

WHY MULTICULTURALISM AFFECTS GENDER MATTERS.  
THE NEED OF A WOMEN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

ABSTRACT

*One of the greatest challenges that Europe faces in intercultural dialogue is the integration of immigrant women and the effective respect of their human rights. In considering the interrelationship between multiculturalism and women's issues, the question of whether or not a minority group has the right to practice their traditional patriarchal heritage, which may include the subjection of women as part of the tradition, should be raised. Starting from the central dimension of the principle of equality between man and women, the paper tries to offer some considerations on the different forms of discrimination that women may meet, affecting the enjoyment of human rights.*

*It is clear that many of the concerns about certain aspects of immigrant cultures involve the status and rights of women. The same idea of citizenship as active citizenship appears to be a weak point if we consider the women's status related to some cultures or some economic situations. To summarise, women's rights related to multiculturalism debate represent a gender matters.*

*If the global and the local context are to be interrelated and linked each other, it means that today the European countries are obliged to become familiar with other cultures. But this process need to be conducted taking into strictly consideration some no negotiable start points, as the principle of equality between man and women and some fundamental rights joined to the spaces of freedom recognised to everybody. An inclusive local context is an environment that satisfies the needs and guarantees the freedom of action, the freedom from the coercion and the freedom to access material resources with respect to women, children and other vulnerable subjects. This elements are at the basis of a human rights approach within the policy agenda on intercultural dialogue.*

*Sometimes the impression is that the decision-makers don't pay sufficiently attention to gender profile in the policy-making process. This obviously is strictly related to the gap of women's political participation, especially at high level institutions. To guarantee the effectiveness of women's rights and to develop a gender mainstreaming approach in the decision-making process is fundamental to make things easy for an active and inclusive women citizenship.*

#### WHY MULTICULTURALISM AFFECTS GENDER MATTERS

Although intercultural dialogue is increasingly important, its undertaking is often difficult.

One of the greatest challenges that Europe faces in intercultural dialogue is the integration of immigrant women and the respect of their fundamental human rights.

Europe's immigrant women population is as heterogeneous as the whole immigrant population – in which women come from many different countries, with very different legal status, education, cultural and religious affiliation and personal condition in general.

Initially many landed in Europe to join their husbands, others followed alone starting in the 1950s, and recently women have been coming as refugees, asylum seekers, victims of sexual exploitation, or undocumented workers.

Today, the labour migration engages a much larger number of women, in areas like as domestic service, health care and catering – traditionally, fields with a high proportion of women workers and a typical unskilled sector of employment. Another fundamental sector is represented by the sex industry in the context of trafficking in human beings within the European Union.

Currently, a significant number of immigrant women in Europe have little or no education; on the other hand, other women have excellent professional qualification, but have relevant difficulties to apply it to an appropriate level in the European labour market. There is also a major difference between the first generation of women immigrants and subsequent generations.

Immigrant women who come from other parts of Europe tend to have fewer difficulties in adjusting to their new life style and environment, while those who come from outside Europe, sometimes bring different cultural and religious traditions and practices with them.

Cultures tend to display a certain dynamism, particularly in situations of rapid change or when confronted with other cultures. Many, particularly the members of the second and subsequent generations, also develop the ability to internalise several different cultural codes and social rules at the same time. They are, therefore, relatively at ease in a multicultural setting but, to favour such condition, other conditions must be satisfied, as for instance having a secure legal status, employment and a satisfactory level of education. Obviously, racism and other forms of discrimination must not exist.

In considering the interrelationship between multicultures and women's issues, the question of whether or not a minority group has the right to practice their traditional patriarchal heritage, which may include the subjection of women as part of the tradition, should be raised. From a liberal multiculturalist viewpoint, cultivating traditions is on the one hand desirable and, on the other, a codified right of the minority, but the problem concerns the condition of women and their human rights<sup>1</sup>.

As affirmed by the European Commission in the *2005 Report on Equality between Women and Men*<sup>2</sup>, equality between women and men is a fundamental principle of the European Union's policies and actions. This principle has created a genuine European model of society which has contributed to significant advances in all member states. Progress has been made concerning the status of women and men in the main areas such as education, research policy, social and employment policies, balanced participation in the decision-making process, violence against women and trafficking in women. However, many challenges still have to be met. Nowadays, the *Report* recognises it is essential to take account of gender issues in immigration and integration policies, considering that immigrant women are often victims of dual racial and sexual discrimination in the context of the European Union.

In the *2006 Report*<sup>3</sup>, the Commission also stresses that the necessity to consider the gender perspective in immigration policies concerns not only the agenda for the integration of citizens of third countries but also the fully availability of immigrant women on the labour market within the European Union. In fact, they suffer a significant gap in labour market integration because countries do not utilise the skill female employment potential as demonstrated from the information available on wages.

The *Final Report by the Joint Specialist Group on Migration, Cultural Diversity and Equality of Women and Men* of the Council of Europe<sup>4</sup>, compiled in 1994, represents a fundamental document for women's rights because identifies and examines a certain number of issues and of critical area of concern for migrants women. Most issues involve areas where values related to private and family life have repercussions in public life.

The position of men and women is of crucial importance in this respect. The principle of equality between men and women is a fundamental human right that has been recognised as such in most societies, in all societies of Western countries.

In some cases, even where immigrants come from societies which do accept this principle, this acceptance is not always shared by all sectors of immigrant communities. Such attitudes and the ensuing behaviour can negatively affect immigrant women by restricting their freedom and limiting their opportunities in the receiving society.

On the issue of women and equality, as the Joint Specialist Group of the Council of Europe underlines, the acceptance of diversity and differences means mutual enrichment and respect of fundamental values and rights. Only thus can equality be considered as having equal value and equal dignity and therefore lead to the enjoyment of all the fundamental rights and basic freedom.

Equality, if approached in such a way, is surely a priority issue for women in general and particularly for migrant and ethnic minority women.

The right to be different and to make choices in one's personal life, free of coercion from other persons or society at large and freedom to access material resources are fundamental human rights that must always be respected. Therefore, certain norms and traditions cannot be seen or accepted as absolute values because they reduce the enjoyment of human rights of some members of that society, particularly women, and represent a problem for the principle of universality of human rights.

As arisen during the debate of the Forty-seventh session of the Commission on Status of Women of the United Nations in March 2003<sup>5</sup>, the problem about the implementation of women's human rights in the globalised world concerning a number of culturally or ethnically plural societies or countries that have large immigrant populations (many of which are developed societies), what is called «respect for traditions, culture or religion of minorities», appears to

impede vigorous protection of women's human rights. This is particularly true with respect to the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators in religious and ethnic communities. This is an extremely severe situation because it adds a new dimension to an already existing serious challenge to women's human rights.

It is a fact that crimes committed against women among their own communities, workplaces and families are often excluded from the domain of much human rights protection, even if these violations are sustained by a state structure which tolerates or even encourages such action. But even more seriously, both *de facto* and *de jure* violations of women's rights – in areas such as family law, nationality, bodily integrity, freedom of expression, freedom of reproductive choice and liberty of movement are also often overlooked, if not justified, by governments on the basis of the respect for tradition, culture, or religion.

These are almost «tolerated» due to a misguided notion of «cultural relativism». This not only obscures violations of women's rights, but also creates a dilemma and inhibits firm response to such acts from the international community. It is, therefore, a serious challenge both the national governments and the international institutions involved in the struggle on human rights must be prepared to confront in the future.

As Susan Moller Okin reported, over the past 20 years, there has been increasing recognition that conceptions of human rights need to be radically rethought in order to fully include women's human rights. One of the greatest accomplishments by the international women's human rights movement was the International Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. Herein, and after much dispute, the Final Program of Action<sup>6</sup> stated: «While the significance of national and religious particularities in various historical, cultural, and religious systems must be kept in mind, it is the duty of states regardless of their political, economic, and cultural systems to protect and promote all human rights and fundamental freedoms». This fact, probably represents the most far-reaching stance on human rights ever taken at a United Nations gathering<sup>7</sup>.

Yet sexual discrimination is a fundamental tradition in a number of non-European cultures, and in some countries where Islamic fundamentalism prevails and women's equality and their human rights are often denied.

The status of Western society today is different since the

principle of equality between men and women is largely recognised even if, at times, it is not always fully realised or put in play.

An important question arises at this point and it is: can equal human dignity be postulated *a priori*, when the female members of some society, for example, accept to submit themselves to the practice of sexual discrimination?

WOMEN'S ISSUE AND MULTICULTURALISM.  
SPECIFIC DIMENSIONS OF THE POSSIBLE CONFLICTS

In a context of multiculturalism and from a liberal viewpoint, the practice of repressive cultures, whether directed against women, individuals, or anyone else, cannot be tolerated. According to the Joint Specialist Group of the Council of Europe, and in conformity with the principles of human rights law, all countries must embrace a balance between apparently conflicting rights and the other fundamental principles of democratic societies.

The extent to which an individual is able to act according to the standards of his or her cultural background or religious beliefs is limited by the extent to which these actions limit the rights of others, or go against the prevailing principles of the state or against the international standards on human rights.

In some cases (e.g. female genital mutilation) it is clear that the practice violates the principle of human rights and represents a criminal conduct; in others however (e.g. the wearing of the Islamic headscarf) the matter remains debatable. When such conflicts arise, the first essential step to take is to examine the factual basis of the action in order to understand the precise extent and scale of the differences.

The Joint Specialist Group suggests to consider the basis, the subject, the form of the conflict, if the action apply to women and men equally and what type of mediation or conflict resolution can be adopted.

The level of the conflict depends on the legal status of the immigrant women and on their employment too. Legal barriers, structural labour market needs, negative attitudes or stereotypes of immigrant women, discrimination against them as immigrants and foreigners or as «others», are more significant than their cultural background.

With regards to socio-economic barriers, migrant women

encounter many obstacles to obtain socio-economic resources<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, most relevant problems arise from other areas that potentially increase the level of discriminations. Immigrant women do not have the same opportunity in general in education, training and professional qualifications. These obstacles greatly decrease immigrant women's chances of finding well-qualified and well-paid employment.

In countries of destination, stereotypes create false impression. Often decision-makers in the training economic and administrative field, as well as scientific researchers, construct an image of migrant women as «victims» of their situation and migration, instead of depicting them as autonomous and responsible subjects.

The law on immigration, residence and work permits as well as recognising diplomas acquired in the country of origin have important repercussions to migrant women's access to economic resources. The difficulty with stop policies in Europe is one of the reasons why transnational mobility takes place outside the legal channels and often involves in trafficking in human beings and not only in smuggling of migrants. The danger is the possibility that such situations could lead to different kinds of exploitation, especially in the sex market.

Most women absorbed in mobile migration do not have a work permit and cannot, therefore, work legally. The growing need for household help comes from the external and paid activities of women and mothers in industrialised countries and from the dismantling of social security and social service. Most of the immigrants women arrive in the Western societies as household workers<sup>9</sup>. Though such jobs provide a personal autonomy to the women, their work is often without a personal earning benefit as it is all sent back to their families. For undocumented women, employment in the domestic workplace often means that they do not have either a work contract or social security, and are forced to work long hours for wages below the minimum national standard. The alternative is represented by the exploitation in the sex market.

Live-in domestic workers at times have a stricter control of their documents, which could be retained by their employers and sometimes lead to incidences of violence and sexual abuse or loss of personal freedom. The situation of women who have fallen prey to trafficking networks which exploit them and who, often under false

pretence, eventually force them into prostitution, must also be taken into account as a threat. This category of women is particularly vulnerable.

So, even when a woman is not subjected to patriarchal authority, she may suffer discriminations which become an obstacle in her attaining equality with men, for many reasons.

As described by the Joint Specialist Group in its *Report*, there are societies and cultures in which men and women have complementary roles, where women are primarily responsible for domestic matters, and men are head of the household, and the decision-makers are thus keeping women separate from the public sphere.

Most of the problems that emerge in the family and domestic areas arise from private attitudes, values and cultural beliefs. The positive aspects of culture, religion and tradition offer security and support to daily life, giving people a sense of belonging and identity. Immigrants and minorities, especially if they feel excluded from the receiving society, have a greater need to retain a sense of identity which often results in adherence to a conservative interpretation of their culture of origin. Moreover, this enables the leaders of immigrant communities to influence and some would say, retain control, especially on religious questions.

The scale of the social barriers to equality are difficult to define and measure for women who only know the private and domestic sphere and are invisible in the public roles. The Joint Specialist Group in the *Final Report* defines, potential conflicts with human rights and the principle of non-discrimination between women and men on the one hand, and certain attitudes and customs in some migrant communities on the other, as follows:

i. «*Freedom to marry*: There may be paternal or family pressure on a woman to marry against her will, and forced (or not entirely free) marriages are, without doubt, contrary, *inter alia*, to basic human rights and freedoms. [...]

ii. *Prohibitions*: Some religions restrict marriages outside the faith. [...]

iii. *Polygamy*: This is clearly contrary to equality principles. The contraction of such marriages in European countries is forbidden, although some recognize the applicability of valid polygamous status created abroad<sup>10</sup>. [...]

iv. *Divorce and family breakdown*: Unilateral repudiation by the man would also be against the principles of equality, and would only



be valid in Europe after an impartial judicial process which would apply the relevant domestic law. In practice however, many relationships break down because one of the parties connives at it, and the test is whether there are equality of rights in the arrangements for dissolution of the marriage. A problem arises when a foreign national returns to his country of origin to obtain a decision, which he could not obtain in his country of residence but intends, nevertheless, to implement there.

v. *Headship of the household*: Systems which accept the male as the head of household with the predominant role in decision-making or with sole authority over the children would be contrary to equality principles and may also infringe the increasingly important field of children's rights.

vi. *Education*: Parents who restrict or exercise control over the content of their daughters' education, including preventing them from attending physical education or participating in school trips or removing them forcibly from compulsory education would be acting against equality principles.

vii. *Social customs*: A line can be drawn between coercion and freedom of choice. Many communities exercise pressure on women and girls to follow certain social customs implying segregation and confinement. [...]

viii. *Mutilation and violence*: Respect for cultural identity cannot justify female genital mutilation, or any others form of violence against women<sup>11</sup>.

ix. *Reproductive rights*: Because of their cultural and religious background and difficulties in obtaining information, immigrant women may experience special difficulties with regard to full enjoyment of their reproductive rights, free from family or social constraints. This may particularly affect access to family planning services»<sup>12</sup>.

The above-mentioned situations involve different levels of prejudice against women's rights.

Multicultural societies in Europe can only function properly when there is an openness to cultural diversity with individuals treating each other with due respect, in both the public and private sphere, and where equal opportunities for participation are practical and based on the respect of the principle of non discrimination between man and women. In other words, the attitudes and practices in immigrant communities that violate human rights or run

counter to the principle of gender equality must not be tolerated, even when rooted in culture or religion.

#### THE NEED OF A WOMEN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Immigrant women are protected by a number of the provisions in existing international and regional conventions, and national legislation too. The European Convention on Human Rights and United Nations international covenants, are directed towards securing and protecting human rights and freedom irrespective of sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, etc. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which most European and non-European states have signed and ratified, sets out, *inter alia*, the principle that the states parties have the obligation to ensure the equal right of women and men to enjoy all human rights.

The constitutions of most European countries also contain provisions which make any forms of racial, ethnic and sexual discrimination unlawful. Specific legislation also exists in many countries against racial, ethnic and sexual discrimination, especially in the work field.

Despite this, the radical political and social changes of recent years have led to an appearance and the re-assertion of nationalistic and ethnic identities and politics. In most European societies racism and xenophobia have taken place. In some cases, violent attacks have been made not only on non-European immigrants who have recently arrived, but also on long established immigrant groups as well.

When immigrants feel excluded from the receiving society as their basic human rights are denied, they alienate themselves from the values of the adoptive society and seek refuge in the most intransigent values of their culture of origin. This could constitute a threat to the principle of the universality of human rights if it involves a return to patriarchal ideas about the status of women and sometimes children too. There has also been a visible rise in all forms of extremism and this can affect attitudes towards equality between women and men.

The multiple forms of discrimination that women may meet, indicating that cross-cutting elements such as age, socio-economic

status, the belonging to a specific group, disability, the low level of education, combined with sex discrimination, create particular difficulties to women and affect the enjoyment of human rights.

Subordinating the acceptance and implementation of international standards to religious laws or practices, or customary and traditional practices, constitutes a serious challenge to the universality of human rights. Furthermore, equality between women and men is now one of the main principles of laws and cultures uniting the different countries of Europe, as well as the international community. It is clear that many of the concerns about certain aspects of immigrant cultures involve the status and rights of women. These questions arise in areas such as marriage, family law, education and social participation, or in case of inter-generational conflicts over personal freedom, and other similar matters.

But at the same time, it should be clear that some practices, as for example the subject of forced marriage<sup>13</sup>, cannot be approached solely from a legal angle, particularly as it is a practice, rooted in custom and tradition.

The problem is not simply to determine what agreement or law should apply: it is also about how well the laws that are applied can be adapted to the specific circumstances of forced marriages and how to work to prevent this kind of situations that affects women's rights. It is a complex question that is directly relevant to all the policies that governments implement, and the programmes and measures they initiate.

In other terms, women and men are nowadays involved in intercultural dialogue in different capacities and scope of actions, locally and internationally. A lack of recognition of women's role is nevertheless still evident. The problem of considering the way both integration public policy and policy on equality between women and men play a central role in the intercultural dialogue.

The Joint Group of the Council of Europe has suggested in his *Report* strategies for action and made proposals for resolving some of the obstacles and problems faced by migrant women, both in the public and the private sphere.

Despite the progress made with the adoption of international instruments, women throughout the world face many obstacles in terms of exclusion and invisibility. Therefore, recognising the urgent need to give women a proper role in the intercultural dialogue and in the multicultural society is merely the start of a much wider effort

for the promotion of their human rights. It is necessary to consider women not only as victims of some practices and customs but as a social subject able to be autonomous and with a specific identity.

In other words, if the global and the local context are to be interrelated it means that the West is obliged to become familiar with other cultures, modifying and changing its own self-images just as other communities have to reconstruct a collective identity based on a political will to develop at local level a more inclusive participation.

#### GENDER INEQUALITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE URBAN SPACE

The structure of urban space is composed by both constraints and opportunities which impact, in varying ways, the lives of different social groups that include women and men, the elderly, children, teenagers, the disabled, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, refugees, migrant workers, the wealthy and the poor; the way they live the city, and contribute to it in different ways.

An inclusive environment is therefore one that satisfies the needs and guarantees the rights of every individual and group, in practical terms too. But the problem of how individual freedoms need to be protected in the context of group rights is not simple when we consider the gender dimension. Hence, understanding the impact of social relations and recognising the specific dynamics of gender relations in a city is of crucial importance. This approach needs to consider the gender profile of the concept of human security too.

Urban spaces are seldom conceived around the particular needs of women in particular contexts, which arise both from their physical difference and their socially and economic roles as workers, mothers, carers, and less as decision-makers. Moreover, women today (and men too) make up a heterogeneous group whose gender identity is further cross cut by, for example, race, ethnicity, class, different ability, age and stage of life cycle.

The feminists' analysis and proposals of local policies are in keeping with their struggle for social equality and economic emancipation; a struggle, that in their view, is closely linked to women's needs for recognition and respect of their fundamental human rights.

Women's transition from the house to a public space has always played an important part in the relationship between women and the community they belong to. This is not only true for native women but it is particularly for immigrant women who can suffer their cultural isolation.

The gender dimension helps to better understand questions such as the needs and the positions of the different social categories, especially the poorest and the homeless and in general the vulnerable groups.

A focus on local and urban governance implies that, beyond the framework of domestic law and of international agreements, human rights must be acknowledged if they are to be realised in practice.

The notion of human rights is linked to citizenship, also inevitably related to the local dimension. Such spatial dimension of rights also presents gender reflections.

The *European Charter for Women in the City. Proposal of a Process on «City, Citizenship and Gender»* is a good example of a research/action that was supported, in 1994 and 1995, by the Commission of the European Union (Equal Opportunities Unit)<sup>14</sup>. As recognised by the *Charter*, although women account for over 50% of the population, they are dramatically absent in the public debate on the development and planning of cities, demonstrating a lack of consideration and sensitivity towards women's condition and the need of giving effectiveness to the principle of equality and non discrimination between the sexes. A woman's self-interest does not exist as such, but women may act as catalysts in the transformation and improvement process of living conditions of all those concerned.

In order to increase chances that an in-depth «gender change» will be successful, complex city problems must be approached differently, taking gender-based socio-cultural relationships into account and associating them to the goal of gender equality.

In doing so, cities must therefore be rethought and remodelled with a woman's perception, an instrumental role to give them a new balance and a different dimension. This element is strictly related to women's presence in the decision-making process.

It seems evident that there is a lack of political commitment on the part of governments and decision-making bodies (at the local, national and international level) in promoting changes towards gender equality that implies attaining a gender balance by increasing

the number of women in high-level positions, and integrating gender perspective into all strategic programmes, policies, measures, actions and analysis. The idea of an inclusive city that embodies women's human rights and considers the dimension of inclusion as fundamental is a revolutionary idea. When the framework of daily life is analysed through a woman's perspective and considered following a *gender mainstreaming* approach, qualitative advantages result in approaching all areas of concern to all citizens like safety, mobility, habitat, childcare services and care for the elderly and the disabled.

In this direction, and as suggested by the Joint Specialist Group on Migration, Cultural Diversity and Equality of Women and Men of the Council of Europe, to give immigrant women the opportunities to participate in the receiving societies, it is important to recognise the central role of some services and measures which facilitate the access to employment and residence, that must be linked to the independent legal status with respect to the husband/breadwinner.

Women's right to work and to political participation even in local associations can be neglected by lack of freedom to move in space and by cultural obstacles that must be taken into consideration in every step of the decision-making process.

Therefore, the issue of women's rights is closely related to public safety and gender violence. In this sense, violence against women represents the most significant element to distinguish between the concept of *gender security* with respect to the concept of security involving men. In considering the multiple issues which the adoption of a multicultural approach implies, a picture of the significance of safeguarding human rights along a continuum which starts from the city and extends to international institution can be drawn.

The city represents the place where potential multiculturalist conflicts may appear and take the form of the identities. The other face of this situation today is often represented by the war.

The answer to the multiculturalism problem lies in a multicultural dialogue based on a correct recognition of the differences involved and on the respect of the principles offered by human rights paradigm. So the universal code of human rights is instrumental for such operation.

But in city contexts, the experiences of women and men, their occupation, their income, social roles, and the relationships they produce and live are all organised within social norms and traditions

that treat women and men differently, sometimes in terms of inequality and in terms of discrimination against women. Such situation arises from the fact that, the social, economic and cultural attitudes, the education of women and men, and more specifically the different roles they play with respect to the division of work, also differ. In other terms, the contributions they make and the survival strategies they adopt reflect the social positions they hold.

Yet, the roles of women and men in different societies around the world are constantly shifting, especially today as a result of economic globalisation and new immigration. The women's mobility has achieved today a public dimension in the migration context. Because women and men experience cities differently, because of the different roles and activities they have, and because women's needs are seldom represented in policy or planning, it is essential for their interests to be now actively carried out, in particular in areas like: basic services, human rights, economic capacity, transport, health, violence, and human security. This means that in the context of public policy specific concerns must be done about gender dimension as previews in the *gender mainstreaming policies approach*. The problem increases notably in considering the situation of some immigrant women.

INTEGRATING A GENDER MAINSTREAMING APPROACH  
INTO PUBLIC POLICIES

When considering the public local policy there are two levels, the private and public spheres, that must be carefully planned according to women's condition. The private sphere must focus on the conflicts between, on the one hand, marriage, family law and some practices of the country of origin that could affect women's rights , and on the other hand, the law and practice of the receiving country that can be very different and result unconnected. The public sphere must look at ways of ensuring freedom of choice for immigrant girls and women in decisions about their education and career, and actions to bring about equal participation by immigrant women in the democratic and decision-making processes (including immigrant organisations).

But, in fact, we know that many other aspects of the daily life stem from the need, of some groups, to keep their traditions alive

even if it implies discriminating against women. For instance, in considering the health and health system problem in relation to reproductive health and reproductive rights, in particular, it is clearly foreseeable that the problems of the immigrant women can indeed be important.

Women rely on public transport more than men and, given the allocation of household resources, and have less access to private means of transport; their use of transport also differs from men because of gender divisions of labour and security. Mobility conditions permits access to employment and means also social integration, but it can become a factor for social discrimination and even exclusion of people whose movements are restricted.

Women's lives in cities are always dictated by real or potential urban insecurity. This is yet another obstacle to women becoming fully active citizens, as they cannot easily take part in public life or in the city's centres of interest when the time and place are not convenient.

To take into consideration concerns about insecurity is a way not only of solving women's daily problems, but also helping men and women to tackle the issue of violence in general.

Many studies show that the environment has a role to play in this type of situation. Violence does not stop at the front door. However, domestic violence concerns all of us as, once again, it affects mainly women. Acts of aggression against women by strangers in public places are fewer than those carried out by women's friends, husbands or fathers or brothers in the privacy of the home as demonstrated by all studies on topic. Feeling vulnerable always reinforces apprehension.

Violence affects women in all countries in the world and represents a universal issue. Violence against women has been on the international agenda starting with the first UN Decade for Women, in 1975, and has continued to be a critical issue in international agreements, including CEDAW (1979) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). It remains the principle obstacle to women's equality, to empowerment and to women's full enjoyment of their human rights.

Women subjected to domestic violence may remain in abusive relationships if they are unable to secure their civil rights and their economic rights, as property, only through their husbands. Violent conflicts between different urban groups and within each group are



often played out in terms of attacks on women and therefore imply restriction to their access to public space and life. And we have also to remember the drama of the phenomenon of the trafficking in women for sexual exploitation.

Women's safety in cities is the expression of a self-respecting society and of consideration about foreign people and their needs. A safe city from a woman's viewpoint is a city that respect human rights of all residents and pay attention to their needs and to the political choice of people too.

The lack for a woman to have access to and control properties – land and housing or their economic earnings – constitutes a violation of human rights, and it contributes to increase their poverty. Despite important recent legal reforms, women in many places fail to benefit from increased rights to inherit property probably due to inaccessible legal systems or to a preference for customary laws over the statutory ones.

At present, women can often be excluded from civil and economic rights as a consequence of cultural norms that involve an unequal legislative and political system. But women have an equal right to freedom from poverty, discrimination, environmental degradation and insecurity. To struggle against these problems and to work towards a gender mainstreaming approach based on universal human rights, it is crucial for women to be empowered and involved in local and central governments as decision-makers.

Important steps in this direction are represented by the problem of the personal relationship, especially the spaces dedicated to socialisation, housing and housing finance that are often more elusive than those of men. But the most relevant issue remains linked to an effective and responsible integration of immigrants in the labour market and in society. This is the first key factors for attaining success and reaching a full integration.

Concluding, to demonstrate that the gender dimension is not an optional criterion, but an unavoidable procedure that is necessary to the achievement of human rights and to contrast inequalities between men and women, means to develop a new approach of local governance and human security and to implement intercultural dialogue. Sometimes the impression is that the decision-makers don't pay sufficiently attention to the gender dimension in the policy-making process. This obviously is strictly related to the gap of women's political participation especially at high level institutions.

To guarantee the effectiveness of women's rights and to develop a gender mainstreaming approach in the decision-making process is a fundamental step to facilitate an active and inclusive women citizenship and to make their rights effective.

<sup>1</sup> I. Hell, *Women's Issue and Multiculturalism*, available at [www.bu.edu](http://www.bu.edu).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Equality between Women and Men*, February 2005, available at [www.europa.eu.int](http://www.europa.eu.int).

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, *Equality between Women and Men*, February 2006, available at [www.europa.eu.int](http://www.europa.eu.int).

<sup>4</sup> The Joint Specialist Group on Migration, Cultural Diversity and Equality between Women and Men (EG/MG-Fem), which worked over a period of two years (1994-1995), was composed of experts appointed by the Steering Committee for Equality between Women and Men and by the Committee on Migration. The group began its work in February 1994. It was composed of eight members. They were chosen for their expertise in the fields of equality between women and men, migration and cultural diversity.

<sup>5</sup> Forty-seventh session of the Commission of Status of Women, Feride Acar, Panel II, *Women's Human Rights and Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women and Girls as Defined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the Outcome Documents of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly*, March 2003.

<sup>6</sup> UN Doc. A/Conf.177/20.

<sup>7</sup> S. Moller Okin, *When Cultural Value Clash with Universal Rights: Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, available at [www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/submitted/okin/multicultural.html](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/submitted/okin/multicultural.html); cf. also of the same author: *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, available at [www.bostonreview.net](http://www.bostonreview.net).

<sup>8</sup> See Council of Europe, *Report Prepared by the Joint Specialist Group on Migration, Cultural Diversity and Equality of Women and Men*, especially the paper of Mona Granato on *Socio-Economic Barriers*.

<sup>9</sup> During the 1970s decade, ethnic specialisations were created. Cf. G. Campani, *Labour Market and Family Networks: Filippino Women in Italy*, in H. Rudolph and M. Morokvasic (eds.), *Bringing States and Markets*, Berlin, 1993, mentioned in M. Granato, *Socio-Economic Barriers*, Section B of *Report Prepared by the Joint Specialist Group on Migration, Cultural Diversity and Equality of Women and Men*, EG-MG(1996) 2 Rev of the Council of Europe.

<sup>10</sup> H. Fulchiron, report for the seminar *Women and Migration: Establishing the Fundamental Right to Equality in Setting of Cultural Diversity*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 4-5 July 1995, Sub-theme 2: *Tradition and Equality in Conflict?, a) In the Private Sphere*. This Report is included in the publication of the Council of Europe, Joint Specialist Group on Migration, *Cultural Diversity and Equality of Women and Men*, EG/MG(96)2 rev.

<sup>11</sup> Today they are forbidden at national level by specific criminal law in almost all European countries. See for example the new Italian law on topic adopted in February 2006 n. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Council of Europe, *Final Report of The Joint Specialist Group on Migration...*, cit., pp. 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> See Council of Europe, *Report of Council of Europe on Forced Marriage*, 2005, available at [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int).

<sup>14</sup> The project is available at [www.cityshelter.org/03.charte/chartes/08charte-en-pres.htm](http://www.cityshelter.org/03.charte/chartes/08charte-en-pres.htm).