

Roundtable Discussion
“Young Migrant Women in Secondary Education”
University of Nicosia, 15 June 2011

The Roundtable Discussion, held at the University of Nicosia on June 15, 2011, preceded the final conference to the project “Young Migrant Women in Secondary Education: Promoting Integration and Mutual Understanding through Dialogue and Exchange”. The main objective of the roundtable discussion was to share research-generated knowledge, and ultimately, to identify and to exchange good practices among experts and policy-makers. The main questions addressed at the roundtable were: What are the root-causes of the problem faced by young migrant women? Is there a remedy for these root-causes? Who are the principal actors, including passive actors, and what is the normative framework we are to work in? Participants included the project partners from Greece, Malta, Spain and the UK, as well as Cypriot policy makers, teachers, and education practitioners.

The roundtable began with a discussion on the role of policy makers in relation to the integration of migrant girls in secondary school. During the discussion, it became apparent that most policy actors consider gender-related issues redundant and as “complementary” to the wider framework of the “real problems” of poverty, language deficit, and ethnic segregation faced by migrant students. The participants identified a number of issues in response to this phenomenon such as:

- *Effects of continuous pathologizing of Women, migrant women in particular, through religion and race;*
- *Dichotomic stereotyping of ‘good Muslims’ vs. ‘bad Muslims’;*
- *Techniques and processes of ‘othering’ used in schools and other public spaces, internalized by both students and teachers;*
- *Factors affecting the formation of Identities of migrant girls;*
- *The diversity of ‘femininities’ and their interaction with perceptions by host communities;*
- *Effects and causes of self- and imposed ethnic segregation experienced by migrants;*

- *Common problems faced by practitioners working on the issues of integration and the ways for overcoming these problems;*
- *The role of school-teachers, parents, peers and young migrant girls themselves, play in addressing the above problems.*

The discussion then shifted towards the question of identity, as a concept alterable and non-codified by religion or race, but rather by language and family heritage. In relation to this, the formation of self-segregated ethnic groups within host-communities was mutually accepted as a mechanism of defence. This matter was understood by all participants as a consequence of such interrelated factors such as the lack of permanency and fear of loss and deportation from the host-country, language segregation (particularly among first generation migrants), limited access to rights as well as preserving the feeling of belonging and resistance to cultural assimilation. The processes of self-imposed [and externally imposed] segregation were understood as directly affecting the formation of women's identities and as vital when dealing with the issues of integration.

The participants then moved the discussion towards the reproduction of stigmatising stereotypes in relation to young migrant women in secondary education, and the role played by schools and teachers, as well as that of trainers and other education practitioners. The participants agreed that, indeed, gender-related issues become invisible in the shadow of other issues such as class, poverty, and ethnic and racial problems. This calls for the need to train teachers and education practitioners with regards to the urgency and importance of gender in framing and implementing integration policies.

At the end of part one of the discussion, the workshop members also addressed various strategies that migrant girls adopt in order to deal with and resist to the problems they face in schools and other public spaces.

ROUND 2

The second session of the round-table addressed more specific issues identified through the research of each partner country. Among the extensively discussed topics were the following:

- Major Repercussions of gender and racial Stereotypes for migrant girls;
- Good practices in addressing gender stereotyping;
- Internalization and privatization of violence and its effects;
- Ways of “deconstructing” gender and racial knowledge of teachers;
- Structural problems and hierarchies of power within schools.

The findings, for example, of the Cypriot study conducted among migrant girls studying at 4 different Cypriot schools, demonstrated instances of direct and indirect discrimination, victimising and stereotyping. Once again, it was agreed by all participants that the racial and ethnic branding (acted out by both schoolmates and teachers) bears particularly negative effects for many girls, whom in many cases react with ways that are harmful for both their school performance and their personal development. Some of these harmful defence mechanisms adopted by girls who suffer discrimination were summarised as mental problems (see the UK example), depression, eating disorders, isolation, as well as loss of confidence and being bullied and low school performance.

Following the discussion of the specific negative effects experienced by migrant girls, the group addressed the best practices and ways of overcoming negative consequences of victimization. It was agreed that the most effective measures for challenging commonly accepted stereotypes as well as the overcoming are as follows:

- Creating spaces for dialogues, where migrant girls can share their experiences;
- Conducting Focus Groups and Workshops, where girls could network and keep contacts;
- Creating Forums where different migrant groups would be clustered, and where the common ground would not be the ethnicity, but rather common positive and negative experiences and issues;
- Awareness-raising among parents and school-teachers

The participants agreed that the position a school-teacher takes, as well as the whole 'ethos' of schools is of great importance when addressing the issues of identity-formation, multiculturalism and gender. In this respect gender-sensitizing of teachers and gender-mainstreaming in school policies should never be understood as 'luxury', but should be taken as a necessity pertinent to everyday realities of thousand of girls. It was also noted that it is crucial to take into consideration all other parties involved, including non-migrant students, parents as well as immigrants themselves.

The last but equally important issue addressed during the discussion was that of class and how gender-based practices are played out in different class settings. It was agreed that, similarly to race and ethnicity, class differences create specific types of discrimination when intersecting with gender. A poor migrant girl, lacking not only cultural but financial capital, will have to face a specific and sometimes double or triple gender apartheid, particularly in the contexts of mono-cultural communities.

The workshop was concluded by summarizing the main themes and questions addressed. It was maintained that many ideas and proposals discussed at the roundtable (training for teachers, dialogue and exchange etc), despite their potential, should be handled with care so as not to perpetuate the further victimization of migrant girls.



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