



Intangible Cultural Heritage



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Intangible  
Cultural  
Heritage







# Intangible Cultural Heritage and Gender



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## Creating gender identities

Values, norms and rules related to gender are diverse among societies, communities and groups. All intangible cultural heritage expressions carry and transmit knowledge and norms related to the roles and relationships between and within gender groups in a given community. In such a way, intangible cultural heritage is a privileged context for shaping gender roles and identities and transmitting them. Intangible cultural heritage and the construction of one's gender identity are therefore inseparable.

*Traditional foodways are in many communities a domain where women hold a prominent role. Central to this practice is the social relationship between mothers and daughters: the daughters observe, learn and join their mothers in carrying out the task. Taking on this specific role gradually and through repetition becomes part of their identity as women.*



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*Camels are entrenched in traditional activities and festivities among Bedouin communities in Oman. In the crafts related to camel breeding, men and women have their respective roles when producing the required gears and accessories. The women make most of the woven items while men are the woodcarvers and silversmiths. A similar division of labour is observed in traditional manufacturing of children's wooden toys by villagers in Hrvatsko Zagorje, Croatia. They use a technique that has been handed down within families for generations. The men gather soft willow, lime, beech and maple wood and then dry, hew, cut and carve it into toys using traditional tools. The women then decorate the toys with improvised floral or geometric patterns, painting 'from imagination.'*

Access to and participation in specific expressions of intangible cultural heritage are also determined by gender. Traditional crafts, for instance, often rely on particular divisions of labour with complementary and gendered roles.

Social practices, festive events and performing arts, on the other hand, can be occasions to stage the problems and social prejudices of the community concerned, including issues related to gender roles and/or inequalities. In many carnival traditions and performances, for example, people switch gender roles and even transcend them. In this way, communities create spaces where they raise awareness about gender roles, facilitate reflection and, sometimes, challenge gender norms.

### **Evolving gender roles and relations**

Human beings generally assimilate and learn gender roles from childhood. Gender roles, however, are not static. Like intangible cultural heritage, they are constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances. Communities 'negotiate' their gender roles and norms over time, and many gender-specific traditions that were the exclusive domain of one gender group in the past have since been opened by the community to include other gender groups.

Intangible cultural heritage plays an important role in the creation and dissemination of gender-related values and norms, and their transformation. The motivation for changing a practice can be pragmatic, such as to find a solution to a specific threat. It can also be principles-based, to promote equal opportunities. While gender norms influence the transmission of intangible cultural heritage,





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*In the rite of the Châu van shamans' song from Viet Nam gender roles are reversed with female mediums taking on traditionally 'male' roles, dress and behaviours and vice versa. Similarly, Kabuki is a Japanese traditional theatre form, where male actors specialized in women's roles are called 'onnagata'. Two other major role types are 'aragoto' (rough style) and 'wagoto' (soft style). Characteristic of their roles is their gender ambiguity and the possibility to transcend gender roles, calling into question the binary female/male gender system. Kabuki plays are about historical events and moral conflict in relationships of the heart. Today, Kabuki is the most popular of the traditional styles of Japanese drama.*



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intangible cultural heritage influences gender norms. There is therefore a mutual relationship between gender norms and intangible cultural heritage.

Another factor for gender-related changes concerns effective participation in the negotiation process and the issue of who has influence. Decision-making about transmission and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage does not happen in a vacuum but is embedded in a larger system of gender- and power relations. These norms and relationships govern behaviours, relationships and negotiation processes. They are frequently questioned from within a community to allow greater participation and balance in power relations.

*The Tsiattista is a form of 'poetic duelling' in Cyprus in which one poet-singer attempts to outdo another with the improvisation of clever oral poetry. Tsiattista has long been a popular component of wedding feasts, fairs and other public celebrations, where eager crowds encourage poets to perform. Traditionally only men transmitted their poetry orally; recently a few female poets have started performing.*



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*Gender roles have changed in transmitting Naqqāli storytelling, the oldest form of dramatic performance in Iran playing an important role in society at all levels. Nowadays, female Naqqāls perform before mixed audiences, which is unusual in Iran where women usually perform (solo) for women-only audiences. Until recently, Naqqāls were deemed the most important guardians of folk-tales, ethnic epics and Iranian cultural tradition, which gives them a special social status, now accessible by women.*



## Diversity of gender concepts

As intangible cultural heritage varies from community to community, gender conceptions can be equally diverse. There is not one globally universal understanding of gender. Moreover, gender roles and values have to be analysed from the community perspective. Some native North American tribal groups, for example, recognize up to seven different genders, including transgender and double-spirited people.

Several European and Asian societies today recognize three or more gender groups. Often age and gender are closely connected, for instance, the gender-related norms and expectations regarding children's behaviour are different from those that apply to adolescents and adults. As gender roles and values evolve in a society, these changes may lead to adaptations in practices and expressions of intangible cultural heritage.



## Gender equality

As the gender relations of communities are constantly evolving, they create opportunities to move towards gender equality and to overcome gender-based discrimination through the practice of intangible cultural heritage. Equality and non-discrimination are core human rights principles. When considering gender equality and intangible cultural heritage, a human rights perspective concentrates not on the differences between gender roles, but whether they deny the dignity and well-being of those involved. The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) does not view traditional cultural attitudes and practices themselves – or even differentiated roles assigned to men and women – as the challenge, but rather the specific negative consequences that may result from them, such as applying stereotypical roles to women that disempower them or otherwise harm their interests.

From a non-discrimination perspective, it is therefore appropriate to question the validity of claims to ‘preserve’ aspects of traditional cultural practices that include and may even promote discrimination and subordination. Such claims should be measured against the rights of those who may be marginalized and disempowered by such practices. Certain practices can obviously never be accepted from a human rights perspective, but many others lie in a grey area in which identifying the degree of harm to individuals can be extremely complex.

This also raises the thorny question as to who should make such determinations and when. Adhering to the principle of non-discrimination and in the interests of community well-being all actors concerned must be involved, including marginalized and/or gender-discriminated groups. On the other hand, these social groups may themselves support and even encourage discriminatory traditional practices. The reason for this is often related to the social function of the practice and underlines the importance of understanding the gender dynamics at play. Even when an aspect of a practice itself is violating human rights, it may serve an important social function.



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*Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYWO), a Kenyan women's organization, has worked with communities whose rites of passage involved female genital mutilation (FGM) and accompanied them in developing alternative rites of passage, while keeping the positive socio-cultural aspects of the ritual. The women's organization met with mothers, girls, fathers and community leaders to gather input on whether and how to change the tradition. They designed an alternative ritual, including all aspects of the traditional coming-of-age ceremony – seclusion, information sharing, and celebration – but no cutting of the genitalia. It became known as Ntanira Na Mugambo – 'circumcision by words'. When the alternative rite was first tried in Meru, Kenya, only 12 families with a total of 30 girls participated in the seclusion. Many people in the community were sceptical and thought the altered tradition would fade away immediately. The ceremony gained a great deal of attention, however, and afterwards MYWO started receiving enquiries from enthusiastic individuals and groups. Within a year, 200 families from 11 locations in Meru had participated in alternative rites of passage.<sup>1</sup>*

When speaking of gender-based discrimination in intangible cultural heritage, extreme caution is required to avoid an overly simplistic view that discounts practices simply on the basis that one gender group practises them. It is a reality in many – if not most – societies worldwide that a significant number of social and cultural practices are segregated (on the basis of age, gender and other criteria) and this alone should not be taken as a sign that discrimination is taking place. Only through a gender-based analysis can communities recognize whether their intangible cultural heritage – a social

practice, ritual, knowhow, oral tradition, etc. – is actually discriminatory. Moreover, it is not necessary that gender segregation be involved for discriminatory aspects to be identified.

The commitment to human rights is clearly stated in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter the Convention), which affirms that only intangible cultural heritage that is compatible with international human rights standards can be considered within the scope of the Convention (Article 2.1).

1. Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization. 2002. Evaluating Efforts to Eliminate the Practice of Female Genital Mutilation. Raising Awareness and Changing Harmful Norms in Kenya, Washington DC: PATH.



## Gender in safeguarding

Understanding the intimate relationship between gender relations and intangible cultural heritage can open new avenues for effective safeguarding. The emphasis on the central role of the community in safeguarding is a crucial opportunity in this regard. As communities and groups are not homogeneous, it is important to identify the diversity of actors and their roles in relation to specific intangible cultural heritage, paying due attention to gender considerations. Otherwise, new possibilities for effective safeguarding risk remaining invisible and untapped.

Gender and intangible cultural heritage interact in complex and, to a degree, mutual ways through enactment, practice, transmission, etc. Therefore, safeguarding approaches have the potential to impact gender relations, and to both strengthen and weaken the status and recognition of communities and their individual members or sub-groups.

The Convention foresees a number of safeguarding measures at national and international levels. At national level they include identifying and inventorying intangible cultural heritage, establishing institutional, policy and legal frameworks, and developing safeguarding plans, research, and awareness-raising and education initiatives. At the international level, States Parties may request International Assistance for safeguarding and submit nominations for inscription on

the Convention's Lists or proposals for the Register of Best Safeguarding Practices.

## Gender in identification

One major issue in implementing the Convention is the invisibility of women's contribution to (re-)creating and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. The same applies for marginalized members of society, whose contributions are rarely recognized at national or international levels.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the spaces where the intangible cultural heritage of marginalized gender groups is enacted are the only social spaces in which society allows them to operate. A gender bias in identifying intangible cultural heritage at the national level therefore carries the risk that the heritage of certain gender groups is ignored.

*The Waanyi Women's History Project, an oral history project established and led by Aboriginal women in Australia focused on recognizing heritage of relevance to them and addressing the gender and other biases operating in heritage identification and management. The women considered that their concerns about their heritage had not been given adequate attention or legitimacy in government plans. They developed a strategy to make their voices heard in the negotiations about the future of their heritage and succeeded in obtaining recognition.<sup>3</sup>*

2. Document ITH/13/8COM/INF.5.c.

3. Smith, L., Morgan, A. and van der Meer, A. 2003. Community-driven Research in Cultural Heritage Management: The Waanyi Women's History Project. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1.



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### ***Gender in inventorying***

Similarly, inventorying intangible cultural heritage and related research and documentation risk silencing or misrepresenting the contribution of women and marginalized groups in intangible cultural heritage. According to the Convention, inventorying intangible cultural heritage should be undertaken with the full involvement of the communities concerned. Therefore, training and support for community-based inventorying need to take account of whether and to what extent the involvement is fully representative of the community in terms of gender. Through this process, a wider range of intangible cultural heritage may be identified and certain gender-based assumptions

underlying transmission and safeguarding can be made visible.

### ***Gender in safeguarding plans***

The elaboration of safeguarding plans for intangible cultural heritage is a decisive moment that influences the future expression of specific intangible cultural heritage. Communities reflect on the significance and meaning of a particular practice, the risks and threats it is exposed to, the strategies and actions to address them, and the associated human and financial resources. For this process to be beneficial to all members of a community, the voices of different age and gender groups have to be taken into account. In the first place, the communities themselves must articulate their own understanding



of gender and gender roles and how it relates to the heritage. Government authorities, civil society organizations, academic institutions and the research community may be able to contribute their perspectives and methodological knowledge on how to integrate gender perspectives in safeguarding. A key element is the appreciation by the community and non-community actors of the different roles and measures – including gender roles and gender-specific measures – that contribute to a successful safeguarding plan.

### ***Gender in policy development***

If policies for intangible cultural heritage are to build on the mutual relationship between gender and intangible cultural heritage, policy-making for safeguarding should ensure the active participation of a diversity of voices, including all gender groups concerned. Leaving this task to a few community members, outside experts or State agencies is a risk. Policy-making should furthermore promote ways to foster the principles of human rights (including gender equality), sustainable development and mutual respect in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage as per the Convention (Article 2.1), and ensure that awareness-raising actions will not contribute to 'justifying any form of political, social, ethnic, religious, linguistic or gender-based



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discrimination' (Operational Directives 102). International instruments relating to gender equality, such as the CEDAW and its Optional Protocol<sup>4</sup> can be useful references. Moreover, for policy work to be inclusive and effective, it needs to take into account the diversity of gender-related practices present in the territory of a State.

4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its Optional Protocol, see: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CEDAW/Pages/CEDAWIndex.aspx>.

### **Gender in international inscriptions**

Increasingly, over the past decade, references to gender have been conveyed in the debates and decisions of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage regarding inscriptions. While descriptions of gender roles have been included in some nomination files, the advisory bodies have expressed concern regarding the insufficient mentioning of gender in nominations. In addition, they have encouraged States Parties to describe the diversity of actors and their roles in relation to specific intangible cultural heritage, paying due attention to gender.<sup>5</sup>

### **Mainstreaming gender**

While the text of the Convention is not explicit about gender, the governing bodies have given increased attention to gender issues, and have requested that States 'pay special attention to the role of gender' when reporting on the status of inscribed elements.<sup>6</sup> Upon their request, all forms and instructions regarding the international cooperation mechanisms and periodic reporting of States Parties on implementing the Convention now contain references to gender, and the Convention's Operational Directives have been amended accordingly. Furthermore, UNESCO's global capacity-building programme for the implementation of the Convention includes training and policy

advice on gender-responsive approaches to safeguarding.

Understanding the relationship between gender and intangible cultural heritage is significant for effective safeguarding in two ways: it can open new avenues to safeguarding and can strengthen steps towards gender equality. Mainstreaming gender in safeguarding is therefore not only an opportunity, but an ethical imperative.

*The National Council for Women commissioned the Egyptian Society for Folk Traditions (ESFT), an NGO, for help in documenting the Art of Tally and to train women in Upper Egypt to safeguard it. Over 300 women attended the first training programme, later followed by a second one. The strong interest of women in the exercise led them to revitalize this specific intangible cultural heritage that was important for them, but severely threatened.*

5. Document ITH/13/8COM/7.

6. Decision 9.COM 13.a in Document ITH/14/9COM/Decisions.









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Intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.