

# Diversity is an Asset that Demands Equal Treatment

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At present, national and local government policies are facing the challenge of promoting and creating mechanisms and spaces with a gender perspective that enable citizens of different origins to contribute to social dialogue and debate, as well as policy decision-making. However, today's reality is that efficient responses to the challenges of diversity, which are sometimes urgently needed, do not come, despite the good intentions of certain political discourses; and this can eventually damage the image of citizens of different origins. Many women do not identify with political activism beyond the field of immigration, and the few who dare to participate in the politics and civil society of the country where they live are pigeonholed because of their cultural or religious background. Thus, it is necessary to implement flexible policies that enable effective and egalitarian inclusion, beginning with the reform of the Spanish immigration law. Only by overcoming fear can we confront the totalitarian and discriminatory discourse taking root in Europe and Spain.

Migration and human mobility, of both men and women, will continue to be a major trend in the 21st century, as they have been in other centuries and eras in the history of humanity. For this reason, the towns and cities of the world and in Spain will continue to be enriched by the contributions of migrants. However, we should not forget that the full scope of these contributions is determined by the type of social integration policies; in other words, the inclusion of migrants, who, as political, social and cultural beings, also need egalitarian, fair and adequate political, social and cultural participation.

The integration and political participation of migrants, or of citizens of diverse cultural

origins, is highly determined by the environment and the political and social climate of the country where they live. However, today, and beyond this political and social climate, and reasonable recognition, we cannot deny that diversity, in general, is a tangible and intangible asset that is beginning to resolutely demand equal treatment, a policy of equal opportunities, mainly from the perspective of women citizens of diverse origins.

To meet the challenges posed by the management of diversity and facilitate adequate governability, we should advance in the promotion of legislation that favours the political participation of migrants in general. In this respect, national and local government policies

have the challenge of promoting, perfecting and creating mechanisms and spaces that enable citizens of diverse origins to contribute to social dialogue and debate, as well as policy decision-making.

## The Management of Diversity and Women Citizens of Different Origins

As a feminist and Euro-Mediterranean woman citizen of foreign cultural origin, in this article I have chosen to specifically address the participation of women migrants or, rather, of women citizens of diverse origins, with the bold desire of putting the spotlight on the fact that diversity, from a gender perspective, specifically provides social and cultural richness, a potential source of knowledge, a new social and political debate on the rights of women, fresh reflections on the new realities of women in other countries, the contributions of the Other to the values of the host society from different contexts, and with different ways of being, doing and behaving. This can be specifically applied, for instance, to community relations, identity issues, the contribution to female economic development, the value of family solidarity, respect for people, care of people with specific needs, and so on. These aspects have been clearly seen and demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

The social policies of each country should have sufficient material means, skills and genuine willingness for better management of diversity so that it becomes an asset that provides plurality linked to migration. When there is bad management of such diversity, with lack of equality, integration, inclusion and cohesion policies with a gender perspective, and, above all, when we contribute to the lack of a process of normalisation, ena-

bling only the problems and conflicts to be showcased and highlighted, the populist conservative minds who resist social changes and policies of equality exploit it. This results in a political application of the thinking of the extreme right, which cultivates a discourse full of prejudices, stereotypes, hate speech and unfounded phobias. We should not forget that, in fact, challenges and conflicts in a diverse society are very common, because we are dealing with people, and people are heterogeneous rather than perfect.

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Nevertheless, beyond the populist or ultra-conservative line, nobody can deny that diversities in our country have become an issue of the first order, linked to a greater range of the social codes that operate within societies and between them. Faced with this range of codes and perspectives, the politicians and rulers of our countries do not always find the right responses, which sometimes are needed urgently because of the circumstances and events that have occurred in our neighbourhoods concerning intercultural coexistence. Thus, of course, equality policies fail and do not manage to put diversities at the service of the common good. It is a situation that eventually harms the image of citizens of different origins.

Therefore, I stress that management of diversities should question the public institutions to analyse whether their policies of equality and social and political integration match the new realities, which are increasingly more complex, heterogeneous and diverse.

In fact, when I analyse the society in which I currently live, I see that there are many women with a high level of knowledge and training, and there is a lot of activism in which



Fe-Male Feminist Organization.

many migrant women citizens participate. However, most of this activism has not yet addressed many of the social and political aspects and fields of the society in which they live, and almost always is limited to the field of immigration. This shows that we are still far from normalisation and the exercise of full citizenship.

I remember that some time ago, when I was head of the Department of Human Rights and Cultural Diversity at the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia, I travelled throughout Europe and elsewhere to explain, in forums and meetings, our experiences in Catalonia in terms of management of diversity and equality. This allowed me to see that many

things are being done, mainly in town councils and in associations, because one of the great potentials and driving forces of Catalan society is the activism of its civil society, which includes feminist activism. Nevertheless, this feminist activism does not involve enough participation of women of different origins, although it undeniably does involve some outstanding figures.

In other fields, such as the political, we find that there has not been a commitment to all the aspects we have mentioned, and this not only concerns Catalonia but is, in fact, a problem throughout Spain, where the conservative voice is increasingly dominant, and this threatens a setback in both equal-

ity policies and the process of participation of women citizens of different origins. This means a threat to diversity in general because the political approach with a totalitarian perspective cannot implement equal and fair management of social policies and equality because it is based on the explicit or implicit argument, much used in politics or in some political discourses, of “Spaniards first.” This discriminatory and selective thinking is also sometimes used by progressive governments, as we have seen in the Covid-19 crisis, when many people were trapped outside Spain and priority was given to the “natives”. Also now, with the Ukrainian war, many women refugees and exiles from elsewhere have spoken out to say that we also come from countries at war, and that the right to asylum has become more difficult, in contrast to what happens with women refugees from Ukraine, to whom Europe has offered all the means necessary.

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Selective and discriminatory policies do not help but rather cause social wounds and reticence that complicates the process of inclusion and full integration.

## **The Political Participation of Women Citizens of Different Origins**

It is important for women citizens of different origins to participate in politics and for them to be aware that their voices count in elections, because we also find that there are women migrants with Spanish nationality who do not vote, and believe that politicians do not repre-

sent them or that politics is not for them, but when they hear a voice with which they identify, they are immediately encouraged. For this reason, the fact that people of diverse origins form part of the different political projects of the country where they live helps general motivation and integration. Thus, people feel that they are not just political pawns in elections but that they also form part of the decision-making and legislative spheres.

We should bear in mind that self-esteem and the feeling of being familiar with the social and political environment favours trust in the political system, and women citizens of different origins who achieve this feel more confident in our capacity to act, react, express our opinion and fully participate in the events, but without becoming idealistic. It is also worth pointing out that women citizens of diverse origins who have taken the step of actively participating in civil society and politics are, in one way or another, coerced and pigeonholed because they are identified and defined through their cultural or religious origin.

## **Normalisation, a Challenge for Local Authorities and Policies**

Authorities in general and, above all, public institutions, should reflect the society of which they form part, because it is very contradictory, and I would even say false, that there are beautiful speeches from progressive and modern currents proclaiming diversity and equal rights and opportunities that are not then put into practice in everyday life. This is clear when we enter the premises of a local authority, government body or parliament and find no face, voice or name that represents women citizens of diverse origins.

Moreover, it is not enough to herald some women citizens of different origins as pioneers to proclaim that we have resolved the issue of

diversity and equality. Diversity should start with a process of normalisation, because anything that is not normalised seems superficial and is immediately seen negatively. For this reason, we should explore equality policies that enable us to enter into the phase of normalisation. Moreover, there are many women citizens of different origins whose family (fathers, mothers, sons and daughters) were born in Europe but we continue to regard them as foreigners although they already hold Spanish nationality.

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Certainly, to achieve better management of diversity, and greater participation in politics and decision-making of women citizens of diverse origins, we should confront many challenges, including the economic limitations to develop real and effective equality policies that result in full citizen integration and accommodation. Diversity is nothing new, as is often suggested, so we could have started working on it years ago, making things better with a political will free of fears and phobias, beginning with reform of the Spanish immigration law. We should first speed up the process of administrative regularisation and, then, the naturalisation process, removing, above all, the administrative burdens, which exhaust women newcomers and slip into institutional racism.

The length of this article does not allow me to explore the issue in depth, but, briefly, I consider that:

- It is necessary to resolve the lack of voices of citizens of different origins, and not to speak about them, but to them, from their

actual presence and representativeness, by promoting active and real participation both in the field of local policies and legislative power.

- We must put an end to the symbolic participation that defined past times, and that persists when we endeavour to advance towards inclusion. Thus, participation remains stagnated in the symbolism of empty words, and results in frustrated women citizens.
- We must come up with policies that enable equal opportunities, but with the objective of achieving real equality; and feminist policies that effectively include women citizens of other origins.
- Resources and good professionals should be put at the disposal of local women politicians to develop social inclusion policies.
- Spaces of dialogue and work should be made available so that women citizens listen to each other and learn to work together.
- Options are needed to increase the rate of representation of women citizens of different origins in political offices. Thus, it is essential for political parties to make systematic efforts to include them in the lists of electoral candidates.
- Measures that enable resident foreign women to vote in local elections should be expanded and approved as an alternative to the complicated and long naturalisation process.

To end, I believe that all the necessary mechanisms have not yet been made available for the management of diversity, and anticipatory policies are still needed, because usually we do not react to a problem until it is upon us. In other words, for some decades, we have been aware of the threat of the extreme right in some European countries and in Spain, where, as a result of Francoist antecedents, it has re-emerged very quickly, but neither at a legal or political level have the necessary measures

been implemented to address the issue and put an end to the racist discourse. Moreover, there are political spheres that, to achieve more votes, have sometimes begun to compete by using a discriminatory and xenophobic discourse, which only favours the extreme right. And when this materialises in a party, it finds the ground has been laid.

Faced with all these challenges, the effective social and political participation of women citizens of different origins is fundamental to stop the populisms that fuel machismo and hatred of what is different, as well as strengthening the pillars of a democratic, free and feminist society that treats its male and female citizens equally.