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WOMEN'S LOT IN WORLD-WIDE PERSPECTIVE

There is a rich literature on gender relations in Europe, but the question of women's situation outside Europe should also be researched. The times of globalisation call for a comparative investigation and confrontation.

In the vast territories of Asia, Africa, Central and South America, in such states, for instance, as Japan, China, Burma, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Iran, as well as in Arab countries, women's situation is still shaped by tribal tradition and religious systems. The position of women is better in the countries where Buddhism is the predominant religion for Buddhism proclaims the equality of all people, preaches a life of restraint, even asceticism, renounces violence and strives after perfection and nirvana. Buddhism allows both men and women to choose monastic life, to be lamas and spiritual teachers (only to mention Khandro Rinpoche, a female lama in Tibet). The situation of women under Confucianism with its patriarchal rules, and especially under Islam, is worse. Although the *Koran* does not openly encourage discrimination, many of its formulations are ambiguous¹. The result is that in Muslim countries where Sharia law is in force women's freedom is severely restricted and their dress and behaviour are subordinated to specific rules (they are shut up at home, have to wear a special

¹ For Islam, see: H. Lammens, *L'Islam: croyances et institutions*, Beirut 1926; S. F. Mahmud, *A Short History of Islam*, Oxford 1963; *The World of Islam: Faith, People and Culture*, ed. by B. Lewis, London 1976.

long dress which especially covers the hair and the face, they have no right to their children, etc.)².

The situation is in general aggravated by stereotypes and beliefs deeply entrenched in mentality — in the females' mentality too. In the years 2004–2005 intellectuals from the World Health Organisation (WHO) interrogated 24,000 women, aged 15–49, in Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Peru, Namibia, Samoa, Thailand and Tanzania. 30 per cent of Japanese and 70 per cent of Ethiopian and Peruvian women confessed they were beaten by their partners; they were often kicked in the stomach when they were pregnant. More than 50 per cent women believe that man has the right to beat the woman and that the wife has no right to avoid sexual intercourse with her HIV positive husband.

To explain such attitudes we have to research the historical development of countries whose culture is rather hostile to women.

In Japan patriarchal family has for ages dominated in the country's social structure, especially among the samurai. In the lower strata, the family was in theory ruled by the father, but the mother's voice counted too. In many middle-class families, the so-called *bushi* (ordinary warriors), economic decisions and money were in the hands of women, who also controlled the upbringing of children and supervised the servants. Aristocrats practised polygamy and did not abstain from love affairs, but the *bushi* were monogamous. The peasants were very tolerant of premarital sex, there was no cult of virginity among the peasantry, but infidelity on the part of a married woman was severely punished. The inheritance rights of daughters were gradually restricted in Japan, despite the fact that the predominant religions, Shintoism and Buddhism, did not discriminate against women and in Shintoism priestesses performed important functions in judicature and medicine. It may have been the influence of Confucianism that led to the gradual deterioration of women's situation. In today's Japan family life is based on patriarchal principles, it is the duty of wives to bear children and do the housework. After World War II the constitution officially introduced the equality of men and women, which gave females access to the same education. In 1948 abortion was legalised. Nevertheless, wage-earning

² Cf. E. Machut-Mendecka, *Świetlana twarz muzulmanki (The Luminous Face of the Muslim Woman)*, "Znak" 1998, January (1), pp. 28–36.

women occupy minor posts. Men, engrossed in their professional work, usually relax outside their homes (in the company of geishas, educated young women who beguile men's leisure time with conversation, music and singing). In 1957 the law forbade prostitution, which led to a drop in the number of geishas (from 80,000 to 8,000). In the last few years emancipation trends have been gaining strength in Japan; young university women, female writers and journalists do not accept the traditional way of life³. There were speculations that Aiko, the grand-daughter of Emperor Akihito, would inherit the Japanese throne. The birth of a male successor put an end to such hopes.

In China the birth of a girl was for ages regarded as a calamity; she was often either killed at once or sold when she was a few years old. Polygamy and various forms of concubinage were widespread until the middle of the 20th century. Since Lilliputian feet were thought to be ideal, little girls had their feet bandaged to prevent them from growing, which turned upper-class women into cripples who could hardly walk. Only peasant families did not observe this custom. It was the communist revolution in the middle of the 20th century that abolished it (as well as polygamy and concubinage). Chinese culture was under a strong influence of Confucianism which promotes patriarchal principles of family organisation and proclaims the theory of two elements — the *yin*, a dark, negative, evil, female element, and the *yang*, a bright, strong, positive, creative male element — which clash with each other and are the source of all natural phenomena. Hence the strict division in China into male and female occupations, the division of homes into a male and a female part, the subordination of women, and male domination⁴.

Despite the communist revolution and the introduction of equality between the genders, the old customs are coming back to life in today's China. Concubinage, banned in 1949, is return-

³ For Japan cf. S. Akimoto, *The Japanese Way of Life*, Tokio 1961; M. Anasaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, Tokio 1963; L. Frédéric, *La vie quotidienne au Japon à l'époque des samourai*, Paris 1968; F. Joüon des Longrais, *La condition de la femme au Japon aux XIIIe et XIIIe siècles*, in "Recueil de la Société Jean Bodin", vol. IX, *La Femme*, Bruxelles 1959; G. Sansom, *A History of Japan*, vols. I-II, London 1961; idem, *Japan, A Short Cultural History*, New York 1943.

⁴ Cf. M. Granet, *La civilisation chinoise*, Paris 1929; idem, *La pensée chinoise*, Paris 1930; idem, *La religion des Chinois*, Paris 1951; K. S. Latourette, *The Chinese — Their History and Culture*, New York 1964.

ing by a roundabout way, via Hong Kong. For some time it has been a popular custom among Hong Kong entrepreneurs to have a concubine in mainland China, in addition to an official wife in Hong Kong. In mainland China, too, many corrupt dignitaries have concubines. The law envisages punishment for bigamy and concubinage but in practice punishment is not exacted. The Confucian patriarchal patterns are still very strong in culture and customs.

The conditions in Taiwan are different. Women account for twenty per cent of the parliament members and for a quarter of the island's government. Taiwan has a liberal abortion law, women have equal inheritance rights with men, and the clause which in case of divorce automatically awarded custody of children to the father has been struck off the family code.

Conditions are more favourable for women also in Malaysia, a multinational state with many religions (60% of the population is Muslim) inhabited by Malays, Chinese and Hindus. Debates are being held there on Koranic law and on relations between the spouses in Muslim families (for instance, whether the husband has the right to enforce sexual intercourse on his wife). Malaysia is a signatory to the international convention on equal rights for women. Malaysian women even perform some spiritual functions: they are members of Koranic courts and since 2004 the chief *mufti* has had a female deputy. It was recalled during the discussion which preceded these decisions that ages ago the caliphs had consulted A'ishah, Mohammed's wife.

As a result of the age-long mixture of many races, languages and cultures on the Indian peninsula, the demographic, cultural and religious conditions there are very complex. In the past India was conquered by the Persians, Greeks, Scythes, Mogols and British, and the Vedic religion, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Islam coexisted there, though not without conflicts. Woman's status deteriorated gradually, especially among the upper castes and classes; slightly more liberal conditions prevailed among the peasants and craftsmen, for since women belonging to these groups had to work and did work hard, it was difficult to separate them from the world, to make them cover their face, and place them in separate quarters. Education, however, prepared girls of all social groups for motherhood, and marriages were arranged by parents. Under a widespread cus-

tom, called *sati*, widows were immolated on the funeral pyre of their husband. Polygamy was frequent. Only nuns could remain unmarried. In more prosperous families girls received a certain education, they were either taught at home or by a local teacher (*guru*). They learned housework, painting, music and weaving. The inheritance law favoured sons. Prostitution was widespread in towns, and professional courtesans waited on aristocrats. Today India is one of the few countries in which men outnumber women. At the beginning of the 20th century there were 972 women for every 1,000 men in India, at the beginning of the current century only 933. This is due to the fact that a female infant has a smaller chance to survive for less care is taken of her than of an infant boy. In 1994 prenatal examinations were made illegal; the aim of the law was to prevent abortions, which were frequent when the foetus was female. When a marriage is contracted, the girl's parents are expected to contribute a high dowry. It does happen that when the dowry is inadequate or has not been paid, the young wife is harassed or even killed (usually doused with oil and burned). Women are still burned on their husband's funeral pyre, though officially the custom has been abolished. But the plight of widows is hard; dressed in white, a symbol of mourning, they drag out a wretched existence on the margin of their family⁵.

In Bangladesh every year several hundred women are doused with nitrous acid and maimed. The number of victims is growing. According to the Bangladeshi Human Rights Coordinating Council, 89 women were maimed in 1996, 163 a year later, and as many as 180 in 1998. The aggressors are usually rejected lovers or husbands dissatisfied with the dowry. Sometimes this is a way of settling a family quarrel. The feminist organisation *Naripakkho* helps the victims, who are usually very young (aged 11–20). The 130 million strong Bangladesh has only five hospitals treating burns and none of them can carry out a plastic face operation, necessary in such cases. A few years ago capital punishment was introduced in the penal code for an attack with nitrous acid but no death sentence has so far been pronounced; the usual sen-

⁵ For general information on the history and culture of India see: A. L. Basham (ed.), *A Cultural History of India*, Oxford 1975; *Cambridge History of India* (collective work), vols. I–VI, Cambridge 1922–1937; J. Kieniewicz, *Historia Indii (A History of India)*, Warszawa 1980; R. C. Majumdar, *The History and Culture of Indian People*, vols. I–X, Bombay 1951.

tence is imprisonment for a few years and many law suits are simply discontinued. Most cases are not reported to the police for fear of revenge.

Islam is the dominant religion in Bangladesh. Women are subordinated to their fathers and husbands. They rarely appear alone in public places. According to the Bangladeshi National Association of Women Lawyers, the number of crimes against women, including murder and rape, had doubled in 1998, compared with previous years. Every year 10,000 girls and women are lured by promises of work or marriage and sent out of the country; no more than 8 per cent of them are ever found.

Similar conditions exist in Pakistan, where tribal tradition is still strong, especially in rural areas. *Vani* is a traditional custom in which young Pakistani women are traded between families in resolution of a dispute, usually a murder. The family of an accused murderer promises to give one or two of their women, sometimes very young (2 or 3 years old) in marriage. 10 or 15 years later, after the girl has reached maturity, the wedding day arrives. It is devoid of all ceremonies. The woman is delivered to her husband without any celebrations, in ordinary clothes and often as a second or third wife. She is treated like an animal. A law against *vani* was passed in 2004, but it is still functioning in the countryside, defended by conservative clan elders.

Every year several hundred women are murdered in Pakistan by their relatives for tarnishing the family's honour; this "honour killing" is resorted to when a wife is suspected of betraying her husband or dares to demand divorce. Every year some 300 Pakistani women are burned and just as many are beaten to death or doused with nitrous acid. Women fall victim to collective ritual rape, which is watched by the whole village, they are tortured and humiliated. An independent human rights commission set up at the government's request has found out that in the province of Punjab more than 850 women were tortured to death in 1998–1999 by male family members. In most cases the local courts acquitted the perpetrators on the ground that the women were guilty of "immoral conduct" (premarital sex, love affair outside marriage, or attempt to flee from a sadistic husband). According to PACAWOM, an association which looks after human rights in south-east Asia, more than 3,700 women were hospitalised

in 1995–1999 after being doused with petrol or acid. Half of them died. In most cases the perpetrators remained unpunished.

“Honour killing” attracted the attention of international public opinion for the first time in 1989, when a 29-year old woman lawyer, Samia Serwar, was shot dead in the office of a Canadian human rights organisation, in the centre of Islamabad. The murder was ordered by the woman’s parents who objected to their daughter’s intention to divorce. The Pakistani government has not done much in this case, although in 2000 General Pervez Musharraf declared that Islam did not approve of murdering women in defence of family honour. The Arkat association of women, which defends women’s rights in Pakistan, points out that serious changes are necessary in the law and, first and foremost, in patriarchal traditions which shape the mentality of even the educated Pakistanis of high social status. In January 2003 the United States asked Pakistan to lift the diplomatic immunity of its ambassador to the United States who was beating his wife and was accused by her of violence.

In Iran the Shah Riza Pahlavi was an advocate of women’s emancipation. During his reign women were allowed to show their faces and wear mini skirts and modern hair styles. In 1963 Iranian women were granted suffrage and their representatives were elected to parliament. In 1979 the Islamic revolution overthrew the Shah. Ayatollah Khomeini and the mullahs forced women to cover their faces again and ordered a strict gender segregation. The two women who had been government members under the Shah were sentenced to death (one fled abroad). Women were removed from the post of judges and a rule was introduced in judicature that testimonies by two women would be necessary to annul the deposition of one man. In buses women had to take back seats. The new rules allowed them to go out only in the company of a close male family member (father, husband, brother), a fact which had to be testified to by a written document. If they contravened this regulation they were arrested, subjected to virginity control, lashed and imprisoned. From the age of nine Iranian females can be treated only by women doctors (including dentists). Polygamy was reintroduced (a man can have up to four wives). The husband may divorce his wife without stating the reason. The old custom of temporary marriage — the so-called *sighe* — was reintroduced. *Sighe* is a union between

man and woman contracted for a day, a week, a month or any other time and is then automatically dissolved. In practice *sighe* is a legal form of prostitution. It exists only in Iran and is not allowed in other Muslim countries.

Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared that women's equality was "a negative, primitive, queer" idea. It was established under his rule that violation of the garment rules (envisaging that the hair and the whole body must be covered up) would be punished by 74 lashes and that public stoning would be a penalty for adultery. Even pregnant women were executed and virgins were raped by the executioner before the execution (to exclude them from paradise). Women were removed from all posts in the administration, they were only allowed to work in education and the health service. They had to have their husband's written permission, if they wanted to travel⁶.

The situation changed slightly for the better under the presidency of Mohammed Khatami, who was regarded as a "liberal". He came to power thanks to the votes of women and young Iranians who secretly favoured the western lifestyle. What is striking is women's progress in education in spite of discrimination. At the end of the 1970s, 30 per cent of all university students were women, in 2004 already nearly 60 per cent. Nevertheless, the lifts in universities are reserved for boys, females have to use the stairs. Female students entering university buildings are searched and, if a lipstick is found in their pockets, they are sent back home.

Despite the discrimination and restrictions some Iranian women gain renown and authority. In 1998 a well educated woman, Masoumeh Ebtekar, became vice-president of Iran. Public opinion was stirred when in October 2003 the Nobel peace prize was awarded to an Iranian woman lawyer Shirin Ebadi. She was a judge before the Islamic revolution; she is now working at Teheran University and practises as a lawyer. She had been frequently arrested and even sentenced to prison (suspended sentences) for defending human rights, especially the rights of women and children.

In Iraq women's situation was in the 1980s influenced by the country's war against Iran. As in Europe during the two world

⁶ J. Strebek, *Fundamentalizm religijny. W Iranie po 19 latach (Religious Fundamentalism. In Iran after 19 Years)*, "Znak", January 1998 (1), pp. 48–60.

wars, men were engaged in fighting, so women increased their activity, taking up work in schools, hospitals and offices. When the war ended, Saddam Hussein tried to send the women back home in order to calm down Islamic priests and neighbouring Arab countries. Nevertheless, there are many energetic, educated women in Iraq who find it hard to accept the male domination, which is evident in Iraq (women have no right to go into the main mosque in Baghdad, they may not enter other mosques by the main door, they must make way for men, etc.). Iraq had an ardent advocate of women's rights, Akila-al-Hassimi, a female lawyer who did not cover her face and did not hide her hair; she was one of the three women on the Iraqi Governing Council; she died on September 25, 2003, following an attack on her car in Baghdad. The new constitution adopted at the beginning of 2004 has been criticised by Iraqi women. Their lot, like the fate of the whole country, is still uncertain.

In addition to Iran and Iraq, the Arab countries on the Persian Gulf also deserve an analysis from the point of view of women's situation. Since the end of the 20th century there has been a tendency in these countries to give women greater rights, even though Sharia law and polygamy are still in force there. In Kuwait, Emir Sheikh al-Ahmad al-Sabah tried to introduce women's equality into the constitution in 1999 but his endeavours were blocked by parliament. The emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad ibn Khalifa al-Sani was more successful; in 1999 the Qatari women were the first women on the Persian Gulf to go to the polls. In May 2003, Mrs Ahmed-al-Mahmud became minister of education in Qatar, the first woman minister on the Persian Gulf. Together with the emir's wife, Mrs Moza-al-Mia, they set to work to reform the education; both ladies appear in public with their faces uncovered (but they wear headscarves).

In Qatar many women are working in offices, banks and schools. In the streets they seldom appear without a dress called *burka*, which envelopes their body from the top of the head to the ground, but in the workplaces they are dressed in the Western way. Nevertheless, gender segregation is compulsory in schools, at universities and in offices. Marriages are arranged by parents.

The number of women employed in Qatar's state sector increased by 61 per cent in the second half of the 1990s. There are many female students at Qatar's university, but they are

separated from men by a 3-metre high wall. In 2001 women were allowed to study engineering, a department which was previously reserved for men. In August 2003, a woman, Dr. Abdullah-al-Misnad, became rector of Qatar University. Successive nominations of women followed in October: Mrs Galia-al-Sani became chairwoman of the National Committee for the Protection and Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons, and Mrs Hessa-al-Sani became deputy head of the Supreme Council for Family Issues. Mrs Mariam al-Djabor, a lawyer, became the first female prosecutor in the whole Persian Gulf region.

Bahrain, a small emirate on the Persian Gulf, is following in Qatar's footsteps. By virtue of the emir's decision the women of Bahrain went to the polls in 2002; many women are active in social life, business and culture.

Saudi Arabia, a country ruled by the secular Saudi dynasty and by the conservative Supreme Ulema Council, is undoubtedly the most hostile to women in the region. When the British Queen visited Saudi Arabia several years ago, the hosts gave her the title of honorary man to enable her to sit at the main table during dinner. If the ulema had their way, women would not be admitted to schools. But in the 1960s king Faisal imposed his will on the ulema and Saudi Arabia is now spending nearly 3,000 million dollars a year on women's education. 58 per cent of the students are women. Faisal's successor, King Abdullah, also supported women's education and work outside their home. Nevertheless, only 275,000 women, that is no more than 5.5% of educated females, are working, less than 2% of all persons employed; they work mostly in schools and hospitals; ca 70,000 women are working in businesses (they run shops, organise supplies of goods, but mostly from behind the scenes, from their homes through male intermediaries or through internet). But despite difficulties and restrictions, they run many enterprises. It is estimated that 70% of the fluid capital in banks belongs to women. Discrimination against women is however so strong that they are not allowed to drive. If they are suspected of adultery, they are stoned; those accused of disgracing family honour may be killed with impunity. There is a Society for the Promotion of Virtue and for Struggle against Vice in Saudi Arabia which pries into private lives to find out whether any woman violates the countless restrictions and taboos imposed on her sex. In March

2002 a fire broke out in a female boarding school in Mecca. 700 girls, aged 13–17, tried to escape, but members of the Muslim religious guard turned them back into the fire for they did not wear the prescribed garments, their hair and face were uncovered. Fifteen girls perished, they were asphyxiated by smoke or trampled to death. Violence is frequent in Saudi Arabian families. In the spring of 2004 Rania al-Bez, a well-known female journalist, disappeared from Saudi television; she had always broadcast wearing a headscarf but with an uncovered face. Her husband beat her so hard that she landed in hospital.

Recently (May, 2006) a new law was passed in Saudi Arabia forbidding the press to publish women's photos. Photos of women with hidden hair but uncovered faces had sometimes appeared in the press, but since they provided a too great temptation and excitement for men, the decision was taken not to allow them.

The lot of women in African countries is extremely hard. In 2002–2003 the world was shocked by a sentence pronounced by a Nigerian court which, in accordance with the principles of Sharia, ordered two women to be stoned, for each of them bore a child after her husband's death. Thanks to international protests both Saphiya and Amina Level were pardoned, but this does not mean that in less known cases such sentences will not be carried out. Nigeria also attracted attention in 2002 when protests broke out in that country against a plan to organise a Miss World contest there.

In Ghana, Somalia, Uganda and other African countries (including Ethiopia, a large part of whose population is Christian, and "Europeanised" Egypt) circumcision of little girls, that is the cutting out of the *clitoris* and *labia minora* (sometimes also *labia majora*) is practised on a large scale (in Egypt 97% of women are said to be circumcised). As a rule this is done by a ritual female circumciser by means of a razor blade or a piece of glass without anaesthetisation. The intervention leads to countless infections and sometimes ends in the little patient's death. The girls are maimed for life, for when the wound has been stitched the women suffer pain when they urinate and during menstruation; sexual intercourse and childbirth are extremely painful. It is believed in those countries that if a woman is not circumcised she will lead a dissolute life and it will be difficult to find a husband for her.

Egypt is thought to be a country whose standards are not far from those binding in Europe; feminism is developing officially there under the patronage of the president's wife, there are many educated women in Egypt and many females are working at universities. But it is still widely believed that the home is the proper place for women and that life in the seclusion of their home is not discrimination for it protects them and allows them to find fulfilment in women's natural roles as wives and mothers. Dancing, singing and acting in spectacles for men are socially accepted women's occupations. Whereas the situation of women in towns is bearable, in rural areas they live under the strain of humble submission to male domination and extremely hard physical work. Several years ago the minister of health and the Supreme Court banned female circumcision but traditional Islamists did not recognise the ban.

In the 1970s the desert areas on the outer fringes of Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania were proclaimed as the Sahara Democratic Republic. This is an African state which is exceptionally friendly to women but which unfortunately has been recognised only by a few African and South American countries. The Saharans, descendants of nomadic communities, and their president, Mohammed Abdel-azis, have in the centre of the desert formed a political organism in accordance with the ideas of liberalism and tolerance. Woman has a high social position in this still virtual state (her position stems from the tradition of nomadic tribes). Since under the Saharan law an equal number of men and women take part in elections, one-quarter of the members of the Saharan parliament are women. They hold many posts in the civil service, are educated and active.

The influence of French culture did not save Algeria from a conflict between traditional Islamists and the Europeanised social groups. It was women who were the main victims of this conflict. According to the Algerian daily "El Khabar", in 1993–1998, 2048 women were raped by members of armed gangs which since 1992 have been fighting against the Algerian government. The fate of another 319 women is uncertain. The majority of the victims are peasant women. In conservative rural areas raped women are not accepted by the community; they are rejected by their families and are forced to flee to a town. Violence against women has found its most brutal expression in the rapes com-

mitted by the armed gangs claiming to be inspired by Islam. Before the army took control of towns, Muslim gangs had attacked female university students, secondary school girls and women dressed in the European way. Many educated independent Algerian women had to emigrate. In the villages, which are separated by a cultural gap from the capital and larger towns, women are still at the mercy of patriarchal families. The High Muslim Council of Algeria recently gave rape victims the right to abort pregnancy, recognising them as "innocent victims". The authorities also granted them the status of terror victims, which entitles them to benefit from medical and psychological care. However, these recommendations are not put into effect. Moreover, despite the protests of women's movements, democratic political parties and human rights organisations, the family code which has been in force in Algeria since 1984 recognises that a woman is a minor until the end of her life, and is subordinated to the decisions taken by her male protector, her father, husband or brother.

Women's situation is not better in the south-eastern corners of Europe, in the Caucasus. A tribal, patriarchal system is flourishing in the states set up after the collapse of the USSR (Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Abkhazia, Chechnya, Dagestan, Kazakhstan); communism had not changed the system much. In 1999, the president of Ingushetia Ruslan Anshev made polygamy legal; in practice he has legalised an existing custom which can be attributed to the numerical predominance of women.

The situation of women is also difficult in Central Asia, in Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Although Islamic extremists are not in power there and cannot lock women in their homes or order them to cover their faces, women have a low social standing and are traditionally doomed to extremely hard work. There has been a rising wave of female suicides in the last few years, especially in Tadjikistan, owing to poverty and the violence women are submitted to by their families and society.

The tribal-patriarchal system has also determined the situation of women in Afghanistan, where women had for ages been a commodity, like cattle or pastures; they were fought for, they were abducted but they were kept locked at home, they were neither seen nor heard and it never occurred to anybody to converse with a woman. At the beginning of the 20th century,

King Amanullah began to introduce European customs; his wife appeared in public wearing fashionable low-cut dresses. This provoked a rebellion led by mullahs; the monarch was dethroned and his successors avoided such risky experiments. It was only in 1959 that King Zahir Shah allowed women to uncover their faces. In 1964 the King proclaimed a constitution which gave women suffrage and the right to education; it also guaranteed them equal pay with men in professional work. When the communists took over power in Afghanistan in 1978, the country was de-Islamised and it seemed that this would mark a great step forward in the emancipation of women. But opposition to the imposed regime was so strong that many women demonstratively resumed covering their faces. Nevertheless, progress was gradually being made. Soon, a half of all persons employed in public offices in Kabul, the country's capital, three-quarters of teachers and one-third of hospital doctors were women. Girls poured into schools and the university.

The overthrow of communist rule by the mujaheddin and the seizure of power by conservative Islamists, the Taliban, extremely hostile to females, put an end to the freedoms women had for some time enjoyed in Afghanistan. Dressed in *burkas* which enveloped them from head to foot, they rarely appeared in the streets and had always to be escorted by a closely related male. Professional work and study were out of the question. Doctors were forbidden to examine and treat women. For the five years of Taliban rule Afghan women lived in prison-like conditions. When the regime was overthrown, only some of them returned to work and uncovered their faces; the others were afraid that discrimination might return. Not all girls went back to school. In Kabul the situation is not bad, but the Taliban still exert a great influence in the provinces for Hamid Karzai's authority does not yet extend to the whole country. For instance, the governor in Herat only officially recognises the central government, the women in his province must wear *burkas* which cover the whole body and they are not allowed to walk about with men who are not their husbands or near relatives. There are, however, some exceptions. In the province of Bamjan a woman, Habiba Sorabi, from a Shiite Hazar tribe, became governor in March 2005.

Turkey is regarded as the most Europeanised Muslim country. In 1924 Kemal Atatürk carried out a revolution in the

country, separating religion from the state and introducing a democratic constitution⁷. Polygamy was abolished and women were granted the right to vote and to stand for election (1934). Istanbul is swarming with emancipated women dressed in the European way who work professionally, attend the university, run their own businesses and frequent cafés and restaurants. Since Turkey is seeking membership of the European Union, on May 7, 2004 the Turkish parliament adopted an amendment to the constitution which introduced the principle of gender equality. But in villages in backward regions the situation of women is still reminiscent of the old tribal, patriarchal model. Now and again a slip occurs even at the top echelons of power. In 2001, the minister of health Osman Durmus proposed that female candidates for medical schools should undergo virginity examinations.

In the other hemisphere, in Central and South America, the situation of women is not so tragic as in Asia or Africa, but it is difficult. The cult of machismo, brutal male force, present in many countries, leads to men's dominance over women and various forms of discrimination. Much has been written recently about the small Mexican town of Juarez (in the north of the country, near the border with the United States) where women of various ages, small girls as well as adult women, have been murdered for over a dozen years. It is estimated that 320 women were abducted and murdered there between 1993 and 2003; most of them were raped and tortured before their death. The reason is still unknown. Are these ritual murders or Satanic practices? Or are they psychopathic manifestations of misogyny? The results of drug addiction? The area where these events have taken place is known for prostitution, human trafficking and drug smuggling, which undoubtedly plays a role in these morbid events. What is surprising is the indolence of the authorities, especially of the public prosecutor's office. The *Mujeres de Negro* (Women in Mourning), an organisation of the families of the murdered victims set up in Juarez, maintains that the families are intimidated by representatives of the prosecutor's office.

In any evaluation of women's situation in non-European countries it is not only their martyrdom but first and foremost their role in culture and education that should be taken into

⁷ Cf. E. D. Smith, *Origins of Kemalist Movement and the Government of the Grand Kemalist Assembly*, Washington 1959.

account. An UNFPA report of July 2002 says that in all programmes for technical, educational and health assistance for Third World countries investments in women have been more profitable than investments in men. It is women who are responsible for the upbringing of children and for guaranteeing them maintenance. In very poor regions women are in control of vital resources: clean water, wood for heating and cooking, and feed for livestock. They often constitute more than 50 per cent of all persons employed in agriculture. In most non-European countries women work more than 12 hours a day in their homes and outside. In Asia and Africa they work on an average 13 hours a week longer than men and in many regions it is practically only women who do the work that allows their families to exist. Rwanda showed the world an amazing example of women's wisdom: during the fighting between the Hutus and the Tutsis, when the whole country seemed to be paralysed, 50 women from the two hostile tribes began to mobilise widows of murdered persons from both sides in order jointly to assist the needy, extend social care, set up orphanages and rebuild the administration. This played a great role in the process of reconciliation and stabilisation of the country.

In Kenya a group of females from the Samburu tribe who as widows or victims of rape were doomed to live on the margin of society organised a settlement called *Umoja* — the Unity. Men are not allowed to visit this place where women work together, cultivating gardens, making and selling souvenirs for tourists, raising and educating their children.

What is also surprising is the existence of many female politicians in countries outside Europe, despite their unfavourable cultural tradition. But this phenomenon has old, historical precedents.

In old China some women enjoyed enormous power, even though the general situation of women was bad. Dowager Empresses ruled as regents when their sons were under age. Under the Han dynasty the Empresses Liu and Liu Hou were in power. During the T'ang dynasty actual power was in the hands of the enterprising and ambitious Empress Wu, founder of the Chou dynasty, even during her husband's lifetime. Her daughter-in-law, the no less ambitious Empress Wei, poisoned her husband not to share power with him. The dowager Empress Tz'u Si of the

Manchurian dynasty ruled in China at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. They were all brutal, despotic women feared by their courts and by all their subjects⁸.

Ethiopia had many prominent female politicians. At the end of the 15th century the Empress Helena was a great stateswoman; it was her concept to create a great Ethiopian-European coalition against the Muslims⁹. In the 18th century the Empress Myntyuab, a great female lover of art and literature, gave Ethiopia decades of wonderful cultural development¹⁰. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Empress Taitu¹¹, wife of Menelik II, played an important political role. They were all beautiful, wise women, extremely talented politically and diplomatically, who greatly surpassed their contemporary male politicians.

The 20th century witnessed an enormous rise in women's political activity. The first female head of state in Asia (and in the contemporary world) was Sirimavo Bandaranaike, wife of the prime minister of Ceylon (the present Sri Lanka) Solomon Bandaranaike, who was assassinated by a Buddhist Tamil monk in 1959. This was the beginning of the Tamil-Singhalese conflict (Solomon Bandaranaike was preparing a decree making the Singhalese language the only official language in the country) which in 1983 turned into an open war. It is worth adding that women are taking part in this war; they make up a half of the Tamil Tigers. After Mrs. Bandaranaike, the government of Sri Lanka was taken over by her daughter Chandika Kumaratunga, regarded as an efficient, intelligent president.

Indira Gandhi was twice prime minister of India (in 1966-78 and 1980-84); she was assassinated by a Sikh member of her personal guard (after she closed down the Sikhs' holy sanctuary, the Golden Temple). Indira was chairman of India's largest political party, the National Congress, and was a stateswoman on a world scale. The irony is that her son, Rajiv Gandhi, who became head of government after her, died at the hands of a woman: a female Tamil terrorist killed him in a suicide attack

⁸ W. Rodziński, *Historia Chin (A History of China)*, Wrocław 1974, pp. 95, 96, 193, 194, 577, 578, 591 ff.

⁹ A. Bartnicki, J. Mantel-Niećko, *Historia Etiopii (A History of Ethiopia)*, Wrocław 1971, pp. 98 ff;

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 187 ff.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 366 ff.

on May 21, 1991 (in retaliation for India's support of the government of Sri Lanka which the Tamils opposed).

Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law, Sonia, was elected head of the Congress Party in 1997 and it looked as though she would become prime minister, even though she is not a Hindu. But when the Congress Party came back to power in 2004 it was Mammohan Singh who became prime minister; however, it was not Sonia's gender that barred her from premiership but her foreign origin.

In Bangladesh two women competed for power at the end of the 20th century: Sheikh Hasina and Chalada Zia, who both inherited their political claims from men, Hasina from her father, and Zia from her husband. In Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, daughter of a well known politician Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was overthrown during a coup and hanged for his crimes, became prime minister after winning the elections in 1989. After ruling for 20 months Mrs Bhutto was dismissed for corruption and ineptitude, but she won the election again in 1993; she was dismissed in 1996 and had to emigrate.

More skilful and undoubtedly less controversial is Mrs Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of Indonesia's former president. Although the Islamic fatwa prohibits women from becoming president, she won the election in 2002 and became president. The presidency in the Philippines was taken over first by Mrs. Corazon Aquino and then (in 2001) by Gloria Arroyo, daughter of a former president, Diosdado Macapagala. Mrs Arroyo, a woman educated in the USA, closely cooperates (also in the military sphere) with the United States. The most famous person in Burma is Auung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the democratic opposition which fights the military junta. In 1991 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. A woman, Hsiu-len Anette Lu, author of *The New Feminism*, a book devoted to women's rights, is vice-president of Taiwan.

The most prominent woman politician in the both Americas was undoubtedly the charismatic Eva Duarte Peron, who was adored by all inhabitants of Argentina. Brought up in a district of poverty, she made a career as an actress; in 1944 she met and married minister Juan Domingo Peron. In April 1946 Peron, guided to a large extent by his wife, won the election and came to power. In fact it was Evita who ruled the country; she created

Peronism, a populist programme of large-scale social reforms (including women's suffrage), nationalisation of the economy, rapid industrialisation, liquidation of poverty. Her activity overturned conservative Argentina's ideas about the role of woman and her place in the world. When she died of cancer at the age of 33, *vox populi* proclaimed her a saint, paying no attention to Evita's love of luxury and her extravagances.

Less known is the fact that after the death of Juan Peron his second wife, Maria Estela Martinez, known as Isabela Peron, became the president of Argentina on 1.06.1974. She was deposed by a military *coup d'état* on 24.03.1976.

Several women have come to the fore in politics also in other central and south American countries. Lidia Geiler was the president of Bolivia in the years 1979–1980 and Violetta de Chomorro of Nicaragua in 1990–1996. Mireya Moscoso Rodriguez de Arias ruled in Panama in 1999–2004. She was the widow of the president Arnulfo de Arias. Rosalia Artaega was president of Equador for only three days (9–11 February 1997). In Chile Isabel Allende, president Salvadore Allende's daughter, became chairman of the Chamber of Deputies. Dr. Michelle Bachelet became minister of health in 2000, and in January 2006 she was elected president of Chile. In July 2003 Mrs Beatriz Merino, a graduate of American and British universities, became the first female head of government in Peru. Four women are members of the government of President Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva, who took over power in Brazil in January 2003. The wife of the president of Mexico Vicente Fox, Marta Sahagun de Fox, is accused of having great political ambitions and of influencing her husband. She shocked Mexican society by saying publicly that Mexico was already mature enough to have a woman president.

In Israel the important post of prime minister was held for many years by Golda Meir (of Polish descent). Very active in Palestine is Hanan Ashrawi, a female lawyer educated at American universities, linked to the Arafat party and the *Intifada*. She has founded the Committee for Legal Assistance and Human Rights and is very active in the Organisation for the Liberation of Palestine.

At the end of 2005 Mrs Ellen Johson-Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia — the first female head of state in Black Africa.

All this shows that also outside Europe women know how to break through the wall of intense discrimination and achieve success in politics. They usually take advantage of family mechanisms, for it is mostly the daughters, wives or widows of politicians who make a political career. As in medieval and early modern Europe, entire dynasties of politicians, in which women hold power, have come into being. But there are also women who in a world hostile to females can reach the top without a family background, making use of their intelligence, skill and beauty (e.g. Eva Peron in Argentina).

The fate of the People's Mujaheddin and their female leader, Mariam Radjavi, shows how complex is the mechanism which determines and shapes women's role in cultures hostile to females. This organisation was set up in Iran in 1979 and its members took part in overthrowing the Shah but then fell into conflict with Khomeini's regime and the mullahs. The result was that they had to leave the country. Saddam Hussein used them during Iraq's war with Iran but after the war he did not need them. The main wave of the People's Mujaheddin migrated to France and set up a headquarters near Paris.

Women play an important role among the People's Mujaheddin. This organisation was an alternative for Iranian women, whom the Islamic revolution has marginalized. Hundreds of women who fled from Khomeini's dictatorship reinforced the ranks of the People's Mujaheddin. They take a vow to remain childless and unmarried, married women have to divorce. They worship their female leader Mariam Radjavi. When in the summer of 2003 Radjavi was arrested by French police (the French authorities decided to liquidate the Mujaheddin centre because of its links to Al-Qaeda and fear of terrorist attacks) stormy demonstrations were held all over Europe (in France, Britain, Italy, Switzerland). Nine Iranian women burned themselves to death in public. The French had to release Radjavi.

In many countries outside Europe there is an important aspect of women's question which is worth discussing here. During the era of globalisation the lot of women and their living conditions are no longer merely a subject of academic discussions, a question evoking empathy and leading to attempts to help them by various charitable missions. The 20th century brought about mass migrations on a world scale. Rich European

countries suffering from a shortage of workers, France, Germany, Britain, Sweden, have become the destination of hundreds of thousands of migrants in search of bread. A confrontation of cultures is inevitable for these mass migrations lead to the emergence of large religious and cultural ghettos, weakly integrated with their surroundings, whose inhabitants live in a new environment in accordance with their own strange customs. In France, Germany and Sweden, the struggle for headscarves (*hijab*) with which Muslim women cover their hair has been going on for years. In February 2004 the National Assembly in France banned the wearing of headscarves and other religious symbols (the cross, skull cap, turban) in schools. This has provoked vehement discussions and the ban has been strongly attacked. However, this is a misunderstanding for the *hijab*, unlike the cross, is not a religious symbol. It does not embody any theological truth. It is a symbol of the low social status of woman, a sign of her submission and a signal that her sexuality poses a danger to man. By banning headscarves France did not proclaim the war against religion but came out on the side of equal rights of all people, against gender discrimination.

In April 2004 the whole of France was shocked by the case of imam Abdelkader Bouziana from the neighbourhood of Lyon, who had been living with his two wives (!) and 16 children, born on French soil, in France for 25 years. The authorities had tolerated this state of affairs and did not react until the imam gave an interview in which he stated that women were not equal to men, that they had no right to work with men and that the husband was entitled to beat his wife. He spoke also in favour of the stoning of sinful women. Bouziana was expelled from France after this interview, another charge against him being that he had contacts with Islamic extremists. He was not the only imam to have been ejected from France during the last few years. In 2003 Italy too exiled an imam from Senegal for proclaiming fanatical views and maintaining contacts with terrorists.

There is not a shadow of a doubt that the immigrants living in a new homeland should be enabled to retain their religion and customs, provided however they are not incompatible with the law in force. Nevertheless the dreadful things that are happening show that next to no progress has been made in the process of acculturation. Let us recall a few examples. In November 1989,

Zein Isa, a Palestinian immigrant in St. Louis (USA), knifed his 16-year old daughter, with the help of his wife, the girl's mother. The reason was that the daughter refused to obey the strict Islamic rules, frequented dance parties, had dates with young men and practised sport. In Swedish Uppsala a Kurd, a political refugee from Turkey, shot his 26-year old daughter Fadima, who was brought up in Sweden in the spirit of women's equality and emancipation. Her behaviour was thought to disgrace her father, her family and her clan. The decision to kill Fadima was taken by a clan council in a distant village in Kurdistan, the father carried out the sentence in Sweden. There have been many cases of this kind. Tribal customs from Asia and Africa are transferred to Europe on a large scale. The press reported recently (April 2004) that leaflets calling for the circumcision of Muslim girls to save them from concupiscence when they grow up were being distributed in the Tawheed mosque in Amsterdam. Among the many instructions provided in the leaflets there was one which said that a woman deserves 100 lashes if she is remiss of her marital duties (e.g. if she refuses to have sex with her husband) or goes out without the husband's permission.

In Holland in the autumn of 2004 an Islamic fanatic killed the film director Theo van Gogh who, together with an African woman, Ayaah Hirschi Ali, made a film which showed violence against women and their submission in Islamic countries. The tolerant Dutch have since been less sure of their safety in their own country.

The invasion of cultures and ways of life that are alien to Europe can be almost as dangerous as terrorist attacks. When I say "Europe" this is of course not the geographical but the cultural notion which, in addition to the Old Continent, also includes the United States which has grown from the same roots and belongs to the same civilisation as Europe.

(Translated by Janina Dorosz)