

## What is Holding Back Full Feminist Solidarity with Muslim Women? The Epistemic Failures of White Liberal Feminism

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the recent shift towards embracing anti-racism and intersectionality within the feminist movement in Quebec, Canada, support for Muslim women affected by secularism laws remains elusive. Our article seeks to understand what is still holding back a full feminist solidarity with Muslim women in Quebec by examining the limits of intersectional solidarity discourses from feminist groups officially positioning themselves in defence of Muslim women's rights to wear religious symbols. We focus on the advocacy discourse against the *Act Respecting the Laicity of the State* (Law 21) led by the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ), Quebec's largest feminist coalition. We employ a theoretical framework combining feminist critical Muslim scholarship and critical epistemologies, which leads us to ask: How does the FFQ's advocacy work against Law 21 mobilise an intersectional approach to defend Muslim women's rights against nationalist and secular colonial narratives? What are the limits and blind spots of this advocacy work? Our analysis shows that despite FFQ's declared political support for Muslim women's rights and attempts to incorporate religion within an intersectional framework of domination, the organisation still failed to dismantle the deep-rooted idea of an inherent incompatibility between feminism and Islam and to consider Muslim women within its ranks as full feminist epistemic subjects.

**Keywords:** Muslim feminism, intersectionality, feminist solidarity, white ignorance, contributory injustices

### INTRODUCTION: WHAT DOES FEMINIST SOLIDARITY LOOK LIKE?

Wearing a hoodie in the workplace has been, at least for a day, a sign of rebellion and defiance of patriarchy in the province of Quebec, Canada. On November 12, 2019, thousands of women wore one in solidarity with Catherine Dorion, a white woman politician, and member of the provincial party Québec Solidaire, who had been barred from the Salon Bleu of the National Assembly of Quebec for dress code violation. The jeans and oversized orange hoodie that Dorion wore were deemed 'inappropriate', a violation of decorum, and showing disrespect for the institution (Hall, 2019). This event stirred a unanimous wave of protest from members of Quebec's feminist movement culminating in Wear-a-Hoodie Day #MonCotonOuatéMonChoix (#MyHoodieMyChoice) launched in her honour.<sup>1</sup> This moment of feminist solidarity would have been inspiring if not for the 'double standard' it displayed (Savic, 2019, para. 10). A few months before Dorion's incident, the Quebec government of the Coalition Avenir Québec adopted Law 21, the *Act Respecting the Laicity of the State*, a secularism law restricting thousands of Muslim women wearing headscarves from accessing positions as lawyers, police officers, and schoolteachers, in addition to ruling out their chances at ever becoming elected political representatives, all without stirring the same unanimous and spontaneous feminist outrage.<sup>2</sup>

Disappointed by this two-tiered solidarity, Muslim feminist organisers tried to use the momentum created by #MonCotonOuatéMonChoix to bring attention to the injustices of Law 21. They launched the initiative #MonVoileMonChoix (#MyHeadscarfMyChoice), which was a call to wear, in addition to the hoodie, a headscarf or a button against Law 21 (Lau, 2019). Not only did their event fail to draw a significant mobilisation (compared

<sup>1</sup> All translations from French to English are our own.

<sup>2</sup> In June 2019, Law 21 established the secular nature of the State of Quebec, prohibiting public service workers in positions of 'authority' from wearing religious symbols, and disproportionately targeting Muslim women who wear a headscarf. The law also prohibits face-covering for both the offering and receiving of public services, targeting also niqab-wearing women.

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to #MonCotonOuatéMonChoix), but it also incited a vehement backlash from feminists who rejected the association between the cotton hoodie and the headscarf. The backlash was particularly fuelled by the support of #MonVoileMonChoix expressed by the president of the Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ) – the province’s largest coalition of feminist organisations – who called for wearing a headscarf in a day of solidarity with Muslim women. Her call triggered the wrath of both supporters of Law 21 and feminists rallying against it, all accusing the FFQ of ‘promoting the veil’ (Jury, 2019) and of betraying women forced to wear a headscarf who are living in Muslim autocracies. Hence, not only did the outpouring of feminist support towards Dorion not extend to Muslim women, but also the attempt to include Muslim women within the initiative provoked yet another controversy around the veil. Paradoxically, an event created to bring attention to Muslim women’s exclusion from feminist consciousness became another occasion to double down and seal this exclusion.

This sequence of events made two things obvious. First, it highlighted the disappointment of Muslim feminists over the lack of solidarity displayed by the white feminists regarding secularism laws. Second, it made clear how despite the yearlong feminist mobilisation against Law 21 – led mostly by Muslim women activists, with the support of other women of colour and white women, all under the label of intersectional solidarity (Cho *et al.*, 2013; Collins and Bilge, 2016) – Muslim women’s lives were still barely considered a feminist issue, and a divisive one at that. Indeed, the mobilisation around Dorion was a sad reminder to many Muslim feminists – the authors of this article included – of what feminist solidarity could look like, and how united in their outrage white feminists can be when their freedom of choice is threatened or violated. This compels us to ask the following questions: What is still holding back full feminist solidarity with Muslim women? Why is the connection between white women’s rights to dress freely in the workplace and the similar rights of Muslim women still not spontaneously made? More importantly, why do we not see the same outrage triggered by Dorion’s ban directed against secularism laws even from feminists who have embraced the call to ‘intersectionality’ and have been mobilising with Muslim women around their freedom of choice for years?

Various works analysing feminist interventions during secularism debates in Quebec and other Western liberal societies have provided important clues in answering these questions, through the lens of the gendered racialisation of Islam (Benhadjoudja, 2018a, 2022; Mahrouse, 2010; Zoghblami, 2020), the ‘phobogenic’ quality of the veil (Bentouhami, 2017), and sexual and secular nationalist ideologies (Barras, 2022; Benhadjoudja, 2022; Bilge, 2010, 2012; Jacquet, 2017; Jahangeer, 2020; Selby, 2014; Taher, 2024). While we do draw from this rich literature, we also opt for a different path, which does not aim to study openly Islamophobic feminist discourses that support secularism laws and oppose the visibility of Muslim headscarves in Quebec (which have been extensively researched). Instead, responding to Jasmin Zine’s call for a ‘critical faith-centred space’ (2004) within anti-racist feminism, one that centres faith as a valid epistemological site for resistance and feminist knowledge, we examine the limits of intersectional solidarity discourses from feminist organisations that officially position themselves as advocates for Muslim women.

Using a theoretical lens combining feminist critical Muslim scholarship and critical epistemologies, we examine the intersectional advocacy discourse of the FFQ in support of Muslim women and against Law 21. Our discourse analysis of the FFQ’s public statements about Law 21 reveals that despite its declared political support for Muslim women’s rights and the attempt to consider religion within its intersectional approach to domination (Collins and Bilge, 2016), the organisation still fails to deconstruct the deep-rooted idea of a fundamental incompatibility between feminism and Islam and to consider Muslim women involved in its ranks as full feminist epistemic subjects. As Muslim feminist scholars who have been navigating within feminist activist circles in Quebec in the past decade, we see this article as an opportunity to engage in a critical conversation with our feminist and anti-racist allies (within and outside of the FFQ) to question and push further the boundaries – and scope – of our solidarities and alliances.

## BACKGROUND OF THE FFQ’S INTERVENTIONS ON SECULARISM LAWS

The Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ), established in 1966, is a province-wide umbrella organisation focused on feminist advocacy. It is one of the main feminist organisations that emerged in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. The Quiet Revolution was a significant period for the development of Quebec nationalism, and the feminist groups that emerged during this period contributed to challenging the traditional social norms dictated by the Catholic Church, thereby promoting women’s autonomy in both the public and private spheres (see Jacquet, 2017). However, despite their common nationalist and secularist roots, feminist organisations did not adopt a unified stance throughout the controversies about the visibility of Islam and Muslim women’s headscarves in the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> Whilst mainstream secular feminist organisations in Quebec have

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<sup>3</sup> Although the first controversy surrounding the Muslim headscarf dates back to 1994, Islam became a key subject of feminist public debate in Quebec only in 2006-2007, during the so-called reasonable accommodations crisis (see Bilge, 2010; Mahrouse,

consistently advocated for state secularism and religious neutrality, the FFQ instead promoted open secularism and systematically criticised the numerous attempts by the Quebec government to regulate and control the visibility of religious signs in the public space, the most recent of which was Law 21. For example, in May 2009, the FFQ took an official public stance to support Muslim women's right to wear a headscarf and opposed the ban on religious symbols for civil servants. This position, supported by the leftist party Québec Solidaire, sent shockwaves through feminist networks and was seen by secular feminists as a betrayal of the FFQ's long legacy in the fight for women's rights. However, in 2011, the only exception to this solidarity was the niqab, which was considered as a manifestation of 'Islamist fundamentalism', and all feminist organisations in Quebec – except for the South Asian Women's Community Centre – supported its ban under Bill 94.<sup>4</sup>

The FFQ's disapproval of the niqab was not enough to prevent criticism from secular feminist organisations. In 2013, many of them broke away from the FFQ to form *Pour les Droits des Femmes du Québec* (PDF-Q) and the *Janettes*, two groups that 'wanted to explicitly advocate for secularism and against "cultural and religious rights", which in practice involved advocating against veiling during the anti-veiling debates' (Jahangeer, 2020: 124). Despite harsh external criticism and internal resistance, the FFQ pursued and solidified its solidarity work by adopting in 2016 intersectionality as 'an orientation for the future, to be deepened and implanted in the ways of doing things, in the demands, projects and structures of associative life' (Couture, 2016: 38). Pushed by Black, Muslim, and racialised feminists, intersectionality was understood both as an analytical framework and as a critical praxis (Cho *et al.*, 2013; Collins and Bilge, 2016), revealing the political marginalisation of women from minority groups 'within the organization and the broader women's movement and (. . .) redress[ing] their under-representation' (Laperrière and Lépinard, 2016: 376). Intersectionality is also used as a tool for political representation, contributing to transforming the FFQ's discourse, positions, and political agenda. According to Laperrière and Lépinard (2016),

While grassroots women's organisations [in Quebec] implement intersectionality to include minority women in a unified feminist project and identity, the FFQ uses intersectionality to challenge and transform the very idea of a single feminist identity for all women. (380)

In that respect, the FFQ's adoption of the principles of intersectionality led the organisation to change its official position against the niqab. In 2017, it publicly stated the unconstitutionality of Bill 62 and one of its vice-presidents, Marlihan Lopez, declared that 'The law targets a group of women by stigmatising them, by excluding them from public spaces' (quoted in Boutros, 2019). Similarly, during public debates against Law 21 in 2019, the organisation asserted 'that the Secularism Act undermines gender equality by discriminating against women wearing religious symbols' (FFQ cited in Nantel, 2022). In appearance, FFQ's position seems then to answer Sirma Bilge's (2010) call to make 'intersectionality scholarship' and praxis 'systematically attend to the religious/secular divide, which is rarely integrated to the collection of social divisions (gender, race, class) typically taken into account' (24).

Considering this long history of public stances taken by the FFQ in defence of Muslim women's agency against discriminatory secularism laws, coupled with the intersectional approach adopted by the organisation and the heavy work of awareness-raising undertaken by Muslim feminists in its ranks, we find it rather puzzling that this advocacy work has not translated into a wide grassroots feminist mobilisation. While a case could be made about a possible gap between the position of the FFQ's board of executives – which during debates on Law 21 was formed by many racialised feminists – and the position of the FFQ's base, which remains predominantly composed of white organisations, we believe that examining the FFQ's intersectional political advocacy discourse can give us important insights into what lies behind the 'elusive solidarity' with Muslim women (Drimonis, 2018).

## FEMINISM AND ISLAM: A CONTROVERSIAL RELATIONSHIP

### At the Roots of the Idea of Incompatibility

Extensive research has already demonstrated how the premise of the supposed incompatibility (or incommensurability) between feminism and Islam has Western colonial roots (for example, Ahmed, 1992; Ali,

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2010). The discourse surrounding accommodations culminated in the creation of the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, named for its two chairs the Bouchard-Taylor Commission (2007–2008), and the subsequent introduction of legislative measures addressing religious accommodations and the wearing of religious symbols. These include three different bills, with the most recent being Law 21, passed in 2019. The debates on reasonable accommodations in Quebec were marked by a political and media representation of religious minorities, especially Muslims minorities, as making unreasonable and abusive accommodation requests, thus reinforcing a set of racial stereotypes against them.

<sup>4</sup> During the public debates surrounding Bill 94, the FFQ advocated an exemption of the ban on concealing the face for educators in family daycare centres.

2012; Fadil, 2014; Salem, 2013; Seedat, 2013b; Thobani, 2021; Zine, 2004). This premise is a product of the colonialist construction of Islam as Europe's 'Other' (Asad, 2003; Saïd, 1978) and as its inverted mirror, a 'mirror of practices and ideals that are internal to Europe, yet that no longer fit its self-understanding, and that have been gradually projected upon the "Other"' (Fadil, 2014: 58). The association between secularism and sexual and gender equality, coined as *sexularism*, has been made since the colonial era with reference to Islam (Scott, 2017). This association was later regularly reiterated and reinforced through cyclical secularism debates that reasserted Western liberal democracies 'as the only space for women's emancipation' (Fadil, 2014: 55). Talal Asad (2003) helps us to understand that if this association has been possible, it is because secularism is more than just a political system in which freedom of conscience is guaranteed by a neutral state; it is – as paraphrased by Sunera Thobani (2021) – 'a doctrine of governance, that presently underpins the self-presentation of the "West" as democratic and "Islam" as repressive' (159).

Further, Nadia Fadil (2014: 53) explains how white secular feminists have historically played an active part in constructing the "woman question" (. . .) as one of the political anchor points for the stabilization of civilisational hierarchies' (see also Éwanjé-Épée and Magliani-Belkacem, 2012). Whilst secular feminism claims to be critical of all religions, most scholarly and public Western debates about the relationship between religion and feminism predominantly focus on Islam (Ali, 2012). White secular feminists have contributed significantly to shaping dominant nationalist narratives and fostering the notion of an open or pluralistic secularism as a threat to gender and sexual equality, as a foundational value of the nation (Bilge, 2012). These secularist civilisational hierarchies have been reinforced both locally and globally following 9/11 and the USA 'War on Terror' when white Western feminists 'came to be seen not only as understanding the "real" cause of "Islamic terror" but also [as] the experts best suited to understand and represent the interests of Muslim women' (Thobani, 2021: 145). These dynamics nurtured a complex relationship between white feminists and Muslim women, with the former positioning themselves as the guardians entrusted with the keys to the emancipation of all women, while the latter are perceived as 'an abject object' eliciting paradoxical feelings of pity, fear, envy, and revulsion (Thobani, 2021: 142). Muslim women evoke pity for their perceived need to be rescued from their men, religion, and cultures (Abu-Lughod, 2002), fear as they symbolise the 'Muslim invasion' threatening liberal, secular, and feminist norms in Western democracies (Bakht, 2008; Bilge, 2013; Razack, 2008), and fascination, envy and revulsion as they inspire a paradoxical orientalist sexual imaginary (Jarmakani, 2010; Thobani, 2021).

In terms of feminist scholarship on Islam and Muslim women, Marnia Lazreg (2005) has revealed the ascendancy of a 'religious paradigm' which, paradoxically, understands Muslim women's experiences only through a religious lens and, simultaneously, minimises the importance of religion as a spiritual resource and praxis as well as a system of knowledge. Furthermore, religion is not viewed as a potential lever for subversion or rebellion, or as a valid space for fostering and building solidarity. Consequently, when Muslim women collectively organise, their resistance is read in binary terms as being either against religion or despite it. In the best-case scenario, when it is not a tool of oppression, Islam is seen as a trivial cultural accessory, not central to the way women organise their struggles (Zine, 2004). Even antiracism scholars and activists often reject religious frameworks as valid for feminist theorising and activism. As Zine puts it, '[T]he idea that women can use religion as a site of resistance and as an epistemological terrain upon which to construct alternative visions of womanhood has not been validated in most antiracist feminist discourses' (2004: 171).<sup>5</sup> Criticising this essentialism that defines Islam as a static reality, fundamentally dogmatic and inherently sexist, Zine (2004) emphasises how the elimination of any possibility of convergence between feminism and Islam by white secular feminists dismisses alternative theological readings sensitive to gender equality. This dismissal, in turn,

upholds the most rigid and dogmatic narrations as being the authoritative voice. They [white secular feminists] therefore fall into the same trap as fundamentalists, who derive only static and literal meanings from the Qur'an and see the human interpretation of laws derived from religious texts as inviolable and fixed rather than as the product of historical, cultural, and gendered attempts to apprehend the meaning of divine intent. (180)

### **Islamic Feminism and How it Disturbs (or Does Not Disturb) the Idea of Incompatibility**

Because of the strong belief in an incompatibility between 'feminism' and 'Islam' among liberal Western feminists and in secular circles, the term 'Islamic feminism' or 'Muslim feminism' emerged as an oxymoron and still faces a lot of scepticism (Ali, 2012). Before delving into how this term disturbs (or does not) the idea of

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the Western feminist movement's complicity with colonialism and imperialism, Muslim communities – spanning secular traditions, conservative movements, and scholars advocating for gender justice (see Kausar, 2006) – refuse the label of 'feminism'. The same essentialism characterises both the secular and conservative Muslim approach: the first defines Islam as a static reality, while the second defines feminism as a unique model representing a normative Western modernity (Ali, 2012).

incompatibility, we clarify our use of the concepts of Islamic and Muslim feminisms. On the one hand, Islamic feminism usually refers to the academic field of ‘knowledge production and meaning making within Islam’ from the perspective of gender justice (Salem, 2013: 8). Thus, Islamic feminism questions the religious patriarchal authority through rethinking Muslim jurisprudence and Muslim historiography (Ali, 2012). On the other hand, Muslim feminism generally designates Muslim women’s cultural and political activism against patriarchy without using religious sources as references (Benhadjoudja, 2018a: 115). Although this distinction is tacit, we follow Leila Benhadjoudja’s (2018a) suggestion to blur the border between the two notions and consider Islamic feminism as part of Muslim feminism in such a way that ‘the latter would encompass the various ways in which feminism and Islam fit together’ and are lived out differently depending on the women’s social location (116). Muslim feminism can thus be broadly apprehended ‘as both a critical practice and an ontological stance’, which combines grassroots activism with an intellectual and academic approach rooted in a socio-political commitment to the emancipation and liberation of Muslim women (Abu-Bakr, 2013: 4). Even if the terminology emerged only in the 1990s, many Muslim feminist scholars trace it back to the original message of Islam and to the struggle for gender justice of early Muslim women from the revelation period (Ali, 2012). Moreover, to account for the multiplicity of historiography and genealogies of Muslim women’s activism for gender justice, and to counter the systematic erasures of Black Muslim women (see Délice Mugabo, 2016), it is vital to always ‘apprehend Islam at the intersection of race, religion and gender’ (Benhadjoudja, 2018b: 116).

Through her review of feminist scholarship on feminism and Islam, Fatima Seedat warns against the easy ‘conflation or inflation of the convergence between Islam and feminism as “Islamic feminism” (2013a: 404). According to her, this convergence does not necessarily advance Muslim women’s struggles for equality and neither does it erase the Western perception of Islam as a sexist and patriarchal religion that is bad for women. Seedat explains how ‘Islamic feminism’ is often promoted by scholars who advocate for the necessity of an Islamic feminism for Muslim women and who usually date it at the beginning of the 1990s. This limited genealogy locates feminism in a Western intellectual paradigm in which Islamic feminism is only an ‘Islamic version of Western liberal feminism’ (Seedat, 2013b: 40). Feminism thus redeems Islam and the Qur’an, in the sense that the late encounter between Islam and feminism is presumed to transform Islam into a progressive religion compatible with Western modernity and civilisation (Barlas, 2008). Hence, ‘contemporary women’s gender consciousness’ is seen as ‘another stage in the historical development of Islam as a religion’ (Seedat, 2013b: 40). Western feminism is again situated as not only the norm but also the condition to save Islam – and, by extension, Muslim women – from patriarchy.

Muslim feminist scholarship also brings a new conceptualisation of agency, challenging the one advocated by white liberal feminism. Among the first articulations of this critique, anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2006) shows how ‘pious’ women reinvent the content of emancipation and agency beyond Western liberal norms.<sup>6</sup> Mahmood describes how dominant feminist scholarship understands human agency as ‘one that seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power’ (2006: 33). According to Mahmood, this liberal conception of agency cannot make sense of ‘the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations, and projects have been shaped by non-liberal traditions’ (33). Adopting a post-structuralist approach, Mahmood suggests instead to look at agency ‘not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create’ (33–34). According to Fadil (2014), in addition to contributing to the ‘decentring of the notion of emancipation and agency by opening it up to other, less obvious, ways of thinking about these questions’, Mahmood’s work had posed a ‘more fundamental interrogation’ about ‘the *translatibility* of these differences: the possibility to decentre our conception of agency in order to consider and envision other ways of being’ (53, italics in the original).

If feminist critical Muslim studies have analysed the nuanced ways in which the incompatibility between feminism and Islam can be articulated in liberal feminist and secular discourses, we consider it relevant to combine these works with critical epistemology studies, to focus on the epistemic undertones of those discourses. To do so, we reframe the incompatibility between feminism and Islam as a (re)production of ‘white ignorance’ (Mills, 1997).

### White Ignorance and Contributory Injustices

In *The Racial Contract* (1997), philosopher Charles W. Mills develops the concept of ‘epistemology of ignorance’. As Mills explains, white supremacy is an ‘unnamed’ political system (1997: 1) that implicitly binds white individuals within society, by what he calls the ‘racial contract’, and produces ‘white ignorance’. The racial contract, according to Mills, is based on an epistemology of ignorance, that is, on ‘localised and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)’ (1997: 18). These dysfunctions, Mills tells us, distort white people’s

<sup>6</sup> In line with Mahmood’s (2005) study of Islamist women’s movements in Egypt, scholars have developed theories on women’s agency and gender equality through the Qur’an and Islamic jurisprudence and law (see Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002; Ali, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

perceptions of social reality, and ‘prevent them from understanding the world they themselves have created’ (1997: 18). In other words, white ignorance – for members of racially dominant groups – entails failing to see that the social world is structured by racial hierarchies in which they are privileged and which they help to perpetuate. Therefore, not only are the members of the dominant groups ignorant of the realities experienced by the dominated, but their ignorance is cultivated because (and as long as) it is not rectified.

As white ignorance contributes to maintaining and perpetuating racial domination, as described through the racial contract, it also contributes to sustaining other power relationships intersecting with race, particularly those of gender, class, and sexuality (Pateman and Mills, 2007). This understanding of white ignorance at the intersection of various power dynamics enables a deeper grasp of the subtle marginalisation of minorities’ contributions and voices within prevailing national narratives, as well as the potential of these contributions, if acknowledged, to disrupt those narratives.

Based on Mills’s concept of white ignorance, philosopher Kristie Dotson (2012) develops the concept of ‘contributory injustice’ as a form of injustice preventing experiences of members of non-dominant groups to be understood, caused by the situated ignorance of an epistemic agent. She argues that epistemic ignorance occurs when the epistemic agent does not want to voluntarily depart from the so-called dominant and widely diffused hermeneutical resources in society. Hermeneutical (or interpretative) resources are concepts and norms that are collectively shared as public resources in society. By refusing to acquire marginalised hermeneutical resources, dominant groups maintain these resources and the groups that hold them in a position of marginality *vis-à-vis* the dominant resources and groups. Linking contributory injustice with epistemic ignorance, Dotson accounts for the power relations that play out to prevent epistemic contributions produced by marginalised groups from finding a place in the prevailing collective hermeneutical resources (2012: 32).

This point echoes Muslim feminist scholars’ critique of liberal feminism and how alternative conceptions of agency, ‘which do not necessarily comfort our liberal sensibilities, are either ignored or viewed as fundamentalist ignominies’ (Fadil, 2014: 51). The perpetual discussion about feminism and Islam through an interrogative framework reproduces these racialising logics that construct Muslim women and Muslim communities broadly as epistemically incompetent Others (Fadil, 2014). It is for this reason that many Muslim scholars and activists for gender justice resist the label ‘Islamic feminist’ or ‘Muslim feminist’ to dissociate themselves from the Western secular feminist movement and lest their struggles be subsumed under the homogenising umbrella of feminism (Barlas, 2008; Seedat, 2013b; Benhadjoudja, 2018b). Indeed, some consider the obligation to use the label ‘feminism’ as an act of epistemic violence or a triumph of modernity over Islam (Seedat, 2013b).

The famous exchange between theologian Asma Barlas and historian Margot Badran illustrates this tension eloquently. Barlas protests the label of ‘Islamic feminist’ given to her by Badran and asks, ‘How can people call me a feminist when I’m calling myself a believing woman?’ (2008: 16). To Badran’s answer that ‘feminism provides a common language’ (cited in Barlas, 2008: 19), she retorts: ‘[I]f we want to build solidarity with Muslim women, we need more than the shared discourse of feminism. We need to be able to understand the specificity of their movements’ (19). Later she adds, ‘While the plurality of feminism is said to be its strength, how useful is a big-tent pluralism that erases such fundamental epistemic differences between feminists?’ (19). Seedat echoes Barlas’s argument, writing, ‘[W]hen feminism insists on incorporating others, two things happen. First, it affirms its own inclusiveness and second, it exercises its power to legitimise other women’s equality discourses’ (2013b: 35). Through this double move, ‘Western feminism’ reiterates and affirms its power to name and to save other women. This exchange highlights the epistemic tension whereby Muslim women find themselves caught between, on the one hand, adopting the feminist label and inserting their perspectives within the dominant white feminist framework at the risk of being diluted; and, on the other hand, resisting the label and thus actively refusing to participate to mainstream feminist hermeneutical resources. Therefore, regardless of how this tension is resolved, Muslim women’s analyses and insights into Western liberal and feminist circles remain unacknowledged as significant epistemic contributions.

## METHODOLOGY

This theoretical background led us to the following research questions: how does the FFQ’s advocacy work during public debates on Law 21 mobilise an intersectional approach to defend Muslim women’s rights against the nationalist and secular feminist narrative and its racial and colonial undertones? How does the FFQ’s discourse dismantle (or not) white ignorance about feminism and Islam? And finally, how does it incorporate (or not) the insights and contributions of Muslim women and feminists within its advocacy? To answer these questions, first, we conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), allowing us to deconstruct the mechanisms of power and exclusion that manifest often subtly through language and, in this case, through FFQ’s language of inclusion and intersectionality (Van Dijk, 1980; Fairclough, 1995). We analysed the FFQ’s official and media statements during the debate on Law 21 (between February and June 2019), including the organisation’s report for the provincial

parliamentary consultation on the law (FFQ, 2019b). This analysis focused on the arguments put forth by the FFQ to defend Muslim women's rights and contest the legitimacy of the law. We paid specific attention to how intersectionality was translated as an advocacy strategy to justify the FFQ's position, and how the relationship between feminism and religion (including Islam) was articulated within this argument. Second, to examine the contributions of Muslim women within the FFQ, we complemented our analysis of FFQ's official discourse with public testimonies from Muslim feminist activists and researchers regarding their experiences within the organisation. Nineteen testimonies have been selected from six academic and activist documents, grey literature, and media columns, published between 2015 and 2020, when intersectionality was being implemented within the FFQ and other white feminist organisations. Our analysis of this second set of data focused on the way Muslim women described the conditions of their inclusion and their activism within the FFQ, and, more broadly, within the mainstream feminist movement in Quebec.<sup>7</sup>

## THE FFQ'S INTERSECTIONALITY AND ITS EPISTEMIC FAILURES

### When Intersectionality Meets Secularism: The FFQ's Rights-Based Discourse

The FFQ's operationalisation of intersectionality as a political representation and as an advocacy tool against Law 21 can be described as an intersectional secular rights-based discourse. Indeed, the FFQ backs up its advocacy discourse by 'a solid and uncompromising approach to intersectionality' (FFQ, 2019a) that,

recognises that women who are marginalised and whose lives are directly affected by specific realities must be the ones to determine the way forward on an issue, as they are the first concerned. This self-determined action is called agency. (. . .) For us, feminist solidarity means that we can't let our own reservations prevent marginalised women from taking actions that they feel are in their best interests. (FFQ, 2019b: 9–10)

Following this commitment to intersectionality, the FFQ critiques Law 21 for its institutionalisation of 'economic and social violence against Muslim women, already relegated to the margins of Quebec's public sphere' (FFQ, 2019b: 10). The FFQ defends Muslim women's rights to 'autonomy', refuses the attempt to control their bodies, and condemns their 'infantilisation' and marginalisation during the public debate on Law 21. To protest Muslim women's exclusion from the public hearings held during the parliamentary commission on Law 21, the FFQ bypasses this exclusion by sharing its platform with Black Muslim activist Idil Issa.

Interestingly, the FFQ's commitment towards intersectionality also goes hand in hand with a commitment to *laïcité* (secularism): 'We want to make it clear that the FFQ is absolutely in favour of secularism, but not the falsified secularism that is at the heart of this bill [21]' (FFQ, 2019b: 16). FFQ distinguishes between two *laïcités*: a 'false' *laïcité* (FFQ, 2019a), labelled as '*catbo-laïcité*', which discriminates against Muslim women and 'infringes on civil servants' freedom of religious practice', and a 'true *laïcité*', defined as 'a principle aimed at separating religious institutions from state institutions' (2019b: 24). This position is consistent with FFQ's history, and that of the Quebec feminist movement more broadly, which has long supported the secularist project in Quebec, although it has gradually distanced itself from its more conservative version in recent years (Jacquet, 2017; Pagé and Anctil Avoine, 2023). However, what this attachment to *laïcité* fails to address is how secularism plays a central role in reinforcing the 'colonial sovereignty of the Quebec State' (Benhadjoudja, 2022: 184). The distinction between a good and bad secularism does not dismantle how the idea of secularism is constitutive of the foundational myths about two solitudes – 'the colonial narrative of two founding peoples [the French and the English], and their rivalry in the colonial project' that erases Indigenous presence and history (184). Nor does it address how secularism is 'a historical product with specific epistemological, political, and moral entailments none of which can be adequately grasped through a nominal account of secularism as the modern state's retreat from religion' (Mahmood, 2017: 198). Hence, secularism in Quebec can hardly be dissociated from the nationalist narratives and their 'story of progress towards women's rights and sexual minorities [that] tend to racialise Muslims in particular (but not only)' (Jacquet, 2017: 87). Contrary to the idea of a 'dissociation between Quebec feminism and nationalist struggles in the province' (Pagé and Anctil Avoine, 2023: 124), our analysis suggests that white Québécois feminism's attachment to the notion of *laïcité* – which is a symbol of Quebec's sovereignty and a reminder of its exceptionalism – reveals an enduring connection with white nationalist ideals.

While the FFQ professes its commitment to *laïcité* (a true *laïcité*), it also endeavours to incorporate religion within an intersectional approach to domination. This is what the feminist organisation states in an official press release:

<sup>7</sup> Since the interview excerpts are sourced from previously published materials, their citation does not pose any ethical concerns.

In Quebec, there are religious feminists, just as there are reactionary atheists. (. . .) Let us think, for example, of the Christian feminists who fight for the right to free abortion, and think of all the Muslim feminists who, as members of the FFQ, fight with us for the rights of all women. (. . .) It is wrong to automatically associate religion with the oppression of women, just as it is wrong to automatically associate secularism with equality between men and women. (FFQ, 2019b)

This excerpt has been a pivotal component of the FFQ's argument against Law 21 as it is the only one that directly tackles the idea of an incompatibility between feminism and religion and also mentions Muslim feminists. Thus, it was included in most of the FFQ's communications concerning Law 21 (FFQ, 2019a, 2019b). We address two key aspects of this statement. First, although the FFQ mentions that there are Muslim women in its ranks, it does not provide more information about their multiple contributions to the feminist movement – their hermeneutical resources, in Dotson's words – or about the history of their activism in Quebec. It is as if using the homogenising label 'feminists' is enough to inform us about these women's activism, whereas Muslim feminism is plural and

is neither an imitation of white feminism, nor a strategy of justification implemented by women to 'prove' that Islam is not misogynistic [but rather a] space in which women experience Islam as a place where liberation is enunciated. (Benhadjoudja, 2018b: 119)

Additionally, while the only information given by the FFQ's statement is that it is possible to be a Muslim feminist, it also says more about those who include than about those who are included. While the first can be lauded for their inclusiveness of women from different religious backgrounds, the second are not presented as a meaningful addition: 'they fight *with us* for the rights of all women' (italics added). Second, while Muslim feminists are not credited with substantive contributions, the mention of Catholic feminists serves to underscore their significant legacy within the feminist movement in Quebec, particularly in the 'fight for the right to free abortion'. Although this reminder of Catholic feminists' input to feminism in Quebec seems to counter the bias about religion and its contradiction with feminism, it stems from the widespread belief that secular feminism is equally critical of all religions, including Catholicism. However, this deconstruction of the incompatibility between religion and feminism does not extend to Islam. Unlike Islam, 'symbols of Catholicism are read as a legitimate white heritage, [and as] a way of affirming one's history and identity' (Benhadjoudja, 2022: 193). Consequently, this point appears to be in tension with the FFQ's criticism of *cathe-laïcité*, which acknowledges the Christian racial heritage embedded in *laïcité*. This FFQ's solidarity statement shows how the organisation falls short of actively deconstructing the history of Quebec's feminist movement and advocating for a greater visibility of the contributions made by women of faith, including Muslim women.

The FFQ's rights-based discourse seems then to be torn between a commitment towards intersectionality and an allegiance to *laïcité* (and the nationalist narratives it holds). Even when it attempts to counter the idea about an incompatibility between feminism and Islam, its advocacy discourse does not dismantle it. To the contrary, because of the silence about Muslim feminists' contributions to the feminist movement, on the one hand, and the reminder of its Catholic heritage, on the other hand, the FFQ's discourse reproduces – although in a very subtle way – this incompatibility and reinforces the secular-Christian Québécois ethos.

### **Muslim Women's Conditional Inclusion Within the FFQ**

Our analysis of the FFQ's statement must also be read in light of the testimonials of Muslim women who were involved with the federation, both at the grassroots level and in leadership positions, or with white feminist groups who share inclusion politics similar to the FFQ's. Although these women's activism within the feminist movement is not new, it was not always labelled as Islamic or Muslim feminism (Benhadjoudja, 2018a). Their identification as Muslim feminists occurred mostly after their voices were silenced and ignored. Their encounters with white feminists show, however, that identifying themselves as 'Muslim feminists' has not proven sufficient for them to be fully considered as epistemic agents within the movement (Bdeir, 2018; Benhadjoudja, 2018a; Ibnouzzahir, 2015).

Both the scientific literature on the feminist movement in Quebec and the activist one by Muslim feminists highlight how beyond the formal position of the FFQ, internal dynamics within the Quebec feminist movement reinforce a conditional inclusion of Muslim women, even those who consider themselves as feminists. Despite the FFQ's official support since 2009 of Muslim women (except niqab-wearing women), 'the debate around the headscarf has created definitive fractures' (Benhadjoudja, 2018b: 121). This led many FFQ member groups to leave the organisation, which they no longer considered to be 'a safe space to organise their feminist struggles' (121). Leila Bdeir, a figurehead of Muslim feminism in Quebec and co-founder of the Collective of Muslim Feminists of Quebec, explained that the inclusion of Muslim women within the FFQ has always been conditional:

[F]or the inclusion of some, the exclusion of others is necessary, and this is what makes it possible to reaffirm each time the essential 'we'. As a Muslim, my entry prize was women who wear the niqab, that



is to say my implicit endorsement (. . .) of FFQ's anti-niqab position of the time [in 2010, during the debate around Bill 94]. (Bdeir, 2018)

This idea of conditional inclusion also came up in Benhadjoudja's interviews with Muslim feminist activists, and especially in the testimony of Lamia:

I don't want to be allied with feminists or with people who will say: you know, (. . .) we support you in your struggle, but (. . .) without necessarily respecting your deep identity, so . . . we support you, but we hope that one day you will be different. (quoted in Benhadjoudja, 2018a: 126)

Muslim feminist activist Dalila Awada testified that this conditional inclusion of Muslim women is also a sign of suspicion. 'Muslim feminists, especially those who wear the headscarf, must constantly "prove beyond any doubt" that they are "real" feminists. They must constantly demonstrate to what extent Islam and feminism are compatible' (quoted in Pierre, 2020: 122). This suspicion about Muslim women's – and other minority women's – feminism leads to their containment at the margins of the feminist movement, into 'diversity' spaces and 'intersectional' committees (Lopez, 2017: para. 6). This point echoes a previous analysis from Dolores Chew, founding member of Montreal's South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC), a long-standing member of the FFQ, and a previous member of its executive board:

What has been the reality is the slotting of minority women into a niche as objects to be studied and acted upon. Monies are spent on workshops where our lives and experiences are analysed, but this is not translated into solidarity and actions. We are not accepted on our own terms, and this is an essentially anti-feminist way of knowledge-building and working. (Chew, 2009: 89)

These selected testimonies are exemplars of the testimonies studied and offer an illustration of how the subtle exclusion processes we deciphered in FFQ's intersectional advocacy work against Law 21 have long been experienced, named and denounced by Muslim activists within the feminist movement in Quebec. They also illustrate the limits of a feminist solidarity with an understanding of feminism still anchored in a white liberal and secular perspective. Muslim women are included if they demonstrate how they fit within the dominant definition of feminism. This solidarity is expressed from the position of a superior and emancipated feminist subject who hesitantly supports Muslim women despite their doubts about the validity of their feminism. It is, again, a patronising solidarity based on pity, where Muslim women are believed to be both victims of an antifeminist religion, and of an Islamophobic socio-political context. Thus, asserting that secularism laws are Islamophobic does not seem to undo the belief in an incompatibility between feminism and Islam. It simply adds to it or juxtaposes it. Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) already demonstrated how dangerous the discourse based on pity is – whatever the source of that pity –, and how '[p]rojects of saving other women depend on a reinforced sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged' (789). This solidarity based on pity and this conditional inclusion within the Quebec feminist movement allows for the reaffirmation of the domination of white feminist perspectives on women's emancipation, and the preservation of a liberal and Western definition of agency.

## CONCLUSION

A more attentive examination of the FFQ's position in 2018 against the ban of religious signs shows that this decision was all but spontaneous (Drimonis, 2018). After a ten-hour special assembly where it 'officially declar[ed] that women have agency and independence and should be free to choose the sex trade as a legitimate career choice' (para. 3), the FFQ 'decided to postpone once again issuing a statement of unconditional support for Muslim women who wear religious head coverings (para. 1), [c]iting a need for more clarity on the issue' (para. 4). According to Toulia Drimonis (2018), this decision 'both angered and frustrated many Quebec feminists[,] who see it as political cowardice and an egregious lack of solidarity with Muslim women' (para. 4). The challenges surrounding the adoption of a resolution in support of Muslim women's agency, right before the debate on Law 21, provides clarity around the tension within the FFQ's rights-based intersectional advocacy. Despite its substantial and continuous advocacy work in support of Muslim women, there is still visible discomfort and hesitation that obstructs a full and spontaneous solidarity like the one witnessed during #MonCotonOuatéMonChoix. Our critical discourse analysis showed that this discomfort seems to stem, among other things, from a deeply anchored attachment to secular and liberal Western understanding of feminism where Islam is still considered as a remote opposite Other. Although not overtly declared (unlike other secular feminist groups), the idea of incompatibility between feminism and Islam is still palpable in the FFQ's discourse through what is *not said* about Muslim women, and in the way their perspectives and hermeneutical contributions are excluded from the advocacy discourse that

is supposed to fight for their rights. The fact that the incompatibility between feminism and Islam is the cornerstone of the secularism debates seems to make it also its blind spot.

Our article also highlights the limits of intersectionality as a representation and advocacy tool as long as it is still rooted in white ignorance (Mills, 1997). Feminist scholarship on intersectionality has already pointed out theoretical limits of the use of intersectionality as a ‘unifying framework’ (Carbin and Edenheim, 2013: 237–238) and as an ‘all-inclusive consensus upon which to build a feminist theory and politics’ (Singh, 2015: 660). Some works have also noted the struggles faced by feminist organisations in Quebec to translate intersectionality into a coherent praxis, while others use it as lip service (Laperrière and Lépinard, 2016; Zoghblami, 2021; Pagé and Anctil Avoine, 2023). Our article contributes to this literature by examining the epistemic failures of the FFQ’s use of intersectionality as a tool for political representation, and its role in concealing the still-active eviction of Muslim women from feminist epistemic consciousness. We suggest that this white ignorance is not only the product of a failed intersectional representation strategy but – as shown through Muslim feminists’ testimonies – it is also embedded within the organisation’s practices, and thus ensures that the relationship with Muslim feminists is, at best, one of figurative and conditional inclusion.

Finally, this article underscores the limitations of the liberal intersectional feminist paradigm to envision relationships between feminists, and the limits of intersectionality as a political representation and advocacy tool when it is translated *only* through the liberal framework of inclusion – in this case, inclusion of religious minorities. Our article stresses the importance of integrating Muslim feminist initiatives and insights into the global – and the local – history of feminisms, without imposing the white liberal feminist conceptual framework or easily – or non-critically – conflating feminism and Islam (Seedat, 2013b). We reiterate Zine’s call for ‘an alternative faith-centred [feminist] epistemology that speaks to the way Muslim women who actively align with their faith see the world and their place within it’ (Zine, 2004: 181). As long as the history and rooting of feminism are told through a Western white liberal perspective, the insights and contributions of Muslim women will be considered only as exceptions and curiosities, but not as substantively constitutive of feminist struggles.

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