5
Religious Women and Gender Equality

The majority of Europeans disagree with traditional perceptions of gender roles at home and in work. However, most think that family life suffers when a mother has a full-time job and around half believe that men are less competent than women at performing household tasks.

(Special Eurobarometer 428 Gender Equality: 13)¹

Introduction

This chapter explores how the interviewed Christian and Muslim women in Norway, Spain and the United Kingdom talk about gender equality. In the first section, we discuss theoretical approaches to gender equality and outline our conceptual framework, focusing on the contested notion of ‘gender equality’ in culture, feminist theory and activism, and in political and legal institutions. In the next section, we describe and analyse the main representation of gender equality that emerged in our interviews. We found that ‘equal worth’ rather than ‘gender equality’ was the preferred notion among the participants. Within the overall dominant discourse of ‘gender equality as equal worth’, however, we identified four different perceptions of gender equality that are discussed in subsequent sections: the perception that gender equality is impossible because of God-given prescriptions; the notion of gender equality as differentiation without hierarchy; the conception of gender differentiation in the family and equal opportunities in the public sphere; and the perception of gender equality as embracing difference. We found that gender differences are emphasized as normative as well as descriptive, but gender equality is not necessarily seen as a prioritized issue, while notions of respect and understanding play a prominent role when the interviewees talk about gender equality. Some of the women were critical of their religious tradition with respect to women and gender equality, however, and this is addressed before the concluding section ‘Complex notions of gender equality as equal worth’.

¹ L. Nyhagen et al., Religion, Gender and Citizenship © Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa 2016
Theoretical approaches to gender equality

‘Gender equality’ is a contested notion, whether we speak in cultural, political, legal or religious terms. It is context-sensitive, and people associate it with different things at different points in time and space. ‘Gender equality’ may refer to norms about womanhood and manhood or to empirical claims about women and men. Culturally, the notion has been entangled with symbolic perceptions of gender as dualist (women and men as fundamentally different) and dichotomous² (gender relations as structured hierarchically) (Holter 1970; Hirdman 1988; Solheim 1998). In political philosophy, ‘gender equality’ has been justified on the basis of both a conception of difference in kind and conceptions of sameness. In her analysis of nine male philosophers, Maud Eduards (1983) summarized their ideas about women’s social condition and gender relations as equal or unequal in table-form and suggested that their ideas were related to their perceptions of gender as basically different or same:

Table 5.1 Perceptions in political theory of the nature of women and men and their social conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Unequal (ojämlikhet)</th>
<th>Equal (jämlikhet)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Different (olikhet)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same (likhet)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From Maud Eduards (1983: 147); our translation from Swedish.
Note: The names of the philosophers have been removed in our account. The philosophers mentioned in square 1 in Eduard’s table were Aristotle, Aquinas and Rousseau; in square 2, it was Plato (The Laws), Hobbes and Locke; square 3 was empty without any philosophers; and the names in square 4 were Plato (The Republic), J. S. Mills and Engels.

Eduards found different combinations represented in the philosophical texts. The most obvious was the combination of different nature–unequal status, and same nature–equal status. She also found arguments for the combination of same nature–unequal status, but she found no example for the combination of different nature–equal status. Eduards (1983: 150) described the ‘empty box’ as a patriarchal paradox and questioned as follows: Is it impossible to obtain equality among basically different people (men and women)? Is the combination of ‘equality’ and ‘difference’ perceived as impossible or even preposterous because it means that women’s