



Integration of Female Migrant Domestic Workers: Strategies for Employment and Civic Participation

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Study Visit in Cyprus 16-19 April 2007 Report prepared by the INTI Team

The third study visit, organised within the framework of the project “Integration of Female Migrant Domestic Workers”, took place in Cyprus on 16-19 April 2007. A number of meetings with key governmental officials and civil society representatives were organised and helped the INTI project team to gain insight on the situation of female migrant domestic workers in Cyprus. The study visit was also used by the team members as an opportunity to discuss the progress of the project, examine administrative issues, and examine comparative viewpoints of the different situations of female migrant domestic workers in each of the five European partner countries.

Over the course of visit the participants met with representatives of:

- House of Representatives [Human Rights Committee]
<http://www.parliament.cy/parliamentENG/index.htm>
- Dr Lazaros Savvides Permanent Secretary [Ministry of Interior]
<http://moi.gov.cy/images/Leafletenglish.pdf>
- Mr Lefcos Vassiliou, Social Welfare Department
http://www.mlsi.gov.cy/mlsi/sws/sws.nsf/dmlindex_en/dmlindex_en?OpenDocument
- Ms Stalo Savvouli Domestic Workers Employers Association
- Mr Doros Polycarpou, Director, Action for Support Equality and Antiracism- KISA
<http://www.kisa.org.cy/EN/index.html>
- Ms Malkanthi Papagerourgiou [Chairperson], Sri- Lancan Community Association, Cyprus
- Ms Merly Millard, [Chairperson], The National Filipino Association, Cyprus.
- Ms Eleni Kalava, Director of Labour Office,
http://www.mlsi.gov.cy/mlsi/dl/dl.nsf/dmlindex_en/dmlindex_en
- Ms. Maro Varnavidou [Secretary-General and Administrative Officer], National Machinery for Women's Rights, Ministry of Justice and Public Order
http://www.mjpo.gov.cy/mjpo/mjpo.nsf/dmlwoman_en/dmlwoman_en?OpenDocument
- Ms. Elisa Savvidou [Administrative Officer] & Ms. Nasia Dionisiou [Officer], Commissioner for Administration [Ombudsman's Office],
http://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/Ombudsman/Ombudsman.nsf/index_en/index_en?OpenDocument
- Mr Christos Pazis & Ms Marina Stavrinou, Pancyprian Federation of Labour [PEO],
<http://www.peo.org.cy/english/>

One of the most important observations made by the participants during the study visit in Cyprus is that, similarly to other member states, migration policies are not gender sensitive and do not include any gender specific policies. This means that the specific needs of female migrant workers in general cannot be met leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation and to double or even triple discrimination because of their gender, their status as migrants, and in the case of domestic workers, their employment status.

The organisations we visited included governmental departments, trade unions, NGOs. This gave to the team the opportunity to understand the current situation of female migrant domestic workers in Cyprus, to be informed about the policies and regulations that currently exist related to female migrant domestic workers, and to analyze and compare migration policies among the partner countries.

Similarly to the previous study visits, the meetings and discussions with migrant women themselves, facilitated by the National Filipino Association and the Sri-Lankan Community Association, proved very valuable to the participants. The representatives of these organizations both gave the team a detailed account of the current situation of female migrant domestic workers which included their personal experiences.

Although female migrant domestic workers are one of the largest migrant groups in Cyprus, reaching 25,000 in 2006, they remain “invisible”. Female migrant domestic workers are “visible” in the sense that they are seen in the streets walking their employers dogs, or washing their employers’ cars, as well as during their days off where they gather together in specific places. However, they are “invisible” when discussing issues affecting Cypriot society such as poverty, unemployment, social inclusion, as well as their legal status and their future in Cyprus.

Female migrant domestic workers enter the Republic of Cyprus under the specific status of ‘domestic worker’ and are required to work for a specific employer whose application has been approved by the Civil Register and Migration Department of the Ministry of Interior. Their term of employment is a maximum of 4 years. Interestingly, when an application to employ a third country national is made, it is accompanied by an employment contract stamped by the Labour Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance. However, this requirement is waived in the case of domestic workers, which leads us to question whether this migrant group is officially recognized as part of the Cyprus labour force. To clarify, third country nationals are employed in Cyprus only in cases where an employer or a specific labour sector cannot cover his/ her needs with national/ EU labour force, or with asylum seekers already residing in the Republic. However, it is not clear whether this procedure is followed in the case of domestic workers.

In Cyprus, in contrast to other countries, the majority of female migrant domestic workers, live in their employers’ homes and have an employment contract with their employers. This employment contract is a standard contract prepared by the Civil Registry and Migration Department of the Ministry of Interior in consultation with the Ministry of Labour. One of the conclusions drawn during the study visit is that these contracts of employment effectively create a relationship of dependency between employer and employee, making domestic workers more vulnerable to exploitation. The employment contracts also violate a number of domestic workers’ rights, such their right to become members of trade unions. Further, the contract of employment provides that female migrant domestic workers will receive the salary of 150 CYP [260 EURO], a salary which was set about 20 years ago and in no way reflects the current cost of living in Cyprus. The majority of employers continue to pay this amount, without accounting the annual increase of 5% provided in the contract.

The contracts of employment were one of the major discussions the team had with all relevant stakeholders. The improvement of these contracts was considered of primary importance to the team. However, one of the main concerns was that calling for the improvement of the contracts doesn't necessarily mean improvement of the working conditions of female migrant domestic workers. Discussions on employment strategies should start on a political level following a holistic approach and aimed at eliminating the relationship of dependency between employer and domestic worker as well as of implementing strategies for the reconciliation family and professional life.

One of the main conclusions drawn by the project team is that the employment sector of domestic work is, in fact, gendered as it is limited to the private sphere of the household and the minimal wages traditionally received by women. A commonality identified in Cyprus, Germany and Greece is the reason for demand for domestic workers as a pull factor.¹ That is that although women in Cyprus have entered the labour force, there is a lack of policies in relation to the reconciliation of family and professional life. This, in combination with the absence of the role of men in such discussions, as well as lack of a welfare services, female migrant domestic workers have replaced unpaid informal work in the household, reinforcing traditional gender roles in Cyprus.

The Pancyprrian Federation of Cyprus [PEO], a trade union, explained to the team that female migrant domestic workers in Cyprus are the most difficult group to reach and inform about their rights. They explained that the nature of their work, that is living and working in the house of the employer, does not allow the state or trade unions to monitor the employment conditions and working hours, because they don't have access to the private sphere.

On the other hand one of the most interesting meetings we had was with the Domestic Workers Employers Association who claimed that the employers are also vulnerable, as in many instances, domestic workers abandon their employer's house without notice. The representative of the association argued that this leaves families in a precarious situation, particularly when they have young children or other family dependents. According to the Association this occurs often, and can partly be blamed on networks created by lawyers, and in many instances other migrants, that aim to exploit domestic workers with promises of better employment elsewhere

Another major observation by the team which is linked to the current employment problems mentioned earlier, is the temporary character attributed by authorities to migration. After discussions with the above mentioned authorities with reference to the National Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2006, it is clear that migrants in Cyprus are considered temporary workers that cover the labour sectors currently not being covered by Cypriots or EU citizens. Also, the fact that integration policies related to migrants in general and migrant women in particular in the National Report, leads us to the conclusion that indeed the Cyprus government considers migration a temporary phenomenon.

In contrast to other countries visited, female migrant domestic workers were the main subject for discussion during the study visit, while in Greece and Germany they were not until the participants posed the necessary questions. Of course, this does not mean that the government recognises the integration problems faced by migrant domestic workers, but simply that domestic workers are a specific category of migrant worker that is in

¹ Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies http://www.medinstgenderstudies.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/study-visit-greece_for-web_final1.pdf & http://www.medinstgenderstudies.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/studyvisit_report-germany_final.pdf

Cyprus in relatively high numbers. This however, can be considered another major reason for the government not to exclude female migrant domestic workers from the labour market and from society in general.

In conclusion, following the third study visit of the project, the team is now in a better position to use the information obtained in relation to female migrant domestic workers and use it as a comparative tool to discuss and analyse commonalities and differences on the issues of integration of female migrant domestic workers aiming to develop specific policies and strategies for their employment and civic participation.

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