

Gender Equality: A Truly Euro-Mediterranean Concern?

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The issue of gender, addressed only a couple of times in the form of a mention of women in the Barcelona Declaration, has suddenly moved high up the agenda of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 2006.

The initiative to organize a Euro-Med Ministerial Meeting on gender equality, now to be held in Istanbul, Turkey, in November 2006, and since re-named the Euro-Med Ministerial Meeting on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society, was first proposed in the Commission's Communication to the Council and the Parliament issued on 12th April 2005. This idea was presented to a wider audience in a prior conference, the Euro-Med Women's Conference Barcelona+10, organized by the Spanish Government and the regional Government of Catalonia in Barcelona on 24th-25th November 2005 as one of the events held to mark the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration.

As a part of the preparatory process for the Istanbul conference, the Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI), and especially its TAPRI Mediterranean Studies Project, was asked to contribute to the drafting of the Anna Lindh Foundation's report *Culture and Communication – Key Factors for Changing Mentalities and Societies*. This article is based on reflections made when formulating the institute's contribution. It focuses on the question

of gender equality within the third basket of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership as perceived from the extreme north of the Euro-Mediterranean region, understood here as the area encompassing 35 countries, while aiming to take differences in contexts into account.

The question to be asked now is whether gender (in)equality has really been perceived as a Euro-Mediterranean concern, and if not, how it could be treated as a truly Euro-Mediterranean issue.

This article is a collective reflection by two people, a gentleman *à l'âge mûr*, a historian who has already worked for many years on the Mediterranean, and a younger lady at the start of her academic career, whose research focuses on gendered processes in migration. We both regard ourselves as peace researchers. The reason why we wish to mention this is that we agree with sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1991) that the battle for gender equality needs to be fought by men and women together, sharing these aspirations. In other words, and as has been repeatedly emphasized by multilateral frameworks following the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, the issue of gender equality concerns both men and women; that is, it cannot be perceived solely as a "women's question". Moreover, we consider that the question of gender equality/in-equalities needs to be addressed by taking into

consideration as well other differences apart from gender, such as age, class, ethnicity, nationality, rural/urban etc., so that inequalities can be fought effectively.

Another aspect we wish to clarify is that of peace research. For us, pursuing peace research entails an ongoing commitment to enhancing societal and global peace by conducting relevant conflict-sensitive research. Gender is one of the key issues when searching for possibilities for peaceful evolution both within societies and in international relations.

Gender Equality – Gender-specificity: Mutual, Interlinking Concerns

To begin with, we would like to emphasize, once again, that our reflection consists of addressing the issue of gender as encompassing both men and women, not just women alone. Taking a position in the gender-women debate seems unavoidable: gender often gets equated with women both in international organizations' documents and in coffee-table talk.

In academic research, men only rarely figure as a specific case in studies examining gender (for an interesting counter-example, see Juntunen, 2002) even if calls to consider the problems of masculinity have been out there for quite some time. The point in favour of using "gender" is pertinent when we consider the question of changing mentalities: we doubt whether mindsets regarding gender equality will ever change if it continues to be addressed as a "women's question", in the same way that racism cannot be tackled if it is solely regarded as a question concerning the victims of racism. Therefore, we base our thinking on the idea that taking the gender perspective into account should entail considering the specific policy or other item in question from the point of view of

its effects on both women and men (the principle of gender mainstreaming).

Along with gender, other differentiating factors, as observed earlier, need to be taken into account in order to arrive at an understanding of "mainstreaming equality" (Shaw, 2004). Emphasizing the multiplicity of differences helps us to see that no community, be it national, ethnic, religious or other, is a uniform whole but that there are differences within each group. In this debate, the question of equality should also be emphasized on a more general level. This implies an attempt to understand the issues of equality within different categories, considering that in a sharply stratified society it is difficult to develop gender equality without paying attention, at the same time, to other forms of inequality.

The concept of gender equality has been accused of being a northern or, more generally, a western value

The question of gender on the North-South axis has also been discussed in a way in which the concept of gender equality has been accused of being a northern or, more generally, a western value, whereas for some southerners, a more appropriate way to view the gender question would be to address gender from the angle of complementarity. Taking this assumption as the sole guiding principle, however, does little more than reiterate the demarcation lines by constructing a "North" and a "South" in a similar vein to "the West" and "the Rest", as monolithic blocks opposed to each other, and disregards differences within various geographical locations.

Equality and complementarity need not be seen as opposites; the goal can hardly be to abolish differences. It would be crucial, in this regard, to ensure that complementary roles accord equal value to individuals, and grant

the opportunity to have a say regarding one's own condition. Moreover, as Iranian feminist scholar Valentine Moghadam (1993: 6-7) reminds us concerning the South, gender asymmetry and the status of women in the Muslim world cannot be solely attributed to Islam because the degree of adherence to Islamic precepts and the application of Islamic legal codes vary from one country to another. Another determining factor is the particular School of Islamic Jurisprudence predominating in a given society. Consequently, women's legal and social positions also vary. In addition, within the same society there are degrees of sex-segregation based mainly on class. This segregation also varies over time. An example that demonstrates this is the fact that in many Muslim societies nowadays, upper-class women are more mobile than lower-class women, even though the opposite was true in the past. Similar differences can also be found between rural and urban areas. Let us remember, therefore, that factors other than religion are important, even essential, in determining gender relations and gender (in)equalities in Muslim societies as well (Melasuo, 2006).

The construction of monolithic blocks undermines the feminist struggles being fought for equality, battles that have been waged for many years now in a number of countries in the South (for an interesting analysis of the Moroccan case, see Eddouada, 2003). It is worth asking whose voice is being heard in the equality versus complementarity debate. As feminist activists Rabéa Naciri and Isis Nusair (2003: 8 and 43) note, it seems that the cultural-religious standpoint has often been considered the most legitimate if not the sole voice to be listened to as "the southern viewpoint". An ongoing debate to be noted is also the phenomenon called "Islamic feminism" (see, for example, Badran, 2002, 2006), which aims at a progressive interpretation of Sharia law in order to denounce patriarchal structures and



the call for gender equality from within religious practice in a given social reality. In the light of this thinking, we consider that context-sensitivity is very important, as is informing ourselves of the various debates going on in the region.

Gender and the Euro-Med: Presences and Absences

Even though there have been calls for gender to be incorporated into the Barcelona Process from the outset, it has, until recent times, largely remained a concern of the third basket only, namely Partnership in Social and Human Affairs.

Echoing high-political agendas, gender has not been seen as a pertinent subject for the various networks apart from the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN), the Euro-Mediterranean Forum of Cultures (FEMEC) and the Euro-Med NG Platform in the form of working groups in the previous Civil Forums. Continuing within the third basket, the newly established Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures has also defined gender as one of the transversal themes in its working programme. The years 2005 and 2006, however, have witnessed a rapid growth in interest in gender in other Euro-Med networks, namely the Euro-Medi-

terranean Study Commission (EuroMeSCo), a grouping of foreign policy institutes, and the FEMISE, a network of economic institutes.

Education, even if fundamental in itself, is not enough without constant reworking of mindsets

Something that we notice in this increased interest in gender within the Barcelona Process is that gender equality, or the lack thereof, seems to be an issue perceived as a problem of the South, not as a concern for the North or for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership as a whole. However, even if disparities exist at a legal level between EU member states and some southern partner states, at the level of mindsets there are many issues which, in reality, are joint concerns.

It is the approach of shared concerns we would like to propose as the working philosophy for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in general, and in the issue of gender equality in particular. This approach of shared concerns is vital to strengthen the Barcelona Process and an important tool with which the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership could be embraced by public opinion.

When it comes to migration, which we consider an issue of major importance in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, due attention should be devoted to the positive impacts that migrants can have in creating links and partnerships *au quotidien*. An interesting point to bear in mind is that the issue of migration consists not only of a unidirectional movement from the South to the North, but multiple paths within different geographical areas and during different epochs. Let us remember too that during the colonial period, hundreds of thousands of Europeans moved to the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Migration and, more importantly again in the context of gender equality as it is being discussed

here, gender and migration should be seen as a common theme for all.

Because of the large number of studies done that have analyzed Nordic conceptions and practices of gender equality, and the obstacles encountered, we do not aim to provide an exhaustive overview here. Instead, we now put forward some concrete examples which could be useful to take into account.

Thematic Issues Glanced through a Gender-lens

Education has been considered one of the key elements in achieving gender equality. In this regard, particular attention should be paid to the most vulnerable groups, often girls living in rural areas, migrants, and nomadic people such as the Roma in different European countries. However, apparent educational equality does not automatically translate into equality in hiring or equal pay: in the case of Finland we observe increasing numbers of women completing university education, outstripping the number of men except in technical fields. Yet salary disparities between men and women persist and remain one of the highest among EU member states. The most senior director posts as well as professorships in universities tend to be held by men. Moreover, women are more often hired on temporary contracts due to their potential role as mothers. Why do we wish to highlight this particular issue, then? Because we want to emphasize that education, even if fundamental in itself, is not enough without constant reworking of mindsets. Mentalities do not evolve in a vacuum but in dialogue with economic and social evolutions.

Fundamental for achieving gender equality, in our opinion, is to look at families and the roles of parents. If women remain responsible for most, if not all, household tasks, and if womanhood continues to be associated with

motherhood only, there is not much hope for change.

Some examples of good practice in this regard in civil society in Finland are initiatives that focus on the role of fathers in families. The aim of father-specific projects is to discuss the roles and responsibilities that men may take on in raising children, and the purpose is to improve the father-child relationship. Some of these projects focus specifically on migrant fathers and the different concepts of parenthood that a change in physical and social environment may entail. One aim is to avoid generational alienation and excessively harsh changes in power relations within families, which have been noted in studies on migrant families in cases in which the parents' language skills are not as fluent as the children's, who are often educated in the receiving country and in a language spoken there. These situations may alter the roles within families in that the children become the authority and responsible for directing family business with the authorities and other bodies, and find themselves as translators even in the most intimate affairs of their parents.

The role of religions, namely the intersection of gender and religion is an issue of Euro-Mediterranean concern. In our view it is crucial that this question be looked at respectfully, and that groupings within the three monotheistic religions present in the region be considered openly and without prejudices, bearing in mind that religious identities and spirituality in general may play, and oftentimes do play, an important role in a person's wellbeing. In this regard, the question of fundamentalist attitudes, both religious and secular, needs to be examined, as does the role of women as guardians of community morals, as "carriers of traditions" (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 61). Something that needs to be examined further is the space left for individual choice within and across communities, and also the possibility of negotiating member-

ship of a religious community. These questions have come to the fore as interest has grown in migration issues, and notably as regards transnational and trans-religious marriages.

It is important to tackle stereotypes of women and men from disadvantaged and migrant communities by encouraging media coverage of their concerns

As regards the media, existing suggestions should be taken into account in the specific context of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership as well. The Beijing Platform for Action has listed communication systems and the mass media as one critical area of concern. Strategic objectives include increasing women's participation in media decision-making and promoting a non-stereotyped media portrayal of women and men. Something we find extremely important to include and to highlight is the way in which minorities are represented. It is important to tackle prevailing stereotypes of women and men from disadvantaged and migrant communities by encouraging media coverage of their concerns. Not only that, though, but migrant communities and migrant women in particular should be increasingly consulted as sources of information and knowledge on news matters of general interest, not only on topics related to their position as migrants and as migrant women.

In spite of her relatively peaceful reputation, Finland is a country with one of the highest rates of violent crime in the Euro-Mediterranean context. In addition to other forms of violence, Finnish men also have the shameful reputation of scoring high in statistics on domestic violence. "Oh, you are one of those wife-beaters", was a comment addressed to Finnish males travelling in the Mediterranean area shortly after the publication of the comparative study examining domestic violence in EU member-states. The question of domestic

violence and other forms of gender-based violence is to be taken seriously. However, gender-based violence does not comprise only unilateral man-woman direction but also man-man, woman-woman, and, even if to a lesser extent, woman-man directions. Therefore, the multiplicity of interconnections between gender and violence should be recognized and examined so that they can be countered in both their physical and mental forms. The deconstruction of masculine identities and the undoing of the connection between violence and masculinity should be encouraged, and the role of the media in these processes should be fully explored. In order to understand the mechanisms of gender-based violence, attention to the role of violent behaviour in a society as a whole could be helpful.

Concluding Remarks

In this article we have reflected upon the question of gender equality in the Euro-Mediterranean context. As the starting point for our reflection, we have taken “the Euro-Mediterranean” in a sense which encompasses the partnership among all the 35 members of the Barcelona Process and, therefore, a Nordic perspective as well. From these premises, we started to formulate issues that could be our common concerns, both in the South and the North. Something that we tried to avoid was to impose a viewpoint, and this, in our opinion, is only possible when there is a climate of discussion in which each opinion is regarded as important.

When we look back at the process of discussing gender equality, admittedly for the first time so high on the common agenda of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, it seems that the gender question is addressed as a problem of the South, an issue faced by southern women, and not as a common concern affect-

ing people, both women and men, in the North as well as in the South. Therefore, the tone seems to be set for the European Union to take a paternalistic role vis-à-vis its southern partners: the EU teaches so that the southern partners can learn.

The multiplicity of interconnections between gender and violence should be recognized and examined so that they can be countered in both their physical and mental forms

In our opinion, we could start by asking what all the partners could learn from each other. In the North, in Europe, we could certainly learn a lot from human relations in the South. This might also concern gender relations in the private realm even if not so much in the public sphere.

We were just about to reach the end of this writing exercise when the barbarous war broke out in Gaza and in Lebanon. From the point of view of our theme, it is clear that this kind of war does not facilitate societal development but quite the opposite. Just as colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries harmed the situation of women in many countries (Lazreg, 1994), so do war and occupation, which disturb all the social structures and mindsets. This war today may affect social and political evolution for years to come. Occupation is always criminal; we can see it in France during the World War II, in Palestine for decades and, for instance, in Iraq, where the situation of women has dramatically deteriorated following the aggression of 2003. So, the future will be difficult, but we do not have any other choice except to work towards ending the occupation and towards peace, both of which are prerequisites for gender equality. But this requires that all Euro-Mediterranean activities, including the political sphere, are a shared concern for us all.

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