

Understanding Gender and Culture Relations

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Are women better than men? Is French culture superior to Moroccan culture? Such questions are silly but pertinent. They reflect largely subconscious elements of human mentalities that interact with sediments of economic and political experiences. In the colourful market economy, everything has a price tag and is advertised as “better than” other commodities. In the political arena, there is hardly any political party referring to others as an “alternative option”.

Hence, perceived differences are almost automatically valued. Our mentalities provide little room for enjoying diversity as a key element of quality of life. It took the international community 20 years to agree on the need to preserve bio-diversity as an essential factor for the survival of our planet. Public opinion quickly followed. Recent agreements on cultural diversity, however, are very far from being followed by public opinion. United Nations and UNESCO Declarations or even Conventions on “The Right to be Different” or on “Cultural Diversity” establish the right to cultural self-determination without any other discrimination than the need to respect the rights of others.

Almost everybody agrees that pluralism, freedom of opinion and non-discrimination along with differences in ethnic or social origin, colour, gender, language, religion or any

other belief, are key elements of democracy. This broad acceptance of human rights, however, has not yet penetrated deeply into our mentalities and does not interact much with the perception of differences. Sixty years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, followed by more than 100 Human Rights Declarations, Charters and Conventions, human rights are not yet mainstreamed within our academic and political discourse. The universal values of non-discrimination, a core element of all human rights documents, seem to be stored in our mentalities with a different software than the perception of differences and diversity. Interaction between these two mind sets seems to be extremely difficult.

Pre-scientific and pre-democratic perception of differences

A recent study on the role of women and men in intercultural and inter-religious dialogue by the Council of Europe (2005) identifies a deeply rooted resentment in European societies which also prevails among organisers of dialogue events: the association of women with peace and tolerance and of men with war and violence. Women are better than men, by virtue of a small biological difference, according

to the mentalities of most dialogue activists. How can we expect, then, small cultural differences such as religious belief or vernacular language to be treated as diversity, and not be subjected to a priori value judgements? Everyday communication in our societies is largely resisting academic standards of statistics and mathematics: reflection on the multitude of causes and consequences, “independent” and “dependent” variables has little space in public communication. Low-standard interpretations are in high demand: almost any study indicating differences between men and women, Christians and Muslims, Europeans and Arabs finds its way into the news, with no or little consideration given to the question of whether a difference in opinion or behaviour of 52 to 48 per cent of women and men has any significance, or whether there are other factors involved. Our perception of differences is still pre-scientific and carries the burden of automatic value judgements.

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In recent years, we got used to the term “gender” in order to recognise social and cultural differences associated with men and women in society. The term was created to sharpen our perception of discrimination. We are getting more and more used to the term “cultural diversity” in order to recognise the creativity of human beings. The term was created to allow us to perceive and accept the wealth of cultural expression.

It seems obvious that gender and cultural relations have many elements in common. In many societies, women have to be better than men in order to get the same opportunities. The same is true for human beings with skin colours other than pale and with other than the so-called “Western” cultural background. Such

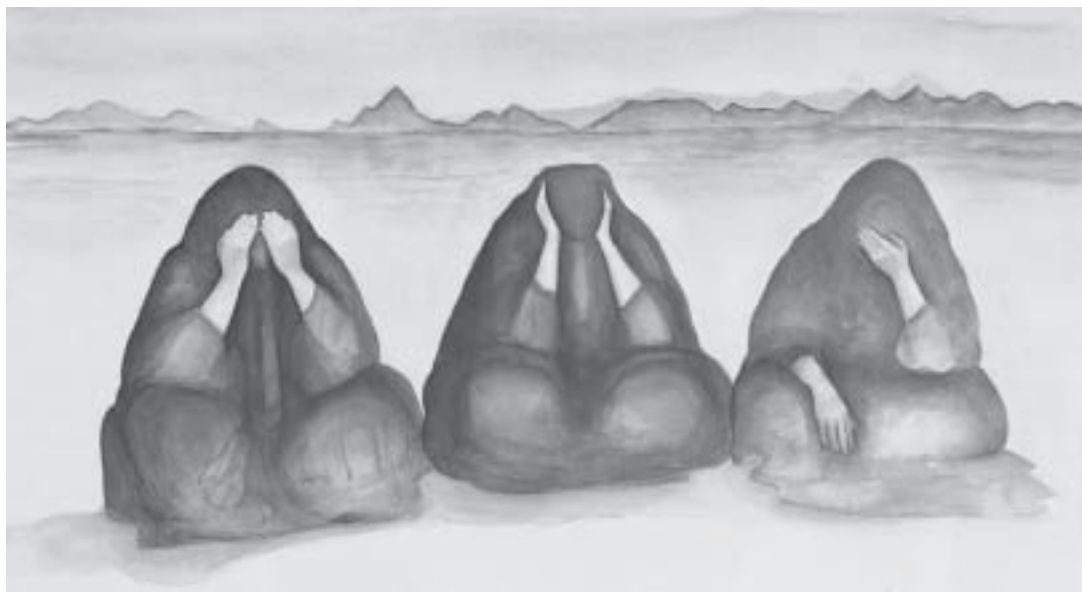
everyday discrimination is, for good reason, the subject of recurrent national and international campaigns and years against racism or for equality of opportunities. Such campaigns will need to be repeated, with little impact, unless our mentalities provide room for diversity.

Diversity and quality of life

We need a more balanced understanding of culture. Culture is underestimated as a factor of change. Culture, in the broad sense of the term, results from human interaction with nature and generalized ways of social interaction, including knowledge, languages and belief systems shared by a number of people. The dominant perception of culture is, however, heritage, tangible and intangible, forming a cultural environment that shapes attitudes and behaviour and gives identity. Underestimated is the process of cultural creation. As knowledge is evolving, so are languages and belief systems. Every human being contributes as much to cultural changes as he or she is shaped by cultural heritage. Thus, diversity is inherent in culture, and no culture is an island.

Gender and cultural relations also have in common a number of options for change. Transfer of good practice in intercultural dialogue to gender relations is possible, and vice versa. Key qualifications for intercultural dialogue such as empathy, the ability to look at things from different perspectives and appreciation of pluralism and diversity can be learned, developed through cultural creation and communicated through quality media.

There are also lessons learned from gender relations which would be needed for intercultural dialogue. The development of non-sexist language over the past 20 years, promoted and undertaken by public institutions, the media and professional organizations, is a success story for women organizations. If



Fahda Bint Saud, *Three Women* (1992).

not merely imposed but resulting from public debate, terminology changes make people think and can induce changes in attitudes and behaviour. We definitely also need a more culture-sensitive language.

From parity to complex identities

In their daily work, educators, journalists and other cultural actors do not need to be visionary to know how to make a difference to gender relations. The principle of equality of men and women is not difficult to understand, if objectives are clarified. Many good practices oscillate between a “gender-neutral” and a “women only” approach. A human rights-based understanding of “gender-sensitive” action would mean that the principle of non-discrimination underlying the gender-neutral approach is the guideline.

There is, however, also need for some “women only” action. As long as most men do not invest as much effort as would be neces-

sary to balance the specific burden women are carrying, a gender-neutral policy includes necessarily women-specific elements of support. Problems would, however, rather be obscured by using the term “positive discrimination” whenever reflecting gender parity measures or specific support women need in public life. It is essential to ensure gender parity at all levels of society. Gender parity is of particular importance when issues of gender relations are discussed or measures for equality of opportunities are decided on. As long as gender relations are mostly left to women’s organisations, and debated at meetings with a majority of female participants, the deep structures of our mentalities remain unchanged.

The preparatory meeting in June 2006 in Rabat for the 2006 Euro-Mediterranean Ministers Conference on “Strengthening the Role of Women in Society” provided good indicators of persisting problems. What interpretation should we make of the almost unanimous rejection of the proposal to cooperate with the Islamic feminist movement and Islamist wom-

en's organisations? Do women have to keep out of organisations which are based on references to Islam, and leave this area to men who would, then, have a monopoly to speak for Islamist groups? Do women, by virtue of a small biological difference, have to behave differently from men? Such conclusions are very close to the mental roots of discrimination: imposing attitudes or behaviour on human beings on the basis of only one characteristic has always been the key mechanism of discrimination. Women's rights are human rights.

Gender and cultural relations are at the heart of democracy. The right to be different must be a right, not an obligation

In a similar vein, not much vision is needed for organising intercultural or inter-religious dialogue in a way that creates room for diversity in our mentalities. We need to discontinue "representative" forms of dialogue. Parity of linguistic, religious or cultural groups is essential for discussing and improving cultural relations. But we need to avoid inviting Christians to speak "as Christians", Muslims to speak "as Muslims", Europeans "as Europeans" or Arabs "as Arabs". If we want to create room for diversity in our mentalities, we have to provide opportunities for all participants in intercultural or inter-religious dialogue events to express their multiple, overlapping and dynamic identities. By no means should they feel reduced to only

one element of their identity which would, then, be imposed on them as a collective attitude or behaviour they have to follow. Our perception of differences is not only pre-scientific, it is also pre-democratic.

Gender and cultural relations are at the heart of democracy. The right to be different must be a right, not an obligation. Acting, thinking and considering oneself as different is a basic human right. Once it is imposed, the everyday logic of rejection and discrimination is working. The annual UNDP *Human Development Report*, for obvious reasons, gives high marks in the human development index to countries providing high levels of equality of opportunities to women and men. The United Nations working definition of "quality of life" refers to the "freedom to make choices". Such freedom is vital for all human beings, whatever orientation they have developed in dealing with their cultural, religious or other heritage. Better understanding between men and women is a good first step for intercultural understanding. Appreciation of cultural diversity is a good first step to providing equal opportunities for men and women.

There are a number of good reasons for supporting the proposal, made by the European Parliament, to create as many synergies as possible between the European Years for Equality of Opportunities (2007) and for the Dialogue between Cultures (2008) – and to fully involve all members of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.