ABSTRACT PHD THESIS “HONOUR, GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN A CONTEXT OF MIGRATION. AN EMPIRICAL-ETHICAL RESEARCH ON EXPERIENCES WITH AND MEANINGS OF HONOUR AND HONOUR-RELATED, WITH FLANDERS AS CASE-STUDY”

Sophie Withaeckx

This dissertation has as its central question if respect for minorities’ cultural identities can be made compatible with guaranteeing minority women’s rights and welfare. This research therefore builds upon the academic feminism-versus-multiculturalism-debate, which critically engaged with claims for the protection and recognition of minority cultural identities in Western liberal states. In this debate, referral was made to the occurrence of “harmful cultural practices” like polygamy, arranged and forced marriages, and honour-related violence, whose recognition would especially jeopardize minority women’s rights. These practices thus served to illustrate the moral dilemmas arising from the willingness to both positively recognize minorities’ cultural identities, and guarantee feminist values like gender equality, autonomy and women’s freedom of decision-making.

This dissertation tried to find a way out of this impasse, by means of a research into the phenomenon of honour-related violence in the Flemish context of migration. Research questions concerned the meanings and importance of the concept of honour among minorities in Flanders, and its role in occurrences of familial violence among minorities. The research was conducted using a multi-methods research design, combining qualitative methods (literature study, in-depth interviews and participation) with the more quantitative method of survey inquiry. Men and women with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds were questioned regarding their interpretations of and experiences with the concepts of honour and honour-related violence. An inquiry was equally conducted among social workers confronted with victims and perpetrators of honour-related violence.

This research revealed the honour concept to be a complex and semantically flexible notion, whose meaning cannot be reduced to male preoccupation with women’s chastity and virginity: this traditional notion of honour appears to be just one version of an “ethic of honour” which can be identified in a wide variety of regions and social groups. In this ethic, violence may be perceived as a legitimate instrument, both to defend one’s own position (or honour) within the group, and to confirm the inferior position of outsiders, differing in gender, ethnicity or social class. While honour may thus serve to reinforce hierarchies and inequality between people, a newer perspective of honour has evolved that accords honour and dignity to any person based on common humanity. Although both perspectives are simultaneously present in most countries
of the world, traditional honour and honour-related violence appear to be more persistent in the regions of the Middle East and South-Asia. Rather than the reflection of unchanging culture and traditions however, these phenomena are the result of complex political and institutional processes of identity construction and nation building in post-colonial contexts.

Among minorities in Flanders, honour appeared to be an important and recognizable concept, although interpretations could strongly differ according to intra-group differences and personal preferences. Traditional notions of honour could be reproduced, but also reworked or rejected. But honour also functioned as a marker of solidarity and ethnic identity, and could thus be perceived as a positive value, which is not necessarily related with violence and oppression.

The inquiry among social workers revealed that honour could emerge as a significant factor in gender violence among minorities. Nevertheless, HRV was felt to be about more than just culture: respondents also pointed out how the broader political, socio-economic and institutional context shaped minorities’ experiences with violence.

This research proved honour to be a notion that cannot unilaterally be considered as oppressing for women. Nevertheless, the traditional notion of honour can serve as a legitimation for violence and oppression, and should therefore rightly be the object of debate. Based on a feminist approach known as “mature multiculturalism”, it is argued that the normative goals of feminism can be made compatible with a positive recognition of minorities’ identities, provided that homogenising visions on culture and identity are discarded. This approach reframes “culture” as a dynamic process of signification, whose role in identity formation should be recognized, but whose content should be subject to critical evaluation. Based on the normative goals of feminism and universal human and women’s rights, cultural values that perpetuate patriarchal oppression and undergird violence against women, could and should be discussed and morally condemned. At the same time, minority women's position at the intersection of multiple dimensions of oppression – including ethnicity – should be recognized when examining how and why traditional and hierarchic notions of honour prevail above more progressive interpretations.