wings

New Gender Strategies for Women's Inclusion

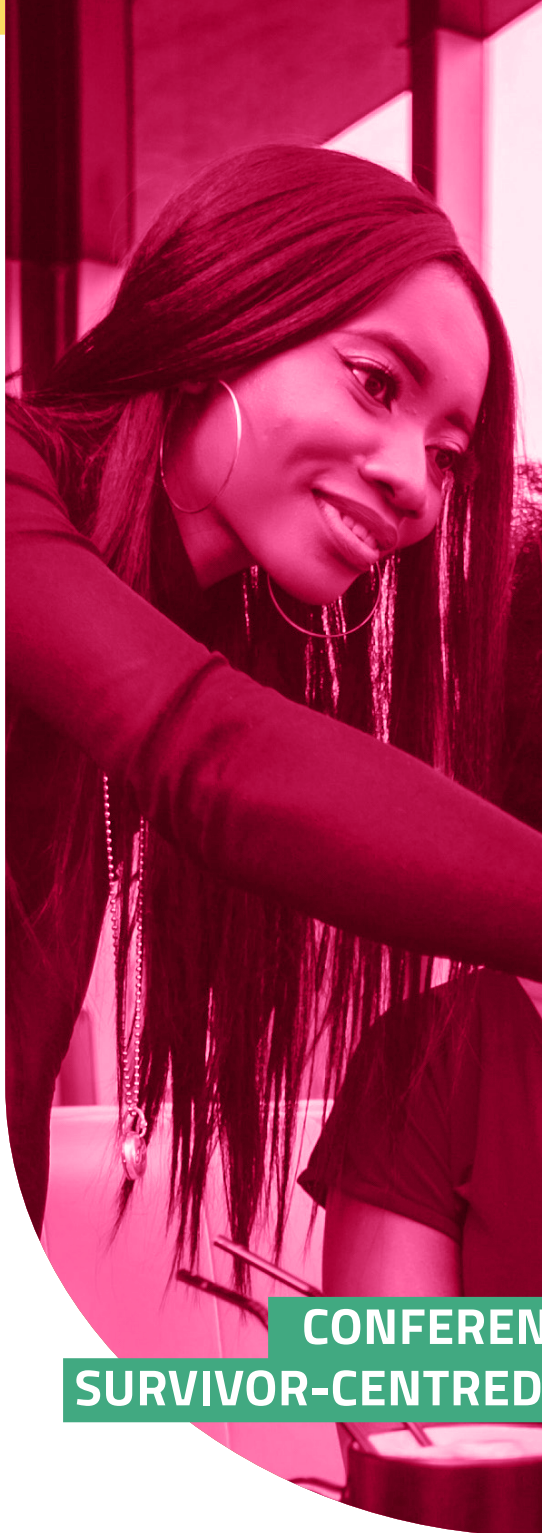## CONFERENCE PAPER FOR SURVIVOR-CENTRED INTEGRATION SUPPORT

January 2024

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Co-funded by
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1.
The WINGS Project

WINGS is an EU-funded project aimed to **facilitate the social-economic integration of third-country national women survivors of trafficking and violence.**

The four partner organizations PAYOKE (Belgium), KMOP (Greece), CESIE (Italy), and SURT (Spain) applied a methodology revolving around a three-pronged approach, providing **support in language learning and the development of technical and professional skills through an ethnopshychological approach** for third-country national women survivors of trafficking and violence.

To this end, a programme was created for developing and applying **gender- and context-specific support programmes** through a language course with integrated psychological support, personalized employment counseling, and tailored internship or job offers which was subsequently translated into national programs. The expected impact of the programme included:

‣ Increased understanding and strengthened capacities of project partners, experts and professionals regarding provision of durable survivor-centred solutions for integration of TCN women VoT.
‣ Enhanced cooperation and understanding of practices already adopted by partners to foster language teaching, psychological support and employment counselling.
‣ Increased language and soft skills, self-perceived wellbeing, and motivation for 60 beneficiaries to facilitate their integration into the labour market.
‣ Increased opportunities for employers to contribute to an inclusive economy by creating internship or job opportunities for the project beneficiaries and increased employers' awareness on the importance of creating inclusive workplaces for vulnerable groups.

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4.

2.
WINGS International Conference
– *The Social Hut* Festival

To discuss the project's results and advocate for its replicability a **2-day Interdisciplinary International Conference was held in Brussels the 6th and 7th December 2023**. The Conference represented a unique opportunity for employers, experts from the anti-trafficking field, representatives of civil society organizations and policy makers to exchange good practices, network among relevant stakeholders in the field of migrant integration and **advocate for the importance of creating inclusive and diverse workplaces to enhance employability and social inclusion for third-country national women survivors of trafficking and violence**. Beneficiary women/their representatives and employers involved in the WINGS Program also attended the two day Conference to share their direct experiences and further promote the developed model.

DAY 1 –
Inclusive workplaces
for social change

During the first day of the Conference a workshop was organized to discuss how companies can adopt an **intercultural and intersectional approach to make their workplaces more inclusiv**e, how professionals and employers can support migrant women to be prepared for the labour market and also to share women's needs in relation to their social and labour inclusion. Thus, the workshop convened project partners, WINGS beneficiaries, social workers, psychologists, employers/employment agencies, and non-profit professionals to explore strategies and best practices for fostering inclusive work environments.

The discussion was organized in multidisciplinary working groups in which participants shared best practices and challenges faced during the implementation of the WINGS Programme and explored potential replicability of the activities. The event, facilitated by an expert trainer in gender and trauma-sensitive approaches, showcased the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in enhancing employee well-being, while achieving business goals. Speakers emphasized the urgency of creating environments where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute with their unique perspectives.

Participants discussed about the creation of intercultural and intersectional working environment focusing on four topics of discussion:

✓ Language Differences　　✓ Gendered Approach

✓ Cultural Differences　　✓ Psychological Wellbeing

2.1. LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Speakers emphasized how **language differences can significantly impact a migrant's sense of inclusion** in a new environment. Language barriers can be one of the most significant challenges migrants face. Inability to communicate effectively in the dominant language can lead to feelings of isolation, difficulty in forming connections, and hinder participation in social and professional interactions.

It was discussed how proficiency in the dominant language is often a **prerequisite for accessing various opportunities**, such as employment, education, and social integration. Participants stressed how language is deeply intertwined with culture. Learning a new language often involves understanding cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, and social norms. Migrants might struggle to navigate social situations or comprehend cultural references due to language barriers, affecting their ability to feel integrated into the new community. Indeed, different languages carry unique idioms, expressions, and non-verbal communication cues. This can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of intentions, humour, or subtleties in conversation, affecting interpersonal dynamics and relationships.

There is also an important **psychological impact associated with language barriers**, as not being able to express oneself adequately can lead to feelings of frustration, stress, and self-doubt. This can impact a person's confidence and self-esteem, further hindering their willingness to engage in social activities or seek out opportunities for fear of being misunderstood or marginalized.

In the workplace, language proficiency is crucial for **job inclusion and advancement**. Migrants facing language barriers might find it challenging to fully integrate into the work culture, communicate effectively with colleagues, or showcase their skills and talents, impacting their career growth and sense of belonging.

It has also been shared how language differences in the workplace can significantly impact communication, collaboration, and overall productivity. When employees speak different languages or have varying proficiency levels in a common language, misunderstandings can arise. Individuals might feel hesitant to express themselves fully or participate actively in team meetings and discussions with colleagues or supervisors if they are not confident in the language being used. Thus, misinterpretations, unclear instructions, and communication barriers may hinder effective teamwork and task completion. Moreover, not only language but also **non-verbal communication** can be a barrier, as this may vary from culture to culture.

Since language is deeply intertwined with culture the use of **cultural mediation** has been cited as a powerful tool, but it may be out of reach for small businesses due to the costs associated with it. However, even if language —and cultural— challenges can hinder efficient communication, **different proactive measures** can be taken to overcome this obstacle, measures such as:

✓ Providing language classes or resources for employees to improve their proficiency and confidence.
✓ Using clear, concise, and simple language in communication to mitigate misunderstandings. Additionally, using visual aids, diagrams, and written instructions can complement verbal communication.
✓ Promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity within the workplace to foster an environment where diverse languages and backgrounds are respected and valued. Therefore, team-building activities and cultural workshops can help create a more inclusive workplace culture.
✓ Employing translation tools or software to facilitate in real-time communication and bridge language gaps, especially in global teams.
✓ Participants concluded that whereas language differences in the workplace can present challenges, with the right strategies and a supportive environment, businesses can leverage this diversity as a strength, leading to more effective communication, increased motivation, and promote stronger team dynamics.

To foster the discussion, the facilitator started the session sharing a video about interactions in new cultures spaces. The video explores **how our culture affect the way we experience the world** and how when individuals move to a new country, they often bring their cultural beliefs, practices, values, and traditions, which can differ significantly from those of the country of arrival. These differences can impact various aspects of social and labour inclusion playing a significant role in how migrants interact in the new cultural and social environment.

Participants discussed how **cultural differences** can affect how migrants socialize with members of the country of arrival. Variances in communication styles, body language, and social norms may lead to misunderstandings or barriers in forming relationships. In addition, cultural differences are perceived as deeply **intertwined with other components of an individual's identity** such as language, religion, education, and age. They can manifest in many ways, through behaviours, language, food, mannerism, and clothing.

Cultural differences can sometimes lead to prejudices or discrimination, as **misunderstandings** or lack of familiarity with different cultural practices may create biases. This can result in exclusion or marginalization. Some people may experience a conflict between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to the new culture. This **struggle between preservation, acceptance and adaptation** can affect their sense of belonging and self-identity within the host community. Setting boundaries and ensuring respect of both cultures and beliefs is key to harmonious intercultural community living.

Participants also agreed on the idea that cultural differences can pose several barriers in the workplace, impacting communication, collaboration, and overall effectiveness. Varied communication styles, languages, and non-verbal cues can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Differences in directness, tone, or conversational styles might hinder effective communication among team members. **Unconscious cultural biases and stereotypes** about certain cultures can affect how individuals are perceived and treated in the workplace.

Between the cultural differences that may have an impact on the working relationship, they have been named:

▸ **Dietary regimes** (as this can affect one's performance in certain job sector, the catering sector for example)
▸ The different **perception of time**
▸ **Women's position** in the country of origin and the norms of behaviour associated to their gender
▸ The impact of **religious beliefs**

Participants also mention how different notions of contractual obligations and employment contract are characterized by a social and cultural framework. People can have different notions and understanding of an employment contract, with the labor rights experienced in their countries of origin also being very far from what they encountered in the country of arrival.

Participants felt that addressing cultural differences in the workplace is crucial for fostering an inclusive and harmonious environment where employees from diverse backgrounds feel valued, respected, and empowered. Initiatives mentioned to foster cross-cultural collaboration and mutual comprehension are:

✓ Offer a mentorship program to the new employees providing them with basic knowledge about the social and cultural framework of the country of arrival.
✓ Implement team-building activities.
✓ Practice openness by demonstrating acceptance of difference.
✓ Be flexible by demonstrating acceptance of ambiguity.
✓ Promote training for employers on management of intercultural teams providing the expertise to work with employees with different cultural and social backgrounds.

The notion of cultural competency has been mentioned as a key strategy to communicate with respect; recognize others' values, accept different knowledge, skills, and talents contributing to the creation of a new cultural space where one's unique history and personality can play an important role.

During the third part of the discussion the influence and impact of gender in the workplace was discussed, sharing how the **notion of gender in the workplace** encompasses dynamics, challenges, and opportunities associated with how individuals of different genders are treated, represented, and valued within a professional setting.

The discussion focused on **gender bias and stereotypes.** It was highlighted how all women face various forms of gender bias in different aspects of their lives, stemming from societal norms, cultural expectations, and systemic inequalities. These includes societal expectations and stereotypes which often dictate traditional gender roles, placing pressure on women to conform to specific behaviors or roles at home and in the workplace, and hindering their self-expression, freedom to make their own choices and forming their identity.

Women may face direct discrimination in various spheres, including education, employment and access to opportunities, based solely on their gender. Participants highlighted the societal pressures and standards women must face, leading to body image issues, competition, internalized objectification, self-esteem concerns, and mental health challenges.

When it comes to **migrant women**, they often face a combination of gender bias and biases related to their migrant status, resulting in **unique intersectional challenges** that can significantly impact their experiences in various aspects of life, including the workplace. Social workers and beneficiary women in the workshop noted how bias and stereotypes based on gender can influence hiring decisions, promotions, and opportunities for career advancement.

Preconceived notions about gender roles may affect how individuals are perceived and treated in the workplace. They emphasized that **disparities** in pay between genders persist in many industries and occupations, together with underrepresentation in leadership positions across various industries. This lack of representation not only affects decision-making processes but also hinders the visibility of role models for aspiring women leaders.

Expectations surrounding family responsibilities and caregiving often differ based on gender. Balancing work and personal life can be more challenging for individuals, particularly for women facing societal expectations of caregiving roles.

Among the positive experiences of internship/job placement within the WINGS program, the experience of the Spanish partners was mentioned as a **best practice**. Beneficiaries of the WINGS program in Spain has been trained to assume positions of command in the fishery industry, a traditionally male-dominated job sector.

As emphasized in the **EU Action Plan on Integration and inclusion**, companies and government agencies must invest in improving employment opportunities and skills recognition *"to fully value the contribution of migrant communities, and women in particular, and ensure that they are supported to reach their full potential."*[1] The assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications is also a key issue that highlights migrant women workers' struggle and aspiration to have their qualifications recognized in the country of destination.

Amongst the **strategies to overcome gender gaps** in employment, participants mentioned:
✓ Implementing fair hiring practices.
✓ Adopting quotas and positive discrimination.
✓ Providing equal pay for equal work.
✓ Offering equitable opportunities for career development, establishing training and mentorship programs.
✓ Support networks that empower women and other underrepresented genders in non-stereotyped sectors.

1   The Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027,
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0758&qid=1632299185798

The facilitator introduced the notion of psychological wellbeing offering a definition that refers to a **person's overall mental health and the presence of positive feelings and attitudes towards life**. She invited participants to explore the various dimensions of emotional, psychological, and social wellness and the several factors contributing to psychological well-being in the workplace and beyond.

The discussion started with exploring the **components** of psychological wellbeing. Among the components of a state of psychological wellbeing, social workers and beneficiary women mentioned:

✓ the presence of a broad support system and solid social network.

✓ physical and mental health.

✓ economic independence by obtaining a meaningful job.

✓ work-life balance.

The conversation then shifted to what contributes to psychological wellbeing. Participants recognized that positive factors and behaviours can enhance well-being. Among c**ontributing factors to achieve a state of psychological well-being** have been identified:

✓ therapy and emotional regulation

✓ self-care and resting

✓ physical activity

Other factors include the **ability to cope with stress, adversity, and life's challenges** in a healthy manner, experiencing positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, gratitude, and joy, and finding a comfort zone when settling into a new country.

Participants also brought to light the **negative factors** that may affect an individual well-being, such as toxic environments, toxic positivity, exposure to conflict and polarization on social media, difficult work environments, and unrealistic expectations based on gender role construction.

Employers and social workers highlighted how **managers** have a crucial role to play in safeguarding employees psychological wellbeing. Managers must create a **safe space** where the **specific needs and condition of the employees** are accepted and recognized. Migrants often experience distress due to the precarious legal and social condition in the country of arrival. It is important for employers to comprehend their situation.

During the discussion there was a consensus about the option to rely on external **support services** (cultural mediator, psychologist, social worker) to foster a sense of wellbeing and trust in the workplace. It has also been suggested to inform migrant employees about the local support services that can contribute to their general wellbeing (mental health hotlines, family support services, health insurance etc.).

Beneficiary women, employers, psychologists and social workers agreed that striving for psychological well-being involves a **holistic approach** that encompasses emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of life. Engaging in activities that promote mental wellness, seeking support when needed, fostering positive relationships, and practicing self-care are essential for enhancing and maintaining psychological well-being.

DAY 2 –
A chance for Europe Event at the European Parliament

The second day of the Social Hut Festival took place in the framework of the *EU Youth in Action* project promoted by the network CHANCE - *Civil Hub Against orgaNised Crime in Europe*, ultimately aimed at discussing innovative strategies to create and ensure an equitable society based on inclusion and on the redistribution of wealth that can allow decent living conditions for everyone. The event was held at the European Parliament in the presence of Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, Luigi Ciotti, President of Libera, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and representatives from civil society.

In this context, **the experience of the WINGS program** was shared including:
- **Outcomes, experiences and best practices** based on the WINGS Social and Labour inclusion program which comprises session plans for the delivery of trauma-sensitive foreign language teaching, individual employment counselling and recommendations for internship/job placement in local companies.
- **Challenges and best practices in the socio-labour integration** of trafficking survivors to enhance the employability of trafficked people and migrants and helping employers to create inclusive and diverse workplaces.

During the conference speakers highlighted how the prevalence of transnational organized crime is a stark reality. According to Europol's 2021 *Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (SOCTA), 7% of criminal groups operating within the European Union are active across more than three EU countries. Additionally, 65% of these groups consist of members from multiple nationalities. In response to this challenging scenario, as corroborated by judicial and law enforcement investigations, there is a pressing need to **establish interconnected networks to devise global solutions**.[1]

Recognizing that organized crime thrives in **environments of social injustice and inequality**, the CHANCE Network, spearheaded by Libera, emphasized the need of creating an equal society where EU institutions engage with responsible civil society actors – citizens, associations and movements to combat organized crime and corruption.

1   SOCTA Report 2021, Europol.
     https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/socta-report

In the second panel dedicated to **protection, justice and reparation for victims** of organised crime and human trafficking speakers highlighted that efforts to provide comprehensive protection, justice, and reparation for victims and their families require a multi-faceted approach that involves not only legal and law enforcement measures but also social, psychological, and economic support. Creating a **robust support system** and ensuring that victims are treated with dignity and respect is fundamental in addressing these crimes and helping survivors rebuild their lives.

Speakers also stressed that victims of organized crime and human trafficking deserve **reparations** for the harm they have endured. Reparations can take various forms, including financial compensation, access to education and job training, housing assistance, and medical and psychological support. Such measures aim to help victims rebuild their lives, recover from trauma, and reintegrate into society. It has been stressed that **recognizing the impact on families of victims** is also crucial. Providing support, counseling, and information to the families of victims helps them cope with the situation and aids in the recovery process for both the victim and their loved ones. Additionally, ensuring that families have access to necessary resources and support services is vital in helping them navigate through the aftermath of these crimes.

Some panelists illustrated how organized crime and human trafficking share a complex and symbiotic relationship, often intertwined due to the lucrative nature of trafficking and the resources, networks, and infrastructure that organized criminal groups possess. Organized criminal networks view human trafficking as a lucrative enterprise due to its substantial financial gains with relatively low risks compared to other criminal activities.

With a focus on human trafficking, CESIE illustrated the WINGS project and model as an example of ways **civil society sector and private sector can collaborate to support victims** and facilitate their social and economic reintegration into society.

The WINGS model was presented as a **multidisciplinary approach to support women** in strengthening their soft and hard skills, psychological well-being and language proficiency. Every project beneficiary was indeed supported by a language teacher, an employment counsellor for individual support, and a psychologist.

Taking into account the approaching end of the WINGS project, CESIE underscored the culmination of the collective efforts and deliberations that have led to a comprehensive set of policy recommendations. The collaborative synergy and expertise pooled together throughout this initiative have yielded a series of strategic directives aimed at addressing multifaceted challenges and opportunities. As a direct experience in the implementation of the WINGS program four policy recommendations have been presented during the Conference at the EU Parliament, serving as a **roadmap for catalyzing positive change and fostering sustainable advancements** in the area of social and labor integration of women who experienced human trafficking and exploitation.

THE WINGS MODEL IN 4 ACTIONABLE STEPS:
Recommendations to facilitate the empowerment of migrant women who experienced human trafficking and exploitation:

1. Facilitating the obtaining of permits of stay (and prevent undeclared work where migrant workers are often involved) to **ensure smooth labour integration** and decent work.

2. Adopting a transversal and multidisciplinary approach in which professionals with different expertise, such as cultural mediators, psychologists, language teachers, and employment counsellors, collaborate to overcome the challenges associated with **working with people in vulnerable circumstances**.

3. Facilitate the recognition of skills of migrant workers through skills assessment for the **recognition of competences** and invite employers to make use of current procedures for recognition and equivalence of qualifications. (e.g. the EU Skills Profile Tool, European Qualifications Framework EQF).

4. To adopt a constructive approach where all parties involved in the social and labour inclusion process (included the employers offering the internship for the beneficiaries) are **trained to work with people with different backgrounds** and in dealing with their specific needs creating a safe environment for everybody.

Organized crime groups leverage their **well-established networks**, spanning across multiple regions or countries, to facilitate the trafficking process. These networks help in recruiting, transporting, harboring, and exploiting victims, using established routes and contacts to evade law enforcement. In an effort to diversify their activities, organized criminal groups often engage in various illegal activities, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, and human trafficking. The inclusion of human trafficking broadens their revenue streams and strengthens their criminal operations.

In essence, the **relationship between organized crime and human trafficking** is characterized by a **mutually reinforcing dynamic**. Organized crime provides the infrastructure, resources, and networks necessary for human trafficking to thrive, while human trafficking diversifies and enhances the criminal activities of organized crime syndicates. Efforts to **combat one often involve addressing the other** due to their interwoven nature within the criminal landscape.

3.
Concluding remarks

The 2-day WINGS international events stands as a testament for **shared commitment to human dignity and justice**.

The workshop held during the first day provided a platform for discussions and actionable insights into creating inclusive workplaces. The consensus among attendees was that **diversity, equity, and inclusion** are not merely checkboxes but integral components for sustainable success in our employment landscapes and communities. It has been shared that companies embracing diversity experience increased motivation, better problem-solving and in some cases, a competitive advantage. The significance of leadership in driving inclusivity was highlighted. Managers and leaders must set the tone by championing diversity, embedding inclusive practices, and fostering **a culture where everyone feels heard and respected**.

Collaboration between organizations, communities, and policymakers emerged as a key driver in advancing inclusive workplace initiatives. Sharing best practices and learning from diverse perspectives was deemed essential. The invaluable insights, discussions, and collaborative spirit witnessed throughout these gatherings have laid a strong foundation for **political actions needed to be taken at the EU level**.

As partners and stakeholders concluded during the forum at the EU Parliament, social and legal political actions need to be taken ensuring that migrant survivors of trafficking are not just recipients of aid, but **active participants in their own empowerment and inclusion process**, breaking barriers, promoting inclusiveness, and paving the way for a future where every survivor finds support, opportunities, and respect in our communities. In this context, social and labour policies must be updated according to the proposals suggested.
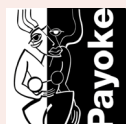
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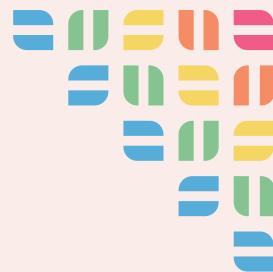
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