of the body, the social bond, humanity and its sharing. The burqa becomes a debate on freedom and not a debate on the attack on freedom.” [5]

This text sums up well the issues completely overshadowed by those who defend the niqab in the name of freedom of choice. In Muslim societies, it is widely accepted recognized that those who insist on wearing the niqab are from the Muslim religious far-right. There is no doubt that groups and people who claim to be feminist and progressive would hesitate to support the claims of the Catholic or Protestant religious far right. Why then refuse to show the same discernment, when it concerns members of a religious minority? Isn't this a form of racism that does not say its name?

Yolande Geadah, 15.11.18

P.S.

• Traduction Sally Rousset.

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 46796), [Quebec feminists maintain support for public sector hijab ban](https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article46796) : <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article46796>

[2] The niqab is an integral veil covering the face with the exception of the eyes. *ESSF*

[3] <http://sisyphe.org/spip.php?article5493#.W-r24SABfnU.twitter>

Available onr ESSF (article 46870), [Débat sur la prostitution et l'industrie du sexe après l'assemblée générale de la Fédération des Femmes du Québec](#) :

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article46870>

[4] Clothing covering the whole body, including the face, of Afghan origin. A veil or "grid" of fabric is installed at the level of the eyes to allow to see. *ESSF*

[5] « Les experts portent-ils la burqa ? », by Kamel Daoud, 1st November 2018 in *Le Point*.