



**United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization**

SYNTHESIS REPORT

ACTIVITIES IN THE DOMAIN OF WOMEN AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE:

**International editorial meeting and future activities in the domain
Iran National Commission for UNESCO
Tehran June 2001**

1. Introduction

The UNESCO Intangible Heritage Section activities on the subject of *Women, Intangible Heritage and Development* are an integral part of continuing programmatic efforts by UNESCO to refine our understanding of intangible cultural heritage and to promote women's priorities, perspectives and contributions to rethinking of development. This report provides a synthesis of regional feasibility studies and an international expert meeting on 'Women, Intangible Heritage and Development' (Tehran, June 2001), in preparation for the development of a future project on this subject.

2. Background

Women have been one of the priority groups of UNESCO programmes since the 28th session of the General Conference in 1995, in line with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.¹ The majority of existing targets for the advancement of women relate to health and education.² UNESCO, as the only organisation within the United Nations system with a mandate covering culture, is in a unique position to strengthen its actions and promote the role of women in relation to intangible heritage and development. There has been increasing recognition of the need to address this role, as underscored at the *'Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development'* (Stockholm 1998), which was convened pursuant to a recommendation of the UNESCO Report, *Our Creative Diversity*.³ The report stressed the need to understand and promote culture as integral to human development on all levels. This approach was reinforced by the *'Global Assessment of the 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore: Local Empowerment and International Cooperation'* (Washington, 1999).

¹ Fourth World Conference on Women: Platform of Action and the Beijing Declaration, Beijing 1995.

² *Targets and Indicators: Progress of the World's Women*, United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2000:3.

³ *Our Creative Diversity* (1995). Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, prepared by the United Nations and UNESCO within the framework of the World Decade for Cultural Development.

In recognition of the above, a Draft Resolution was presented by the Islamic Republic of Iran and approved at the General Conference for UNESCO at its 29th session proposing that the role of women in relation to intangible cultural heritage be studied and the results presented at the *International Symposium on the Role of Women in the Transmission of Cultural Heritage* held in Tehran in 1999, under the joint auspices of the UNESCO Unit of Intangible Heritage and the Iranian National Commission for UNESCO. The recommendations flowing from the Tehran Symposium led to a Draft Resolution submitted by the Iranian National Commission and approved at the 30th General Conference (1999) proposing that feasibility studies on “*Women, Intangible Heritage and Development*” be undertaken in six regions of the world as a basis for recommendations for actions to support women as central actors in maintaining intangible heritage and development.

The International Expert Meeting, *Women, Intangible Heritage and Development* was held in Tehran on 25–27 June, 2001 and jointly organised by the Iranian National Commission for UNESCO and UNESCO Headquarters Intangible Heritage Section. The purpose of the meeting was to provide an informal forum in which to evaluate the six regional feasibility studies undertaken on a decentralised basis by six UNESCO Offices representing their respective regions. They were Apia (Pacific), Accra (Africa), Beirut (Arab States), Mexico (Latin America), New Delhi (Asia), Tashkent (Central Asia). The studies, prepared on the basis of replies to questionnaires sent to all major specialised institutions within the Member States concerned, provided an overview of major research, institutions and issues relating to woman, intangible heritage and development, as well as recommendations for future directions and actions to be taken in this domain in each region.

2. Justification for future projects concerning women, intangible heritage and development

Women are central to the maintenance and vitality of cultural heritage and diversity world wide. Their roles in relation to intangible heritage are of particular significance, and encompass what may be described as fundamental domains and expressions of cultural heritage, which are very often central to maintaining cultural identity. They include, but are not restricted to, language, codes of ethics, behavioural patterns, value systems and religious beliefs. In most cultures, women play the principle role in raising children, through which the intergenerational transmission and renewal of many forms of intangible heritage occurs. In maintaining and passing on intangible culture to future generations, women also recreate and transform culture. Further to this, the role of women in maintaining intangible heritage, particularly within local cultural contexts, is of vital significance in the safeguarding of cultural diversity. In this respect, women’s intangible heritage should be granted special recognition and support in activities following the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, as adopted at the 31st session at the Organization’s General Conference (2001).

Two major issues to be given immediate attention in activities to support women’s intangible heritage are the lack of systematic research undertaken in this field to date, and the inadequate recognition of the importance of women’s roles and contributions, both within local communities and wider contexts. Despite the diversity of the problems and priorities evident in the regional feasibility studies, they share a core of analytic and practical concerns that form the justification for the preparation of a future project. These core concerns may be articulated around three central questions as follows:

1. Why “women and intangible heritage”?

A common feature that unites the regions represented in the feasibility studies is that they have experienced various types of *colonial encounters*. Some, like the Spanish conquest of the Americas dating from the 15th century, have a long history, creating hybrid cultures based on indigenous, Hispanic, African and other European influences. Others, like Central Asia, a region marked by Turco-Iranian influences, have experienced colonial penetration as late as the 19th century with the Russian conquest and the Soviet regime that followed it. The parties to these various encounters have ranged from imperial formations such as Moghul India or the Ottomans in Egypt to the relatively isolated island communities of the Pacific which were “discovered” in the late 18th century. The spread of universal faiths, through either conquest or missionary activities, also meant that various belief systems and practices have been eradicated, assimilated and modified, creating a wide range of syncretisms reflecting the sedimentation of complex cultural influences.

The domestic sphere and the family are recognized as important sites for the transmission of group identities through food, dress, language, life cycle rituals, oral narratives and modes of socialization. Expressions of living cultures are best sought in the everyday practices of those engaged in making a living, rearing the young, healing the sick, enjoying leisure or searching for existential meaning. The role of women as key reproducers of cultural identities is, therefore, not in question.

However, *national policies* introduce significant differences since they map out a network of institutions and discourses that define the realm of heritage. Governments and public institutions such as museums, archives, cultural centres, educational and research establishments are important agents of the definition and elaboration of intangible cultural heritage. These institutions often perform a filtering role privileging certain definitions of the “traditional” and the “local” over others. The legislative frameworks of states also determine women’s degree of access to property, education, civic rights, social welfare and gainful employment while the national media influence perceptions of women’s roles.

Furthermore, *the official policies of states* mediate the relation in which the domestic sphere stands to expressions of local cultures. At one end of the continuum, we have the example of the Soviet state which, moved to “reform” the cultural complexes it encountered in Central Asia in the interests of modernization. In this particular case, the domestic sphere gained a disproportionate importance in the transmission of local culture and women became the main agents of this transmission, especially in the fields of ritual and religious expression. Even in cases where the cleavage between state imposed “official” cultures and local forms of expression and practice are not quite so stark, the process of creation of nation-states and of “national” cultures by post-colonial states has entailed a process of homogenisation of language and custom that has privileged certain social and cultural groups over others.

Paradoxically, the marginalization of women from the public sphere, which is often dominated by men, results in their becoming privileged reproducers of the intangible cultural heritage of their communities. However, in the same way that the productive work that women do is undercounted and rendered invisible (a subject that has received a great deal of attention in works on development), so is their contribution to the transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Women’s sphere is frequently devalued through association with the “traditional”, treated as the inferior partner in the “modern/traditional” dichotomy. This dichotomy has itself been subjected to critical scrutiny in recent writing on development.

2. Why “intangible heritage and development”?

Until quite recently, the terms “development” and “intangible cultural heritage” were seldom coupled together. The report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, *Our Creative Diversity* (1995) broke new ground in this respect by challenging the conceptual distinctions separating the sphere of culture from that of the economy. Refusing to see culture as a mere instrument of development (either creating obstacles to growth or stimulating it), the authors of the report emphasize that culture performs a creative and constitutive role, one that underwrites human freedom and dignity. Furthermore, cultures are defined as neither isolated nor static, but as interacting and evolving.

Development, often equated with modernization, has introduced belief systems, technologies and infrastructures (such as the faith in science and the adoption of modern health and education systems) that have marginalized bodies of local knowledge and practice. Development, understood exclusively as economic growth, has been critiqued for its ecologically and socially untenable consequences. Bottom-up approaches to development that are informed by the aspirations and the know-how of local communities have drawn attention to intangible cultural heritage as a resource for development in different spheres of human activity; in the sustainable management of ecosystems, in the adoption of appropriate technologies, in the definition of systems of property and in health promotion and healing techniques, to mention but a few examples. Thus, terms which started out as potentially antithetical are now increasingly recognized to have potential synergies.

3. Why “women, intangible heritage and development”?

During the two decades between the first United Nations Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 and the Beijing conference in 1995, issues relating to gender and development have gained increased visibility and legitimacy. However, the interactions between culture and development and women’s roles in the maintenance, transmission and creation of living cultures through their everyday struggles for livelihood and self-expression have yet to receive the attention they deserve.

Gender-sensitive development interventions have favoured the use of participatory and gender planning frameworks designed to include the “voices” and perspectives of different gender and age groups. They have not, however, explicitly foregrounded the role of culture in development. More specifically, they have not taken full account of the ways in which women reproduce and use intangible cultural heritage as a resource in flexible and innovative ways.

Central aims of the future project “Women, intangible heritage and development” project will be to raise awareness of the significance of women’s roles within communities in society at large, and to inform culturally sensitive development activities.

3. Evaluation of Feasibility Studies

The feasibility studies presented at the Tehran meeting in June 2001 provided numerous examples of women’s roles as transmitters of intangible cultural heritage in a variety of domains such as subsistence knowledge, health and healing, family and socialization, material/artisanal culture, artistic expression, religious expression, oral literature and economic life. However, they all refrained from associating certain traits, attributes and practices exclusively to women (thus essentializing them), adopting instead a gender perspective that contextualizes their practices and activities. Both the risks and the synergies implicit in processes of globalisation and technological change for women’s livelihoods and empowerment were addressed as significant issues. The main points and recommendations raised by the feasibility studies are summarised below.

i) Africa Region, presented by Mrs Esi Sutherland-Addy

Mrs. Sutherland-Addy examined the question of intangible heritage through the lens of African institutions and the types of spaces these create for the expression of women's agency. Women's knowledge is maintained and expressed through their day-to-day activities and their work acts as a forum for their living heritage and as a crucial domain for the continuity of transmission of knowledge and traditional practices. Women also have important roles as ritual performers during puberty rites held for girls, as singers of oral tradition and of dirges, as healers, mediums and religious practitioners.

The imposition of colonial legal and political structures over indigenous systems has diminished strong traditional institutions of women's authority in these domains. Women have lost ground through the partial or complete transformation of traditional institutions by colonial powers and missionary activity. However, the author refrained from glorifying women's traditional spaces and acknowledged the fact that whilst women are the custodians of positive value systems they are also the purveyors of more questionable practices such as female genital mutilation.

The report pointed out that a large number of NGOs have been created dealing with issues of gender and development. However, the majority of studies in this field are mainly concerned with issues of livelihood, health status and poverty and do not explicitly focus on women and intangible heritage. This situation may be remedied by projects representing women's voices and perspectives (such as the *Women Writing Africa Project*⁴).

The recommendations presented for a future project included:

- reassess representations of African women in historical documentation and preparation of research guidelines, such as best practices, in order to avoid misrepresentations of African women;
- support activities which enable the written documentation of women's cultural heritage and perspectives in forms including story-telling and academic writing;
- support women's active participation in global processes, such as information technology, to enable them to gain from the opportunities and benefits they present;
- encourage governments and civil society to support the full participation of women in development agendas.

ii) Asia Region, presented by Dr Maitrayee Chaudhuri

The report noted important differences between and within countries in Asia with respect to levels of economic development, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity and between so-called indigenous peoples and mainland majority populations.

The central argument developed in the report is that the protection of intangible heritage cannot be separated from issues of livelihood. The study revealed a substantial emphasis on the link between poverty as a threat to the survival of women's intangible heritage, and in this respect, underlined the significance of addressing livelihood in relation to protecting this heritage. A result of increasingly centralized markets for traditional crafts is a growing trend for women to produce for metropolitan markets. Processes of production are removed from their cultural contexts, thereby greatly effecting the way of life, meaning associated with these creations, and their quality. On the other hand, the

⁴ This project is sponsored by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. The concept of "writing" has been deliberately broadened to include songs, praise poems and oral texts alongside fiction short stories, letters and journals.

failure of modern health systems in terms of delivery is causing a regeneration in traditional health and healing practices and future projects should address the maintenance and protection of this domain of knowledge, with an emphasis being placed on intellectual property rights.

The recommendations presented for a future project included:

- undertake micro-regional studies in order to better understand the complexity of phenomenon effecting women's intangible cultural heritage, particularly in relation to global dynamics;
- develop activities for the protection of women's intangible cultural heritage which will contribute to their livelihood without undermining this heritage.

iii) Latin America region, presented by Dr Dora Cardaci

The report highlighted the complex cultural mix represented by indigenous populations linked to pre-colonial civilizations, settlers of European and Asian origin, Afro-American and creole influences in a region comprising over 500 million inhabitants and 400 ethnic groups. The study was limited to four countries reflecting this diversity; Mexico, Chile, Peru and Brasil.

Referring to the debate on women and the environment, Dr. Cardaci identified a shift towards gender, the environment and sustainable development during the 1990's in Latin America. This approach allows for the identification of differences among women and the socio-historical contingency of their links with natural resources, their social relationships and the power systems in which they operate. Since the 1980s a growing number of NGOs and research programmes situated in public universities and research centres have been created dealing with issues relating to gender and the environment as well as networks among the various organizations and collaboration between academics and NGO activists.

Likewise, the gender perspective in health seeks to impact on the causes affecting women's access to and unequal control of the factors that would satisfy their fundamental human needs. There are a range of NGOs that work on the recovery and preservation of the resources and techniques of traditional healers drawing on the knowledge of different indigenous peoples. These NGOs are organized into national, sub-regional or Latin American networks that exchange information and experience and participate in training programmes. Research institutions also contribute to knowledge in this field especially through disciplines such as medical anthropology, social medicine and public health.

The area of artisanal production and handicrafts occupies an important place in Latin America, with a wide range of government institutions dedicated to the preservation of this type of material culture. This government support is linked in most cases to the so-called 'indigenous movement' and thus towards creation of a national identity. Only in recent years has the role of women in the transmission of intangible heritage related to handicrafts become the subject of interest. In family or individual workshops, women acquire important roles being in charge of the production of artisanal objects both for their own use and for exchange. Moreover, to the extent handicrafts are not limited to production but to the distribution and commercialisation of the final products, women come into contact with new materials, new technologies and new demands.

A significant number of NGOs concentrate on supporting artisanal production and their comercialization. In some countries, women have organized themselves into networks and research is conducted through academic institutions in the different countries.

The recommendations presented for future project included;

- multi-disciplinary and gender based approaches to the study of women, intangible heritage and development which emphasize women's cultural diversity;
- support NGO's undertaking activities relating to women, intangible heritage and development, and the use of information technology to achieve their aims;
- encourage collaboration between NGO's, government institutions and research centres in activities concerning women, intangible heritage and development, in particular, with regard to preservation.

iv) Central Asia region, presented by Mrs Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva

Central Asia is a multi-ethnic region where the influences of nomadic and sedentary ways of life, of Islamic and pre-Islamic belief systems create a complex mosaic. It is of particular interest since it experienced a break with its Turco-Iranian heritage under the influence of Soviet official cultural policies and yet demonstrated the great resilience of its intangible cultural heritage, often reflected through practices in the domestic sphere where women occupy central roles.

The Soviet period had paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, the Soviet state propagated European "high culture" and created an elaborate network of libraries, theatres, museums, institutes, concert halls and clubs. This had the effect of pushing traditional, popular culture to the margins and the performance of religious rituals-which were banned-to the underground. On the other hand, indigenous traditions became the subject of ethnographic enquiry as historically obsolete phenomena but nonetheless subjected to systematic documentation and compilation (such as formal musical notation of folk tunes and drawing and photography of applied folk arts).

The consequence of an official infrastructure privileging high art and Soviet modernity and the codification of "traditional" cultures has been that intangible heritage persisted through the medium of family socialization and oral transmission through master-apprentice relationships. The industrialization of the applied arts since the 1950s also resulted in a decline of the creative standards of earlier masters, turning former craftspeople into factory workers.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union and national independence a process of national revival focussing on local languages and cultural forms and "traditional" culture acquired the status of official policy with support from the state. However, this happened against a background of deterioration of existing institutions in the fields of education and culture which were left to face market transition without adequate state support. The preservation of traditional culture is closely linked to the survival of the network of social institutions such as archives, museums, educational centres and research institutes (which employed a large female workforce). The revival of folk applied arts and crafts has now moved from academic research institutions to NGOs working directly with crafts people.

The period of transition to the market is marked by the decline of the institutions inherited from the Soviet period in the absence of new alternatives. The author surveys the various state bodies, NGOs and business organizations involved in intangible heritage. The state bodies are currently under funded and in crisis. The NGO sector which has been developing since the late 1980s during *perestroika* seems better able to combine issues of livelihood (such as providing training in crafts and folklore) with the revitalization of traditional arts and crafts. Examples of organizations such as Mussavir in Uzbekistan, "Turkmen style" and "Kyrgyz style" show how folk masters may be supported. There is a strong female presence in this NGO sector.

The recommendations presented for future project included:

- the revision of legislation and taxation policies in the field of culture;
- support the training of policy makers, the creation of new types of professional associations;
- promote joint projects between government bodies and NGOs.

v) Arab States region, presented by Mrs Annie Tohme-Tabet

The report points to the great ethnic and religious heterogeneity of the region with 22 Arab States, each with marked regional differences and different patterns of development. It involves several sub-cultural areas; the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian peninsula and the Maghreb (North Africa). The research for the report focuses mainly on the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian peninsula, and emphasises the pervasive reference to value systems and problems that affect women across the region (such as crimes of honour).

There a number of actors in the region from individual researchers to NGOs dealing with different aspects of intangible heritage in material culture and handicraft production, health and healing and traditional subsistence knowledge. The field of handicraft development opens a space for NGOs to initiate income-generating activities for women (for example the promotion of traditional embroidery that characterizes Palestinian dresses by women in Palestinian refugee camps).

The report details a variety of projects concerning traditional subsistence knowledge, oral tradition, religious and artistic expression, and concludes that the most systematic activities with respect to intangible heritage are undertaken by national states although a range of other actors (NGO and commercial) also play important roles. What is noteworthy among women's NGOs dealing with development issues is that some pursue a transformative agenda, asking for a change in established cultural patterns, while others seek more pragmatic goals having to do with women's welfare.

The recommendations presented for a future project included:

- raise awareness of the diverse social and cultural contexts in which women live;
- sensitize research centres and local level organizations such as NGO's to the significance of women's intangible heritage and its role development;
- encourage research, documentation and publications which will inform action and policy development in this domain.

vi) Pacific region, presented by Dr Susanna Kelly and prepared by Dr Lissant Bolton and Dr Susanna Kelly

The Pacific region encompasses 22 states with high levels of cultural diversity. A central factor in understanding the situation with regard to intangible heritage is that as a result of colonial encounters since the 18th century much traditional knowledge has been undermined and lost. Nonetheless, significant amounts of traditional knowledge has been maintained, and new cultural forms combining local and introduced elements have evolved. Despite great interest in the documentation and revival of traditional knowledge and practice, existing programs are not inter-coordinated but managed by a wide range of organizations creating both gaps and areas of overlap.

The region is undergoing rapid social change fuelled by massive population growth, rapid urbanization and lack of employment leading to criminality and substance abuse, against a background of growing disparities of wealth and class. Many Pacific women's organizations aim to overcome the problems occasioned by the effects of these changes. However, many aspects of

women's intangible cultural heritage, such as women's religious and ritual practice, food production and childbirth and child rearing are currently overlooked.⁵

Concerning the safeguarding of cultural heritage in the region, the important role of documentation was emphasized for the Pacific. It is important to take into account the innovative and dynamic nature of women's intangible heritage, and its adaptability to changing situations. With regard to the documentation of heritage, issues of ownership of knowledge must be taken into account, as it is not always accessible for recording, and may be owned by individuals or families.

The recommendations presented for a future project included:

- incorporate audio-visual documentation activities as a significant and effective means to document and revive women's intangible heritage;
- centralize documentation to avoid duplication;
- further strengthen consultations with local women into activities;
- provide support for a radio programme in view of the effectiveness of this medium for geographically dispersed communities in the Pacific.

4. Future Directions

The regional feasibility studies presented above have different emphases and priorities reflecting specific historical pathways, varied colonial histories, different national policies and varying degrees of dialogue and engagement with approaches to gender and development that have emerged and evolved since the first United Nations Conference on Women in 1975. They nonetheless share some important commonalities. They all treat intangible heritage as *living culture* which evolves through the daily practices of people. They all acknowledge the centrality of women to the creation and reproduction of intangible heritage in multiple domains of activity and expression. They all avoid the treatment of women as a homogenous category and are mindful of distinctions among them.

The two central themes emerged as the focus a future project to be developed in the domain of *Women, intangible heritage and development* :

a) Knowledge and Practices Specific to Women:

Women's specialist knowledge spans a wide variety of fields from techniques of production to healing practices. In Latin America we find female health practitioners who draw upon indigenous knowledge. Women traders in West Africa have their own professional associations and codes of conduct and play key economic roles. Women also occupy specific niches in handicraft production such as carpet making and felt making in Iran and Central Asia, pottery and textiles in Latin America, embroidery and textiles in the Middle East and a wide variety of handicrafts in the African and South Asian sub-continent. Moreover, women do not merely act as reproducers and transmitters of intangible cultural heritage but respond in innovative ways to changing material circumstances and technologies.⁶

⁵ A notable exception may be found in the successful Vanuatu Cultural Centre 'Women Fieldworkers Program' which teaches volunteer female extension workers to document and revive aspects of their cultural practice, focussing on a different topic each year.

⁶ For instance, in the Cook Islands, Tahiti and Hawaii, the important female tradition of creating *tifaifai* or quilts is an innovative response to new materials and technologies drawing upon the older practice of barkcloth production. Quilts are presented to relatives to strengthen family ties but also represent significant commercial value when sold and form part of women's personal wealth.

In most societies women are central agents in the performance and transmission of life cycle events and rituals related to birth, marriage and death. Female ritual and religious experts exist worldwide. In the Pacific region they preside over female initiation, life cycle rituals and they possess midwifery knowledge and skills. In Central Asia the *otyn* have acted as transmitters of Islamic knowledge throughout the Soviet period. Sub-Saharan Africa is rich with examples of female ritual specialists performing as instructors for female initiation rites, singers of funeral dirges or composers and performers of chants and songs. In the Arab world, women professionals are engaged in the beautification of brides (as seen in the *henna* ceremonies in Morocco) and the mourning of the dead (*nadabe* or professional mourners). In South Asia, women are active agents in the arena of food and rituals keeping alive modes of worship, fasts and festivals and rules governing concerns of purity and pollution. Although these reinforce and reproduce the boundaries of caste and class they also provide avenues of self –worth and expression through the command of the repertoire of rules and of innovation and subversion. Women’s ritual practices often provide the best window on local forms of syncretism. Although these sometimes elicit ambivalent responses on the part of state and religious authorities, they nonetheless exhibit tremendous resilience.

Many areas of women’s knowledge and practice, which are at the heart of intangible cultural heritage, risk becoming marginalized with increasing globalisation of production, exchange and the transmission of knowledge. Globalisation has profoundly paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, it may create new avenues of livelihood by stimulating markets for local cultural products (such as handicrafts, healing techniques, types of cuisine or music). On the other hand, it transforms, commercialises and redefines the cultural products in question as items of consumption. It is therefore an urgent priority a) to document women’s existing roles in the transmission of cultural heritage and b) to explore areas of both conflict and synergy with increasing globalisation.

b) Women mobilizing cultural resources:

One of the central weaknesses of development interventions aimed at empowering women is that they take insufficient account of women’s existing knowledge and coping strategies. There are notable exceptions, illustrating how local knowledge might inform development projects. An example from Egypt shows how women’s informal economic networks may be deployed to create effective credit systems. Building on the practice of the *gami’yya*, an informal savings association predominantly run by women, a local NGO, ADEW, was able to implement a successful credit system modifying the Grameen Bank model to suit the local context.

Numerous examples of women’s informal (and formal) networks exist, performing a variety of functions for their members. A noteworthy feature of these networks is their malleability and ability to respond adaptively to changing circumstances. For instance, the *gap* in Uzbekistan had an ostensibly recreational function bringing women belonging to the same group together around a meal every month. Every member of the group pays in a fixed monthly contribution and the member who organizes the gathering at their home receives the lump sum collected. In a period of recession, shortage of cash and rising inflation these gatherings acquired a more economic function, allowing group members to use the lump sums to make essential purchases or unexpected expenses.⁷

⁷ Similarly in Papua New Guinea, Eastern Highlands women have since about 1960 developed a savings and exchange system called *Wok Meri* (‘women’s work’). *Wok Meri* is a network of autonomous groups whose membership is based on a kinship unit (lineage and sub-lineage) that itself is the unit of collective social action. Members pool their savings and these are invested and given in loans to members. Importantly, *wok meri* groups also enter into exchange relationships based on cultural practices (such as the payment of ‘bride price’) already established. Likewise, the *jamiy’ya* in the Arab

Women's networks are frequently multi-functional and may involve self-help, ritual and artistic forms of expression. They involve elements of innovation as well as transmission of local cultural practices. For instance, the *jalaseh* in Iran is primarily a religious gathering of a group of women for the teaching, learning, reciting and interpreting the Koran and other religious texts. However, they may also perform social support and economic functions if they lead to the establishment of a *sandough-gharzul-hasaneh* making loans without interest.

Women may also mobilize local cultural forms and resources in their search for greater equality.⁸ Intangible cultural heritage may act not only as a resource for development but also for the empowerment of women.

Taking into account the recommendations of the regional feasibility studies, and the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Section proposes the development of a project concerned with safeguarding, revitalizing and raising awareness of women's roles in relation to intangible heritage and development which would fulfil the following objectives:

- furthering UNESCO's mission with respect to promoting culturally sensitive approaches to development and community-based perspectives;
- documenting women's intangible cultural heritage across regions with a view to informing and improving development projects targeting women;
- sensitising decision makers in government, non-governmental and corporate sectors to the importance of creating positive synergies between global markets and local know-how, including know-how specific to women.

world represent a type of economic network which is widespread and helps women to establish a measure of control over their savings and finances.

⁸ For instance, Egyptian feminists are fighting for a new marital contract allowing partners to stipulate more equitable terms on the basis of the principle of the *'ayma*, commonly practiced by the popular classes. The *'ayma*, which consists of a listing of the property brought to marriage by women with the stipulation that it must be returned to the women in cases of divorce or desertion, effectively acts as a deterrent to easy divorce.