

Promoting Women's Rights in Immigrant Populations: NGOs' Best Practices for Muslim Women in Athens

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Abstract

Working for the promotion of women's rights is based on the "Beijing Platform for Action." Research and prevention policies against women's discrimination as well as confronting the violence against women are generally recommended, but there are also specific cultural issues that affect the outcomes of NGOs' interventions for female immigrants. This paper is focused on NGOs' actions to support immigrant women in Athens, Greece and researches culture in the promotion of gender equality, with special attention given to the needs of Muslim women. A qualitative research based on select NGOs' programs is presented and discussed in order to determine criteria for best practices. Interviews with programs' stakeholders also refer to practices' efficiency as well as to particular obstacles determined by cultural issues. Intercultural mediation as a practice for dealing with conflict and to maximize understanding and empowerment of women immigrants is also addressed.

Keywords: NGOs for immigrants, Migration, Gender, Muslim women, cultural competency, Greece

Women and Migration in Greece: An Overview

Increasing international migration rates shape today's multicultural societies thereby raising demands for social cohesion and tolerance. The Greek experience of migration shares many common characteristics with countries of South Europe. Having been mainly emigration countries until the 1970s, South European countries became also host countries for immigrants in their recent histories (King & Zontini, 2000). The South European model of immigration presupposes common social, political, and economic features among Greece, Italy, and Spain (Lafazani, 2008). Massive inflow of immigrants has highlighted the complex social dimensions of migration in Europe, particularly since 2000; this has corresponded to an increased academic interest on migration (Lafazani, 2008).

In the case of Greece, a massive inflow of migrants during the early '90s and the continuous increasing immigration rates over the past two decades makes Greece an interesting case study in the literature, especially the country's capital, Athens (e.g., Antonopoulos and Winterdyk, 2006; Baldwin-Edwards, 2004, 2005; Iosifides and King, 1998; King, Iosifides and Myrivili, 1998; Lyberaki and Maroukis, 2005; Mavroudi, 2007; Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2009). The immigrant population largely comes from neighboring countries (Kiprianos, Balias,

and Passas, 2003), while Greece is also a “transit station” for Middle Eastern, Asian, and African immigrants and asylum seekers (Lafazani, 2008). According to the 2001 national census in Greece, there were approximately 800,000 immigrants, representing 7% of the total population (Karantinos and Christofilopoulou, 2010). In fact, the 2001 census was the first instance of substantial evidence for Greece as a destination for immigrants, but there is also an increasing – and largely unaccounted for – number of illegal immigrants (Kiprianos, Balias, and Passas, 2003); many of whom are smuggled into Greece (Antonopoulos and Winterdyk, 2006).

In general, migration constitutes a complex phenomenon, which involves various economic, social, political, cultural, historical, and geographical factors and linkages, related both with immigrants and host communities (see also Chrysochoou, 2005; Troumbeta, 2000). Acculturation processes are often challenging to both the immigrant populations and the society of the host country (Berry, 2001; Chrysochoou, 2005). In this context, the culture and values of the host country may conflict with those of immigrant populations, as ethnic stereotypes, attitudes, and prejudice and the multicultural ideology shape the intergroup relations between cultural minorities and host society (Berry, 2001; Chrysochoou, 2005). Furthermore, globalization and human rights have an impact on shaping the concepts of culture and most of all, in forming a concept of recognition of the right of cultural self-determination (Markovitz, 2004).

Social integration and support of immigrants are general aims in policy-making to protect human rights and to ensure socioeconomic development in European countries. The European Union (EU) has recognized that the existed “neutral” formal discourse on immigrant issues used to ignore women’s experiences and needs, contributing to the reinforcement of patriarchal stereotypes (Kambouri and Hatzopoulos, 2009). Gender and cultural needs are referred to in United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) documents, for example, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995 and the Council of Europe Recommendations on Women Migrants Issues (particularly Recommendation 956 (1982), **Resolution 1478 (2006); Recommendation 1732 (2006); Resolution 1697 (2009); Recommendation 1891 (2009);** Resolution 1811 (2011)). Obligations of member states represent the axes for the intervention both for public and NGOs in changing attitudes and stereotypes about violence against women, systematic coordination of services, citizenship, and the comprehensive evaluation of program implementation [Council of Europe **Resolution 1478 (2006); Resolution 1697 (2009)**]. Immigration-

related policy priorities include the protection of human rights, the promotion of civil and cultural rights and equal opportunities in employment, and a variety of social services and citizen participation. Ethnic and religious minorities, women, and the young are special groups of interest for the policy making agenda. At the same time, NGOs for immigrants protect immigrants' rights and focus on their specific needs and interests; to this end, NGOs usually cooperate with public social welfare services for immigrants. NGOs also play a significant role in the dissemination of best practices both in the community and the targeted groups of interest.

Research interests on women's immigration, focused on their distinct needs and characteristics, has emerged as a result of the development of women's movements, the increasing feminist perspective and the limitation of the male-centric approach to migration in sociology during the 1970s (Maratou-Alipranti, 2007; Morokvasić, 1984). Within this context, "gender" has proven to play a significant role in researching immigration, as female migration rates have increased globally over the last 40 years, resulting in a phenomenon that has been referred to as the "feminization of migration" (Maratou-Alipranti, 2007, p. 27). This qualitative change in the conceptualization of female migration focused on women migrating as autonomous individuals, both in examinations of employment and social participation (Maratou-Alipranti, 2007; Basu, Smith, and Villa, 2001).

In the case of Greece, researching immigrant profiles is difficult and although research projects increased over since 2000, there has not been any systematic collection or categorization of this data since 2003 (Lafazani, 2008). Recent research findings focus on patterns of immigrants' integration in urban and rural areas, the general improvement of employment and life conditions, as well as increased gender issues awareness (Stratoudaki, 2009). However, research focusing on the special needs of immigrant women and other gender and cultural issues is still lacking (Stratoudaki, 2009).

Feminization of migration actually focuses on "push and pull factors" of women's independent immigration, while immigration's effects on them has not yet been studied (Lafazani, 2008). There seems to be lower immigrant women participation (i.e., compared to that of immigrant men) that reflects their difficulties with Greek language and lower education levels (Tsakiridi, 2009). Generally, immigrant women in Greece continue to work in lower-skilled and temporary jobs compared to men; they are less paid and often suffer discrimination and violation of their rights (Maratou-Alipranti, 2007, pp. 30-31; Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003; Maratou-Alipranti and Fakiolas, 2003). Additionally, high

rates of immigrant incarcerated women (Artinopoulou, 2012) raises many worries as to their engagement in criminal acts during their arrival and staying in Greece. In fact, current literature on women's immigration underlines seemingly contradictory notions concerning the "empowerment" and "exploitation" of immigrant women (Maratou-Alipranti, 2007, pp. 28-31). Risk of exploitation and trafficking of immigrant women is also stressed in the existing Greek literature (e.g. Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003; Lazaridis, 2001; Lazos, 2002). However, links between immigration and trafficking is not clear in the Greek surveys (Stratoudaki 2009).

Moreover, academic interest on "informal social networks" contributes to the study of immigrant women's social participation and their experience of rights. Informal social network approaches present friends, neighbors, and relatives of immigrants as "regulators" of individual decisions about migration (Oishi, 2002). These networks are recognized as key points in newcomers' adaptation and for distribution of information about the host country's living conditions and shared values (Oishi, 2002). In Greece, informal networks are also accessed by immigrants to find accommodation and work (Fakiolas and Maratou-Alipranti, 2000). At the same time, the relationships of immigrant women with their families (especially if the migration of women is a means of achieving the economic goals of the family) are maintained along with the parallel adjustment of their status and their role in family and society (Maratou-Alipranti, 2007; Maratou-Alipranti and Fakiolas, 2003).

Nevertheless, stereotypes about immigrants as "foreigners" together with gender stereotypes, contribute to multi-level discriminations against immigrant women (Maratou-Alipranti, 2007). In general, women immigrants face a double obstacle in their immigration to the host country, both as immigrants and as women, especially in the labour market and as victims of exploitation and trafficking (e.g., Tastsoglou and Hadjicostanti, 2003; Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003; Ekme-Poulopoulos, 2002; Lazos, 2002; Morokvasic, 1984). Negative gender and racial attitudes affect service provision to immigrant women. The lack of social support consequently exacerbates this inequality and its consequences. Whilst gender mainstreaming is becoming common in academia, research, and policy, cultural mainstreaming is not yet done in research and the policy framework. This is partly due to the fact that gender mainstreaming is coherent and explicit, while cultural interests of different groups and minorities are rather heterogeneous (Karantinos & Christofilopoulou 2010).

Muslim immigrant women in the Greek society: A threefold model

With respect to Greece, Muslim immigrants' typically come from: Egypt, Gambia, Libya, Morocco, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Syria (Tsakiridi, 2009). There is a large Muslim community of approximately 112,000 members in Thrace, northern Greece (Antoniou, 2003). A smaller Muslim community also exists in Athens; Muslim immigrants in Athens are partly immigrants from Thrace, which follows the pattern of urban migration after arrival in Greece. Partly, as a result of immigration, Muslims constitute the second largest religious group in Greece (Antoniou, 2003).

Muslim women in Europe are a diverse group who require further study and categorization (Ahmad & Sheriff, 2001). The criterion of women's grouping is typically by nationality and not religious affiliation, therefore religious and spiritual needs are not well represented in research. This gap in knowledge of distinct needs actually impedes the integration of policy implementation.

In Greece, we may assume that a threefold model may apply in the case of Muslim immigrant women, as they are Muslim immigrant women in an Eastern Orthodox country where religion is a very sensitive issue. While there is some research on immigrant women in Greece (e.g., Maratou-Alipranti, 2007; Cavounidis, 2003; Maratou-Alipranti and Fakiolas, 2003; Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003; Tastsoglou and Hadjicostanti, 2003; Fakiolas and Maratou-Alipranti, 2000), research on Muslim immigrant women or generally Muslim women in Greece is very limited (e.g., Malkides, 2005; Zaimakes and Kaprani, 2005; Papadopoulou, 2010). This might be due to the lower flow of immigrant women from most Muslim countries (e.g. Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, etc.) to Greece; (Cavounidis, 2003; Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003; Tastsoglou and Hadjicostanti, 2003); or "the different patterns of settlement and stay in Greece" where females from Muslim countries usually work inside the home (Maratou-Alipranti and Fakiolas, 2003, pp. 172-173).

In researching the case of Muslim immigrant women in Greece, we noticed some key-points:

1. Greece has experienced a great social, economic, and political change that has had an impact on Greek legislation concerning migrants and on the social representations and attitudes towards immigrant populations (Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003; Troumbeta, 2000).

2. There is a xenophobic trend in Greek society that derives partially from past events that had a great effect on the Greek labour market and ethnic homogeneity (i.e., the large migration flows from former Soviet Union and Albania during the 1980s and 1990s); but it

also reflects the lack of effective policy and legal framework in managing immigration from abroad (Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003; Cavounidis, 2003; King, Iosifides and Myrivili, 1998). Particularly important when examining Muslim immigrant experiences in Greece is the past history of Ottoman-Turkish oppression's linkage with Islam (Antoniou, 2003).

3. From a cultural-religious perspective, there is an on-going debate as to the limits of acceptance of public practice of the cultural-religious rights of Muslim populations in Greece. This debate is focused primarily on the issue of establishing a mosque in Athens and is extended to general ethno-national disparities and the wider socio-economic policies toward Muslim minorities (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2009; Anagnostou and Triandafyllidou, 2007; Antoniou, 2003).

4. From a socio-cultural perspective, there are some obvious differences between the social patterns of the Greek Orthodox and the Muslim minorities; such differences include symbolic features of dressing customs of Muslim women and their typical engagement in housework or farm work (Malkides, 2005; Zaimakes and Kaprani, 2005). A gender dimension is also apparent here; in Greece, there has been a cultural shift from the "family-centric" model where women are engaged in childcare and domestic work to a model where women are attend formal education longer and are more active in the labour market outside home (Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003). The family still has a crucial role in Greek society. However, while the patriarchal model of family has given way to modern types of families in Greek society, such as single parent families, Muslim minorities in Greece maintain their traditional family structure where the man works outside the home and the woman undertakes domestic household duties (Malkides, 2005; Zaimakes and Kaprani, 2005). A hierarchy exists in many Muslim families who live in Greece and it reflects the Koran's principles on the status of each family member and of gender (Malkides, 2005).

Considering the above notions, the tree-fold model that characterizes Muslim immigrant women is used in the case of Greece. This raises some questions as to what extent Muslim immigrant women are involved in informal social networks and to what extent they access the care of social services or engage in activities of social integration and support of other organizations and NGOs. Moreover, how does the limited inclusion of Muslim women in the wider Greek society function as protection from discrimination and exploitation? At the same time, does the limited integration of Muslim women in wider Greek society

cost this population while maintaining existing xenophobic stereotypes towards the Muslim community? Of course these questions cannot easily be answered in this article and the respect of religious beliefs of every individual while examining such questions is necessary. Some of the answers to these questions can be found in existing, although limited, NGO programs for Muslim women.

Greek policies and practice on migration, gender and race: Five selected implementation programs

a. Overview

Greek legislation for immigrants reflects the harmonization to the EU general framework and directives to all member-states in managing migration (e.g., Council of Europe, 2000a; Council of Europe, 2000b). Law 3304/2005 on “Application of the principle of equal treatment regardless of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation” refers to employment and occupational training, education, social protection, security, health, participation in employment committees, and access to social goods and services. Additionally, Law 3386/2005 on “Entry, residence and social integration of citizens of third countries in the Greek territory” constitutes the first attempt of the Greek government to regulate the social integration of immigrants. Aiming at their legal status and social integration of immigrants, a broad set of regulations covers the reduction of discrimination, social equality in employment, respect of social and religious rights, support of immigrant families and networks, and participation of immigrants in social services and language learning. Articles 65 and 66 refer to immigrants’ socio-cultural integration, while cultural diversity is presented in Article 66 as justification of respect of immigrants’ rights and human rights as well as a standard for immigrants’ integration and peaceful coexistence.

On the level of local governments, care for immigrants and their needs is reflected in the Code of Municipalities and Communities (Law 3463/2006) among the responsibilities of municipalities and communities in the fields of social protection and solidarity. Furthermore, the ‘Kallikratis plan’ - the regulatory framework of regions and municipalities in Greece - introduced Immigrant Integration Councils, which operate as advisory bodies in municipalities to strengthen the integration of immigrants into local society (Article 78 of Law 3852/2010).

Furthermore, the National Program for the Actual Gender Equality introduces gender as a challenge and calls for mainstreaming both in legislation and policy (Miloni, 2010). The Program defines

women's equality in education, employment, and migration as national priorities. Thus women's protection against any form of discrimination and violence and support of women's independence and cultural participation are primary issues for public authorities, social partners, and civil society.

b. Selected implementation programs: Methodology

Original field research was carried out in Athens for the purpose of this paper from October 2011 to January 2012. Our research aims included studying NGOs' actions to support immigrant women in Athens, with special attention given to Muslim immigrant women, and identifying programs' efficacy and obstacles in regard to cultural and other needs. The research team¹ conducted participant observation in agencies providing services for immigrants and semi-structured interviews with program volunteers as well as with professionals in these agencies.

Our sample was purposefully selected from a database of NGOs supporting immigrants, which have operated in Athens since 2009 (Harokopio University, 2009). Five agencies offering programs that met the criteria both of gender and race were identified; two of them included training activities for NGO professionals and volunteers and the other three offered direct support to immigrants. Interviews were conducted with these programs' volunteers and professionals focusing on specific outcomes and best practices. NGOs' professionals and volunteers were asked to address the special needs of immigrant women based on their personal experience and emphasize their experiences with Muslim women. In our research, 20 interviews with NGOs' staff were conducted; two professionals and two volunteers from each program were represented in our sample. Selection criteria included their previous and consistent engagement with program design, implementation, and ongoing evaluation. Certain evaluation questions referred to cultural competency of staff, planning issues involving direct participation of service recipients, respect of cultural and religious needs, access of women and men clients, follow up surveys, and suggested lessons from implication experience. Furthermore, in one program, Babel's intercultural mediation program, a questionnaire was distributed to 27 participants, in order to enhance the information collected on the lived experiences of Muslim women's profiles that approach social services.

c. Brief description of programs

¹Many thanks to Christina Kalavri, Ph.D. student at Panteion University for her contribution to data collection.

Five agencies offering programs which include, or refer directly or indirectly to, Muslim immigrant women were chosen as case studies for the purposes of this paper as described above.

- The Odysseus program, led by the General Secretariat on Life Long Learning Education of Greek Ministry of Education, is one of the first formal initiatives aiming to integrate immigrants through training on the Greek language and customs. This initiatives' target groups included both EU and non-EU citizens in ages over 16 who were legal immigrants in Greece (See website "Odysseus" program). The program included voluntarily lessons in Greek which implemented in two levels. Target groups consist of 16.500 immigrants, with special emphasis on women immigrants especially women from non-European countries as these women are for the most part marginalized and unemployed. Intercultural learning skills as well as increased access to social services had been the aims of the program. Certain groups of experts, volunteers and trained intercultural mediators/facilitators contribute to implementation of the program, support immigrants to interact with local authorities, and to accessing services.

- A second program is a partnership of seven NGOs (i.e., Nostos, Arsis, EfxiniPoli, Iasis, Hellenic Council for Refugees, Centre of Women's research, and XEN) called Co-Development on Employment which was established in 2004, and is funded by the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism 2004-2009 (see Co-Development on Employment website). The program's target population is 1,600 immigrants and their families, and aimed to improve immigrant women's skills and employment opportunities. Positive evaluation results in the social integration of immigrants, through employment and social services, lead to integrating the program's concept and methodology in formal national policies (ibid).

- Women's Café is another initiative of an NGO called Ways of Life ("DromoiZois") that supports the Muslim community located in Gazi area in Athens. The Muslim community in the greater area of Gazi has approximately 2,000 Muslims, according to the NGO's director, Mr. K. Varlas (Interview, January 12th, 2012). This community consists of Muslim domestic migrants previously settled in Komotini, northern Greece and Muslims from other countries (e.g., Syria, Egypt, and Georgia). Ways of Life provides social support for immigrant families, lessons on Greek language for children and mothers, educational support to children, and exhibitions and entertainment activities such as dance and theatre. Women's Café was established in 2009 as a place for women's weekly meetings to encourage communication among Muslim women and offer a pleasant break for them who often have many family

obligations paired with the challenge of integrating into Greek culture and society. However, meetings at Women's Café have recently evolved because more pressing needs of women were identified during the meetings and instead of the regular meetings, these meetings were used for Greek lessons for mothers as this was considered more useful for the target group. Now the Women's Café has been reformed, enriched with information and counseling activities for Muslim women on medical and health advices, child development, etc. During participant observation, we had the opportunity to note the positive climate and confidence between staff and participants of the project. "Knowledge of Islamic culture is a basic principle of such programs" states Mr. Varlas and interaction with target group maximizes equality and confidence between clients and volunteers. Also, encouragement, empowerment, and continuous training and support of volunteers ensure the standards of the services provided are maintained. "The most important feature of our activities is respect of target groups' distinctiveness. Every day we try to get over differences and be like an extended kind of family" says Mr. Varlas. Moreover, he mentioned that: "Actually we listen to incoming women's needs rather than imposing our own standards on them... [...]...women are very interested in learning and participating. [...] The model of Muslim women who were married at the age of 13-14 has already decreased because of women's participation in education. [...] We are very glad to provide such opportunities and to help in this sector."

- A project on improving cultural skills of NGO staff was held by Babel Day Care Centre which deals with meeting immigrants' cultural needs, provide clinical services, training and mediation (Gionakis, 2010). In this context, a training guide on 'cultural skills' was published in order to help professionals and volunteers to support immigrants. This guide was disseminated via e-mail in all centers that serve immigrants, including public services and hospitals.

- Furthermore, Babel Day Centre, in cooperation with Hellenic Social Mediation Center, implemented a short training program on intercultural mediation for professionals from different fields who work with immigrants. That 25-hour training seminar presented its participants not only theory and practice on mediation techniques in multicultural contexts, but a structured framework where common and different cultural characteristics are embraced with respect and equality of different cultural and religious identities. In cases of intercultural conflict, mediation provides a structured, neutral, and stable context for the parties to resolve their conflict peacefully. The seminar was evaluated positively by participants. However, reduced funding for the

development of mediation services was identified as potential challenge to expanding intercultural mediation practices. Nevertheless, participants implement mediation skills in their workplace with immigrants and reported positive results in conflict resolution.

Lessons from program implementation – Meeting Muslim women's needs

A. Practicing "culture"

Both culture and gender perspectives are for the most part combined in such initiatives. Actually, NGOs are more flexible than services of the public sector in diagnosing and meeting women's needs due to their direct communication with them and social service provision. Odysseus program through cultural learning as a strategy promotes sympathy among Greek and immigrants alike, while focuses on face-to-face contact with its clients and aims to address their special needs. Indeed, non-EU immigrants are clearly mentioned in issues of Odysseus program and Muslim women could take advantage of such initiatives. Similarly, Co-Development on Employment aims at raising employment opportunities for immigrants. Such initiatives affect immigrants' everyday lives as they try to improve their living conditions (i.e., communication, employment) in Greece. However, both these programs place an emphasis on one-way interaction and do not offer opportunities for the opposite.

On the other hand, Women's Café by Ways of Life, Babel's Project on Cultural Skills and Intercultural Mediation Training focus mostly on meeting Muslim women's needs. These three programs focus on addressing social issues that arise not only in the (social) interaction within the Greek society, but also on issues within their family or Muslim community, through mutual communication and interaction among professionals, volunteers, and the target group.

B. Muslim women's profiles and needs

Findings from our survey and according to NGOs professionals and volunteers describe the profile of Muslim women who approach NGOs. Muslim women are seen only as part of their families in Greece and not as autonomous individuals. And although there are different profiles and needs between Muslim women based on their nationality or places of origin, a common characteristic is that they all confront problems with the Greek language. This is firstly due to the short period of residence and secondly because of limited social contacts and therefore, limited opportunity to learn or practice the language. According to the participant interviews, Muslim women who visit these NGOs, often have

a low level of formal education, they are married at an early age and have more than two children. Children learn to read and speak Greek due to their attendance at Greek schools and their regular interaction with Greek children at school and often share their knowledge of the Greek language with their mothers. Muslim women who visit these NGOs usually request psychological support and are showed less socially active in the Greek society than European immigrants but there are few cases of empowered Muslim women that are families' "heads" as well. Psychological and legal support, education, social support in housing, more leisure time and social contacts are mentioned by NGOs professional and volunteers as priority needs for Muslim women in Greece.

C. Evaluations and Maximization of Program Outcomes

The majority of programs operates on a voluntary basis and hasno clear infrastructure, making systematic evaluation difficult. Written reports are often used in order to keep notes on important activities especially for the purpose of information exchange among program volunteers. Ongoing evaluation and program supervision by staff with particular expertise is the most frequent method of evaluation. In our research, no significant differences between professionals' and volunteers' responses were found. Both categories mark achievement of "respect of spiritual/religious needs" in the highest level of a 5-pointLikert scale while evaluating NGO programs. Improvement of women's access remains at the mid-point of the same scale. Integration and flexibility evaluated as very high corresponding to points 4-5 of the Likert scale. Nevertheless, it is suggested that volunteers must be involved in relevant programs from the very beginning of program planning.

D. Particular obstacles and limitations

A comment that many participants made during the interviews was that immigrant women are not able to participate regularly in programs; difficult economic situations and many family obligations may be the reason for reduced participation. What is more, these initiatives depend on volunteers, a group that is not always constant. It is proven difficult and challenging to integrate in a new and different society when immigrating. Even though this paper provides some positive results and presents good practice case studies in Athens, it is lacking of field research on Muslim immigrant women representations concerning these programs, how they evaluate such initiatives and to what extent such initiatives truly meet their needs.

Conclusion

The article focused on NGOs' actions to support immigrant women in Athens, with special attention given to the needs of Muslim women. A qualitative research based on select NGOs' programs and interviews with programs' stakeholders presented practices' efficiency and obstacles.

In general, there seems to be progress in human rights recognition and implementation that determine the immigrants' status in Greece and their peaceful consistency with others. Formally, culture and gender are combined equally in legal texts, public policies, and NGO practice. For example, while addressing gender needs in the National Program within Greece, women's cultural activities are implicitly mentioned as a primary aim. However, female immigration constitutes a complex and multi-level phenomenon. In studying Muslim immigrant women in Greece, a three-fold model is emerging concerning their social image; this is interpreted by: a) their disadvantaged status as immigrants, b) their disadvantaged status as women, and c) their social status as Muslim women living in an Eastern Orthodox country.

NGOs' programs play an important role to the support of immigrants' rights. Thus far, education, skills learning, communication and integration of immigrant women in the Greek society, as well as local community empowerment have been the main aims of NGOs programs for immigrant women. The program Odysseus shows how education and language learning can increase mutual understanding and improve immigrant integration. The Co-development Program shows how local community can be informed and mobilized. Particularly, women's support and empowerment can be achieved by increasing social meetings and supporting immigrants' daily activities via initiatives, such as is done by Women's Cafe. Furthermore, intercultural mediation is a practice to deal with conflict by maximizing personal contact and deeper investigation of needs. Dissemination of cultural competency principles expands in all NGOs initiatives. Also, cultural competency is a presupposition for the improvement of intercultural mediation in multi-cultural environments. Such initiatives have shown much respect in immigrants' rights in gender equality, education, access to social services and health resources; all of which constitute significant issues in EU and UN papers promoting human rights.

However, it was observed that programs often reflect a top-down model, where an NGO offers services to "helpless" immigrants. Therefore, new programs should be created using a bottom-up approach, with more immigrant representation in program design and implementation. Possible criteria for future practices may include more active involvement of immigrant women in programs planning, more

active involvement of family members, and extensive research regarding the special needs of each target group.

In Greece, Muslim immigrant women should be supported in line with their stated religious beliefs, as well as their social customs. In doing so, the three-fold model that characterizes their status should be utilized with respect to human rights and their specific religious needs, above and beyond the legal regulations concerning immigrants as a whole. In doing so, addressing the unique needs of Muslim women is highly recommended for academia and policy making in order to design a comprehensive framework for the effective integration of Muslim immigrant women into Greek society.

Future research could involve cross-cultural research between Greek women and Muslim immigrant women in order to study the different patterns of special needs these cultural groups share and the convergences and divergences and possible ways of Muslim integration into Greek society with respect to human rights. The practices of intercultural mediation, intercultural conferences and circles could be proven useful and challenging for mutual communication between community members and within communities.

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Co-Development on Employment:

<http://www.nostos.org.gr/site/gr/synanaptixi.html>

Dromoizois : <http://www.dromoi-zois.gr> Hellenic Social Mediation Center:<http://socialmediation.blogspot.com/>

“Odysseus” program: <http://www.gsae.edu.gr/index.php/press/275--lr-l->

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