This paper looks at the construction of gender, class and ethnicity in recent public policy debates in France including violence, prostitution, trafficking and modern slavery. It discusses, for example, the construction of ‘little African girls’ in the debates around the criminalisation of the clients of underage prostitutes; the construction of migrant women working as prostitutes in France; and the construction of sexual abusers of children as unknown paedophiles or foreign traffickers. It argues that the construction of gender, class and ethnicity within these debates has implications for the lives of women living in France or attempting to enter and for social relations more broadly.

The paper also discusses feminist attempts to place gender issues on the public political agenda and their struggles to retain the power to define the issues once there. It shows, for example, how feminist debates around whether prostitutes are victims of male violence or sex workers were overtaken in 2002 by the new right-wing government’s framing of prostitution as a law and order issue and proposals in the Domestic Security Bill to criminalise prostitutes through the introduction of a new serious offence of passive soliciting.

Finally it considers the extent to which parliamentary and public debates on gender issues have taken into account the interaction between gender, class and ethnicity.