

## European Conference

### **Young Migrant Women in Secondary Education: Promoting Integration and Mutual Understanding through Dialogue and Exchange**

**15 June 2011**

#### **Background**

The conference on ‘Young Migrant Women in Secondary Education: Promoting Integration and Mutual Understanding through Dialogue and Exchange’ was held on June 16, 2011 at the Newton Amphitheatre in the premises of the University of Nicosia.

The conference was organized within the framework of the project also entitled [‘Young Migrant Women in Secondary Education: Promoting integration and mutual understanding through dialogue and exchange’](#), funded by the European Commission Fund for the Integration of Third-country Nationals. Partners to the project included the Centre of Research in Theories and Practices that Overcome Inequalities (CREA), University of Barcelona (Spain); the Centre for Rights, Equalities and Social Justice (CRESJ) at the Institute of Education, University of London (UK); the Department of Sociology, Panteion University (Greece); and the Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research (EMCER), University of Malta (Malta). The conference launched the research reports produced by all five partners and marked the completion of the project which had duration of 18 months.

#### **Conference**

The conference was a collaborative meeting of all the partners to the project who presented and discussed the results of the research conducted during the project with a wider audience. Over 50 participants attended the meeting, including representatives of local NGOs, the UN Offices in Cyprus, governmental representatives, media persons, as well as academics, students and members of the public. The programme included introductory speeches, two key-note speeches, and two panel presentations followed by discussions.

The conference was opened by Ms. Josie Christodoulou, Policy Coordinator at the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies. In her introductory remarks, Ms. Christodoulou expressed the Institute’s gratitude to all the project partners and acknowledged the still somewhat ‘problematic’ position of gender-related research.

The introductory address was followed by two opening speeches by Ms. Loukia Hadjimichael, representative of the Ministry of Education and Culture, and Mr. Kypros Filipou, Representative of MP Nicos Tornarites. Both congratulated the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies for its initiative in exploring and bringing to the surface the issue of integration, with special focus on young migrant women in secondary education, and MIGS work on gender issues and women’s rights more generally.

### ***Education, Ethnicity and Constructions of Femininity: Black and Minority Ethnic and Migrant Young Women's Struggle against Racism, Sexism and Classism***

The first session was opened by Gill Crozier, Professor of Education at the Centre for Educational Research in Equalities, Policy and Pedagogy, at the University of Roehampton. In her keynote address, Prof. Crozier gave an extensive historical overview of migration, outlining the major recent trends and the most problematic areas in relation to migration and gender. Her theoretical/empirical presentation encompassed the issues of integration, belonging, transformation and identity, all at the intersection with gender and the specific problems that gender analysis identifies. Prof. Crozier introduced her main arguments by drawing attention to the very definition of 'migrant' and 'migrant girl / woman', a definition often problematic in the present context of increasing movement of people across the globe. She questioned the notions of integration with emphasis on whether and when an immigrant stops being defined as an alien. That is, when she/he becomes a proper citizen, and what factors affect this definitional and perceptual change. She then continued by drawing attention to the relations between migrants and their host countries, stressing the importance of reciprocity in such relations. Prof. Crozier pointed out that the histories, and the accompanying narratives, of host countries play a particular role in these relations, where colonial pasts or new economic trends impact the processes of framing migrants. These narratives, she explained, are an amalgam of legislation, political rhetoric, media interpretation and inherent xenophobia. She then moved onto specific points of discrimination as experienced by migrant girls: the effects of Islamophobia, invisibility of minorities, essentialization of women, and gender mainstreaming – phenomena directly affecting their migrant experience. A characteristic example in the UK is the 'obsession with boys' underachievement' in gender and migration discourse that leaves 'girls' problems 'inadequately attended'. She also mentioned the results of her research with young Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Caribbean people in the UK, where she frequently observed a mismatch between the realities of migrant girls and the perceptions dominant in schools (mainly public) that framed girls as either passive / domesticated or mischievous. Prof. Crozier concluded that it was those misconceptions and the invisibility of real problems that were at the core of her research. In the end of her speech she also expressed the strong need for the continuation of collaborative work between the countries and the sharing of research results.

The first panel discussion consisted of three presentations by Emiritus Professor Heidi Mirza & Veena Meetoo, Research Officer, at the Centre for Rights, Equalities and Social Justice (CRESJ), Institute of Education, University of London; Zelia Gregoriou, Assistant Professor at the University of Cyprus & Georgina Christou, Project Coordinator with the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies; and Alexandra Halkias, Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Panteion University, Greece.

### ***Young, Female and Migrant: Gender, Class and Racial Identity in Multicultural Britain***

In their presentation Prof. Mirza and Ms. Meetoo spoke of their research conducted in two schools in the UK: 'Hazelville', a mixed-sex state comprehensive school (School 1), and 'Bushill', an all-girls state secondary school (School 2). They started off by emphasizing the importance of gendered research on migration and the problems encountered in such research. Using the intersectional methodology, where the frames of race, class, gender, patriarchy and religion were at the base of analysis, the research identified the following problems faced by young migrant women in secondary education: 1. *Bullying* and

*Victimization* based on class, gender, racialization and religion. The schools' response to bullying proved inadequate, often contributing to rather than preventing victimization by essentializing migrant-girls. 2. *Gendered surveillance*. Gendered-behavioural expectations, particularly in relation to Muslim girls, result in lack of support and, eventually, in regulating girls' behaviour, thus preventing them from achieving desirable educational standards. 3. *Mental Health Problems* of migrant-girls surfaced as correlated with gendered surveillance and bullying. The researchers concluded by providing a comprehensive list of recommendations that included ensuring clear procedures for dealing with specific incidents of bullying and victimization in schools, developing strong leadership programmes and securing funded support for learning mentors in schools.

### ***The Dubious Gift/Debt of Integration: Patriarchal Regimes, Ethnicity and Sexuality in the School Lives of Migrant Girls in Cyprus***

The presentation by Professor Zelia Gregoriou and Ms. Georgina Christou was next in line. Here the main findings of the research conducted in Cyprus were discussed. Professor Gregoriou's stressed her main point that simply "integration in the classroom is not culture; it is politics." She explained that within the EU legislative framework integration becomes a 'dubious gift' for many migrants. Common EU policies become translated on a national level into a set of requirements, albeit the notion that integration should be a process and not a sudden transformation. She continued by drawing critical conclusions on the interrelation of such problems with the politics of patriarchy, nationalism and other forms of exclusion in Cyprus. Finally, she warned that a new kind of citizen in Cyprus is being formed: a citizen that has given up on her rights or always fights for them, instead of having them as an implicit part of her citizenship.

Georgina Christou, in the second part of the presentation on Cyprus, gave an overview of empirical results from four Cypriot state schools: Similarly to the UK, the strong presence of cultural / racial stereotyping in schools results in bullying and victimization of young migrant girls. The gendered expectations of Eastern European women as promiscuous and 'free' vs. Muslim women as inactive and 'repressed' encountered in Cypriot schools reflects similar conceptions within the society at large. This leads to the continuous reproduction of stigmatization. Simultaneously, the notions of integration, particularly those of migrant students, are limited to 'language learning', with an assumption that once a student successfully passes the Greek language test, the process of integration is complete. Ms. Christou concluded her presentation by drawing attention to the structural problems of patriarchal norms that are prevalent in Cyprus and prevent the development of comprehensive integration policies.

### ***Girls of Migrant Background in Greece: Conflicting loyalties and troubling hierarchies***

The last panel presentation was delivered by Alexandra Halkias, Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Panteion University, Greece. In her report Prof. Halkias provided an extensive mapping of the existing system of public education in Greece. She commented on the strong monolithic character of Greek education and the heavy character of Greek Orthodox Male curricula. She highlighted the lack of specific policies addressing gender in education, as well as the lack of gender policies on integration. Similarly to Cyprus, integration in Greece is strongly related to the idea of learning the Greek language that leaves other vital areas related to integration unaddressed. Extensive use of private after-school courses leaves most migrants at a disadvantageous position vis a vis their Greek counterparts and creates a further division between migrants and non-migrants in the

classroom. The gendered division of labour in private households affects all female pupils in relation to their homework performance, but is particularly negative for migrant girls, who also need to live up to gendered/racial standards in schools. Prof. Halkias went on to emphasize the need for intercultural and gender mechanisms that target all (and not just multi-cultural): 1. Introduction of yearly school-wide anti-racist festivals. 2. Organization of gender-specific events and discussion groups in schools 3. Development of a comprehensive methodology to address instances of bullying and victimization 4. Development of a module on the multicultural character of Greek society from its present, but also historical perspective.

Throughout the discussion that followed the guests/participants asked a number questions concerning ways of bridging the gaps between policy and implementation, the role of parents in the integration processes of migrant children, the specificities of girls' experiences in relation to boys' experiences, as well as the role of migrant groups as a form of resistance and integration into the dominant host societies. It is important to note that the presenters had to also clarify why it was important to address the needs of young migrant women separately to the needs of young migrant men.

### ***Migration, Identities and Belonging: Issues of education and citizenship***

The second session was launched by the keynote speaker Professor Naz Rassool, Institute of Education, University of Reading. In her keynote address, Prof. Rassool focused firstly on the (re)production of inherent hegemonic consciousness, that also includes ideas of 'migration' and 'migrant', based on the notion of the nation-state and its definition: 1. Common people 2. Common language 3. Geographically defined territory 4. Political autonomy. With powerful video materials, she also reminded the audience of the key role media continues to play in the formation of stereotyping of migrants in the public mind. She then problematized the definition of *migrant* whose access to human rights are always mediated by citizenship. Prof. Rassool continued her speech by demonstrating how the discourse of the 'demonization' of migration always worsens during times of local, regional and international crisis, emphasizing the hazards that arise when addressing migration. She asserted that addressing the issues of migration, and migrant girls in particular, requires a multi-dimensional and active approach, where all parties, including school teachers, parents and migrants themselves, engage in critical dialogues towards practical solutions to integration. Prof. Rassool called for understanding segregation as, not only threatening to host-societies, but potentially severely hampering the development of effective policies of integration. She also brought forward the importance of civil society as well and of role models for the formation of young migrant girls' identities, and concluded her presentation with positive images of migrant women, affirming the ideas of powerful, engaged and publicly-praised individual migrant women.

The second panel of the conference was comprised of two presentations: by Simone Galea, Senior Lecturer, Philosophy of Education, Department of Education Studies, University of Malta and Professor Mimar Ramis, Centre of Research in Theories and Practices that Overcome Inequalities(CREA) - University of Barcelona, Spain.

### ***Young Migrant Women in the Making: Educational Experiences in Maltese Secondary Schools***

In her presentation of the results of the research conducted in Malta, Prof. Galea introduced the current legislative frames on integration in Malta, emphasizing the fact that, despite justice and fair treatment being the central notions in education, the current Maltese

policies are drawn on the ideas of assimilation rather than of actual integration. She commented that the policies of inclusion, which are central in relation to integration, are based on preceding policies for disabled students that clearly render migrants as having learning disabilities and reinforces the discourse of 'othering'. Prof. Galea stated that in view of the absence of clear integration policies, schools need to develop and adopt their own ethos and rationale of integration and fair treatment. She then provided the main findings from the research in two schools, both of which dichotomized discourses of either assimilation or of patronizing migrants. She questioned the idea of reconciliation between the notions of the European Identity and the Identity of the Migrant, that often clash with each other, and she also problematized the idea of integration as a 'two-way process' that often takes the form of cultural assimilation. Prof. Galea then continued to address the absence of the gender parameter in school curricula, which consequently has a negative impact on migrant girls. She also noted that suppressing social-group difference does not resolve the conflict between 'European' and 'immigrant' identities and that it would be much more effective to emphasize the positive sides and the importance of migrant cultures migrants and relate them to EU culture(s). Similarly to other presenters, Prof. Galea addressed the importance of giving voices and providing spaces for migrant women. She suggested creating effective gender clustering with other domains, where young migrant women would be able to engage and freely express themselves. Therefore, the question we should be addressing is how to address European identity as something constantly in flux, as always in a state of becoming different to itself.

#### ***Migrant Girls in Secondary Education in Spain: Fighting to Transform Difficulties into Possibilities***

The final presentation was delivered by Professor Mimar Ramis, who shared the results of the research carried out in Spain. Prof. Ramis gave an overview of the current migration and education policies in Spain, which, she argued, promote segregation and, in fact, prevent integration. This is exemplified by the drastic gap in the performance of migrant and non-migrant children in schools. Prof. Ramis stated that, according to the research, the present integration model adopted by Spain is not based on research that had been generated over decades but rather on internal political agendas. She argued as well that the policies of de-segregation adopted by Spain render invisible various migrant groups, girls in particular, leaving their needs and problems undressed. Despite evidence that similar policies have failed in other countries, the same policies are reproduced today in Spain, at the expense of other successful integration policies. Moreover, she said, the results of the research reveal similar problems experienced by migrant girls as identified in other countries: Pathologizing and essentializing young women (Muslim girls in particular), gendered expectations of low performance in school and double efforts required to achieve desirable standards. Like other presenters, Ms. Ramis also emphasized the importance of support from all parties: mentoring / teaching support, family, and peers. She also noted that the role models and positive spaces for networking among young migrant girls are essential for the successful integration of migrant girls. Ms. Ramis concluded by stating that active participation of parents in decision-making processes in schools plays out as a reciprocal reinforcement of both parents' and school's responsibilities with regards to integration of migrant girls and migrant students in general.

Finally, twenty minutes of discussion brought the conference to an end. The audience inquired about such problematic issues as European Identity, that is often used instrumentally to define 'otherness', the phenomenon of universalisation vs. particular cultural backgrounds, and the relation between academic discourse and politics. It was

emphasized that despite many conflicting areas where the EU discourse on migration and integration comes into conflict with various national contexts, it still remains very important to maintain the frame of reference that is based on universal principles pertaining to all. The final remarks addressed the importance of civil society as well as the need for strong cooperation between academic research and NGOs.



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