Fatima Mernissi’s work shrugs off the powerless and revisits power structures with the intention of transforming them. Her work should therefore not only be included in university programmes, but also a Fatima Mernissi Chair should be created in order to decolonize our academic institutes and to transform a university into a ‘pluriversity’, an institute whose people (professors, students, researchers and personnel), infrastructure and knowledge are characterized by diversity.

Since all of us young Muslim graduates trained in Belgium are products of Eurocentric knowledge production, we were not taught about Mernissi at the University. Therefore, after the publication of her op-ed in the newspaper, Saida Sakkali did not stand still. A few days later she approached the University hierarchy and told that she would like to talk about the creation of a Fatima Mernissi Chair or Reward at the VUB.
Soon afterwards, she was invited to a meeting. The enthusiasm of the Academic director prompted Saida Sakkali and Yamila Idrissi to write an official proposal for the creation of a Fatima Mernissi Chair. The proposal urged the university to play an important societal role by offering a space for non-Western scholars and knowledge. They argued that this was particularly important in Brussels, the capital city of Belgium and Europe where religions and cultures intersect. On 26 January 2017, the VUB Fatima Mernissi Chair was officially launched, with me, Iman Lechkar, a Moroccan Belgian anthropologist as the chair holder.

One year earlier, on 5 January 2016, a Fatima Mernissi chair had also been inaugurated in Rabat at the Mohammed V University. Another Fatima Mernissi Chair was inaugurated in Mexico on 11 November 2019 by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), in order to foster South-South relations with Morocco.

A Muslim feminist and decolonial thinker

Fatima Mernissi was born in 1940 in Fes, Morocco, and was raised in a middle-class family. She studied political science at the Mohammed V University in the capital city of Rabat and continued at graduate school in Paris. She obtained her PhD in sociology at Brandeis University in the United States. Once she received her doctorate, she returned to Morocco and taught sociology at the Mohammed V University while also doing research at the Moroccan Scientific Research Institute, both in Rabat. Mernissi wrote many scholarly books on Islam, gender and power. *The Veil and the Male Elite – A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (1987) was internationally recognized as a masterpiece.

Mernissi was committed to equality between men and women in the Arab and Muslim world. She was a vehement critic of patriarchy and male religious authority. She also denounced the unattained promise of democracy in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) regions by nationalist movements. She further condemned the wrecking consequences of colonialism and coloniality. As one of the best-known Arab Muslim feminists, Mernissi’s influence extends beyond a limited circle of intellectuals. In Morocco she was a valued public figure who transformed her house into a meeting place for artists, intellectuals, activists and policymakers, and discovered many ‘new talents’. Her feminist practice did not stem from party politics but from the way in which she embraced Islamic
Fatima Mernissi’s work debunks all normative and stereotypical views on Muslim women in both Islamic and Western contexts. As a Muslim female scholar, she also studied in the West, making frequent trips there. Elaborating on these experiences and insights, she shows that the idea of the powerless and submissive Muslim woman is a construct promoted by both Muslim and white Western men to consolidate male power. Mernissi provides us with more complex understandings of the role of the Muslim woman in power dynamics, both in the West and in the Muslim majority societies. By drawing on different his-/her stories, Mernissi offers frameworks and concepts for discussion, including intra-Islamic challenges and challenges related to Muslim women in Western societies.

A decolonial praxis making pluriversalist universities possible

Because of her insightful, critical, rich and layered work, Fatima Mernissi’s work should be included in all curricula in the human and social sciences. However, changing curricula content is not enough. The Fatima Mernissi Chair aims to bring about structural change and is aware that in order to decolonize universities far more needs to be done than merely changing their curricula. The Chair aims to achieve structural change by focusing on two pillars, academic and societal.

The academic pillar of the Mernissi Chair focuses on education and research by introducing new knowledge, research questions and research fields. It also includes an equality policy in order to transform the university into a pluriversity. Three academic achievements of the Chair include the temporary assignment of a female Muslim Chair holder, the funding of research on Muslim men in prison and the creation of the course ‘Islam and Gender’, which has an extensive reading list in which only the works of scholars of colour are included. The course is part of a larger Masters degree on Gender and Diversity. These modest achievements aim to ‘disturb the totality from which the universal and the global are most often perceived’.3
As the creation of a prayer room or offering halal food remain contentious issues, we realize that we are far from becoming a pluriversity where minority students can see the university, as Achille Mbembe puts it, as: ‘... my home’ and where one thinks ‘I am not a foreigner. I belong here’. Decolonization, Mbembe continues, should also involve changing ‘the systems of access and management and changing the buildings and the classrooms, as “a good university education is impossible without an extensive material infrastructure/architecture”’.  

The societal pillar of the Fatima Mernissi chair aims to unlock academic knowledge and make it accessible to different types of public. This pillar places the participation of different marginalized publics and the ‘democratization of access’ in a central position. Although university tuition fees are quite accessible in Belgium compared to many other European countries, the university remains a white space to which it is difficult for minorities to belong. To enhance access to underprivileged groups, the Chair is developing a programme in the city centre, far away from the inaccessible wealthy Eastern part of Brussels where the VUB is located, and is collaborating with a range of secondary schools.

With our yearly programmes we aim to create spaces where marginalized groups of the European metropolitan capital are able to express their aspirations and frustrations, and where they can compare their experiences to other struggles against dominant, colonial and imperial structures. The Chair also aims to attract privileged groups in order to connect them to minorities and their voices and ideas. According to Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, this type of decolonial praxis creates possibilities of living together in which the West is no longer the only reference. These are encounters where other modes of living are not categorized as reactionary, radical, underdeveloped or uncivilized.

It is Fatima Mernissi’s decolonial ideas such as ‘forgotten queens’ and practices such as the ‘civic caravan’, that inspire us to develop yearly programmes exploring the (in)visible structures pushing women to the margins or the empowering effects of linking marginalized populations to artists and intellectuals using books, literature and slam poetry as glue between different groups.

It seems clear from the above that the Fatima Mernissi Chair at VUB challenges the dominance of Western knowledge. The Chair continues the work and legacy of Fatima Mernissi by investigating the complex relationship between power, gender and Islam. Essential to its work is the creation of spaces to foster conversations so that the dreams
and frustrations of marginalized groups can be raised openly. In this spirit, the Chair aims to transform the structure of the university so that the university can become a pluriversity where underprivileged groups not only form the subject of study but can also act as producers of knowledge and theory and act as co-creators of academic spaces. 

---