

# **INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN TRANSMISSION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

**27 - 30 September 1999, Tehran, Iran**

## **Annotated Agenda**

### **BACKGROUND**

The General Conference of UNESCO adopted at its twenty-fifth session (November 1989) the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore. UNESCO uses the term 'intangible cultural heritage' in the identical meaning as the 'traditional culture and folklore', the definition of which was given in the above - mentioned Recommendation. This definition is as follows; 'Folklore (or traditional and popular culture) is the totality of tradition based creations of a cultural community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts'.

UNESCO undertakes activities in the field of its competence to pursue the purpose of the Organisation as stipulated in its Constitution;

*The purpose of the Organisation is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.*

The role of women in the transmission of intangible cultural heritage is of great significance to our world today. Intangible, or immaterial heritage, concerns aspects of our lives which are essential to the continuity and expression of cultural identity.

Women's involvement in various spheres of intangible cultural heritage is both central and vital. Such spheres include what may be described as essential realms of culture, and those which are often indispensable in maintaining familial and cohesive social relations. They include language, codes of ethics, behavioural patterns, value systems, and religious beliefs. In most cultures, women maintain principle roles in the upbringing of children, through which the intergenerational transmission and renewal of many of these essential forms of intangible heritage occurs.

Women are also custodians of intangible cultural heritage which encompasses, among other forms, the performing arts including music, culinary and medicinal knowledge and the know-how for the creation of material culture. The latter includes, but is not restricted to, handicrafts, weaving, textiles, habitat production and the making of tools for a wide range of subsistence activities in areas such as horticulture, agriculture and fishery. In maintaining and passing on these forms of intangible culture, women often integrate new forms and techniques with the traditional, thereby recreating culture.

The creativity of women is also essential to the continuity and revitalisation of intangible cultural expressions. In performance, such as theatre and dance, many female artists perform works of traditional significance while innovatively fusing new aspects. Through dedication to their art, women transmit intangible heritage in ways which are adaptive to contemporary contexts, encompassing of change and furthermore, enriching cultural representations.

The resourcefulness of women in their use of intangible cultural heritage also plays a significant role in the economic well-being of many communities. Women manage and contribute to income generation through the use of intangible cultural knowledge in diverse ways. These include, but are not restricted to, the creation and marketing of handicrafts and the cultivation and selling of agriculture and other forms of produce, all of which may draw from, depend upon and often recreate traditional knowledge and practices. Further to this, in these roles, women are often primary providers within the family and community at large.

In many societies, women's spiritual and ritual knowledge and practices specific to themselves are essential aspects of religious life. Women maintain their traditional religious practices, often within exclusive domains. These practices are often closely integrated with knowledge and teachings of ethics, behavioural patterns, symbolism and life-cycles relevant to women and their interaction and relations with other women, men and youth. In these domains, women share and transmit intangible culture.

Dedicated literary and academic work of women makes an immense contribution to our understanding of the contexts relevant to women and intangible heritage, and the transmission of this heritage. There is a growing wealth of information and perspectives pertaining to intangible culture that is expressed through literary mediums. It is imperative that the ongoing research and publication of writing, both creative and academic, relating to women and intangible heritage is encouraged and supported, thus ensuring its wider recognition and dissemination.

Historically and in the present, tangible cultural heritage, in its many forms, has been the subject of much documentation, research and protection through the efforts of individuals and organisations worldwide. It is vital that such efforts also be applied the preservation and revitalisation of our intangible cultural heritage in its living forms, through means including research and documentation.

Without knowledge of how to create material culture and to convey culturally symbolic aspects, whether in more traditional forms, or through inventive integration with contemporary influences, much tangible and intangible heritage is endangered. Tangible, or material culture, is often an inseparable phenomena from the intangible. Women in cultures worldwide are principle custodians of much knowledge that relates to the creation of material heritage which often embodies culturally significant symbols and artistry. Such forms of heritage may include, among others, textiles, carpet weaving, habitat production, architecture, art and craft. Women have not only been highly successful in retaining and transmitting traditional methods and practices, but also in adapting them in innovative ways with modern elements and high levels of technical competency.

As a living manifestation, intangible cultural heritage is all the more vulnerable to dynamics and forces of modernity which threaten its continuity, integrity and survival. The impacts and rapid rate of current economic and technological globalisation can have an adverse influence on the maintenance of intangible cultural heritage. While an increasingly complex interchange between local and global forms of expression occurs, various types of cultural knowledge and performance are becoming commodified. This is producing both innovative, and alternatively, compromised forms of cultural expression. An impact of these dynamics is that local cultures are becoming increasingly enmeshed in the rapid growth of the global economy and at the same time, more exposed to both the spreading homogeneity of international media and unprecedented advances in technological communication.

While these phenomenon can have positive influences on the lives and heritage of local cultures, such forces can also undermine the status and survival of culturally specific and traditional knowledge. Consequently, globalisation, particularly in its capacity to facilitate the spread of homogenous cultural patterns, can pose a very real threat to local and distinct cultural forms and identity. Women's intangible cultural heritage makes a profound contribution to the way our societies interact with and

counteract adverse influences of globalisation. Through the transmission of various types intangible culture, and in their abilities to creatively reinvent and adapt such culture to changing environments, women to some extent effectively counter eroding influences, thus ensuring greater continuity of local cultural expressions, and thereby, cultural diversity.

UNESCO's mission is to promote international peace and common welfare through intellectual and moral collaboration among nations. Elevating the position and appreciation of women's roles in transmitting intangible cultural heritage whilst drawing international attention this issue, is a path towards this mission. As stated previously, a primary objective of this Symposium is to enhance recognition of the significance of women's contributions, abilities and creativity in relation to this realm of culture. While it is crucial to do so *in* the communities in which women live, there is also much to be gained from heightening awareness of women's roles and domains in relation to intangible cultural heritage to a wider audience.

The preservation and enhancement of intangible cultural heritage is tantamount to the continuity, evolution and vitality of local cultural traditions. This in turn, contributes to the maintenance of cultural diversity. Striving to maintain and revitalise cultural diversity, however, is not a sole means in itself of ensuring continuous movement towards cultures of peace, tolerance and dialogue. Through promoting the significance of intangible cultural heritage, not only in the cultures within which it is embedded, but *among* cultures, a greater level of understanding and tolerance of cultural difference and coexistence leading to global peace building may be achieved.

The present Symposium is the first of its kind. It provides a pioneering forum in which to conduct meaningful discussions, forge new networks and develop purposeful directions. In doing so, further steps will be taken in the preservation, revitalisation and greater recognition of women's central and significant roles in relation to intangible cultural heritage. As women are so often principle transmitters of much intangible heritage in cultures worldwide, it is imperative that their role in reaching these objectives is a meaningful and central one.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE SYMPOSIUM**

The primary goal of the Symposium is to encourage and stimulate intercultural dialogue in which different views and experiences of the role of women in preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage may be exchanged.

On a more specific level, the objectives of the Symposium are as follows:

- i) To assess the diversity and commonality of women's roles in transmitting intangible cultural heritage worldwide;
  - a) To analyse the role of women in the intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage;
  - b) To consider women's social organisation and the domains in which intangible cultural heritage is expressed and transmitted;
- ii) To examine the interrelationship between women's roles in the transmission of intangible cultural heritage and other spheres of culture and society;
- iii) To explore the methods and means of preserving and revitalising intangible cultural heritage, and enhancing women's roles in its promotion and transmission;
- iv) To formulate and prioritise necessary and urgent actions to be undertaken by UNESCO and Member States.

## **ORGANISATION OF THE SYMPOSIUM**

Papers will be presented by the participants, and discussions will follow the presentations in accordance with the Agenda items. During discussions, participants will be encouraged to consider future measures to be formulated in order to enhance the preservation and recognition of women's roles in expressing and transmitting intangible cultural heritage.

**AMONG TOPICS THAT MAY BE DISCUSSED ARE THE FOLLOWING:**

➤ *The diversity and commonality of women's roles in transmitting intangible cultural heritage worldwide;*

i) *The role of women in the intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage*

This statement highlights the significance to be attributed to women's creative roles in transmitting intangible cultural heritage in the present and in the future. In most societies, women play the principle role in the upbringing of children and the transmission of fundamental cultural values, knowledge and skills, codes of conduct and behavioural patterns. This is a significant issue in light of present concerns that in many cultures, younger generations are not being exposed to traditional cultures in ways which will enable them to secure its transmission. Thus, women provide an essential link between the past, present and the younger generations which must be preserved.

Further to this, in maintaining and passing on intangible heritage, women have always, and continue to demonstrate remarkable creativity in adapting and renewing cultural traditions to suit present and future needs. In many respects, this recreation enables the appropriation and survival of cultural heritage in the face of change and other influences.

ii) *Women's social organisation and domains in which intangible cultural heritage is expressed and transmitted.*

Discussion of this topic should involve examination on two main levels; the first being that of the particular spheres, situations and local contexts in which women transmit intangible culture. Women, in various ways, maintain domains exclusive to their own cultural traditions, interests and needs. These domains may relate to, among others, religious and social institutions exclusively reserved for women, literary and musical repertoires reserved for women and know - how in the production of feminine material culture.

The second main level of discussion may seek to identify comparative and common cross-cultural issues, concerns and themes. The outcomes would then inform discussion of future directions to be pursued in policies, programmes and activities aimed to promote and revitalise the intangible cultural heritage of women.

- *The interrelatedness of the role of women in transmitting intangible cultural heritage and other aspects of culture and society;*

Knowledge necessary to the creation of material culture is often inseparable from the production of tangible cultural heritage. Traditional material cultural productions and more innovative appropriations, from textile weaving to the construction of built environments, depend upon intangible cultural heritage in the form of skills and knowledge. To view intangible cultural heritage in isolation from other cultural forms and the wider social contexts in which it exists, leads to unrealistic and narrow perspectives and understanding.

Consideration should be given to the various spheres, which are often integrated aspects of the social fabric, in which women express and transmit intangible culture, from the more intimate family realm, to creative, religious, public and official domains. Such discussion would serve to highlight the ubiquitous nature of women's intangible heritage, and its relevance across various realms of society.

- *Methods and means of preserving intangible cultural heritage and of enhancing women's roles in the promotion and transmission of this heritage;*

Particular attention should be given to ways in which to integrate women transmitting intangible cultural heritage in all aspects of any future measures, such as research and training. The implementation of such projects and networks within local community environments should be a central focus. This approach would serve to reinforce the significance of intangible cultural heritage in the societies in which it exists, and to promote forums for women to articulate objectives and concerns, exchange views and develop future measures.

It should be noted that UNESCO undertakes activities to preserve and promote intangible cultural heritage (traditional and popular cultures) which are compatible with universal values that the Organisation has been promoting as its mandate, such as tolerance, peace building, democracy and human rights.

Programs and activities aimed to preserve and enhance the intangible heritage of women should also involve men and youth, thus providing an integrated approach to enhancing awareness of women's contribution to cultural life within the communities in which women live.

➤ *The need to formulate and prioritise necessary and urgent actions to be undertaken by UNESCO and Member States*

The Iranian National Commission for UNESCO submitted to the forthcoming UNESCO General Conference at the 30<sup>th</sup> Session to be held in November 1999 a Draft Resolution proposing a worldwide project for which feasibility study be undertaken in different regions worldwide within the framework of a project concerned with women, intangible cultural heritage and development. The present Symposium may elaborate more concrete and practical measures for the project planning and implementation. Effective strategies may be defined and potential partners identified.

The lack of research relating women and intangible heritage should also be addressed within the framework of the discussion, highlighting ways in which to incorporate the collaborative efforts of UNESCO, Member states, concerned specialists, custodians of this heritage and relevant organisations. These organisations may be universities, research institutes, local community groups or others with relevant interests in better understanding and promoting women's roles and objectives in relation to intangible heritage. Strategies may be considered for the development of pilot research projects, training workshops and organised networks on local, regional and international levels.

There is also a need to promote appreciation of women's principle role in the transmission, renewal and creation of intangible cultural heritage among women and the communities in which they live. Generally, women have an inadequate awareness of the significance of their intangible knowledge, skills and practices. The discussions and findings of this Symposium should seek to inform and direct UNESCO and Member States in developing future measures aimed to heighten awareness among women of their contribution to the continuity and enriching of cultural heritage.