

The Position of Women in Quebec Society

**Brief presented by the South Shore University Women's Club to the
Commission on Reasonable Accommodation**

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Summary

This brief addresses the challenges facing immigrant women as they attempt to take their rightful place in Quebec society and an appropriate response by the public education system.

Although the members of the South Shore University Women's Club are keenly interested in all aspects of Quebec society our main interest is in the welfare of women and children and our brief will be limited to a discussion of our thoughts and concerns about this section of immigrant society.

However, before making suggestions concerning ways to integrate immigrants into mainstream society, we would like to express our concern about the underlying thesis of this Commission. "Reasonable accommodation" might imply that Quebec society is a static, monolithic structure that never changes and that immigrants are of necessity outside of this and can never be fully included. This is not a formula for peaceful coexistence. All societies change and Quebec is no exception. We only have to look at the extraordinary changes in the status of women in Quebec over the past 40 years to realize just how fast societies do change. Fifty years ago, the average woman had almost no access to abortion, contraception, divorce, higher education, a scientific career, a credit card, bank loans, sole custody of her children etc. It seems almost impossible to believe, looking back, that a society could change so fast. It is inevitable that a large influx of immigrants will change our society as will technology, globalization, mass foreign travel, the Internet and global warming. The nature of these changes is unpredictable. However our goals as a society should be that we manage this inevitable change in such a way as to maintain peace and harmony within Quebec society, ensure the dominance of French in civil society and ensure that everyone benefits equally from the abundance of wealth and opportunity that we are fortunate to enjoy here in Quebec.

A profound change occurred in the structure of Quebec society during the latter half of the twentieth; women are now considered equal to men in most spheres of public and private life. The women who lived through this transition and put large amounts of time and energy into this change are still alive and deeply committed to assuring that there is no reversal in this position. Although there are still areas in which women are not yet equal – women are more likely to live in poverty, the number of women in politics is still significantly less than the number of men, and women are not yet numerous in boardrooms or acting as CEO's of large corporations – in education, health and small and medium sized businesses, and on the home front, women are doing well.

It is generally accepted that in most non-western countries, this is not the case. Not only do women not live the liberated lives of Quebec women but also societal values are such that the perceived inferiority of women is firmly entrenched. Literacy levels of girls are lower than that of boys, the attendance rates in all levels of education are lower for girls, the age of marriage is much lower than in the west, and arranged marriages are often the norm. Some countries still have an unofficial dowry system. Women are relegated to stereotypical roles. The number of children per fertile women is higher and many Roman Catholic and Muslim countries have not yet legalized abortion. The number of women in leadership roles is much lower; therefore it is difficult to effect change.

The purpose of this brief is to recommend ways of ensuring that immigrant women are given the tools to allow them to participate fully in Quebec society and to ensure that Quebec society remains committed to the equality of women both in belief and reality.

The major way that we as a society can ensure this is through the education system. We have to be sure that children, both male and female, have learned to accept and even promote the equality of women by the time they reach adulthood.

The Early Years

Many immigrant groups are not used to the development of preschool skills in their children. This is not part of cultural norms. It is important that when children arrive in kindergarten they are already prepared to participate fully in the learning experience. There is nothing more detrimental to future success in school than for a young child to be overwhelmed in kindergarten. Research in learning styles and multiple intelligences have given teachers diagnostic tools to identify learning difficulties and behavioral problems at an age when early intervention is most effective and appropriate.

Recommendation: That the Quebec Ministry of Education assures that pre-kindergarten is available for all immigrant children. The children would develop their French vocabulary but also other skills that are taken for granted in Quebec families such as using scissors, holding a pencil, colouring, sitting still at a desk, how to turn the pages of a book, etc. Parents who have not received an education or who have lived through violent and uncertain times also need literacy support and parenting skills. Child psychology is a relatively new field in Western society but has contributed to a better understanding of learning styles and the different type of intelligences. Effective parenting can assist both children and their parents.

Primary and secondary education

Moral education

We endorse whole-heartedly the teaching of world religions in Quebec schools, with the underlying principle that no religion is superior to another. However, we do not believe that this should extend to values. It is acceptable to teach the accepted values of Quebec society and the ways in which they underpin and therefore assure harmony within our society should be stressed. The equality of women in the schooling system and within the wider society must be emphasized in the schools and the right of girls to be treated as equals within the household must be made clear. As children reach their teens, it is also possible to have open discussions about the symbolism behind certain dress codes so that the girls know that they are free to choose how they dress once they reach the age of majority.

Recommendation: That the belief system of Quebec society be taught at school and that concrete illustrations of the equality of women be emphasized within all spheres of society so girls can be aware that they are free to make their own choices. Of course, one will have to define what exactly Quebecers believe in. The Ethics and Religious Culture programs which will be introduced in Quebec schools in 2008 will provide a measure of meaningful dialogue. These could be extended to Continuing Education courses offered in CEGEPs for adults.

Physical education

All girls have the right and the obligation to participate in physical education classes.

Physical activity needs to become a normal part of the life of every Quebecer, as daily exercise is as important as a good diet in maintaining health into later life. Obstacles to participation of girls should be removed (especially with regard to clothing).

Communication between the school administration and parents should stress the lifelong advantages of physical education and sound nutrition.

Recommendation: That schools adopt an unwavering approach to the requirement that girls participate in Physical Education classes and activities and that elements of healthy nutrition be taught and practiced in the school setting.

Counseling

School counselors need to find an appropriate balance between cultural sensitivity and encouraging girls to see themselves as valued and supported members of Quebec society.

It is clear that children need parenting and must accommodate to parental discipline and that this may well result in the immigrant girl being subjected to stricter rules than her Quebec-born counterpart. However, the girl should resist parental coercion into an unwanted marriage, leaving school at 16 years of age rather than continuing to post-secondary education or career choice. If the school becomes aware of these problems, it must assume the responsibility to talk to the parents and if necessary, find an alternative means of support for the girl so that she can survive without parental support. This also

requires that schools foster a spirit of open communication between teachers and students to build trust.

Recommendation: That the involvement of the guidance-oriented school in the well-being of female students be extended to include the possibility for them of making choices which favour postponing marriage (and childbearing) such that they can benefit from the possibilities that are offered to them in Quebec.

Post secondary education: the CEGEPs

To what extent should educational institutions be obliged to provide prayer space for religious organizations in environments where space is at a premium and is frequently a cause of political battles? This is an issue that most of Quebec's post-secondary institutions have had to face in the past few years. Presumably all religions should be treated the same, no one group can expect to have special treatment. If any one religion has its own space on campus then other religions can ask for the same consideration. A separate issue arises when there is a demand for separate prayer space for men and women. This must be resisted, as the underlying assumption is that there should be no public spaces on the campus that are off limits to women other than bathrooms and locker rooms. It is also clear that the reasons for demanding separate prayer space are not congruent with the modern Quebec society.

To what extent can provocative discourse be tolerated on the grounds of freedom of speech? There are several fundamentalist Islamic groups that have sought to expand their

philosophy through Muslim organizations on Quebec campuses. It is the responsibility of educational institutions that the dialogue does not transgress Canadian laws; that within the confines of the academy debate should be encouraged but cannot include incitement to racial or religious hatred or the denigration of others based on their gender or sexual orientation.

CEGEPs cannot be expected to make special arrangements for students of any particular religion. Public CEGEPs are publicly funded and secular. It is not possible to build university or CEGEP timetables with no classes late on Friday afternoons. Students can almost always select from a choice of schedules that will accommodate their needs; teachers cannot be expected to make special arrangements beyond the understanding that students might wish to celebrate major holy days with their families.

Recommendation: In keeping with the nature of our publicly funded and secular educational institutions which promote the equality of all citizens. That all religions be treated equally on Quebec campuses.

Conclusion

History has shown us that waves of new immigrants have integrated into Quebec society within one generation and there is no reason to think that this will not be true for the current immigrants from Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The more open and accepting our society is the faster and more smoothly this process will be and the most important

tool is education. And what we have to accept is that change is constant and that a society that refuses to change is doomed to stagnation and social unrest.

We must assist adult newcomers in perfecting their language skills in French and finding employment at a level that is commensurate with their education or making sure that their qualifications can be upgraded to fit the requirements here. We must provide early intervention for immigrant children who require it through pre-kindergarten for enrichment activities and early diagnosis of learning, emotional or behavioral difficulties. If this requires more resources, then this is where the resources should be put. We must define our belief system and make sure that, in the course of primary and secondary education, children and teenagers are made aware of our commitment to gender equality. We must extend the dialogue on ethics and religious culture to forums beyond these levels. We must ensure that all girls participate in regular physical education and learn the basics of sound nutrition and that schools practice what they preach. We must ensure that the immigrant girl be provided with the opportunity to engage in critical thinking with respect to parental pressure if that interferes with her opportunity to pursue further education or make enlightened career choices. And, beyond that, we must be able to support her when faced with the consequences of choices that run counter to traditions that restrict her choices. We must ensure that the so-called “reasonable accommodations” in our schools, primary, secondary and post-secondary do not carry a double message with respect to gender equality in our society.