

Outlook opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘The situation of migrant women in the European Union’

(2007/C 305/10)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- emphasises that optimum integration of immigrant women and men is crucial, not least in view of their role in bringing up families, and therefore in the effective integration of the second and third generations of persons of foreign origin, given the role played by women in the development of society;
- emphasises that integration means sharing and respecting the fundamental rights and duties of the individual, which are part of the European legal *acquis*;
- highlights the key role played by public services, especially at local and regional level and their ability to create networks between services and with local communities, associations of migrant women and the voluntary sector;
- is concerned about the high level of school failure and drop-out rates among young girls of foreign origin, who are disadvantaged in their training and vocational choices, and are sometimes held back by their families, as well as by cultural prejudice and difficult economic circumstances; considers that ensuring equal opportunities for girls (and boys) from immigrant families requires parents to be made familiar with the educational system, thus enabling them to make well-informed choices on their children's and in particular daughters' education, taking into account their individual potential and aspirations and transcending gender stereotypes; and believes, furthermore, that initiatives to improve awareness and involvement among all stakeholders are needed to secure real equality of opportunities.

Rapporteur: Sonia MASINI (IT/PES); President of the Province of Reggio Emilia

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. **welcomes** the Commission's request for an outlook opinion, also with a view to the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All 2007 and the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008;

2. **reiterates** the need for a comprehensive European migration policy that provides for approaches coordinated between the Member States and local and regional communities, and coherent measures on legal migration, both in order to promote the integration of immigrants who comply with the laws of the host countries and to strengthen the fight against illegal immigration and irregularities;

3. **notes** that the Commission communication *A Common Agenda for Integration* recognises that any measures must include a gender perspective, as well as addressing the particular issues of young people and children;

4. **emphasises** that optimum integration of immigrant women and men is crucial, not least in view of their role in bringing up families, and therefore in ensuring the effective integration of the second and third generations of persons of foreign origin, given the role played by women in the development of society;

5. **points out** that its opinion on the *Policy plan on legal migration* drew attention to the concern of local and regional authorities about gender issues, noting the need to consider the discrimination which may be faced by women based on their gender, ethnic roots, geographical origin or other causes listed in Article 13 of the EC Treaty;

6. **notes** the need to guarantee effective legal protection against discrimination; to look at future measures for completing the current legislative framework; to incorporate the principles of non-discrimination and equal opportunities into Union policies; to promote innovation and good practice; to improve awareness-raising among the groups concerned as well as the host population and cooperation with them; and to tackle the discrimination and social exclusion faced by many ethnic minorities;

7. **recalls** that integration is a two-way process, involving both the host communities and migrant women, both as individuals and as members of their national communities and that awareness raising is necessary for both immigrant and host communities;

8. **emphasises** that integration means sharing and respecting the fundamental rights and duties of the individual, which are part of the European legal *acquis*, as recognised by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights, the common

constitutional traditions of the Member States, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

9. **notes** that, especially in the case of migrant women, conflicts may arise between different categories of individual rights and the right to cultural and religious identity, and **believes** that the latter should be safeguarded provided the practices deemed to express this identity do not violate fundamental inalienable rights and are consciously chosen by women rather than imposed by the family network or community to which they belong and/or the community of origin;

10. **observes** that local and regional authorities have acquired considerable experience in policies relating to reception, mediation, labour market access, welfare for migrant women, and combating different forms of exploitation and violence, which may be useful in drawing up new European strategies and programmes; and that involving associations of migrant women and other representatives of the relevant groups of migrant women in permanent dialogue with local and regional authorities, and representing such groups in the administration, is crucial to enable the development of effective strategies and programmes;

11. therefore **calls on** the Member States and the European Union, as recommended by the European Parliament, to support these efforts both financially and with human resources by exchanging information and good practice;

12. **particularly welcomes** the adoption of the framework programme on *Solidarity and management of migration flows*, especially provision for a *European Integration Fund*, whose measures must take account of gender issues and optimum integration of women of all ages, young people and children of migrants;

13. **confirms** the wish expressed in its opinion on the *Policy plan on legal migration*, that the *European Integration Fund* should be managed in such a way as to take account of the demands of local and regional authorities and that the latter should be actively and constructively involved in negotiations on national programmes and operational plans;

14. **highlights** the crucial contribution of organised groups of migrant women and NGOs;

15. **stresses** the importance of joint measures with the countries of origin to promote women's rights, and urges the Commission and the Member States to support measures organised by local and regional authorities in collaboration with those countries and their respective local and regional authorities in order to establish suitable indicators;

16. **points out** that gender-sensitive language use is very important;

Statistics

17. **points to** the lack of precise statistical data on immigration in the European Union, especially illegal immigration and the full circumstances regarding undeclared work;

18. **believes** it is vital that the data-gathering process should include non-binding gender variables and that indicators of gender inequality should be drawn up;

19. **highlights** the possibility of analyses based on data provided at regional and local level, which are essential for conducting decentralised policies and ensuring an effective approach to migration;

Social services and healthcare

20. **observes** that access to social services and healthcare are often a migrant's first point of contact with the public services and laws of the host society, and **believes** that it is essential to overcome the forms of discrimination that are actually emerging, in order to eliminate healthcare inequalities;

21. **underscores** the need for all migrants to be covered by the health checks and preventive actions carried out by the appropriate services; also **underlines** the need to devise and fund appropriate social and healthcare programmes, based on objective studies on specific health problems, to combat recurrent diseases in the migrant population;

22. **stresses** the need to step up appropriate information and health awareness-raising among people of foreign origin, in particular women, and **believes** it is important to design methods of enquiry that are more attuned to individual and cultural particularities, making use for instance of linguistic and cultural mediation and dialogue, not only with individual people and groups, but also with organisations; respect for cultural diversity must be underpinned by the basic right to healthcare and women's right of self-determination, especially with respect to health and sexuality;

23. **favours**, therefore, the introduction of targeted measures in relation to information provision, prevention, support and awareness-raising with the aim of combating any discriminatory and/or humiliating practice or tradition and of capitalising on effective, high-quality multidisciplinary and cross-cultural bridge-building/dialogue approaches to preventive and proactive mechanisms (e.g. linguistic or cultural mediation, childbirth preparation classes, social integration initiatives for migrant women and cross-cultural consultation schemes) in use in the various European countries and at local and regional level;

24. **highlights** the key role played here by public services, especially at local and regional level (in fields such as family advisory services) and their ability to create networks between services and with local communities, associations of migrant women and the voluntary sector, i.e. the third sector;

25. **believes** it is important to widen the use of good practice in the social and healthcare spheres, establishing a proper European register in which to classify different policies of excellence and good practice implemented in this area;

Education, youth and cultural policies

26. **notes** that the younger generation is the critical factor on which future integration depends, in part because of the crucial importance of mediation between the society in which a person is raised and their family of origin;

27. **restates** the need for specific and appropriate actions to enable immigrants to be fully integrated into the host educational system (in the first place, language-learning), particularly during the early part of their stay;

28. **highlights** the requirement for school curricula that reflect diversity;

29. **recalls** its views set out in its opinion on the *Policy plan on legal migration* concerning the high rate of school failure in many EU countries among young people of immigrant origin, and the proposal to establish specific financial and policy instruments to address these problems. It draws particular attention to the need to strive for all young people to be able to achieve their aspirations and potential, and **notes** that particular emphasis should be placed on the academic achievements of and educational opportunities for girls; close contacts between teachers and parents together with complete information on educational systems should ensure that girls' individual potential should be recognised and promoted in line with their wishes and needs;

30. **draws attention** to the special situation of migrant women of all ages, but particularly young girls of foreign origin, who are sometimes torn between the cultural identity passed on by their families and their attraction to the new identity promoted by the society they have grown up in, and **underlines** their need for specific attention, to enable them to become one of the real strengths underpinning the new Europe;

31. **is concerned** about the high level of school failure and drop-out rates among young girls of foreign origin, who are disadvantaged in their training and vocational choices, and are sometimes held back by their families, as well as by cultural prejudice and difficult economic circumstances; **considers** that ensuring equal opportunities for girls (and boys) from immigrant families requires parents to be made familiar with the educational system, thus enabling them to make well-informed choices on their children's and in particular daughters' education, taking into account their individual potential and aspirations and transcending gender stereotypes; and **believes**, furthermore, that initiatives to improve awareness and involvement among all stakeholders are needed to secure real equality of opportunities;

32. **supports** the call, made in the Parliament resolution on women's immigration, to promote young immigrants' access to the integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning (2007-2013);

33. **believes** that when framing youth policies, the measures developed must be inclusive of the cultural and gender diversity of young people of foreign origin, using their potential as a resource for intercultural mediation, and encouraging the establishment of dedicated forums for cross-cultural encounters and the development of a culture of women's associations;

34. **stresses** that communication, particularly through the media, plays a key role in the integration of migrant women and calls for the promotion of media-related initiatives to harness the potential in this area and make good the information deficit in both immigrant and host communities in order to overcome stereotypes and negative prejudice;

35. **reiterates** in this regard how worthwhile it is to find ways of cooperating with the media (by promoting voluntary codes of conduct for journalists), as highlighted in its own opinion on the Communication *A common agenda for integration*;

Economic integration

36. **restates** the need to promote migrant women's access to employment and vocational training, not least by means of positive measures aimed at combating discrimination and at removing the obstacles that effectively prevent equal opportunities from becoming a reality;

37. **highlights** the fact that migrant women are often employed in poorly paid, low-skilled temporary jobs, in hidden economic sectors or in illegal activities, and therefore **requests** the Commission to undertake a study to examine this issue and make recommendations on how best to deal with it;

38. **stresses** the importance of measures designed to recognise professional skills and educational qualifications or professional experience gained by women in their countries of origin;

39. **confirms** its support for the Commission's aim to draft a general framework directive on the rights of third country citizens legally employed in a Member State, and in this context to address the problem of the recognition of professional diplomas and qualifications;

40. **notes** that, in certain Member States in particular, immigrant women are widely employed in care assistant and home help positions and that this is changing European welfare conditions, and **calls on** the Commission to study the phenomenon and consider drawing up specific instruments;

41. **strongly underlines** the need to encourage women's independence and entrepreneurship in the economic field, both in their home countries and in the host countries, by means of specific measures, for instance by using micro credit;

42. **welcomes** the attention given in the second edition of the *Handbook on integration* to immigrant business support schemes, **believes** this type of scheme is essential so as to contribute to the real independence of women and **calls on** the Commission to support these initiatives, for instance professional and language training in the countries of origin;

43. **highlights** the particular difficulties faced by women immigrant workers with children and the consequent need for measures to facilitate a proper work-life balance, **stresses** the important initiatives that have been taken at regional and local level, not least in conjunction with women's associations and voluntary groups, and **urges** the Commission to support these initiatives;

44. **notes** that in many cases women's rights are undermined in practice by the serious problems they encounter in terms of transport and mobility, in part owing to the conditioning of their cultures of origin, and **calls on** the Commission and Member States to promote independence as regards transport (e.g. driving lessons);

45. **notes** that undeclared work often exploits women, and **supports** efforts to unearth and combat this phenomenon;

46. would **stress** the need to devise appropriate measures to combat illegal employment, treating the victims of these situations fairly, and **notes** the Commission's recent proposal for a directive designed to harmonise the sanctions against employers who either employ immigrants who are illegally resident or employ legally resident immigrants under illegal conditions;

47. in line with its opinion on the *Policy plan on legal migration*, **repeats** its call to the Commission and Member States to adopt measures to make it easier for migrants to send back their remittances and to encourage their use in productive investment schemes in their countries of origin;

Protection against forms of coercion and participation rights

48. **notes** that some immigrant women may be particularly vulnerable to forms of exploitation, the violation of their fundamental rights and physical and psychological coercion, and **agrees** with the European Parliament that such practices cannot be in any way justified or tolerated for any cultural or religious reason;

49. therefore **joins** the European Parliament in **calling on** the Member States to take immediate and effective action to address and combat all forms of violence against women, in accordance with national legislation and international and EU laws; and **considers** it vital to provide full information on such legislation in order to ensure that migrants are also aware of it;

50. **urges** the Commission to support these measures and the efforts made by regional and local authorities;

51. **notes** the particularly widespread nature of domestic violence and **calls on** the Commission to examine effective measures to prevent and combat it, and bring forward those measures as a matter of urgency so that they can be incorporated into EU legislation. Honour crimes are a specific type of domestic violence, and particular attention should be paid to them;

52. **stresses** that marriages (or de facto unions) between people of differing nationalities are a citizenship right and are potentially test benches for positive integration between differing cultures, sensibilities, religions and laws. At the same time, it **emphasises** that the protection of the fundamental rights of women and children should be ensured regardless of whether or not there are reciprocal legislative arrangements;

53. **observes** that reuniting families is an increasingly powerful and positive way of improving integration, and is essential for the protection of the right to a family life, and **agrees** with the European Parliament that Directive 2003/86/EC has yet to be applied in a satisfactory manner by all the Member States;

54. **highlights** the fact that in the course of family reunification, the individual rights of all the members of the family group must be respected, and free choice on the part of women must be guaranteed;

55. **condemns** forced marriages and practices that do not comply with European laws (e.g. infibulation, polygamy) and **calls upon** Member States to take immediate and appropriate action to ensure the laws that forbid these practices are implemented fully;

56. in line with its own opinion on the fight against illegal immigration, **reiterates** the recommendation to adopt, as a priority, all necessary measures to put an end to human trafficking, of which women are the main victims, and to eradicate the organisations responsible and all forms of slavery, including those involving children and adolescents, by adopting appropriate laws and specific action programmes and to recognise that even when some of those victims are illegal immigrants that they are seen to be special cases and that in some circumstances deportation may lead to extreme violence against them, or even death, if they are forced to return to their country of origin;

57. **supports** the European Parliament's invitation to Member States, in its resolution on *women's immigration*, to show special awareness in relation to the participation of migrant women in society and political life, in accordance with national legislation.

Brussels, 11 October 2007.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Michel DELEBARRE
