

Why are Ontario colleges furthering gender apartheid in Saudi Arabia? Add to ...



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The news that two publicly funded Ontario colleges are operating men-only campuses in Saudi Arabia feels wrong at first glance.

At second glance, too. There's bound to be a level of complexity in any business transaction with a repressive country that discriminates against women, among its other human rights sins. Conscious of the yawning gap between professed ideals and entrepreneurial self-interest, we often find it easier to accept the moral contradictions built into real-world relationships as unavoidable and even necessary.

But in this case, the cynical equivocation usually brought to dealings with Saudi Arabia isn't worth mustering. Algonquin College and Niagara College are public institutions; it should raise eyebrows if they operate in a way that undermines Canadian values of equality, even when they establish international outposts designed to make a profit.

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne is right to call the colleges' compliance with Saudi men-only rules unacceptable. In asserting her forceful views, she overruled the tepid response of her own Minister of Colleges and Universities, who had insisted that the colleges themselves were best-placed to decide on the composition of their student bodies.

Clearly that's not the case. How can two Canadian schools fail to ask basic questions about the exclusionary nature of their Saudi classrooms? Yes, they're involved with vocational courses like hospitality and electrical technology. And yes, the fact that only 40 per cent of their budgets is covered by the province means they have to be highly resourceful at making up the difference.

But surely it should have been apparent from the outset that complying with the strict gender-segregation rules of Saudi society was inconsistent with the educational values the colleges purported to be exporting. This is why so many of the Western educational institutions that have entered the Middle Eastern market have done so by locating outside of Saudi Arabia, in neighbouring countries with less problematic human rights records.

The question is, why did it take Ontario so long to call its colleges out? The campuses opened in 2013 and 2014. Unless they can bend the gender apartheid rules, both should get out of Saudi Arabia.

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