Intersectionality and the Politics of Feminist Coalition in Times of Crisis

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Abstract:

Feminist organizations and feminist movements have often been challenged for their lack of inclusiveness: despite claims to represent ‘all’ women, many groups of minority women have felt that their identities and interests have been sidelined, excluded or ignored by organizations with feminists ideals. This phenomenon is not new but it takes different forms depending on the context, and becomes particularly apparent when attempts at coalitions among feminist emerge. This paper explores the extent to which the capacity of feminist organizations to respond to this challenge, and the capacity of feminist coalition to be inclusive, shape the responses they articulate to intersectional issues. In particular it investigates feminists responses to proposals to legislate and regulate Muslim women’s veiling in two constrasting contexts : Québec and France. Focusing on two nation-wide organizations which work as broad feminist coalitions, the Fédération des femmes du Québec and the Collectif national des droits des femmes, this paper looks at how these umbrella organizations responded to the political challenge they faced and examine the various factors that have shaped their contrasting positioning on these controversial issues.
(...) every issue required analysis from the perspective of those disadvantaged by all forms of oppression, and privileged by none. Only then would it have been possible to avoid strategies that neglected or even disadvantaged women who live at the very different intersections of race, gender, and class”. Barbara Ellen Smith (1995)

Introduction

In the now vast theoretical and empirical literature on intersectionality, the subject/trope of the coalition occupies a pivotal place. Indeed, while the literature on intersectionality and social movements has rightly focused on heterogeneity and divisions among groups mobilizing for social justice, pointing that ‘ignoring difference within groups contributes to tension among groups’ (Crenshaw 1991: 1242), the trope of the coalition has emerged as a possible antidote to the inescapable increase of identity politics that the acknowledgement (or, as pointed by Crenshaw the ignorance of) intersectionality produces. Coalitions appear as an institutional response to an intractable political problem: preserving unity while acknowledging diversity and the multiplicity of forms of oppressions and identities (Ferree and Roth 1998, Lyshaug 2006). Moreover, it immediately revives the ideal of solidarity and sorority, which animated many white/mainstream feminist movements since the second wave in many Western contexts, but supposedly without the narrow identity-politics that characterized most of their collective actors at the time (Reagon 1983).

However, coalitions are not always successful in bridging across differences, in acknowledging intersectionality while preserving the possibility of common action. Under which circumstances can a coalition sustain intersectional forms of feminist action and practice? This paper makes a first step in trying to provide an answer to this question by comparing two feminist coalitions in France and Québec. To do so, I compare two broad national organizations institutionalized as coalitions: the Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ) and the Coalition Nationale pour les Droits des Femmes in France (CNDF). Although these two organizations are differently organized, financed and legally institutionalized, although they have of course different historical roots and are embedded in contrasted social contexts, they share similarities (both are nation-wide umbrella organization central to the national feminist landscape with roots

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1 On the need for more identity politics spurred by intersectionality see among many others Anzaldua / Moraga, Collins XXX, Crenshaw XXX, on the risks it entails see Fraser XXX.
in the feminist second wave) and a common challenge, that is the responsibility to position themselves on hotly debated intersectional policy decisions. Indeed, in both contexts, the last decade has been marked by several debates over secularism, Muslim religious practices and social integration, and in particular over the regulation of Muslim women’s religious attires. Debates over the opportunity to legislate restrictively Muslim women’s veiling in the public space, public institutions or public schools have crystallized issues of inclusion and exclusion within feminist movements across the Atlantic.

While these political debates are not the first ones to put on the table the question of the inclusion of women from minority groups within the White/mainstream feminist movement, or the question of solidarities between feminist organizations and racialized women (both countries share a colonial past, the influx of migrants and the presence of non-White minorities) they have had, contrary to previous debates, dramatic – and contrasted - consequences: while in Québec debates over Muslim veiling and secularism have successfully put to the test the FFQ commitment to apply an intersectional framework to its political actions, in France debates over banning Muslim veils in school have led to profound divisions inside the CNDF, with lasting consequences on the French feminist landscape. More precisely, while the FFQ was able to take a common position against the 2010 Québécois bill 94 proposing to prohibit face covering attires in public services in the name of an intersectional analysis of such a policy’s consequences for Muslim/immigrant women, the CNDF was unable to take a common position about the 2004 law prohibiting the Muslim veil in public school, a failure which provoked and reflected profound divisions inside the larger feminist movements. Moreover, while both coalitions received criticisms for their positioning (or lack thereof) from different corners of the feminist movements, the FFQ maintain its internal cohesion and its leadership, while unitary feminist actions organized by the CNDF now meet with resistance and competition from new feminist coalitions.

There is now a vast literature on the French case analyzing the political and legal regulation of the veil and the full veil (Bowen 2007, Scott 2007, Laborde 2008, Hennette-Vauchez 2013). The Québécois case has also attracted scholarly attention, see Baines 2009, and on similar issues in Ontario see Bakht 2007, Razack 2007 and Lépinard 2010.

Although it should be noted that this position was not consensual and was at odds with the position of the governmental body in charge of women’s rights, the Conseil du Statut de la Femme, see its 2011 report ‘affirmer la laïcité, un pas de plus vers l’égalité réelle entre les femmes et les hommes, accessibile at https://www.csf.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/avis-affirmer-la-laicite-un-pas-de-plus-vers-legalite-reelle-entre-les-femmes-et-les-hommes.pdf
This paper explores the historical and institutional factors that contribute to explain the contrasting positions of these two feminist coalitions with respect to the political challenge raised by intersectionality, as they are exemplified by their positions over Muslim veiling. Feminist political positions and conflicts about Islamic veiling reflect divergent conceptions of women’s autonomy, collective emancipation and feminist practice. However, the sociological analysis of why and how women’s organizations and feminist coalitions opt in favor of prohibition or support accommodation of veiling practices should not be reified to ideology only. Indeed, it is important to also scrutinize the sociological and historical factors which contribute to shape these ideological positions if one is to understand the social dynamics of feminist coalitions, or any social movement coalition aiming for inclusion in an age of fragmentation. Building on the literature on social movements, coalitions and intersectionality, I argue that three historical and sociological factors contribute to make a feminist coalition likely to be intersectional inclusive.

**Inclusion or separate roads? Intersectionality and feminist coalitions**

At the root of the theoretical questions raised by intersectionality with respect to social movements is the historical experience of Black feminists and feminists of color, in particular in the U.S. context but not only, of exclusion and active separatism from the ‘mainstream’ White feminist movements (see among others: Moraga and Anzaldua 1983, Crenshaw 1989 and 1991, Collins 1991, Roth 2004). In any social movement, appeals to solidarity or interest claims on the basis of one identity alone privilege the dominant/majority group at the expense of minority groups (Strolovitch 2007) and therefore promote forms of what Myra Ferree and Silke Roth have termed exclusionary solidarity, rather than inclusive solidarity (Ferree and Roth, 1998:629). Hence a crucial question that the literature on intersectionality in social movements addresses is that of the social conditions for a successfully inclusive feminist movement, or of a successful feminist coalition that can bridge across racial, ethnic, age, sexuality or national differences.

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4 Many contributions on the Islamic veil/secularism debates approach it through the lens of feminist theory, e.g. for Canada Baines 2009, Bakht 2007, Razack 2007, for an overview on feminists theoretical discussion on the French case see Lépinard 2011.

5 This paper is part of a broader project comparing French and Québécois feminist movements and the way they address intersectionality (Lépinard 2014). It is based on qualitative fieldwork (over 50 interviews with activists in women’s rights organizations in both countries, and archival work at the CNDF. The fieldwork will be completed by archival work at the FFQ this summer.
Inclusive coalitions are usually (implicitly) defined as coalitions in which there is descriptive and substantive representation of minority women or as coalitions which, despite internal dissent and differences among women, manage to achieve substantial political gains (Weldon 2006, Giraud and Dufour 2010).  

The literature on feminist movements and intersectional coalitions delineates various factors that foster inclusion or encourage separatism, as well as various strategies that minority women’s organization or ‘mainstream’ women’s organizations deploy to achieve their political goals, strategies which can foster or impede coalition politics across differences. Among the factors that might foster coalition politics, a recurring one is the acknowledgment, under various institutional forms, of power relationships among participants to the coalitions. Laurel S. Weldon for example shows that norms of inclusivity in the successful transnational coalition she studied included a commitment to descriptive representation and separate organizations of disadvantaged group (Weldon 2006). Isabelle Giraud also shows that the representation of young women in the World Women’s March was ensured, in line with Weldon’s analysis, by separate organizing and formal descriptive representation (Giraud 2015). Elizabeth Cole also addresses a similar issue when she argues from empirical evidence that power differentials need to be addressed directly for a coalition to sustain collaborative work (Cole 2008). Barbara E. Smith also shows that a first necessary (but not sufficient) step in maintaining a feminist coalition across the great racial divide among working women in the U.S. South was the involvement of all participants in anti-racism consciousness raising groups (Smith 1995).  

By contrast, and reciprocally, not acknowledging power relations was one of the reasons advanced by feminist of colors in the US context to refuse to engage in coalitions politics with White feminists (Anzaldua and Moraga 1983, Roth 2004, Nelson 2003). Similarly, today in the

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6 This is a minimalist and functionalist definition of inclusion which does not exhaust the complexity of this process which is simultaneously political, ethical and emotional, however it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a more thorough definition of minority groups’ inclusion in movements’ organizations.

7 An answer often provided by activists themselves about a failure to build a coalition across differences linked to race, ethnicity or religion is that they don’t agree politically. This is the case when French feminists from the CNDF explain the impossibility to ally with those who oppose ban on veiling in the name of opposed conceptions of feminism. However, to take this explanation at face value is to obscure the social processes which have led to this opposed political positions and to endorse the idea that political dissent prevents coalition, while one could argue that coalition or solidarity presuppose dissent and difference.

8 This first step is not necessarily easily embraced, see Srivastava 2005.
French or Québécois context, organizations representing women of color or of migrant descent that refuse to engage in forms of coalitions with mainstream women’s also argue that the lack of acknowledgement of institutional racism inside majority organizations makes it impossible for them to cooperate. The recent refusal from a French afro-feminist organization and of a Filipina women organization in Québec to demonstrate with the majority march on Women’s day or, in Canada, the falling out of the National Action Committee for women on such issues in the 1990s (Dobrowolsky 2000) exemplify the importance of this factor. Hence, the institutionalization of procedures that acknowledge and counter-balance power relations (such as descriptive representation, separate organization, anti-racism task-forces etc.) appears to be an important factor that enables a sustainable coalition among feminist organizations and across racial/ethnic/citizenship differences. Of course the power relation to be acknowledged will vary depending on the context and of the salience of specific forms of oppression (Townsend-Bell 2011). I call this factor the internal factor because it posits that internal institutional changes (acknowledgment of power relations leading to institutionalization of dissent, separatism or descriptive representation) inside the coalition are necessary for it to maintain itself in an inclusive way, without suppressing conflicts or excluding differences.

A factor that might make a coalition more difficult to achieve is the organizational culture of a women’s movement in a given context. Indeed, as Benita Roth noted, Black and Chicana feminists during the second wave were not just excluded from the socialist/radical White feminist movement. They actively sought to organize on their own because this type of organizational form (based on consciousness raising group and centered around a common identity and experience of oppression) was perceived (across racial differences) as the epitome of feminist practice (Roth 2004). Evolving in a competing social movement environment, with many radical-left organizations claiming for Black women or Chicana women’s time and resources, minority women groups preferred to organize on their own and around their specific identity. This importantly reminds us that the broader social movement organizational culture plays an important role in the strategies of coalition or competition that women’s organizations might develop. I call this factor the organizational culture factor.

In the following sections I show that the recent political activism by feminist coalitions targeting intersectional issues in Québec and France confirms these insights from the literature, and I add another factor that the comparative framework between France and Québec reveals
starkly, that is the relationship that a feminist coalition has had and continue to have with other social movements, in other words their (partly inherited) place in the competitive constellation of social movement protest. In this vein, Ferree and Roth (1998: 628) note that in order to explain “the presence or absence of working-class women and women of color in movements” one needs to scrutinize inter-movement relationships. In previous work on the French feminist movements (Lépinard 2007) I showed that conceptions of gender oppression which left little place for intersectionality, were tied to the structural place of the feminist movements of the second wave vis-à-vis the extreme left and to the internal division (between radicals and ‘class struggle’ trends of the movement). Building on this argument, I argue that it is crucial to analyze the historical legacy of a coalition’s structural position vis-à-vis the broader arena of protest - its ties with other social movements which shape its identity - in order to understand its response to intersectional challenges. In particular, in this case, it is crucial to explore the historical ties of the coalition with migrant women’s and ethnic minority women’s movements, as well as ties with the broader protest arena, in particular radical/leftist politics. I call this last factor the relational factor because it posits that a coalition’s relations to other segments of the protest arena and formal politics shape its organizational capacity to include differences. Of course this factor has an important historical dimension as well: the position of a coalition in relations to other social movement organizations and political parties is in part a legacy of previous alliances and conflicts.

Although it is important to separate analytically these various factors, they are, empirically, enmeshed. Indeed, the position of a coalition in the broader social movement arena is also a product of past legacies and is shaped by the organizational culture of this broader arena. The ability of an organization to address racism in its very own structures is also evidently tied to organizational culture and links with other social movements. However, separating these various factors is useful to tease out the processes by which a coalition might embrace intersectionality or not.

**Two contrasting coalitions face an intersectional challenge**

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9 For a similar argument that stresses the importance of inter-movement relations, see Ferree and Roth 1998.
The FFQ and the CNDF are both coalitions\(^{10}\): they welcome other feminist organizations as members and attempt at articulating feminist politics at the national level with the broadest representation of women. They both claim to be the largest women’s rights structure in their respective contexts. They both have ties to unions and political parties, they are both today clearly identified with the left of the political spectrum and they both use several repertoires of collective mobilization (e.g. lobbying, conferences, demonstrations, popular education). They both engage in dialogue with governments and state feminists on specific bills regarding gender issues. They also both are central and crucial actor of the visibility of the feminist movement in their respective contexts. Since the 1990s the FFQ has established itself as the voice of women in Québec with the important 1995 March for bread and roses, while the CNDF is the structure in charge of organizing the International women’s day march each year.

Beyond these commonalities, they have distinct histories and organizational structures. While the FFQ is almost 50 years old with historical roots in a reformist-liberal approach to feminism, the CNDF is 20 years old and clearly linked to the ‘class struggle’ trend of the second wave through its two current (and only) presidents. While the FFQ has a 5-people permanent staff, important funding from the federal and the provincial government\(^{11}\) and numerous individuals (variation between 50 and 700 depending on the period, today probably around 300) and organizational members (today around 200); the CNDF is a coalition with no legal status, no permanent staff, and no budget of its own (because it is not a legal entity). The list of its members varies depending on the actions it launches and is not recorded anywhere (but in sharp decline in contrast with the end of the nineties, as both presidents admit). Finally, while the FFQ members are for the most part grassroots women’s rights organizations, and while the FFQ does not accept membership from political parties (women’s groups) but does accept union’s women committees, the CNDF members represent political entities (the Green party women group, union women committee) and women’s rights organizations.

Finally, in order to understand how both coalitions took position on intersectional issues in the last decade it is important to briefly sketch their historical roots. The FFQ was founded by

\(^{10}\) It should be noted however that they are more formalized than temporary coalitions that emerge to adress a specific event (elections, policy reform, protest). They have a more permanent structure but are coalition nonetheless in the sense that they aim at forging large bases for feminist solidarity by joigning together many organizations to influence the political process.

\(^{11}\) In 2003 the FFQ budget was around one million canadian dollars (Trudel 2009)
Thérèse Casgrain in 1966 to push for more women in Québécois politics: 25 years after Québécois women were granted the right to vote, their absence in elected bodies called for more action. Initially a reformist, a-political and moderate organization with ties with the main Québécois union, the CSN, the FFQ lobbied for the creation of state feminist institutions in Québec and issued numerous memoirs and reports on women’s condition in Québec over the years. The FFQ evolved in the 1980s and 1990s as it became more radical and more clearly in favor of Québec’s independence (Trudel 2009). While during the silent revolution the FFQ did not have ties with the radical left and was closer to the Liberal Party (despite its formal commitment not to be politically identifiable with a specific party) in the 1980s, a crisis in the leadership and the continuing social mobilization around the constitutional status of Québec within the Canadian federation altered the FFQ’s initial DNA (Trudel 2009). The ties of some of the members of the FFQ with the Parti Québécois contributed to change the position of the FFQ which, without pledging allegiance to any party, decided to affirm itself, in the name of Québécois women’s interests, in favor of Québec’s sovereignty.

Despite intense political involvement in the debates around Québec’s political future, the economic crisis and the budget cuts initiated by the right-wing government in the first half of the 1990s impacted negatively on the FFQ’s membership, then at one of the lowest points of its history. To remobilize feminists across the province, the then FFQ president Françoise David organized a large march for Bread and Roses in 1995 which drew media attention and mobilized feminists around concrete demands towards the government, especially to alleviate poverty. This provincial mobilization would morph, 5 years later, in the World Women March, coordinated from Québec with a team originating from the Bread and roses march (Giraud and Dufour 2010). This decade of intense activism drew more members to the FFQ and increased its public profile. After the Bread and roses march and the WWM, the FFQ became a central political actor of Québec’s political life. Confronted with a leadership crisis after the departure of Françoise David, the FFQ continued its actions on a more traditional mode of lobbying during the 2000s. In 2009, an Anglophone self-identified lesbian and mother, Alexa Conradi took the leadership of the FFQ. One of few Anglophone leaders of the FFQ and with an immigrant background (Britain), and the first out lesbian to be president, she embodies the politicization and radicalization of the FFQ which continued to occur in the 2000s. The leadership since the mid-1990s has reflected this change: Françoise David left the FFQ to fund a radical-left-wing political party, Québec.
Soïlidaire, with which the FFQ therefore has strong links (in terms of ideological affinity and membership), and the current president was also a founder of Québec Solidaire before taking the leadership of the FFQ.

In contrast to the reformist-turned-radical history of the FFQ, the CNDF has direct roots in the radical/class struggle trend of the second wave feminist as well as roots in a broad protest social movement, which destabilized the French public sphere and the right-wing government over pension reform in 1995. This social protest remains the longest (almost a month) and biggest (e.g. two millions participants is an estimate number for the December 12th demonstration) workers’ strike in French recent history. In the beginning of the 1990s, new spectacular forms of opposition to abortion rights emerged in France (with pro-life activists chaining themselves to clinic’s gates, interrupting medical operations etc.). This attack on women’s rights mobilized the already existing coordination for abortion and contraception rights (CADAC) which mobilized broadly political parties and unions in 1993 to lobby the government to create a new offence, ‘délit d’entrave à l’avortement’ (crime of interference with abortion procedures). To counter the proposed 1995 legal amnesty for persons convicted of this offence the CADAC called during the summer for a broad national demonstration on November 25th 1995. The date was, unexpectedly scheduled in the middle of the biggest French social movement since 1968, and a day after a very important demonstration from the public services. This timing enabled a large feminist mobilization (40 000 people on Nov. 25th), and the CADAC was able to create strong solidarity links with unions and political parties, which led to the creation of a stable, although informal, coalition in January 1996: the CNDF. Very active at the turn of the century with congresses in 1997 and 2002, and an active participant in the debate on the 2006 law against violence against women, the CNDF lost some of its initial steam during the late 2000s. Although it is still in charge of organizing international women’s day it does not have supervision of the French coordination of the World Women’s March, and deplores the lack of involvement of participants, as a side-effect of the reflux in protest and social movements politics which characterizes the current austerity period. Since its creation, the leadership of the CNDF has not

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12 Each time a new President of the Republic is elected it can provide amnesty for certain types of offences. Jacques Chirac, newly elected, proposed to amnesty persons convicted for having interfered with abortion procedures.

13 But, by contrast, less active in the debate over gender parity in politics which took place at the same time (1998-2000)
changed: it is co-presided by two historical figures of the second-wave, self-identified with the ‘class struggle’ trend of the feminist movement of these days, and with political involvement in radical-left politics in the 1970s.

In the 2000s, both the FFQ and the CNDF were faced with a political challenge: they had to take position on hotly contested issues in the public sphere framed as concerning gender equality and secularism/immigrant integration. In 2004 the French Parliament debated, and adopted, a law banning conspicuous religious signs, including the Islamic veil, in public schools. This ban was, among other rationales, legitimated on the grounds of gender equality and the protection of young girls from the influence of religion and of their communities and families. The CNDF discussed the bill in the midst of a conflict among French feminists and opted for an ambivalent message: while it denounced the veil as a sign of gender oppression, it opposed the government’s will to legislate, arguing that focusing on the veil was politically misguided, even to fight against religious fundamentalism: there were more pressing social matters fueling social exclusion and Islamic fundamentalism to take care of (Dot-Pouillard, 2007). This positioning, or lack thereof, encouraged feminists opposed to the ban to organize and to create their own organization to gain voice in the public space, creating a new “separate road”, to take Benita Roth’s term, that would lead, a decade later, to separate marches in Paris for International women’s day. Hence, the conflict over the 2004 law represents the end of unity for the CNDF, after almost a decade of leadership in women’s rights mobilizations, and the beginning of a period marked by distinct coalitions competing to represent feminists and feminisms in France.

In 2010, the Québécois government proposed a bill on reasonable accommodation in public services, which was interpreted as an attempt to prohibit conspicuous signs, and in particular the Islamic veil, for public service agents. The FFQ took position on the bill, asking for modifications to ensure that accommodation would prevail. It argued that women’s economic independence meant access to work and public service jobs that should be accessible to Muslim women as well. This analysis was articulated with the idea that a feminist approach to the bill should emphasize that women should decide for themselves if they want to wear the veil, and that the veil did not have one singular meaning: women could wear it and adhere to gender equality. This position against prohibition was later on articulated again in 2013, during the debate on secularism and the Charter of Québécois values. Although the FFQ received many criticisms in the public debate for its position, perceived by some as dangerous because it did not defend
secularism or oppose religious fundamentalisms strongly enough, \(^{14}\) and although its membership decreased after 2009 (from 900 members to 500), its leadership position as the most important organization defending women’s rights in Québec was not challenged and its commitment to be inclusive for all women deepened.

The history of the positioning of these two coalitions on their respective Islamic veil issues is a complex one that cannot be told exhaustively here. I chose to focus on the three factors I have identified in the previous section in order to show how they contribute to shape the political positioning of the coalitions and their organizational trajectories within the feminist movements.

**Coalitions and intermovements politics: the relationships with radical left politics and minority women’s movements**

Two striking features distinguish the FFQ and the CNDF: their relationship to leftist radicalism, past and present and their history of interaction with minoritized women’s movements. It is tempting to subsume the first difference under an ideological cleavage: reformist v. radical. However, reifying this difference to an ideological one obscures the fact that it is the coalition’s historical and present relations with other movements (through interpersonal contact, joint events, membership), which sustains these ideological positions. While the FFQ has historical links with the CSN, a major union in Québec, the weakness of the radical-left in the 1970s in Québec meant that the FFQ was not really challenged by a radical fringe. The Front de Libération des Femmes, (Women’s Liberation Front, FLF, funded in 1969 and close to the Québec nationalist party) did not oppose the FFQ but on the contrary sought alliances with it, asking for example the FFQ to write articles for their journal (Trudel 2009: 118). The FLF and the FFQ shared similar analyses about women’s oppression but diverged only on the means, but without expressing antagonism towards each other. Moreover, the FFQ was founded before radical left politics really emerged on the Québécois political scene. This gave the FFQ anteriority and exteriority vis-à-vis leftist and nationalist political parties. Today, left wing parties on the Québécois political scene are headed by former FFQ members (rather than the reverse) and the FFQ therefore appears as an

\(^{14}\) To answer these critiques, the FFQ published in 2013 a pedagogical brochure to ‘debunk myths’ circulating about its position in social networks and media, see : [www.ffq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/rapport_laicite_web.pdf](http://www.ffq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/rapport_laicite_web.pdf)
autonomous actor that can ally with the radical left but has organizational and political autonomy. Hence, the FFQ reflects the history of the Québécois feminist movement: often allied with leftist/nationalist movements it did not depend on or compete with them to exist and did not have to struggle against them, as was the case for other second wave movements in many other Western countries.

The story is quite the opposite with the CNDF. The CNDF finds its roots in the class struggle trend of the second wave. While radical French feminists decided to break with leftist organizations during the 1970s in order to organize on their own and put the struggle against patriarchy as their priority\(^\text{15}\) (Picq 1993, Lépinard 2007), class struggle feminists chose to combine the two forms of oppression which put them in constant relation to leftist politics, trying to convince leftist organizations and unions to include a gender perspective while attempting to also exist on their own and to forge coalitions with the radical feminists during the 1980s. Leaders from the CNDF were socialized in revolutionary groups (the Cercle Dimitriev and Revolution) and continued to have very strong links throughout the 1990s and 2000s with the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (Communist revolutionary league), and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (New anticapitalist party).

This different positions vis-à-vis the social field of radical/leftist protest in each context has had important consequences when both coalitions had to take a position on the Islamic veil issue. While the FFQ could provide its own analysis, without fear of upsetting political allies, the CNDF, in particular through its leadership, could not ignore the positions taken up by other leftist organizations. The fact that the CNDF comprises representatives of political parties and unions, and the fact that these organizations were internally divided over the issue meant that it was very difficult for the CNDF to reach a common position on the proposed bill.

The second important relational factor is the links between both coalitions and minoritized women’s movements and organizations. Here again differences are striking. The FFQ has been confronted historically to the inclusion of minority women. It’s foundational charter from 1966 states that the FFQ mission is to assemble “without distinctions based on race, ethnic origin, color or belief, women and organizations willing to coordinate their activities in the domain of social action”. This commitment reflects on the specific Québécois situation of the 1960s marked by the emergence of indigenous claims and the historical segregation between Anglophones and

\(^{15}\) In a similar way as radical feminist in the U.S described by Benita Roth (2004).
Francophones (considered as ‘races’ at the time). Relationships with women from ethnicized and migrant communities have not always been easy and some migrant women organizations refuse to join the FFQ (Laperrière and Lépinard forthcoming), however the vast majority of minority women organizations that cater services to women in ethnic communities, adhere to the FFQ.

Since the 1980s the FFQ has had to consider its relationship with the Fédération des Femmes Autochtones du Québec (FAQ, indigenous women from Québec federation). In 1991 the FAQ decided to quit the FFQ, stating that it did not recognize itself in the cultural Québécois identity promoted by the FFQ. This break-up encouraged the FFQ to reflect on the question of colonial domination and to include in its 1994 political platform the idea that Québec’s sovereignty (promoted since the mid-1980s openly by the FFQ), should have constitutional bases “just and equitable for women, for cultural minorities and for indigenous nations”\(^\text{16}\). Because the FFQ became in favor of Québec’s sovereignty, it could not ignore claims of self-determination by indigenous people in Québec, nor escape the debate on the ongoing colonial relationship between non-indigenous Québécois and indigenous peoples. In 2004 a mutual solidarity protocol was signed between the two organizations. The relationships with indigenous women paved the way (among other factors I detail in the following sections) for a critical reflection, inside the FFQ, about other forms of oppression than gender that the FFQ could not simply dismissed from its analysis.

Finally, the FFQ has been working to include minority women for the last 20 years. Many activists argue that the first official commitment of the FFQ to work to represent minority women goes back to the 1992's president declaration that: "The [feminist] movement will no longer ignore the issue of cultural pluralism. We must achieve a real articulation between the feminist movement and women from ethnocultural communities." Although this was often considered has a turning point in the movement's history, the "fight against racism and discriminations specific to minority women" (Fédération des femmes du Québec 2003) only became part of the FFQ's declaration of principles, and an official priority, in 2003. In March 2015 the FFQ held a general assembly to orient its future actions and proposed to its members to adopt the fight for the

\(^{16}\) ‘Le référendum s’en vient’ Le féminisme en bref, 5/2, décembre 1994, p.8, cited in Trudel 2009 :372
elimination of all forms of oppressions (including racism and colonialism) in its Charter, as well as intersectionality as an analytical tool shaping the FFQ’s position in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{17}

A different picture emerges from the CNDF. The class struggle trend of the second wave, has always had punctual, and sometimes more permanent, relationships with migrant women movements (Lesselier 2007). While there are not a lot of traces of the numerous joint actions between feminists and migrant women which occurred during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, relationships existed between them and punctual solidarity and support was the norm. For example, one of the migrant women organization founded in 1985 (the \textit{Nanas Beurs}) was founded at a meeting at the Parisian ‘Maison des femmes’, a place ran by radical and class struggle feminists.\textsuperscript{18} However, the issues faced by migrant women and women from migrant descent were always marginal on the mainstream class struggle feminist agenda and it seemed normal to radical and class struggle feminists that migrant/ethnicised women would organize by themselves. This tendency is reflected in the activities of the CNDF\textsuperscript{19}: in the proceedings of the 1997 founding meeting of the CNDF, racialized women and migrant are absent as such, except under the item of female genital mutilations and in the international rubric which relates the necessary solidarity with women in Algeria and other African countries. While the proceedings address issues relating to work, family, or health, these themes are not analyzed with an intersectional lens. Similarly 5 years later, the proceedings from the 2002 forum on \textit{New challenges for feminism} organized by the CNDF\textsuperscript{20} also show little inclusion of racialized women’s concerns (despite their symbolic presence on the cover of the book).\textsuperscript{21} Hence, despite relationships between CNDF’s members and migrant women’s organizations, despite punctual solidarity actions and regular discussion of migrant women issues, organizations followed separate roads and the CNDF never envisioned the necessity to add the fight against racism, or

\textsuperscript{17} The formulation of these principles are now currently being debated and to be adopted in september 2015, see www.ffq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Cahier-de-propositions-Amandées.pdf

\textsuperscript{18} Communication by Souad Benani at the conference on the history of the class struggle trend of the feminist movement held in Paris, ‘Faire et écrire l’histoire : féminisme et lutte des classes’, September 25th 2010.


\textsuperscript{21} Specific discrimination faced by migrant women are mentionned and the effect of globalization on women in developing countries.
later islamophobia, to its founding principles. While the fight against racism or imperialism might appear in the CNDF political positioning in the public debate, the fight against capitalism is much more prominent and the CNDF has not launched actions or working group to address racism specifically.

**Organizing despite or along differences**

The FFQ and the CNDF have inherited from very different organizational cultures. While it is in the FFQ’s historical legacy to aim at representing all Québécois women and to federate them despite their differences²², the CNDF has inherited from its roots in the second wave feminist movement an organizational practice that puts political agreement on specific issues (relating to the definition of women’s oppression) before the need for consensus and mobilization of a broader constituency. Moreover, while in Québec cooperation and networking among grassroots feminist organizations prevails over competition, in France, similarly to what Benita Roth describes for the second wave American context (Roth 2004), organizing on one’s own continues to be a normal pattern of mobilization for feminist groups.

The legitimacy of the FFQ rests upon its claim to be the most important women’s rights organization in Québec and to *represent* the vast majority of women’s organizations. Born in a historical context with no competitor and with a practice of consensus and broad alliances, the FFQ allows dissent in order to ensure inclusion. For example on prostitution the FFQ refrains from taking a public position in favor of abolition in order to ensure that organizations such as STELLA which works with prostitutes and promote regulation, be included in the Federation. The FFQ’s practice of broad alliances at the national level (with unions and anti-poverty organizations in the 1980s and 1990s), and at the international level (with the launching of the World Women’s March) means that the Federation has had to confront dissent and differences and to find organizational solutions. For example, after the 2000 WWM the FFQ supported the move of the March headquarters to Brasil, which meant relinquishing power and acknowledging the power relations between North and South and the need the anchor the March in the Global South (Giraud 2015, Giraud and Dufour 2010). Moreover, organizing a world-wide event with

²² For example, in 1992 the FFQ forum is entitled ‘pour un Québec féminin pluriel’ stressing the diversity of the movement.
women from different nationalities and with pressing concerns regarding imperialism or poverty meant acknowledging other types of oppression than gender alone. As an FFQ activist notes:

"This March is an important moment in our reflection process. We have decided to widen our perspective to consider multiple discriminations and also to think in terms of and to apply the intersectional analysis. (...) We wanted this fight against discriminations to be totally integrated into the Fédération's work."

Moreover, the FFQ regularly defines its political orientation through a bottom up process which includes the mobilization of all its members in the drafting of common documents. In 2011 members of the FFQ where invited to take part in a vast process of drafting and sending their texts describing their vision of Québécois feminism in the future, which led to a vast Forum with more than 1100 members in 2013. In 2015, a participative process was again launched to adopt a revised Charter reflecting the orientation of the feminist movement for the future.

On the contrary, the CNDF approach to coalition is based on the idea that participants should agree on basic values relating to women’s emancipation. Organizations that do not support the prohibition of prostitution are therefore excluded from most of the CNDF’s actions. The CNDF leaders talk about the person they can ‘work with’ and those with whom they cannot, and the dividing line is a political one. When I mentioned to one of the CNDF coordinator a new Afro-feminist group that had been created in Paris and that they had chosen to march on international women’s day with the alternative march in a popular neighborhood rather than to join the CNDF’s march, she reacted by saying: “yes of course we could meet with them, but if you are telling me they are marching with the STRASS (an organization which promotes the regulation of prostitution) then… it will be very difficult”.

Moreover, the broader context of the French feminist movements encourages minority women to organize on one’s own, rather than seeking inclusion in preexisting structures. The feeling of not being represented by feminist organizations and needing to carve one’s own space is a recurrent pattern for minority women in the interviews I did with minority women activists from different periods.\(^{23}\) Remembering her first meeting in the Maison des femmes\(^ {24}\) in Paris at the end of the 1980s, Samira, a woman in her fifties of Algerian migrant descent who founded

\(^{23}\) It is also mentionned by Souad Benani (founder of Nanas beurs) and Gerty Dambury (founder of the Coordination des femmes noires) during the conference ‘Faire et écrire l’histoire : féminisme et lutte des classes’, September 25th 2010, Paris.

\(^{24}\) A feminist place run by radical and class strugle feminists.
and heads a French organization devoted to girls in deprived neighborhoods near Paris analyzes her feelings when coming to the meetings:

There was such a gap between my desire to get involve in a feminist group and… you see they scared be these women (…) They were so political, me frankly, I did not know what was the Communist revolutionary league. (…) I found their words were as sharp as knives, there was no place for an exchange, and it scared me (…) I found these women totally submitted to the party, and I can’t stand that, it’s terrible. (…) I think they wanted to be open to all women, except that all women could not find their place in this organization, did not feel welcome. But you see, these women, they were political activists.

After these experiences, Samira decided to create her own organization to cater to young women from migrant descent like her, living in deprived neighborhoods. Twenty-five years later, Jessica, a young activist of African descent from a newly created afro-feminist group in Paris tells a similar story. She describes how during her master thesis, as she was becoming a feminist she hopped from one feminist group to another in Paris, trying to find a place where to fit in, but finding herself regularly the only Black woman in the room and feeling unable to speak during those meetings. Confronted with this situation she decided it was important that women like her create their own space to reflect on their specific situation. While this type of story is not absent in the Québécois context, the difference lies in the effort made by each coalition to keep this type of organization as a member and to include their voices in the political process.

While the CNDF organized two important Forums in 1997 and 2002, which produced some Charters and the definition of common objectives, its informal structure means that the leadership is not elected nor renewed and that the principles adopted during these Forums do not have to translate into actual practices. Since 2002, the CNDF did not organize bottom-up participatory events but rather rely on existing networks that the leadership mobilizes to address specific urgent issues. Usually the leadership drafts a public position, which is then signed (or not) by the member organizations. This top-down process (also explained by the lack of permanent staff and resources) means that political rectitude with the position of the leadership determines who will be included or not in the coalition.
Acknowledging racism, institutionalizing intersectionality… or not

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the effort a coalition makes to acknowledge and address racism in its midst and to institutionalize intersectionality shapes the position it will take on an intersectional issue. Here again, both coalitions differ greatly.

In line with its work to establish a relationship with indigenous women exempt of domination or racism, the FFQ has work to reflect on its own practices with respect to racism and inclusion of minority women. In January 2000, the FFQ created the Comité des femmes des communautés culturelles (Women from cultural communities' committee, CFCC). This subcommittee, which is composed mostly of immigrant and racialized women had as a mandate to:

"defend the rights and interests of women from ethnocultural communities as a marginalized group, by fostering the openness of the women's movement to cultural diversity and national and international solidarity and reinforcing the relationship between women from cultural communities and visible minorities and women from the majority." (Fédération des femmes du Québec 2007)

Following this commitment, in 2004 the FFQ launched a 3-year long process to develop ‘in an inclusive perspective and a shared leadership with cultural communities organizations (…) a strategy to fight racism and ethnic and religious discrimination’. This process included education and training for unions and women’s organizations to promote migrant women’s contribution to Québécois society. The CCFC surveyed minority women’s status inside member organizations of the FFQ and the distribution of resources among member organizations to conclude that a rebalancing of resources towards migrant women’s organization was in order, as well as an increase in their descriptive representation inside the FFQ structures. For some years the FFQ hired a former representative of the Québécois Association des aides familiales au Québec (female domestic workers organization), a Québécois Black woman, as an officer in charge of intersectionality. Trainings were proposed to member organizations on intersectionality with role play sessions in order to address unconscious racism, and in 2015 the FFQ proposed to its members to adopt intersectionality as a guiding principle and methodology.

The process by which the FFQ has decided to include intersectionality in its feminist analysis and practice does not go without resistances and does not mean all minority women organizations agree with the FFQ analysis. For example, a Filipina domestic workers
organization based in Montréal for example has decided not to join the FFQ and to organize its own demonstration for International women’s day because they feel they need their own representation nonetheless and that their political priorities are not similar to those of the FFQ. However, when faced with the Bill 94 issue, because of this process to include intersectional analysis, the FFQ was able to provide a nuanced position without loosing its leadership, despite some criticisms.

By contrast, the CNDF has not put the questions of the descriptive or substantive inclusion of minority women on its agenda. Despite a political commitment to address the intersection of class and gender, the intersection of gender and ethnicity or migration has remained a very low priority and there has been no particular effort to address the potential racism inside the organization. In the absence of any collective effort to address racism and intersectionality inside the coalition, the presence of veiled women at the CNDF meetings for the preparation of the 2004 international women’s day march, in the midst of the legislative debate to prohibit the veil in public school, provoked violent reactions from CNDF members. As one of the veiled participants recall:

‘feminists’ asked us, those who were wearing the veil, if we were for or against the right to abortion, if we were for or against equality between men and women, our position on homosexuality etc. We had to prove we were feminists, but whatever our response, the piece of cloth on our heads disqualified us.\footnote{Ndella Paye, http://lmsi.net/Stop-Mon-corps-ne-vous-appartient}

Ten years later, Jessica hinted at a similar type of racism in her explanation of why she felt women from African descent like her needed their own space and could not join the CNDF. Recollecting the march organized by the CNDF on the international day against violence against women in November 2014, she describes how her group was gratified with comments such as ‘you are beautiful’ by fellow White feminists. Jessica interpreted this seemingly anecdotal comment as an instance of White feminists fueling stereotypes about Black women being exotic. In a context in which racism internal to the coalition has never been addressed, and in which there has been no institutionalization of descriptive or substantive representation of minority women, the CNDF found itself articulating an ambivalent position towards the prohibition of the Islamic veil, and loosing some of its leadership since an increasing number of organizations refuse to march along with them on international women’s day.
Conclusion

For many intersectionality theorists, coalitions appear to be a form of collective organizing conducive to intersectional politics. Comparing two coalitions in two very different contexts of social mobilization, this article has attempted to show that this is not always the case. Although a coalition is a form of collective organization that enables the common political action of various organizations, despite and across their differences in terms of identities or political agenda, not all coalitions can become an inclusive intersectional coalition.

The picture that emerges from the comparison between the FFQ and the CNDF reveals a stark contrast with respect to the three factors identified. While the CNDF is historically closely linked to extreme-left politics and parties, and develops on the one hand punctual solidarity relationships with migrant/ethnicised women movements, and on the other hand competitive relationship with other feminist organizations, the FFQ because of its historical anteriority in the field of movement politics and its autonomy vis-à-vis political parties develops mostly cooperative relationships to other feminist organizations and migrant women organizations. This contrasted positions of both coalitions in their respective fields of social movements is closely articulated with different organizational patterns. While inclusion and bottom-up claim making characterizes the FFQ because of its historical leadership and its modus operandi, the CNDF has a more top-down and politicized approach which results in the affirmation of strong political cleavages that prevent collaboration with many feminist organizations. Finally, these two factors combine with a third one, that is the institutionalization, or lack thereof, of minority women descriptive and substantive representation inside the coalition. While the FFQ has initiated anti-racism work and a formal inclusion of intersectionality on its platform, the CNDF has not addressed the issue clearly.

Hence, while this comparative case-study confirms arguments made by the literature on social movement and intersectionality, mainly that institutionalized procedures (internal dissent, descriptive representation, separate minority women organizations inside the coalition) contribute to make a coalition intersectionally inclusive, it also sheds light on another factor, namely the position of a coalition within the broader social movement sphere, and in particular its autonomy vis-à-vis political parties.
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