

Empowering Women against Structural and Cultural Inequalities

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The role and status of women in any society is not a given. However, without doubt the status of women remains constrained by structural and cultural inequalities in terms of perceptions about what they can and cannot do, and in terms of the actual discrimination they face in their everyday lives. In what follows, the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey upon which I base my analysis shows some variations in general attitudes towards the role of women in society between respondents from select European countries and those of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM), reflecting in some cases the persistence of patriarchal structures and norms in the latter group. It would be a mistake, however, to suggest outrightly that attitudes towards women's contributions to political and social lives are more positive in European societies in practice. In reality, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that women in major industrialised countries, including in Europe, have been disadvantaged by their social and familial responsibilities, if not by persistent social inequalities, particularly in lower income households. It is important, therefore, to reflect on how we can use the findings to enhance opportunities for women and promote their self-confidence and empowerment through intercultural initiatives. This article will explore the social impact of intercultural cooperation in terms of its impact on attitudes towards gender roles and other perceived societal gains.

Attitudes and perceptions

The Survey explores attitudes and perceptions towards women's current and future roles in society, with respondents in Europe generally displaying more positive attitudes towards women holding public or political roles than respondents in SEM countries. In SEM countries, only 39% of respondents believe that women should play a greater role in government and politics. This ranks lowest of all the domains asked about, which included the future role of women in sport (44%), in the media (49%), business (52%), science and technology (64%), education, arts and culture (64%) and looking after children and the home (80%) (Chart 10.1).

In contrast, over half the respondents in the European countries surveyed feel that women should play a greater role in government and politics (53%), with very few – only 2% – believing they should play a lesser role. In SEM countries, 29% said women should play a lesser role in the future.

Across the SEM countries, the resistance to women playing a greater role in government and politics could be attributed to worries that women taking on a more prominent role in politics and public life would challenge patriarchal structures and negatively impact childcare. Male respondents in the SEM countries are less likely than female respondents to want to see women playing a greater role in government and politics

(35% compared with 42%, respectively) and more likely than female respondents to want to see women playing a lesser role in government and politics (33% compared with 24%, respectively).

The specific social and economic dynamics of each country influence representations and responses. When studying the data more closely, country by country, Lebanon and Mauritania bucked the trend, with 66% of respondents in Lebanon and 71% of respondents in Mauritania voting for a larger role for women in government and politics (Charts 10.2 and 10.3).

These results, however, must be analysed in their socio-political context. Although 66% of respondents in Lebanon say they are in favour of an increased role for women in politics, in practice Lebanese women are yet to crack the political glass ceiling and continue to make only piecemeal advancements. Indeed, in 2020 – the year the Survey was carried out – Lebanon ranked 149th out of a total of 152 countries in the political empowerment index according to the Global Gender Gap index, with one of the lowest rates of women’s political participation in the region. The low rates of women’s political participation are attributable not only to women’s underrepresentation in formal political positions but also to some structural or cultural factors that sustain this reality – including personal status codes, social perceptions of women that identifies them more to the private realms of the family and the household, the limited legal protections afforded to women, and the processes of gendered citizenship more broadly – have been well documented (for example, Al-Ali 2008; Joseph 2010; Kelly and Breslin 2010).

The role of women in family and at home remains prime in SEM countries: eight in ten (80%) respondents in this region believe that women should play a greater role in looking after children and the home and only 3% a lesser role. This compares to just over two in ten (22%) in Europe who think women should play a greater role in the future (and 18% who say they should have a lesser role). This attitude is prevalent across all the SEM countries surveyed (Algeria (86%), Mauritania (85%), Jordan (82%), Morocco (73%) and Lebanon (71%)), another reflection of the patriarchal structure with women often seen as child-bearers and housewives.

Another representation of this is that 68% of respondents in SEM countries believe that women should play a greater role in education, arts and culture, second only to their role at home. This reflects general attitudes that women are more suited to so-called soft careers that are viewed as less demanding.

These findings may reflect the importance that SEM respondents give to maintaining and supporting religious beliefs and practices. When asked about their key values when raising children, 65% of SEM respondents said that ‘maintaining religious beliefs and practices’ would be their ‘most important’ or ‘second most important’ value, followed by 40% who said that ‘family solidarity’ and 40% who said that ‘obedience’ would be their ‘most important’ or ‘second most important’ values. On the other hand, only 29% of SEM

respondents say that 'respect for other cultures' is their 'most important' or 'second most important' value when raising children.

Conversely, the Survey data show that European respondents perceive family solidarity (49%) and respect for other cultures (54%) to be more important than religious beliefs/practices (8%) or obedience (11%) when raising children.

This raises the question, to what extent can intercultural dialogue support women's empowerment within the confines of religious and cultural value systems? The Survey data suggest that people of various religions and cultures do nevertheless see a role for intercultural dialogue in creating positive social change, particularly respondents in SEM countries. Indeed, 51% of SEM respondents believe that closer cooperation with countries in Europe will 'definitely' lead to societal gains relating to gender equality. More than six in ten (63%) in SEM countries also think greater cooperation will lead to gains with regards to recognising cultural diversity (Chart 10.4).

Conclusion

The Survey data suggest that attitudes are changing, particularly in places like Lebanon and Mauritania where respondents see a greater role for women in the public as well as private sphere. We also see respondents supporting a greater role for women in the arts and cultural sphere, as well as in the media. It is perhaps through these roles that we will see women actively engaged in improving their situation and in initiating dialogue and cooperation with women from other cultures.

Nevertheless, while persistent contemporary debate relates to the empowerment of women, confusion remains over what this means. For some in the West, there is a belief that only a concerted move towards a Western-style political culture that delegates religion and ideology to the home space would open the way for the empowerment of women elsewhere.

However, research and critical scholars (such as Nancy Fraser, 1990) have long noted that making a crude binary between what is private and what is public has deflected attention from how women themselves perceive their own empowerment and what they seek in life. In this sense, we can expect that while religion, patriarchal cultures and ideology are possibly restraining elements for women's empowerment, negatively impacting their chances for public participation, this might not be the view of the women we are studying or researching.

In addition, what it means to be an 'empowered woman' in SEM countries (and in Europe for this matter) depends on their own situated experiences, socio-economic conditions, country-specific regulations related to women's rights and well-being and, importantly, to opportunities for improvement and development for women.

In recent years, women's global activism has been most visible through the #metoo movement, through which women have pursued their rights and their status as social

and political actors. The question that we need to answer now is how activism on the ground and the exchange of ideas and images through social media networks can help change women's participation and attitudes towards their participation. It is in these movements, where women have identified their own local definition of empowerment, that women should be supported. Organisations working on intercultural dialogue can support such women-led endeavours and practices that cut across cultures and regions without treading on sensitive ideological and religious issues.