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## Women in the Mediterranean: Still Discriminated Against?

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This Special Issue is the outcome of a successful and lively debate, taking place in the course of the Women in the Mediterranean event organized within the context of the Festival d'Europa 2015 in Florence. The panel consisted of women addressing, from a variety of viewpoints, the challenges faced by women on the two shores of the Mediterranean. The thoughts, views and analyses presented in the course of this debate are the inspiration for the present publication. In it, we are aiming at proposing different disciplinary perspectives and methodologies offering a composite, although not exhaustive, picture of such a complex and multifaceted issue. At the roots of this effort is the attempt to give voice to women and to their questions through the contribution of experts in various related fields. What emerges is a kaleidoscope of overlapping images, realities, information, all hinting at the fact that women are still experiencing inequality on both the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean.

In the EU's Mediterranean countries social patterns have evolved and women now are strongly present on the labour market and have become financially independent. Nevertheless, inequalities persist, as women's employment rate is still lower than men's. For young women it is even harder than for young men to enter the labour market and women are still paid on average less than men for the same job. They are more likely than men to take up part-time jobs or interrupt their careers altogether to care for children or a sick parent. This inequality is also carried on to women's pensions, which are on average lower than men's. The glass ceiling has not disappeared: there are still too few women in leadership positions both in private and public sectors as well as in politics.

While in the EU's Mediterranean countries inequality is mostly linked to the social sphere, and in particular refers to labour market dynamics, in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) area the situation is more complicated as the social and private spheres overlap and cultural and religious factors have a great impact on women's autonomy and opportunities beyond the family perimeter. The different challenges women are facing on the two sides of the Mediterranean have sometimes led to incomprehension and misperceptions. Western-supported policies devoted to closing the gap between men and women in the Southern Mediterranean area have overlooked those countries' peculiarities, simply exporting models tailored for EU's member states. The EU's attempts to strengthen relations with the Mediterranean countries on a multilevel basis have not rescued women from marginalization. Nevertheless, during the 2011 awakening, women played an important role in activating civil society and they are still to play a role in the modernization of their countries. They are considered as a key part of the fight against terrorism and radicalization,

although in some countries their condition has worsened after secular regimes have been overturned. The number of migrant women has increased and, no differently from men, they are looking for opportunities and better conditions of life while Western media tend to present them in a stereotyped way either as traumatized victims and/or as caring mothers.

There are other misleading commonplaces, which need to be better conceptualized and understood, such as the alleged incompatibility between Islam and women rights. Unfortunately, women's rights are still under attack even in European countries where they are considered established. These questions are at the core of the articles presented in this Special Issue.

The article by *Barbara Henry* questions some conceptual assumptions which are shaping the contemporary debate on Islamic feminism, such as the incompatibility between the *Qur'an* and women's rights as well as its uniqueness. Feminism, it is argued, consists of an extremely fluid, dynamic and pluralistic set of phenomena. The article offers a deep and analytical account of the variety of feminisms in the Mediterranean in a diachronic perspective. Women have been involved in liberalization movements, engaged in modernization and also recently have been supportive of changes in their societies. Besides the emergence of innovative interpretations of the *Qur'an* there is also the clear will to develop a syncretic and transnational feminism.

The article by *Alessia Belli and Anna Loretoni* points out that Western feminism is not immune from the effects of the use of stereotypes regarding Muslim women. The authors suggest a deconstructive strategy and an intersectional approach that they apply to the case of some Italian and British Muslim women activists. The aim is to show that the agency of Muslim women emerges in different contexts, thus breaking the Western mainstream essentialist perspective. The concept of fluid identity seems suitable for capturing the intertwining of religious, gender and political dimensions. The feminist approach to cultural diversity would then benefit from a perspective of cultural flexibility and transformation, an experience of continuous border crossing, in which principles, rights and values are constantly negotiated, while at the same time they are translated into multifaceted and controversial practices.

The article by *Leila Simona Talani* tackles the question of women's access to technology and their position in the political economy of the countries of the MENA area. If it is true that the area is progressively more marginalized in the globalization process, this particularly affects women as they tend to have fewer of the skills that are necessary to respond to the technological challenges of globalization. Furthermore, despite the different interpretations of the role of women in Islamic societies, the crisis of the Arab states seems to emphasize a more radical approach to Islam and a diminished role played in it by women. The article is centred around a transnationalist interpretation of globalization, which stresses the dynamic nature of this process, its technological and skill content, and its uneven manifestation. After discussing these characteristics of globalization, the author moves to the analysis of the evolution of civil society institutions and social capital in the MENA area to assess how they have been impacted by globalization and where this leaves women.

The article by *Serena Giusti* examines the EU's gender mainstreaming towards the Mediterranean countries. It discusses, in particular, the implications of the European Neighbourhood Policy that promotes gender equality through diffusion of norms. In spite of efforts toward appraising and making it more effective, the EU's gender strategy has generally failed to confront the structural causes of inequality as it has mainly focused on

the external aspects of the question while underestimating cultural, domestic and familial impediments. The EU has overlooked national debates on these issues in the partner countries and the contributions of local feminists.

*Heidrun Friese* in her article underlines that there is also a gendered way to represent migrants, as women are usually described as traumatized victims and/or as caring mothers. Based on the author's direct experience in Lampedusa, the article argues that situations of emergency generate a post-humanitarian discourse and a 'visual humanism' that make pain and suffering a-political and a-historical. And yet social imagination sets female vulnerability against male aggression and the threat of 'invasion'. Within the reiterated gender binarism and its symbolic order, the mother as well as vulnerable children are deprived of threatening agency, of autonomy. They do not menace the political order of the nation and its sovereignty. In other words, the female victim and her suffering do not belong either to historical time or to the political order.

The topic of migrants and refugees is also dealt in *Mariangela Veikou's* article. She analyses how European societies are coping with the growing refugee crisis in tandem with the on-going economic crisis in recent years. Within this climate, migration risks being seen more than ever as an additional 'burden' that societies have to 'carry' and it is sometimes even questioned why it should be accommodated or respected at all. This paper draws on empirical research from Greece to examine changing European societies, with a particular focus on how the crisis is affecting the most vulnerable members of society, the stateless children and women migrants and refugees.

Finally, in her article, *Miray Enric* notes how the female labour force participation rates are known to be exceptionally low in Turkey by international standards. The general consensus is that the catalyst behind female labour force participation rates is the level of educational attainment. In the academic literature, the relationship between the two factors – education and female labour force participation – is explained under what is known as the U-shape hypothesis. Although female education has increased over recent years, the U-shape is not observable in Turkey. This research scrutinizes the economic and social characteristics of the labour markets in Turkey and finally seeks to demonstrate how women in Turkey are trapped in a vicious cycle. The U-shape theory is insufficient in explaining female labour force participation rates in Turkey. Turkish women face barriers in entering the labour markets, although they are well-educated. They present a form of passive human capital, whose skills are underutilized. Thus, the curve remains an L rather than a U.