

# Gender in intercultural perspective

Gender is a controversial issue because the temptations to either reject a traditional culture, or to idealise it, are at work. Moreover, gender is about power and resources, and has to do with cultural and personal values. Gender issues are particularly hard to incorporate into ongoing discussions.

development debate, and often dominates the discussions.

In many cultures the participation of women in the different domains seems to be very limited, and the position of women outright difficult. Many women are faced with the dowry system in marriage, female genital mutilation, limited rights to take part in decisions, strict labour division, overburdened labour, relative under-nutrition, and limited access to political and spiritual leadership. But, how do women in those cultures think about these issues themselves? How should we examine these issues without criticising or romanticising? How can their voices be heard under circumstances of restricted participation?

tance of women in reproduction. Women traditional leaders are especially powerful in aspects related to health, reproduction, childcare and nutrition. In Zimbabwe for example, the female spiritual leaders are very powerful - the spirit mediums. Nevertheless, very often, women are limited in their position.

In an intercultural dialogue, it is legitimate that controversial items are raised as subjects for debate. Endogenous development, building on local resources, leadership, knowledge and values, may find it particularly difficult to deal with gender issues, as the gender roles are often clearly defined by traditional values. Yet, it would be a mistake to suggest that the process of women's liberation as it has taken place in the west would be the sole model for other societies. Endogenous development will always need to be gender sensitive, but also culture sensitive.

gender related controversies in endogenous development. Other issues that could be debated on this theme could include the way the cosmovision or worldview of women differs from that of men, or the difference in values and objectives between women and men. To what extent does the perceived relationship between the natural, human and spiritual domains differ between men and women? What are the problems involved and what possibilities are there to improve them by building on the own tradition and leadership?

In each situation it is important to pose the question to what extent would men and women need a different approach when it comes to activities that can support local initiatives. To what extent should there be a gender difference when it comes to building on local values, needs and capacities? Are there differences in the methodology that can be used to improve local knowledge and skills, and to enhance local control of development options? How can we stimulate the inclusion of a gender focus in the identification of development niches, the selective use of external resources, and the retention of the benefits in the local area?

How can we base the exchange between cultures, as well as training and capacity building, on the concepts used by men and women? A true

understanding of culture-based gender concepts, and addressing these in a culturally sensitive way, stand at the roots of endogenous development.



## Western bias

During the last decades gender issues have consistently been raised in the debates and programmes of development. For a long time the focus of gender thinking has been on the negative impact of development on women, the gender division of labour, and the gender specific constraints in access to and control over resources. Undoubtedly these international discussions on gender differences and gender relations have been influenced by the particular focus on gender in the west. Women in the west historically had no right to vote, to own property, to be educated or to take part in decision making. As a result of the 'women's liberation movements' the participation of women in politics, education and economic life has increased, though the main centres of power and leadership are still in male hands.

This western concept of women's liberation has also been introduced in the

## Intercultural gender perspective

One of the possibilities for starting such a dialogue is to look at the gender concepts within the different cosmovisions. In many traditional cultures a complementarity between opposite forces is a central element of their thinking. Men and women are not equal, but have complementary roles of equal importance. The men, for example, perform rituals, the women prepare the accompanying food and drinks for all involved. This, of course, provides the women with a certain role, security and social structure in which to function, as well as natural way of learning for girls.

Female cosmovision concepts are especially related to the Earth and to reproduction. The earth is perceived as *Pachamama* in Latin America, and as 'mother or womb' in Africa. The Indian notion of 'sacred seeds' which are nurtured by women, reflects the impor-

## Experiences and questions

In this issue, Kahandawa (p.29) presents an interesting experience of a discussion amongst women farmers on taboos related to the menstrual cycle. De Zoysa (p.31) adds a reflection on the same subject from the Buddhist perspective. Tengeza (29) explains how male traditional leaders were motivated to share their knowledge with women and youth. Hountondji (p.7) and Waris Dirie (p.45) discuss aspects related to female circumcision. Obviously, these issues only cover a few of all the

**To what extent should gender differences be taken into account when it comes to building on local values, needs and capacities?**