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Guest editorial

The rights of women and the crisis of multiculturalism

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Across Europe, the discourse and practices of multiculturalism are in crisis. Politicians compete to stress the importance of a strong sense of national identity and belonging, and have come to regard diversity as a problem rather than a resource. The language of integration – once perceived by many as objectionably close to assimilation – increasingly dominates debate. Newspaper articles call on immigrants to confirm that they have opted for the values of their host society, while governments insist on applicants for citizenship undergoing courses in the national language and what are said to be the values of the host country. Multiculturalism – never as powerful a force in European politics as its critics have suggested – has come to be associated with ethnic ghettos and people living ‘parallel lives’.

Multiculturalism was attacked from the right almost from its inception, and was repudiated by segments of the left for allegedly burying the inequalities of race in vague celebrations of cultural difference. It was never adopted as official policy in any part of Europe, though Belgium has long pursued what might be described as policies of multiculturalism in relation to its major language groups, and Norway, Sweden, and Finland have increasingly recognized the rights of the indigenous Sami people, most notably with the creation of a Sami Parliament in Norway. In France, however, multiculturalism was rejected pretty much out of hand as at odds with republican principles;¹ in Germany, as at odds with a predominantly ethnicized conception of citizenship; while in Italy or Spain, multiculturalism barely figured in either popular or political discourse until the last few years. In those countries most commonly cited as exemplars of multicultural

policy – the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden – practices varied and were rarely codified in any explicit way.² Yet however modest the policies, there was, until recently, a wide body of opinion across Europe claiming that cultural and religious diversity was now part of the fabric of life, and arguing that it was inappropriate (in the stronger versions, inequitable and unfair) to require migrants to abandon all aspects of their cultural heritage in favour of the conventions of the new society. Typically, those arguing this also believed that immigrant associations and networks should play an important mediating role between individuals and the state.

Disenchantment with these broadly multicultural ideals dates mostly from the mid-1990s, when multiculturalism began to be blamed for failures of economic and social integration, as evidenced in significant variations between ethnocultural groups in the take-up of educational opportunities, in differential employment rates, differential crime rates, and continuing high levels of residential segregation. The later focus on multiculturalism as impeding *political* integration was more closely linked to fears of Islamist-inspired assassinations and terror attacks, fears given graphic confirmation in the destruction of the World Trade Centre in 2001, the Madrid bombings in 2004, the two London bombings in 2005, and the murder of Dutch film director Theo Van Gogh in 2004. A typical article in the British press in 2005 described ‘these British bombers’ as ‘a consequence of a misguided and catastrophic pursuit of multiculturalism’; while a contribution to an online discussion forum described them as ‘the children of Britain’s own multicultural society’ whose actions smashed the multicultural consensus ‘to smithereens’ (cited in Modood, 2007: 12). A number of commentators have noted the discrepancy in this, for the young men recruited for suicide missions were not, on the whole, living ghettoized lives of cultural conservatism or economic marginalization, and it would be difficult to specify the ‘multicultural’ policies that supposedly encouraged them in their political and religious beliefs. Our starting point for this issue is a further discrepancy. The fears of terrorism are, at their most basic, fears about the activities of young men. But as these feed into attacks on ‘misguided versions of multiculturalism’, the critique of minority cultures and religions is played out largely on the bodies of young women.

We argue in this issue that the rights of women have come to play an important role in the current retreat from multiculturalism. When we consider what is most commonly offered, in both popular and policy discourse, as evidence of a conflict over fundamental values, we find issues relating to the treatment of girls and women figuring large: women wearing hijab; girls subjected to genital cutting; young people forced by their families into marriage with unknown and unwanted spouses; young women murdered by family members for behaviour said to offend principles of community honour. The repudiation of homosexuality by leading Muslim clerics is sometimes cited as a further example of the conflict of values, but

somewhat less so. This may be because it can be more readily assumed that 'we' in the majority group all support gender equality, but not so easily asserted that 'we' all regard homosexuality as fine. Migrants to Denmark now have to sign a contract stating that they accept the principle of gender equality, and recognize that female circumcision and forced marriage are illegal in Denmark. As the articles in this special issue indicate, there are broadly similar trends elsewhere.

When countries draw up their list of the core values that must not be sacrificed to the requirements of cultural sensitivity, they refer, as one might expect, to values such as democracy and toleration. But they almost always also include the equality of the sexes in a prominent position. Attitudes towards women are taken as especially significant in exposing the gap between majority and minority cultures, and degrees of integration are sometimes measured by degrees of assent to women's rights. It is typically argued, moreover, that previous practices of multiculturalism have encouraged public officials to turn a blind eye to the ill-treatment of women. Part of the shift from the now discredited multiculturalism is therefore to a more interventionist state (although outside the integration agenda, this may coincide with a reduction in state intervention). Those committed to the principle of gender equality are called upon to be more assertive than in the past in challenging the misogynist practices of minority cultural groups.

To varying degrees in the different countries, these arguments have shaped public policy. Governments have become more proactive in identifying and addressing problems of forced marriage, 'honour' killing, or culturally sanctioned abuses of children; and tackling violence against women in minority cultural groups has become a more visible part of the political agenda in many countries in Europe. In recent cases regarding the wearing of the hijab, where violence towards women is hardly at stake, the arguments also commonly revolve around the status of women and girls. Headscarf bans are partly defended in terms of sustaining the public neutrality of state institutions (as in the French legislation that bans the wearing of conspicuous symbols of religious affiliation at school). However, there is nearly always a subsidiary argument that represents any requirement for women to cover their heads as a particularly pernicious example of unequal treatment, or defends a hijab ban as protecting young women from the coercion of their parents and peers.

Part of our objective, in this issue, is simply to draw attention to the role played by the rights of women in the current crisis of multiculturalism, a role that has gone largely unnoticed in academic commentary. Ten years ago, contestations around multicultural policy mostly proceeded without any mention of either gender or sexual violence. People debated the different bases for cultural claims, the relationship between individual and group rights, the balance between common citizenship and respect for diversity, or the nature and limits of toleration, but largely pursued these

without reference to gender concerns. To give just one example, a substantial index to the influential collection *Ethnicity and Group Rights* (edited by Shapiro and Kymlicka, 1997) includes no entry for sex or sexual violence, three entries for gender, and only half a dozen for women (Gays fared slightly better). In two essays specifically devoted to toleration – a topic that might be thought to throw up particularly vexed questions about the treatment of girls and women – there is only a passing reference to clitoridectomy, and no apparent recognition that the toleration of cultural difference might be especially problematic as regards women's rights.

That this is now less likely owes much to feminism: to the work of Gita Saghal and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992), Susan Moller Okin (1998, 1999, 2002) and Ayelet Shachar (2001), who drew attention to the potential sacrifice of women's rights and interests in the pursuit of certain policies of multiculturalism; and to the political interventions of women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially those drawn from women in minority cultural communities, who were often sharply critical of multiculturalism. There is now a substantial body of literature exploring the damage that can be done to women in minority groups when the societies they live in adopt multiculturalism, the main argument being that multicultural policies shore up the power base of the older men within the community and encourage public authorities to tolerate practices that undermine women's equality. Feminist analysis of the risks has significantly refocused the debate, to the point where it is hard to imagine a sustained discussion of multiculturalism that now proceeds without *any* reference to gender or sexual violence.

Analysis of the backlash, however, has fallen back from this high. We hear a lot about the presumed failures of integration or supposed divergence of values driving the current retreat from multiculturalism, yet there has been little focus in the academic literature on what politicians or journalists commonly offer as the main example of value divergence – the presumed disagreements about women's rights. Abuses of girls and women figure high in the daily chit-chat through which people represent or misrepresent minority cultures, as in accusations that 'they' don't encourage their girls to continue in education, that 'they' punish sexual transgressions in females while tolerating similarly transgressive behaviour in males, that 'they' expect their wives to be docile and submissive, or don't allow women to work outside the home. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the preoccupation with oppressive gender relations in minority cultural groups is also increasingly evident in policy initiatives across Europe, where there is now a considerable amount of legislation and intervention designed to protect the rights of girls and women in minority groups.

Our *first* aim in this issue is thus to draw attention to the centrality of gender in current discourses around multiculturalism and open up the discussion about why this should be so. We do not take the preoccupation with women's rights at face value, for we are well aware that principles of

gender equality can be employed to promote a more restrictive immigration agenda, or deployed in ways that feed stereotypes about minority groups. The endorsement of gender equality as a defining feature of European politics is, at one level, very much to be welcomed. When, however, the rights of women figure as a marker of a modern liberal society, one of the key things differentiating such societies from ‘traditional’, non-western, illiberal ones, this encourages a stereotypical contrast between western and non-western values, and represents (all) migrants as less likely than those long established in Europe to accept the equality of the sexes.

This can operate as a cover for racist prejudice. Feminists have noted that when those in an ethnocultural minority insist on the need to defend ‘their’ practices and traditions, they invoke highly contested versions of these practices and traditions, and often defend ones that have been particularly harmful to women. This can be read as a kind of falsification or reification of tradition. But the falsification of tradition also occurs when those in an ethnocultural majority talk of protecting girls and women from the harmful practices of ‘their’ culture, and accept without question that the practice at issue is indeed a custom of the minority group. When something like forced marriage, for example, or honour killing is described as a ‘cultural practice’, this dignifies with the term ‘practice’ behaviour that may be widely condemned by cultural and religious leaders, and shunned by most members of the cultural group. Depending on how it is framed, the concern with women’s rights and protections can then become a proxy for attacks on minority groups. The principal effect may be to demonize minority cultural groups rather than improve the condition of women within them.

The recognition that multiculturalism may entail risks for minority women can then easily become squared with a belief that multiculturalism is (intrinsicly) bad for women. With this in mind, our *second* aim in this issue is to explore the ambiguities and tensions in current invocations of gender equality, recognizing and exploring the sometimes disingenuous role played by women’s rights, but without turning this into an apologia for practices harmful to women. Keeping these two elements continually in mind has been a central – and often difficult – part of our project. We have no wish to add to the criticisms and misrepresentations of minority groups, yet are aware that our work could have precisely this effect because it focuses – as do the critics of multiculturalism – on harmful practices associated primarily with minority groups. Selecting out genital cutting, honour killing, and forced marriage clearly does little to enhance the general appreciation of minority cultures. Avoiding these issues, however, is not the answer. When public authorities intervene to protect women’s rights, it is important that they do so in ways that are sensitive to cultural identities and interests, respect women’s autonomy, and do not give hostages to fortune in their attacks on cultural diversity or stereotyping of cultural groups. It is also important that they *do* intervene, and that the interventions are effective.

Analysing the perverse role played by notions of gender equality and the rights of women is not, in itself, enough, for there are also substantive issues of violence against women that need to be addressed and it is important to identify where public policy *can* make a difference, and what kinds of policy work best. How, that is, can public agencies most effectively intervene against practices that are harmful to women, without in the process adding to stereotypical representations of minority groups? In our answers to this question, we have generally opted for a strategy of comparison, asking, for example, to what extent patterns of domestic violence really do vary between majority and minority households; and how different policymakers in different countries approach the issues. One important question that surfaces through a number of the contributions is whether it is helpful to pursue what might be described as culturally specific policies, ones recognized by everyone as targeted at specific minority groups, or better to address such matters as genital cutting and honour related violence under the more general umbrella of violence against women. One finding – at least for some of the countries in our study – is that new coalitions are emerging between women’s organizations partly as a consequence of the central role of gender equality in debates about multiculturalism; where this happens, it promises to open new space for a resolution of the dilemmas we address.

Though we believe that our approach *has* been beneficial in recognizing the often ideological role played by women’s rights in discrediting multiculturalism whilst simultaneously stressing the urgent need for interventions against harms to women, we remain conscious of our vulnerability to critique. The contributors to this special issue of *Ethnicities* are overwhelmingly drawn from majority ethnocultural groups, and while we pay considerable attention to the work of minority women’s NGOs, drawing, in some of the articles, directly on interview material, we can hardly claim to represent minority women’s voices. As regards the issues we address here, it goes without saying that the discussion would benefit from representation of a wider range of experiences, for everyone speaks from a particular location – cultural, social, historical – and where we speak from matters a great deal. This is not, however, to say that we should silence ourselves until that wider representation of experiences and locations is achieved: that would suggest an inward looking and parochial feminism, very much at odds with ideas of global solidarity. Majority group members – male as well as female – have both a right and a responsibility to speak out against gender injustices wherever they find them; and there is no privileged position that gives some the right to speak and not others. What we need, however, is critical reflexivity, an awareness of the particular preoccupations likely to be associated with particular locations, and a willingness to reflect critically on these. Substantively, this can lead in unexpected directions. In our preliminary discussions, for example, we became aware that some of us were more reluctant to make arguments that could be twisted against minority cultural

groups than might be the case if we were, say, Kurdish women in Germany or Moroccan women in France, battling against oppressive forces in our own community. We had to learn not to focus so exclusively on the misrepresentations and cultural stereotypes that we ended up almost denying that there was a problem. We had to learn from those more directly engaged in tackling problems of violence against women to rebalance the two sides.

Our *third* aim in this issue is to contribute to the comparative analysis of the ways in which the gender story is being played out in redefinitions of national identity in Europe. Much of the theoretical literature addressing the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism originates from Canada and the USA, and has been driven by North American concerns. Much of the comparative literature developing typologies of multiculturalism in Europe suffers from a lack of attention to gender. The articles in this issue analyse developments in seven European countries: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the UK. The selection is not comprehensive (apart from anything else, these are all northern and western European countries), and the comparison is not systematic, in the sense of covering identical sets of data. But even within these limitations, we can begin to identify a typology of countries. Interestingly, this differs from the more standard typologies deployed in Europe, precisely because it focuses on gender.

There is, by now, a substantial literature in the political sociology of immigration and citizenship that proceeds through comparing national examples across Europe (e.g. Bodeman and Yurdakul, 2006; Joppke and Morawska, 2003; Koopmans et al., 2005). Inspired by the work of Rogers Brubaker (1992), this literature usually differentiates between countries with an ethnic or a civic conception of the nation, and more recently, those with a multicultural conception, and considers how the differing understandings of nationhood inform a country's immigration and integration policies. In this literature, Germany commonly figures as the classic example of a country with an ethnic conception of the nation, France embodies the civic conception, while the UK and the Netherlands represent the multicultural. One of the major research questions is then how significant these differences really are: for example, does the subsequent movement in Germany away from *jus sanguinis*, and in France away from *jus solis*, mean there is now less to choose between these two in their understandings of citizenship?³ Is there a process of convergence, as all parts of Europe become less multicultural? Or, to the contrary, a process of convergence as all become more multicultural?

When we take gender as the centre of attention, other kinds of question come into focus, and other patterns of differentiation take shape. Consider the Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway, Sweden. These have not figured especially large in the standard typologies, perhaps because they fall within the civic rather than ethnic conception of nationality, but have until

recently remained relatively homogeneous in their ethnic composition. Yet these are the countries that stand out as having a particularly strong gender equality mission, reflected in the high proportions of women in elected office, and social welfare regimes that provide substantial public funding for the typically feminized work of care. With the rights of women becoming an increasingly central trope in the debates on multiculturalism, these countries move into greater prominence – although to markedly different effect.

Denmark became, of course, a household name for its seeming refusal of multicultural sensitivity through the so-called cartoon affair; but for anyone working on gender issues, has long been especially interesting (not to say, infamous) for the severe restrictions on family reunification introduced as part of a programme to combat forced marriages. Norway, not normally seen as especially multicultural in its policies or practices, has concluded that bans on hijab are a form of sex discrimination; unusually, therefore, it has employed principles of gender equality to defend the wearing of headscarves rather than attack it. Sweden's commitment to gender equality has been instrumental in putting honour crime firmly on the political agenda, and there has been a shift from a simpler 'multicultural' stance, with the courts initially willing to consider cultural arguments in mitigation of honour killing, to a perception that such arguments worsen the nature of the crime. The material gathered here marks a first stage in making sense of these differences, and we have not attempted to generate anything like a complete alternative typology. But just as the categorization of welfare regimes had to be significantly revised after feminists drew attention to the missing gender agenda (Lewis, 1993), so too can we anticipate that typologies of citizenship will have to be significantly revised when the role played by gender is more fully acknowledged.

One aspect that already comes out from our studies is the difference between countries in terms of the nature and involvement of minority women's NGOs. Mobilization in Belgium and Germany, for example, turns out to be unexpectedly strong; this cuts across one common view of German immigrant associations as excessively oriented around homeland issues and loyalties because of their relative exclusion from participation in German politics (Koopmans et al., 2005: 126–34). This seems to be less the case for women's organizations. In the UK, the fact that women's NGOs so often anticipated government and the media in identifying problems of forced marriage or honour crime has helped turn what might otherwise be a politics of cultural stereotyping in more positive directions. In Belgium, mobilization around gender issues seems to confound the expected contrast between a more francophone, civic republican Walloon, and a more corporatist, multicultural Flanders. In all cases, the prospects for effective defence of women's rights seem to be significantly enhanced where there are a range of women's organizations proposing and testing out a variety of approaches and initiatives, and getting sufficient access to policy circles to contribute to

the debates. Recent UK legislation providing greater civil protection against forced marriage provides a good illustration of this.

The articles in this special issue represent part of a larger project, which ran from 2004–2006, and was funded by the Nuffield Foundation in the UK. It came out of our recognition that the rights of women *were* becoming entangled with both the media and policy debates on multiculturalism, that policies and debates were being transported from one country to another, and that there were very similar flash points across Europe regarding such matters as hijab, forced marriage, honour crime, or female genital cutting (FGC). It was difficult, however, to put together a coherent picture of what was happening, both because the primary source material (policy documents, legal judgments, media reports) was mainly available only in the national languages, and because people were still at a relatively early stage in theorizing these developments. We organised two conferences, a preliminary workshop in London in 2005, followed by a larger conference in Amsterdam in 2006, and commissioned a number of country studies (of which this special issue of *Ethnicities* represents a selection) as well as some more thematic debates.

Our final list of participants for the second conference, including people making panel contributions as well as those preparing country studies, were: Haleh Afshar, Sabine Berghahn, Anja Bredal, Gily Coene, Moira Dustin, Martin Frank, Halleh Ghorashi, Aisha Gill, Zenia Hellgren, Barbara Hobson, Elizabeth Holzleithner, Riva Kastoryano, Chia Longman, Anne Phillips, Baukje Prins, Petra Rostock, Sawitri Saharso, Birte Siim, Hege Skjeie, Martine Spensky, Sabine Strasser, and Julia Szalai. We are very grateful to all participants, particularly those involved in the second conference. We are also very grateful to Avigail Eisenberg and Birgit Sauer for providing detailed comments and suggestions on the articles. Drawing on the material produced for the conference, Moira Dustin produced a summary account of the main legislative and policy initiatives across Europe, identifying factors that threaten to undermine initiatives to protect minority women, and approaches that enhance their effectiveness. This report, *Gender Equality, Cultural Diversity: European Comparisons and Lessons* (Dustin, 2006) is available on request from LSE Gender Institute, or can be downloaded from the Institute's website.

Notes

- 1 Although analysts have noted that the state proved more willing than the rhetoric might suggest to engage with citizens through their ethnocultural associations (see Kastoryano, 2002).
- 2 The main exception being the gradual codification of land, language, and political representation rights for the Sami people. For an overview of cultural and political rights in nine European countries, see Lister et al., 2007.

- 3 Changes in Germany's Nationality Act in 2000 now make it easier for non-ethnic Germans to obtain German nationality, while making it more difficult for ethnic Germans. In France, meanwhile, the cultural requirements for obtaining French citizenship have been made heavier in recent years (see Koopmans et al., 2005, Lister et al., 2007).

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