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# Gender mainstreaming in Intercultural Dialogue

## Thoughts on culture, intercultural dialogue, encounter of people, gender mainstreaming and Europe

**When I was asked to share my vision on Gender Perspectives of Intercultural Dialogue with Coyote readers, I was very happy to be given this opportunity because this has been my field of work for the last 10 years and intercultural learning has become a very important component in my daily life. However, I did know that this was going to be a difficult task because it is a wide theme and there is a variety of issues related to gender and intercultural learning, the notion of culture, dialogue, gender, identity, etc. I will try to summarize and share my vision on such themes and explain why I believe that mainstreaming gender and intercultural learning is crucial for European multicultural societies.**

I will start by sharing my vision of intercultural learning, dialogue and gender mainstreaming by taking into account the very important issues of culture, identity and encounter between people from different backgrounds. I will focus on my personal experience as a trainer in intercultural learning and a cultural mediator by bringing my specific perspective which is the experience of a migrant woman living and working in Italy and in Europe.

I have been living in Italy for 16 years and intercultural learning has been a constituent in my life throughout these years. I moved to Europe in 1991 after the Somali Civil War broke out, it was then the first time I encountered the “other”: new country, new culture and different people. I have travelled since I was a child, meeting new and “different” people, but this time it was different because I was not a tourist anymore: I was an immigrant who had to integrate and adapt to the way of living of the receiving country. Suddenly, I realised that in several diverse settings – school, society, etc - it was me who was regarded as the “other”, the foreigner and the “stranger”. Being the only foreign, black and Muslim girl in my school, I remember the thousands of questions asked to

me by my schoolmates: Why did you come here?, How come you chose Italy? Why is your culture so different from ours? Why did you fast (during the holy month of Ramadan) in your country? Why, why, why? I remember that I felt like being on trial! Rapidly, I realised that what I considered to be “normal” and “usual” were not fully understood by the new society I was living in and they were being questioned. I must say that I was irritated by all those questions and by the fact that my values, my culture and religion were being questioned.

I decided not to be intimidated and bullied and I started to ask them questions about their culture and their traditions. This way my schoolmates and I started to dialogue and share information about our respective countries and cultures, and I truly enjoyed that.

Around the age of 18 I decided to volunteer in intercultural women’s organisations in Torino, I liked very much the varied environment and got fascinated by how women from different backgrounds could work together for the same goals: understanding one another and promoting women’s rights. This experience motivated me to get involved in intercultural learning programmes and to recognise the importance of gender



mainstreaming in dialogues between cultures. However, besides the positive experiences with these organisations, there were also negative ones that led me to interrupt my collaboration with them. I left many of these organisations because their vision of intercultural learning did not go beyond organising nice intercultural evenings in which the immigrants were just needed to play the role of “the exotic” one. Being a migrant woman, I really had to face many prejudices, I was asked many times to play the role of “the different” one. Prejudices and stigmatisation have been the enemies I have been fighting since I started my activism in intercultural organisations. I always believed that intercultural learning is not a slogan and it is more than organising parties and preparing “ethnic” foods “all together”.

To better explain my vision of intercultural learning I will refer to the Italian pedagogue Antonio Nanni. Nanni explains interculturality as a “movement of reciprocity, it strives to overcome any prejudice in the transmission of knowledge”. Intercultural learning is not a one direction journey. It’s a journey *with* and *towards* the “other”. Antonio Nanni highlights the need to pay attention to the point of view of the “others”, which means understanding their history, memories and vision of the future – to list just a few aspects. I very much appreciate the fact that Nanni speaks about “vision of the future”. While giving an explanation of what intercultural learning is, we usually tend to focus on the present – for example, the dialogue and coexistence of different cultural groups in our societies – not taking into account the future: what Europe are our communities willing to build? In my opinion, the dialogue must lead to a genuine intercultural policy, thus building the backbone of our societies in the present and in the future.

The relationship between people of different cultural backgrounds is in fact, a relationship between different cultural identities. When people encounter each other, they exchange

*cultures in movement*, which makes in my opinion, more challenging the process of intercultural dialogue. In the process of intercultural dialogue it is therefore essential that people do not have a “fixed” idea of their own culture so that they can be open to dialogue, exchange and learning from each other.

Another important aspect in intercultural dialogue is equality: a genuine dialogue can only take place if the parties involved in it are equal and equally represented. Women and men need to be equally represented, with the same rights and responsibilities in this dialogue.

I believe that gender mainstreaming is needed to measure the implications for both men and women, of any policies or programmes, including intercultural programmes and policies. Mainstreaming gender in intercultural dialogue is crucial not only to ensure women’s participation in the dialogue but also to avoid stereotypical female and male roles, which represent the obstacle to equality between men and women.

Intercultural dialogue can lead our societies to gain a better understanding of one another and to set up long-term intercultural policies. Therefore it is important that as many citizens as possible take part in this process and bring in their own contributions. Through my experience in intercultural organisations in Italy I have realised that women and men are not equally represented in many of these organisations, or, more often, the majority is represented by women. Despite this, I have noticed that often gender balance does

not translate into women’s issues being taken into account in the political agenda of intercultural dialogue, which is crucial. I am highlighting this because culture and tradition are often used as a tool to discriminate against women at all levels of societies. The mentality that “women should stay at home” is unfortunately still widespread and anti-women policies and harmful traditional practices are being carried out in many countries.

**“ Culture is an important aspect linked to the concept of intercultural learning. Culture is what people exchange when they encounter. In regards to this, I would like to highlight that cultures are not “fixed” ones but they are in a constant process of change. Culture is one of the main elements in one’s identity, when we speak about the culture of an individual we are actually dealing with her/his cultural identity. As cultures go through a changing process, identities are, therefore, in constant movement. ”**

► **Should only the positive aspects of the cultures be discussed in intercultural dialogue?**

I do believe that intercultural dialogue should be open and tackle as many issues as possible, including the misuse of culture in order to oppress women. Unfortunately, in many years of activism in intercultural organisations I have experienced how difficult it is to bring the gender perspective into the agenda and to deepen the discussion to analyse the misuse of culture to oppress women. I believe that while engaged in dialogue, women and men from different backgrounds should discuss the obstacles that women face within the different cultures and look for and share possible solutions. In several years of activism in intercultural dialogue platforms I also had to struggle to make sure that my voice as a migrant woman was listened to and respected; refusing stereotypical roles. Minority women in fact face a double discrimination; being a woman and belonging to a minority group. This fact leads me to highlight more and more the importance of equality in intercultural dialogue as I believe that minority and majority groups have to have the same voice while engaged in dialogue.

Coming now to Europe, where, in our societies, diversity is often feared. How can we build an intercultural Europe based on mutual respect and equality? I believe that Europe's multiculturalism should be seen as a richness and not feared. After September 11 many hidden forms of racism have arisen and xenophobic groups are more and more taking part in the European political arenas. Some talk of the end of multiculturalism in Europe, I say that Europe is multicultural and it always will be. Multicultural Europe is a reality and to know more about its roots we must go back to history: movements of people have always taken place and their encounters have been a constant element in Europe's history.

The challenge today is how to strengthen the dialogue between different communities in order to establish genuine intercultural dialogue that in turn can lead to a long-term intercultural policy. An important step towards an intercultural Europe is to introduce intercultural learning and gender mainstreaming in school curricula to overcome any prejudice in the transmission of knowledge.

I believe that dialogue and encounter between people from different backgrounds, if based on respect and understanding, can bring positive results: we can improve ourselves by sharing experience from others and enriching ourselves with new and positive elements.

*With regard to the role of women in intercultural dialogue, bearing in mind the successful role that women have had in peace-building processes in different countries of the world, I can only believe that their role will be a very important and fruitful one.*



**Notes and references :**

- Nanni, Abbruciati (1999): *Per capire l'interculturalità*. Parole-chiave, Emi, Bologna

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