

## 4.2 Misunderstandings about Gender Equality and Islamic Feminism

More suspicion than expected has poisoned North-South relations across the Mediterranean Sea. In November 2005, a new Five-Year Work Programme for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was adopted by consensus. It includes a commitment by all 35 Member States to adopt measures to “achieve gender equality, preventing all forms of discrimination and ensuring the protection of the rights of women”. A plan of action should be prepared by a Ministerial Conference.

This conference took place in Istanbul from 14 to 15 November 2006. But its title had been changed at request of a number of Southern partners. The word “gender equality” has been replaced by “strengthening the role of women in society”.

I expected the 200 participants at the Preparatory Conference in Rabat (14 to 16 June), most of them representatives of civil society, to unite in protest against a perceived reduction in scope of the project. The three studies prepared for the conference had explained “gender equality” as a term indicating the objective of ensuring equal rights of men and women, and carrying the message that existing discriminatory situations should be changed through joint action by men and women. This applies to human rights (study by EuroMeSCo, the EuroMed network of political science institutes)<sup>1</sup>, to access to education and economic participation (study by FEMISE, the EuroMed network of economic institutes)<sup>2</sup> as well as to attempts of changing mentalities through education, culture and communication (study by the Anna Lindh EuroMed Foundation network).<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, other subjects attracted more attention at the Rabat meeting. Above all, the recommendation by the EuroMeSCo study “to involve Islamist political parties and

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1 Women as Full Participants in the Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States. A EuroMeSCo Report, April 2006 ([www.euromesco.net](http://www.euromesco.net))

2 Women and Economic Development in the Mediterranean. A FEMISE Report, April 2006 ([www.femise.org](http://www.femise.org))

3 Culture and Communication – Key Factors for Changing Mentalities and Societies. Study by the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, April 2006 ([www.euromedalex.org](http://www.euromedalex.org))

women rights organisations in the process of reform, in order to design policies that successfully encourage political reform and gender rights” was almost unanimously rejected after heated debates. The rejection did not address the proposal to involve Islamist political parties, but Islamist women’s organisations, defined by EuroMeSCo as equivalent to what is normally referred to in the literature as ‘Islamic feminism’.

United in opposing this idea, the participants did not want to accept the diversified picture of women’s organisations which are based on references to Islam, as portrayed by the study. EuroMeSCo justified its proposal by concrete opportunities to engage political Islam for strengthening at least “the public role of women” (which, ironically, comes close to the new theme of the Ministerial Conference). There was a climate of resentment. Many participants seem to consider feminist Islam a new trick for strengthening patriarchal tendencies of political Islam, misusing women for reinforcing their chains.

Whereas, in the West, generally dialogue with the political Islam, represented by men, is accepted or even seen as essential for countering terrorism, Islamic feminism is generally rejected. This adds to the already long list of double standards piling up in Western attitudes towards the world of Islam. EuroMeSCo’s proposal reflects the urgent need to support reforms that can be accepted as locally rooted. In my interpretation, the change of the theme for the Ministerial Conference results from the almost omnipresent suspicion against any “imposing” of Western values and concepts to the Arab world. Such fears cannot be dissipated with terminological disputes. We need to go deeper in dialogue and discussion, talking about common values but also about differences, about facts and feelings.

The Anna Lindh Foundation study was also subject of criticism: Some participants felt that it refers too often to cultural traditions and is not critical enough against Governments that should be fully held responsible for discrimination of women in their countries. This is a pertinent argument but leads to a new question: Is it easier to change a government or to change mentalities?

The contribution of the Anna Lindh Foundation to the 2006 EuroMed Women Ministerial Conference focuses on culture, education and communication media as key factors in changing attitudes, behaviour, and, more generally, societies. The authors take into account that neither education nor culture nor media can be seen as mere instruments, ready for achieving envisaged results from appropriate input. The challenges and recommendations gathered in this study are based on the assumption that real changes in gender relations can only be achieved with clear focus on the human being as learner, creator and communicator.

Almost everybody believes in the power of communication. Companies, Governments, NGOs and other social actors spend significant amounts of money in PR, information materials and visibility strategies, addressed to the public at large and always hoping that the mass media take up the message and spread it to citizens. Other than institutional communication, independent media add their credibility to information they disseminate. The intrinsic link between credibility and independence of media, however, is often underestimated. Failing Governments, for example, tend to replace their PR agents rather than changing their policy, while overestimating the power of their institutional communication.

Culture is underestimated as factor of change. The dominant perception of culture is heritage that shapes attitudes and behaviour and gives identity. But every human being contributes as much to cultural changes as he or she is shaped by cultural heritage. Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations scenario is not unique. It is an expression of culturalism being deeply rooted in our mentalities. There is urgent need to discover culture also as a space for creativity.

The power of education is definitely not to be overestimated. Too often, however, education is not fully perceived as interaction of teaching and learning, of formal schooling and informal learning in society. Modern concepts such as lifelong learning and learning society indicate growing awareness of the fact that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, learning has become as much important as teaching, if not even more.

The Barcelona Declaration (1995) refers to the role of women from a mainly economic point of view as it recognizes "the key role of women in development" and expresses commitment "to promote their active participation in economic and social life and in the creation of employment". As regards to the cultural partnership, women are not in focus.

Gender issues in the Euro-Mediterranean area were first specifically mentioned at the 5<sup>th</sup> Euro-Med Ministerial Conference in 2001<sup>4</sup>. The Governments endorsed the conclusions of the "Forum on the role of women in economic development" (Brussels, 14 July 2001), which highlighted the need to promote the role of women in economic life in a way consistent with religious and cultural values.

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4 *Barcelona IV, Presidential Conclusions*. Brussels: 5/6 November 2001.  
[www.europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/euromed/conf/bxl/conc\\_fr.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euromed/conf/bxl/conc_fr.htm)

The new “European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument” stipulates the objective of “supporting policies to promote social development and gender equality, employment and social protection including social dialogues, and respect for trade union rights and core labour standards”<sup>5</sup>.

The Euro-Mediterranean Summit of 2005 has adopted a working plan, designed to provide the basis for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation for the next five years. This document addresses specifically the promotion of gender equality.

In all countries of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, many recent efforts aim at increasing the participation of women in political, social, cultural and economic decision-making positions. With a view to contributing to this objective, Euro-Mediterranean Partners have committed themselves to take measures to achieve gender equality, preventing all forms of discrimination and ensuring the protection of the rights of women. It seems that, ironically, Governments and conservative Muslim communities can agree on measures for strengthening the role of women in society, but not yet on gender equality in concrete terms of legislation on family and other aspects of the daily life of women and men. It seems, indeed, more difficult to change mentalities than Governments.

*Adapted from Traugott Schoefthaler: Editorial for the Anna Lindh Foundation Newsletter July-August 2006, and: “Introduction” to: Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures: “Culture and Communication – Key Factors for Changing Mentalities and Societies”, Alexandria, April 2006.*

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<sup>5</sup> Proposal laying down general provisions establishing a European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument. COM(2004) 628, p. 15.