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WE-EMPOWER training

“Participation of migrant women in democratic life through the community of practice”



October 18-19, 2023
Belgrade, Serbia



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This is a report of the second international training within the project, "Expanding Tools in Addressing Barriers for Migrant Women to Participate in Democratic Life - WE-EMPOWER." It is funded by the EU Erasmus+ program and coordinated by the European network WIDE+. Next to WIDE+, it is a collaboration of the feminist organizations GADIP (Sweden), NGO Atina (Serbia), KULU Women and Development (Denmark), Romanian Women's Lobby (Romania), Alianza por la Solidaridad (Spain) and Red De Mujeres Latinoamericanas Y Del Caribe (Spain, Red Latinas in short). The project's main objective is to support and strengthen the participation of migrant women in Europe through training activities and the design of tools to enable them to have their voices heard in political spaces.

WE-EMPOWER is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.





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The second international WE-EMPOWER training was held on 18 and 19 October 2023 in Belgrade, Serbia. Representatives of project partners, activists from the WIDE+ migration and gender working group, members of the Advocacy Group of women with experience in migration gathered around Atina, and other migrant women came together to exchange and learn through a series of interactive workshops using the community of practice. The training gathered 7 members of NGO Atina and 25 learners - 12 representatives of the WE-EMPOWER partner and collaborating organizations, 3 members of the Advocacy Group of women with experience of migration, and 10 migrant women who are taking active part in NGO Atina's activities within the Asylum Center Krnjača in Belgrade.

The second training centered around the concept of participation, as it is vital in enabling the inclusion of everyone in the decision-making process. This includes the participation of female migrants and refugees in all the steps by decision-makers. The host association Atina includes migrant women as an integral part of all their programmatic steps (in preparing policy papers, advocating for changes in protocols and procedures, increasing their voices through civic initiatives, etc.). This concept of full participation should be relevant for state institutions to better respond to the contexts and needs of migrant women. Participation in its complete form, in such a way that it works, is only sometimes achievable in Serbia (or elsewhere), but it is possible.

In addition to the two training days, there was an additional training opportunity for all the participants who had come to Atina in Serbia. On 20 October, they could participate in a day-long public event that included exchanging policies and approaches with refugee women who went through asylum in Serbia and relevant Serbian officials. This event also provided further awareness of the collective studies carried out by the project partners.

Overall, the second transnational training contributed to the following objectives relevant to the WE-EMPOWER project:

- To share and exchange experiences and introduce reasonable practice solutions from other countries and how they can be applied.
- To promote improvement in the accessibility of migrant women to democratic institutions.





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- To have migrant women and girls access democratic institutions more efficiently and become included in decision-making processes.
- Compile and reflect on future action recommendations based on the exchange and good practice examples.
- To have the voices of migrant and refugee women and girls heard, to have them participate in all the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Gathering at Bagel Bejgl, 18 October

The training included an informal gathering of WE-EMPOWER partners on the evening of October 18 at Bagel Bejgl, NGO Atina's women's social enterprise. This informal exchange gathered 32 participants - 12 representatives of WE-EMPOWER partner and collaborating organizations, seven members of NGO Atina, three members of the Advocacy Group of women with experience of migration, as well as ten migrant women from the Asylum Center Krnjača in Belgrade who regularly attend Atina's activities.



WE-EMPOWER partners, Advocacy Group, and migrant women from AC Krnjača in Bagel Bejgl



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This gathering created a safe, welcoming environment for all the participants and encouraged an exchange of experiences. Through a collaborative effort, participants learned from one another in this shared space, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the complex issues that women face. Diverse perspectives in a setting that promotes solidarity, empathy, and support create a solid basis for joint advocacy toward a more just and inclusive society.

In addition, this gathering was used to showcase the continuation of the Community of Practice (CoP) approach and its ability to create a unified, informed, and empowered community. Migrant women often face different challenges that may vary across countries. By fostering collaboration and joint initiatives, these challenges can be addressed collectively, ensuring that advocacy efforts are more impactful and tailored to the specific needs of migrant women in the European context. This approach promotes a more inclusive and equitable society by actively involving those directly affected in the advocacy processes and ensuring voices are heard and considered when decisions concerning their lives are made.

On 18 October, representatives of the project partners held their third project meeting and took time to explore their surroundings in Belgrade, giving ample time for informal exchange. One of the elements suggested for improvement from the previous transnational WE-EMPOWER training was to allow for more informal interaction among participants.

Full training day with three workshops, 19 October

The second day of the training consisted of three workshops on: 'Democracy and rights,' 'Participation of migrant women in democratic life through the community of practice,' and 'Integration of Migrant Women in a European Society.'

The aim of the workshops was to:

- create a common level of knowledge among participants on the position of migrant women in different countries;
- reflect on the most effective tools that can be used in joint advocacy initiatives;
- serve as brainstorming sessions and inspire the creation of new ideas and approaches to the advocacy initiatives for greater participation of migrant women in democratic and political processes throughout Europe.





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Workshop #1 Democracy and Rights facilitated by Christina Reyna

The workshop opened with a round of introductions, followed by each participant writing down one crucial right. In the introduction, they were asked to explain why this was important. Once the round was completed, the facilitator categorized all the mentioned rights into four categories:

- Economic rights (gender equality in all categories);
- Social rights (freedom of speech, respect, freedom of belief, free and accessible education, right to choose and self-express);
- Political rights (freedom; right to representation);
- Health rights (right to make decisions about your body; right to access health and wellbeing; right to physical integrity, including the mental aspect).

In the next part of the workshop, participants shared their reflections on taking these rights for granted, the intersectionality of the rights, and the number of rights that remain limited for girls and women compared to men and boys. They talked about how other rights (e.g., freedom of movement) can be jeopardized based on factors other than gender and how these factors shape different lived experiences (what life is like in Europe compared to Africa or Latin America? etc).



Christina Reyna, WE-EMPOWER partners, Advocacy Group, and NGO Atina





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The facilitator highlighted different layers regarding all the rights we are connected to. It made participants further aware of how each is influenced by the individual situation and the context in which a person lives.

The second activity within the workshop began by dividing participants into groups of four, where they were asked to share personal reflections on the rights they each chose at the beginning of the workshop throughout generations: from grandmother to mother, from childhood through teenage years, to adulthood. Within groups, the participants explored how the same right can change through space, age, and time layers.



Representatives of the Advocacy Group, GADIP, KULU and NGO Atina





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Representatives of GADIP, GABRIELA, and Alianza por la Solidaridad



Representatives of Romanian Women's Lobby, Babaylan, and Advocacy Group





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A plenary reflection dishing out conclusions followed the group sessions. The participants shared how their rights have increased throughout generations and through their lives. However, there is still a long path, for instance, for gender equality, the right to belief, etc. It was also interesting to see how long the struggle for these rights can last. Participants further discussed how the lived reality of enjoying different rights depends on where a person lives and how the patriarchal system in force affects all these rights.

Throughout the workshop, the intersectionality of our rights was highlighted, emphasizing that each path is dynamic, especially when moving through countries. Some rights can be lost, and some can increase. There is a notable difference between the rights existing on paper and the actual availability of those rights in practice regarding women and minority groups.



Christina Reyna, WE-EMPOWER partners, Advocacy Group, and NGO Atina





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The final activity was, at the same time, an introduction to the next workshop. The facilitator formulated several questions regarding the rights and concepts around the democratic participation of women and asked the participants to write down their responses on sticky notes. They shared what they wrote and reflected on their ideas in a group discussion to highlight the mutual understanding of these concepts.

Workshop #2 Participation of migrant women in democratic life through the community of practice facilitated by Iva Đolović

The second workshop was conducted using the fishbowl method. This is a strategy where participants are separated into an inner and outer circle. In the inner circle (fishbowl), participants have a discussion; those in the outer circle listen to the conversation, take notes, and provide their input when asked to share. Once the topic is exhausted, the facilitator switches participants and continues with the following question. This is an engaging and participant-centered strategy, which helps participants respond to multiple viewpoints. Observations from those in the outer circle provide fresh insight into the topics and create a practical brainstorming session.



*Iva Đolović, WE-EMPOWER partners, Advocacy Group, and
NGO Atina*





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The first question asked of the fishbowl was:

- What are the predominant challenges migrant women face in your country, representing a barrier to their participation in democratic and political life?

The participants mentioned voting rights (for example, no right to vote for migrants in the Netherlands), health, education opportunities, and (lack of) recognition and validation of existing diplomas. One participant shared a personal example, citing that a degree in engineering from the Philippines was not considered valid in Denmark. Another common challenge for migrant women is the language barrier, as knowledge of language is needed to access job opportunities. Examples were shared of how language courses provided within the integration process were patronizing and made people feel immature.

Issues concerning work permits, few job options, and labor rights are another set of closely connected challenges. One of the participants shared that the lack of a work permit means working hard without knowing whether they would be paid. Housing was also shared as a challenge that places migrant women in a highly vulnerable position, as they are often refused due to prevailing prejudices.

On the other hand, the participants mentioned 'chosen migrants,' workers headhunted for their skills and profession, particularly those in the health sector, who are unaffected by these challenges and have the same privileges as the domicile population. This underlined that another approach by governments and others is possible to avoid vulnerability for migrant women.

The second question asked of the fishbowl was:

- How do we encourage institutions and political parties to increase the participation of migrant women?

The participants cited that policymakers must understand how migrant workers benefit the economy. This was followed by the need to have migrant women be louder, take up space, organize by creating groups and (in)formal organizations, communicate clearly, and demand their rights.





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Another insight was that politicians usually lack personal connections to people with a migrant background – they need to see migrant women as subjects to make them a part of the process. Full and informed participation is the key – no policy on migrant women should be signed without consulting migrant women themselves.

As an example of increasing the participation of migrant women, engagement in a form such as the Advocacy Group around NGO Atina was explained. This included collecting proposals, creating political agendas, and meeting with institutions and decision-makers, powerfully conveying that “Power needs to be shared.”



Iva Dolović, WE-EMPOWER partners, Advocacy Group, and NGO Atina

The third question asked of the fishbowl was:

- How can civil society organizations mediate between migrant women and the governments?

The participants’ responses were diversified, depending on their own experiences but also the situation in the country they were coming from. It led to the conclusion that there are significant differences in European governments’ approach to the issue and willingness to offer space and support to the civil sector. The same goes for their approach to migrant women and the problems they are experiencing.





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One of the participants shared how migrant women (specifically those employed as domestic workers) were forced to contact reporters to communicate their need to have the right to unemployment within the host country. They viewed this as the only way for their voices to be heard, as they needed help approaching the institutions and decision-makers.

In general, participants view civil society organizations as crucial actors when it comes to direct assistance and response to migrant women's needs - from helping them meet the requirements of the asylum process through providing other necessary information and services to giving them a chance to contribute and take part in all the actions involving their rights. Participants emphasized the need to be contextual - always looking for a window of opportunity to give them a certain leeway in promoting an agenda favoring migrant women's rights.

The fourth question asked of the fishbowl was:

- How can mentorship and leadership programs be used to build confidence?

The discussion began with one of the participants sharing her view on the importance of the teachings of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which is also an excellent approach to be used with younger generations. Freire used a dialogical approach in which students become "active agents" in their education instead of "dehumanized" by the traditional approach.

Feminists can use Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed as the idea that objectification of the oppressed in society, alongside uncritical models of education, results in the internalization of oppression and fearfulness of freedom. His approach aligns with the community of practice approach the participants were engaged in today. Both encompass the empowerment of the marginalized to question and challenge oppressive structures, paving the way for a more just and equitable society.

Among the mentorship programs for this purpose, the participants cited guiding migrant women on how to access employment programs, utilize the resources at hand, and support in networking to create communities that will provide them with greater visibility and representation.

Another point raised during the discussion was that other institutions constantly rely on experts as a distinct category of people who are separated from migrant women. The participants were questioned about this division and asked what stops people from considering all involved as an expert in a feminist/solidarity framework that contributes to the agenda at hand from that role.





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The discussion was closed with the slogan “No taxation without representation / participation,” coined during the American Revolution and, unfortunately, still used due to numerous issues many face daily.

The final question for the fishbowl was:

- How can we utilize social media?

The participants shared that migrant women must view social media and digital spaces as tools for increased visibility and actions. The overall impression was that individual activities and advocacy could not be enough, as they do not have the power to fuel actual societal changes. There is an obvious need to network, to gather their voices in a community that will assist their agenda and make them louder and more noticeable in a space that has become the catalyst of many significant movements in the past decade.

Workshop #3 Integration of Migrant Women in a European Society facilitated by Christa Maniratunga and Ingabire Lola Brigitte

The final workshop was facilitated by two members of the Advocacy Group* of women with the experience of migration gathered around NGO Atina. Both came to Serbia from Burundi and went through the asylum process, obtaining work permits and overcoming the boundaries and prejudice they encountered.

They shared their personal experiences of migration, but also the experiences of other migrant women, focusing on the most common challenges and sharing the current perspective of being an African migrant in Europe.

*In 2019, NGO Atina facilitated the establishment of Advocacy Groups for women survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence (one for the domicile and one for the migrant population). The idea of an Advocacy Group arose from the need to provide space for persons with experience in the protection system to participate in policy making, focusing on advocacy for the rights of victims of trafficking, gender-based violence, and persons from groups at risk. In other words, the group enables the participation and advocacy of disadvantaged women in creating and improving policies and institutional practices based on their experience with the protection system. In this way, girls and women started publicly advocating for their equal position in society and changes in the protection policies and available services, addressing conferences and trainings, gatherings, and maintaining regular meetings with decision-makers.





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Christa Maniratunga, Advocacy Group

The path to integration is complex and multifaceted, filled with challenges that affect a person on both personal and societal levels. By sharing their own stories, through mutual understanding and collaborative efforts, women migrants can overcome some of these challenges and build bridges toward a more inclusive and accepting society.





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At the beginning of the workshop, the facilitators asked the participants to write down one word each to describe their migration experience (or any other association coming to mind) and post their responses on a whiteboard around the words “My story. My journey.” These responses were used throughout the workshop to further reflect on the central issues and connect individual experiences into a cohesive and effective effort to jointly advocate for improving access to rights.



Christa Maniratunga, and WE-EMPOWER partners

What was interesting is that through sharing their experience, the facilitators touched upon each of the other challenges mentioned throughout the workshop. They also shared the vast differences between the existing laws and their actual implementation in practice, which was a common theme brought up. Their efforts to change the unresponsive practices and biases they encountered through the meetings with decision-makers, representatives of state institutions, and organizations providing support to the migrant population show the significance of creating a community of practice. In their case, the Advocacy Group enabled them to reach higher instances and share recommendations to ensure that no other woman has to go through the same experience, which is their ultimate goal.

The most striking observation from the participants was that every one of them could relate to some aspect of each other's experiences, even though they do not share the same countries of origin nor live in the same countries. Despite all the differences in background,





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ethnicity, age, education, or the country they find themselves in, they can easily find a connecting point and build upon that to create their community and help unlock the potential within each other.

In conclusion, the journey of migrant women toward integration is a collective effort that requires understanding, empathy, and a commitment to fostering inclusivity. By addressing the barriers, celebrating cultural diversity, and advocating for inclusive policies, together, we can build a society where migrant women not only survive but thrive.



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