

# **IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND INTEGRATION**

Community relations

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Directorate of Social and Economic Affairs

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## Foreword

This is one of a series of booklets designed to accompany the report **Community and ethnic relations in Europe**, published by the Council of Europe in 1991<sup>1</sup>. By community relations is meant all aspects of the relations between migrants or ethnic groups of immigrant origin and the host society, and the report sets out proposals for a comprehensive approach to community relations policy in the Organisation's member States<sup>2</sup>.

Following on from its work on community relations, the European Committee on Migration (CDMG) has embarked on a project entitled: "the integration of immigrants: towards equal opportunities. This project aims to promote the exchange of practical experience between people who are attempting, in a variety of different ways, to put the community relations approach into practice.

The present booklet is the outcome of a meeting held in June 1994 in Strasbourg on: *Immigrant Women and Integration*.

Two consultants, Ms Jacqueline Costa-Lascoux and Ms Julie Cator, played a leading part in the preparation of this meeting. The participants at the meeting included the organisers of a variety of practical projects aiming in one way or another at the integration of immigrant women of the first and second generation, and at the identification of obstacles to integration and of strategies to overcome them.

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<sup>1</sup> It can be ordered under the reference MG-CR(91)1 final E.

<sup>2</sup> These number 34 at present: Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom.

A number of officials with policy-making responsibilities in the field also took part. The full list of speakers and projects is given at the end of the booklet: this will enable readers who so wish to make contact with those responsible for the various initiatives.

Following an introductory section, the booklet contains the "Conclusions and future prospects", drawn up by Ms Costa-Lascoux on the basis of the debates and exchanges of views held at the meeting in Strasbourg. For those wishing to know more about the initiatives presented at the meeting, there follows a series of shortened versions of the project descriptions which were prepared by those responsible. This part of the booklet has been compiled by Ms Julie Cator.

The number of initiatives promoting the integration of immigrant women and focusing particularly on the obstacles to the integration of this group is constantly growing. Despite the rising interest in these questions, these initiatives are often desperately short of funds and financial support.

Finally, I should like to take this opportunity of thanking the consultants and all who took part in the meeting, especially those whose written contributions are summarised here.

**Robin Guthrie**  
Director of Social and Economic Affairs  
Council of Europe

## Introduction

The purpose of the meeting on "*Immigrant women and integration*" held from 22 to 24 June 1994 as part of the Council of Europe Project on "The integration of immigrants: towards equal opportunities" was to pool experience with and ideas about projects for immigrant women.

The projects discussed at the meeting, at which twenty or so countries were represented, dealt with equal rights, equal opportunities, measures to prevent discrimination, recognition and development of immigrant women's cultural lives, ways of meeting their specific needs and aspirations and immigrant women's participation in policy-making. Women's approach reflected "a different view of integration" and of the issue of real equality. It adopted the wider perspective of human rights. The projects presented described the sometimes very difficult circumstances in which immigrant women lived and sought recognition in the host societies. They all took care to describe practical facilities and concrete initiatives. A comparison of experience highlighted the main obstacles encountered by immigrant women in their efforts to become integrated, the creativeness and diversity of the initiatives they took, and the fact that some of the proposals submitted at the meeting could be acted on immediately.

## Obstacles to integration

The discussion revealed both marked similarities and differences in situation depending on the host country and the socio-economic characteristics of the group of immigrant women.

1. **The similarities** revolved around a few basic points:
  - the legal status of immigrant women, which depended too often on the restrictive conditions governing family reunion;
  - language difficulties, especially for primary immigrants and first generation women - mothers;

- the lack of job qualifications or, particularly in the case of refugees, failure to recognise their previous qualifications due to the lack of a system for the equivalence of diplomas;
  - the isolation of women with large families, whose time was taken up by household tasks;
  - the obstacles generated by rural background and illiteracy, which were particularly difficult to overcome in urban societies currently hit by competition on the labour market.
2. The diversity of situations was due to three main factors:
- the host countries had widely differing integration policies and some had no special provision for immigrant women;
  - housing, education and social welfare conditions varied from one country, region and town to another.
  - in some countries a majority of women were illegal immigrants, subject to exploitation with very arduous working conditions and in some cases forced to work as prostitutes in order to survive;

Once this general fact was established, the projects discussed revealed the diversity of the situations encountered and the steps taken. This wealth of information and proposals concerned the actual focus of the schemes, the population groups involved and the resources used.

### **Priority action and long-term integration**

1. All the projects presented stressed the crucial role of literacy and learning the host country's language. Some projects were included in comprehensive programmes supported by the authorities, while others were local initiatives with few financial resources. But whatever

the teaching situations, the speakers pointed to a number of requirements for such language learning:

- ensuring that women gradually became accustomed to the host society in order to help motivate them;
- initially, priority for the spoken language and introduction to conversation;
- the confidence-building function of women mediators from the same background as the women attending the classes;
- training for teachers and social workers working with immigrant women;
- designing suitable teaching aids and content;
- childcare arrangements for women attending the language classes, especially, but not only, women on their own.

2. Some projects reflected a concern to diversify the national origins or social backgrounds of women learning the language of the host country; others had opted for classes targeted on certain groups of women from the same background or with similar problems. Some projects showed that it was helpful to extend language learning to other cultural activities facilitating relations with the social environment and, better, still, to vocational training or preparation for working life.

The discussion highlighted the need to be flexible with academic educational standards, to ensure that women attended language courses on a voluntary basis and also combine language learning with a wider understanding of family life, working life and institutions in the host society. A question was raised about the integration model that might be imposed through this linguistic and cultural introduction to the host society.

3. Many speakers stressed the importance of fostering cultural expression to enhance immigrant women's image. Experience with drama groups, for example, or with newspapers and television programmes, which demonstrated their creativeness and encouraged communication with people from different backgrounds, helped to motivate women and increase their self-confidence. At the same time, all activities organised to make women familiar with the host country's cultural heritage, which thus became a shared and accessible heritage, appeared to meet a thirst for knowledge which immigrant women did not always dare express. This meant that the presentation of their own culture became part of a reciprocal relationship.

4. Vocational training or preparation for working life was hampered by many immigrant women's low skill level or lack of qualifications. This was particularly true of older women. However, even if training or pretraining did not always lead to a job, especially because of the high unemployment rates in several European countries, it was in a sense a preparation for the training of young girls. Becoming more familiar with the constraints of working life and visiting firms facilitated acceptance of the idea of women pursuing an occupation.

5. Several projects dealt with immigrant women's physical or psychological health problems. In some countries, poor financial conditions, which affected the well-being of immigrant families, poor housing conditions in very small or unhealthy flats and the very arduous working conditions of women working as servants or in sewing workshops, for instance, were compounded by the cost of medical care and the fact that it was not refunded. Voluntary organisations had opened reception centres and clinics which were attended by thousands of women. Gynaecological and family planning clinics often came up against cultural resistance, but information work achieved remarkable results. More than in other areas, it was essential to have women mediators from the same background and to train health care personnel.

Several participants emphasised the need to provide family planning information to husbands as well.

Likewise, the issue of support for older women clearly needed to be addressed at once. These women's medical requirements, isolation and psychological distress were rarely taken into account.

More generally, most of the projects described and ideas put forward in the discussion emphasised a concern to help women build up their own identities, but within the family, which remained a source of support and solidarity even in the event of conflict or breakup. The work done with girls who had run away from home showed how important it was to re-establish family ties where possible. Work with women often meant work with the whole family, involving mothers and daughters, to maintain communication between generations.

Here again, however, maintaining relations with the home background had to be a voluntary matter. Some women wished to become emancipated from their community, whether refugees who had fled persecution or women who rejected certain restrictive traditional practices. Several references were made to the problem of the growth of religious fundamentalism.

### **The population groups concerned**

1. The meeting discussed the choice of people or groups at which projects should be aimed. Some projects deliberately focused on a particular community; others preferred to work with women from various backgrounds, including women who had acquired the nationality of the host country or been born or educated there; still others dealt with specific situations such as that of "clandestine" women or women who had broken with their families. The choice was often dictated by circumstances: hardship situations, groups subjected to special discrimination.

2. Attention was drawn to an important point: the difficulty of reaching isolated women. The projects described showed that very imaginative means were used: from improvised conversations in the street or at the market to contacts through school, from reception

centres to telephone helplines which allowed anonymous conversations. While immigrant women as a whole were "invisible", some were completely ignored by the host society and social environment and by institutions and public services.

A second point was noted: the need to involve fathers and husbands. Several projects had been set up to involve men, explain the aims pursued and overcome their reluctance.

3. It proved necessary to think carefully about the best places to meet women and offer them training, tuition and social gatherings. All the projects stressed the importance of the premises and the material conditions in which women were received. This question inevitably raised that of resources.

### **Resources for integration**

1. The projects differed very markedly in terms of the material and financial resources available to them. Some received nationwide subsidies from the state or local authorities; others were purely local and relied on voluntary workers.

2. More seriously, despite their success, many of the projects presented were reaching the end of the grants awarded to them. All the participants regretted the lack of follow-up, which was liable to put an end to original and successful experiments. Yet the discussions had underscored two points to which the speakers attached importance:

- projects were bound to stop when the goal was reached
- work with immigrant women was geared to making them responsible people, not welfare recipients.

But the end of a project could not be decided by lack of resources alone.

3. It was agreed that integration needs to be built up over time, drawing on the experience of certain temporary failures. Grants were too often short-term and conditional on immediate results, which were difficult to achieve in the area of social work and cultural activity.

4. The basic idea, which was learning to be independent, meant that immigrant women had to be directly involved in the projects concerning them. This also required the authorities to involve them, through consultation and partnership, in the framing, application and assessment of policies.

Immigrant women did not want to be socially and culturally "invisible"; they also wanted to be heard in debates and decision-making. This discussion of the conception of integration showed that they had ideas which had rarely been taken into account.

### **General orientation**

In terms of their creativity and diversity, the projects presented already amounted to proposals. To emphasise some of the positive points they demonstrated, a few proposals could be outlined:

- all policies in favour of immigrant women should be drawn up with their participation in terms of both the measures planned and their implementation;
- meeting places, reception centres, training premises and material support were needed and should not be provided only on a short-term or experimental basis;
- special attention should be paid to legal provisions which continued to discriminate against immigrant women, especially because of their dependant legal status;
- grants to create jobs for women trainers and mediators from immigrant backgrounds should be systematically considered;
- the situation of immigrant women was too complex to be treated as a mere question of national origin, religious background or generation.

A wide range of projects was needed. For example, it should be possible to recognise previous qualifications; suitable measures should be taken to deal with the specific situation of older women or the situation of exploited women.

In conclusion, policies in favour of immigrant women would achieve their aims only if they were based on human rights and action against discrimination.

**CONCLUSIONS AND  
PERSPECTIVES  
IN THE FUTURE**



## **IMMIGRANT WOMEN: OUT OF THE SHADOWS AND ON TO THE STAGE**

by Jacqueline Costa-Lascoux

The reports presented and the projects examined at the Strasbourg meeting, at which some 20 countries were represented, stress a number of priorities in integration policies: the transition from a formal equality of rights to equal opportunities; the fight against sexist discrimination which is more often than not combined with other forms of discrimination; recognition and development of the cultural life of immigrant women.

### **Disregarded**

In the different spheres of social and cultural activity immigrant women have for a long time been disregarded. The difficulties they have to cope with and, even more so, their aspirations and their participation in the devising and implementation of policies have been pushed into the background. Today, however, the authorities can no longer ignore the decisive presence of immigrant women nor can they refuse to listen to their proposals. The future of integration policies depends to a large extent on their involvement.

The women see integration from a different point of view: in particular they see the shortcomings of measures for social and vocational integration, the inadequacy of education and training policies, the need to consider both responses to emergency situations and long-term solutions. It is necessary to demand equal treatment for all immigrants, but that of itself is not enough.

The basic freedoms demanded by immigrant women are directly covered by the European Convention on Human Rights; they also have more practical demands relating to their day-to-day existence. The wives

and daughters of immigrants, women exiles and refugees are not satisfied with empty formulas; they want guarantees which recognize their self-respect and acknowledge their rights. They are determined that principles should be applied in practice and they have a pragmatic conception of the law which strengthens their commitment to their cause.

The information provided by associations of immigrant women describes particularly difficult living conditions which they are fighting to improve today through their efforts to enlist the support of public opinion. This awareness of the seriousness of some situations explains the most striking feature of all the projects presented by the associations of immigrant women: their concern to introduce effective mechanisms and tangible measures without delay.

A comparison of the actions carried out in the different European countries spotlights three main characteristics: the large number of obstacles which immigrant women face in the integration process, the wide variety of initiatives they undertake and the immediate practicability of some of the proposed measures. They want to see fundamental changes in their living conditions and those of their children. The first step that must be taken before anything else is done is certainly the one that requires the most energy and courage: they -must emerge from the shadowy recesses of society to which they are still often relegated.

### **A paradoxical invisibility**

Women immigrants are in a paradoxical situation: they are those from whom one expects the most, particularly in maintaining family stability, bringing up the children of the 'second generation' and transmitting values and, at the same time, hardly any attention has been given to their own education and socio-economic integration. This failure to consider their socio-cultural and political role goes hand-in-hand with ignorance of their status and their projects.

It has for several years been recognized that research on immigrant women in the countries of Europe is scattered and fragmentary and this is regrettably still the case. The public authorities which are attempting to adapt their integration policies are openly critical of the situation but have not provided the resources to carry out the necessary surveys nor have they made it easier for immigrant women to put their case. Associations which would like to compare their experiences often feel at a loss when the authorities in the host country ask them to provide statistical analyses and representative data in support of their claims.

Decisions on social policy have to be based on statistical arguments, estimates and evaluations and the absence of such information is one reason why immigrant women are not referred to either in sociological surveys or in socio-educational or economic measures. Because they were the 'first to be forgotten' when it came to public policy-making and research immigrant women today feel the need to speak out.

All the research done on family reunion procedures points to the increasing demographic and social importance of immigrant women. However, data are either too localised to generalise from or too general to take account of the development of all the diverse forms of behaviour and mentalities. The number of immigrant women residing in Europe is increasing, and their status, level of education and involvement in social life are far from uniform. They also play an important part in social and educational activities.

As a result of families being reunited with foreign workers already living in the host country, the arrival of single women or women heading single-parent families, women seeking asylum as a result of persecution on the grounds of personal status, religious belief or non-belief or political involvement, there has been a considerable increase in the number of women from distant countries now living in the countries of western Europe. They now account for 40-45% of the immigrant population, or nearly seven million of the fifteen and a half or sixteen million nationals from third countries living in the European Union. They live mainly in major European cities and their suburbs, in the poorest

districts or in former industrial zones in many of which there is a high rate of unemployment.

There are few examples of research which deals with the "combination of socio-cultural and economic handicaps" which inevitably affect immigrant women. They were looked on as second-class citizens in their country of origin and, in addition, they came to Europe just as the economic recession was beginning. They were thus exposed to various types of discrimination, sexist, ethnic, nationalist and even religious, which are intensified because of the worsening social and employment situation. An overall analysis of xenophobia or racism is an inadequate way of examining the other types of discrimination to which the most disadvantaged women are subject.

### **Realities and stereotypes**

Accounts of the daily activities of immigrant women, whether dealing with their work in the home, the education of their children and, sometimes, the jobs they have, speak of the many, often arduous tasks they have to cope with. They do have a wide range of activities. At home, in their neighbourhood, in school, in meetings of associations, women now occupy a very important position in the public sphere. It is not only their numbers which should be considered but the diversity of the activities which they undertake. In addition to their daily activities immigrant women are also the first, in their neighbourhood, to arrange child care, to organize the fight against drugs and petty crime among young people, to promote the improvement of the environment, in much the same way as those Afro-American and Porto Rican women in the large cities of the United States who successfully stand up to the drug dealers and make their neighbourhood a better place to live in.

But when immigrant women eventually come to the notice of the public authorities they are almost always considered in their traditional role. Women rejoiners, mothers of families or future wives, they are regarded in the traditional way in terms of their relationship to a father, husband or brothers, and are hardly ever looked on as responsible individuals

capable of taking decisions and giving expression to them. However, the stereotyped image of 'women rejoiners', confined to the home with no employment and no involvement in public life, is no longer a true picture of the way many immigrant women really live.

The authorities have not yet taken the measure of the phenomenon, which is distinguished by both the speed and contradictory nature of the changes observed in the situation of women immigrants.

The male leaders of immigrant associations are themselves at a loss, if not reluctant to act, fearing to see their wives abandon the traditions of which they are supposed to be the guardians. Frequently practical difficulties and the lack of social recognition by the host society are compounded by the mistrust or the opposition of fathers, elder brothers and husbands.

As for the political class, it seems to be unaware of the many difficulties faced by 'immigrant women as a group'. It takes a dramatic news story, given wide coverage by the media, before an incident illustrating the way some wives are mistreated, or drawing attention to restrictive traditions or religious, matrimonial or sexual taboos, puts the spotlight on the situation of such women.

Thus the 'Islamic scarf' which attracted publicity in several European countries, particularly in France, or the exile in Europe of the novelist Taslima are examples of occasional glimpses of the situation in which women find themselves and which provokes a stream of impassioned comment exploited by the media. But after a brief flurry of interest the subject is forgotten. The impression given is that there is general agreement that such matters should not be brought out into the open.

With a view to counteracting such ignorance and making it easier to plan measures which would promote the integration of immigrant women and take more account of the part they wish to play in defining and implementing new public policies, the meeting in Strasbourg in June 1993 considered several possible ways forward. Whether they relate to

areas still unexplored or to the development of initiatives already under way, the ideas put forward by the associations of immigrant women at local, national and European level command interest and respect.

### **Main trends and diversity of situations**

The far-reaching discussions which took place in Strasbourg from 22 to 24 June 1993 in the Council of Europe made it clear both that there were similarities in the main trends in the evolution of the status of women and a wide diversity of situations depending on the host country and the socio-economic characteristics of the communities to which women belong.

1. **The similarities** revolve around a few basic points, very often interconnected:

- The legal status of immigrant women is very dependent on the restrictive conditions governing family reunion, which leave very little room for personal choice or independent expression of views, matters which are however so highly valued in contemporary societies. The changes made to legislation recently in the majority of European countries foreshadow a worsening of the situation of immigrant women, who are the first to suffer from restrictions placed on the entry of foreign nationals coming from third countries.

- Difficulties with language vary but are always a fundamental feature: language is a problem especially for primary immigrants and first-generation women - mothers - who stay in the home and have little contact with the outside world; their daughters, on the other hand, go to school and do not encounter the same difficulties, but are unable to achieve full rapport with their mothers; the generation gaps widens with the difference in language.

- A rural background, illiteracy and a lack of job qualifications, which are often features of immigrant women over the age of 30, create obstacles which are difficult to overcome in urban industrial societies

where there is keen competition for jobs. What should be encouraged, in addition to language learning itself, is psychological adaptation and familiarization with the habits of urban life.

- The isolation of women, in particular those with large families, whose time is taken up by household tasks, sometimes leads to distressing situations, especially when the children get older and leave home. The sad situation of ageing immigrant women is often mentioned as a matter for concern which will become more acute but in which the public authorities are as yet showing no interest.

- Failure to recognize previous qualifications because of a lack of a system for establishing the equivalence of diplomas, particularly in the case of refugees, has catastrophic results for women left alone with children. This handicap barring the way to paid employment is felt to be very unjust and is condemned by all the associations.

## **2. The diversity of situations is due to three main factors:**

- The host countries have different(4) integration policies and some have no special provisions for immigrant women. Arguing that they are making provision for family reunion or introducing measures concerning the second "generations", many European legislators think they are satisfying all the aspirations of immigrant women and the needs indicated by them. Moreover, some countries have done nothing to help with the establishment of associations for immigrant women; others, however, subsidise many activities organized by them.

- Housing, education and social welfare conditions vary from one country, to another and sometimes from the region or town to another, especially in very decentralized countries. Conditions in the areas mentioned will have a decisive influence on the situation of many immigrant women by either curbing or encouraging their efforts to escape from their ghetto-like existence.

- In several European countries a majority of women, who have come with only a visitor's visa, are obliged to stay in the country in which

they have arrived. They are de facto illegally there and are subject to the most shameless exploitation, in particular as domestic servants, and are sometimes forced to work as prostitutes or to accept "new forms of slavery". Thousands of immigrant women have to accept such conditions in order to survive.

### **The time factor**

The general view is often a pessimistic one and the associations have to work on the most varied types of information, comparing and cross-checking their sources in order to build up an authentic picture which the authorities usually fail to appreciate or refuse to acknowledge. The associations then draw up specific proposals to be presented in stages. Indeed, one of the main benefits of discussions with immigrant women is to illustrate the importance of time in the integration process. The projects therefore define long-term objectives but also allow for programming of actions, often modest ones, spread over the short and medium term.

This staged approach is essential if integration policies are to succeed. It also makes it possible for cultural influences to be heard and for their fundamental importance to be recognized. It would be a mistake to have too rigid a scale of priorities: it is necessary to make constant adjustments to allow for age, level of training, experience, previous work and the aspirations of the populations and individuals concerned.

The means employed to further social and educational policies must themselves take account of a number of factors: a certain measure would be appropriate on arrival in the host country, a different one after a certain length of stay and yet another after a change in marital or parental status. Finally, and especially, more than in other areas, the intercultural approach is essential.

It is therefore necessary to provide for flexible arrangements in accord with the aptitudes and motivation of those concerned. Only then will it be

possible to avoid the failure of policies which are well-intentioned but turn out to be useless if not damaging.

### **Priority action and long-term integration**

The projects for the better integration of immigrant women stress the critical role of the first stage, i.e. literacy and learning the language of the host country. Some countries include this initial stage in comprehensive national programmes fully supported by the public authorities, others leave it to local initiatives with perhaps fewer financial resources but with the will to respond as specifically as possible to particular needs. However, whatever the financial procedures or the bodies involved, the associations stress that this learning process must satisfy a certain number of conditions:

Gradual familiarization with the customs and practices of the host society in order to improve understanding and enhance motivation;

- initially, priority for the spoken language and introduction to conversation which, thanks to the evident results in daily life, encourages the women to persevere;
- the confidence-building role of women mediators from the same milieu as the women attending the courses;
- specific preliminary training for the teachers and social workers working with immigrant women;
- childcare arrangements for the women attending the language course, especially for unattached women or mothers of large families. More generally the aim is to involve the young children in the mother's activity and so avoid either feeling deserted.

Once the general principles are established the possible problems associated with other measures have to be considered:

- Some projects prefer teaching programmes "targeted" on groups of people from the same background or having similar cultural problems; others, on the contrary, prefer to diversify the national origins or socio-cultural backgrounds of the groups learning the language of the host country. Basically the point at issue is whether it is more important to respect cultural identity or to avoid strengthening feelings of group exclusiveness. In reality both types of project lead to methods that can be adopted in succession: in the first stage a certain uniformity of background makes it easier to appreciate the difficulties of the populations concerned and, perhaps, to build up their confidence and, in a second stage, diversity of origins may lead to readier acceptance of cultural pluralism.

- Most associations are in favour of extending language learning to other cultural activities so facilitating relations with the social environment and, in addition, opening the way to employment outside the home and, subsequently, vocational training. In this way language learning is more directly centred on participation in social and working life.

The linguistic and cultural introduction to the host country has to be organized with great care since it should not merely be modelled on the academic standards of the general education system. It is necessary instead to combine the language courses with a wider understanding of family life, health and hygiene problems, social customs and working life and the laws and institutions of the host society.

There remains a question, however, about the 'integration model' which might be imposed through this introduction of the language and culture of the host society. The results of projects are more harmful than beneficial when they arouse guilt feelings in women or induce them to break their links with their family but do not offer them the right to make decisions for themselves. Integration is not a process for the elimination of a culture nor is it a form of cultural imperialism; it should lead to greater freedom of expression and unrestricted enjoyment of legal rights. For women kept in a dependent status under the authority of a father, then of a husband, or at least in a subordinate status,

emancipation is impossible if they are unable to express themselves in the language of the host country, but the process of learning that language should not require them to reject their own culture.

### **Cultural action without an imposed model**

Many immigrant women want to enhance their image and give expression to their culture but without using clichés current in the host society. Thus, experience with drama groups, choirs, newspapers or television programmes demonstrates a creative ability which encourages communication with people from different backgrounds and helps to motivate women by giving them self-confidence. This creative ability is seen most widely and to best advantage in artistic expression. Immigrant women are often surprisingly successful in this sphere, through a harmonious combination of symbolism and the real world.

At the same time, activities organized to make women familiar with the host country's cultural heritage have a marked effect: this heritage is not only made more accessible but it becomes a shared heritage. Such activities appear to answer a real thirst for knowledge which immigrant women do not always dare express. The presentation of their own culture becomes part of a reciprocal relationship with the other groups making up the host society. The best way to be recognized, with one's history and traditions, is to be able to talk about them with those who are also making the same journey and presenting foreign cultures in their own account of it. It is not the past which such people have in common but it is the journey they are undertaking which is the same.

Intercultural communication is at the heart of the integration process(6), but it cannot of itself solve disputes nor, in particular, overcome socio-economic inequalities. In order to combat all forms of exclusion access to employment is essential but the situation of immigrant women is such that it is often virtually impossible for them to find a job. Their low qualifications or the total lack of them are major obstacles at a time when there is so much unemployment. That is especially so in the case of older women. However, even if training or pre-training does not lead

to a job, it is already in a sense a preparation for the training of young girls. Becoming more familiar with the constraints of working life and visiting firms make it easier to accept the idea of women pursuing an occupation. However, the attempts to achieve emancipation through work could be put at risk by the arduous and tedious nature and the low pay of the jobs on offer.

The physical and psychological health problems of immigrant women could be linked with their social isolation in the host country, a matter considered in several projects presented by the associations. In addition to the poor financial conditions, which affect the well-being of immigrant families, to the poor housing conditions in small or unhealthy flats and the difficult working conditions for women employed as servants or in sewing workshops, another factor in some countries is the lack of social protection.

The cost of medical care and the fact that it is not refunded are obstacles to any lasting improvement in the situation of immigrant women. In Italy associations have opened reception centres and clinics which are attended by thousands of women. Gynaecological and family-planning clinics come up against cultural resistance but information work achieves remarkable results. More than in other areas it is essential to have women mediators from the same background.

Similarly, it is necessary for health care personnel to be trained for work in an intercultural milieu if communication is to be possible. Finally, the need to provide family-planning information for husbands is often emphasized. More generally, before providing information for the women there should be discussion with the husband in order to avoid the possibility that the wife might reject it, being afraid to challenge her husband's prerogatives.

The issue of support for older women needs to be addressed at once. Many associations stress the need to prevent situations arising which will soon be cases for emergency assistance. These women's medical requirements, isolation and psychological distress are seldom taken into account, though there are more and more of them left to live alone after

being widowed, deserted or rejected or after a separation. What will become of them when they are no longer able to care for themselves?

More generally, most of the projects described and the ideas put forward by the associations stress the concern to help women build up their own identities, but that does not, however, mean breaking with the family, which remains a source of support and solidarity, even in the event of disputes. The work done with girls who have run away, for example, shows how important it is to re-establish family ties whenever possible. Work with the women usually means work with the entire family, involving mothers and daughters, it being essential to maintain communication between the generations.

However, maintaining relations with the family and the home background has to be a voluntary matter. Some women wish to become emancipated from their community, whether they be asylum-seekers or refugees fleeing from the repression of dictatorial regimes or from the persecution of fundamentalists. There can be no denying the violence of certain movements which, in the name of some fundamentalist belief, currently are a threat to the lives or dignity of many women in their own countries. A respect for different cultures is a feature of a democratic society, but that does not mean providing a cover for the abuses inflicted on people seeking asylum in European countries in order to protect their lives and live again in freedom.

### **The choice of projects and means**

There was much discussion about the people or groups who should be targeted by the projects. It was not merely a matter of establishing priorities but also of allocating responsibilities. Some projects deliberately focus on a particular community; others prefer to work with women from different backgrounds, including women who have acquired the nationality of the host country or been born and educated there; still others deal with specific situations such as that of 'clandestine' women or women who have broken with their families.

The choice is often dictated by circumstances and by the urgency of the situation (hardship situations, groups subjected to special discrimination). All the associations are openly critical of the damaging effect which current economic constraints are having on projects for immigrant women.

One important point was emphasized: the difficulty of reaching isolated women. The associations find imaginative ways of breaking down barriers or establishing communication: improvised conversations in the street or at the market, contacts through schools or crèches, reception centres or telephone helplines ... Because of the 'general invisibility' of immigrant women some are completely ignored by the host society and social environment, by institutions and public services.

A second point was mentioned by several associations: the need to involve fathers and husbands. Several projects have been set up to involve men, to explain the aims pursued and overcome their reservations. These are generally the projects which are most successful or at any rate which make quiet and most lasting progress. The associations of immigrant women often object to the charge that they work only with women: this is not a point of principle but a response to a situation over which they have no control. Because the allocation of sexual roles is of cardinal importance in traditional societies and the problems of communication with the host society are difficult to overcome, for the immigrant women 'women only' meetings are a first stage in self-assertion. Once this is assured cooperation with the family, in particular with fathers and husbands, is positive.

A matter which is also of concern to the associations is deciding which are the best places in which to meet women and offer them training and tuition. All the projects stress the importance of comfortable reception facilities, a convenient location and the 'family' dimension of the premises: 'the way they are received is of key importance; the women must be able to overcome their misgivings and feel at their ease, as if in the company of friends'. But inevitably the quality of the reception facilities raises the question of the resources available to bodies working with immigrant women.

There are wide variations in the financial resources at the disposal of the different associations. Some receive subsidies from the state and from local authorities, others rely on voluntary workers and charitable associations. Many of the projects, despite their success, must be stopped because they reach the end of the grants awarded to them. The lack of follow-up often endangers original and effective projects. Integration is a long-term undertaking and, if it is halted for want of subsidies, the result can be bitter disillusionment. Projects are often *ad hoc* activities financed as private or prestige experiments.

It is true that projects are bound to stop when their goal is achieved and work with immigrant women is geared to giving them responsibility, not turning them into welfare recipients, but when a project is arbitrarily halted by a lack of resources it is a serious disincentive for people who have done so much to get it started. There is no comparison between the time and courage invested by women who agree to leave their home to take a training course and the sacrifice made for vocational training by experienced educated people already familiar with the business world.

The need to develop integration over time, in particular building on the experience of women who have followed the same route and learning from their setbacks, should lead to the planning of programmes spread over fairly long periods. Grants are often conditional on immediate results, which are difficult to achieve in the area of social work and cultural action. Learning to be independent is not the same as being trained in order to find a job, and it follows from that that the authorities should involve the immigrant women themselves, through consultation and partnership, in the framing, implementation and evaluation of policies. If immigrant women want to emerge from the shadows it is in order to let their views be heard and to have a share in decision-making, not just to add to the number of their activities. The perception of integration would be clearer if account was taken of their ideas, something the decision-makers have seldom done.

## **Immigrant women and the public sphere**

The authorities have regarded women immigrants in terms of their roles as daughters or wives of immigrant workers and defined their legal status accordingly, in relation to the status of their fathers or husbands. Parallel to this 'dependent' status, social integration programmes implemented for immigrant women were frequently linked to 'backward-looking' images of women as 'guardians of family unity and the culture of origin', as if immigrant women had only a subordinate existence. Whilst recognition began to be given to women's key role in the academic success of their children, especially their daughters, it was seen in terms of their moral support rather than their know-how or skills. Because of this negative view projects often had very limited objectives.

This meant that many initiatives were limited to basic literacy and training in home and traditional crafts. There were even courses in traditional cooking for women who could have given such courses! There is a strong tendency to 'ethnicise' in immigration circles, especially when working with women. However, what is appropriate for first-generation immigrant women, who are very disadvantaged in the host society, as was the case with women who arrived under the family reunion policy in the 1970s and 80s, has little relevance for women who have lived in the host society for several years, young women born and educated in the host country, women heads of households, political militants and refugees, those who already are trained, or are working or studying.

Faced with the diversity of the situations experienced by immigrant women and their increasing demands for a better status, sometimes at the price of traumatising breaks, it seems necessary to define:

- the nature and form of the immigration which brought them to the host country in question
- their legal status in the country of residence, particularly information on whether they entered the country illegally or clandestinely, individually or as a result of family reunion, as an immigrant or an asylum-seeker

- their marital and family situation
- their generational status (first-generation or second-generation immigrants)
- their socio-cultural origin
- their family and socio-occupational history since their arrival or birth in the host country.

Within this evolving framework, it is then possible and meaningful :

- to identify the places, enterprises and institutions where women immigrants are beginning to appear
- to analyse their current social and cultural situation in relation to the restrictions of their initial legal status
- to differentiate between cultural and material factors in their social background
- to study both the continuities and breaks with the past in new forms of behaviour.

Studies on women immigrants frequently pass over contextual data and the circumstances of immigration/emigration to focus on roughly sketched cultural elements. However, the generational phenomenon and socio-economic environment are equally important factors. Many immigrant women are critical of the 'discourses' relating to them, particularly when these minimize the key socio-economic data. Let us take three characteristic examples:

- in order to assess the educational or occupational success of young women from an immigrant background, it is essential to take a control group of young people from a similar social background, otherwise there is a risk of providing explanations

solely in terms of "culture of origin", seen as a homogeneous entity, for differences which actually stem from social conditions.

- When analysing immigrant women's religious and cultural practices, there is a risk of the interpretation failing to discriminate between the fundamental values of the religion which they profess and popular superstitions, which are often prevalent in some circles in the host country. This applies to Islam, in particular, which is often confused with practices not recognized by Islamic theologians, such as the wearing of the chador, or practices which minority fundamentalist movements use to their own advantage.
- Research on the fertility rates of immigrant women tend to take a simplistic approach, reducing to one or two explanatory factors the more subtly nuanced results which can be achieved by more qualitative studies in the field. The failure of certain integration policies stems precisely from a failure to understand the complexity and sometimes contradictions of the inter-relationships which are observed.

Socio-demographic and legal data are necessary to provide a framework but not sufficient in themselves. Likewise, cultural interpretations are important, but need to be put in context. On the other hand, the authentic voices of immigrant women themselves must be heard as often as possible. Immigrant women are increasingly proving that they are able to express their opinions and demands when they take an active part in public life.

### **The development of the voluntary sector**

The development of women's associations is particularly remarkable in relation to immigrant communities. Those who make their entry into public life through this avenue can together confront discrimination but can also overcome the distrust or even hostility of their compatriots, fathers, elder brothers or husbands. Reports describe the difficulties

encountered and their cumulative and very discouraging effects. In this regard, the daily timetable of a woman immigrant with several children, who is obliged to take on the main share of the housework, who goes out to work and is an active member of an association, is particularly revealing. When one adds to this already excessive burden the daily 'ruses' which have to be employed to stop activities outside the home from becoming a source of conflict, the amount of energy expended by immigrant women is obvious and contradicts all the 'outdated' stereotypes and paternalistic representations of immigrant women "confined to the home", incapable of taking initiatives or making decisions.

In order to analyse the participation of immigrant women in the voluntary sector, an extremely wide range of complex data must be taken into account. A number of questions can usefully be raised:

- which sectors of social, economic or cultural life do associations of immigrant women participate in (for example, neighbourhood or parent-teacher associations, but also theatre groups, drug prevention groups, anti-racist movements, and so on)?
- are these 'ethnic', 'religious', charitable or social associations or associations with a 'political colouring'?
- are they mixed or women-only associations?
- what are the socio-economic characteristics and age groups of their members and leaders?
- what are the links with the authorities (grants, provision of premises, material resources or dissemination facilities)?

In addition to this information on the voluntary sector, other information might help to give a clearer picture of the role of immigrant women. For example there are very few studies on the trade union activities of immigrant women. Is this because immigrant women are not represented or involved in trade unions or because there is no

information on the new situation? The question is all the more worthy of attention because it would enable a comparison to be made with the scale of involvement in voluntary sector activities. The question is frequently not even raised.

Also, some immigrant women have stood for local elections, or, when they have acquired the nationality of their country of residence, for national and European elections. In France, immigrant women who have acquired French nationality hold elective office, even retaining their dual nationality. Little consideration seems to have been given to this phenomenon, although it could considerably enhance the image of immigrant women both among the general public and in immigrant communities.

#### **Taking on the nationality of the country of residence**

It would be useful, to the extent that data are available, to record the number of immigrant women who have changed legal status with regard to nationality. In some Council of Europe member countries, recent reforms of nationality legislation have made it easier for immigrants to acquire the nationality of their country of residence; others have remained extremely restrictive. If joining the national community of the country of residence is seen as the final phase of integration and proof of definitive settlement, some data could be very enlightening:

- the number and socio-demographic, cultural, economic and occupational characteristics of the women of foreign origin who adopt the nationality of the host country
- the procedures used (acquisition of nationality according to *ius soli*, option on reaching the age of majority or on application, acquisition after marriage to a national, naturalization, etc.)
- the number of 'mixed' marriages, in other words between immigrant women and nationals from the host country.

In France nearly 51% of those applying for naturalization are foreign women, as against 40% in the general population. They come mainly from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. There are an increasing number of Turkish women, now the fourth largest national group, applying for French nationality. A third of those women have no education or have hardly completed primary education and their income is lower than the minimum wage. The initiative taken by these women born in North Africa or in Turkey is evidence of a desire, expressed in survey interviews and sometimes in naturalization applications, to live under a democratic legal system which guarantees equal rights with men and a secular constitution.

The question of dual nationality, currently being discussed in a number of European countries, particularly in Germany, would also be worth examining in more detail. Is the situation influenced by the fact that some religions forbid mixed marriages and consider renunciation of the original nationality as a betrayal or abjuration? In a country like France there are more than two million people who have both French nationality and the nationality of one of the three Maghreb countries. How do women see their dual nationality? Errors are frequently made in interpreting the complex law on dual nationality and there are conflicting demands.

Thus, an association of 'dual nationals against dual nationality', recently established in France denounced the negative effects of this ambivalent status when the persons concerned return, for even a short time, to their country of origin - they then lose the diplomatic protection of the other country, in accordance with the rules of private international law(6). Many questions are raised but seldom studied in depth, in spite of the consequences of the nationality status on the family life and social and public life of individuals.

### **The emergence of immigrant women at European level**

Some women of immigrant origin, after acquiring the nationality of a European Union country, hold elective or representative posts in

European institutions. A few have even been elected on lists of candidates to the European Parliament. How are they perceived by immigrant women, by immigrants in general and by public opinion in the different countries? Mrs Tjida Tazdait, born in a suburb of Lyons and a leading figure in the *Association des jeunes Beurs de Lyon (JALB)*, was a member, representing the Green Party, in the last term of the Strasbourg Parliament. The arrival on the international stage of a second-generation immigrant woman born in a French suburb is symbolic of the progress such women can make in Europe if they take advantage of the openings offered by the political system.

Immigrant women are also active in associations working together at European level, especially women from Sub-Saharan Africa, who have concentrated their efforts on action with a European dimension. A full account of this participation in public life and an analysis of its nature and of the socio-political changes it brings about would be a useful counterweight to images based on the traditional role of immigrant women. The European dimension is a new arena where immigrant women can be heard and give expression to their demands.

A Chinese proverb says that 'women are half of heaven'. Even if they do not represent half of the immigrant population those who have crossed seas and continents to win recognition in European countries are no longer the submissive invisible women whom the authorities have tended to relegate to the background. By their voluntary work and by their political activity or, more modestly, by the courage they display in their family life and at work, they demonstrate another perception of what integration means: their top priorities are human dignity and the rejection of discrimination. When the Council of Europe gave them an opportunity to make their voices heard it opened a window on the diversity of the initiatives and the originality of the projects which were presented. It is now for readers to look beyond the clichés and turn their attention to the authentic documents which the women themselves have produced.

# **PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS**

**EL ELE**  
**A VOCATIONAL ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR**  
**FOREIGN WOMEN AND GIRLS**  
Steinfurt, Germany

**Background and history of the project**

El Ele, a project of the *Verein für soziale Dienste* (association for social services), affiliated to the Protestant church, is involved in social projects, such as vocational training for unemployed adolescents. The organisation is located in the town of Steinfurt, which is in a farming area about 30 km from Münster. Steinfurt has a population of 32,000. Five and a half per cent of the population is of foreign origin. There are about 800 Turkish nationals living in Steinfurt.

In 1988 the organisation assumed responsibility for working with foreigners in Steinfurt. The goal was to help both male and female migrants deal with a wide variety of bureaucratic, personal, social, legal and educational problems.

As a result of this early work it was discovered that women in particular had many problems, and that their main problem was that it was difficult for them to find work. A project especially designed to help these women was therefore developed, because one of the most important steps that these women could take to integrate themselves fully into German society was to find jobs.

This project has been in existence since 1992, following a successful request for funding to the *Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Sozialordnung* (department of the German federal government responsible for work and welfare). It is called El Ele, which in Turkish means hand in hand.

The project was originally located in Steinfurt and had one director and several part-time teachers. However, in January 1994 courses were set

up in three new locations around Münster and as a result of this expansion funding was received for a second director, as well as for several part-time employees.

### **The women who attend the courses**

All women from countries from which foreign workers were recruited in the past are encouraged to participate in the project. However, as most immigrants in Münster and the surrounding area are Turkish, mostly Turkish women attend. Some of the women are from the first generation of migrant workers. Most of the women, however, are from the second generation and can be broken down into three sub-groups: those who migrated to Germany as children in the 70s, after their parents; those who were born in Germany; women who came to Germany specifically to marry Turkish men and who have stayed in Germany with their husbands and families. Each group has different educational and vocational needs.

### **How the courses are publicised ?**

A large number of women came to the two community centres for German lessons and for general information and learned about the existence of El Ele. A programme of home visits was carried out in collaboration with a Turkish woman who interpreted and facilitated contact with the women. Before a course begins, almost every potential participant is visited to discuss her needs, her wishes and what she would like to learn and do in the project.

The Imams and Turkish community centres are also contacted. Once most of the families in town as well as the press and the Turkish radio station have been made aware of the aims of the project, all the interested women are invited to attend a meeting.

**The three different vocational orientation courses offered by the project:**

a. *Vocational orientation for unemployed women*

The vocational orientation programme for women gives 132 hours of classroom time to its participants. Classes meet twice a week, and each course has about 10 participants of varying vocational and educational backgrounds. The main aim of this course is to build up the participant's self-confidence, which is often low. There are several reasons for this, such as the well-defined social roles for women who have responsibility for all household duties, while the men deal with the outside world; and their difficulties in communicating in German.

The course has seven main aspects:

- The general family and work situation of the women is discussed and explored through various activities.
- The women are given access to a great deal of printed information about many vocations. In addition, women who work in jobs of potential interest to the participants are regularly invited to the classes to speak about their work.
- Classes take tours of various workplaces.
- The women are taught how to write job applications, and curricula vitae. They also receive interview training, during which they do role plays and other related activities.
- Information is disseminated about various German institutions such as schools, the unemployment office, pension funds, as well as about the changes in laws for foreign residents in Germany.

- The women are trained to fill out various types of forms on their own.
  - The teaching is in German, with bi-lingual native speakers of Turkish available in the classes to help women who may have difficulty understanding German.
- b. *Vocational orientation for employed women without professional training or qualifications*

A large percentage of the women who take part in this course have part-time or seasonal jobs as cleaning women or in factories. Their employers provide them with no social insurance. The rest work full-time, mainly in the textile or meat-processing industries, or for cleaning firms. In general working conditions in these jobs are poor.

The course consists of 36 lessons. The aim of the training is to help the women qualify for higher-paid jobs with better working conditions and benefits. At the beginning of the course a needs analysis is carried out, which is used to design the course syllabus according to their needs. A technique for this needs analysis that works well is collage. The women are asked to express through collage their image of how they would like to be living five years from now. This collage activity provides them with a rare opportunity to express their dreams and aspirations.

Once this needs analysis has been completed, the particular requirements of the women in the course are addressed. Sometimes an amelioration of their working conditions can be achieved simply by contacting the appropriate factory committee. Some groups visit the information centre of the government job agency, where an information officer speaks to the women about various possibilities and answers any questions they may have. As in the course for unemployed women, visits are arranged to various workplaces. These information sessions take up about half of the course hours. The rest is taken up by various job-related skills that the women need in order to find employment in Germany. They receive information about German courses in their local area, about training and educational institutions and about various re-

training programmes. They also learn interview techniques, how to fill out applications, write their curriculum vitae, and obtain a German driver's license.

Child care is provided at the places where the course is given, which enables a number of women to attend who would otherwise not be able.

c. *Vocational orientation course for foreign girls and young women (ages 16-20)*

None of the girls and young women in the programme have any professional training, and some have no diplomas. Most of them were either born in Germany or moved here when they were children. These courses are made up of only foreign girls and young women, as this gives them the opportunity to map out their future as well as to explore some of the cross-cultural problems that arise in their lives as young Turkish women in Germany. This interaction is facilitated by the fact that the course is taught by two teachers, one a German, the other a bilingual Turkish woman.

When the young women begin the course, they are asked which jobs interest them. Experience has shown that there is a range of about ten professions that they would like to be trained for. The most frequently named among these are hairdresser, shop assistant, secretary in a doctor's office, and dressmaker. Other opportunities for jobs are explained, besides the ones they often express an interest in, which could provide with them better pay, benefits, and job security.

They also do role plays and participate in structured discussions led by the Turkish member of the teaching team. In addition, the teacher has developed a relaxation exercise during which the young women are asked to imagine where and how they would like to be living in ten years time. Often their original idea of what they wanted to do changes. The girls also create their own slide lecture about some of the jobs they have expressed an interest in.

The girls and young women also observe various kinds of work in action. They visit offices such as banks, hospitals and police headquarters. They also visit training centres for hands-on experience of trades such as furniture making or being an electrician. They also visit the information centre of the government job agency in order to learn more about particular jobs. As in the other courses, they learn how to perform well during interviews, how to fill out applications, as well as other job-seeking related skills. At the end of the course, the organisers search for a suitable practical training course for each girl.

### **Other aspects of the project**

#### *a. International Women's Groups*

Migrant women of various nationalities, mainly from Turkey, ex-Yugoslavia, Lebanon and Germany meet every other week, in order to socialise, exchange information, and get to know and understand each other. The women also cook together, visit museums and other places of cultural interest, and attend talks at the centre on subjects of interest to them.

#### *b. Weekend courses for Turkish families*

Weekend courses outside of Steinfurt, Gronau and Ahaus are organised for 10 - 12 Turkish families at a time. The purpose of these courses, which are given in Turkish, is to give all family members the opportunity to discuss everyday cross-cultural issues of concern to them in their effort to integrate into German society.

#### *c. InterCultural Activities*

Activities are organised to celebrate Muslim religious holidays (such as Ramadan), International Women's Day and Intercultural Week.

#### *d. Sewing courses*

Several sewing courses are offered by the project. These courses also facilitate relaxed exchange of information and socialising among the course participants.

e. *Counselling*

There is a great need for counselling. The vocational orientation courses can only be successful if an attempt is made to solve the women's more personal problems. Women can come to either of the two centres on a drop-in basis. Often women who are not participants in the vocational orientation programme come for counselling. The main problems that they come to discuss are jobs and training. They also come to see us about other problems such as housing, debts, unwanted pregnancies and child-parent conflicts.

f. *Networking initiatives*

The project cooperates with various organisations and other projects. Once a month a meeting is held which is attended by, among others, representatives of the city government's office of equal opportunities for women, women's groups from religious organisations, and women's counselling centres.

## **Conclusion**

By mid 1994, about 160 women and girls had attended the vocational orientation courses. About 150 women and girls have participated in the international women's groups and the sewing courses. The programme has been successful because of the large numbers of women who have participated. During the first year of the project's existence, some women found jobs, mostly as shop-assistants, but also in factories. Several women also attended training courses leading to a professional qualification. As a result of encouraging the women to obtain a driver's licence, a total of six women have been able to find work further afield in Münster.

Since 1993, there has been a recession in Germany and as a result many people, above all migrant women, and especially those who work in the textile industry, have been losing their jobs. Most businesses and firms want part-time employees without work contracts, which for the workers means no health insurance, sick pay, and other similar benefits.

Therefore, it is now more important than ever before to motivate migrant women to upgrade their job qualifications. This, however, is a difficult task, because many of the women have become frustrated and have given up hope of ever finding a job.

The government funding for the project ends on 31 December 1994, and alternative sources of funds are still being sought. Although this means that the project will not continue in its present form, another project to train Turkish women to work in senior citizens homes is already scheduled to start in 1995.

Barbara Schonschor and Bedia Ugurlu

**PROGETTO DONNA: HEALTH CARE PROJECT  
FOR IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND CAMPAIGN  
TO INFORM ABOUT CONTRACEPTIVE  
METHODS TO PREVENT ABORTION**

NAGA, Milan, Italy

**Health situation of immigrants**

A large number of immigrants in Italy have no right to public health services because of their residence situation. Between 15 and 25 percent of immigrants are illegal and another group (about 25 percent) are legal but are without residence certificates. These include clandestine migrants, family members (wives and children) who cannot obtain family permits and also refugees waiting for political asylum.

Free registration to the National Health Service for unemployed migrants is not automatic but has to be repeated annually with specified decrees. These people are only able to obtain health care through voluntary associations, or hospitals in the event of emergencies and childbirth, although there are different regulations in different regions.

There are other obstacles such as language, cultural and social differences that impose limits on the success or ability to meet the demands of these immigrants.

**The NAGA experience**

NAGA, the *Associazione Volontaria Assistenza Socio Sanitaria Stranieri e Nomadi*, like other similar organisations in cities throughout Italy, is committed to improving the health situation of migrants. NAGA is a voluntary association created in 1987 with the aim of promoting human and social commitment of social assistance activities towards foreigners and gypsies. It recognises health as an inalienable right of the individual, independent of race, religion, culture, ideology and legal status and

wants to respond to the social and health problems of Gypsies and immigrants excluded from public health services because of legal, economic and cultural reasons. The purpose is not to provide an exhaustive solution to the problem, nor to replace the lack of state facilities, but to use this service as a means for giving a voice and political dignity to the needs of people deemed invisible by the state.

The association's activities are based on different sectors: health and social care, research, training, information and informing the general public of the need for health rights for immigrants.

NAGA is staffed by about one hundred volunteers, both Italian and foreigners. The funds for the centre are collected from a network of individuals and groups who share the aims of the association, and also from research and training activities carried out by NAGA.

The activities of the association are various and include the reception of foreigners, primary and specialistic health care, therapeutic and diagnostic intervention, services in Gypsy camps, research, training of immigrants and social-health workers and care for foreigners held in detention.

The meeting and interviewing of the patients constitutes the main element of NAGA activity. Each member is involved in this task. This reception of the patients also defines the type of health service required. Each patient is welcomed, interviewed and a medical record card is then completed which contains the social and medical details of the person. The social secretary then introduces the patient to the services available.

During the centre's opening hours there are usually 2 general practitioners present. The following specialists are also available at certain times: gynaecologists, paediatricians, orthopaedists, urologists, cardiologists, dermatologists, surgeons (for minor operations), neurologists, psychologists, psychiatrists and nurses. A specialist volunteer network guarantees, outside NAGA, help for more difficult cases such as psychiatric needs and dental problems.

The association works only in the social-health sector and refers immigrants to other associations for problems such as accommodation, legal or bureaucratic questions and employment. In fact, in Milan there are many other active, specialised associations who help immigrants to solve their problems. For example, CESIL deals with legal and administrative problems, *Segreteria degli esteri* helps with accommodation and employment difficulties, *Villa Amantea* and ASGI provide legal support. Without any formal and official coordination these associations form a cooperative network for the solution of certain problems and deal with specific cases common among immigrants.

### **Progetto Donna**

"Progetto Donna" is a project set up by NAGA to inform and advise immigrant women about the issues of pregnancy, abortion and contraception.

The main health problems presented by the women during their visits to the centre are due to pregnancy or concern about the female genital system. The problems that most frequently arise are about pregnancy, voluntary pregnancy interruption and contraception. Also frequent are the problems of vaginitis and disorders of the menstrual cycle, such as the absence of periods or irregular cycles, and menstrual pain.

Other problems are respiratory, digestive and osteo-muscular, which are mainly due to the change of nutritional habits, the precarious socio-economic conditions under which the women live and also the stress caused by their new situation as immigrants.

The available data of the relationship between voluntary pregnancy interruption and birth rate shows a very high rate of utilisation of this practice among migrant women, higher than for Italian women, and also the use of this practice as a contraceptive method. The increasing number of women arriving in Italy from Africa, and especially Somalia, is increasing the cases of sexual mutilation and the accompanying complications that the Centre has to deal with.

In order to respond to these problems a number of programmes of intervention have been organised:

- Prevention of abortion with a campaign of information about different contraceptive methods;
- Provision of information about Sexually Transmitted Diseases and AIDS;
- Programme aimed at reducing female sexual mutilation.

The first programme involves research and intervention with the aim of reducing the rate of abortion, without interfering with the values given to maternity and to the number of children in different cultures. This project was made possible by funds provided by the European Community.

The first phase is the organisation of specialised research into incorrect knowledge, individual and/or general prejudices, conception, the use and the effects of different contraceptive methods in different cultures and in the social context of migration. The information and experiences collected represent the foundation from which specific material and strategies for intervention can be produced.

The other aspect of the project is to stimulate discussion and collaboration between health workers from different countries of origin and local health workers involved in family planning. For this purpose a gynaecologist from Tunisia was invited to spend a week at the Centre.

In the NAGA Centre, an area has been set aside containing information and offering free distribution of contraceptives. For this service there is an obstetrician and some intermediaries from different countries available for consultation, who are well informed about the subject in question. This service is accessible to all women and is completely free of charge.

This service is especially important following an abortion, or after childbirth. A gynaecologist talks to the women concerned about their

options. Information about this specific service is given every day during the process of the normal activity of the Centre and also while collecting information from patients in the waiting room.

### **Training**

The aim of the training activities of NAGA is to support the participation of immigrants in the management of their health and interaction with Italian society. In fact, in Italy immigrants are only seen as carriers of needs and not as a source of resources and richness. The presence of foreigners inside the association as members working with others in the running of the association represents the first important exchange and part of reciprocal training. With the aid of the European Social Fund, two formal training sessions were organised. The first course was to train 15 linguistic-cultural mediators, which trained people working in public services. The second course trained 15 social workers to assist the elderly.

At the end of the first training course the intermediaries created a cooperative and called it Kantara (the Arabic word for bridge), and now they work in hospitals and public health services supporting the health workers in their interactions with immigrants, especially when they do not speak Italian. At the same time they try to assist in combatting the cultural obstacles that often prevent immigrants from using the health services offered.

### **Research**

The research activity springs from the demand for a continuous analysis of the diverse and rapidly changing needs of the immigrant community and from the planning and checking of the activities and interventions undertaken by NAGA. The research undertaken has included the following projects:

- registration of patients, compiling medical histories;

- data analysis supplied by current information systems;
- residential, work and health conditions of immigrants in Milan;
- epidemiological observation of the social-health needs among immigrants and Gypsies in Milan;
- case-control study of features of pregnancy and childbirth among immigrants;
  
- research and intervention for training, health education and prevention of termination of pregnancy and for responsible motherhood.

### **Conclusion**

Over the first six months of 1993, NAGA assisted over four thousand immigrants with their health problems, proving the need for the services provided and the failure of the state to provide it. Therefore, as well as providing care, NAGA also undertakes to inform public opinion about the precarious health situation of immigrants in Italy. It attempts to give an incentive to health workers in this sector and to prompt the public authorities into engaging themselves in the health care of immigrants, while at the same time respecting the specificity of the sector.

Lia Bandera and Marta Castiglioni

**WORKSHOP FOR WOMEN SPEAKING  
FOREIGN LANGUAGES**  
Zürich, Switzerland

**Introduction**

More than a quarter of the 360,000 inhabitants of Zürich hold a foreign passport. These 100,000 or so foreigners come from no fewer than 148 different nations, the largest group being Italians, who make up approximately one-fifth of all foreigners.

Approximately 2,000 foreign women arrive in Zürich and the vicinity every year. Often these women are accompanied by their children. Many of them are married to men who were once seasonal workers but, after a certain time prescribed by law, obtained the right to be joined by their families. Others are married to Swiss men and often come from so-called "developing countries".

It is an established fact that many immigrants - and in particular women - do not speak a word of German, even after having lived in Switzerland for 10, 20 or even 30 years. The beginning of any form of communication is language. At least two if not three languages are spoken in Zürich. The colloquial language of the region is the Swiss-German dialect, which varies from canton to canton and is quite different from High German, the area's official language. But the language spoken at work and in particular in the building industry, factories and in the kitchens of restaurants, ie the places where foreigners work, is Italian. How, therefore, can immigrants be motivated to learn German?

**Learning a language: the first step towards integration**

A large number of German language courses are offered for foreign-language speakers. However, most of them are too expensive, of too

low a standard or too academic. It is therefore obvious that only a small proportion of foreigners seriously consider learning German. There are employers who offer immigrant workers the opportunity to learn German and the Zürich local authorities give them their backing. Unfortunately, however, there are as yet only a few public-sector companies which have offered their employees this opportunity. For some years now the office of the *Städtische Koordinationsstelle für Ausländerfragen*, the co-ordinating office for matters concerning foreigners in the city, has been trying to persuade employers to stimulate the use of and to sponsor instruction programmes for German language among their employees, but this has not been widely successful.

Until recently there were no courses specifically for women and particularly for women from underprivileged social classes. This is why the project for foreign-language-speaking women was launched by the *Zürich Städtische Koordinationsstelle für Ausländerfragen*. Its aim is to help foreign women learn the skills necessary for successful adaptation to their new homeland.

### **Outreach**

The office invites women arriving in the city of Zürich to attend courses run by the Workshop for foreign-language-speaking women for a period of two years. The addresses of the women are provided by the local authorities. All of them receive - if possible in their mother tongue - useful information concerning the city. Many of them are visited by a female co-ordinator who speaks their language, who explains the workshop programme, discusses their feelings and needs and tries to provide information for the women, whether they choose to attend the programme or not. These visits are very important as they give the newcomer the opportunity to make contact with other women and to learn a little about the still unfamiliar surroundings.

### **The organisation of the courses**

The Workshop offers two language courses, each lasting one year and requiring attendance two or three afternoons every week. It is possible to begin a course at three different times in the year, so that women who have just arrived do not need to wait too long before enrolling for a course.

The aim of the first year course is to familiarise women with the German language. Particular emphasis is placed on improving the women's oral fluency and vernacular vocabulary. Extra hours' teaching are given to women experiencing difficulty with basic reading and writing skills to make it easier for them to follow the normal lessons. The German language classes are organised in groups of mixed ethnic origin as this not only motivates the women to converse in German but also provides contact with women from various cultural backgrounds.

In the first year the women also have a two and a half hour lesson every two weeks to provide social information to familiarise them with daily life in the Swiss-German community. These groups are divided according to mother tongue and are conducted in eleven language groups: Croatian, English, French, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Thai, Tamil, Turkish and Vietnamese. Each class is led by an immigrant woman from that country who is well-adapted to Zürich. The material is prepared in German by a workshop organiser and is translated by the social information class leader in the language of her particular group. A wide range of social topics is discussed, such as the Swiss school system, further education and job opportunities, the health care system and social services. The emphasis in the social information classes is not only on complicated social issues. Several times throughout the year, excursions are arranged to show Zürich's recreational facilities and social events which promote a sense of community are organised.

During each session some time is devoted to informal conversation. Participants are encouraged to ask any questions they may have or discuss issues or experiences they have encountered.

Women of various economic, social and educational ranges take part in the social information classes. However, although their experiences may

differ, they all share a common bond - establishing a home for themselves and their families in unfamiliar surroundings.

In the second year the German lessons continue but there are fewer hours. The women also have the opportunity to choose from three courses providing elementary knowledge of working life:

\* The municipal school for housework (*Städtische Schule für Haushalt und Lebensgestaltung*) offers a course of household management. Women who have the opportunity to work in budget management in a hotel, hospital or home choose this course. The course lasts one year and takes up ten hours per week.

\* The Swiss Red Cross offers a basic nursing course lasting eight weeks with an additional twelve days of practical training in a hospital. This course interests women who would like to work as nurses or who would simply like to know more about caring for ill people for personal reasons.

\* The Swiss Federation of cafe owners, restaurant owners and hoteliers (*Schweizerische Wirteverband*) offers an introductory course geared to employment in the tourist industry. This course lasts six months and requires four hours per week.

All participants in these courses are offered child care for children from two years of age. In certain cases younger children are accepted and this is very important as it is the women who have just arrived in Switzerland with small children who are the most isolated. Indeed, women from all social classes often opt for our Workshop for the very specific reason that we offer child care, for there is no other way, given that they have small children, that they can attend classes and make contact with others.

### **Experiences to date**

As the first year of the project has just ended it is not yet possible to make a conclusive assessment. At present approximately 100 women of more than 30 different nationalities attend the Workshop courses. There are at present six German teachers and 11 translators. Another teacher is responsible for eliminating illiteracy among the weaker students. Three women look after the children.

The women are very motivated. The German teachers and translators for the social information courses find their students very eager to learn. The fact that the women are of various ethnic origins prompts them to converse in German. The language lessons are, however, complicated by the very different education levels of the women.

However, there are also many women who drop out of the course before the end. Only a third of the women who started the course in 1993 attended the second-year course which started at the beginning of May 1994. There are always many reasons for leaving: an opportunity for employment has been found, a baby has been born, there are problems in the family, the student has lost the desire to learn German because it is too difficult, the student is leaving Switzerland or Zürich, and so on.

The workshop provides opportunities, not only for the course participants, but also for the women who serve as translators and social information session leaders. They too are women who are foreign language speakers and who live in Zürich, mostly also because of employment opportunities for their husbands. The country's strict employment laws and current economic circumstances make it more difficult to find work and the workshop is an opportunity to use their skills in a constructive way - helping other foreign women integrate.

### **The aim of the project**

Unfortunately, the specific goal of the course, ie. to reach women from the underprivileged classes of society, has not yet been satisfactorily

achieved. Conversations held during visits to the homes of women from southern European countries (Italy, Spain, Portugal, former Yugoslavia) reveal that they have little motivation to learn German. They are convinced that they will only stay in Switzerland for a short time - they believe that they will be able to work to earn money quickly and thus return to their homeland. The fact that the real situation is quite different does not seem to motivate them. A further reason is that these ethnic groups are sizeable in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and they can therefore remain in a community which speaks their mother tongue and are not obliged either to learn the local language or to become integrated into the Swiss-German community. On the other hand, women who are married to a Swiss man are highly motivated; this is the case with the majority of women from Far Eastern or Latin American countries.

Since the Workshop was devised the economic situation in Switzerland has fundamentally changed. Women without employment qualifications, in particular, now find it very difficult to find jobs. On the one hand this stimulates interest in attending the course because obviously employers will require at least a basic knowledge of the German language before employing someone. On the other hand interest in vocational training has decreased as it is now almost impossible to find work, particularly in hospitals.

## **Finances**

The two courses run by the Workshop for foreign-language-speaking women which finish in spring 1995 are financed through a special contribution by the State as well as by general subsidies. The Zürich municipal authorities also contribute their share through assistance from their staff and the provision of facilities. The course participants currently pay very low fees but this does not mean that those who cannot afford the fees may not attend the courses. It is always possible for the women to see if the fees can be met by the welfare office, unemployment benefit or humanitarian organisations. So far every woman who has wished to take the course has been able to do so whether she could afford it or not.

It is not yet known what form the funding will take in 1995 and it is not yet certain whether these courses will become a regular municipal activity or not.

### **Summary**

The great interest aroused by the Workshop clearly indicates that this type of course is necessary in the city of Zürich. The participants regard the personal relations they form as the most important aspect of the course. It enables them to have contact with other women of the same nationality or of other ethnic origins who share the same problems. Every attempt is being made to secure funds and ensure that the course becomes a permanent activity.

Rosanna Rath-Cappai

## **SELF ORGANISATION OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN IN NORWAY**

The MIRA Centre, Oslo, Norway

### **Introduction**

The MiRA Resource Centre was established by a group of immigrant and refugee women who had been working together in a Foreign Women's Group since 1979. The Foreign Women's Group was Norway's first immigrant and refugee women's organisation, involving women from all nationalities.

Establishing the MiRA Centre was made possible through economic support from a 1989 Norwegian TV Campaign, which granted economic support for five years.

The MiRA Centre engages in securing legal and constitutional rights for immigrant and refugee women, as well as strengthening self-organisation among them. Through legal aid, information and awareness campaigns, networking in and outside Norway, political initiatives and cultural and social activities, MiRA tries to better the living conditions of immigrant women in Norway.

The MiRA Centre is also a meeting place for African, Asian and Central and South American women living in Norway. Women's culture and companionship is encouraged by arranging cultural activities where women contribute with dancing, music, paintings, poetry and theatre.

### **Organisation and daily management**

The MiRA Centre is run by a political and administrative body, a finance manager and a working group of 8 to 10 people, which meets about twice a month. Each member of the group is responsible for different projects and areas. Most of this work is done on a voluntary basis. In

addition to this, there are many volunteers who are working on different projects or attend activities arranged by the Centre.

The Centre has hired a part-time secretary to do the regular office work, making it possible for the others to concentrate on the further development of the MiRA Centre. In 1993 the number of crisis cases increased to a level that was no longer possible to manage on a voluntary basis, and the Centre therefore hired a person on a part-time basis to work on the crisis cases.

Due to limited resources the MiRA Centre is only open to the public on Tuesdays. During this time anyone who has questions or who needs assistance can call, come to the office in Oslo or make an appointment to visit the Centre later in the week. During 1993 the Centre received, on average, 15 telephone calls and five visitors each Tuesday. One of the main goals is to be able to open the Centre several days a week.

### **The Activities at MiRA**

#### *a. Monthly meetings*

The MiRA Centre arranges meetings where immigrant and refugee women can come together to discuss, receive and give information, study and meet new people. Each month the Centre holds meetings, attended on average by 20 to 25 women, where different problems and issues are discussed. The women have a forum where they can meet others in similar situations and discuss common problems.

In the spring of 1993 MiRA used the monthly meetings to carry out a series of seminars on immigrant women's health and their relations with the Norwegian health care and social system. The seminars looked at both the physical and psychological aspects of immigrant women's health. The aims of the seminars were to strengthen immigrant and refugee women's security and trust in their relations with the Norwegian health care and social system, to increase women's knowledge of their own body and to explain how the social system functions. The meetings

were informal and the number of participants was deliberately low so that the women could speak freely about sensitive subjects.

b. *Sewing workshop*

Following the wishes expressed by many women involved with the MiRA Centre, the Centre arranged a sewing workshop in November 1993. The workshop gave an introduction to basic sewing skills. MiRA bought fabrics and supplied the sewing machines. The workshop was a good opportunity to meet and have a good time, while doing something useful.

c. *Cultural activities*

The MiRA Centre tries to encourage women's culture and female companionship. At all of the Centre's activities, from monthly meetings to seminars and courses, there is a social and cultural aspect. In addition to this the Centre started a dance-group for Indian and Pakistani women. The success of this group has encouraged other women to organise cultural activities from their home countries. MiRA Centre also arranges poetry and literature readings and visits to the theatre, cinema and art galleries.

d. *Crisis cases and mediation*

The MiRA Centre has, despite its limited resources in this area, given continual help to individual women in crisis or with difficult living conditions. The help given may consist of anything from working out economic difficulties and giving advice about legal and social rights, to talking with the women and getting in touch with their family or friends. If the MiRA Centre cannot help them it tries to find others who can.

The MiRA Centre has been working with, on average, four to six cases each Tuesday. In some of the cases advice or information has been sufficient. Others have needed a more thorough follow-up. Many of the cases have been about young women and the growing conflicts with their family and at school due to cultural or social reasons. Many of the girls come to the MiRA Centre because they identify with the women there and wish to learn from their experiences in Norway. The MiRA Centre has qualified people to deal with such cases, who can mediate

between the families and provide assistance in the resolution of the conflict.

Many women feel it is easier to get in touch with the MiRA Centre than with public institutions. At the Centre they know they will meet women who will understand their situation and who may have similar experiences.

e. *Networking*

MiRA is in contact with about 500 immigrant women all over Norway. The contact is established and maintained by travelling, lectures and by meetings and seminars. It is especially important for women in rural areas to have a national network of women from whom they can receive help and inspiration. The MiRA Centre arranges an annual conference for immigrant and refugee women.

The MiRA Centre works with other immigrant organisations in Norway and internationally. The Centre has close relations with about 15 organisations within Norway and is actively engaged in maintaining an international network of immigrant and refugee women. International conferences are often attended and visits arranged to and from other countries.

The MiRA Centre is also represented on several committees and boards which have importance for the integration of immigrants in Norway and Europe. It is important that immigrant and refugee women are represented in the fora where issues concerning them are discussed and where important decisions regarding their lives are taken.

f. *Nordic Forum*

Nordic Forum is a women's conference on the pattern of the United Nations International Women's conferences. It is the largest gathering of Nordic women and was held for the first time in Oslo in 1988. During this conference the MiRA Centre was responsible for the co-ordination and content of the Nordic immigrant and refugee women's activities.

g. Information activities

Informing the public and the network has always been a high priority at the MiRA Centre. Through this kind of work the Centre can reach more people and affect society more effectively than through single projects and case-work.

The MiRA Centre has produced a multimedia programme about women in Pakistan and a video about women and development in India. Information videos are planned on the situation of elderly immigrants and on the struggle of redefining the images of immigrant and refugee women. Since 1989 the Centre has published an annual report covering the important aspects of immigrant and refugee women's lives. The Centre is now working on the idea of distributing a magazine twice a year which can be the voice of immigrant and refugee women and a forum for discussion.

h. *Consulting*

- public institutions

The MiRA Centre is contacted by people working in public institutions who need assistance in specific cases or on a more general basis. The Centre is contacted by child welfare authorities, social welfare offices, schools, crisis centres, doctors and psychologists and youth clubs. The people who contact the Centre feel that they do not have the proper knowledge and experience to deal with conflicts concerning immigrant women and girls.

The MiRA Centre often mediates in individual cases and discusses the matter with the person concerned and with representatives from the public welfare authorities. Meetings have also been arranged with official institutions to discuss these matters on a more general basis.

- research

There is a great lack of research on the conditions of immigrant and refugee women living in Norway. The lack of documentation and statistics make it difficult to assess the needs and resources among women and thereby come up with concrete plans of action to improve their conditions. The MiRA Centre, through its various functions, tries to gather statistics and document the needs and resources among the immigrant community.

i. *Talks and lectures*

The MiRA Centre sends qualified women to give lectures and talks all around the country on the situation of immigrant and refugee women. In 1993 the Centre only had the capacity to handle on average one lecture a month but many enquiries are passed on to others outside the Centre.

j. *Contact with the media*

Unfortunately immigrant and refugee women do not make the news except for something sensational. The issues of female circumcision, women's position in Islam, forced marriages and questions in relation to young girls from immigrant families have been taken up intensively by the media. The MiRA Centre tries to represent a diversity of cultural and social aspects of immigrant women's background. The Centre has been approached by radio and television, newspapers, magazines and film producers to comment on various issues concerning women. Representatives of the Centre have given interviews and contributed their knowledge as far as time and resources have allowed and to the degree thought advisable: not all media attention is necessarily for the best.

k. *Production of information material*

The MiRA Centre's main production in 1993 was "The Invisible Pain", a report gathering some of the knowledge and experiences that were presented during the seminars concerning immigrant women and health.

Representatives from the MiRA Centre have also cooperated with others in writing, editing and producing the "Women-to-Women" calendar for 1993 and 1994 for the TV Campaign on Women in the Third World.

### **The Women's House**

In 1993 the MiRA Centre used a great deal of time and resources in securing the Centre's activities for the future and in expanding them. The Directorate of Immigration and Oslo *Kommune* granted some economic support so that the Centre could prepare and develop a project the "MiRA Women's House", where the work done at the Centre would be expanded. The Women's House would offer daily activities and be run on a full time basis. It is important to receive stable funding so that qualified women can be employed to run the House. There will still be a great reliance on voluntary work, but it is important to have a core group of experienced and qualified people who can secure continuity and be responsible for the day to day management of the Centre.

### **Conclusion**

The number of activities and a broader network among people shows that there is a great need for the MiRA Centre and its professionally organised work both among immigrant and refugee communities as well as in Norwegian society. As illustrated above, the MiRA Centre works in a wide range of areas. This covers both leisure time activities and professional assistance. The limited economic resources have put real restrictions on MiRA Centre's work to better the conditions of immigrant and refugee women according to their own vision. There are many things women active at MiRA Centre would like to do but is unable, or can only carry out on a small scale, due to financial problems.

Until now the Centre has based its professional assistance on voluntary work offered by women themselves to institutions and individuals, and obtained its financial basis through private channels. This economic

support will be discontinued in 1994 and the Centre needs to secure its finances from other sources.

The work of the Centre is unique and specialised with regard to the specific cultural and social needs of the immigrant and refugee community. To integrate immigrant and refugee women within the broader society, it is important to utilise their own resources and to provide them with the necessary financial assistance to enable them to realise their own efforts.

Fakhra Salimi



## **BASIC SKILLS FOR THE VOCATIONAL INTEGRATION OF MOROCCAN WOMEN AND GIRLS**

AWO, Düsseldorf, Germany

### **Background**

In 1985 the *Arbeiterwohlfahrt* (AWO) regional association published a study on "The social situation of Moroccan families in Germany" and for the first time drew public attention to a hitherto little known minority. The study showed that Moroccan girls and women were suffering from social isolation.

The association recruited a social assistant to work on this issue and the first steps were taken to open up the possibilities of employment for Moroccan girls and women. In addition, a number of groups were set up: one for Moroccan girls, one for Moroccan women and a mixed group to learn German.

This work gave an insight into the living and housing conditions of Moroccan women and provided the necessary information for planning and implementing a project to promote the vocational training and social integration of Moroccan girls and women. The lessons to be drawn from this project show that other factors relating to work with Moroccan women need to be taken into account with a view to opening up suitable job prospects and at the same time, with their help, exerting a positive influence on the future working lives of their daughters.

#### *a. The special problems of Moroccan families*

Many of the families living in Düsseldorf arrived in Germany during the first half of the 1980s. Most came from rural areas and had a low level of education and vocational skills. A good many Moroccan workers are Berbers (who make up about 40 percent of the population of Morocco) and they too have a low level of education even in their own country. The fact that many women and men are illiterate or with very little schooling complicates their social and vocational integration. There is little

awareness in Germany of the scale of the problem of illiteracy among Moroccan women (the illiteracy rate for these women is 78 percent, according to a 1985 Federal Report).

b. *The work situation of Moroccan girls and women*

At present there are fewer opportunities for vocational and social integration of Moroccan women than for other immigrant groups. This is due to the fact that Moroccan women have not yet succeeded in settling the contradiction between the values and standards of their country of origin and those of the society in which they are living.

The traditional distribution of roles, the distinction between the world of women and the world of men, and the high illiteracy rate have so far prevented many Moroccan women and girls from following a professional activity.

**The project's target groups**

a. *Girls*

Two categories are distinguished: girls engaged in vocational training and girls and young women without an occupation.

With the first group of girls, the aim is to help them escape from dependence on their family of origin, forge their own identity and make plans for their social and vocational integration. Conflicts arising from the aspirations of the parents and Moroccan society are virulent and make it necessary for each side to adjust its objectives.

The young women with no occupation come from particularly traditional families who protect their daughters from the influence of German society and want to marry them off as young as possible. Depending on the progress of their social integration and the length of their stay in Germany, these women suffer to a varying extent from the situation imposed on them. It is a matter of urgency for these women to break out

of their isolation and lead free and self-reliant lives, which is impossible without financial independence.

Both groups need to be given advice and vocational guidance aimed at maximising their chances of finding jobs. For this purpose, training programmes offered by the *Arbeiterwohlfahrt*, such as courses to qualify as assistants in nursing or child-care, can play a very important role.

b. *Adult women*

The project deals with adult women as a target group from two different aspects:

Firstly, the project focuses on the vocational integration of women with a view to improving their own situation, in which they often feel trapped for reasons such as illiteracy, poor comprehension of the German language, fear as a result of racist aggression, isolation and an unfavourable financial situation. Here it is worth pointing out that setting objectives too high can undermine the motivation of both instructors and participants. Due to the background conditions mentioned above, progress has to be gradual. Sometimes the end of isolation triggers a positive process of personal initiative.

Secondly, it is necessary to work in co-operation with the mothers as it is they who guide their daughters in the choice of an occupation.

c. *Group leaders*

Even those Moroccan women with a good education and sufficient knowledge of German have little or no experience in group leadership. For the project itself, but also for future mutual help activities, women with sufficient organisational and teaching skills are essential. The practical experience of acting as a group leader or assistant group leader should make it possible to set in motion a training process for this work. At the same time, through the preparatory work and regular assessments with these women, they are helped towards the acquisition of a skill.



## **Structure of the project**

The project is planned to run for one year. The association would like to continue the work on the basis of results obtained so far, due to the encouraging motivation of participants and the interest shown by the husbands in having their wives and daughters participate in and benefit from the various activities. It will be possible to evaluate the true possibilities of the participants and establish contacts with the employment agency, businesses and vocational training centres so that these women and girls can be directly involved in practical work.

### *a. Programme*

The activities are planned in the light of the personal background of Moroccan women and girls. The project content takes account of living conditions, social relationships, possibilities for personal fulfilment (accepted by Moroccan families) and the knowledge and skills of the women concerned and is aimed at real possibilities of employment. It should enable participants to acquire knowledge and skills, to use the German language and to gain access to the labour market or vocational training. Another of the essential tasks of the project is to provide advice and information on the world of employment for those needing it.

The actual work done is not always directly related to the objectives; it is broader in scope and more varied than work with groups with a European culture.

In accordance with the principles outlined above, the project has three basic elements:

#### *- Course for women with little or no knowledge of German*

This course amounts essentially to a combination of literacy training and learning German. The language classes encourage conversation about matters directly related to everyday life. The aim of the course is to enable these women to help and encourage their daughters in the choice of a vocational training programme.

- *Course for women and girls (over 16 years old) with some knowledge of spoken and written German.*

The aim of this course is to provide vocational guidance (vocational training, self-expression, etc.) for young women. The participants are informed about the education system, letter writing (curriculum vitae, official letters and private correspondence), payment operations, consumer counselling, the environment, food, family budget, education and health.

The more women know about vocational opportunities in Germany the more motivated they are to start vocational training.

- *Courses for mixed groups (both generations)*

In addition to taking part in one of the courses mentioned above, the adult and young women (if possible mothers and daughters) can take part in this mixed course, for which a knowledge of German is not necessary. The most urgent task here is to help these women choose an occupation. These courses may also play a big part in improving understanding between the different generations, making each more sensitive to the other and strengthening self-esteem. This can be achieved through activities in common that take the form of training periods, exhibitions of work and through initiatives aimed at establishing contacts with training centres and businesses.

As part of this course there are plans to inform participants about training opportunities, for example in day nurseries, hospitals and doctors' consulting rooms. The team of course leaders is joined by an assistant specialising in social education who will help them in course preparation and evaluation and give individual assistance to participants in matters of social and psychological development (parents, school, friends, sexuality, housing).

It is also hoped to build collaborative links with similar projects in Europe so that a meeting can be organised to exchange views between group leaders and participants.

b. *Project organisation*

Four two-hour classes are given each week for a minimum of ten participants. One course is for women with no knowledge of either written or spoken German, one is for young women and girls with a command of German and one mixes the two generations. These courses are run in three segments over a period of 40 weeks: January to March, April to June and October to December.

One day a month is set aside for further vocational training for the group leaders as part of the social and pedagogical back-up arrangements.

**Prospects for employment**

From experience of the work carried out so far the association has learned that the majority of the women will be recruited for low paid employment such as menial jobs in cleaning firms, clinics, hotels, etc. It should be noted that even these simple jobs need to be done in the western way and call for a western mode of behaviour. Many Moroccans do not know how to behave in this way because of the different situation in their country of origin and their isolated lives in Germany. Today it is impossible to find a job without having gone through the appropriate training. For young women or girls, who often have brighter prospects than their mothers, the aim of the project is to mediate between school and work or vocational training.

Nowadays the chances of finding a job or gaining access to vocational training or further training are better than before for these young women. In individual cases, for example, it is possible to help girls continue their studies. So-called "short-staffed occupations" such as nursing or child

care offer very good opportunities for training to a few young women. Also, many women are able to go on preliminary self-improvement and training courses in subjects such as home economics, textiles, selling and health, in the *Arbeiterwohlfahrt* centres. There is also the possibility that some women might be taken on as apprentices or assistants.

### **Conclusion**

This project was planned to last one year. It will hopefully serve as a basis for future projects and for projects in other regions of Germany, such as the Rhine-Main region, where large numbers of Moroccans live.

Since there are many Moroccan immigrants in other European countries such as France, Belgium and the Netherlands, it is necessary to establish co-operation with similar projects at the European level as multilateral exchanges of knowledge and experience would be highly beneficial for the continued planning and implementation of the project in the future.

Zineb Daoudi

**LES NANAS BEURS**  
Boulogne-Billancourt  
France

**An association with a difference**

Ten years ago a group of young women from the North African immigrant community decided to set up an association to defend their own special interests. Women's concerns were often overlooked in the ideological battle for equal opportunities for immigrants. None of the slogans or campaigns showed how young women of North African origin were the victims of discrimination or oppression. The women too had often played a central role in organising demonstrations and were leading activists.

Les Nanas Beurs emerged to fight their fight: they wanted equal rights but wanted them on all fronts, in particular between women and men. Women's interests could only be looked after by women and had to be upheld in every field where women were present. This dimension fundamentally enriched the very concept of equality and parity.

**The association's strategy and objectives**

The Nanas Beurs association came into being specifically in order to analyse the dichotomy and explore the grey area separating two extremes: that of young women who all suffer a particular kind of oppression combined with the burden of their origins and, on the other hand, that of women who are put on pedestals and held up as models of the success and integration of immigrants of both sexes.

One of the Association's *raison d'être* and founding principles is to combat the discrimination against young women by:

- providing a daily reception service for young women who come to the association premises (staff on duty from 10 am to 6 pm);
- finding emergency accommodation;
- providing follow-up, in the form of support from community workers, teachers or psychologists, etc;
- addressing judges in cases involving minors;
- taking action at school;
- ensuring that girls who have run away from home have peace of mind and proper protection;
- giving refuge to battered wives;
- helping women whose husbands have abducted their children;
- helping divorced or rejected women who are left paperless and therefore become illegal immigrants under French law.

The association's services (advice centre and community work) and the women who provide them have a key role to play here. The primary objective of the reception service is to allow women to relax and talk about their problems with no qualms as to whether the North African women whom they will see will understand the difficulties they wish to talk about. The first step is to reassure them and restore their confidence. The second is to try and find solutions, which are not always that easy. Thirdly, in the longer term, the aim is to involve them in the Association's work and its fight to win the rights to which they are entitled as women and French citizens.

The association stages debates and public meetings on specific topics such as Islam and women's rights, contraception and abortion, family codes in North African societies, French legislation and the nationality code.

Women of North African origin who are success stories help to correct the negative image of immigrants. High-flyers at school and at work, professional women or leading figures in the voluntary sector or, more broadly speaking, in politics are all examples of this trend. But these

profiles are examples which the Association of Nanas Beurs wants to hold up and extend to all young women of immigrant origin. These successful women should not be exceptions to the rule: we might say that all Beur women should be exceptional.

Nanas Beurs has, since it was set up on 3 July 1985, achieved a lot with its scant resources. It has three part-time permanent paid staff working in a tiny office in the Paris region and a network of 400 members. The association relies financially on increasingly inadequate grants.

It is currently endeavouring to expand and set up local and national branches in universities (St Denis Paris VIII), in the 20th arrondissement of Paris and outside Paris (Lille or Marseille). The association is striving to set up branches of Les Nanas Beurs wherever there is a demand and for this material resources such as premises, professional staff etc. are essential and are being sought.

### **Summary of the association's crisis work**

#### **- *women without papers***

This includes cases of girls detained against their will in North Africa, who find that they are illegal immigrants when they return to France and also cases of girls who entered France on their own - ie not to join other family members - and who were unable to legalise their situation. These case-files are currently being examined for transmission to local administrative offices or the Ministry of Social Affairs.

In 1993 three young women were helped to legalise their residence situation:

\* The first is a young 34 year-old who had been living in France illegally for over 8 years, with a dependent daughter. She had been kidnapped, taken to Algeria for over two years and married against her will. When she returned to France she was disqualified from legalising her papers because she had been out of the country for more than 6

months. She has always lived in France and could not contemplate living in Algeria. Nanas Beurs helped her to resolve her problem by addressing the authorities in Lille. She now has a home and a job and is bringing up her daughter with dignity.

\* Second, a 23 year-old who had run away from home at the age of 16 had done nothing about her papers because she had broken off contact with her family. The association helped her by asking a government official to intervene at the local government offices in Boulogne-Billancourt.

\* Third, the case of a young unmarried mother of Tunisian origin was put to the RPR party's spokeswoman for women's affairs. She passed her file on to the Ministry of the Interior for legalisation of residence on humanitarian grounds.

- *unmarried mothers*

Most unmarried mothers have no papers and fled their country of origin because they were unable to have an abortion. Some of them are directed to an association which helps women to give birth under an assumed name. The children are then looked after in a nursery for 3 months before being found an adoptive family. Women who decide to keep the child are initially given moral and psychological support and are then directed towards maternity centres and helped with the administrative arrangements.

- *refugees*

Nanas Beurs knows of 30 cases of women who have fled Algeria because of the political situation there. They are often professional women - teachers, nurses, sportswomen or students, etc - who have been persecuted because they are independent and refuse to wear a veil. The association alerted the Women's Rights Department of the Ministry of Social Affairs, which has offered to examine all their cases.

- *30 young women who have left home*

Those who are minors are put in touch with the relevant administrative services although the association continues to lend them a sympathetic ear. The adults are directed to the DDASS (*Direction départementale des affaires sanitaires et sociales*), which cares for them under its young adult scheme. The association found them accommodation and helped them to find a job, assisting them with the administrative arrangements. In certain cases Nanas Beurs helped them to recontact their parents.

- *battered wives*

Nanas Beurs' telephone number is mostly passed on by bodies like *Violences Conjugales* or *SOS Femmes Battues*. Distress calls tend to come from women telephoning from home while their husbands are out. Whenever possible a worker meets them and helps them take the steps required to compile a file which contains details of their plight.

This is a very difficult type of problem to solve since the women live in terror and find it hard to decide to leave. They often have small children. Moral and psychological support is given and they are put in touch with other women who have had the same experience and have dared to take action and leave home.

Often there is no available emergency housing or longer-term accommodation in Paris and the surrounding region. It is then necessary to call on social services to find a hotel room if they are in danger.

Most of the women who contact the organisation are of North or sub-Saharan African origin. Childless women may be found temporary accommodation in specialised housing centres.

Files are systematically compiled, containing medical certificates, notes and witness reports from neighbours, just in case the women decide to sue for divorce or leave their husbands.

In all the association has assisted around 30 battered women and girls. When mothers are ill-treated their children often suffer too and in such

cases the organisation *Enfance maltraitée* is contacted, a body with which Nanas Beurs frequently works.

- *arranged marriages*

There is a resurgence in arranged marriages between young Frenchwomen and North Africans. The association talks to the girls to find ways of avoiding the marriage and have on occasions called the parents to reason with them, mostly successfully. In the case of young women who have already married, they are helped to take steps towards divorce and the association often acts as intermediary between these girls and administrative services as they get divorced without telling their parents. They are urged to opt for French nationality so that they can be protected if ever they are forcibly taken out of the country.

- *abduction*

Nanas Beurs has dealt with four cases of abduction. Social workers at schools or friends of the girls concerned contacted the association, which is in touch with Tunisian women's associations such as the Association of Tunisian Women for Democracy which carry out on-the-spot research to track down these girls. Three of the girls are in Tunisia and they have French nationality, but must now await adulthood if they want to return to France: they are French in France but North African in North Africa. There is another case in Algeria but it is very difficult to act there because of the political instability in the country. This girl's case is being investigated by the DDASS: although she has come of age in France she has not under Algerian law.

- *kidnapping*

A Moroccan woman, was helped to recover her three children. The association called the Moroccan embassy in France to put the children on her passport without their father's authorisation. She then went to Morocco to collect her children. She was going through divorce proceedings and obtained their custody.

- *family reunification*

The families in question met all the conditions for family reunification: given the events in Algeria the family did not want to be separated for over six months (the minimum period required before families are reunited). Their files were passed on to the Ministry of Social Affairs and their cases were dealt with favourably.

- *mixed marriages*

Young French men and women call for advice on how to approach parents and how to go about marriages between French nationals, North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans.

**Plans for a magazine - "Les cahiers des Nanas Beurs"**

Since 1985 the association has carried out grassroots work to help young women of North African immigrant origin. The Nanas Beurs Association has liaised and mediated between young people, families, employers and trade unions to represent women's interests and defend their rights as best as possible.

Even before the word "integration" became a buzz-word, the Association did all it could to track down ways of helping young women to develop personally and succeed, to become fully-fledged citizens. This in turn will lead to the shaping of a new profile for immigrants' children as well as for immigrants themselves.

But much still remains to be done and, at this important stage in the Association's growth, there is a pressing need for an extra tool. That is why a new project centred on a magazine to be called "Les Cahiers des Nanas Beurs" is being proposed.

The magazine would be a mouthpiece for all kinds of women with an interesting personal past, or from associations with interesting records,

sharing varied experiences. It would be a forum for debates, opinions and different points of view. Its dialogue would always be open, closed only to sectarianism. It would disprove the clichés and stereotypes surrounding immigration and would challenge popular misconceptions and highlight women's knowledge and skills. It would also offer women useful tips about their rights in France and their country of origin. It would also give an insight into the world of art and culture and could stage meetings, debates and colloquies. Finally, it is hoped that the publication will inspire women, in the rest of Europe as well as France, to share ideas and mobilise. In brief, Les Cahiers des Nanas Beurs would record and voice the ideas of all those who take part in the work to liberate and integrate women of North African origin in France.

Souad Benani

## **"NOW" PROGRAMME**

Roubaix, France

### **Introduction**

In the Nord/Pas-de-Calais Region, the economic crisis has had a particularly serious effect on the sectors traditionally open to women. The female unemployment rate in 1992 was 16.9 percent, as against a national level of 12.9 percent. At the same time, the proportion of single women with families to support has been rising constantly. Half of the Roubaix population is of immigrant origin and 17 percent is of foreign nationality. The unemployment rate in Roubaix itself is 30 percent of the active population.

It was in this context, particularly unfavourable to the employment of women, that the Agence pour le Développement des Quartiers de Roubaix (ADQR), in partnership with the Centre d'Information sur les Droits des Femmes (Women's Rights Information Centre) launched a training programme intended to lead to a return to employment for single women with families to support.

The action was initiated in the context of the "NOW" (New Opportunities for Women) Community Initiative Programme which aims to reinforce national policies to combat unemployment among women. The programme was launched under the Human Resources Initiatives by the European Social Fund. The Women's Rights Service of the Ministry for Social Affairs, Health and the Town wished to give the NOW programme an essential role in the promotion of the policy for equal opportunities in the fields of employment and vocational training.

When the programme was launched, there were some 900 women who met the criteria: single women living in Roubaix with at least one dependent child. To date, over 300 women have worked with the

programme, for periods of varying length, to remotivate themselves with a view to preparing for a return to work.

### **Profile of the women who attend**

Women come to the scheme via various routes. Some are sent by other social services, some have seen the publicity posters, some have heard of the NOW Programme by word of mouth. But they all have one basic thing in common: the desire to improve their lot and regain the right to a life of complete financial independence by getting back to work.

Often, the women come to the programme following the breakdown of a relationship. There are often a whole host of other difficulties which constitute major physical and mental obstacles to a return to work: poor housing conditions, debts, very precarious resources, divorce proceedings, health problems, etc.

The women who attend the job preparation workshops are very often quite unfamiliar with what work is all about. Many have worked in the past, but a long time ago and they no longer have any recognised skills. Above all, they need to regain self-confidence. They need to learn how to face an employer with assurance, how to become more mobile, how to take on responsibility in the professional context, to be punctual, not to mention a host of other skills.

### **The action undertaken**

The "NOW" team consists of a leader who co-ordinates all the activities at the centre, a secretary, three instructors and a nursery teacher to run the day-care centre. As many of the women attending the course need to straighten out one or a number of personal legal problems, it became essential to also employ a lawyer to assist in resolving these problems which inevitably hamper a return to work.

The programme occupies a floor in a building housing the Women's Rights Information Centre and apart from offices and classrooms,

consists of a nursery - kindergarten and dormitory. Depending on the requirements of the mothers who attend, the young children can be looked after on a half-day or whole-day basis. This is an unquestionable bonus for many who would otherwise be unable to come for training. Just being aware that their child is close by is a reassurance, but it also gives them experience of handing their children over to other people.

The action undertaken by NOW is divided into two main programmes: remotivation workshops and a more specialised literacy training course.

a. *Remotivation workshops*

The programme consists of a number of remotivation workshops, which aim to reshape the participants career projects, making it consistent, realistic in terms of her experience and abilities, but also in terms of economic realities.

The trainee groups are mixed by origin, with French women, foreign women and women of foreign origin. The women are also put into groups with mixed educational levels, which range from women with virtually no schooling to those with university qualifications. But all the women have one thing in common - a past that has been fraught with difficulties. The idea behind this is that each women will, with the help of the trainer, but also with the other participants, be able to draw on a whole range of experiences to remodel her professional project.

There is no fixed duration for the job preparation workshops: women join and leave as they wish. Some will leave because they have found a job and do so to begin some form of training, while others may be discouraged and simply give up. But the workshops remain open to them and they can start again, whenever they wish, and for as long as they consider it necessary.

There is also no predetermined programme for the courses and they therefore evolve according to the demands and needs of the participants. The course may cover such areas as job search strategies (CV, letters, job interviews), written and oral expression and time

management. The participants also discuss issues such as health and relationships.

Many of the women lead isolated lives and coming to the workshops in itself gives them the opportunity to meet other women in similar situations. The group dynamics that inevitably develop during these workshops provide a positive moral support and foster self-confidence among the women.

When it turns out that a vocational qualification is necessary, the trainee is directed to the training organisations in the region. In certain cases, returning to work may be via assisted contracts (such as the part-time *Contrats Emploi Solidarité*, which are 80 percent State-funded), in a sheltered work environment, less demanding than the ordinary world of work. However this is still valuable as it represents a first step towards employment.

b. *Literacy training*

As soon as the project got under way, very soon it was found that a number of women enrolled for the scheme were foreigners who had the greatest difficulty in expressing themselves in French, in particular older Maghreb women and young women newly arrived from sub-Saharan Africa.

A teacher was recruited with the mission of taking charge of the literacy sessions and introduction to the French language. The aim was to enable the women to integrate socially and professionally, through adaptation to the western world, and secondly, to achieve a level of autonomy, whilst allowing for their social and cultural backgrounds. It should be noted that throughout the training course the women received an allowance from the state.

With the support of a number of partners, each specialising in a particular field such as cooking or dress-making, a training programme was created based on a study of the main areas of daily life, with three practical workshops: sewing, cooking and manual work.

The literacy courses picked up in detail the ideas covered in the practical workshops and were supplemented by modules, such as

knowledge of the host country, social environment and family life. These modules were illustrated by a number of visits: a visit to the Town Hall and its main departments, a guided tour of Lille, a visit to a mining centre in the region and a day-trip to Paris.

The literacy course, like the remotivation workshops, were initially composed of mixed groups. However, the disparity in the composition of the group in terms of educational level or origin slowed down the progress made in French by some, so the participants were divided into several groups. By the end of the one-year course the trainees had learned the mechanics of writing, could read a simple text (in the case of the more advanced) and had made a marked improvement in speaking and understanding French.

The training initially occupied 15 hours per week, but gradually increased to 30 by the end of the course. During the course two one-week periods were devoted to work experience. Between these two weeks, workshop sessions concentrated in particular on punctuality, regular attendance, quality of work, productivity and motivation.

Several conclusions could be drawn from the experience. The Respect for "the right to be different" was the dominant approach of the 1980's, which has given way to a useful apprenticeship in the codes of the host society which does not deny the culture of origin. By way of example, African textiles were used for the "French dressmaking" workshop. Also, the diversity and distance of the places used for training, made necessary for organisational reasons, increased the women's mobility as they learned how to travel with ease around the city.

Learning to read and write is an essential first step in the integration of foreign women into society and in giving them independence in carrying

out everyday activities. Learning French is an essential precondition for any vocational training.

## **Conclusion**

After three years of work the steering organisation, the *Agence pour le Développement des Quartiers de Roubaix*, along with its partner the *Centre d'Information sur les Droits des Femmes*, consider the achievements of the project on the whole successful, but feel that there is still scope for improvement.

A new initiative has just been launched in Roubaix, which aims to assist the integration of women in need. It is important that this new project has a long-term future within the framework of new Community Initiative Programmes.

Patricia Debaveye

## **HACKNEY REFUGEE WOMEN'S PROJECT**

World University Services  
London, United Kingdom

### **Introduction**

The Hackney Refugee Women's Project is a project of the World University Services (WUS-UK), which is part of the international network of World University Services. WUS programmes in the UK focus on the needs of refugees including asylum-seekers. WUS-UK provides a comprehensive advice service for adult refugees covering all levels of education and training. This service has played an important role in enabling refugees to gain access to mainstream provisions of education and training in the UK. WUS programmes and campaigns focus on refugees, women and people in areas of conflict.

The Hackney Refugee Women's Project is the first of its kind in Britain. Its aim, through education, is to facilitate the integration and empowerment of refugee women, who are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Hackney, a relatively poor area of London, into the economic regeneration activity in this area. The project is funded by the Ministry of Environment through two funding bodies, Dalston City Partnership and the Task Force in Hackney.

### **The Women's Project**

Special problems are faced by refugee women as they strive for integration and settlement in Britain. They face problems such as lower initial level of literacy and education than men, responsibility for child care, cultural isolation, lack of extended family and other support networks. Also, poor housing and unemployment are widespread among refugee women. Lack-of-access to English language teaching and other educational opportunities add to the social deprivation of these women.

Refugee women are often tied to their homes and communities by cultural factors and the existing provisions of childcare and office-based advice services do not meet their needs. WUS were aware that few refugee women made use of their advice service and set up an outreach service for individual women, but soon realised that a larger project for women refugees in general needed support.

At the time there were no refugee women's organisations in Hackney. The women were looked after by the refugee community organisations through a women's committee, which generally ran no specific programmes for them and they have to follow the policy of the management committee of the specific organisations.

World University Services therefore decided to create a project specifically for refugee women, to assist them as they try to integrate into UK society.

The project runs in two phases: from 1993 to the end of 1994; and 1995 onwards. WUS is managing the first phase, during which it is working to set up a consortium of refugee women, with the close involvement of local refugee communities, as an independent and viable charitable organisation in the Dalston City Challenge area capable of becoming operational from January 1995. In the second phase, WUS will chair the management committee of the consortium and will continue to provide support on fundraising, management and operational aspects of the organisation.

Phase one

During the first part of the project the following tasks are being undertaken:

- a) Providing advice and assistance on education and training and employment support to refugee women in Hackney;
- b) Running training courses for volunteers and staff of organisations participating in the consortium;

- c) Establishing a permanent self-sustaining network of refugee women;
- d) Auditing refugee women's education, training and employment needs and opportunities in Hackney;
- e) Establishing guidance systems for providing a service to be used by refugee women, including an information bank;
- f) Consulting the funding partners and refugee communities in Hackney;
- g) Establishing the necessary personnel, fundraising and financial management systems.

An essential part of the project at this stage is the outreach service in order to reach women in their own homes and communities. Indeed, WUS employs two full-time outreach workers to provide advice and information to the women, through meetings and home visits.

The above description details how the project is planned to proceed, but as with many projects flexibility is essential and other needs have to be taken into account. As the outreach advisors assessed the needs of the women it became obvious that language is a major barrier to integration, and so this became a priority for the project to address. Five English language classes were established, each one with childcare facilities and always situated in venues which are local and near the communities they are serving.

In mid 1994 the project also started classes to help those women who have just attained professional qualifications and are actively looking for work. The programme will cover writing CVs, interview techniques, jobsearch assistance and assertiveness.

Phase Two:

Once the consortium is established in 1995 it will provide targeted and locally delivered advice, information, advocacy, training and employment support to refugee women in the Borough of Hackney through the following:

a) Advice and Counselling on Training and Education: individual advice and counselling on training and education will cover the acquisition of English language; fees and awards entitlements; identifying appropriate training courses; obtaining places in appropriate education institutions or training schemes; and re-qualification in vocational and professional fields. Advice and counselling will be carried out on an outreach basis through home visits and community-based activities and where appropriate through office-based activities.

b) Training: training will take place through referrals to a number of appropriate educational institutions and training centres for courses which will be especially designed for this purpose. The consortium will negotiate with these institutions and centres to set up courses which are specially designed to cater for the needs of refugee women. Funding of these courses will take place through the project budget operated by the management committee.

c) Employment Support: assistance will be provided on an individual basis to enable refugee women to seek and find employment. This will cover assessment of skills and work experience, cultural aspects of job-hunting, writing CVs, interview skills, and facilitating contact between employers and job-seekers.

d) Enterprise Advice: an advice and referral service will be provided to cover all aspects of setting up a business.

e) Information: Written information in English and original languages will be provided in the form of leaflets, information sheets, briefing papers and handbooks to inform refugee women about all aspects of training, education and employment.

f) Support, Advocacy and Networking: local providers of education and training, statutory, voluntary and community services, professional bodies, employment services and employers will be informed about the special needs of refugee women and their rights and entitlements through contacts related to casework, briefing notes, handbooks, training sessions, workshops, and seminars.

### **Difficulties and challenges**

Although many refugee communities have been contacted and invited to participate in the project, a number still remain uninvolved. This is an understandable situation if it is taken into account that it takes time to establish a good working relationship; many of the people concerned have been through bad experiences in the past and have seen many projects designed to help them collapse.

Another barrier faced when meeting the communities is that the coordinator is often a man and some communities have no women's worker. This is not a serious problem but it takes time and requires patience to overcome the barrier.

In those cases where there is a women's worker or a volunteer, she tends to be overworked, in an unsupportive working environment, facing childcare difficulties and isolated and on a very low income. All of them are keen to develop themselves and their potential to contribute and are generally highly motivated. The response from these women is positive, they would like to work with the project, and some of them express their frustration and difficulties. This led to a plan to help them by setting up group support and a self-development programme.

### **Conclusion**

World University Services initiated the project and will hand over the reins at the end of 1994 to the refugee consortium. It is therefore a short-term project, but one that will leave behind a permanent organisation of

refugee women working for the empowerment of other refugee women in Hackney. The project has also ensured that refugee women's issues are firmly on the agenda in the area.

The running of the project has only been possible through successful co-operation at a number of levels. Various agencies in Hackney, both charitable organisations and local government are working together. The different refugee communities are working together. Co-operative action is often much more successful than groups working in isolation.

Finally, it is hoped that the continuing success of this project will encourage other organisations to seriously consider establishing similar projects elsewhere.

Anba Ali

**ALMA MATER,  
INTERCULTURAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN**  
Turin, Italy

**Introduction**

In 1990 the proposal was launched to create an intercultural centre for immigrant women in Turin, a place where women of many origins could express themselves socially, culturally and economically. The proposal for the Centre came from a group of women from different countries who were trying to find a new way of assisting immigrant women to integrate into Italian society. The organisation *Produrre e Riprodurre* and the Regional Commission for Equal Opportunities took up the idea and formed the Promotional Committee, composed of various women's and immigrant women's associations and trade unions.

The group took advantage of Italian laws which provide funds for the reception of foreigners, the restoration of buildings and other activities. The local authority provided a large, unused school building and the local government funded the restoration of the building and the first year of activities. Thus, in September 1993 Alma Mater, the Intercultural Centre for Women, opened its doors.

The project arose out of the experience of immigrant women in Italy, especially their problems in the fields of work, housing and family and social life. These problems were compounded by the fact that there was nowhere in Turin designated as a place where the women could meet.

**The aims**

Alma Mater is intended to be a centre for the self-promotion of immigrant women, managed by immigrant women, but also with the support of Italian women. It is totally independent, outside of any control of the state-run social service system.

Apart from the basic aim of providing a place for women to meet, discuss and share experiences, it envelopes many other projects aimed to promote the integration of immigrant women. It encourages work activities by immigrant women which, at the same time, respond to the needs of the city; it is a point of reference for the people of Turin who are involved in the work with immigrant women; it is a cultural centre; information and advice are always available for those seeking it. Finally, it seeks to provide innovative answers to the social problems of immigrant women.

### **Organisation and activities**

The Centre is managed by a small group of immigrant women, mostly on a voluntary basis. However, many other women devote their free time to assisting in running the Centre's activities.

The Centre itself is a large building divided into four floors. The organisers themselves were closely involved in the renovation work and as a result much work was put into making the place look as informal and welcoming as possible.

The first floor of the Centre is composed of a reception area, a large room for meetings and group activities, offices, creche, documentation area and kitchen. The basement area is devoted to work initiatives and comprises a launderette, sewing workshop and Turkish bath.

### **Activities**

In order to fulfil its objectives, a number of different activities take place at the centre, covering many cultural, social and economic aspects of womens' lives.

- *Reception area*

There is a reception area which is open every day, where women can meet on an informal basis to discuss, or organise meetings. Continuous hospitality and help and information is given in response to requests from women who visit the Centre, such as help in finding housing or work

- *Work initiatives*

The basement houses a number of small work cooperatives which aim to promote the value of foreigners' work projects and support new economic initiatives by immigrant women. Activities which are currently underway include: a launderette, sewing workshop, Turkish bath and a take-away kitchen.

- *Cultural and educational activities*

Public meetings, group activities, exhibitions etc. are encouraged at the Centre and are organised by both the Alma Mater mediators and other groups looking for a meeting place. Recent seminars included "Being a women in Italy and the Maghreb" and "Cultural Mediation: improving relations between different cultures" and during Spring 1994 there was an African fabric exhibition. These seminars and exhibitions are open to all those interested in the subject.

A multicultural theatre group called "Almateatro" has been created, composed of women from 16 nationalities. Their first production, entitled "Mi chiamavano Righibè" played at a public theatre in Turin and toured the local schools.

- *Creche*

A large room has been converted into a creche, which is open every afternoon during working days, to the children of immigrant and Italian women. It is intended to be a multicultural environment for children to play and to learn.

- *Training course*

The project has organised a number of vocational training courses for women immigrants:

a) A training course for cultural mediators, comprising 500 hours over a five month period and completed by 15 women from 11 different countries. Some of the women are now involved in the management of the Centre and others working in public services.

b) A course training women to become home assistants. The women who completed the course formed two cooperatives called *Talea* and *Mediazione*. These cooperatives are growing and already have work contracts in the city. The groups also run the sewing cooperative and the Turkish bath which are housed in the Centre.

- *Documentation centre*

A documentation centre is being created to hold information on issues of concern to immigrant women, such as health, family rights, violence and peace. The Centre would also like to have at the disposition of its visitors, works of Italian and foreign literature, where possible in the original language.

- *Advice and information*

On top of the advice given to the immigrant women who visit Alma Mater, the Centre has also rapidly become a source of reference for workers in the public services, who are involved in work with immigrants, as they know they will receive expert advice.

- *Advocacy work*

The bringing together of individuals and groups into the Centre pools a great wealth of knowledge and experience in the field of immigration and in particular its effects on women. This knowledge and experience is translated into ideas for the improvement of the situation in Italy which is

then used in lobbying work carried out by the various women's and immigrants organisations involved with the centre.

## **Conclusion**

The success of the Intercultural Centre was made possible by collaboration among a number of groups such as the regional committee for equal opportunities, NGOs, associations of immigrant women, women members of the municipal council and trade unions and proves the worth of such collaboration.

Projects of this kind are very rare in Italy, and the women of Alma Mater are very interested in contacts with women in other European countries to learn from their work and to share experiences.

Despite some support from national and local government, the project is continually seeking new sponsors in order to survive and expand its activities. To date, only two floors of this four storey building are in use and there are always new ideas and proposals to fill the empty space. If the money was to be made available a permanent training centre could be created, and longer term work in the field of intercultural communication could be undertaken. At present the lack of funds prevents this expansion.

Giovanna Zaldini et Souad Bendkim

**HOME-BASED PROGRAMMES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD  
INTERVENTION AS A STARTING-POINT FOR  
INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN**

Averroès Foundation, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Introduction**

Over the years, the Averroès foundation has contributed to the development of a series of programmes which support immigrant children from 0 to 7 years of age in discovering the world around them. In this way, they can achieve a better starting-position for their school-career. The foundation's basic premise is that people from different ethnic-cultural backgrounds must have the opportunity to integrate into Dutch society, which means that they should be able to participate equally in society.

Since 1992 the central policy line focuses on preschool and primary school educational support and this paper will describe two programmes: Opstap, for children aged four to six and Opstapje for children aged two to four.

The following assumptions form the basis of the work of the foundation:

- educationally disadvantaged children's home environment is often not conducive to learning the kinds of skills and knowledge that are expected when these children enter primary school;
- the mothers of these children tend to see themselves as inadequate educators and unable to contribute to their children's school success;
- women, as mothers, are still the main educators of children of preschool age. As educators mothers do much more than taking care of their young children.

**Opstap: "Learning that learning is fun"**

The Opstap-programme is the largest programme. It is the Dutch version of the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), developed at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the late sixties. It is a two year stimulation programme for mothers and their 4 to 6 year old children. Central to the programme is the interaction between mother and child. For two years the mother will carry out playing and learning activities with her pre-school child for about 15 minutes a day, five days a week. In general, the programme aims at "enabling children to be better pupils". More specifically, the programme aims at stimulating the cognitive development of the pre-school child and strengthening the mother's self-esteem through her activities as an educator in the family setting.

Each mother-child couple receives thirty weekly sets of work-sheets a year. They include instructions for the mothers and sheets on which the children "work". Every 4 weeks they also receive a booklet (9 booklets a year) which goes with the programme. In addition to this written material, the simplest physical materials are also used in the beginning. The programme aims to improve the child's development of language and comprehension, sensory discrimination and problem-solving capacities. All written materials for mother and child for this and the Opstapje programme are available in 4 languages: Dutch, Turkish, Standard-Arabic and Papiamentu.

The programme is characterised by programmed instruction. Together with a neighbourhood aid the mother is made familiar with activities and materials. To achieve this, the neighbourhood aid visits the mothers every other week in their homes and will hold group meetings between visits. Depending on the participant's wishes, special topics may be discussed during group-meetings. These topics usually refer to real-life situations. Women can talk about the upbringing, guidance and formal education of (young) children, but they can also discuss the possibilities of initiating a study or other educational activities themselves, such as Dutch language lessons. They also visit local services like libraries.

### **Opstapje: "Playing and learning together"<sup>3</sup>**

Opstapje is an intervention programme for immigrant children from 2 to 4 years of age and their parents. This programme was developed for the following reasons:

- A responsive, child-oriented interaction style will promote the child's development and stimulates the development of skills which are highly valued within the Dutch education system. Therefore, the programme aims at developing a number of parental skills, which allow them to follow their child's development and to stimulate it.
- The expectations at Dutch primary schools are based on the premise that play and play-development are highly important factors in the development of young children.
- Children are active learners: they actively interact with people and objects in their direct environment. Opstapje aims to create a favourable environment in which to play and learn.
- The level of second language proficiency attained by ethnic minority children is partly related to the level of mother-tongue proficiency at the time when intensive exposure to the second language begins. The programme is therefore presented in the language of the ethnic group to which the family belongs and/or the language which the mother speaks best.
- Ethnic minority children are under-represented in Dutch pre-school playrooms. Among other things, Opstapje aims to lower the threshold for mothers to enrol their children in these centres.

The programme therefore aims to increase the opportunities for and skills in playing and handling materials; to offer cognitive knowledge and skills which can help provide a successful transition to primary school, to

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Source: D. Ince, J. Kloek and P. Tan, Opstapje: a programme in development. Averroès foundation, Amsterdam, December 1992.

stimulate language development in the child's own language and to develop social skills.

The mother is stimulated to interact in a (more) responsive way with her child in natural everyday situations. The programme also aims at increasing the mother's consciousness about her child's development. Therefore, information is offered which is tied up with her own knowledge and skills. It also contains some guidelines to follow and stimulate her child's development.

Opstapje is basically is a two-year home-based programme. But unlike Opstap the neighbourhood aid works with both parent and child. She is responsible for providing the materials of the programme, accomplishing the activities with both mother and child and the supply of information. The neighbourhood mother functions as a role-model for the mother. However, the mother plays an active and responsible role in the programme: she is also learning by doing.

During the home-visits the neighbourhood aid provides mother and child with purpose-made play-activities. These activities are described on work-sheets. The materials also include six booklets a year and a limited number of toys and songs for mother and child. Additionally, the mothers make intensive use of household objects with which the children can play. The materials provided meet the requirements of the Dutch school system as far as possible.

Opstapje has also centre-based components for both mother and child. During the operation of the programme the children taking part visit the pre-school playroom while their mothers attend the group meetings. The main objective of this centre-based component is that mothers can get acquainted with this kind of day-care service. The group meetings also support the mothers in accomplishing the programme and guiding and educating their children. They are informed about their children's development and education and various community services. The children can get used to a Dutch 'Kindergarten-like' environment where they can play with other children, where the Dutch language is spoken and where they can experiment with new materials and activities.

### **The neighbourhood aids**

The neighbourhood aid forms an essential part of the project. There are approximately 300 neighbourhood aids. She is a paraprofessional who is part of the target group of the mothers she supervises. She lives in the same neighbourhood but has a slightly higher standard of education than the other women taking part. She usually has a pre-school child, with whom she follows the programme. Hence she knows the material used and can put herself in the position of any mother taking part. Neighbourhood aids have to have sufficiently mastered the Dutch language to adequately carry out the tasks.

She is specially recruited, trained and supervised by local project coordinators. Project coordinators and neighbourhood aids often share the same ethno-cultural background. Since neighbourhood aids often have a variety of family problems confided to them, their role is not restricted to that of a teacher. The neighbourhood aid is usually employed on a two year contract for 16 hours a week by a local welfare foundation which is formally in charge of carrying out the programme.

The project coordinators also hold monthly training meetings and are in turn individually supervised by regional coordinators.

In general, the organisation is characterised by strong network ties. Training, guidance and supervision are part of the everyday activities. The organisation aims to prevent people from dropping out and provide prompt assistance or referrals to other agencies.

### **The programmes as a starting-point for the integration of women**

The programmes are reaching many women: in 1993/1994 74 municipalities, 265 groups and about 4,000 mother-child couples take part in the Opstap programme and up to mid 1994 about 170 mother-child couples, from eight municipalities took part in the Opstapje project.

Most of the participating mothers are of Turkish or Moroccan origin. The programmes aim to select mothers who have had less than ten years formal education. Many of the women show a moderate command of Dutch, but a number of them are illiterate.

Immigrant women want to give their children everything they need to guarantee them a much better future than they have themselves. This is quite a hard task because, on the one hand, they can rely on proven cultural traditions, but on the other, they are confronted with a world that thoroughly differs from the world they grew up. That is why immigrant women can play an important role being able to establish a bridge between two generations. So working with immigrant women can be considered as an important way to integration and better opportunities for the older and the younger generation of immigrants.

Positive appraisal of their key-role as a mother and offering knowledge and skills, as concrete tools for fulfilling this task, are important ingredients of the programmes. Strengthening the self-confidence of the mothers and using this as an important aspect to induce changes in family life can be considered as a first step towards the integration of immigrant mothers.

The programmes also provide immigrant women with the opportunity to work outside the home. Already, about 500 immigrant women are employed by implementing the programmes. Recently the Averroès foundation, together with the Dutch Federation of Employers, offered the Ministry of Welfare a concrete proposal to create new jobs for paraprofessionals who are working in the programmes. The Ministry decided to facilitate this plan of action with 8 million guilders under the condition that Averroès finds additional funding to carry out the project. At present these funds are being sought from the European Social Fund. The objective of this plan of action is to create about 260 new jobs a year. In this way the employment of immigrant women can be stimulated and the programmes could be expanded to reach the large number of immigrant women who otherwise would be overlooked. The Averroès Foundation is also working to create a new kind of vocational training and education which will be specially developed to meet the needs and wishes of the

neighbourhood aids in order for them to make the transfer to more regular jobs.

### **Problems and restraints**

The programmes offer a lot of opportunities for the integration of immigrant women, but of course there are also a number of problems.

There are the language problems. Though at the moment most participants are of Turkish or Moroccan origin, there are always other ethnic groups who have difficulties mastering the Dutch language. In these cases the mothers cannot be given materials in their own language and it is hard for them to join the group meetings because they can feel isolated not being able to speak another language than their mother-tongue. Sometimes it is hard to find neighbourhood aids that meet all the requirements, but language can be the main problem.

A serious problem is that only half of the mothers participate in the group meetings. There can be several reasons for that. Some traditional women do not get the permission of their husbands to participate; women can be too busy housekeeping or taking care of other children; sometimes the time or the location is not very well chosen; mothers are not very well informed about the objectives of these group meetings. Also, the methods used often tend to be based on western-orientated rules and principles. Stimulating individual development has a high priority in this society, rather than making use of group solidarity and loyalty as a starting-point for individual change. So coordinators and neighbourhood aids should be intensively trained and supervised to adequately fulfil this task. Sometimes the group meetings do not always really meet the needs of the participating mothers, so Averroès is trying to improve the quality of the meetings. It is necessary to explain and discuss objectives and offer structured, clear and useful information. There should also be a balance between offering information and working with experiences.

## **Conclusions**

The programmes are a unique and valuable instrument within the framework of governmental integration policy on immigrants in general and immigrant women as mothers of young children in particular. Although confronted with some important problems and limitations, programmes like Opstap and Opstapje reach many immigrant women and their children who belong to the most vulnerable groups in society and keep them enthusiastically and highly motivated in the programmes. Participating mothers appreciate the fact that they can actually develop strategies to promote the school performance of their children. Furthermore, they can add to their own knowledge and skills so that their lives are no longer exclusively aimed at survival in a foreign country.

In this respect, Opstap - and other programmes based on this concept - contribute, to the emancipation of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands in general and the integration of immigrant women in particular.

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