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**Multiculturalism and feminism shifting identities**
By Yael Maayani 10/03/03

In the story *Pope Joan* by Donna Woolfolk Cross, Joan assumes her brother identity and enters the Benedictine monastery as Brother John Anglicus. She disguised herself as a man and rose to rule Christianity for two years. The story is written as fiction, but is there lessons to be learned? (1)

Despite many achievements in women’s rights, in reality gender equality is not fully yet achieved and in many countries hard to maintain. In most societies men still have easy access to the economic resources, political power and social privileges. The continuing marginalization Women, emphasize their dependent position in a range of areas worldwide, such as the continuing pay gap between men and women, a lower levels of land ownership by women and poor representation in decision-making bodies.

Global dominance of the masculine languages, such as English, and the control of the access to information throughout history by male dominated institutions like the church or western governments enabled gender discrimination and restrict access to information. “The U.S. government's ‘global gag rule,’ is a clear violation of women's rights to expression. It stifles women’s rights to seek and impart information on reproductive and health needs. The gag rule prohibits any organization that receives U.S. funding in informing women clients on any topic or issue related to abortion, even if the organization is not using U.S. money in doing so.” (2)

Perhaps the most visible illustration of women’s’ oppressed position in all societies is their inability to appropriately respond to male violence and discrimination. States are failing to act adequately to encourage women, who are victims of gender violence and discrimination, to speak up, testify and take action.

Women’s right to freedom of expression, that includes articulation of words, images, personal actions and lifestyle choices. Including choices around one's sexuality, continues to be tightly controlled by governments, community, family, religion and other institutions throughout the world. If one does not conform to heterosexual norms, originated by certain religious beliefs, or advocate for reproductive and sexuality rights, greater access to contraception or abortion, it will often lead to social condemnation, threats and sometimes violence. As a consequence many women are also silenced within resisting social movements that claim to fight against oppression. In many cases as a result of the social and economic strains that occur within these oppressed groups, women become an easy group to target.

“I don’t want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake, tore up her writing, threw the kerosene lantern into her face waiting like an unbearable mirror of his own.”

*Adrienne Rich* (4)
Feminist activism is often excluded in the struggle of a culture to be included. So activist women, who fight for their identity within cultural context, will naturally resist gender discrimination within their own groups. Among women like these we see constant transformation and exchange between their multiple identities. In the clash for cultural identity, women have to fight for their rights to cultural identity, their rights for free expression and equality.

"Despite feminist critiques of patriarchal narratives of race that suggest black men suffer the most vicious assaults of white supremacy and racism because they are not empowered to be "real" men (i.e. patriarchal providers and protectors), most black people, along with the rest of the culture, continue to believe that a solid patriarchal family will heal the wounds inflicted by race and class. Frankly, many people cling to this myth because it is easier for mainstream society to support the idea of benevolent black male domination in family life than to support the cultural revolutions that would ensure an end to race, gender and class exploitation."

Bell Hooks (5)

(1) http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/pope_joan.asp
(2) http://www.hrw.org/women/
(7) “Black Popular Culture” Michele Wallace, Bay Press Seattle 1992
(8) “Borderlands/La Frontera The New Mestiza” Gloria Anzaldúa, Spinsters/Auntlute Book Company San Francisco, 1987

Proposal for action:

I propose starting an online multicultural group for women who are active for equality in their communities. The website will be a way to connect between these women, write their stories, advocate their actions. The unique aspect of this online community will be its multiculturalism and its interest in women from divers fields and interest that are active in improving women’s life. The site will not advocate feminism, feminism is a word loaded with different meanings and can exclude many active women.

Through the site will organize regular outreach in CA to encourage active women to express themselves through writing and art.

Provide online discussion board and counseling for these leaders to communicate.
Offer multi-media workshops and/or training—from journalism to web design to photography to theater—for women to develop their communication skills.

Publish the writing and art of these women on our website

Develop partnerships with other agencies and organizations to strengthen cross-culture service networks that address a wide range of needs.