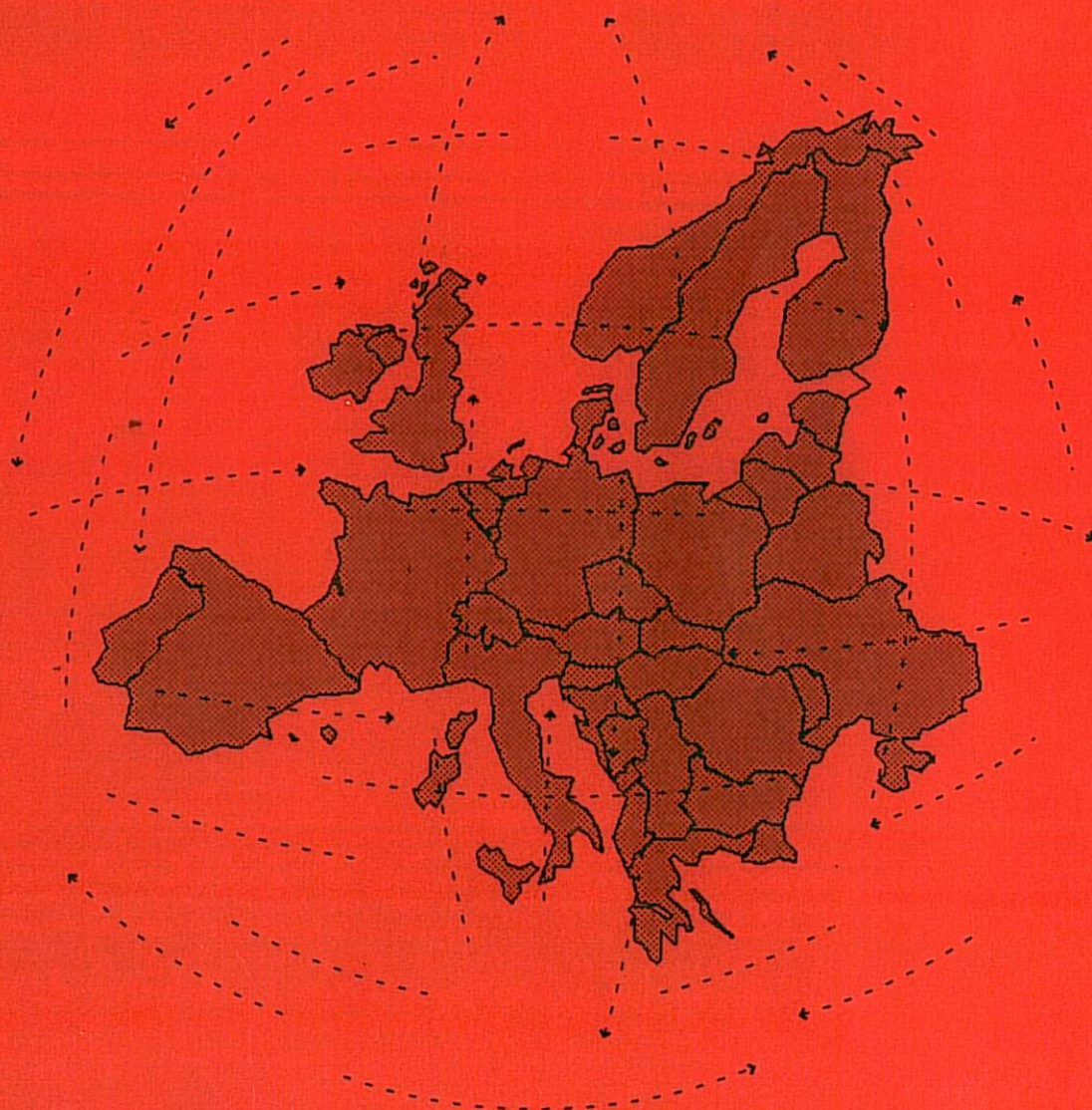


# IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND INTEGRATION: TOWARDS EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Edited by Julie Cator



CHURCHES COMMISSION FOR MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

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## INTRODUCTION

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In June 1994 the Council of Europe held a meeting on Immigrant Women and Integration, to which they invited representatives from ten European projects concerned with the integration of immigrant women, to present and discuss their work, with the aim of pooling experience and ideas about projects for immigrant women. This Briefing Paper is an edited version of the report from that meeting.

The projects discussed at the meeting 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.

The first section of this paper is a discussion of the priorities of immigrant women in the integration process and of projects devised to tackle these concerns. Jacqueline Costa Lascoux, from the Centre d'études de la vie politique française prepared this part of the paper. The second section contains descriptions of three of the projects, prepared by the women involved in them. Jacqueline Costa Lascoux and Julie Cator were consultants to the Council of Europe project and meeting.

CCME would like to thank the Council of Europe for its permission to produce this version of the report. The full report, entitled Immigrant Women and Integration (reference MG-EO (95) 20E) is available from the Council of Europe (Population and Migration Division, F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex, tel: +33 88 41 22 69, fax: +33 88 41 27 31).

## IMMIGRANT WOMEN: OUT OF THE SHADOW AND ONTO THE STAGE

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### 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 basic freedoms demanded by immigrant women are directly covered by the European Convention on Human Rights. However, 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 recognise 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. 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 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.



## 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 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 organise the fight against drugs and petty crime among young people, or to promote the improvement of the environment.

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 terms of their relationship to a father, husband or brothers, and are rarely 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 measure of 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.

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, immigrant women's projects have found 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

There are 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.

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 gap widens with the difference in language.

Rural background, illiteracy and a lack of job qualifications, often features of immigrant women over the age of 30, create obstacles which are difficult to overcome in urban industrial societies. What should be encouraged, in addition to language learning itself, is psychological adaptation and familiarisation 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 recognise 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.



The diversity of situations is due to three main factors. Host countries have different integration policies and some have no special provisions for immigrant women. By making provision for family reunion or introducing measures concerning the second "generations", many European legislators think they are satisfying all the aspirations and needs of immigrant women. Moreover, some countries have done nothing to help with the establishment of associations for immigrant women; others, however, subsidise many activities organised by them.

Housing, education and social welfare conditions vary from one country to another and sometimes from one region or town to another, particularly in very decentralised 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 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 recognised. 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 familiarisation 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 organised 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 organised 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 recognised, 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, 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. 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 emphasised. 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, women should be assisted to 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 is much discussion about the people or groups who should be targeted by the projects. It is 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). Associations are openly critical of the damaging effect which current economic constraints are having on projects for immigrant women.

One important point should be emphasised: 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.

Involving fathers and husbands is also important. 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. 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 associations is deciding which are the best places to meet women and offer them training and tuition. 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 associations. Some receive subsidies from the state and from local authorities, others rely on voluntary workers and charitable associations. Many 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 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.

### **Onto the stage**

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 women's associations is particularly remarkable in relation to immigrant communities.

The daily timetable of a women immigrant with several children, who takes 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 the "ruses" employed to prevent 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 of immigrant women "confined" to the home and incapable of taking initiatives or making decisions.

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. For example, Tjida Tazdaït, born in a French suburb and a leading figure in an immigrant association, was a member, representing the Green Party, in the last term of the European

Parliament. The arrival on the international stage of a second generation immigrant woman is symbolic of the political progress such women can make if they take advantage of the openings offered by the system.

A Chinese proverb says that 'women are the other half of the sky'. 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.

## DESCRIPTIONS OF IMMIGRANT WOMENS PROJECTS

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### 1. PROGETTO DONNA: HEALTH CARE PROJECT AND INFORMATION CAMPAIGN ON CONTRACEPTIVE METHODS

Lia Bandera and Marta Castiglioni, 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 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.

## 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, contraception and ailments related to the menstrual cycle.

Other problems are respiratory, digestive and osteo-muscular, 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.

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 called 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.

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

Zineb Dauodi, 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.

#### *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).

#### *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**

#### *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.

#### *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.

#### *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.

### *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.



— *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.

### 3. LES NANAS BEURS

Souad Benani, 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.

Nanas Beurs has, since it was set up on 3 July 1985, achieved much 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.

#### – *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.

— *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.

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 French women 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.

– *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 to share experiences. 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 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.



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