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Policy gaps in integration and reskilling strategies of migrant women

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Πολιτικές κοινωνικής ένταξης και στρατηγικές των μεταναστριών για την απόκτηση νέων δεξιοτήτων

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ABSTRACT

Although language learning and re-skilling are indispensable components of EU integration policies for third country nationals, existing policies and infrastructure in Greece are insufficient and incoherent particularly with regard to migrant women. The main focus of the paper is how integration policies - especially language learning, formal education and vocational training opportunities affect migrant women's positioning into the labour market and their life plans. How do migrant women cope with the absence of reskilling opportunities and what alternative strategies do they develop to open new paths and overcome marginalization? Improvising in language learning, upgrading professional profiles, building a career through voluntary work and self employment constitute exemplary cases of agency and strategies devised by migrant women in the context of Greek migration policies and society.

KEYWORDS: Migrant women, deskilling, reskilling, agency, integration strategies

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Αν και η εκμάθηση της γλώσσας και η αναβάθμιση των δεξιοτήτων αποτελούν αναπόσπαστο στοιχείο των πολιτικών ένταξης της ΕΕ για υπηκόους τρίτων χωρών, οι υφιστάμενες πολιτικές και υποδομές στην Ελλάδα αποδεικνύονται ανεπαρκείς και αποσπασματικές ιδιαίτερα σε ότι αφορά τις μετανάστριες. Στο άρθρο δίνεται έμφαση στην επίδραση που έχουν οι πολιτικές ένταξης και ειδικότερα η εκμάθηση της γλώσσας, η συμμετοχή στην εκπαίδευση και στα προγράμματα επαγγελματικής κατάρτισης, τόσο στη θέση των μεταναστριών στην αγορά εργασίας, όσο και στα σχέδια ζωής τους. Πώς αντιμετωπίζουν οι μετανάστριες την απουσία ευκαιριών απόκτησης νέων δεξιοτήτων και τι εναλλακτικές στρατηγικές αναπτύσσουν προκειμένου να ανοίξουν νέες διαδρομές και να υπερβούν την περιθωριοποίησή τους; Ο αυτοσχεδιασμός στην εκμάθηση της γλώσσας, η αναβάθμιση του επαγγελματικού προφίλ, η επαγγελματική προοπτική μέσα από την εθελοντική κοινωνική δράση και η αυταπασχόληση, αποτελούν παραδειγματικές περιπτώσεις εμπρόθετης δράσης και των στρατηγικών που επινοούν οι μετανάστριες στο πλαίσιο της ελληνικής πραγματικότητας.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Μετανάστριες, απώλεια και αναβάθμιση δεξιοτήτων, εμπρόθετη δράση, στρατηγικές ένταξης

1. Introduction

In this paper we discuss the impact of integration policies on new migrant women and especially in relation to language learning, education and vocational training opportunities, based on the findings of the 2-year (2006-2008) transnational research project "Integration of female immigrants in labour market and society. Policy assessment and policy recommendations" (acronym: FeMiPol) funded by the European Commission (6th Framework Programme) - within the programme *Scientific Support for Policy*.¹

Our main concern is the examination of *deskilling* processes experienced by a great number of migrant women immigrating to Greece in the last decade, and of *reskilling opportunities* offered by existing integration policies. In addition, we highlight migrant women's own *reskilling* strategies to cope with the devaluation of their qualifications and aiming to open new paths for regaining their lost social status and achieve social mobility. In other words, we attempt to contribute to the theoretical and policy assessment debate by shedding light on migrant women's efforts (i.e. agency) to deal with specific policy, social and structural constraints in order to avoid their marginalization within the hosting society. Using the qualitative method of biographical analysis conducted with 22 migrant women who are or have been employed in the domestic sector, we aim to grasp the ways policy restrictions affect migrants' life plans and enrich the public debate with the need for a qualitative policy assessment and policy reformulations.

In the first section we briefly present the core elements of European and national integration policies, the accompanying infrastructure as well as the role of NGO's in filling the existing policy gaps. In the second section we examine policy gaps related to the accessibility of migrant women to the formal education, vocational training and the labour market. In the third section we present some of our findings pointing to the interrelationship of deskilling with a number of other aspects such as legal status and positioning into the labour market. In the fourth section we present a variety of migrant women's coping with deskilling strategies pointing to their own efforts to transgress existing barriers. In the conclusion we draw attention to key issues to be taken into consideration in filling the existing gaps in the development of integration policies.

2. Migrant integration policies at a European and national level

While the European Union is in search for a new concept to provide a more comprehensive monitoring tool to follow progress towards the integration of immigrant populations in European countries, and while it recognizes the need for new indicators and indexes, at the academic level the discussion about the concept of integration as such remains an open query which has produced a variety of theoretical standpoints. Although the presentation of this debate is beyond the scope of the present paper, it is still worth mentioning that, in the last years, we witness a trend of converging points of view leading to the Europeanization of policy oriented research and theoretical foci.

A basic ascertainment included in the European Framework for integration of third country nationals particularly stressed is "*the need to continually reinforce the link between legal migration policies and integration strategies*".² Consolidation of the legal framework on entry and stay conditions is essential for the development of a coherent EU approach to integration.

Legislative instruments such as family reunification, long-term residence permits and qualification of third-country nationals, access to employment and to education/training and

equality of treatment is already in place and EU legislation on anti-discrimination supports this legal framework. Moreover, mainstreaming integration is acknowledged as an integral part of policy making and implementation across EU, therefore promotion of fundamental rights, non-discrimination and equal opportunities play a crucial role in the context of integration. As women are the majority of the immigrant population in the EU, addressing their specific needs is increasingly reflected in gender mainstreaming mechanisms.

The cultural dimension of integration and intercultural dialogue are increasingly recognised, as essential instruments to foster successful integration and counteract racism and extremism.

Among the various indicators/factors for examining (and/or measuring) progress in integration the “*basic knowledge of the host society’s language, history and institutions*” as well as “*efforts in education*”³ are indispensable to integration and essential to preparing immigrants to be more successful and more active participants in society.

Integration policies across Europe vary considerably between old and new migration countries whereas in the former the establishment of a long standing tradition with mechanisms to promote integration policies is far ahead the latter ones. Being one of the relatively new migration countries and having in addition a far higher percentage of undocumented migrants, Greece has recently provided for specific legislations (i.e. laws, ministerial decrees, regulations) and policies regarding migrants’ integration. According to the latest law (Law 3731/2008) migrants who can prove continuous legal residence for a consecutive 10-year period are the ones entitled to long term residence permits. Still, a great majority of immigrants who have been residing for a long period and would be entitled to long term permits are in practice excluded due to previous legalisation procedures which were based on the issuance of short term (2-year) renewals of permit together with great administrative delays. Moreover, entitlement to long term residence is undermined by the fact that a great number of migrants, especially women, cannot prove their presence in the country as they have been working informally and may also have been undocumented for some period. Therefore, we should keep in mind that, in any case, deficits /gaps in integration policies, which Greece is obliged to implement according to EU directives, refer to a comparatively small number of immigrants residing in the country due to strict prerequisites for long term residence and citizenship.

Given these restrictions, we shall examine the policies for long term residence, i.e. the cornerstone of integration, and the acquisition of citizenship rights in Greece and in Europe, from a comparative perspective.

Several European countries have introduced voluntary or obligatory inclusion programmes or integration tests for immigrants to pass in order to acquire permanent residence or citizenship. Even though the “terminology” used for such programmes across countries varies, it usually consists of language and orientation courses aiming at facilitating migrants’ participation in social life through the teaching of basic information about the legal system, the labour market, the culture and history of the receiving country.⁴

In Greece the satisfactory knowledge of the Greek language has been introduced as a prerequisite for foreign nationals (article 68 of Law 3386/2005), which provides for a mandatory course and an integration test which consists of a high-level test on Greek language, culture and history. The accreditation is obligatory (Ministerial Decree 16928/ 2007) for migrants to acquire the long term residence permit and those eligible to participate in the accreditation system are third country nationals over 16 and residing legally in Greece. The decree provides the attendance of a 150-hour educational programme for Greek language courses and a 25-

hour course for Greek history and culture at the Centres for Adult Education (KEE) of the Ministry of Education or at accredited Centres for Vocational Training (KEK), among other institutions/organisations.

Successful candidates receive a certificate (A, B, C or D) based on their level of linguistic skills (including listening, reading, writing and speaking). Non natives (both EU citizens and third country nationals) holding Level C certificates can according to the ministerial decree (1504/30-5-2001) enrol in a Greek university, whereas EU citizens with a Level D certificate can formally prove fluency in Greek and be employed in the public sector.

On the other hand, in order for migrants to obtain the Greek nationality (Code of Greek nationality 3284/2004), among other preconditions (i.e. having lived in Greece for ten years and having no criminal record, paying 1.500 euros for submitting an application), they must pass a simple language interview.

However, the whole procedure has moved at a rather slow pace as it has not been supported by the necessary infrastructure to facilitate accessibility. In addition, payment of a relatively high fee, proof of health insurance and financial resources - not to mention that migrants expecting the renewal of their permit have no right to participate in the procedure - have resulted to the limited participation of immigrants so far.

Nevertheless, it is expected that existing deficits are to be counterbalanced by a number of recently launched programmes such as the Integrated Activity Project "HESTIA" (Ministerial Decree 25057/2008) aiming at the smooth adaptation and social inclusion of third country nationals residing legally in Greece and including different priority areas (operational programmes) as for example Information Services, Promotion in employment, Education, Health and Housing, Civilisation, Reformation and Care for ex-prisoners. In addition, the programme "ODYSSEUS", aiming to upgrade existing infrastructure and systematize the learning of the Greek language and the recent implementation of the programme "European Fund for the Integration of third country nationals" (of the Ministry of Interior) are going to be added to the policy tools for the promotion of immigrants' integration and to an extent cover existing policy gaps and delays.

To sum up, the existing legalisation framework can be considered as a process which contradicts integration policies leading to a type of subordinate integration (Liapi 2009). In other words, taking into consideration the functioning of the above mentioned intersecting factors / obstacles the result is a subtle "gate keeping" mechanism for the majority of immigrants having the right and willing to acquire the status of permanent residency and become integrated. Moreover, emphasis of the Greek law on the knowledge of Greek language, culture and history as a formal prerequisite, in contrast to other European countries which support immigrants residing on their territory by providing information and knowledge about the legal system, the labour market and everyday life, limits the scope of integration in itself. In practice it deprives them of becoming competent in actively participating in social, cultural and economic life through which immigrants may acquire a much broader capacity in exercising their civic rights. From this perspective integration policies are proven to be less inclusive.

2.1 The supplementary role of NGOs

The limited or insufficient infrastructure of educational institutions (usually under the ministry of education and often the responsibility of local authorities) is in most European countries supplemented by language courses offered by NGO's (mainstream, advocacy, migrants' associations, etc). In fact, the language courses offered by NGO's prepare migrants for official

language and integration courses being in a way the doorway to the former. What is more, courses offered by NGO's are easily accessed by both documented and undocumented migrants; they are frequently free of charge and flexible and often employ mediators or trainers with a migrant background. Apart from that, some NGO's deliver social counselling services targeted at specific "groups" of migrants (women, victims of trafficking, prostitutes, asylum seekers, etc).

Despite the fact that the courses and services offered by NGO's may be insufficient (short term courses, as they may be project based and dependent on time limited funding, low level, not covering all migrants' needs, etc) it should be stressed that NGO's in many cases substitute the policy deficit with regard to language learning and integration courses or the gap in service provision. Most importantly however, NGO's are sources of expertise for migrants' communities often capitalising their knowledge by becoming trainers and advisors for governmental organisations and authorities.

Given that NGOs and the civil society play a complementary role to state migration policies, their formal and substantial participation in public consultation procedures, up to now characterised by mutual distrust, should be further strengthened.

3. Access of migrant women to policies and measures: between chances and restrictions

The feminization of recent migration flows to Europe and in particular to Greece, is characterized by an educated female population immigrating in the context of an autonomous migration plan (*solo migration*) to financially support their family and/or look for a new and better life. This is a given which prioritizes the need to elaborate a gender sensitive integration approach and to formulate specific policies. To this end, we present our findings about inefficiencies and limitations of implemented integration policies and their discriminatory character, by pointing to their biographical impact (biographical evaluation of policies).

3.1 (In) accessibility to language learning

Language being like a web it intersects with almost every dimension of migrants, and in particular, migrant women's lives: residence stabilisation and legal status i.e. long term residence and access to nationality/citizenship; access to language learning measures and infrastructure as well as to the educational system, i.e. secondary and tertiary education, formal vocational training; access, insertion and positioning in the (formal and informal) labour market; economic and social integration in general.

According to the results emerging from biographical interviews and the analysis of policies⁵ migrant women and especially those employed in the informal labour market and the domestic sector, have limited access to language courses. The majority of migrant women are more than often self-taught using their ingenuity in order to learn the language: they watch TV, use dictionaries, read children's books, learn through their own children, etc.

On the other hand, even when migrant women are fluent in the host country's language (e.g. *omogeneis* from Albania in Greece) this does not necessarily safeguard their access to the labour market as the former is almost always interrelated to their legal status and type of permit they possess. What is more, even when it is not necessary to speak the native language in order to find employment if one speaks English, as for example some Filipino migrants working as domestic workers, access and positioning in the labour market may not be more favourable.

Analysing the biographical interviews it becomes apparent that language knowledge is an indispensable but not sufficient condition in order to successfully access labour market integration measures or vocational training. Although migrant women in our research are in many cases (highly) skilled and qualified, the majority are employed in the domestic sector or at best have to work in the domestic sector before moving on to other sectors of the economy. Still, moving to another sector does not necessarily mean that they never return to domestic reproductive work when unemployed as the latter functions as a “safety net” (Liapi 2008) for many of them. Besides, high demand for care labour due to the insufficiency of public care services for people with care responsibilities operates as a pull factor for migrant women, in particular in South European countries and more so in Greece.

3.2 Access to formal education

Second Chance Schools are an innovative institution for adult education established in Greece in 1997 (Law 2525/97) and co-funded by the ESF and the Ministry of Education and aiming at combating social exclusion and enhancing social cohesion. Courses are free, last for two years and include Greek language courses, math, ICT, physics, English, as well as vocational guidance and career counselling, whereas graduates acquire a degree equivalent to the high school certificate. However, access to Second Chance Schools is only reserved for citizens over 18 who have not completed compulsory education and offers no opportunities for lowly educated and/or illiterate migrants to benefit.

Access to formal education (secondary, higher, tertiary etc) is reserved only for migrant women (and men) who have a legal status⁶, i.e. long or permanent stay permit. However, access to formal education may be further restricted, as apart from the legal status and with the exception of migrants with a study permit, there are extra requirements in order to be eligible to attend (e.g. good previous educational degrees, language skills, etc). Such requirements, together with social class disadvantages and difficulties migrants may have understanding the educational system of a host country restrict access to formal education even more.

3.3 Recognition of academic titles

Despite the institutional framework regarding the recognition of academic titles and the certification of qualifications in the EU (e.g. *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region – Lisbon 1997*⁷, *The European Qualifications Framework*⁸, *bilateral agreements between states, etc*), collaboration networks (e.g. *ENIC*⁹, *NARIC*¹⁰) in Greece, as in many other countries studied, migrant women have limited access to information about procedures, requirements, fees, etc. in order to obtain recognition or accreditation of their academic titles or university degrees. Therefore, migrant women who succeed in reaching this process are usually discouraged by difficulties (time consuming and bureaucratic formalities) and in many cases “choose” not to pursue the recognition of their qualifications and skills, remaining trapped in precarious and low-paid jobs in the (mostly informal) labour market.

Another point to be considered is that recognition does not automatically mean acquiring a license to practise a profession. For example, qualified nurses, have to obtain a professional license in order to practise their profession. Furthermore in Greece, the difficulty in recognising academic degrees and professional experience from other countries and the policy gap with regard to appropriate regulation measures is to an extent justified by the major differences

among educational systems and syllabuses and the absence of fully comparable programmes in the various universities. Recognition is only fully guaranteed to graduates and degree holders from a few countries with which there are agreements of mutual academic recognition, which is not the case for ex-eastern European countries from where the majority of educated migrant women originate. In addition, given that the majority of female migrants are employed in services as domestic workers and/or carers doing jobs which are considered manual and unskilled, even though they may be skilled, as was the case with many of our interviewees, means that the state may have no incentive to recognize their degrees as they are employed in a non regularized sector of the economy and have no negotiation power to exercise pressure.

Lack of adequate, reliable and precise information about the process as well as prejudices are among the basic obstacles they face and therefore it is not surprising that migrant women are usually discouraged by officers and do not consider having their degree recognized or postpone the procedure indefinitely. Instead, in many cases they may "hide" their qualifications in order to make job-searching easier, applying for low-skilled, low-paid jobs as the necessity for cheap labour is always present.

Though evident it should be stressed that for a skilled person with a university degree to be classified as a manual and unskilled labourer not only drives to the narrowing of their potentials but may also be experienced as a deep sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction arising from unfulfilled biographical plans.

3.4 Vocational training and active labour market measures

During the past few years (2003 - 2007, EU Third Community Support Framework) the participation and eligibility of migrants as beneficiaries of vocational training and labour market measures has been established in the context of active labour market policies. However, these policies are targeted at the unemployed population excluding the large majority of migrants – especially migrant women – who cannot prove their unemployment due to the fact that they have worked informally either in the domestic or in other sectors.

The implementation of individualized Support Services programmes addressing migrants in the previous period, ended up with no overall data and relevant indices to allow for the evaluation of both quantitative and qualitative results and thus limiting chances to use assessment for prospective programmes and measures to be applied in the future.

Finally, even though Community Initiatives, and especially the Equal I and II projects, have developed significant innovations and have contributed to the accumulation of know-how, it remains open whether they will be utilized and incorporated into new policies and programmes.

3.5 Deskillling of migrant women causes marginalisation in the labour market and vice versa

For most migrant women deskillling is experienced and even accepted as an integral component of migration or as an obvious fact, i.e. migrants have fewer opportunities and have to work harder than others. What is more, for some migrant women deskillling and downwards social mobility is a process which has started in their countries of origin, before migration, and may have been the very reason for migrating. In these cases migration is an attempt to regain the lost social status.

Even though language acquisition is one of the headlight proposals of integration policies in general, it is not sufficient to ensure vocational and social insertion when other obstacles prevail (e.g. short term residence, temporary work permits, being undocumented, etc) as already mentioned. Exclusion from active labour market measures (vocational training and/or reorientation, continuous learning, required in many occupations and at many skills' levels nowadays) "consolidates" the deskilling process and may, in some cases, become a vicious circle trapping educated and skilled migrant women in marginal sectors of the economy, from which, there is no way out as they are invisible both as economic and social actors. Having no alternative and being pushed to work in the domestic sector, as domestic workers or as carers, live-ins and live outs, in turn becomes a far-reaching deskilling process.

On the other hand, deskilling might be "accepted" in terms of an integration strategy whereas work in the domestic sector may become a *survival strategy* (Kontos & Sacaliuc 2008; Morokvasic & Catarino 2008; Krzystek, 2007), a *stepping stone* (Cederberg & Anthias 2008) or an *entry labour* (Liapi 2008) for qualified and skilled migrant women who have limited or no access to other sectors of the labour market. Alternatively, other entrance- to- the- labour market-trajectories are followed, such as, self employment, professionalization of domestic and care work or transformation of voluntary into paid work.

In sum, deskilling being a process resulting in brain waste, misuse and mismanagement of such a workforce reservoir, should not remain a blind spot in policy making.

4. Migrant women's coping with deskilling strategies

4.1 Contextualising migrant women's coping strategies

Migrant women's integration strategies are differentiated based on a number of structural factors, migratory circumstances, legal and institutional constraints and biographical obstacles they face both before and during migration.

The migratory plan and the reason for migrating decisively affect the strategies migrant women deploy in relation to reskilling strategies. That is, motives and intentions to become actively engaged in reskilling processes, is determined for instance by the initial plan for the duration and reason of migration. Migration due to problems in their personal lives becomes itself a strong life orientation for gaining a better social status (Liapi 2008), whereas becoming the breadwinner and migrating in order to support the family back home may lead to an instrumental relationship with the host country due to the plan to return (Morokvasic & Catarino 2008; Kontos & Sacaliuc 2008).

Their legal status i.e. being documented, under refugee or family reunion status, *the type of residence permit* they manage to obtain i.e. long or short term permit, work or study permit, along with *the unstable legalization framework for admission* as is the case in Greece and Italy (Zeis & Liapi 2006; Campani, Chiappelli, Cabral, Manetti 2006), function as starting points and set the conditions for integration processes including access to language learning policies, qualifications and skills recognition.

Consequently *access to rights, public services and goods* are directly affected by the above and in turn restrict or broaden the chances migrant women have to participate in reskilling policies and measures such as active labour market policies, social counselling, childcare services, and support from social networks of the majority society (Anthias, Cederberg, Barber, Ayres 2008, and Liapi 2008).

Moreover, ability in devising reskilling strategies is embedded *in their educational capital and professional background*. For example, migrant women from East European countries, usually with a higher educational level, seem to be more able to analyse lucidly the socioeconomic conditions of the host country and therefore are more often actively engaged in reskilling processes as was seen in our cases (Liapi 2008). Their educational capital becomes a stimulus leading them to take steps in order to improve their lives in the host society irrespective of the outcomes. Also, whether they are at the beginning of their professional career, young and ambitious, or close to pension, older and not interested in building a new career, are additional factors differentiating their intentions and efforts to be reskilled.

Their positioning in the labour market of the host country and most importantly whether the type of job they do is considered an *entry labour* directs their efforts to exit low paid sectors through participation in retraining policies. For example live-in domestic migrants in Greece try to move out and become either live outs or self-employed (Liapi 2008).

The country of origin and ethnic background may facilitate not only language learning but also labour market insertion. For example, knowing the language of the host country or a language similar to the language spoken in host country (e.g. Pontian which has similarities with the Greek language,) may constitute a head start in order to deal with deskilling, access different sectors of the economy and enter different professions/vocations.

Finally, *migrant women's life plans and trajectories, awareness of the (lack) of perspectives, resources activated and utilized, relations and interactions established both with the majority society and co-ethnics or other migrants* are also factors which have diverse and multiple effects on the strategies developed in order to deal with and/or overcome difficulties and insufficiencies with regard to integration and reskilling policies.

4.2 Main reskilling and integration strategies

Overcoming language barriers

Based on the analysis of biographical interviews our findings point to the fact that migrant women have developed a variety of strategies in order to overcome language barriers, find work, communicate with other migrants and build networks with the majority society. More specifically, to deal with the insufficiency or absence of specially designed language learning projects and the fact that they do not speak the native language, migrant women, in particular domestic workers, utilize and capitalise their knowledge of English in order to communicate with their employers and gain access to the majority society. In other words, migrant women use the English language as a *"lingua franca"* in their working environment (Greece, Cyprus, and the UK). This is not the case with the women coming from ex communist countries where opportunities to learn English as a foreign language were extremely limited. Instead, migrant women from the former USSR use the Russian language as a *"lingua franca"* to communicate with migrants from East European countries and establish relationships among each other and therefore manage to overcome social isolation.

In Greece migrant women from Balkan countries use their mother tongues (i.e. Romanian, Bulgarian) as a job asset in the services sector when for instance they are employed in job agencies (Liapi 2008).

Satisfactory language skills and mobilization of social capital resources reflected in connections with the natives may lead to upwards occupational mobility of migrant women, as for example may be the case with *omogeneis* from Albania, who being fluent in Greek have better access to reskilling processes (formal and informal) and can therefore construct a new professional profile (Liapi 2008).

The majority of migrant women both across the European countries we studied and in Greece have developed and devised self help and/or trial and error methods to learn the language of the host country (at least on an elementary level) and cope with policy gaps and exclusion from language and/or official integration courses. The majority of domestic workers being constrained by the lack of free time and inflexibility in the delivery of language courses are not able to attend specialised courses and adopt self teaching methods to learn the language. School-aged children (second generation migrants) are another “source of knowledge” aiding parents with language learning and also with other subjects such as history, geography, etc.

Learning the language on the job is another common strategy. For migrant women working as live-ins the acquisition of language is facilitated by the daily contacts with employers and self teaching methods they are helped to devise.

A point for further consideration is how fluent they can become when learning a “*contextual language*” used only in specific occasions and milieus (domestic work and care sector) and most importantly if this language level allows them to apprehend the social and political situation in the host country, exercise their rights and participate in civic society (Liapi, Vouyioukas 2008).

Acquiring new skills and upgrading one’s professional profile

The strategies for coping with deskilling are often interrelated and interdependent and they point to certain shared, objective obstacles encountered by migrant women. For example, they may resolve to any kind of employment as they need financial means to avoid exclusion and inactivity. Therefore, accepting deskilling and downwards mobility at a certain (initial) stage of their migration course but remaining keen and ambitious, career driven and continuing to pursue one’s goals for a more satisfying job in the future, may be seen as a strategy to cope with deskilling. Also they may develop various strategies aiming at their *professional reorientation* (Liapi 2008; Kontos & Sacaliuc 2008; Morokvasic & Catarino 2008) through both formal and informal training.

Building a career through voluntary work

Volunteer work is a reskilling process allowing migrant women to capitalise their experience, reorient and be employed as (cultural) mediators and also a way of learning the language. Most importantly however, volunteer work is itself transformed, or at least there are attempts to do so, by migrant women into paid labour. Confronted with an exclusionary reality in the host country migrant women make *efforts to construct an alternative professional profile and build a career in the social economy* (Campani & Chiappelli 2008; Liapi 2008). Political participation and activism is both an enabling process for the development of a migrant identity and a social integration process. This is accomplished through participation in training, and seminars, mostly EU funded such as Equal projects, and through the use of formal and informal social networks.

Self employment as a reskilling process

Self employment may on the one hand be a route to overcome failure to utilize one’s qualifications and skills in the host society’s labour market and on the other a strategy to deal with social exclusion. In the latter case self employment is conceived more as a survival strategy while in the former it is mostly an occupational reorientation strategy to cope with deskilling and poor chances to enter the labour market in one’s own profession. In Greece even though migrant women may choose to become self employed in order to regain their lost social status, or to cope with their exclusion from public social services, still accumulation of knowledge has proved to be an empowering reskilling process.

However the obstacles faced by migrant women mean that such strategies cannot be generalised but rather they should be presented as exemplary cases in order to develop policies fostering entrepreneurship and self-employment among migrant women (and men).

Attempts to professionalize care and domestic work

Professionalization of care and domestic work is another strategy deployed by migrant women (Morokvasic & Catarino 2008; Kontos & Sacaliuc 2008; Liapi 2008) often trapped in the (informal) domestic sector where the division between care and other domestic tasks (housework, cleaning, cooking, etc) is unclear and the workload huge and where migrant women are extremely vulnerable and have no voice or power as workers experiencing major limitations on their freedom and autonomy. Migrant women have been attempting to professionalize care and domestic work either by transferring/translating parts of their previous mothering and housekeeping experience and skills to their job or by investing new values to domestic work (Kontos & Sacaliuc 2008; Liapi 2008). Their efforts point to the urgent need to recognise care and domestic work and have the skills needed accredited and most importantly to the need to regularise the informal domestic sector.

5. Conclusions

One of our main findings from the analysis of the biographical interviews is that the role of migrant women's agency in acquiring skills is not recognized and addressed by social integration policies. More specifically, migrant women acquire skills on the one hand through migration, such as intercultural competences, multilingualism, flexibility, occupational mobility and on the other on the job, such as skills needed in the domestic care sector.

The need to examine the above in view of their impact on migrant women's employability, social and economic integration and cover the policy gap when planning and implementing reskilling measures for (men and women) migrants is both evident and urgent. Moreover, migrant men and women are not a homogenous group. They are diversified by ethnicity and national histories, age, gender, social class and migration pattern. In this sense policies have to be more complex and sophisticated if they are to be effective.

Migrant women bring rich educational and/or professional background that can enrich and enhance the dynamics of host countries' labour markets; therefore they should be taken into account when implementing programmes and activities targeted at them. Moreover, different socioeconomic conditions can produce different socioeconomic problems or potentialities, reflected in the field of language/integration courses, training and reskilling measures. In this sense, programme promoters, along with migrant women and their representatives and NGO's should pay more attention and distinguish between general problems and those specifically affecting migrant women.

Notes

1. The research covered eleven European countries: Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK.
2. Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Third Annual report on Migration and Integration pages 3-5
3. Ibid

4. See also Third Annual Report on Migration and Integration, Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2007) 512 final Brussels, 11.9.2007 and the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) [<http://www.integrationindex.eu>]
5. Femipol: WP1 Policy analysis
6. It should be noted that we are not referring to the education of minors (second generation migrants).
7. The Convention has been signed, ratified and put into force in Cyprus, France, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK, it has only been signed by Italy, whereas Greece and Spain have neither signed, nor ratified the Convention. The Convention states basic principles related to the assessment of qualifications (e.g. no discriminations on any ground such as the applicant's gender, race, colour, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status; transparent procedures; provision of information; reasonable time limit; etc), the recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education, of periods of study and of higher education qualifications, information etc.
8. The EQF is a common European reference framework which links countries' qualifications systems together, to make qualifications more readable and aiming to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate lifelong learning. Adopted by the European Council in February 2008, as an instrument for the promotion of lifelong learning, it encompasses general and adult education, vocational training and applies to all types of qualifications. The emphasis of the EQF is on 'learning outcomes' regardless of where a particular qualification was acquired. Shifting the focus to learning outcomes it supports a better match between the needs of the labour market (for knowledge, skills and competences) education and training provisions and it facilitates the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the transfer and use of qualifications across different countries, education and training systems.
9. The Council of Europe and UNESCO have established the ENIC Network (European Network of National Information Centres on academic recognition and mobility). The Network is made up of the national information centres of the States which have signed the European Cultural Convention or the UNESCO Europe Region providing information on the recognition of foreign diplomas, degrees and other qualifications, education systems in both foreign countries and the ENIC's own country, as well as information on opportunities for studying abroad (loans, scholarships, practical advices etc).
10. The NARIC Network (National Academic Recognition Information Centres) is an initiative of the European Commission and aims at improving academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study in the Member States of the EU, the EEA countries and the associated countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Cyprus. The network is part of the Community's Programme SOCRATES/ERASMUS, which stimulates the mobility of students and staff between higher education institutions.

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