

## ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE OF WEARING VEILS IN SCHOOL

### Summary of position

The Conseil du statut de la femme (CSF) opposes expelling girls from school on the grounds that they wear veils. The CSF believes that forbidding the veil is neither the best way to fight fundamentalism, nor the best way to ensure equality between the sexes. As is the case in many other instances, instruction in democratic values is a more promising solution. This is the conclusion of a reflection paper on the issue of wearing veils in school published by the Conseil du statut de la femme.

For the Conseil du statut de la femme, tolerating the veil is not tantamount to endorsing crimes currently being perpetrated against women in Algeria. On the contrary, the Conseil denounces, and will continue to denounce, all violence against women no matter what excuses are offered in its defence. On the other hand, tolerating the veil does not mean that school or society has to adapt absolutely to any given culture or religion. The CSF feels it is important to counter incidences of segregation, like attempts to exempt girls from certain courses.

It is difficult to analyze this issue without discussing the various symbolic meanings of the veil. While we do not wish to endow it with sacredness, we acknowledge that for certain people the veil has a religious significance. For others, it is an expression of cultural identity. Then again, many individuals regard it as a symbol of women's inequality. Especially in light of events in Algeria, the veil has come to symbolize Muslim fundamentalism to a large proportion of the population.

The CSF does not believe that girls should bear the brunt of the fight against fundamentalism. Above all, the Conseil feels that the debate must be widened immediately and analyzed in the context of «diversity management». We have to join forces and think about our society's increasing cultural and religious diversity, and separate standards we are willing to compromise on from principles we consider non-negotiable. Equality between women and men should fall unequivocally into the category of non-negotiable fundamental principles.

### The veil and its many meanings

The veil is a complex symbol. Because it represents a restrictive conception of modesty applying only to women, it clashes with the notion of sexual equality. But our society tolerates other forms of sexism, such as standards of beauty which turn women into objects. We also have to guard against prejudices like the assumption that veiled women are necessarily submitted to men. Remember that women took up the veil again in Iran primarily in reaction to the Shah's regime and to American imperialism. In Iran, at least initially, the veil had distinct connotations of politics and cultural identity. It was only afterwards that this «identity badge» became obligatory under the Islamic regime. The veil also has a religious dimension.

Even though Muslims do not agree on the issue of whether it should be obligatory, the fact remains that many women wear it for religious reasons.

Ever since fundamentalists pushed the issue of the veil to the forefront, it has also symbolized a world view based on sexual segregation and the exclusion of women from public life.

### Results of banning the veil

Sexism implicit in the veil issue must be denounced, like all other forms of sexism. But criticizing a sexist symbol does not necessarily mean banning it outright. The Conseil du statut de la femme believes that the harmful ramifications on girls of a ban must be considered in the debate over veils in the schools. One such consequence is that some girls will be expelled from public schools.

School is a place where people can acquire the skills necessary for economic self-sufficiency. When expulsion from school results in recourse to correspondence courses for those expelled, as was the case in France, motivation to continue studying will be difficult to maintain. Such motivation is crucial for girls, especially when their parents are often inclined to interrupt their studies at the minimum legal age. Educated women are more likely to fight if their rights are infringed upon. Moreover, school plays a major role in the social integration of immigrants and members of cultural communities. If girls are excluded, they will no longer benefit from school as a milieu that encourages integration into society. And if they attend private religious institutions, they remain on the sidelines of mainstream society.

Many people think that it is better to tolerate a veiled girl in public school than to force her to attend a religious educational institution.

### Girls should not bear the brunt of the fight against fundamentalism

The expulsion of girls who wear veils only punishes girls. Fundamentalist boys and those exhibiting sexist behaviour are not affected by this form of ostracism. Nor are they excluded from public places. The CSF firmly believes that the fight against fundamentalism should not be waged on the heads of girls wearing veils. Girls and women are already the primary victims of fundamentalism. Must they also suffer in the fight against it?

On the other hand, some people suggest that such accommodation must be rejected when it clashes so obviously with a girl's right to equality. The «right to be different» must not become a «difference in rights». We cannot condone any departures from the educational curriculum, which must be the same for all students. And even though the details need to be made specific, it is clear that concrete expressions of sexual segregation and exclusion must be opposed on school grounds.

### **Holding fundamentalism in check**

First of all, remember that the Québec context differs from that of Algeria. The size of the fundamentalist movement is quite small here, despite an impression to the contrary fostered by media treatment of the issue. It is important to remind ourselves that the vast majority of Muslims are not fundamentalists.

We understand that the veil worries people because it symbolizes the rise of Muslim fundamentalism. Like all fundamentalism, the Muslim variety must be denounced because it runs counter to democratic values, and because its spread is particularly threatening to women's rights.

The best way to fight fundamentalism, however, is not to forbid the veil. We must not make martyrs of girls, like the students in France who went on a hunger strike after being expelled from school. We must also refrain from giving fodder to fundamentalists who will exploit feelings of alienation among the Muslim population. Fundamentalism tends to grow as a movement every time it comes up against bureaucratic prohibitions.

The development of social programs to counter poverty and marginalization, as well as those to fight racism seem to be the best solutions for preventing fundamentalism's rise. Because the debate touches the very heart of the democratic process, persuasion and a clear embrace of democratic values are the most propitious methods of opposing fundamentalism in its many forms. School plays an important role in the development of young people's critical thinking skills. It also teaches students about fundamental democratic principles.

It is important to add that should fundamentalism become widespread and pose a threat to our society, we will review the above strategy of tolerance towards the symbol of the veil.

### **Widening the debate beyond the veil**

If the debate seems difficult now, it is really only the tip of an iceberg. The bigger and more fundamental issue is diversity management. The rules governing our various institutions — hospitals, schools, the workplace, etc. — are under increasing pressure to adapt to the needs of various cultural and religious groups.

Many people fear that once veils are allowed in schools, requests for other regulatory exceptions will multiply, creating a plethora of student sub-categories and hindering integration. Requests might include those for special prayer rooms, for exemptions from courses or activities, or for the right to respect religious holidays. Which requests should result in reasonable accommodation of diversity, and which ought to be refused because they threaten our fundamental values? We have to establish first principles without delay. Only then will we be able to delineate the border separating the negotiable from the non-negotiable. It bears repeating that equality between women and men must be one of our society's non-negotiable principles.

The government must outline the conditions under which freedom of belief can be practised. In the field of education, for instance, it seems inappropriate to let schools or school commissions decide this issue.

Questions with ramifications for the evolution of Québec society ought not to be resolved by some dress code or other. If the goal is to ease integration and encourage the development of a common culture, we must try to avoid creating ghetto schools where all the children of a cultural community or religion congregate. For our part, the Conseil du statut de la femme will publish an opinion paper on religious and cultural diversity by the end of 1995.

Women the world over have been leaders in the quest and fight for equality between the sexes. They are, and will continue to be, the first to resist attacks waged by fundamentalists of all types who try to push them back into the shadows of private life, and who promote, either directly or indirectly, physical and functional segregation of the sexes.

### **Publication**

*Réflexion sur la question du port du voile à l'école*, research paper by the Conseil du statut de la femme, research and writing : Marie Moisan, march 1995, 54 p.

This document is a commentary based on documentary research concerning the meaning of the veil in Islam and the repercussions for women of their being forced to wear or to remove their veils. This paper is first and foremost a feminist analysis of the issue and of the possible effects on women of decisions concerning the veil taken by Québec institutions.

### **Where to obtain publication**

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Claire Rothman, june 1995

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