



11. ● REFLECTION ON THE FIQ'S MEMBERSHIP WITH THE FÉDÉRATION DES FEMMES DU QUÉBEC

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REGROUPEMENT
DES FIQ



REFLECTION ON THE FIQ'S MEMBERSHIP WITH THE FÉDÉRATION DES FEMMES DU QUÉBEC

POLITICAL OFFICERS

Nancy Bédard
Shirley Dorismond

UNION CONSULTANTS

Myrna Karamanoukian
Amélie Robert

COLLABORATION WITH STATUS OF WOMEN COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Kathleen Bertrand
Caroline Flageol
Caroline Gravel
Line Mercier
Michèle Piché
Caroline Rioux

FFQ presentation and background

The Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) was founded in 1966 as part of an initiative of several Quebec feminists to highlight 25 years since women obtained the right to vote. The FFQ's objective was to unite associations so as to build greater union activism strength and achieve gender equality. Influential women got involved, including Thérèse Casgrain, Madeleine Parent and Françoise David. Over the years, the FFQ has played an important role in Quebec's history of feminist battles.

Many gains for women can be attributed to the FFQ and the mobilization of its activists. From the start, its members fought to obtain paid maternity leave. This has always been a key part of their battle. The FFQ also played an important role in the coalition for the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) and in the actions for the International Women's Day (March 8), now called the International Day of Women's Rights. Starting in 1975, it also influenced the battle for women's right to have an abortion. Furthermore, it played an important role in making demands on the government, for example to set up the Council on the Status of Women. One of the Federation's most significant achievements was the organization of the Bread and Roses March in 1995, which persuaded the government to substantially increase minimum wage and to implement the Pay Equity Act. This success led the FFQ to create the World March of Women. The FFQ's mobilization inspired a movement in which, every five years, women all over the world march for equality between women and men.

Quebec society owes several of its gains to the FFQ. However, in recent years, the Federation has ceased to bring together feminists in Quebec.

FFQ's challenges

Since the 2000s, and more specifically since 2010, the FFQ has faced several difficulties. They can be divided into two main categories:

- Difficulties with the FFQ's stances;
- Difficulties with the FFQ's governance.

These issues had major consequences, in particular on the climate at the Federation and among its members, and on the projects it took on. As a result, there were waves of departures of members and administrators. In 2015, the Federation had 645 individual members and 223 associative members, whereas in 2019 it only had 253 individual members and 53 associative members. Some of the provincial labour organizations included:

- The CSN, SPGQ and SFPQ left;
- The FIQ, FTQ, CSQ and APTS are still members at present;
- The CSD and FAE were never members.

Difficulties with the FFQ's stances

Prostitution and sex work

The FIQ does not have an official position on prostitution or sex work. However, the topic was brought up by several groups who decided to leave the FFQ, like the Regroupement interprofessionnel des intervenantes retraitées de la santé (RIIRS), the Concertation des luttes contre l'exploitation sexuelle (CLES), the CSN and some community groups.

Since the start of the 2000s, there have been differing points of views at the FFQ on prostitution and sex work. In 2006, the general assembly decided to support the different schools of thought. Historically, the FFQ focused on a common ground between the different groups, i.e., the well-being of women working in prostitution or sex work. Yet, in 2018 the FFQ decided to adopt the following positions:

- 1** That the FFQ recognize the agency of women in prostitution/the sex industry, including consent to their activities.
- 2** That the FFQ fight against the stigmatization of and barriers to full participation in society that these women endure their whole lives, even after they leave the industry. Also, that it fight against the violence and obstacles to leaving prostitution/the sex industry that women in the industry face.
- 3** That the FFQ recognize the importance of defending the rights of those who decide to work in prostitution/the sex industry, and those who want to leave, to safety, health, independence, freedom of expression and association, and to decent conditions, both in their work and other areas of their life.
- 4** That the FFQ work to differentiate between the sex industry, consensual exchanges, exploitation and human trafficking.
- 5** That the FFQ fight against the exploitation of and violence against women in prostitution/the sex industry, and defend the right of all women to physical and mental integrity, dignity, health and safety.
- 6** That the FFQ continue to fight against poverty, marginalization, and antagonistic relations with the government and its agents, in particular on behalf of women who face multiple layers of oppression.

The first resolution provoked a particularly strong reaction from groups who defend the position of prostitution prohibitionism. It was interpreted as going against the values they defend and downplaying the oppression that women face in the sex industry. This explains why some groups decided to leave the FFQ.

Intersectionality and a culture of individual action over collective action

The FFQ has long integrated the concerns of all women into its actions. At its Estates General in 2013, it restated its commitment to an intersectional approach, which means paying more attention to ways in which women face situations of oppression, not only because of the patriarchy, but also because of other systems of oppression (racism, ableism,¹ heteronormativity, etc.). There is a consensus among FFQ members on this matter. However, viewpoints differ on how to apply the principle. Many think that the FFQ applies it more from an individual rather than a collective action angle. Indeed, it concentrates on women's individual experiences rather than on the systems that create these realities. In this way, the FFQ strays from the usual focal points, which makes some feel that they are no longer represented by the organization.

These are delicate matters because, while some women feel less represented by the FFQ, others feel the opposite.

Difficulties with the FFQ's governance

For a few years now, the FFQ has had difficulties with governance. They have worsened to the point of becoming serious shortcomings in terms of governance and transparency.

Moreover, the organization's lack of funding forced it to restructure and create new positions with new responsibilities, requiring everyone to adapt. This type of situation often creates tension. The FFQ wanted to improve its structures to make them "more democratic," and to incorporate inclusion according to the principle of intersectionality. These are commendable intentions, but they created friction between the various visions of best democratic practices, in particular between union group and community group practices. These tensions could be viewed as circumstantial, but they have been exacerbated by significant failings in the Federation's responsibilities.

The FFQ's board of directors (BOD) and executive committee (EC) did not comply with several meeting decisions:

- The FFQ adopted a system to increase participation among women who live in the regions in the organization's decisions and activities. The FFQ ignored this system over the last few years;
- On at least two occasions, the FFQ took a public stance against decisions previously adopted by members in a general assembly (regarding zoning in Laval for prostitution/sex work, and secularism).

¹ Ableism is an attitude that ignores the fact that everyone has different abilities due to reasons of physical or mental health, and this can result in discriminatory behaviour. One example of this behaviour would be neglecting to consider people who will not have access to an event/building because they use a wheelchair to get around.

Furthermore, there seems to be confusion around the roles of the BOD and EC, as well as around the difference between a BOD or EC member's personal stance and the FFQ's official stances.

There also seems to be transparency problems, for example around the election of the BOD and EC in 2019. The call for candidates was insufficiently circulated, which could have created an advantage for those who were already elected at the FFQ, thus disadvantaging those who could have gotten involved had the information been better circulated.

Several discussions were held to correct the situation. Official efforts were made at assemblies, as well as informal attempts through discussions between FFQ representatives and union groups, including the FIQ. However, these attempts were unsuccessful and were, at times, met with hostility and contempt.

Moreover, several other organizations that decided to leave the FFQ (CSN, community organizations like the Regroupement des groupes de femmes de la région de Québec) had flagged governance issues.

Repercussions within the FFQ

Issues with respect

The previously mentioned tensions solidified members' differing positions and created a climate wherein they do not listen to one another. What's more, attempts to make the assembly process more accessible and less formal ended up creating an atmosphere prone to personalized debates and shows of disrespect. Consequently, participants no longer listen to differing opinions and refuse any type of consensus and unity. FFQ members have always had differing opinions, but there was more of a culture of respect for different opinions in the past. The current lack of respect creates an unhealthy climate that discourages FFQ members from participating in activities or freely expressing their opinions.

Abandoning important issues

The FFQ has often been a rallying point for feminist actions in Quebec. For example, the Bread and Roses March (now the World March of Women) began under its stewardship. The FFQ also oversaw representing Quebec in different Canadian coalitions. As such, it represented Quebec, within the Canadian coalition, for the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In the Beijing follow ups, the FFQ continued to represent Quebec until 2020, when it celebrated the Declaration's 25th anniversary. That year, the FFQ abandoned this role without warning and did not ensure there was another organization to take over. The FIQ was informed of this when the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) reached out to the FFQ about it, but in vain. The FFQ therefore decided to no longer play this historic role, to not communicate its decision, and to not pass on the role to another organization.

The FIQ's membership with the FFQ

The FIQ has been a member of the FFQ since 1990 and has proudly participated in different events it organized, such as the Bread and Roses March in 1995. It also sat on their board of directors. That said, the new circumstances force the FIQ to question its membership: what does the future hold for the FIQ at the FFQ?

Status of Women Committee's thoughts

In 1990, at the FIQ's first convention (FIQ at the time), the delegation ratified the FIQ's membership with the FFQ following a joint recommendation from the Status of Women Sector and committee. Years later, considering the problems with governance, transparency, and respect at the FFQ, as well as the unsuccessful attempts to correct the situation, the Status of Women Committee recommends that the FIQ not renew its membership with the FFQ in 2021. The committee also recommends that any potential future renewal of the FFQ membership be analyzed jointly with the Status of Women Sector, and that the Provincial Executive Committee issue a recommendation on it.

Leaving the FFQ: what will it mean?

The FFQ has been a rallying point for various women's groups since the '60s. If a large portion of the FFQ's membership leaves, it is at risk of dissolving, especially due to a lack of funds. However, even if it survives the departure of much of its members, how will women's groups rally together?

As it stands, there is no organization that could directly take on the FFQ's role for the groups who left. But two organizations seem to want to do what is necessary to take on the role.

One of them is the group Pour les droits des femmes du Québec. However, this group is not an option for our organization because its stances are often in conflict with the FIQ's.

The second organization is the Coordination du Québec de la Marche mondiale des femmes (CQMMF). It became officially independent of the FFQ in 2018. While the division came about mainly because of funding issues, some see it as an opportunity to unite the groups that left the FFQ. As it stands, the organization has not officially declared that it wants to take on this role. Time will tell. That said, the CQMMF's mandates are potentially large enough to allow for this reorganizing.

Another option would be to create a brand-new women's group that would rally together all those that left the FFQ. To this end, the Intersyndicale des femmes, for example, could play a role in rallying together community organizations dedicated to women.

Regardless of what option is chosen, the FIQ must be involved in a new women's group in Quebec. An alliance is needed to promote women's rights in the province and to face any eventual backlashes. The FIQ and its allies will have no choice but to invest time and money into a new coalition of women's groups.

The Provincial Executive Committee recommends:

"That the FIQ does not renew its membership with the FFQ in 2021, but that it keep collaborating with it via various coalitions.

That the Status of Women Sector, in collaboration with the Status of Women Committee, analyze the potential of a future membership renewal and present a subsequent recommendation on the matter."

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NOTES



REGROUPEMENT
DES FIQ

FIQ Montréal | Head Office

1234, avenue Papineau, Montréal (Québec) H2K 0A4 |
514 987-1141 | 1 800 363-6541 | Fax 514 987-7273 | 1 877 987-7273 |

FIQ Québec |

1260, rue du Blizzard, Québec (Québec) G2K 0J1 |
418 626-2226 | 1 800 463-6770 | Fax 418 626-2111 | 1 866 626-2111 |