

Le Réseau

NEWSLETTER OF THE FIIQ WOMEN'S NETWORK

Vol. 3, No. 1, June 2006



The Federation: a finalist for the Corps-Accord 2006 award

News from the Women's Network

This newsletter is intended to be a summary report on the meeting of the Women's Network, held on May 24 and 25, 2006, on the theme of *Abortion and the rise of the right: crucial stakes for women*.

On the agenda was a brief review of the theme of the previous meeting on body image with the *Coalition Corps-Accord*, which intervenes on the obsession with slimness and the impacts of weight-loss diets on women's health. Good news: FIIQ+ was nominated for its ad paying tribute to bodily diversity, *La santé sous toutes ses formes* (Health in all its forms) within the context of *International No Diet Day*.

There was also a review of the *100 voices of women* operation, carried out within the context of the reform of the electoral system. We saluted the participation of several Network activists who contributed to the operation's success by depositing briefs. The colour orange, worn last March 8 to symbolize women's struggles, was approved by the activists and the information will be brought to the *Collectif 8 mars* within the context of its consultation on the subject.

We also took the opportunity to launch a collective action involving thousands of letters to be sent to the Premier on the Quebec demands deposited within the context of the *Women's Global Charter for Humanity*, with the aim of obtaining concrete answers that are slow in coming. Regarding the main theme, the activists focused on the dangers represented by the rise of right-wing forces, which weakens women's right to control their own lives and pregnancies. Activists were urged to remain vigilant when gains are threatened. They also had a discussion with two CLSC nurses who talked about their practice in voluntary pregnancy termination clinics, and coaching based on respect and empathy.

Two intense and touching days, marked by numerous historical reminders, particularly with the *Feminist Quiz*, and by the launch of the *Réseau's Coups de cœur*. The success of this new item suggests that it will become a regular activity at future meetings.



This May 6, International No Diet Day, the Coalition Corps-Accord presented its 2006 award, with the objective of rewarding a medium or organization promoting women's bodily diversity. The nominees this year were:

- The poster *La santé sous toutes ses formes* by FIIQ+
- The article *Maigrir? Mais Pourquoi? Et à quel prix?* published in *Audacieuses, le défi d'être soi* magazine (Réseau québécois d'action pour la santé des femmes - RQASF)
- The article *Ceci est mon corps* published in the "Vivre mon corps" special section of *Châtelaine* magazine
- The article *7 femmes, 7 silhouettes, 150 maillots au banc d'essai* published in *Coup de pouce* magazine
- The article *Pub : La revanche des « vraies » femmes* published in *Elle Québec* magazine
- The article *Perdre du poids, pas la santé* published in *Protégez-vous* magazine

Let charm and beauty equal diversity

The Coalition denounces low-calorie weight loss diets that endanger women's health and instead advocates physical exercise and healthy nutrition. It also denounces the prejudices against obesity that injure and harm self-



esteem. All women have the right to feel beautiful and everyone is urged to honour her body and make peace with it.

For the Federation, women's body image poses an important social problem and raises major issues for their health. The ad that appeared in the last Newsletter of the FIIQ Women's Network, accompanying the article "Yes to bodily diversity!" had the honour of being nominated. Who won? The award went to the RQASF for its action guide, published in 70,000 copies, which sought to reconsider current standards of beauty that endanger women's physical and psychological health.

The Network activists were particularly proud of the fact that their work had obtained such recognition. They were also proud that the RQASF won the competition, since they themselves are involved in the RQASF's Quebec-wide action campaign. One of the aspects of this campaign is the regulation of the diet industry. The Federation is a member of the RQASF.

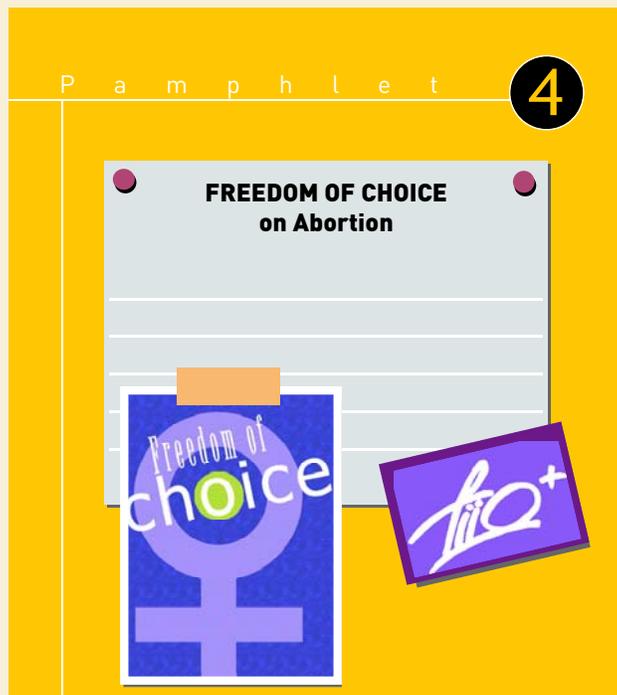
For more information:
<www.corpsaccord.com>

"We will have the children we want"

At the FIIQ Founding Convention in 1987, in a context in which abortion was not yet decriminalized, 900 delegates almost unanimously supported a resolution in favour of freedom of choice.

So why return to this issue nearly twenty years later and decide to make it the theme of a meeting of the Women's Network? Because the growing influence of Christian fundamentalists gives reason to fear the worst. The new religious Right, widespread in American society, is tending to grow and express itself more openly in Canada, particularly since the arrival of the Conservative government, several of whose MPs are pro-life.

Significantly, the pro-life groups are numerous and have substantial financial resources.



A brief historical review with resource people recalled the progress made since 1869, the year of adoption of the first Canadian law criminalizing abortion. It took 100 years for things to change.

In 1969, the Omnibus Bill decriminalized abortion only for therapeutic reasons and put the decision back in the hands of doctors. Disappointed feminists denounced the fact that women still did not have control of their wombs and continued the struggle on all fronts.

We had to wait until 1988 for abortion to cease to be a crime in Canada. The Supreme Court judgment, which recognized that criminalization of abortion is a violation of women's rights to life, safety and freedom entrenched in



Andrée Côté is a lawyer and Director of Legal Affairs for the National Association of Women and the Law. For several years, she was involved in the struggle for the right to abortion and against violence against women. She recently received the Bar's Christine Tourigny Award of Merit for her contribution to the advancement of women's rights.

the Canadian Charter, was a major victory. This decision, according to Andrée Côté, makes it possible to consider the right to abortion as one of the human rights at the basis of the Canadian Constitution and international human rights law¹. It is possible to talk about recognition by the international community of women's right to make their own reproductive choices².

The 1988 victory was short-lived. Barely one year later, a battle raged on the legal front with the Chantale Daigle case and mobilized the feminist movement once again. But women who needed to terminate their pregnancy were not left to their own devices. Starting in the early 1970s, in Montréal, the *Centre des Femmes* referred women from all corners of Quebec to competent physicians while, in Quebec City, the *Centre de santé des femmes de Québec* began offering its own voluntary pregnancy termination services. In the 1980s, CLSCs took over, establishing a major gain for Quebec women.

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Special contribution
(letter to Jean Charest):

Table de concertation des groupes de femmes de la Gaspésie et des Îles-Médialog

1. See *Ratifying the American Convention on Human Rights: the Stakes for Women*, National Association of Women and the Law, Ottawa, November 2003, p. 18.
2. See *Chronology of Reproductive Rights*, Action Canada for Population and Development (ACPD), March 2006.

Two nurses who offer coaching



Louise Desmarais is a feminist activist involved for many years in the struggle for free and unrestricted abortion. In 1999, she published a book on the unfinished struggle for the right to abortion in Quebec, *Mémoires d'une bataille inachevée – La lutte pour le droit à l'avortement au Québec* (Éditions Trait d'union).

During this time, the pro-life movement has continued to organize in alliance with the Canadian pro-life movement, a powerful lobby that is particularly active in the West, where Christian fundamentalists are numerous. Its adherents want a return to the traditional family, calling for the end of sex education in the schools and a return to abstinence and fidelity as means of prevention. The Pro-Life Conference held in Montreal in 2005 is evidence of the fact that this conservative current is well rooted here. It should be noted that Stockwell Day, currently Minister of Public Security, attended this Conference.

While some question the rising abortion rate in Quebec, this practice is not used as a means of contraception, according to Louise Desmarais³. Going beyond statistics, she points out that contraceptive methods are not suitable for all women, that contraceptives are not free and that sexual activity is beginning at a younger age. This is apart from

In 2006, it is 25 years since Canada ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), which affirms:

"...The rights to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights."

the fact that governments are still delaying in establishing the socioeconomic conditions that allow women to have the number of children they want. But for Desmarais, the statistics also send a clear message: women have obtained the right to control their own lives and fertility. They now have the children they want under the conditions they consider acceptable for themselves and their children.

At a time when government disengagement and the fundamentalist and sexist Right are threatening precious gains in the field of women's sexual and reproductive health, vigilance is necessary. Even though abortion is legal and funded in Canada, nothing protects us against a law that would limit access or criminalize it. Mobilization with the entire feminist movement is planned for autumn 2006 within the context of International Abortion Day. Women don't want to lose their fragile and recent gains. The struggle must continue.

Two CLSC nurses, working in voluntary pregnancy termination clinics, Suzanne Durand and Rita Dionne-L'allier, came to the Federal Council to talk about their work. They believe they offer an essential service that absolutely must be preserved. Their key message: accept women in their experience and coach them without judging them. There are many reasons for interrupting a pregnancy and each woman has her own: failure of contraception, pressure from the people around her, precarious economic status, absence of spouse, conjugal violence... They pointed out that this is not a means of contraception, as some would have us believe.

They told us about the challenge of entering into women's sphere of intimacy and creating a bond of confidence in so little time. Their coaching is based on respect and empathy and is carried out in three stages: receiving them before the procedure to ensure that their decision will be as clear as possible, informing them about contraception and the steps of the procedure and conducting the necessary tests; being present and reassuring them during the procedure; offering the necessary comfort after the intervention if there is an upsurge of guilt or sadness, and making a follow-up telephone call a few days later.

They both have concerns about the current changes in the health-care network and the rise of the right, fearing their impact on the accessibility of services. Their recommendations: sex education in the schools, more school nurses, free and accessible contraception, the possibility for nurses to prescribe the pill for a period of more than three months, given the delays in appointments with doctors; formal support on a regular basis for the teams performing the procedure. Two serene and committed nurses, happy to be able to discuss their work with women who share their concern... it was a good meeting.

Did you know?

●●● that a nurse named Dorothea Palmer was prosecuted in 1936 for disseminating information and material on contraception, a prohibition removed from the Canadian Criminal Code only in 1969, with the adoption of the Omnibus Bill.

●●● that in 1986, pro-life militants interrupted the abortion service at CLSC de Sainte-Thérèse de Blainville after taking control of the board of directors.

●●● that a research centre associated with the American religious Right, the Institute of Marriage and Family, which receives part of its funding from the United States, wants to set up an office in Ottawa to promote traditional marriage and reopen the debate on abortion.

●●● that Wal-Mart, one of the biggest American pharmacy chains, refuses to sell the morning-after pill?

3. See article by Louise Desmarais, *Avortons-nous trop?* La vie en Rose, Hors série, 2005, p. 111.

Our favorites

The Status of Women Sector has decided to innovate by adding a new item to the agenda: the favorites of activists participating in the Network. From now on, they will be invited to share a reading, a meeting or a documentary that particularly touched them and took them a little farther along the path of solidarity with women here and around the world.

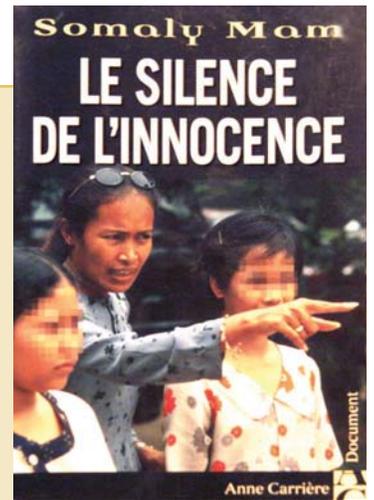
Here is the Network's very first "coup de cœur", that of Michelle Poirier, a nurse at Hôpital Louis-H. Lafontaine and a member of the Status of Women Committee:

"I would like to tell you about a troubling book which I found extremely moving -- Somaly Mam's autobiography, entitled *Le silence de l'innocence*. In her book, this woman tells how, after being physically and psychologically victimized, she managed to overcome this trauma and today is fighting sexual trafficking in her country, at the peril of her life.

Somaly Mam was born in Cambodia, a country where it is considered inappropriate to talk about oneself or one's feelings, and where sex education for girls can be summed up as letting the husband have his way. She tells how she was sold as a domestic slave to an old man when she was ten years old, and then resold five years later to a brothel. There she lived in hell for eight years as a "forced prostitute".

She met Pierre, a Frenchman who became her husband and with whom she established the association "Agir pour les femmes en situation précaire" (AFESIP) in 1997. The goals of this association are to seek social reintegration of women who have been reduced to sexual slavery and to fight against sexual trafficking of human beings. Initially established in Cambodia, the association now has branches in Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and soon in Myanmar.

Through this association, Somaly Mam wants to help abused female children and adolescents overcome their situation, first by providing them with medical and psychological care, and especially by giving them access to literacy courses and



vocational training that can provide them with a job and financial independence. What a beautiful message of courage and hope!

You can help Somaly Mam in her struggle by becoming a member of AFESIP. This is an invitation!"

For more information:
<www.afesip.org>

100 voices of women for democracy: mission accomplished

At the last meeting of the Women's Network, we appealed to activists to speak out and make themselves heard within the context of the Special Committee on the Election Act. This was a unique opportunity for them to argue the necessity for equal representation of women in the National Assembly.



The *Collectif Féminisme et Démocratie* had initiated an operation to deposit 100 briefs written by women. As of March 9, 2005, 125 briefs had been deposited. The members of the Status of Women Committee and 11 activists from the Women's Network participated in this broad-based campaign of speaking out for democracy. We salute their commitment.

The government must take note of the major trend emerging from this exercise: that neither the status quo nor the draft bill has popular support. In most cases, people want to have two votes, alternation of women and men on the lists, Quebec-wide setoff and more effective measures for achieving equality. We impatiently await the next step¹.

For more information: <www.feminismeetdemocratie.ca>

1. As we go to press, the report of the Parliamentary Committee on the Election Act has been released. It seems that the voice of women has not been heard.



Making the Charest government take us seriously!

The entire women's movement is mobilizing again to remind the Charest government to respond to the five demands deposited on March 8, 2005. These demands were supported by 15,000 people at the time that Quebec received the *Women's Global Charter for Humanity* within the context of a major mobilization in which the members of the Women's Network participated.

Poverty and violence continue to be two powerful obstacles to **equality, freedom, solidarity, justice and peace**. Given the lack of concrete responses, the Quebec Coordinating Committee of the World March of Women is staying on course with its demands and launching a signature campaign to force the Charest government to respond, with specific commitments, to these just and legitimate demands.

You are invited to make a personal commitment by signing the detachable letter that comes with this Newsletter. Every signature counts. Added to thousands of others, they can make a difference.

Join us in this major solidarity campaign:

As a member:

- by signing the letter now;
- by forwarding it to your local team.

As a local team:

- by collecting the signed letters in an envelope provided for this purpose;
- by returning the envelope to the FIIQ before the end of June.

For more information:
<www.marchemondiale.org>



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Mr. Premier of Quebec,

I am addressing this important letter to you at the same time as many other people in every region of Quebec.

2005 was a year particularly rich in events and mobilizations demanding the right to happiness and freedom for all women all over the world. The invitation to women's groups throughout the world to act together to counter poverty and violence against women generated immediate interest and strong support. Women of Quebec and Canada joined forces with thousands of others in over fifty countries or territories around the *Women's Global Charter for Humanity* and its five values of **equality, freedom, justice, peace** and **solidarity**.

"I am 13 years old and I am one of the 4 million women and girls sold all over the world to future husbands, pimps or slave dealers," says Milanka of the former Yugoslavia.

"I refused a marriage proposal from a man who then disfigured me with acid," reveals a woman from Bangladesh.

"I work in a maquiladora in Managua (Nicaragua), under blazing lights in stifling heat, where the rumbling of the machines never stops. Very often we are hit, insulted, sexually harassed and forced to work 12 hours a day. The factory doors are locked and nobody can leave before finishing work," Marta accuses.

In Quebec, we have drawn your government's attention to five demands, which we tabled on March 8, 2005 and which were supported by 15,000 people in Quebec City the following May 7. Your government didn't take us seriously... On October 17, by way of a response to our demands, Ms. Thériault, your Minister of the Status of Women, recycled the same old statements and offered us nothing we hadn't seen before.

As regards political lobbying, the women's movement rigorously presented each demand. Cabinet ministers, political attachés, MNAs and public servants were met, all in a spirit of dialogue, emphasizing the desire to obtain satisfactory results. The difficulties encountered were not related to the choice of demands, nor to insufficient political lobbying or inadequate mobilization. Although we have made some progress that encourages us to continue, we find that the problem is a democratic deficit, particularly a real lack of political will to reduce poverty. Like all the groups fighting against poverty, the women's movement has run into a brick wall!



OUR DEMANDS ARE CLEAR AND JUST:

Equality

Mr. Charest, will we have a concerted, concrete policy on the status of women that reflect the recommendations of the Parliamentary Committee on Equality?

The *Conseil du statut de la femme* (CSF) and the *Secrétariat à la condition féminine* (SCF) are essential structures. Will they continue their work of implementing your government's commitment to eliminate discrimination against women solely because they are women?

Freedom

Freedom is essential! The Quebec Government must negotiate an agreement with the Government of Canada to protect the rights of migrant women who are victims of trafficking, and prevent their expulsion or deportation in all cases. This is a matter of justice and common sense.

Solidarity

The women's movement is truly in solidarity with everyone whose income comes from Income Security and from Loans and Bursaries. Quebec's poorest people are getting poorer year after year, while the rich are getting richer. Given this deterioration of the living conditions of our poorest fellow citizens, your government (which is also ours) must act now to ensure coverage of their essential needs, as required by section 45 of the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms!!!

It is also unacceptable that free prescription drugs have not yet been restored for people on social assistance. Finally, child support payments continue to be deducted from social assistance benefits, or from loans and bursaries, when they are not considered as parental income for tax purposes. This is fundamentally unjust!

Justice

Introducing a principle of equal treatment in the *Act respecting labour standards* would help counter the negative effects and growth of casualization. There are more and more of these unstable new employment statuses, abandoned by the institutions that protect Quebec workers' rights. Do something fast! Also do something so that employee status is recognized for people who receive Income Security benefits, who participate in measures for integration into the job market and who perform real work.

Peace

It is high time to make the entire Quebec population take responsibility so that the message becomes clear to everyone: violence against women is criminal and intolerable. Just as people quickly learned that they have to fasten their seatbelts, we demand an effective public awareness campaign against violence against women, lasting ten years with a budget of at least \$25 million.

Mr. Charest, can we hope that this project will begin in fall 2006? The women's movement is ready to participate in its implementation.

In some countries, women's living conditions are dreadful and terribly discriminatory. Women's living conditions are not equal to those of men, even in Quebec. This is unacceptable, Mr. Charest. Don't you agree???

The entire Quebec women's movement has endorsed the *Women's Global Charter for Humanity* and once again is addressing five just and clear demands for your attention. I support the demand addressed to you by the Quebec Coordinating Committee of the World March of Women and hope that you will meet with its representatives as soon as possible.

Please answer me quickly, Mr. Charest, and tell me that you will take action to improve the living conditions of women here in Quebec and, indirectly, of course, in the rest of the world.

SIGNATURE: _____

NAME: _____
(in block letters)

FULL ADDRESS: _____

DATE: _____

