There are three major obstacles to the equal participation of women in interfaith dialogue. These are the lack of access to religious education, to representation, and to communication. It is partly due to these obstacles that women belonging to different religions have sought to come together. Through sharing and discussions, they discover similarities and differences in their respective positions as women and as believers. They discover together the many ways of being and of leading a spiritual life.

Dialogue between women often starts with a discussion of their social situations, which in many societies are heavily influenced by religious factors, and not always for the benefit of women. In most cultures, men are not oppressed for being men; they do not need to discuss the role religion plays in their oppression or in their liberation. During discussions between women, on the other hand, they share solutions to the problems they face stemming from their status as women belonging to a certain society and religious tradition.

On this point, painful conflicts sometimes emerge: conflicts pitting Western women against women from other regions of the world. The non-Western women have often felt that the others have sought to impose an analysis and brand of feminist solutions that do not correspond to their own reality. There can also be conflicts between traditionalist and progressive women from the same religion, in which some defend tradition while others criticize it. During interfaith dialogue, these internal conflicts emerge even more strongly. Sometimes women from different faiths get on better together than they do with women who share their religion. Nevertheless, what emerges is that Jewish, Christian, Muslim,
Hindu and Buddhist women discover at the essence of their faith a message of equality between men and women—messages that have been distorted by the patriarchal structures that dominate everywhere. Despite this consensus, however, the necessity for liberation has not been felt with the same urgency by all women.

**Lack of Access**

Christian women quickly noticed that the pattern of keeping women at the periphery of ecumenical dialogue also applied to interfaith dialogue. This situation emerges with the first obstacle: education. For a long time women only had very limited access to religious education in most faiths. The film Yentl portrays a young Jewish woman, played by Barbra Streisand, who disguises herself as a man to study the Torah. In Germany, women have only been allowed to study Catholic theology since the 1940s. This exclusion from official religious education accounts for the fact that women have developed their own religious traditions in the different faiths which are not always in accordance with the official doctrine (if there is one). The fact that these spiritual treasures have been looked down upon or ignored up till now is one more reason that women want to share them with each other.

It is also important to make space for local traditions, which are often very marginalized, be they ancient or relatively recent. In Africa, for instance, several independent churches have been started by women. In North America, several communities have reintroduced veneration of the pre-Christian Great Goddess. In this way, women's knowledge and religious creativity have been substantially widened.

**Representation**

The second obstacle, that of representation, is dependent on the first. Those who have no access to official religious education cannot represent the official tradition. Women cannot help but notice that the perverse situation in which key functions are reserved for men while women constitute the membership base, does not only exist in the Christian tradition. Key functions can be religious positions like "bishop" or scientific positions like "professor of theology or of religious sciences." This exclusivity transpires in all major world religions, that is to say in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam where you find predominantly male rabbis, experts in Muslim law, gurus and pandits, Tibetan Buddhist lamas and so on. A specialist on India once said that women are always the best friends of religion but religion is not always the best friend of women.

Excluded from key positions, women are also excluded from being official representatives of their religion. Of course, there are always exceptions, but today they are still rare. An analogy can be drawn with
ecumenical dialogue where, in practice, women are very active and involved at grassroots level, while official representatives are mainly men. Despite many efforts, this fact is only starting to change very slowly. This is because the pattern which institutionalizes men as those who think, teach and decide, and women as those who implement, is profoundly imbedded in most Christian churches--and not only in the Catholic Church I would add. Many women active in the ecumenical movement are no longer willing to make the fundamental efforts needed at the grassroots level if they are to be ignored in the main and important decision-making processes at an official level.

This model can also be found in other faiths and organizations involved in peace and interfaith work. In the local groups, there are more women participants and women in charge. There they play a central part. But at a higher level, where decisions are made that affect the whole community, men dominate. This also shows in the very unequal participation at large interfaith meetings. Few women are sent and those who are go mainly as helpers and translators and rarely as official representatives.

Long before the "official" peace process, Palestinian and Jewish women got together to fight against hate and violence between their peoples and to build a better world for their children. During the international meeting of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) held in Nairobi in 1984, a Jewish woman from Israel, a Christian woman from Palestine, and a Muslim woman from Lebanon met and put together a common statement in which they underlined the right of existence of the state of Israel and the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people. A more recent example comes from ex-Yugoslavia where women from all three conflicting groups worked together against ethnic hatred and are now working for reconciliation.

Because of the patriarchal convergence between the main world religions, public and official interfaith dialogue often took place between members, representatives and specialists of the religions involved with very little participation from women. I remember being invited to a debate on "Cultural Identity and Transcultural Ethics" at a renowned academy in Germany. The invitation was addressed exclusively to "collaborators and researchers" using the masculine form of the words. The speakers list only showed male names. In my opinion, it is impossible and ridiculous to defend a true plurality if the experiences, reflections and visions of women are not duly taken into account during such meetings. And duly would mean in this case that half the participants and speakers should be women. In the WCRP this problem has been noted and a quota of at least 35% women has been adopted, although it seems difficult to fulfill.

Communication

Problems in the structure of communication represent the third obstacle to
women in interfaith dialogue. Even if women take part in interfaith dialogue, if they speak, they are often not heard. In fact, in groups composed of men and women, there is a domination of structures of communication developed by Western men for Western men. This structure is marked by confrontation and abstraction, which seeks to establish a hierarchy between participants. For women on the other hand, the main point of the dialogue is to build links or to conserve them. They generally contribute their own personal experiences. Forced to use a structure of communication that is alien to them, women often receive less recognition and their contributions are taken less seriously than men's. During a male-dominated conference on the philosophy of world religions one of the only two women present proposed that each participant should speak about the decisive influences in their life and their own personal experience of faith. Apart from a formal thank you this suggestion received no comment. It was silently refused.

To be fair, it is necessary also to talk about the advantage this situation has for women. As they rarely hold key positions, as they are rarely official representatives of their religious tradition, they can speak and act freely, only speaking for themselves.

The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi made an important observation during the surprisingly virulent protests of women from the Arab world against the Gulf War: "The fact that we women are excluded from powerful positions gives us an incredible freedom of thought, which alas goes along with an unbearable power-lessness." (from La peur de la modernité, 1991). What Fatima Mernissi says in her context also seems true for women participating in interfaith dialogue. Our mission now is to answer this question: How can we maintain this freedom of thought while taking our share of power?

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