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# Women's voices: Civil society and immigrant women's rights

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## Summing up

*Ulla Björnberg*

The current political and economic situation in many countries, especially in Europe, is often conducive to unfriendly policies towards migrants and migrant women. However, what this workshop has shown is that there are many positive initiatives that strive to help people in need and bring good to societies. What is often forgotten is that the economy is not only about buying and selling, but there are many interconnected dimensions, and the topics that have been brought about today are all clearly important for the economy in its different dimensions.

The greatest value that these organizations can bring is through cooperation and mutual connectedness, because it is thanks to these links that their true potential can be proven. In this way, knowledge can be spread more easily, and there can be more opportunities to improve people's lives. What we also learned from today's sessions is that it is everyone's responsibility to take care of people in need, as professionals in the social work or migration sectors at times tend to forget that there is always a human dimension that is to be taken into account.



## Women's voices: Civil society and immigrant women's rights

Workshop May 29, 2018

Hotel Eggers, Gothenburg, Sweden

### Keynote Speakers

**Ulla Björnberg**, GADIP

*What we wish to obtain with this workshop*

**Sahar Armandi, Elnaz Zara, Djana Filipovic**, Terrafem, Gothenburg

*Supporting migrant women in Sweden – experiences, problems and visions*

**Jelena Hrnjak**, Atina, Belgrad

*Violence against women and girls among refugee and migrant population in Serbia*

**Kinga Lohmann** and **Agata Maksimowska**, Karat, Warsaw

*Assimilation or integration? Migrant and refugee women's perspectives on state policy*

**Janviere Ntamazeze**, Fisofa, Göteborgs Integrationscenter

*How migrant women can obtain economic empowerment*

**Annika Lindström**, Göteborgs rättighetscenter mot diskriminering

*Working against discrimination on individual and structural levels*

**Marianne Lööf**, Göteborgs Kvinnocenter

*Female pluralism in work life*

**Nancy Contreras**, Starka Kvinnor and ABF Fyrbodal, Trollhättan

*Learning how to make dresses. Work training for women with a migrant background*



Göteborgs rättighetscenter  
MOT DISKRIMINERING



terrafem  
nätverk för kvinnors rätt  
mot mäns våld



## **Introduction: What we wish to obtain with this workshop**

*Ulla Björnberg, GADIP*



Ulla is the chairperson of Gender and Development in Practice (GADIP), a non-profit organization focused on resolving many of the issues that women all over the world face. The workshop is organized by GADIP, and it is based on an initiative by the WIDE+ (Women in Development) network, which is devoted to showing the effects on women that global policies based on a neoliberal framework can have. The workshop brings together women's rights organizations from different European countries in order to work towards stronger and more innovative solutions to protect the rights of female migrants and refugees. There is a need to bring together different organizations because each one of them deals with such issues in different ways and faces different problems; comparing strengths and weaknesses of various approaches in different cultural contexts can therefore be beneficial to the network as a whole. As networking and capacity building are fundamental in this mobilization, the real strength of these organizations' work can only truly be applied when they cooperate and work together on sensitive issues.

Among the participants of this workshop there are different types of organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), voluntary organizations, and grassroots movements. What they all share is their commitment to help and assist migrant and refugee women in their struggles to be visible and find their place in society. Migration is currently a very relevant topic, especially in Sweden, where it is at the center of the campaigning for the 2018 elections. Since many migrants are women, it is extremely important to understand their needs, as they often seem to be neglected by governments and authorities. What this workshop also strives to achieve is a higher degree of transnational cooperation between organizations that have experience in dealing with migrant women in different countries. The themes the participant organizations work with are mainly violence, labor market, and economic and civil rights.

Through discussions on discrimination, labor rights, and possible solutions to improve migrants' and refugees' lives, the workshop aims at discussing different ideas and experiences, spreading the knowledge of the participant organizations, and effectively contributing to capacity building. The role of social media in this also needs to be recognized, as it is one way to build stronger networks between organizations located in different countries.

## **Supporting migrant women in Sweden – experiences, problems and visions**

*Sahar Armandi, Elnaz Zara, Djana Filipovic, Terrafem, Gothenburg*

Terrafem is a shelter for women and girls who experienced violence of any kind. It is an organization that is able to provide guidance and legal assistance, helping women in their own native languages (they work with as many as sixty different languages). In their center, volunteers work with women in need of help, and the organization is also involved in spreading awareness of such issues through public speaking, talks and workshops.

It is a much-needed organization because the statistic on violence on women are worrying. It is reported that in Sweden 31% of girls experience violence before the age of 15, and this percentage increases to 46% after that age. 56% of women, moreover, has reportedly been sexually harassed. This calls for organizations actively working against this widespread violence and making the general public aware of the problem. In particular, there is a need for an increased awareness on what violence is: there are many types of violence that do not necessarily imply physical harm, such as psychological, sexual, material, or economic violence.

Terrafem works with intersecting perspectives. Many of the women who seek their support have a limited knowledge of Swedish, and an interpreter is often needed, which is not necessarily easy to find. Many women migrate with their husbands, which often makes it difficult for them to be fully independent. A related problem concerns the residence permit: when a woman is married, she needs to stay in the relationship in order to retain the permit, otherwise they might risk deportation. This creates a situation in which women can feel trapped in their own lives in a country where they barely know anybody. An exception to this rule occurs when it can be proved that children of the couple are also subjected to violence or other serious violations of their freedom.

The definition of violence on women in legal terms is problematic, as for a woman to leave a relationship and retain the residence permit the violence needs to be considered certain and serious. There are also other requirements, such as a minimum time period in which the couple lived together; moreover, if the woman returns to the violent relationship, this reduces the seriousness of the violence from a legal point of view. In general, the complexity of the laws on the matter makes it considerably difficult for women to cope with violence, as they often have no one to help them, and language is a considerable barrier in communication with authorities.

Freeing women from cycles of violence is consequently a troublesome and long process, as violence risks becoming normalized, and there are cases of women going back to violent relationship for several years. Women might need additional help with issues such as protection of their children; the feeling of guilt that often stems from such situations also calls for psychological support.

What should a girl or woman do when they experience violence? Talking about it with someone close in one's own language is a good way to start, and writing a diary detailing such experiences can also be useful. Physical injuries should be duly documented; a good way of doing this is sending evidence to trusted people. Women centers should also be contacted, as they can provide different types of support and assistance. Most importantly, violence should be reported to the police, although many women do not do it because they do not believe the police is able to do something concrete. However, the police need to be notified; it is important that a violent man has a reported precedent, in case such situations arise again in the future.

Terrafem helps women by providing legal advice and support on how to proceed with their situations. They give information on the different options the women have, and they can arrange a legal representation for them. The organization also works with a psychologist, as many women are in need of psychological support. Terrafem can be contacted and called at no charge, and callers can maintain anonymity. They publish their informational material in several languages. Terrafem's work on awareness building includes talks in schools in order to make young people aware of these issues, collaborations with teachers of Swedish language, and police students, as everyone needs to be conscious of their responsibilities in preventing and solving violence.



## **Violence against women and girls among refugee and migrant population in Serbia**

*Jelena Hrnjak, Atina, Belgrad*

Serbia is a post-conflict country in which civil society is striving to cooperate with state authorities in matters related to migration and to counter negative trends of the government. Feminist organizations in particular have a strong role in limiting the harm the government's policies cause to people. Migration is a topical issue in Serbia, with the Interior Minister mentioning the work of the police in dealing with migrants and hindering their rights to entrance in the country. The problem with migrants and refugees in Serbia is that the system is not set up to help them: as unemployment is high among Serbians as well, it is difficult for migrants to find a job or even get their asylum requests granted. Moreover, there are several unsolved political issues in the country, such as the recognition of Kosovo. The Serbian government has signed agreements with countries that do not recognize the independence of Kosovo; as a consequence, many of the migrants come from these countries, as they are granted the right to legally stay in Serbia for one month. They often use this time to look for chances to cross borders, searching for smugglers that can help them reach the EU.

Two months prior to the workshop Atina had its 15th anniversary. The organization has therefore been working consistently with victims of human trafficking for years. This often involves visiting centers for asylum-seekers and informing them of human trafficking and of the support they are entitled to receive in Serbia. There is a widespread violence in these contexts, and this divulgation effort includes informing women of applicable laws and support systems they can benefit from. Research conducted by Atina on migrant women and girls in Serbia has revealed that they face several types of violence aside from trafficking, including forced marriages, rape, family violence, honor killings, revenge marriage, and genital mutilation. Moreover, the state is unable or unwilling to recognize and effectively respond to this threat to women's lives, even when there is severe physical or sexual violence. State procedures on the matter are not clearly defined, and a general failure to process criminal procedures is reported.

The situation for refugees in Serbia is far from being positive. Official numbers count around 4000 refugees in the country, with eighteen centers for asylum-seekers. With walls on the border with Hungary, there are almost no legal ways of entering the EU. Even though the government denies the presence of violence against migrant women, Atina has found out that 65% of the women they talked with have experienced some sort of violence, predominantly of sexual nature.



Many of these refugee women have a high tolerance towards violence; reporting violence is difficult because they lack information on who they can report it to, and what kind of protection they are granted; moreover, the fear of the possible stigma resulting from their reports further prevents them from ending the cycles of violence. Many of these women are in strong need for support, and Atina helps them with different types of assistance, including support with asylum applications, and they help provide evidence of the violence that was conducted upon them. What is striking, in general, is that reports of gender-based violence come up daily, and the victim is always the one to be moved from the center, while the perpetrators are free to stay and potentially commit other acts of violence. What this often leads to is that the victim is blamed for what happened, and the following processes of questioning only create further victimization.

The struggle NGOs face in Serbia is that of seeking social change, a goal wider than the mere reduction of harm done to migrants. Atina strives to reach this goal with a continuous and comprehensive work that is also meant to help refugee women take an active role in their cause. It is an individual and women-centered approach that aims at creating an open space for solutions through integration, resettlement, and family reunification, as well as prevention of violence. One of the biggest problems Atina faces in this is the recognition of feminist causes by the government, which is often neglectful of violence on women. Moreover, the government does not seem to believe that helping refugees is a priority, since many of them try to leave towards other countries. There is therefore a need for more feminist activists and organizations involved in humanitarian issues.



## **Assimilation or integration? Migrant and refugee women's perspectives on state policy**

*Kinga Lohmann and Agata Maksimowska, Karat, Warsaw*

The number of migrants entering Poland has increased over 300% in the years 2013-2016. This is due to factors such as the increased demand for foreign workers as a result of the economic situation in the country, and the economic and political situation in Ukraine. There is indeed a simplified procedure to hire Ukrainians in Poland, and there are many refugees from Eastern Ukraine as well. As for the political situation in Poland, a populist nationalist government took power in 2015, signaling an authoritarian turn. Some of the features and actions of this government include the widespread use of xenophobic and hate speech, the repealing of earlier migration laws, and the blocking of EU funds for the integration of third country nationals. Moreover, refugee centers and NGOs have been deprived of resources, and funds have been allocated to Caritas because of its ideological allocation, thus threatening the pluralism of actors, as well as human rights and gender equality.

Refugees' rights are consistently violated, and very few are granted refugee status. The Polish Border Guard denies the right to cross the border, and the government does not comply with EU obligations concerning Syrian refugees. In general, there is a hostile attitude against refugees: according to available data, only 22% of Poles accept the presence of refugees from the Middle East or Africa, and 55% of them accept refugees from Ukraine. According to a 2016 study of hate speech on the Internet, 80% of content young people come across is deemed to be anti-Islamic, 75% anti-Semitic, and 71% anti-Ukrainian. Public media is also contributing to this hostility.

Despite the general hostility on part of the government, some entities are striving to implement a different approach to integration. This includes some progressive local governments, a small number of NGOs that are funded externally, and ombudsmen for human rights, which can help in case non-EU citizens are denied the right to apply for international protection or are refused entry in Poland. What makes working with migrant women especially difficult is that the Polish government has also questioned the Istanbul Convention. The gender dimension of migration is not therefore taken into account by the government, and discrimination against women is not tackled, even though it is a multifaceted problem that affects many lives. The utmost lack of integration programs and facilities therefore makes migrants feel like integration is all on their shoulders.

The main issue before the creation of a network was that migrant and refugee women did not have any voice to widely represent them, and their experiences were only included in broader and more general feminist agendas at best. The role of Karat in dealing with the situation of migrant women in Poland therefore derives from the lack of organizations addressing xenophobia from a gender perspective and the absence of political power of migrant and refugee women. Karat's role in this is consequently that of applying a gender perspective to migration issues and cooperating with women's organizations, thus creating a platform for migrants' voices to be heard. The idea of this network is therefore based on the values of cooperation, mutual support, solidarity, exchange of experiences, empowerment. Moreover, learning activities are organized, such as workshops on how to organize demonstrations, how to effectively learn advocacy of one's rights, and how one can fight for them.

The membership of Karat is very broad in its nature, as it encompasses migrant and refugee women activists from many countries, Polish activists (from feminist, refugee and human rights groups), academics, political dissidents, and so forth. The network is collective and non-hierarchical, and it organizes regular meetings, spaces for mutual learning and for spending time together. The topics discussed range from labor and reproductive rights to violence and discrimination, human rights, integration policies, and legal and psychological support. Some of the demands that Karat is trying to enforce include the implementation of international human rights conventions, the introduction of anti-discrimination education in schools, the development of an effective integration policy, and the inclusion of migrant women in policy-making and feminist movements. Karat has well-defined plans for its future activism, and they include the writing of blogs with stories of migrant refugee women and workshops in which other discriminated groups and legal experts can share views and experiences. Other events that are planned are a women's congress and a roundtable that has the aim of addressing decision-makers with demands and problems that need to be urgently solved.



## **How migrant women can obtain economic empowerment**

*Janviere Ntamazeze, Fisofa, Göteborgs Integrationscenter*

Fisofa is a new non-profit organization that is helping women with economic empowerment; it counts 36 participants and two associations. It works closely with the networks WIDE+, Integration Nätverk Göteborg, Business Region Gothenburg, and Inclusive Business Sweden. The idea of creating Fisofa came from the need to solve poverty and cope with economic illiteracy, which is an important problem for many migrant women. Economic empowerment is extremely important because it can increase women's and girls' access to economic resources and opportunities, including employment, financial services, and skills development. It is often the case that not all of these women have papers, and many of them face violence or are victims of human trafficking, so their economic situations are considerably worrying, as they otherwise receive little help in terms of economic empowerment.

Fisofa helps women by providing them with information and education with the aim of economic empowerment, and by collaborating with WIDE+ and Business Region Gothenburg, which provides funding. The capacity building that the organization strives to achieve is often pursued with a "learn by doing" strategy, in which women are asked to take responsibility and learn critical skills, such as budgeting. Fisofa recognized that some of the causes of domestic violence are strictly economic. The lack of economic independence is a major factor, as it creates a lack of self-esteem, consequently leading to lower economic literacy, which in turn creates economic dependence from the husband, potentially escalating into domestic violence.

The activities that Fisofa organizes take place twice a week, and the program lasts for ten weeks under this scheme:

1. The first week is designed to build self-esteem and self-confidence.
2. In the second week women learn how to manage stress.
3. Information on labor markets, as well as help in writing a CV and choose a career are given.
4. Lectures on financial literacy and planning.
5. Entrepreneurship skills are the focus of the fifth week, in which examples of successful businesswomen are brought up.
6. Leadership skills.
7. Information on tax, pension, and insurance in Sweden.
8. First help, with the support of the Red Cross.
9. Women's rights and children's rights.
10. The last week is focused on evaluation and certification, and women are encouraged to reflect on what they have learned.

In this way, women find a way to connect with each other and share ideas that can foster innovation and entrepreneurship. It is also something that helps them psychologically, since Fisofa provides them with a space to talk with each other and engage in different activities, such as sewing. As for the challenges that the organization faces, these mainly include the lack of funds for the planned activities, and the lack of partners and donors.



### **Working against discrimination on individual and structural levels**

*Annika Lindström, Göteborgs rättighetscenter mot discriminering*

Gothenburg's Human Rights Center against Discrimination is a non-profit anti-discrimination agency that is currently active in 34 municipalities in the Gothenburg area. It was started in 2012 and its membership is made up of thirty organizations that work on different issues related to discrimination; the funding is provided by the City of Gothenburg and MUCF, and there are project funds available by VGR and others. Its purpose is that of promoting human rights and pluralism in society, fair treatment of all people, prevention of discrimination based on ethnicity, religion or other beliefs, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, functionality, age, and respect for all types of differences. This is done by offering legal counselling and support, as well as education on human rights and discrimination.

The legal framework in which the organization operates most importantly includes the Swedish Discrimination Act of 2008, which combats discrimination and promotes equal rights and opportunities regardless of sex, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion or other belief, disability or transgender identity or expression. The protected areas of society in this legal framework are working life and education. Moreover, other areas of society are concerned, namely entrepreneurship, membership in certain organization, medical care, social services, the social insurance system, the national military service and so on. The problems with this law are that intersectionalities are rarely taken into account; moreover, one can face discrimination even in the absence of identification in one of the mentioned categories.

Discrimination is a complicated concept because it can take several forms. Direct discrimination takes place, for instance, when a man receives a job offer instead of an equally qualified woman solely on the basis of a discrimination based on sex. However, there are several other types of discrimination, such as indirect discrimination, harassment or sexual harassment, reprisals, instructions to discriminate, or inadequate accessibility when certain needs are to be accommodated. The Discrimination Act has not been brought up in court consistently, as its application is arguably hard. As a consequence, there is also a lack of relevant statistics on the matter. In particular, there is a lot of discrimination against women, both in workplaces and in education, though this is usually extremely difficult to prove. The reason why discrimination is difficult to prove is that society is often built around structures that favor certain categories of people, such as white males, over others.

Active measures for people who risk discrimination are to be taken in working life and education. Especially for migrants, taking an active role in society is important, because it is often difficult to know and understand what one's rights are in matters related to discrimination. When one finds ways to participate in society, they avoid feeling as a liability. It is important to know one's own rights and how Swedish society works, and we all have a responsibility to create a safe environment for everybody to enjoy such rights.

The Human Rights Center works with cases of individual discrimination, but they are able to redirect people who might be in need of different types of assistance to the most relevant organization. Helping people be able to actively participate in society and achieve independence and self-determination is part of the main goals of the organization. In order to do this, the Center works with legal advisors and educators; however, the lack of funding is a problem, and there is also a lack of manpower, especially with regard to legal staff, as they only have two legal advisors for 34 municipalities.



## **Female pluralism in work life**

*Marianne Lööf, Göteborgs Kvinnocenter*

This women's center in Bergsjön rents a two-story house for their operations. It has existed for twenty years, having been established in 1998. It is a non-profit organization that is meant to help women regardless of age, nationality, religion or political affiliation. It is a resource center that also has courses available and it is organized as an open meeting center where active dialogue is encouraged, and women are invited to decide what activities they want to do, and this can include course of Swedish, cultural activities, cooking and many other things. This often surprises them, as it is something that social services do not organize. The purpose is, among other things, to help women find an employment and support themselves, or start a company and run it efficiently. The ambition of the center is to spread knowledge to its members and cooperate more widely with other organizations and agencies.

The women's center works as a local center of excellence for equality and diversity. As a general objective, the women's center strives to help women live their lives in the way they want. This is pursued, for instance, through the organization of courses and discussions on sensitive topics such as discrimination, human rights, and sexual identification. Collaborations with different organizations made it possible for the center to become an international meeting place that also organizes international exchanges.

The weekly schedule of the center includes courses on Swedish language (five days a week), Somali language (since some women are illiterate), computer literacy, sewing, cooking, crafts etc. Swedish courses, in particular, are divided according to the level, and preparation for SFI is also provided. They do not currently have English courses available. The courses can be said to be successful: as an example, a 78-year-old woman was recently able to learn Swedish from scratch, thus proving the validity of the center's methods. Aside from courses, the center organizes other activities and different kinds of exhibitions and talks with the public, which is also a good way to advertise its programs. Children are also provided with different activities. An instance of a cultural activity is textile crafts: a teacher gives lessons on it every week, and women are able to use their creative abilities, presenting their work in different exhibitions.

In spite of all the obstacles the center faces, and all the struggles the women go through, the overall experience is that of a meeting place where everyone can feel welcome and appreciated. Some women have experienced clear improvements in their lives. As some of them join the center with no employment history, they are helped and assisted with the preparation of resumes and job interviews, information on the job market, as well as with the job search. When needed, they organize joint meetings twice a week to work together in the job search, and many have been successful in their endeavors thanks to this support.

## **Learning how to make dresses. Work training for women with a migrant background**

*Nancy Contreras, Starka Kvinnor and ABF Fyrbodalen, Trollhättan*

Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund (ABF), founded in 1912, is a leading Swedish education establishment which acts as an umbrella organization for 55 member organizations. They are mostly financed by the national and local governments, and they strive to “make another world possible”. The way they commonly work is through study circles, in which participants learn about different topics together. Examples of such topics range from the English language and environmental issues to ceramics, painting and music. Under the ABF framework, Starka Kvinnor (Strong Women) operates as a training support for women with foreign backgrounds that need help in settling in the Swedish work environment. In order to do this, there is now a stronger cooperation with the work agency Arbetsförmedlingen in place, aimed at work training and support for obtaining residence permits for migrant women. This also includes classes in the Swedish language. It is especially important to help women, as they often find themselves alone in a foreign country with little to no support. For many migrant women, the situation is that, in order to receive support from work centers, they need to be enrolled in a Swedish for immigrants course and perform work training. The purpose is therefore that of including women in the Swedish work life by helping them establish a daily routine.

In Starka Kvinnor they work with smaller groups of about ten women both in the mornings and in the evenings. There are several activities that are organized: these include a program of language skills support for illiterate women in order to increase their communication competencies and thrive better in employment settings, and discussions on topics such as human rights, which take into account possible religious sensibilities of participants. Starka Kvinnor also trains women in important skills such as computer literacy, helping them, among other things, set up email addresses that they can then use to write to each other.

A very interesting project is the sewing program organized by Starka Kvinnor. Thanks to her background in design, Nancy helps women run a sewing workshop in which they all decide together what items to sew. It is a process of empowerment, and it is also a way in which women can find time to communicate and share experiences with each other while creating something useful and learning how to run a co-operative.





Topics of discussion that have been brought up include the election process in Sweden and the ways immigrants are portrayed in political speeches. Many of them work in the organization for some time, and later decide they want to do something different. Other ways in which women are helped and help each other are, for instance, the search for housing and the initiation of startup organizations. There is often also the need to help them with issues that are the competence of migration centers, since many women have family members, and especially children, in different countries. In general, women experience a strongly positive environment thanks to the support they receive in the development of a wide-ranging set of skills.