



## WOMEN ON DECISION-MAKING BODIES. WHAT FINDINGS AND WHAT CHALLENGES?

Josée Camara, regional representative of the *Conseil du statut de la femme* for the Greater Montréal region showed, through her conference, the importance of women being present on decision-making bodies with the goal of solidifying gender equality in practice and exceeding mere de facto equality.

### THE NETWORK IN A NUTSHELL

It was under the theme “*Démocratie syndicale et influence des femmes à la FIQ*” (Union democracy and the influence of women at the FIQ) that the Women’s Network took place on January 20 last. Nearly 130 activists were welcomed by the vice-president and political officer for the Status of Women, Line Larocque, before attending the two conferences on the agenda and taking part in the discussions and the debates which followed.

To initiate the exchanges, Josée Camara and Florence Thomas, Union Consultant for the FIQ Status of Women Sector both gave presentations on the role of women in the decision-making settings. The reported data reveals the challenges facing women when it is a question of female representation in settings where decisions are made.

The resulting debates were an opportunity to review the concerns of the activists about the issue and they also had the chance to come up with possible solutions for promoting better representation of women at decision-making bodies, in particular within our own Federation.

A common theme seemed to emerge from the last Women’s Network: the FIQ needs to have measures for fostering the representation and participation of women in the union structure. Indeed, 95% of the activists voted in favour of such a motion.

However, in light of the studies conducted on the number of women elected at the municipal, provincial and federal levels as well on the boards of directors of companies and Canadian corporations, it must be recognized that the role of women is still far from being equal with that of their male colleagues. For example, only 17.6% of municipal mayors in Québec are women, while the feminine gender only represents a mere 15.9% of the members of the boards of directors of Canadian corporations. In addition to this significant difference, the women elected have a tendency to be concentrated in the sectors known to be traditionally female, such as health and education, but very few in the areas of economy and in the files on infrastructure development and roads.

According to Josée Camara, it is “a permanent deficit” based on the conservative institutional practices, a lopsided economic reality between women and men and the distribution of

domestic and family tasks which negatively affect women and discourage them from running for the different decision-making bodies. In addition, several statements from the activists, following the conference of Ms Camara, confirmed one fact: women have a tendency to under-estimate their qualifications, which dampen their ambitions for submitting their candidacy for decision-making positions. Contrary to them, men have more of a tendency to “go for it” and take their chances, even if they do not have all the qualifications required for the position.

Nonetheless, the presence of women on decision-making and advisory bodies is desirable for several reasons. In fact, to insure the democratic health of our institutions and to conserve the gains and avoid setbacks in equity, women need to have a bigger role. To achieve this, a gender-based analysis appears to be a valuable tool. Since this method is used to identify the distinct effects that a policy, law

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Josée Camara

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or a programme that have on women, it makes it possible to better evaluate what constitutes an advantage or a disadvantage for women. For example, who thought about the impacts of the Northern Plan on women? What roles can they play in the implementation of this important aspect in the economic development of Québec? There has been no reply to these questions at this point. The role of women has been completely obscured from this societal project, whereas a gender-based analysis would have made it possible to better identify this aspect of the question and to integrate a strategy that also covers the interests of women.

So, the question that arises is the following: how to increase the role of women in the decision-making and advisory bodies? According to Ms Camara, on the political level, first the number of female candidates must be increased by, among other things, forcing the political parties to have an action plan in this respect. It is also important to increase the support and training programmes for citizen participation in order to make women aware of the importance of their commitment. In turn, the more women there are on decision-making bodies, the more they can influence things and the more these bodies will be likely to adapt to promote greater gender equality. So girls, are you ready?

## March 8 WOMEN ON THE MOVE FOR EQUALITY. STANDING TOGETHER AGAINST AUSTERITY!

With the theme of austerity, the 2015 International Women's Day will stress the effects of the massive cutbacks in the State's expenses and their major impacts on public services and social programmes. The first victims of these cuts, women must speak out and denounce the Government's orientations. You will have the tools for March 8: a poster, a sticker, a pamphlet and a pin to use to take the message into your institutions and make the healthcare professionals aware of the impact of the austerity policies on their daily routine. Also check the media because the FIQ and women's groups fully intend to denounce loud and clear, the impact of austerity on the lives of women.

## FIND OUR BALANCE

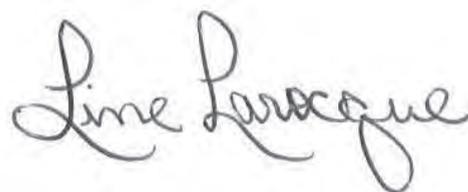
The FIQ has had an active role in the major battles on women's rights in Québec. It has made equality between men and women a major platform, which has enabled it to contribute to the major victories in the feminist cause.

Among other things, the Federation has adopted clear positions on workplace violence and has developed policies in this respect. The expertise and commitment of its Status of Women Sector has enabled it to involve the organization in several feminist subjects, in particular concerning the health of women. Moreover, we remember that the FIQ took a position in favour of abortion at a time when this practice was not only taboo, but even criminal. Economic equality has also been at the heart of the feminist actions at the FIQ. As such, the Federation has been a leading figure in the fight for pay equity in Québec and was very involved in this major progress for women's rights.

From the outset, the FIQ has also been involved in the women's movement such as the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* (FFQ) and the *Intersyndicale des femmes* and actively participates in the debates and the mobilization activities in line with the feminist cause. However, there is an element that the FIQ has not concretely addressed before now: insure that a feminist vision and representation is maintained in its own decision-making bodies.

We know, the face of the FIQ has changed over the years. So, if our collective hope is to continue to make the FIQ a dynamic organization which is not afraid to take ambitious and audacious feminist positions, we need women at our decision-making bodies. This representation must be based on a strong, concrete principle rooted in our organizational principles.

Obviously, insuring a fair representation of women at our decision-making bodies will not be easy. It constitutes a significant challenge and for which we have to take the time to collectively reflect. However, it is a principle dear to me and for which I am convinced that we have to adopt a firm position. We have to find OUR balance. Both by respecting this audacious feminist tradition, which is ours, and by insuring its sustainability for future generations.



Line Larocque, Vice-President and political officer for the Status of Women Committee



## FEMMES EN MARCHÉ POUR L'ÉGALITÉ



SOLIDAIRES CONTRE L'AUSTÉRITÉ!

Le Collectif 8 mars : 

## REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE UNIONS. WHAT IS IT AT THE FIQ?



Florence Thomas

## REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE UNIONS. WHAT IS IT AT THE FIQ?

Contrary to popular belief, women entered the labour market at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So, it was during the Second World War that the number of women active in the labour market really increased significantly. Their working conditions and their salaries were then much less than that of men, despite the demands that they might make. At the end of the war however, the Government at the time, that of Duplessis, “returned women to their kitchens” to leave room on the labour market for the men and to not, he said, “harm” the economy.

We had to wait thirty years, that is, until the 1970’s, for women to return to the labour market. However, even though there were more women than before, it remained uncommon for them to be present in the union structure and their demands were not relayed in organizations composed of a majority of men. To advance their causes, such as contraception, the right to an abortion, pay equity, work-family balance or parental rights, the women’s committees in the unions were forced to organize by creating parallel structures like the *Intersyndicale des femmes* on the fringes of their unions.

### SITUATION AT THE FIQ

The movement to unionize nurses started at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was composed of a very strong majority of women. Since the founding of the Federation in 1987, women make up about 90% of its members. Because women are the majority, one would think that they don’t have to question, like organizations that are mixed, the

issues of representation. But, over time, the representation of women at the decision-making bodies of the FIQ has changed. These bodies are the only setting where the union representatives can speak as women about their working conditions, but also promote the values that move them and orient the major decisions of the organization. Thus, the question must be asked: does the women-men representation in our structures clearly reflect the reality of our members?

In this respect, certain statistics are very revealing. While in 1987, men represented 12% of the delegates, today, they make up nearly a third of the delegation, that is, 27%. Certain committees are composed equally of women and men, others are made up of a very large majority of men, like the Occupational Health and Safety Committee, while others, like the Status of Women Committee, only has women on it. It is also relevant to see that the “higher up” we go in the pyramid in the settings of responsibilities, staring

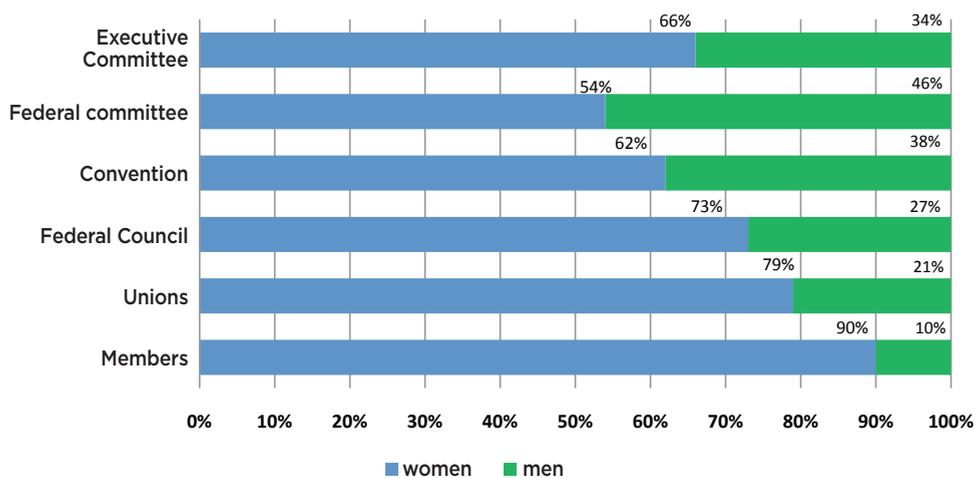
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# THE FIQ, A STRONG VOICE, ACTIONS THAT COUNT



## Pyramid of exclusion of women at the FIQ 2014



## WHAT THE ACTIVISTS AT THE WOMEN'S NETWORK THINK

For the vast majority of the activists present, the question of the representation of women in our decision-making bodies deserves to be asked now! For them, the debate is necessary for the health of our organization. They unanimously stressed the importance that women take on their role and speak out. To attain this, several opinions on the means and the strategies to adopt were launched. Reserved positions, accommodation, ways to encourage and conserve the interest of the young union representatives, work schedules and provincial meetings adapted to the reality of young mothers... In short, there is no shortage of solutions! Proof that when there is a willingness to change things to make progress in the feminist issues at the FIQ, the Women's Network activists are mobilized!

with the members on the Executive Committee, the less women are in a majority in the bodies of power.

### WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO GREATER REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN?

Activism often requires a triple investment, that is, on the professional, union and family level. To have a greater number of women, work-family balance then becomes a challenge. So, despite the progress in the distribution of family tasks and responsibilities, it nevertheless remains that there is still an inequality and that women continue to do more than men. Also, when they are questioned on what are the obstacles preventing them from investing more in their union, besides the lack of time, women name the lack of confidence in their own capacities, the functioning of meetings and their schedules. They also state fear for the preconceived ideas and hostile reactions of their colleagues.

### WHAT STRATEGIES TO ADOPT TO INSURE A FAIR REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN OUR DECISION-MAKING BODIES?

How to improve the representation of women in the settings where decisions are taken at the Federation? One of the strategies may be to set numerical objectives for the representation and to develop specific plans to attain these targets. Another way would be to make modifications and to reform the Constitution and Bylaws of the organization. We could also think about accommodation, or, in other words, a "mentorship", to support the young union representative in this sizeable challenge or even the structures and positions reserved for female union representatives. It is also possible to implement an across-the-board feminist approach in all the files in which the FIQ works. In this logic, for example, the analysis of the files such as the collective negotiations and organization of work time must take into account the gender concerns in order to always bring into focus the reality of women.

*Power  
Women's Way ♀*



From left to right: Claire Alarie, Annie Pinard, Patricia Lajoie, Line Mercier, Nancy Moss, Julie Daigneault, members of the Status of Women Committee. Below from left to right: Line Larocque, Vice-President and political officer for the Status of Women Committee, Florence Thomas, Union Consultant - Status of Women Sector and Dominic Garneau, Coordinator - Status of Women Sector.