

**Thank-you and Welcoming Note  
Hanna Beate Schöpp-Schilling**

**Feminism and Cultural Diversity  
Conference in Honour of Hanna Beate Schöpp-Schilling  
Berlin, May 6, 2009**

I am deeply grateful to the German Institute for Human Rights and the Heinrich Böll Foundation for convening this conference in my honor. My gratitude goes in particular to Frauke Seidensticker, Barbara Unmüßig and Heiner Bielefeldt. The conference cements our common commitment to human rights in general and to women's human rights in particular. It also is a manifestation of our friendship that started more than eight years ago. I also welcome and thank the speakers and the participants for their contributions.

Unfortunately, I cannot be with you. I had very much hoped to be able to do so, but the medical treatment I am currently receiving leaves me weak and fatigued. I have to rest a lot and cannot talk much. I am looking forward to reading your papers and about the discussion.

I identify myself as a cultural feminist. One of the three great stimulations in my life was the new feminist research in the 1970s, to which, as an American Studies scholar, I had easy access. It fascinated and stimulated me, and it exposed the patriarchal perspective that had guided my learning processes as a student (although a female professor was my Ph.D. mother!).

The study of culture was an important part of my studies in German and English literature and American Studies. I still relish the knowledge I gained about American Puritanism, although it was purely from a humanistic intellectual history of ideas point of view at the time, and of course, done from a male perspective. One of the scholarly essays I never wrote - I had a writer's block at the time - was about the American Puritan Ann Hutchinson, who protested against the male clergy and invited people into her house to discuss in private the contents of the clergy's preaching. This was, of course, unacceptable. Moreover, in the Puritan theocracy of Boston it meant a threat against the State. What finally led to her expulsion from the colony, however, was not the fact that she spoke her own mind, as did her co-protester Roger Williams, who was expelled for that very reason. In her case, it was the fact, that being a woman in her forties she had a strange miscarriage while in prison. It was reported that she gave birth to a number of hairy balls. This immediately led to the

“belief” that she had had sexual intercourse with the devil. Thus, she was expelled because she failed her destiny as a woman, defined by her sexual and childbearing obligations as expressed for Eve when she was expelled from Paradise! This was the first example I taught to my students about the interplay of culture and patriarchal power politics.

An English Marxist literary critic gave me insight into the three levels of culture: 1) religion, philosophy, ideology; 2) works of art; 3) everyday customs, rituals, attitudes, expectations, and behaviour. This definition has been important for my understanding of articles 2 (f) and 5 (a) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in the CEDAW Committee. In addition, the interpretation of state obligations by Dutch feminists as comprising obligations 1) on the legal and administrative level, 2) on the programmatic level to improve the material situation of women, and 3) on the cultural level with respect to each article of the Convention was an eye-opener that helped me tremendously in my understanding of the Convention.

Unfortunately, the CEDAW Committee never has sufficient time to follow and apply this typology in full when discussing States Parties’ reports. In the Committee I learned about cultural diversity, about “Northern” and “Southern” feminism, about the interplay of cultural and patriarchal power politics. The latter use all arguments based on religion, philosophy, cultural traditions, to justify forms of discrimination against women either on the basis of their “natural differences” when compared to men or on the basis of their “complementary” roles and tasks in society. The CEDAW Committee usually does not accept such arguments, and the Committee is most powerful in its reasoning when the counter arguments come from members with the same cultural background as the respective State Party.

The CEDAW Committee with its twenty-three members, of course, is also culturally diverse. My last professional job taught me about intercultural learning processes, and these are an ongoing feature of the Committee’s work also due to its constantly changing membership. It has not always been easy to accept some members’ positions on cultural issues, and the discussion comprised rational, irrational, emotional, obstinate, furious and conciliatory interventions, depending on the personality and cultural background of each member. Miraculously, although I sometimes had given up already, we always found a solution. Not always the most desirable from my point of view, but some sort of solution.

Thus, the questions I want to leave with you today are: 1) how do we empower women to accept and cherish their own cultural diversity but to also expose the patriarchal fallacies which clothe themselves in “culturally” constructed garments to impede women’s enjoyment of their human rights on an equal basis with men? 2) How do we encourage and improve cross-cultural and domestic inter-cultural discussion of different positions to demask their patriarchal underpinnings and manifestations? 3) When and how do we have to draw a line and stand up firm for equality and non-discrimination but do not break off the discussion?

Your contributions today will be important for me and the work of the Committee. This conference, which is a present to me, is also a present to the Committee in which I spent twenty years of my life.

Thank you, once more, and I will be with you in spirit.