

# Gender at the Intersection: Intersectional Feminisms to Understand the Present of the Mediterranean

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Euro-Mediterranean societies are continuing their journey to becoming more inclusive and egalitarian despite the many challenges present across the region. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are still being keenly felt in different ways throughout the multiple and varied Mediterranean territories – a pandemic that, as highlighted by the UN, is not gender-neutral and has deepened all sorts of inequalities, including gender-based ones.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the pandemic emerged, grassroots organizations have proven their resilience and inventiveness in tackling its negative effects, and local and regional institutions and governmental bodies have implemented emergency plans, coming up with tailor-made budgets, policies and an array of strategies in response. 2020 was a global turning point that led to hasty responses. In 2021, it is time to make room for deliberations and actions that take into account the effects of the pandemic, but which also go beyond them by considering the complexities inherent to each country and each region of the Euro-Mediterranean, and which appreciate all of their strengths in order to positively contribute to the transformations that are underway there. In this article, I argue that adopting an intersectional gender outlook is key to acknowledging such complexities and strengths. It is key to understanding the present of the Mediterranean in all its nuances. Only through a better understanding of our present will we be able to carry

out lasting core transformations in our neighbourhoods, villages and cities, and which give space to alliances for a fairer and more equitable region.

## Weaving the Way Forward

For some time now, all across the northern and the southern rim of the Mediterranean, multiple initiatives have led the way to a more feminist region, making room for its diverse voices to be heard, making its heterogeneity visible as a whole. Activists are launching campaigns, training and awareness-raising activities to highlight gender-based inequalities, and to improve the conditions of the most vulnerable social groups. Languages are being reshaped so that they can name the experiences and realities that the heteropatriarchal regime has, for so long, left hidden and unrecognized – namely those of women and girls, and subjects that do not fit in the gender binary, such as trans people. Grassroots movements have managed to pave the way for changes in laws, constitutional and governmental reforms, and the creation of new policies that encapsulate the desire for more egalitarian societies, whilst pushing for their attainment.

In the 2020 edition of this very same yearbook, Beirut-based gender advisor Lina Abou-Habib claimed that a positive take on the pandemic might come from the fact that it led to “framing gender equality issues as political issues and as concerns to be debated in the public domain” (Abou-Habib, 2020: 161). Abou-Habib was specifically referring to the MENA region, but her statement might well be extrapolated to the whole of the Euro-Mediterranean region, problematic as this categorization may be.

<sup>1</sup> In the report “From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of Covid-19,” released by UN Women right after the pandemic outbreak, we read that “the impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and Covid-19 is no exception” (2020: 1).

One example of such a shift, and proof that governments are enacting changes, can be found in Catalonia.<sup>2</sup> Following parliamentary elections, the Catalan government has incorporated a newly-created department: the Department of Equality and Feminisms, the plural declination being a statement of intent. As its Minister, Tània Verge, has stated, the Department seeks to incorporate the gender perspective as a cross-sectional axis in all of the governments' actions, which means striving to include the experiences of social minorities – understood as those groups which do not hold political or societal privilege – such as women and girls, refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, people who are part of the LGBTBI community, and those belonging to groups that represent dissidence against the patriarchal norm. The department aims to put an end to all forms of gender-based violence (GBV) and the stereotypes and biases on which these types of violence are built; to contest the idea that gender equality concerns women only, and to promote the understanding that societies, because they are diverse, require diverse responses that take such heterogeneity into account. It is objectives such as these that the whole of the Mediterranean region should strive to attain.

### Adopting an intersectional gender outlook is key to understanding the present of the Mediterranean in all its nuances. Only through a better understanding of our present will we be able to carry out lasting core transformations

In her appearances and in the interviews that she has given since being elected, Verge has repeatedly stated the need to work from an intersectional standpoint. Intersectionality, as a concept, has received much critical attention of late. In the context of Catalonia, in her recently published book *Interseccionalitat: Desigualtat, llocs i emocions*, the activist and researcher Maria Rodó-Zárate traces a geneal-

ogy of the concept. The author situates its origin as a theoretical tradition in the work of black feminists in the US, in the 1970s and 1980s (see Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989; Combahee River Collective, 1977), who sought to understand “the situation of structural discrimination and inequality to which black women were subjected, from a feminist and anti-racist perspective” (Rodó-Zárate, 2021: 17).<sup>3</sup> Rodó-Zárate claims that today the term is used “to display how different axes of inequality, such as gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, functional diversity or age, are interwoven and configure concrete forms of discrimination and inequality” (18). Understood this way, the author acknowledges that prior to the emergence of the theory in the context of the US, other voices, belonging to other geographies, had developed epistemological frameworks operating upon the same basis.

In what follows, we shall explore how intersectionality, understood as an analytical tool, can help us to comprehend the plurality of the Mediterranean, not only to celebrate its enriching diversity, but also to understand its multi-layered and manifold inequalities, so that they can be most effectively tackled. Several scholars have raised the alarm about the perils of intersectionality becoming a trend, as has happened with feminism: now co-opted by capitalism and emptied of meaning in many contexts. Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Leslie McCall put forward an idea of intersectionality as an “analytical sensibility” that unfolds not only because the word “intersectionality” is inscribed in a text, but because it is “a way of thinking about sameness, difference and their relationship with power” so that “any kind of discrimination or inequality is seen as configured by several axes” (in Rodó-Zárate, 2021: 28).

What does it mean to look at the Mediterranean region from an intersectional perspective? How can we be attentive to the different forms of inequality that affect it?

### Situating the Plurality of the Mediterranean

Feminist studies have highlighted the importance of situating our discourses, our actions, our thoughts and

<sup>2</sup> Catalonia is the place where I develop my work. Hence, it informs my views on the topics that I analyse here.

<sup>3</sup> The translations into English of this text are my own.

beliefs, and our bodies. Contextualization is of paramount importance. Our subject position in the world matters, insofar as it determines how the distinct axes of difference listed above are interwoven. Our bodies also bespeak these axes. Through our bodies we experience the world, we relate with others, we get a sense of ourselves. Our bodies bear the imprint of our privileges and our oppressions, always active in context. They bear our age, our background, our names and surnames, which resonate differently in different scenarios. The Mediterranean is built upon multiple types of sociocultural and linguistic exchanges. Focusing on the transcultural fabric that these exchanges bring forward dilutes the fact that power relations also impact on the bodies that make such exchanges possible.

The Mediterranean space is sometimes thought of as monolithic, especially from the northern rim, permeated by an outlook that celebrates an unproblematic and all-encompassing Mediterranean identity. Considering it from an intersectional standpoint brings just such a construct into question, in that intersectional perspectives pay attention to the structural racism that criss-crosses the region, and to the many sorts of inequalities that operate within it to this day. If we want to make the Mediterranean a more equitable and fairer space, it is necessary to deploy analyses that consider all of these intricacies: analyses that avoid essentialisms and homogenizations, and that are situated pieces of knowledge.

This exercise will facilitate the realization that the Mediterranean is indeed a composite of plural collectivities, each framed within a particular genealogy. The way each of these collectivities seeks to counter the inequalities to which they are subjected and move forward is thus inextricably linked to their situated epistemology. Therefore, a plurality of ways to reach equality in each of the corners of the Mediterranean exists, paralleling the inherent plurality of the region. So it follows that there is not a single universal feminism, but rather feminisms.<sup>4</sup>

As argued by Rodó-Zárate, “intersectionality calls for several explanatory frameworks to be taken into account so that the complex configuration of social inequalities can be understood.” Such a configuration relates to the multiple axes of difference identi-

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fied, and also to the varied and changing ways in which these axes are interwoven, and how they are contextually configured (96). To attain a thorough cartography of the present of the Mediterranean, it would thus be necessary to deploy an intersectional framework that allows for each specific context to reveal which of the axes plays a bigger role in the unfolding of its particular inequalities.

A picture of our present, as has already been made clear, revolves around the pandemic and its consequences. In the abovementioned article, Abou-Habib insists on the need to be “cognizant of the situation of gender equality, or rather inequality, in the region and the activism around it before the pandemic” in order to better assess the impacts of Covid-19, especially from a gender perspective (2020: 160). In this respect, she comments on the patriarchal legacy of the region, which “came into full play during the Covid-19 pandemic, as women’s vulnerability and burden increased exponentially against a system that, even before the pandemic broke out, was unable (even unwilling) to protect women and secure their rights and entitlements.” (162)

### **Looking towards a Better Future, from an Intersectional Perspective**

In the Mediterranean, as anywhere else in the world, the pandemic has brought about greater job insecurity, a reduction in service provision and an increase in all sorts of gender-based violence (including cyberviolence), which particularly affects women and

<sup>4</sup> There is also a reticence to uncritically embrace the term “feminism” by certain groups that understand it as a Eurocentric concept. See, for instance, Bouteldja (2016) and Lamrabet *et al.* (2020).

vulnerable social groups.<sup>5,6</sup> The attendant economic downturn – the consequences of which are also gendered – and health crisis were prioritized, which lead to a situation in which other issues were seen as less important. Funds that had been set aside for countering GBV, as well as reproductive and sexual health services for women and girls, were diverted towards addressing more pressing matters.

This ties in with an idea put forward by many grassroots organizations that work from a gender perspective. In November 2020, the European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation organized a round table with gender experts to shed light on the cartography of GBV in the region. During the debate, Ghida Anani, founder of ABAAD – a key figure in Lebanon working in solidarity with other organizations in the region – pointed out that:

Activists, moments, civil society organizations and multilateral organizations should all foster keeping GBV at the heart of the priorities of governments when it comes to policy-making, and strive to counter the perception that GBV is a separate issue, as if it is separate from the public health agenda, the security and the peace agenda, and the economic agenda. It needs to be perceived as a pillar that can make any country healthy and have real prospects for the future.<sup>7</sup>

(IEMed and EMWF, 2021: 7)

Dispelling the perception that tackling issues such as GBV is not a priority connects with the change in the collective imagination that feminist stakeholders in the region are trying to enact: countering hegemonic masculinities, and working (with the whole of society) to put an end to gender stereotypes and the

real and symbolic types of violence that accompany them. In line with what has been detailed above, the tools to achieve these goals need to be put into context, so that intersectional analytical frameworks can be put in place, for – let us remind ourselves once more – gender inequality and its consequences unfold differently in different scenarios.

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Creating spaces in which common and specific challenges can be discussed, and successful practices can be shared from a framework that is attentive to each context's nuances, is of the utmost relevance

In the above-mentioned conversation with Anani, Egypt-based activist Mozn Hassan analysed the topic of GBV in relation with the pandemic and noted that its emergence in 2020 had to do not only with Covid-19 and the lockdown measures imposed as a result, but also “with the contraction of the public sphere that Egypt has been suffering for years” (IEMed and EMWF, 2021: 11). Along the same lines, advocacy officer at Women Now for Development Zeina Kanawati pointed to the need to understand GBV contextually, and in intersection with other issues: “[w]hen dealing with the Syrian context, one must remember that we cannot disconnect the violence that women are experiencing in 2020 from

<sup>5</sup> For more insights on the gendered impacts of the pandemic, see the “Women4Mediterranean Conference Report” by the Union for the Mediterranean. The report gathers the conclusions of the 5th UfM Women4Mediterranean Conference, held in 2020, which featured the participation of diverse stakeholders in gender equality and women’s empowerment in the Euro-Mediterranean region. For a detailed analysis of the (post)covid economic scenario through gender lenses in the western Mediterranean, see the report “Fostering women’s economic participation in the western Mediterranean” (IEMed and MedThink 5+5, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Some voices are referring to the current economic situation tied to the pandemic as the “pink recession” due to the fact that it affected sectors in which the majority of employees were women, and the effects were also gendered (see Matthewman and Huppertz, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Humanitarian organizations, such as OXFAM, have expressed the same concerns: “Each and everyone is valuable and has the same rights – regardless of gender, ethnic origin, sexual identity, religion or belief, disability, age, social status or position – this is the foundation of intersectional feminism. [...] Anyone who sees existing inequalities and intersectional discrimination [...] as marginal issues that are not pressing in times of crisis, is missing the point.”

the long history of GBV in this society, nor from the violence tied to the Syrian conflict” (15).<sup>8</sup>

The example of GBV shows that, all throughout the Mediterranean, regions face distinct problems, and have also developed tailored strategies to move forward. Creating spaces in which common and specific challenges can be discussed, and successful practices can be shared from a framework that is attentive to each context’s nuances, is of the utmost relevance. Intersectional perspectives will allow us to understand the Euro-Mediterranean reality in all of its complexity, thus opening the door to envisioning better, more inclusive and feminist societies.

We have seen how intersectionality is neither a response nor a mechanism to be implemented, but rather a tool to put in-depth analyses into practice. It is a way of looking at our region in order to critically consider the complexities and the resilience of its societies, and thus to envision both local and regional networks of solidarity, so as to ensure that the region is truly inclusive: an outlook that enables us to acknowledge the diversity of the Mediterranean as a transformative force.

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<sup>8</sup> Kanawati also highlighted the (gendered) digital divide, deepened due to the pandemic.