



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/513
Inclusion of migrant
women in the labour
market

Brussels, 21 January 2015

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on

Inclusion of migrant women in the labour market

(own-initiative opinion)

Rapporteur: **Béatrice Ouin**

On 10 July 2014, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on

Inclusion of migrant women in the labour market.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 18 December 2014.

At its 504th plenary session, held on 21 and 22 January 2015 (meeting of 21 January 2015), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 212 votes to 1, with 10 abstentions.

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1. **Recommendations**

1.1 In order to implement the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals, both in terms of access to employment for women and integration of immigrants, and because Europe needs migrants despite the worrying spread of hostile discourse which is contrary to the long-term interests of the people living in Europe, **the EESC calls on the European institutions to:**

- make better use of the potential of the European Semester and issue country-specific recommendations on the inclusion of migrant women in the labour market;
- take account of the specific circumstances of migrant women when preparing the post-2015 strategy for gender equality;
- continue to monitor the implementation of Directive 2003/86/EC on the right to family reunification in order to avoid delaying access to employment for women who have the right to family reunification and consider revising the directive to give spouses immediate access to employment;
- assess the proportion of women among EU Blue Card holders¹ and among those benefiting from the Directive on seasonal workers², along with the kind of jobs they are doing, in order to ensure that women migrants are not victims of discrimination;
- ensure that the future rules on researchers, students, voluntary workers and au pairs³ benefit women as much as men;

¹ Council Directive 2009/50/EC of 25 May 2009.

² Directive 2014/36/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 26 February 2014.

³ Proposal for a directive COM(2013) 151 final.

- ensure that at least half of the funds from financial instruments dedicated to integration of immigrants are devoted to women.

1.2 In addition to the measures that should be implemented for all immigrants - men and women - **the EESC calls on the Member States to:**

- put in place clear, ambitious objectives for integrating women migrants;
- adopt policies that take account of women's specific situation, their qualifications, knowledge of the language of the host country and whether they are first- or subsequent generation immigrants;
- inform the European Commission, in the framework of the European Semester, of the measures introduced to promote women's inclusion in the labour market;
- in the context of family reunification, not defer access to employment for spouses, in order to promote integration of families and prevent poverty and loss of skills;
- guarantee women individual rights at every stage in the migration process, not just rights derived from family membership;
- ensure that migrant women are given more information about how to access the support services in place to facilitate access to language and vocational training and good quality jobs;
- organise language courses that meet the specific needs of migrant women, are accessible and oriented towards finding work;
- speed up the process of recognising qualifications and experience gained abroad to enable women to find jobs corresponding to their skills and aspirations;
- avoid de-skilling, which represents a waste of human capital;
- consider work in some sectors (such as cleaning, caring for children and the elderly, hotels and catering and agriculture) as offering opportunities for less-qualified migrant women, provided that steps are taken to ensure that these sectors are legalised, professionalised and upgraded and that women are given training in these areas and enabled to develop their careers;
- support women entrepreneurs and foster entrepreneurship education for migrant women;
- involve the social partners and civil society in policy-making and delivery;
- ratify the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families of 18 December 1990;
- regularise the right of residence of immigrants who have been living in Europe for several years, the mass amnesties granted by certain Member States having proved beneficial.

1.3 Lastly, **the EESC calls on the social partners to:**

- ensure that aspects specific to migrant women are incorporated more effectively into the European social dialogue work programme;
- facilitate the recognition of women migrants' qualifications in collective agreements.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Over recent decades, the face of immigration has become more female. The women migrating to Europe are doing so to re-join family members or because they are refugees or asylum seekers. Many come to earn a living, leaving their families behind in their country of origin and becoming the family's main breadwinner.
- 2.2 They may arrive with or without a residence permit and with varying levels of qualifications. They may be migrating voluntarily or under duress, and some are victims of human trafficking. It is evident that this population is as large as it is diversified.
- 2.3 For its part, in view of its ageing population, falling birth rate and need for skilled labour in numerous sectors, Europe is facing a serious labour-market challenge.
- 2.4 In this context, migrant women represent a currently under-utilised source of skills and creativity. It is vital that they be brought into the labour market, as this can help to ensure that both migrant women themselves and the European Union take full advantage of the potential of migration, as well as strengthening integration and contributing to economic growth and social cohesion.
- 2.5 The EESC has given its views on the issues of immigration and integration on several occasions, and has issued numerous recommendations that apply to both women and men⁴. These recommendations will not be reiterated in this opinion.
- 2.6 On the other hand, the Committee has not hitherto issued proposals specifically concerning migrant women. However, given that equality between women and men has not been achieved anywhere in the world and that there are issues specific to women that cannot be captured using a global approach, this opinion is devoted to the inclusion of migrant women in the labour market.

3. The European context

- 3.1 Increasing the employment rate of women, and migrants in general, is one of the EU's priorities, as stated in the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals⁵, and the European Council's multi-annual programmes⁶.
- 3.2 The Europe 2020 Strategy has set the objective of raising the employment rate to 75% by 2020. Ensuring that migrant women are better integrated into the labour market will be vital

⁴ The EESC's most recent opinions are: [OJ C 451/96, 16.12.2014](#) – [OJ C 67/16, 6.3.2014](#) – [OJ C 351/16, 15.11.2012](#) – [OJ C 181/131, 21.6.2012](#) – [OJ C 48/6, 15.2.2011](#) – [OJ C 354/16, 28.12.2010](#) – [OJ C 347/19, 18.12.2010](#) – [OJ C 128/29, 18.5.2010](#) – [OJ C 27/95, 3.2.2009](#) and the information report on *The new challenges of integration*, CESE 518/2010 fin.

⁵ COM(2011) 455 final.

⁶ The Tampere (1999), The Hague (2004) and Stockholm (2009) European Councils.

to achieving it. Here, the European Semester can make a valuable contribution. The Member States should introduce measures aimed at integrating migrant women and the Commission should issue specific recommendations on this subject.

- 3.3 In addition, aspects specific to migrant women should be given greater consideration when preparing the post-2015 strategy for gender equality. This strategy should help to improve the position of migrant women on the labour market through various means, including support for entrepreneurship.
- 3.4 At the EU level, the situation of migrant women varies considerably, depending on the specific implementing directive that applies.
- 3.5 Women who hold a Blue Card⁷ find it easier to get access to highly skilled jobs; similarly, the spouse of a Blue Card holder is entitled, automatically and immediately, to access the labour market in the host country.
- 3.6 On the other hand, spouses who are admitted under family reunification arrangements⁸ sometimes have to wait for a year - the delay which the Member States may impose - before being able to take up waged employment or a self-employed activity. This delay means that women are dependent on their husbands, distances them from the labour market and leads to a partial loss of skills. To remedy this, the European Commission should envisage a revision of the directive on family reunification, rather than simply monitoring its implementation in the Member States.
- 3.7 As for asylum seekers, prohibiting them from working is an encouragement to their taking undeclared work. The legal obstacles to their access to the labour market should therefore be removed. Furthermore, asylum seekers who are in work should have their stay regularised, something which has already produced good results in the Member States which have granted mass amnesties.
- 3.8 Lastly, European instruments need to be harmonised to ensure that any person residing legally on European territory has immediate access to employment and individual residence rights, irrespective of their matrimonial status.

4. **Specific measures for including migrant women in the labour markets of the Member States**

- 4.1 It is worrying that women migrants face two-fold problems, both as women and as immigrants.

⁷ Directive 2009/50/EC.

⁸ Directive 2003/86/EC.

- 4.1.1 The labour market is disadvantageous to women, whether they are Europeans or immigrants. Despite the EU's legislative framework, when it comes to work-life balance, access to social rights and positions of responsibility and participation in public life, women continue to face greater challenges than men.
- 4.1.2 Women are concentrated in a small number of sectors⁹ (such as health, education, public administration, hotels and catering, services to families and domestic work). Women are more likely to be working part-time and are also over-represented amongst those working on short-term contracts. In 2014, the gender wage gap in the EU is still 16.4%¹⁰, and the gender gap in pensions is wider still.
- 4.1.3 For migrant women, whose employment rate is lower than that of autochthonous women, the situation is still more serious. With the majority concentrated in a few sectors, they are also more likely to be employed in insecure and part-time jobs or jobs with low salaries or poor working conditions. Cultural obstacles in their families or communities can make access to jobs difficult for them. They may also suffer discrimination in access to the labour market.
- 4.2 Specific measures are necessary.
- 4.2.1 In view of this situation, positive action is required. Such action and measures must, above all, take account of women's situation, their qualifications, knowledge of the language of the host country and whether they are first- or subsequent generation immigrants.
- 4.2.2 Some measures, relating to work-life balance, are the same as for autochthonous women. Access to good quality childcare, which is accessible in terms of both cost and location, is crucial for migrant women, who generally have no family nearby to help.
- 4.2.3 Other measures are more specific to migrant women. These include: combating racism, improving access to housing, health and social services and combating forced marriages and polygamy. The desire to benefit from respect for human rights and gender equality in Europe and to flee violence against women and situations of inequality are reasons which compel women to leave their country. They ought not to come up against these same problems in Europe and yet these difficulties exist here too, affecting even second generations of immigrants and hindering their access to employment.
- 4.2.4 Within the EU, many successful initiatives aimed at integrating women into the labour market are taken at local level, by civil society, migrant women's associations and universities. These should be supported and the dissemination of good practice encouraged at national level and between Member States.

⁹ Gender Equality Index Report (EIGE, 2013), page 21.

¹⁰ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics.

- 4.3 Collecting the necessary data for informed policy-making
 - 4.3.1 In order to get a deeper understanding of the needs of migrant women and develop appropriate policies, there is a need for better statistics, broken down by gender and nationality or origin, at both the national and European levels.
- 4.4 Better information for migrant women
 - 4.4.1 To improve their knowledge of the host country and its labour market, migrant women need to be given access to information about their rights and the existing services, in several languages and in cooperation with civil society and migrants' networks, whose contribution must be recognised and supported.
- 4.5 Making it easier to learn the languages of the host countries
 - 4.5.1 Integration and access to employment depend on access to the language of the host country. Insufficient knowledge of the language perpetuates women's isolation, prevents them from finding out about their rights and accessing public services and affects their children's integration. Indeed, young people from immigrant backgrounds tend to have lower educational results than their autochthonous counterparts.
 - 4.5.2 The authorities must therefore make language courses available to migrant women, ensuring that these are accessible in terms of cost, location and timing (compatible with having young children at home). With regard to the content, the courses should be oriented towards being useful for the search for work and contact with public services.
- 4.6 Recognising qualifications and preventing de-skilling
 - 4.6.1 Women immigrants have very diverse profiles and policies must take account of these differences. Whilst some women have a low level of education and experience, others have considerable university or professional qualifications.
 - 4.6.2 For many of these women, the biggest problem is getting the qualifications and experience they have gained abroad recognised, which is paradoxical given that Europe needs skilled workers in numerous areas. It can take some considerable time to get their qualifications recognised and this can lead to discouragement and a loss of skills and push these women to accept jobs for which they are overqualified. When migrant women are unemployed or in jobs for which they are overqualified this represents so many under-utilised resources and a loss of human capital.
 - 4.6.3 Services should be set up to allow the recognition of qualifications acquired in the country of origin. The social partners also have an important role to play in facilitating the recognition of these qualifications in collective agreements.

4.6.4 Some sectors, such as cleaning, care for children and the elderly, hotels and catering, agriculture and the social economy can offer opportunities for less qualified migrant women, as employees or in a self-employed capacity. However, it will be necessary to professionalise and upgrade these sectors, give women training in these areas and recognise the significant contribution made by the women working in them, so that employment in these sectors benefits both autochthonous and immigrant women.

4.6.5 This kind of work may also be transitional, hence the importance of offering training while women are working in these sectors so that they can develop their careers or move into other areas of work.

4.6.6 The specific case of work in private homes

4.6.6.1 Although not all women immigrants work in this sector, it is often the sector which they are drawn to initially, partly because demand is high but also because it is possible to work there without legal registration.

4.6.6.2 These women find themselves trapped. Since they are undocumented, they can only do undeclared and unprotected work, and since they cannot prove that they are working, they cannot regularise their situation and obtain an official residence permit. This places them in an extremely vulnerable situation, alone with numerous employers or living with a single employer.

4.6.6.3 Some European states have introduced measures allowing for this undeclared work to be legalised (tax incentives in Sweden and service voucher schemes in Belgium and France, etc.), which make registration easier for employers and give employees access to social rights and proof of their professional activity, thereby allowing them to regularise their situation.

4.6.6.4 The Member States should ratify International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 189¹¹, which provides for domestic workers to be accorded rights equivalent to those enjoyed by other workers, and should structure this sector, as the EESC recommended in its opinion on *Developing services to the family to increase employment rates and promote gender equality at work*¹².

4.7 Supporting self-employment and entrepreneurship

4.7.1 Research has shown that immigrants are more innovative and entrepreneurial than the host population. In many countries they become self-employed or set up new businesses, often

¹¹ ILO Convention No. 189 entered into force on 5 September 2013.

¹² [OJ C 12, 15.1.2015, p. 16](#)

employing other immigrants. The Committee has adopted an opinion on *The contribution of migrant entrepreneurs to the EU economy*¹³.

4.7.2 To boost their success, these entrepreneurs need support to enable them to access funding, learn how to draw up a business plan and become familiar with the business environment in the host country. Specific initiatives need to be developed to help women entrepreneurs and a particular focus should be placed on social entrepreneurship.

4.7.3 Immigrant women should also be able to draw on mentoring from more experienced entrepreneurs and support should be given to networks of migrant women entrepreneurs. In addition, immigrant women should be offered entrepreneurship education, which should be organised in close cooperation with the social partners and organised civil society.

4.8 Improving the image of immigrant women

4.8.1 Despite the rise in autonomous female immigration, often involving qualified women, society's image of immigrant women as victims of cultures that place little value on women's rights is proving very slow to change. There is a need for a more positive image of migrant women, which could also serve as a model in immigrant communities. Awareness-raising campaigns would contribute here.

4.9 Improving multi-level cooperation

4.9.1 Integration will only be achieved effectively through a partnership between all the parties concerned, including the European institutions, the Member States and the national, regional and local players.

4.9.2 Organised civil society – particularly migrant women's associations – must be involved at all levels of policy-making relating to the inclusion of migrant women in the labour market. These stakeholders can bring genuine added value, thanks to their knowledge of the realities of migrant women's lives and situations. Their participation might also facilitate the emergence of a feeling of co-ownership that would lead to greater acceptance and better implementation of the policies.

13

[OJ C 351, 15.11.2012, p. 16.](#)

5. **Conclusion**

- 5.1 Participating in the labour market is one of the most effective and practical ways of integrating into society. Immigrant women need to be supported and accompanied through their integration process. They must be informed of their rights and obligations in the host society, enjoy individual rights, have access to training, be able to take full advantage of their skills and be recognised for the contribution they make to Europe's economy and society.

Brussels, 21 January 2015.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Henri Malosse
