

# MIGRANT WOMEN AS CHAMPIONS OF LEARNING

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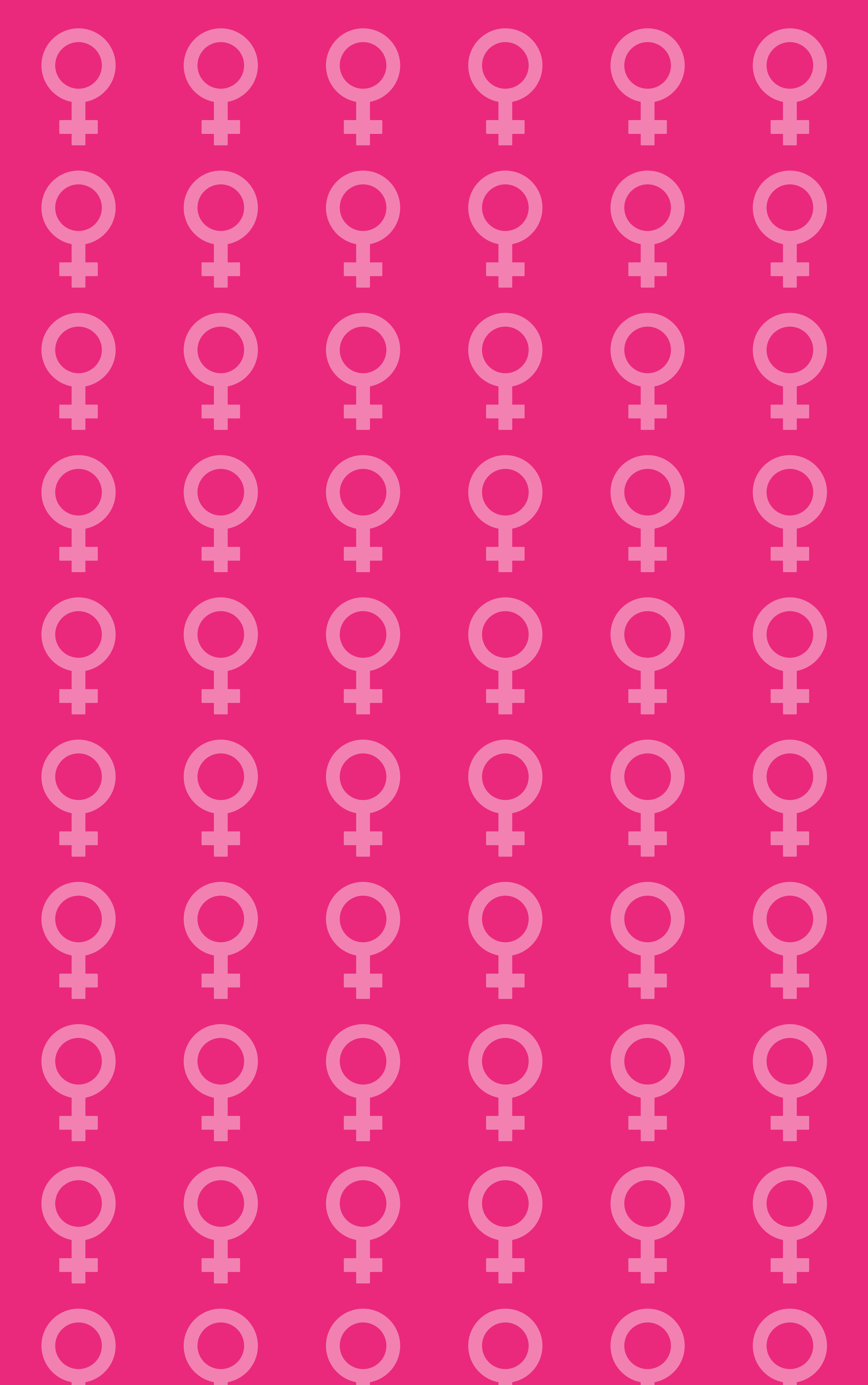
*Data collection on how women use their experiences and linguistic knowledge to help newcomers in diaspora communities adapt to the local culture and the new language*



**Women in diaspora communities  
as champions of learning  
to live together**



**Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union**



WIDHT project consortium

# MIGRANT WOMEN AS CHAMPIONS OF LEARNING

Data collection on how women use their experiences and linguistic knowledge to help newcomers in diaspora communities adapt to the local culture and the new language

A research report of



**Women in diaspora  
communities as champions of  
learning to live together**

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As a reaction to the existing challenges in inclusion of migrants in their new host countries, organizations from several European countries decided to come together to shed light on the contributions of migrant women to their diaspora communities, and to reflect on how their activities could be encouraged and further supported. The project WIDHT (Women In Diaspora communities as champions of learning to live Together) united organizations from Italy, Spain, Greece, Romania, Finland, and Belgium.

The project is rooted in several principles: **1) creation of networks; 2) outreach; 3) capacity-building; 4) learner-centred approach** and **5) gender dimension**. The five principles were derived from research on existing inclusion projects in the involved countries that were considered successful. Following the five principles, project partners established objectives of the initiative formulated in five intellectual outputs:

IO1: Data collection on how women use their experiences and linguistic knowledge to help new comers in diaspora community adapt to the local culture and the new language.

IO2: Design and implementation of toolkit for adult educators of disadvantaged people with A1-A2 and B1-B2 linguistic level.

IO3: Design and implementation of toolkit for adult educators of people of high profile.

IO4: Trial of toolkits in courses coordinated by adult educators in Greece, Italy, Spain.

IO6: Implementation of a local interactive map that will show people, institutions, resources etc. helpful for the socio-educational inclusion of migrants.

The current report reflects on the results of IO1, bringing forward best practices from successful EU-funded project, as well as the experiences of individual women, who themselves are “champions of learning” in their communities.

## Background

### Project countries

The organization from the countries that are participating in the project view migration and inclusion as one of the primary concerns of the society that needs to be addressed. Below is a brief explanation of the relevance of the project to them.

#### Italy

Being located on the Mediterranean Sea, Italy has become one of the main gates of entry for refugees and migrants from different countries. In 2014, more than 90000 refugees resided in Italy, according to UNHCR<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the political discourse around the growing migrant population has shown controversial tendencies, which escalates the need for comprehensive migrant policies in the country. Even though there is a number of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e996.html>

positive initiatives existing in the formal school education on the integration of migrant children, there is still a lack of strategies in non-formal adult education. Public opinion on the topic has also been divided between supporters and those, who see the migration process as an issue. Everything brought together points at the need of more effective programs of integration for migrants into Italian society. Currently, there is a lack of political awareness about the demands of adult education on the Italian scene. There have been numerous publications related to Upskilling Pathways initiative, as well as several comprehensive projects that aimed at awareness-raising and quality improvement of adult education provision in Italy, however, the national level strategy is yet to be developed.

In the WIDHT project, Italy is represented by Associazione CReA onlus (project coordinator), CE.S.MED. – Centro studi del mediterraneo societa cooperative, and CPIA7, who, among others, provide adult education opportunities for migrants and raise awareness of the contribution of migrants to their new societies.

## **Spain**

Spain, as one of the countries located on the Mediterranean Sea, has also faced inflows of migrants, however, unlike in case of Greece or Italy, the numbers of newcomers have been rather low due to the cooperation of the Spanish government with transit countries, such as Morocco and Mauritania. Nonetheless, provision of strong inclusive educational offers is on the agenda of adult education in Spain. The discussion evolves around literacy education of immigrant families.

Spain is represented in the project by Intered, a non-for profit organisation that advocates quality, inclusive, and transformative education for children, youth, and adults.

## **Greece**

Integration of immigrants, just as in case of Italy, is a hot topic in Greece. Located at the frontline of migration routes, Greece is expected to surpass the 90,000 mark of asylum seekers by the end of 2019 at current rates. At the same time, the country is still recovering from the financial crisis and is dealing with high unemployment rates<sup>2</sup>. In order to support the integration of migrant into the Greek society, there exist a number of educational opportunities, both for children and adults. Adults can seek help through second-chance education institutions, language courses, centres for lifelong learning, and online courses.

Greece is represented in the project by The Institute of Entrepreneurship Development is a research organization established in 2005, focused on the promotion of entrepreneurship for everyone.

## **Finland**

In the recent years, education for migrants has become an important topic for Finland. The government has invested in the integration courses for migrants, mainly focusing on literacy skills and language learning of Finnish and Swedish languages. Non-formal adult education providers have had a major role in organizing such courses.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/18866/refugee-migrant-numbers-rising-in-greece-this-year>

WIDHT's Finnish partner, Kansanvalistusseura (KVS), The Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation supports learning and builds a society of learners by offering expertise and services. KVS' activities include communication and publishing, education, media literacy and international cooperation.

At the European level, the partnership is represented by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA). EAEA is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 130 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.

## The transformative power of learning

Education brings positive changes to people's lives. Several studies have drawn parallels between the level and of education and the quality of life. International organisations, such as OECD and World Bank, highlight the importance of education for the wellbeing of humanity as a whole. The benefits that education brings range from personal satisfaction, mental and physical wellness of individuals to overall stronger social cohesion, more economic and political stability, and fairer societies. However, in the light of formal higher education still holding a rather elitist status <sup>3</sup>, non-formal adult education can play an important role in filling the gap between those with higher education and without it. Lowering the differences between the groups of people with varied levels of education can have a positive impact on the society as a whole, eliminating stereotypes, increasing social inclusion, equality, providing space for productive political dialogue.

There are several benefits to non-formal learning that have been highlighted in research and through good practices. Non-formal adult learning, understood as "all systematic communication and transfer of skill, knowledge, and competences provided outside the limits of the formal education system," its objective being "the promotion of social inclusion, active citizenship, personal development and wellbeing, alongside the transfer of knowledge, competences and skills" (EAEA, 2019).

First of all, learning in adult age is advantageous for individuals: educational activities highly influence the development of brain plasticity, a crucial for personal well-being process<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, participation in learning has shown a positive impact on people's well-being as they engage in healthier food habits and start leading more active life-style. In addition to health-related incentives, education is profitable for individuals to develop their skills and become more successful on the job market. Lifelong learning is a necessary skill in the face of changing world, advancing technology, and shifting opportunities on the job-market. Moreover, learning expands one's social network, securing their inclusion into society and, thus, sense of belonging and personal importance<sup>5</sup>.

Besides personal incentives, non-formal education can have a great impact on the society as a whole. PIAAC study identifies a correlation between trust and political efficacy with

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<sup>3</sup> <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/4-3-1-participation-rate-of-youth-and-adults-in-formal-and-non-formal-education-and-training-in-the-previous-12-months-by-sex/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/edu\\_today-2013-9-en.pdf?expires=1566831245&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=393DF4CA1B28C0EA1148C46328C2F344](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/edu_today-2013-9-en.pdf?expires=1566831245&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=393DF4CA1B28C0EA1148C46328C2F344)

<sup>5</sup> BeLL study <http://www.bell-project.eu/cms/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final-report1.pdf>



skills level of the population<sup>6</sup>. In short, the level of education is correspondent with the extent to which adults engage in political dialogue, community building and civic participation. A higher rate of participation can strengthen the principles of democracy in the society and nurture the culture of mutual dialogue between authorities and communities.

What is central to the principles of non-formal adult learning is the idea of agency: the ability to make informed choices about one's life and take an active role in a society. Learning allows adults to reflect on the world that surrounds them, to question it and ultimately to take action.<sup>7</sup> Yet while evidence shows the wide benefits of adult education and its power of transforming learners' lives and ultimately societies, the field has yet to be acknowledged on a wider scale.

## Non-formal adult education in Europe: a fragmented field

The term adult education is understood differently across the continent and may vary widely depending on the existing policies or adult education traditions. Therefore, the term can include formal adult education through state and privately owned institutions that is usually certified in a standardized form; vocational training; as well as informal and non-formal learning.

The extent to which non-formal adult education is recognized at the policy level differs from country to country. On the European level, the main aims of adult education are defined in the European Agenda for Adult Learning<sup>8</sup> and the ET2020 framework and are focused on promoting lifelong learning, improving overall quality and cohesion of adult education, encouraging equity, social inclusion, and civic participation.

In 2016 the European Council introduced a recommendation Upskilling Pathways<sup>9</sup> that tackles the issue of the alarmingly wide share of adults in Europe struggling with basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. Therefore, the challenges of adults at the risk of exclusion from society due to the lack of basic skills are now strongly present on the agenda of EU member states. One of the particular problems that several countries in Europe face is inclusion of migrants who experience difficulties in becoming fully included in society due to language and cultural barriers.

## Migrant women as learners and actors of change: an unexplored ground

Few studies address the topic of inclusion and empowerment of migrant women through adult learning; migrants or women as separate target groups for adult learning activities have received considerably more attention.

Participation of migrants in adult learning has been widely covered, especially following an increase in the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers across Europe after 2015. While

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>

<sup>7</sup> Mezirow, J. (1991). Transformative dimensions in adult learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>8</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011G1220%2801%29>

<sup>9</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC\\_2016\\_484\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC_2016_484_R_0001)

some countries have taken various steps to welcome newly-arrived migrants, be that through language courses or introductory programmes, others have proven openly hostile towards new communities. Even in those countries where systemic support is provided, it might be limited to those whose legal status is already settled; it might also focus on the newly arrived, ignoring the needs of migrants who do not fully participate in society even after several of moving to a new country.

In light of the above, WIDHT project partners focus their attention as migrant women, who are frequently in a position of a double disadvantage. The concept of “intersectionality” – understood as “relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations<sup>10</sup>” - while having been present in feminist literature for years, has yet to be commonly acknowledged on a wider scale. Gender analysis is also predominantly absent from policy discourse or research about migration.<sup>11</sup> As women earn consistently less than their male counterparts<sup>12</sup>, are expected to juggle both family and professional responsibilities, and lack adequate representation in decision-making positions, there is still a long way to go in terms of gender equality. Having a migrant background is likely to deteriorate women’s social and economic status even further, as language barriers or lack of knowledge about their rights can hinder their access to labour market, learning opportunities, childcare and a number of other services.

As concluded by the OED network<sup>13</sup>, participation of vulnerable groups in adult learning and ultimately in society requires a careful examination of existing barriers (including, but not limited to, those described above) and concrete steps to remove them. What OED project partners have found particularly successful was the concept of ‘learning ambassadors’: members of a community who serve as role models and encourage others to take up learning. Having the necessary language skills and cultural sensitivity, they can serve as a bridge between the ethnic and native communities.

The idea is far from new; to a certain extent, it corresponds to the concept of a “cultural broker”, coined as early as 1970s. The role of the cultural broker described as that of linking the “mainstream culture” and the “various sub-cultures”; this is why he or she must be “an expert manipulator of cultural symbols, information and people”, while also being a role model for those in the ethnic community<sup>14</sup>.”

Some countries have taken to the idea, recognizing the need for the support of migrants, such as interpreting or providing information about existing services. A profession of a ‘cultural mediator’, frequently carried out by representatives of migrant communities, is recognized in several countries, including Italy<sup>15</sup>, where three WIDHT project partners are based.

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<sup>10</sup> McCall, Leslie. 2005. “The Complexity of Intersectionality.” *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30 (31): 1771–802

<sup>11</sup> <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/2205/1/2205.pdf>

<sup>12</sup>

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid\\_development\\_cooperation\\_fundamental\\_rights/report-gender-pay-gap-eu-countries\\_october2018\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/report-gender-pay-gap-eu-countries_october2018_en_0.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.oed-network.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/guidelines-for-trainers\\_en.pdf](https://www.oed-network.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/guidelines-for-trainers_en.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Karen M. Gentemann and Tony L. Whitehead, *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Spring, 1983), pp. 118-129

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280384100\\_Cultural\\_Mediators\\_in\\_Italy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280384100_Cultural_Mediators_in_Italy)

While some literature on the specificity of cultural mediators exist (including results of European projects<sup>16</sup>), other forms support provided by migrants to their communities – frequently bottom-up and not remunerated – have been largely overlooked. This is why the present report brings forward data on the variety of grassroots approaches across Europe, showing the myriad of contributions that migrant women are already making to their communities and societies as “champions of learning”, and reflecting on how such approaches could be encouraged, to the benefit of everyone.

The perspective of the present report is two-fold: on the one hand, it analyses what is being done at the European level to include migrant women in society – most notably through EU-funded projects. On the other hand, it provides insight into how women themselves take action in their communities. This is why the present analysis is divided into two sections:

- 1) A description of successful projects that fostered inclusion of migrants and/or women
- 2) A series of interviews with migrant women who are “champions of learning” in their communities.

The report closes with recommendations on how the role of migrant women in their communities can be brought further.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.mediation-time.eu/images/TIME\\_O1\\_Research\\_Report\\_v.2016.pdf](http://www.mediation-time.eu/images/TIME_O1_Research_Report_v.2016.pdf)

## What is a successful project?

As the first step of the project, the partners conducted a research into what defines a successful project on social inclusion. The project partners were asked to identify and briefly describe three EU-funded projects implemented in their countries that have targeted migrants and/or women and that they deem innovative. In total, 15 projects were collected from four partnership countries (Italy, Finland, Greece and Spain). European Association for the Education of Adults, based in Belgium but representing the European level, contributed with the present analysis and background information, provided in the previous chapter. The projects were collected through a common questionnaire to ensure that the results are comparable.

All of the projects discussed by partners ended relatively recently (only one dates from before the 2010s; most of them were carried out in the mid-2010s or are still ongoing). This means that they are particularly reflective of the current realities faced by migrants, such as repercussions of the economic crisis that shook the continent in 2007; political and military conflicts that resulted in increased movement of people from outside Europe towards the European countries from 2015 onwards; increase in populism and anti-immigration discourse across Europe and beyond. The changing realities have also been recognized in the priorities of the Erasmus+ programme, which put more emphasis on social inclusion, and especially integration of migrants and promotion of common values. In 2014 Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) was established, following its predecessors Refugee fund, Integration fund, and Return fund. Its priorities are in alignment with the Erasmus+ programme and they target strengthening and developing the Common European Asylum System by ensuring that EU legislation in this field is efficiently and uniformly applied; supporting legal migration to EU States in line with the labour market needs and promoting the effective integration of non-EU nationals; enhancing fair and effective return strategies, which contribute to combating irregular migration, with an emphasis on sustainability and effectiveness of the return process; making sure that EU States which are most affected by migration and asylum flows can count on solidarity from other EU States.

Among the 15 projects described here, seven were implemented with the support of the Erasmus+ programme or its predecessor, the Lifelong Learning Programme; four were funded through AMIF. The remaining four were financed through other programmes but also with the support of the EU (e.g. ESF and the GROWTH programme).

While all of the projects clearly aimed at fostering social inclusion (in some cases targeting specifically migrant and refugee women, migrant mothers or caregivers; in others, broadened to migrants in general or socially disadvantaged groups that might include migrants or refugees), specific aims of the projects tend to focus either on the development of skills and competences of the target group or raising awareness among the host communities. In the case of the former, the projects explored a variety of skills and competences, ranging from entrepreneurial skills, language skills, soft skills, civic competences or different vocational skills, e.g. in agriculture.

In many instances, the different skills were approached in a holistic way: for example, in the framework of the Lingua e Cittadinanza di Prossimità project, implemented in Italy,

migrant women followed classes of Italian, which also included a strong cultural and societal component, exploring topics such as access to health services. Similarly, one of the projects submitted by the Finnish partner, Learning to Speak Democracy, explored the topic of democracy during Finnish language classes targeting young unaccompanied migrants and migrant mothers. Another example of the holistic approach to learning is the URBAGRI4WOMEN project implemented in Greece. While it focused on developing agricultural competences of participating women, the training course that had been developed also introduced topics such as “Living in the EU” or “Introduction to entrepreneurship”. A very interesting example was also submitted by the Spanish partner: while the “Bonds” project aimed primarily at developing soft skills of migrant children and mothers, the use of comic books as the basis of the training course also allowed the participants to explore different literacies and to enhance their own creativity.

Three projects selected by the partners focused predominantly on awareness-raising among the host community. The initiative “Nobel Prize for African Women”, carried out in Italy, highlighted the contributions of African women to societies as well as different sectors of the economy. The two other projects – Migrant Bodies and Migrant Tour (the former implemented in Italy, and the latter as a transnational partnership) took on the topic of cities as common spaces for diverse groups, emphasizing the long history of migration and allowing the native population to rediscover their cities from the perspectives of migrants.

Based on the good examples of social inclusion projects, the partners identified five criteria to define successful projects:

- 1) Successful projects are based on **effective partnership**. European partnership can increase innovation and exchange of ideas whereas national or local cooperation is supportive of outreach and awareness-raising.
- 2) **Outreach** plays an important role. Creative and diverse approaches need to be applied to involve target groups, such as connecting through places where they feel comfortable, making the content relevant, etc.
- 3) **Capacity-building** means train the trainer approach to strengthen the professional community and ensure innovativeness in adult educators’ work.
- 4) **Learner-centred approach** makes the learning content relevant and meaningful to participants, resulting in higher motivation to get engaged.
- 5) **Gender dimension** is specifically relevant to the current project. Research has consequently shown that migrant women face double disadvantages when it comes to integrating into new communities. On the one hand, they experience common for migrant challenges due to linguistic, cultural, and administrative barriers. On the other hand, migrant women take on the responsibility of taking care of their family and children, therefore becoming even more isolated due to household workload.

## Creation of networks

While all of the projects were implemented as a partnership of different organisations (at the local, national or transnational levels); six of them were specifically identified by partners as examples of effective and well-functioning networks.



Strengthened networking and cooperation at the regional level was the primary objective of a Finnish project, Together for the education guarantee. By studying the existing cooperation between education providers and local actors, the project identified gaps in the existing provision, such as inadequate recognition to migrants' learning difficulties. A common, regional counselling model improved access to information about learning opportunities in an attempt to fight against exclusion of young people from education. Another project, Lalera, set up a bilateral cooperation between two countries: Italy and Romania, aiming to support Romanian women in their future – or ongoing - work as caregivers in Italy. By broadcasting Italian language lessons on the radio not only in Italy but also in Romania, the project aimed to prepare a specific target group – Romanian women – for a specific job.

In two cases, new networks were established at the local level. The Finnish project Learn to speak democracy built a network between stakeholders coming from different fields: research, public authorities, non-formal organisations and volunteers. A similar approach was taken in Italy, where the Lingua e Cittadinanza di Prossimità project developed a partnership between local organisations, health services and an adult education centre specifically to reach out to a larger group of women.

It is also worth mentioning the on-going “You-Me” project which aims at setting up a network of entrepreneur migrants and their mentors. Additionally, migrants get access to a geo-localized map of organisations that could help them out in their professional endeavours.

An interesting cooperation was also established within the framework of the Migrant Tour project, which was carried out in five Italian and four European cities. Aiming to promote a new narrative on migrations, based on equal dignity of all citizens, regardless of their origins, the project involved a variety of actors in each city. Working with local authorities, social workers, teachers, civil society organisations and diaspora organisations to share information, tools and good practices enabled to reach diverse audiences.

## Outreach

While the majority of the projects addressed the topic of outreach implicitly, two submissions highlighted outreach as the key aspect of the project. Interestingly, in both cases (“Learn to speak democracy” and “Lingua e Cittadinanza di Prossimità”) outreach to the target group – migrant women – was successful thanks to the establishment of diverse cooperation, as discussed above. Working with other local partners – such as the municipality, local NGOs or health services – facilitated the contact with the migrant community. Also common to both projects was the conclusion that outreach activities need to be held at meeting places of migrant communities, and in places that they frequently attend and where they feel comfortable: parks, kindergartens, or libraries.

## Capacity-building

Among the submitted projects, five have a strong capacity-building or train-the-trainer element, thus supporting the sustainability of the results and increasing professionalization. The “You-Me” project, carried out in five countries, has developed trainings for migrants who are interested in starting their own business, as well as for

entrepreneurs who would like to become mentors and offer practical help to migrants, but might lack the necessary intercultural competences. The success of the mentoring programme is particularly important, as it allows migrants not only to learn more about entrepreneurship and get advice from more experienced colleagues, but also to start building their professional and social network.

An interesting approach to mentorship and peer-learning was also implemented by the URBAGRI4WOMEN project. Within the framework of the project, which aimed to increase migrant women's competences in urban agriculture, learners were encouraged to take up teaching themselves.

Some of the projects explicitly addressed educators working with migrants as a target group, thus aiming to strengthen professionalization of staff. Two of them: From home to home and society – counselling model to integrate immigrant women into society, implemented in Finland, and MOVE ON, carried out as a transnational partnership, focus specifically on counselling services for migrant women. Both include a train-the-trainer course on counselling migrant women; the latter also including a staff exchange to participate in a training on gender and culturally sensitive guidance services.

A transnational training to improve the competences of staff was also carried out within the framework of the WhomeN project. Focusing on recognition of soft and transversal skills among women at the risk of exclusion, the trainings have included workshops on topics such as individual support or group communication. They have also served as a basis for a curriculum that will target practitioners working with women from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Other projects, however, also frequently have a capacity-building aspect that is embedded in the activities, although to a lesser extent; usually in the form of training materials or teaching resources shared online and available free of charge.

## Gender dimension

While it could be argued that all of the ten projects singling out women as the main target group have a gender dimension, three of them seem to have taken gender issues as the primary focus, disproving gender stereotypes, highlighting inequalities or advocating gender-sensitive approaches.

Nobel Prize for African Women, implemented in Italy by Solidarietà e Cooperazione Cipsi, was a campaign that aimed to raise awareness of the myriad roles that African women play in their communities. Bringing examples of women's active role in politics, environment, childcare, as well as all sectors of the economy, the project demonstrated that far from being "the weaker sex", women are the backbone of the African continent. The campaign also shed light on persisting inequalities, such as the fact that in spite of realizing 70% of the agricultural production, African women are rarely land owners. A wide-reaching campaign with several events in and outside of Italy and with a petition for recognition of African women through an attribution of a Nobel Prize, the ambitious initiative was ultimately successful: after the campaign closed in 2011, two African women were awarded with the Nobel Prize.

A gendered perspective was also key in the implementation of two transnational projects: WhomeN and MOVE ON. While the former highlighted persisting inequalities on the labour market, and aiming at supporting women in recognition of skills, the latter developed a

gender-sensitive counselling model for migrants. The model included, for example, profile requirements of career advisors that would work with migrant women; a number of case studies were also collected, showing the diversity of practice and legal frameworks across Europe.

While other projects also target women, gender issues do not seem to be explicitly addressed, aside from some of the resources and materials included in the curricula that sometimes take a gendered perspective. In some cases, aiming at (migrant) women as a target group was reflected in outreach activities (e.g. meeting women as they drop off or pick up their children in kindergarten).

## Learner-centeredness

In addition to the four innovative elements discussed above, a closer look at the projects also reveals another factor that is a common denominator among many of them. Several projects have clearly developed a learner-centred approach, bringing forward personal experiences of the participants and taking them into account in shaping the activities.

The personalized approach is present for example in the “Migrant Bodies” project. One of the primary ideas behind the project was the concept of inclusive dance practices; being part of a collective experience, shared by migrants and native population. During the dance classes, the trainer made sure that migrants’ cultural and artistic background was taken into account; movements from traditional dances known by migrants were incorporated into the dance. Another important personal dimension of the project was included through city walks; bringing together local residents of different origins, the city walks aimed to help everyone re-discover their city in all its diversity. Stories of migrants were also collected to become part of an audio-visual installation, raising awareness of the diversity of backgrounds across Europe, and highlighting the individual voice behind each experience.

The value of personal experience was also a key aspect of the “Bonds” project, which aimed to improve soft skills of migrant women and children through Collaborative Comics Storytelling. The method aims specifically at providing women with opportunities for voicing their emotions about the experience of migration, such as hope, frustration or fear. Comics become a creative tool to open a conversation between the participants, but also to reflect on why it is important to tell your own story.

A more personalized approach was also adopted within the framework of the “You-Me” project, thanks to the implementation of a mentorship programme between aspiring migrant entrepreneurs and established business-owners.

## Interviews with migrant women who are “champions of learning”

Part of the present report also intends to explore how migrant women use their skills and develop networks to become “champions of learning”. To get better insight into individual experiences, women’s motivation and the impact of their work, the project partners conducted interviews with women who are particularly active in their communities. To ensure that the answers are comparable, the partners were encouraged – but not obliged – to follow the same set of questions. The questions were organised around their initial experiences in the country, their motivation to get involved, their activities and the impact of the activities on the community and on themselves. The present report is based on transcripts of the interviews translated into English (and attached as annexes).

Each partner country contributed with a sample of five interviews (except for Italy where eight interviews were conducted), bringing a total of 23 interviews. The interviews were anonymous; the women were however asked to share some personal information such as their country of origin, their mother tongue and age.

While the sample might seem relatively small, it is however representative of the diversity in European countries. Among 23 interviews, 16 different countries of origin were represented, ranging from EU countries (Romania and Bulgaria) and non-EU countries in Europe (Albania, Armenia, Ukraine and Russia) to various African countries (Morocco, Gambia, Nigeria and Senegal) as well as South America (Brazil and Peru) and Asia (Iran and India). The ages of the interviewed women vary – from 22 to 56 (although a few women chose not to disclose it); as does the length of stay in the country, from one year to up to 32 years.

### Initial experiences

The circumstances upon which the women arrived in their new country as well differ greatly. A few emigrated together with their parents, as children or teenagers, a vast majority however left their countries of origin as adults, usually to look for better life opportunities. Three clearly underwent traumatic experiences prior to arrival (such as being detained in prison, having vivid memories of a war, witnessing imprisonment and death of an important family member along with being politically persecuted).

When asked about their initial experiences in the new country and the major difficulties they faced, almost all of the interviewed women singled out language problems. Several of them expanded on it, adding that this hindered “access to public services, training and other facilities”; one woman, who had emigrated together with her parents as a child, reflected on her past inability to understand the language and talk to her classmates, describing it as “traumatic”. In Finland, all four women identified having difficulties finding language courses. Particularly, all women pointed out that the help from TE offices, Public employment and business service, was not sufficient and time-mannered for them to learn the Finnish language, which resulted in them staying at home for some time and being excluded from work opportunities. Only in four cases language issues did not come up, in some situations because a person learned the language before moving and in others

because women shared the spoken language of their host country (for example in the case of Latin American migrants in Spain).

Another recurring theme in the answers concerns difficulties in finding gainful employment. Six of the women indicated that they initially struggled – or are still struggling – with different problems in entering the labour market, such as recognition of their diplomas. One of the women noted the unequal pay between migrants and locals; another voiced her concern over stereotyping (“Everyone thinks that migrants can only work in care homes; they don’t want us to have other jobs”). A few also mention bureaucratic or administrative issues. Again, also when describing these difficulties women frequently mentioned a language barrier.

Even in the unlikely case that the interviewed women spoke the language in their host country, their initial experiences did not necessarily turn out to be easy. One woman, who emigrated from Bulgaria to Greece having already learnt the language, felt she was being discriminated against and that a lot of people held prejudices against Bulgarian women. The issue of discrimination emerges several times throughout the interviews. Seven of the interviewed women say they have experienced discrimination; two of them specify it was because of their skin colour. One says she has been abused verbally by “people with far-right ideas”; others mention discriminatory events when looking for a job. Two women mentioned that both the public and the authorities hold stereotypes and prejudices of people from different cultural contexts not considering them part of the society.

When asked whether they felt that any of the initial difficulties were different for women and men, most women said that they did not think so. One woman felt that the difficulties are different but equally important for men and women; another woman believed that women tend to be “more considered in society”. Four took a rather opposite view, saying that it is more difficult for women to obtain a job, reasons for which can be both external and internal, but eventually based on gender stereotypes and division of gender roles: “Women are treated differently in comparison to men”; “For men it was easier to find work and even the issue of roles. Men do not know how they do it but they get it easy”, “Traditionally, men find it easier to create networks because they have better self-awareness than women.”; “women take care of children”; “mother must remain at home”.

Several women also mentioned what one of them described as a “sense of disorientation” and the emotional distress they experienced. One of the women described herself as “scared and (...) trapped in a totally unknown place”. Another one, recalling the problems her children had at school, admitted that “sometimes I cried at night”.

When talking about migration it is important to consider the opportunities for integration where the local community plays an essential role. In the interviews the question of community and diaspora help was also discussed with the women and the responses varied depending on the place of migration and the diaspora new-comers were relying on. Among the difficulties to access help and services through local community and diaspora were mentioned such aspects as not being acquainted to anyone as a foreigner, weak links within the diaspora (in case of the Ukrainian diaspora in Italy), not having enough time to connect with the community due to a busy work schedule or due to the lifestyle of a stay-at-home mother. Diaspora community as a point of reference was mentioned more frequently than local community, and in many cases family members and friends were mentioned as communities that were more supportive and helpful than official services.



The main issues that women were seeking help with were language learning, practicalities of living in a new country, e.g. legal issues, customs and traditions, as well as how to deal with discrimination. One of the women also mentioned that today getting acquainted with new traditions and learning about the lifestyle is made easier with the help of online social networks.

## Building connections and becoming active

Connections with the local community opened up learning opportunities for many of the interviewed women and the other way around, learning helped them build networks and find community for connection. Most of the women first participated in language courses, which later on led them to taking up other learning opportunities. Among non-formal and formal training that women participated in were vocational courses (working with children for two women in Finland), professional and personal development courses (apprenticeship and work skills in Finland, cultural mediation courses in Italy), recreational courses, e.g. cooking, music, dancing, and even courses on managing household chores. Interestingly, four women described personal relationships with others as important sources of knowledge, referring to their neighbours, co-workers, and friends as people who helped them learn about the new country and who provided them with supports and sense of belonging. One woman mentioned technology as a learning source, referring to television and music.

All the interviewed women identified that their network has grown significantly since their arrival to the host country. The network the women described are not limited to a specific national group; in fact, many of them mention that they are now part of international communities along with having several local connections. Only one woman from Finland stated that making friends with locals still appeared a challenge for her. The most commonly mentioned factor that contributed to the integration of women was the ability to communicate in the local language, however activism also played an important role for some of them. Online social networks were mentioned as facilitators.

Being involved in the local community is something that all the interviewees identified as part of their regular routine. The activities that they take part in are closely connected to helping migrants get acquainted with the culture and lifestyle of the host country, with practical aspects of living in a new environment, such as finding a job, dealing with medical services, processing of documentation, etc. Most of the participants from Italy are now involved in cultural mediation. Several women also mentioned being involved in activism, e.g. fighting for human rights, women's rights, animal protection, collecting clothes for charity, promoting the recognition of foreign qualifications, providing help in refugee camps, being a volunteer in local NGOs, and so on. Some of the interviewed participants mentioned cultural activities that they take part in or organize: three women established informal and cultural clubs in their communities; one woman plays in a band and writes songs for her community; another teaches African dance to children.

Most of the interviewed women identified that they do not limit themselves in the scope of their outreach in the community, but rather tend to provide help and support to various groups of people, independent of their nationality, gender or age. However, seven participants specified that they primarily target women in their activities.

The point at which the women became active in their community differs from situation to situation. Four women mentioned that they have always been active, three of whom particularly specify being involved in human rights activism and volunteer work in their own countries. For the majority of the interviewed women, however, gaining awareness of the need to be engaged in the community came after their arrival to the host country. For many, being engaged with learning and integration courses meant later becoming an active person within their community. In particular, interviewees from Italy mentioned the cultural mediators' course, participants from Finland marked Integration training organised by WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) and Naapuriäiti training hosted by Nicehearts society.

For others the idea of taking an active part in their community came through getting acquainted with other activists or getting involved with local NGOs and associations. One woman mentions that after she engaged with associations that were helping migrants in her community, she decided to organize activities to "unite our diaspora". Another woman wanted to feel equal and as heard as other local activists, and joining animal protection activism movement helped her feel more liberated. "Here the only activism being payed is the white activism. If you are a black woman or you are from other culture it is not so easy and we are not being considered for that"; "In animal activism was when I began to see myself differently to feel equal with other citizens in the city. That was the process of my awareness." For others community engagement meant doing a good deed and being useful. Similarly, some women mentioned that helping others is an essential part of their daily life as migrants, as "When we are together there is no difference in colour, we seek a path together for all"; "I do not care if it is my community or another community. I do not see it like that. It is not about what is mine". One woman stated that being active is an inevitable part of moving to a different country and looking for opportunities to become a functional member of society: "I turned active since I arrived because I have economic problems so I need to be active for me and for others."

## Personal and societal benefits

Essentially, all the interviewed women mentioned some personal benefits that they gained from participating in the community and providing help and support to others. Among the mentioned were happiness and satisfaction, sense of fulfilment, confidence, value of uniqueness and dignity, increased motivation, changes in the attitudes to others and a shift to becoming more open and accepting, feeling complete and less stressed, more responsible and independent in their choices, empowered to stand up for themselves and their community.

In most cases women did not draw particular correlations between their health and the role they play in their communities, however, six of them pointed out positive mental states, such as feeling relaxed or feeling good; being mentally well and coping with stress in a healthy way: "I didn't feel well at home and now I have taken decisions on my life"; "I developed in difficult situations calmly and fairly well". Two women admitted they are experiencing challenges, feeling stressed and overwhelmed, and one said her physical wellness deteriorated over the years: "I assimilated the person's anxieties and often I cried once at home, as an outlet"; "I feel stressed and I'm struggling with it, but physically I'm

stronger". Some women also mentioned the importance of interpersonal relationships that they gained through their activities.

Engaging with the community also had positive practical impact on women's lives. A lot of them stated that they gained different important skills that later on helped them with their job, e.g. language skills, public speaking skills, being a team-player, etc. For one of the women the outcomes were also connected to financial stability and earning more money. Participation in the community also helped those women increase their motivation to engage in learning. Only one of the interviewees said that her attitude to learning did not change, which does not necessarily imply the person is not willing to learn.

In terms of the impact on others, some women interestingly identified themselves as important links in the community: "I see myself as a bridge"; "Within my community I am a point of reference..."; "I am like a person with a position of trust"; "Yes, [...] but I am a point of reference for many in my community". Several women mentioned that they are role-models for other women in their community and they try to represent a positive example of being an active migrant woman, and support others in claiming their rights: "When immigrant women see some of us ask about our rights, they realize, they feel an awareness and they are empowered themselves." Besides helping newcomers with legal and formal questions, the interview participants mentioned helping them "find their identity" and "discover their passion".

## Conclusions

Overall, looking at the interviews, it is possible to draw a conclusion that there are two factors that contribute to a person's integration into the new context: being engaged in the local community and connected with other people and learning and training. The very first difficulties that local communities and diasporas can be a help with are overcoming the language barrier and settling down (dealing with legal issues). Further on, learning plays a crucial role for a person to find a job and become more integrated. The communities can have an assistant role in helping a person with employment, e.g. some local organizations offer training courses. In general, throughout years most women felt more involved and comfortable in their new communities, as their networks grew and strengthened. Their skills and knowledge have expanded: participants identified being more confident and self-aware, empowered and willing to explore new possibilities.

The participants faced some difficulties in obtaining help: not all were satisfied with the integration services (especially in Finland) claiming they were not timely or adequate. For some of them the challenges were related to their personal family situations, such as being a single parent or having duties at home. Some participants noted being confronted with prejudiced and stereotypical opinion and behaviour of the public, in some cases going through verbal abuse and discrimination.

The interviews show both correlations and varieties in the experiences of immigrant women in different European countries. Nonetheless, the interviews identify that in any case there is a room for improvement for the way the local communities work with migrants and integrate them in society. The most impacting observed shortcoming is insufficient integration services that can derive from language barriers, cultural stereotypes and assumptions. On the other hand, what interviewed women found particularly helpful was getting to know someone from their country of origin or someone who speaks their native language, as well as having informal meetings that help them meet people and build their network.

## Recommendations

### **1. It's not women's problem – it's society's problem**

Migrant women experience double discrimination: they are migrants, and they are women – both being marginalised, albeit not in terms of the size of these “groups”, but in terms of social categories. Many women feel that it is more difficult for them to have an active role in their communities or obtain a job, reasons for which can be both external and internal, but eventually based on gender stereotypes and division of gender roles that exist in their countries of origin as well as the countries of destination. Any measures for the inclusion of migrant women need to tackle this double discrimination. This highlights that inclusion is a multi-layered process that is not the individual responsibility of migrant women. It requires awareness-raising at societal level and actively changing social norms. Global citizenship education can play an important role in fulfilling this task; however, this requires the political will and support of any such learning measures.

### **2. Cooperation at the local level promotes outreach**

A key question for learning providers as well as local communities, local authorities and service providers, is how to include migrant women in adult learning. Evidence shows that cooperation between these stakeholders and forming networks is crucial to reach out to migrant communities. Outreach activities are more likely to be successful when they are held at meeting places of migrant women, for instance parks, kindergartens, or libraries.

### **3. Women have a key role to play**

Women are at the center of family learning as well as learning within a wider societal context. Including women in adult learning allows them not only to develop their own skills and competencies, but also promotes learning in their families and social environments. This means, for instance, being able to support their children with homework from school, and thereby helping them to attain a higher educational level. Furthermore, by sharing their positive learning experience within their communities and becoming “role models” of adult learning, they will encourage other people to engage in learning. And lastly, they are more likely to become active citizens that shape their communities and society at large.

### **4. Learner-centeredness makes learning more relevant**

A key feature of successful inclusion activities targeted to migrant women is a learner-centered approach, meaning that learning offers are built on the specific experiences and learning needs of migrant woman. Learner-centeredness also takes the life situation of migrant women into account, including their roles in unpaid care work and in the paid economy. This makes learning more relevant and creates a direct link between migrant women's lives and their learning path.

### **5. Sharing is caring - building a sense of community through learning and teaching**

Community, in the context of migration and diaspora, has a double meaning: it refers to native or ethnical communities from the country of origin, but also to local communities in the country of destination. Learning helps migrant women to build networks in the local communities and the other way around, connecting with the local community directs migrant women to learning opportunities. At the same time, it empowers them to become more active in their native or ethnical communities, and, what is more, it helps them to link both spheres, for instance by sharing knowledge and skills from their country of origin with the local communities. Reversing learning-teaching roles is not only improving the



self-confidence of learners, but is also contributing to building a sense of community among the native and migration population. Such opportunities should be easy to access and encouraged, for instance through mentorship programmes.

#### **6. Adult learning brings huge benefits, but support is needed to bear additional strain**

Adult learning is, overall, an enormously beneficial experience for migrant women and leads to more active life-style as well as improved well-being and job opportunities. However, the active involvement in one or several communities, alongside household and family work as well as working in the paid economy, often comes with additional strain, especially from an emotional point of view. Peer-to-peer groups or other forms of support could be needed in order to help migrant women find their way in their communities and improve their mental health.







