

# Daphne Initiative 1999

## Final Report

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**Development of intercultural negotiation skills for  
the prevention of violence against young women of  
a Muslim immigrant background in Europe**

**Summary presentation**

## **Introduction and General Objectives**

This study is the work of a transnational network whose aim is to *define violence against girls and young women of a Muslim immigrant background in Western Europe, both within the family and at a social and institutional level*. Our work has a practical aim, that of identifying effective measures for preventative action. Developing a capacity for intercultural negotiation among young people, their parents and youth workers is seen to be a means of resolving conflicts in this area.

The transnational network consists of the 'Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches en Psychologie de l'Adolescent (GERPA)' of the 'Université de Paris V' and the 'Agence pour le Développement des Relations Interculturelles (ADRI)' in Paris, on behalf of France; the Pädagogisches Zentrum (PÄZ), Aachen on behalf of Germany; and the 'Service d'Etude du Développement Psycho-Social (SEDPS)' of the University of Liège and the 'Institut de Recherche, Formation et Action sur les Migrations (IRFAM)' also in Liège, on behalf of French-speaking Belgium. The project was initiated by IRFAM, which is responsible for its organisational and scientific co-ordination.

The research project is being supported by the Secretariat-General of the European Commission, within the framework of the 'Daphne Initiative' to fight violence against children, young people and women.

### **Subject matter of the study**

Every individual who has to live in a country other than his or her country of origin may be regarded as trying to establish a delicate balance between respecting his or her original cultural identity and negotiating his or her social existence and recognition in the host country.

The situation of *girls and women of a Muslim immigrant background in Western Europe* is particularly relevant to these problematics of identity. Yet, despite the extensive media coverage their very real difficulties have received, their situation has never been examined in a scientific, constructive and neutral manner. It is time to investigate in particular how certain types of marriage (mixed, arranged, forced and unconsummated marriages and marriages of convenience), through the conflict between cultures to which they may give rise, can lead to violence, whether verbal, psychological (threats, rejection and abandonment, abduction, imprisonment, being forced to return to their country of origin, various forms of humiliation, etc.), physical (corporal punishment, crimes of honour, vendettas, the murder of girls, scarification, female circumcision, infibulation etc) or sexual (rape, virginity tests, incest etc.) being inflicted on these girls and women. Other problems encountered among young people have been running away or suicide.

We also consider the institutional violence perpetrated against these girls and women by the host culture (the prohibition on wearing the chador, administrative red tape, disbelief, the slow workings of the police and the courts, discrimination on the grounds of race, racial or anti-Islamic violence and various forms of exclusion at school, in the work-place and in the public arena, etc.).

**It is clear from many socio-ethnological or political indicators and news reports that the questions surrounding marriage, presence in the public arena and more generally that of the social and cultural liberation of women and girls from countries with a Muslim tradition (such as the Maghreb, Turkey, Mali, Chad, Senegal, etc.) constitute a locus of conflict between cultures, more specifically between western society, regarded as 'modern and individualist' and Muslim immigrant communities whose idealised cultural identity is regarded as 'collectivist and traditional'. Questions concerning marriage, work and socio-psychological liberation for these women constitute a nexus between the more general problem of violence, whether originating**

**within the family or of a racist nature, in a context of acculturation and the more general process of socio-cultural transition for Muslim families who have settled in the West.**

Care has been taken in the course of the research (and its practical application in the form of preventative measures) to avoid stigmatising families from an immigrant background, which can only lead to increased tension within the home and greater complications in the areas of social work and education. Our aim is to elaborate *strategies for dealing with cultural discontinuity and the negotiation of identity*, to be seen as a positive step and played out both within Muslim immigrant families and between these families and the institutions of the host country. In this way it is hoped that violence and cultural tension will be avoided.

In addition, teachers and members of the social services of the host countries often express a high level of distress at having to work in an area, which is rife with cultural tensions between immigrant families and the culture of the organisations and institutions whose job it is to integrate them, and which they fail to understand in many respects because it raises so many spectres for them, a phenomenon which impacts on the quality of the service offered by social workers and educators.

Therefore this research has two major and immediate aims:

1. to use various forms of scientific enquiry to identify strategies for identity-formation and for integration which will be of use to girls and women from a Muslim immigrant background; in a context of cultural tension the capacity to negotiate is assumed to promote non-violence.
2. to use various forms of scientific enquiry to identify professional strategies for social workers involved in educating and integrating young people from an immigrant background and outlining difficulties and needs in the areas of education and integration which are linked to the use of violence.

These lines of inquiry have been pursued in unison in various places in Western Europe with regard to various areas such as teaching, health, support for young people, and access to employment. Transnational seminars and joint publications allow us to compare results obtained in the three countries. These comparisons form the basis of the final analysis, allowing us to put the recommended practices to the test in various national and institutional contexts, and thereby constituting a first step towards political recommendations at a European level.

In the medium term these investigations should usher in a new phase of the work that is being carried out in the individual Member States and facilitate the creation, evaluation and transmission of working documents on how to provide greater awareness, information and education for young people from a Muslim immigrant background, their parents, and the teachers and social workers working with them.

### **Methodological strategies**

In the research phase of the project (Dec 1991-November 2000) three types of investigation were carried out in order to produce a body of scientific knowledge which will shed light on the problems in question.

- Empirical studies of both a qualitative and quantitative nature were carried out among populations (of girls) from a Muslim immigrant background. These inquiries attempt to relate the level of their integration at school and in the workplace and the way their identity is constructed through what they say, how they behave and how they react to their scale of values. The study of the way in which their identity is constructed, their level of harmony with their families and their capacity for cultural negotiation follows the various stages of adolescence. These data are analysed with regard to the attitudes and expectations of the subjects and limitations placed on them in the areas of educational and professional aspirations, plans for family life, marriage etc.

- Interviews and surveys were carried out within the institutions involved (schools, public services providing support for young people, associations for helping young people and/or women, organisations

for counselling young people, regional centres for integrating people of foreign origin, university services, the forces of law and order, organisations for facilitating social and professional integration etc.) in order to identify their visions, resources, difficulties and expectations within the framework of this investigation with a view to finding practical solutions.

- A critical examination was also undertaken of the international scientific literature on the issues raised in this study. Newspaper articles and online materials were also analysed. In each of the countries a bibliography of the subject and a synopsis of findings was produced.

## Findings

Until the early 90's research into the health of Muslim immigrants in Europe had been restricted to the occupational illnesses of workers (i.e. it focused on their productive function) and health problems associated with birth and early childhood (i.e. focusing on their reproductive function). Then a number of studies appeared on their mental health (Es Safi et al., 1996). Feelings of disappointment and problems relating to the identity of young people who find themselves torn between two cultures may lead to suicide in some cases, running away, violence or ill-adjusted behaviour. This situation was explained in terms of tensions created by a pressure to assimilate stemming from the institutions of the host country. Social workers and teachers are the first to become aware of the psychological problems involved.

Girls from a Muslim immigrant background who have been educated in the host country sometimes refuse to marry the men their fathers have selected for them. In so doing they encounter many difficulties and in such situations the solutions put forward by the health and social welfare institutions of the host country seem ineffective as they ignore the cultural dimension and the alternative frames of reference. Following the controversy about schoolgirls wearing chadors the status of the Muslim woman attracted the attention of many researchers and observers, who have focussed on the questions of virginity and the demand for hymen reconstructive surgery and above all on the female Muslim's ambivalent status as a result of the patriarchal system within which she is placed. In this way the young woman of foreign origin has become one of the concerns of integration and public health policies.

*These findings must be differentiated according to the type of immigration and the host country concerned, according to whether the subjects are from a rural or urban background, whether they come from the Maghreb or Turkey, whether they are educated people or illiterate manual workers, practising Moslems or not, whether or not they live in an area with a high percentage of foreigners ... Attempts at negotiation in an intercultural context seem to offer a means of preventing and combating violence.*

## **Conflict management as prevention of violence in an intercultural context**

Negotiating one's differences, values, characteristics and presence in a tense multicultural context is no easy task for adolescents torn between their loyalty to their family's culture and their desire to belong to the society in which they were born and have grown up. In order to negotiate their being or identity in such a situation young people from an immigrant background need to draw on various resources effectively. Mediation and certain identity-forming strategies can be of assistance.

The process of negotiation between children and parents, children and institutions, and institutions and parents in a situation of cultural dissonance aims to pacify and to prevent violence. *The capacity to negotiate of the social actors in question (girls, immigrant parents and educators) is supported by the use of what may be termed 'intercultural' skills.*

This hypothesis is based on the theory of 'cognitive dissonance' as defined by Festinger. Whenever a social actor is presented with cognitively dissonant elements whose implications are inconsistent with each other, he or she will try to minimise the contradictions. Several strategies are available in such cases: avoiding the information which gives rise to dissonance, rejecting one of the contradictory elements or focusing on the consonant aspects of the situation lived through. In a situation where more than one culture come into contact the term 'cultural dissonance' is used, since subjects are potentially confronted with contradictory cultural elements: they cope with these contradictions by devising identity-forming strategies. (Camilleri et al., 1990).

It is by developing identity-forming strategies that the (social ) actor can identify, control and overcome his or her socio-cultural estrangement and conflicts in order to achieve integration, to position himself or herself within a global framework, or in the course of negotiations. In this way he or she can move towards constructing an identity. A sense of identity arises from relating one's values (including values referring to oneself) to one's personal projects and is considered to be at any one time the interim result of the action of *dynamic identity-forming strategies*, which are of a complex nature. These strategies attempt to by-pass symbolic conflicts by simultaneously giving consideration to the two contradictory terms (negotiating values, creating

new values, etc.). In this way a synthesis may be reached but it requires a degree of psychological investment going as far as confrontation.

A distinction is also made between *mediation* (by a mechanism or a third party) and direct negotiation without intermediaries. Intercultural mediation and communication are thought to encourage a higher level of interconnectedness between people and between services and the public; they are thought to lead to a higher level of 'intercommunication'. Thus we believe that intercultural mediation may help the social services to become more effective by providing a harmonious context for the integration of immigrants. Far more than a simple linguistic '*translation*', mediation can be seen as a '*bridge*' between two point of view, two types of logic or two cultures. It requires the participation of groups or individuals who are culturally pluralistic, come from various backgrounds and who through the practices they institute will help to construct relations between representatives of different cultures, thereby leading to cultural diffusion (Manço, 1999).

In this way 'the management' of identities through various strategies and mediation makes for a positive transaction between the individual and his or her environment and allows the actor to 'negotiate' with him or herself (Camilleri et Vinsonneau, 1996, p. 24). The individual who employs such strategies will benefit from a double cultural model, to which both the immigrant group and the host country contribute. This model is termed 'paradoxical' (Manço, 1999): it allows the individual to 'move towards unity from a starting-point of diversity' or in other words 'to become Other while remaining oneself' (Abou, 1981, p. 94).

The subject's resulting behaviour represents a balance between new aspirations on the one hand and on the other, older rules which have remained to a certain degree functional. Adhering to some of the codes of 'traditional' behaviour in the host country results in the heterogeneity of juxtaposed social practices.

Matrimonial strategies and fertility-related behaviour in certain Muslim immigrant communities provide an interesting illustration. Lesthaeghe et Surkyn (1996) observe in particular among the Turks that marriage practices tend to be increasingly 'traditional'. Yet, at the same time among young couples who have been united in the 'traditional' way a more egalitarian division of authority may be observed between the man and the woman than would be the case in the country of origin. This democratisation of the relations between the sexes is accompanied by a sharp decline in the birth rate. This result may be compared those of a study of mechanisms for identity compensation at work in subjects in the process of acculturation (Camilleri et Vinsonneau, 1996). This possibility allows the individual a certain scope in the management of the components of his or her identity and his or her multiple allegiances (manifest in the non-correlation of symbolic behaviour or the convergence of contradictory aspirations), as if *a loss of identity in one area were a trade-off for (or made negotiable) a voluntary cultural assimilation in another area*. An example of this is that of girls from a Muslim immigrant background who wear the Islamic chador and who go to university: by compromising in their dress they dispel their parents' worries that their daughter will be culturally assimilated and in a sense they use this compromise to barter for their freedom to move freely and to be educated without being alienated from their families.

This introduces the notion of *paradoxical identity*. (Manço, 1999). The paradox (*para-doxa*) is a 'counter-opinion', a fact or an attitude with an apparent contradiction, an observation contrary to common sense. *The paradoxical nature of identity-forming behaviour is a sign, not of an absence of internal and/or external conflicts but of a capacity to manage and work through them*. One might say that the paradoxical nature of identity forming and symbolic behaviour reflects an ability to manipulate contradictions between values and personal projects. Paradoxical identities appear to be the expression of a creative self-management leading individuals to take up positions - in terms of identity - which are coherent because they are have achieved a synthesis and unexpected because they are original. A paradoxical identity may facilitate the psychological integration of individuals exposed to a diversity of cultural references and the tensions which are associated with this (Abou, 1981).

An individual's effectiveness in managing the symbolic contradictions, which become visible as that individual achieves a certain level of social conformity, seems to be linked to the formation of his or her own personal set of values. *Personal projects are the main tools of this critical and specific internalisation and the 'place' where 'paradoxical identities' are constituted. Achieving a paradoxical identity, both at an individual and a group level may lead to a positive resolution of conflicts between norms in a context of cultural confrontation. This resolution is possible only through a detailed articulation of differences, in other words through the construction of a more or less clear logical link between the ontological preservation of the self and a pragmatic self-actualisation. This cognitive activity requires both rationality and an ability to accept contradictions.*

Many groups from a Muslim immigrant background spontaneously achieve this paradoxical identity and are able to negotiate between cultures. However the process of acculturation encounters difficulties or breaks down in some cases, leading to conflictual, even violent situations (Bak, 2000).

Intercultural negotiation constitutes a transition from strained relations to provisional understanding. It amounts to defining a new body of norms which combines older and contradictory norms. The resulting agreement can sometimes give way to new oppositions which may then be taken into account in a new negotiation. The outcome of the negotiation depends on the inherent qualities of the parties but also to a large extent on the context in which the actors in negotiation find themselves. The terms of the agreement must evolve with the contexts from which they emerge. The term '*intercultural intelligence*' is used to refer to the sensitivity and adaptability displayed by the actors and which allows them *to prevent violent conflicts between young people, immigrant parents and the institutions of the host country and to maintain a positive attitude when these do occur.*

These skills and strategies are not unrelated to what are more generally termed 'coping strategies'. However, the present debate goes far beyond the psychological dimension for individuals from immigrant backgrounds and includes exploring the mixed identities of groups of young people, parents and youth workers who have been brought into contact by particular institutions. The young people from an immigrant background sometimes have a power which is the result of a lack of skills on the part of both the immigrant parents and the social and educational structures of the host country and the use of which is potentially harmful to themselves. *Nevertheless, it is this 'mixed' space in the child's psycho-social development that spawns all future possibilities for the child to make successful transitions between two equally weighted allegiances. Establishing a genuine partnership between educators and immigrant parents which integrates this awareness is probably the only positive step capable of producing citizens with a rich multi-cultural identity in a truly intercultural society.*

### **Ways of reducing cultural dissonance and negotiating values for young people from a Muslim immigrant background.**

The aim of this study is to identify cultural tensions to which girls from Muslim immigrant families are subjected both by virtue of the process of psychological development which characterises adolescence in general and the process of acculturation for the 'second-generation'. This was done through group sessions and extended interviews with individuals, in the course of which the strategies the girls use for identity formation and integration were defined, with their capacity to negotiate in a context of cultural tension being regarded as a sign of positive progress. The work was based on the analysis of verbal material collected during a series of meetings with numerous groups of Muslim girls in the area around Liège in Belgium, in the Paris region and in Aachen in Germany, who met six times during 1999 and 2000. The practices followed resembled those of the 'focus group' (Hamel, 1999).

During these meetings the aim was to obtain information from the girls on the following issues (Bak, 2000):

- Family relations during the process of acculturation: identifying the degree to which the girls share the values transmitted by their parents (both actual and asserted values) or have modified them and whether or not this poses a problem for them in their relations with their parents or with society;
- Relations at school: identifying the degree to which the girls share the values transmitted by the schools of the host country and whether or not this poses a problem for them in their relations with their family;
- Violence at home or at school: to what extent does the acquisition of their own values or the combined values of the two systems allow them to negotiate with their family and the institutions in the host country, thereby avoiding or curtailing pressure and possible suffering.

At the initial stage, preliminary meetings were held with the teachers for those classes in order to explain the nature of the study to them and to assess the composition of the classes (counting the young Muslims). Then the groups of secondary-school girls from a Muslim background were met by teams consisting of two interviewers. One led the discussion while the other observed and took notes. The teachers had informed the girls in advance of the arrival of the interviewers and were themselves absent during all the meetings.

Six meetings took place with each group (roughly one meeting per week). The meetings were held in places familiar to the pupils. They began with tasks to carry out in groups (photo-language exercises, projection exercises etc), designed to get discussion going.

On analysis, it appears that the girls' families exercise a high level of influence on their choices in their domestic life in a multi-cultural context. The family has the power to encourage or to repress a child's autonomy, which is generally true beyond the particular case of Islam. The young people's desires are linked to their parent's approval.

The pressure, threats and corporal punishment to which these girls are subjected form part of their parents' child-rearing methods. These must be seen in relation to their situation as immigrants which is sometimes strained because of a pressure to assimilate culturally and their often deprived lifestyles (isolation, poverty, etc.). The difference between the status of girls and boys and what is judged permissible behaviour for them is a source of permanent humiliation to the girls from Muslim families. The real risks of violence to which Muslim girls are exposed occur (in their own estimation) on reaching adolescence and accompany them from the adolescent stage right through to marriage. Their virginity becomes the focus of a collective fixation which can degenerate into an open attack on their freedom of movement and of association. Greater risks include being locked up, forced to return to their country of origin, etc.

The importance attached to their virginity is due to their parents' desire that their daughter should make a 'culturally valid' marriage, which would represent the completion of their task as parents. Muslim girls are responsible for transmitting their culture from one generation to the next, and this role becomes increasingly important for families living in immigration. The parents' marriage plans for their daughter may differ considerably from her own (she may want a mixed marriage or to continue her studies). The concept of the arranged marriage is unacceptable to the host country's social and educational structures within which the girls find themselves and this may be a further source of tension. In such cases the risk of violence arises; forced marriages, conjugal rape, running away, threats, abandonment, murder, suicide, etc....

Violence may also occur once the girls are grown up and may be linked to marital problems or the upbringing of their own children in a multicultural and inegalitarian context. However these are aspects which do not fall within this study.

The investigation confirmed that girls develop resources and strategies in order to reduce or stifle the effects of cultural dissonance (Manço, 1999). The strategies identified are as follows:

- *Avoidance strategies, i.e. when the girl submits to the parents' choice in order to avoid a conflict.* This approach includes, for example, lying in order to do what is prohibited or on the contrary repressing one's own desires (self-negation) which conflict with the parents' expectations: the young girl in such cases will not ask to go on a particular outing, knowing that her parents will refuse to let her go. The girl anticipates what will and what will not be allowed. She may also represent her parents' opinion as her own in order to convince herself that the father's authoritarian behaviour is justified. Wearing the chador may also be a strategy used in this way by girls, especially those who study or work.
- *Circumventing strategies.* The subject will merely delay following her inclination. She will use cultural arguments like referring to the egalitarian verses of the Koran in discussions with her father in order to negotiate being allowed out. She will deliberately omit certain information regarding her leisure time, people she meets, will stall or change the subject, be discreet, have secrets, forget to mention things, use euphemisms, etc. Some girls will call on their mother to act as a go-between to prepare the ground for them in order to have their requests granted (the mother may either 'cover up' for the girl or negotiate her requests with the father); the brothers may also be called on to assist. All this

confirms that parents need to be taken into account and integrated in any attempts at mediation or therapy.

- Other strategies mentioned by the participants in the study were *confrontation and brinkmanship*. However, these can only be employed when the balance of power is in the girl's favour.

In reality, these different strategies are used in alternation, tactically and according to the situation and the resources at hand and they help to strengthen the position of the young women in their personal development within the family. They are used to negotiate in order to defuse tensions, at least temporarily; every negotiation leading to a new situation which in turn necessitates another negotiation...

The contradictions expressed by the teenage interviewees in their attitude towards certain habits and traditions reflect the cultural tensions to which they may be subjected, both by their family and by society in the host country. As regards their home life, for example, the girls describe their relationship with their father as unsatisfactory and becoming even more difficult as they grow older. The fathers require certain codes of behaviour to be followed, without explaining the significance of such behaviour to the children. Their relations with their mother are not always any better. Adolescence is a time when there are more and more prohibitions for girls. More than ever they are made to feel that the family honour rests on their shoulders.

A certain number of young girls adopt their parents' conservative values regarding sexual relations and the preservation of their virginity which they present in terms of self respect. Others have more assimilationist attitudes and let it be understood that they have had sexual relations. Other girls adopt a paradoxical attitude by combining elements of both cultural systems, claiming to have boyfriends and flirting but remaining virgins until they marry.

As regards marriage and the choice of a husband they find it hard to accept the type of marriage their parents expect for them, some of them declaring that ultimately they will have to submit to their parents' opinion. They do not conceive of a short-term marriage and seem to want to put marriage off for as long as possible while their parents would like to see them marry sooner and so suggest potential husbands.

The strategies developed by the girls have an impact on their families: the older ones set an example for the younger children. This makes families prone to change, giving children new choices. Through being in a state of constant negotiation the girls avoid getting into situations which are depressing or critical. They try to persuade their family that they are participating in their original culture (by wearing a chador, speaking the language, etc.) because *they want to go on being their family's daughters but at the same time they want to participate in the culture of the host country*.

## **Violence towards girls: relations between the institutions and Muslim immigrant families**

In this exploratory research we tackled the question of violence towards Muslim girls occurring within the family and the way institutions providing education, healthcare, protection and help to young people react to this. We did by adopting the perspective of workers in the health, social welfare and educational institutions of the host country which are involved in the education and integration of young people from an immigrant background. Our aim was to identify, through a series of semi-directed qualitative interviews, the strategies which these youth workers find useful for intervention and also to get them to define the difficulties they experience. In France the youth workers were interviewed in group sessions.

Many meetings were held in the Liège area, in Paris and in Aachen, in late 1999 and early 2000, in institutions involved in the area (schools, public services for helping young people, health services, women's associations, organisations for counselling young people, the forces of law and order, legal advisory services, etc.) in order to identify the visions, resources, difficulties and expectations of the social workers (in the widest sense) relating to this study and to consider the practical consequences of these. Several informal exchanges, factual information and discussions as well as recent reports concerning the issue addressed (de Conninck et al., 2000; Delens-Ravier, 2000) were included in the analysis of the material collected.

The *aim* was to define the experience and perceptions of these institutions in the host countries regarding violence, whether symbolic, psychological or physical, towards girls from a Muslim immigrant background. Information was exchanged and collected regarding the roles and the difficulties experienced by personnel from different sectors when confronted with mixed cultural references among the young people from immigrant backgrounds. The question of institutional violence towards these girls and their families was also raised indirectly.

In selecting the interviewees we began by identifying which institutions were most likely to encounter problems of violence within immigrant families; the keywords used in making our selection from the list of organisations were 'violence within the family' and 'assistance to young people'. A large number of institutions were contacted. Once we had contacted the institution our choice of which individual or individuals to meet was made on the following basis:

- The interest shown by the volunteers or those designated by the institution as specialised or experienced in our area of research;
- Their availability;
- The diversity of the individuals interviewed (sex, origin, career orientation and world-view etc.)
- We chose people we already knew from previous work in order to speed up the creation of a climate of confidence and exchange.

When more than one person from the same institution was interviewed, we made sure that one person was on the administrative staff and the other was working on the ground. The interview methods used were similar to those of the 'privileged witness interview'.

Most of the interviewees were women. This was not the result of a choice on the part of the research team but reflects the overwhelming number of women in community work and the social, educational and healthcare institutions. Those interviewed were not immigrants and almost five individuals out of six, when asked about their world-view, described themselves as 'secular'. All the people we met are professional (no voluntary workers) with third level education: teachers, psychologists, social workers, educators, criminologists, lawyers, nurses, doctors etc.

The interviewees knew of acts of violence against Muslim girls. These acts varied considerably in type and seriousness according to the sector the interviewee worked in. Generally, the study showed that the majority of workers were disappointed by their attempts to intervene in the matter which had, they said, had either mixed or negative results. In the view of the majority their 'failure' to stop the violence aimed at the girl(s) was due to a lack of the knowledge and tools needed for dealing with the situations they had encountered. The source of this feeling is undoubtedly linked to an underlying bias in their point of view and professional practices which aim at 'saving' the girl from her 'cultural straitjacket' (Brion, 2000).

Following the analysis of Cohen-Emerique (2000, 240 ff.), we may describe the social workers dealing with problems of violence towards Muslim girls, as tending towards either an attitude of extreme cultural relativism ('it's their 'culture', let's just prevent things from getting out of hand by using a language they understand') and an alarmist attitude which leads to the girl being taken into care even before her parents have been heard.

In our heterogeneous sample of interviewees we encountered both these attitudes and also some attempts at alternative positions. The first approach is simplistic and denies the possibility of change in identity, values and intentions in the process of acculturation. In particular, it causes girls who are in the process of rejecting their parents' expectations to be victimised a second time. The second approach, which was more common in our sample, leads to potential confrontation between the social workers, mainly female and secular, and parents/fathers, for the most part religious and assumed to wish to ensure that traditional values are passed on. There is a clear risk of mutual revulsion, at least subconsciously. The 'archaism' of one side will be feared and resisted while the 'depravity' of the other will be feared and rejected as a dangerous model for the younger generation brought up in exile.

The almost total absence of meaningful communication between the parents and the social workers we met is an important sign of the communication, comprehension and recognition problems they have with each other. From the social workers' discussions of individual cases it was clear that most of their contact with parents occurred in the course of investigations following complaints. Most of the parents met by the various workers included in the sample were thought to be first and foremost 'bad parents'. Several institutions have no structures for contacting parents of the young people in their care. Focusing on these questions raises the possibility of an insidious discrimination against (Muslim) immigrant families by the social institutions of the host country.

Clearly, the concept of discrimination is not a good starting point for diagnosing and attempting to resolve communication problems between the social services and their multi-ethnic public, since by unfairly questioning the good faith of individual workers it can actually conceal the institutional aspects of the problem. However, defending oneself from any charge of discrimination by simply repeating mantra-like the formula that 'professional practices are applied without reference to the cultural background of the individuals involved' is hardly an effective strategy.

Ignoring difference leads to inequality. Equally, young people and families from an immigrant background have a right to be different from what is expected to be their particular form of 'difference'. Thus the majority of workers we met correctly perceived a need for methods, tools and modes of analysis in order for them to understand the complex cultural values, intentions, and mind-set of young people and their immigrant families (Manço, 1999).

What is also needed is access to spaces for debate or discussion of fundamental questions both between social workers and their own management and between social workers, the families and the wider community. We must constantly challenge our ideas of what social workers should be and what it means to be a democrat both in terms of our institutional structure and in terms of the needs of immigrant families (de Conninck, 2000). Establishing spaces of this kind is necessary in order to avoid perpetrating a symbolic institutional violence which imposes external norms without any regard to the point of view of the other, under the guise of the protection of children (Cohen-Emerique, 2000).

## **Discrimination in employment against young women from a Muslim immigrant background**

This study was carried out only in French-speaking Belgium and concerns the employment services and their staff who were asked to define the difficulties experienced by young Muslim women. The aim was to outline the points of view and contributions of these organisations and whether or not they are successful in helping young Muslim women to integrate.

In general, immigrant women or women from an immigrant background have unskilled or low-skilled jobs. While the majority of employed Belgian women work in the services sector, many immigrant women are factory workers and one in four works in the cleaning and buildings-maintenance sector. The positions they hold are most often badly paid and lacking in job security. Quite a few of them work part-time. Moreover, women from an immigrant background are particularly likely to be unemployed: their unemployment rates are twice those of the native female population, whose unemployment rates are in turn high compared to their male counterparts.

Several factors have a bearing on the social and employment situation of women from an immigrant background: place of birth, date of arrival in Europe (for those who are immigrants), their reason for being in the host country (joining their family, study, political exile, etc.), their level of education and where they received it, their family situation and number of children, ethnic and socio-cultural origin (rural or urban), where they live, etc. A woman's chance of finding a secure and stable job will vary greatly according to these factors.

Since, in the host country, socio-economic integration is generally achieved through work, working also allows women to assert themselves within the home. However, in addition to the state of the economy and the limited availability of unskilled work, an abundance of research has shown that women of foreign origin are

discriminated against on the labour market, both because they are women and because they are foreigners (Firgule, 1999, Manço, U, Feld et al., 1997; etc.).

*Within this general framework, discrimination and the specific difficulties of young Muslim women must be analysed at the following three levels:*

- Firstly the processes for *educating and guiding* Muslim girls must be described, since these introduce a bias at an early stage which will considerably limit their future chances of access to the employment market. The responsibility of their families must also be considered.
- Then, the *relationship between family and working life*, complicated for all women in our society must be seen against the background of the family structures of Muslim immigrants.
- Finally *ethnic and religious discrimination in recruitment and employment* which affect Muslim women (particularly the question of wearing a chador) must be examined both from the point of view of employers and that of the employment services and provide social and professional training.

According to the ideals of many Muslim families, the woman's place is in the home. In Belgium and Europe generally the status of women has changed since the two world wars and the sixties when there was a shortage of male workers, the socio-cultural emancipation of women and, more generally the development of a society in which integration into social life is achieved through work for both men and women. This situation has gradually led to equal access to higher education and all types of employment for women, although there are still numerous instances of inequality in the treatment and recognition of women.

The staff (particularly female members) of institutions facilitating access to employment and of vocational training establishments, who are in charge of implementing these equal opportunities policies, often become concerned about the future of girls from a Muslim immigrant background. This may give rise to tensions between these institutions on the one hand and the young people and their families on the other, sometimes to the extent that contact and co-operation become impossible. Integration will never be possible, however, without discussion and without creating a climate of trust.

Since they attend school until the compulsory school-leaving age of 18, young Muslims are brought into contact with the native young people and may be attracted by the western model of emancipation which is promoted by the media and by their own teachers. They are torn between the family ideal of the mother entirely dedicated to her children and society's model of a long period of study leading to economic success. While this 'western', individualist model does not preclude the possibility of having a family and children, it contradicts the 'usual' Muslim objectives in that it appears to subordinate the importance of family and children to economic success.

Matters would still be relatively simple were it not for the question of marriage, which represents the completion of their upbringing duties for Muslim parents. How can one be sure that a girl, born into an immigrant family, who studies for many years and goes on to work outside the home, will not be exposed to 'bad company', possibly causing her to depart from what is for her family the 'acceptable' path? How can one be sure that the men whom the parents consider 'suitable' will still be interested in a girl who is emancipated in this way (and who, inevitably, is growing older...)? These are the questions which Muslim immigrant parents ask themselves when they consider their daughters' future prospects.

*This study concerns the employment services and their staff who were asked to define the difficulties experienced by young Muslim women on the employment market. There are various reasons for their difficulties (lack of school education, incompatibility between the family's plans and the girls' aspirations to work, discrimination, exploitation and poor career guidance etc.). Recent studies on these women's work prospects which were carried out in Brussels and the Hainaut were also analysed (Ludik, 2000; AMIS, 2000).*

The interviews were carried out in institutions with experience of these issues (various public services and associations for employment assistance, as well as universities in Brussels, Liège and the Hainaut), in order to identify their points of view, resources, difficulties and expectations as reflected in their research, and action

and prevention practices. Our aim is to apply the experience and observations of the institutions in the area to the facts relating to the specific difficulties and discrimination to which women from a Muslim immigrant background are subjected. Ten specialists, chosen for their expertise (of whom 7 were women and several were of foreign origin) were met in the institutions dealing with these issues (8 of which are in Brussels) and interviewed anonymously, on the basis of a short interview guide, during the first half of 2000. In some institutions several individuals were interviewed.

The interview with the specialist (approximately one hour per interview) began with a very specific, deliberately provocative and simplistic question: '*Are young women from a Muslim immigrant background motivated to work?*' This had the advantage of getting the discussion going immediately and allowing the interviewer to introduce fundamental questions (as per the interview guide) and possibly also specific secondary questions depending on the way the discussion was going and the interviewee's contribution to it:

- What are the reasons for their motivation or lack of it?
- What do you as a specialist think of socio-economic integration?
- What should be done about such situations?
- What do your colleagues think of such situations and how do they react to them?

The results of the empirical study concur with those of the other research (Ludik, 2000; AMIS, 2000) allowing us to gain a better understanding of the *system* within which the young women from a Muslim immigrant background do or do not seek paid employment.

The women must live up to very different sets of expectations – their own, their husband's, their family's, their community's, those of the employment services, social security institutions, vocational training establishments, employers, and temping agencies and also deal with how they are perceived by the native population. The interaction between these conflicting expectations and images keeps Muslim women in a state of unstable equilibrium.

By definition, the financial means of the families concerned are limited while their economic needs are not. But does the unskilled work which is all that the majority of the women find add to their dignity? How do their family, children and communities react to their taking up such jobs? What is to be done about the supposedly 'accusing' attitude of teachers, and agents of the local public services generally who are amazed to see the daughter of an immigrant worker... not working?!

It is clear that asking a question about the employment of these women in terms of 'cultural motivation' is reductive and ignores the many problems of discrimination and maladjustment which researchers have identified (Ouali et Rea, 1995). However, the identity of women in a post-migratory situation is certainly at the heart of the debate and draws on their multiple resources stemming both from family values and values received during their socialisation and schooling in the host country.

Their 'choice' of whether or not to work is determined by concrete conditions, such as the 'baggage' of their education and the obstacles they have encountered on the employment market which hardly make for an easy life. In order to achieve a measure of self-realisation and personal emancipation the women sometimes draw sustenance from the values transmitted to them by their family and extended community which they articulate and adapt, often very successfully, to the material conditions of their immediate environment.

Therefore, in addition to a general policy to promote employment which should include combating discrimination and illegality on the job market there is a need for better articulated policies in the area of social security and the employment of unskilled individuals. The question of vocational training is in urgent need of review. Finally, the employment services must take a comprehensive approach to the situation of these women who, living in strained socio-cultural and economic conditions, display an *adaptability* which suggests that it would be better to support particular projects on the part of individuals rather than pursuing a policy of 'employment at any price'.



## **A few practical recommendations by way of a conclusion**

The studies presented here have allowed us to show that the questions of marriage and the socio-cultural emancipation of girls and young women from a Muslim immigrant background constitute a locus of cultural confrontation between European society and communities of foreign origin whose cultural identity is to a certain extent 'collectivist and traditional'. Thus these questions constitute a point of entry into the more general problem of violence in the process of acculturation. The studies also showed that if preventative measures are taken in such a way as to carefully avoid stigmatising families from an immigrant background, it is possible to elaborate strategies to deal with cultural discontinuity. Here the negotiation of identity is recommended as a positive response within immigrant families, which may prevent violence and tensions within the family, as well as tensions between the families and the institutions concerned. Finally, the research showed that teachers and social workers are often confused due to working in an area rife with cultural tensions between immigrant families and the culture of the organisations and institutions whose job it is to integrate them. Educators and social workers also lack the perspectives and practical tools needed to work through these issues.

There is a need to provide information, education and awareness within a complex institutional framework (target audience, workers on the ground, decision-makers, researchers) and a framework of intercultural exchanges whose representation in the media is often distorted by various stereotypes, particularly anti-Islamic ones.

Institutions, educational establishments and public authorities must be assisted and given the right tools for combating violence and co-operating in order to implement positive prevention strategies. This objective can be best realised through setting up multi-disciplinary networks and ensuring that there is an exchange of practical and scientific information at a national and international level. The aim of the work envisaged is to instruct the public authorities and their personnel on how to prevent physical and psychological violence towards girls and women from a Muslim immigrant background by means of intercultural negotiation which includes the young people and their families. Appropriate sources and resources of information and experience must be assembled and made available to the services concerned in order to help them to understand and prevent violence which may occur in the process of acculturation and to help families in difficulty.

### **Action with social workers**

The primary course of action must be the training of those working to provide support to women and children who are or could become victims of violence by promoting training programmes which enable them to recognise and interpret instances of violence and to intervene in an appropriate manner where the victims or those who inflict the violence come from ethnic Muslim minorities. The question of discriminatory practices towards members of the Muslim immigrant community and their exclusion from the public arena which constitute psychological and institutional violence must be addressed with particular care.

We have outlined a number of general skills to be acquired by social workers. *The first ones concern preventative and informative measures for communities.*

- The acquisition of language skills and general knowledge about the communities in question, and their complexity and changing nature in the context of migration (as a corollary: the development of a critical self-awareness, and awareness of one's own allegiances, particularly ideological);
- Being answerable to the community as a whole and to the various audiences; and emphasising a policy of participation and sharing responsibility (encouraging autonomy, 'empowerment') over support

work. In communicating with the public attention must be paid to difficulties of an intercultural nature (the interests of the parties involved must be clarified, it must be ensured that the parties understand each other correctly, the non-verbal aspects of communication must be understood, stereotypes must be identified, the situation or individual must not be reduced to their 'ethnic' dimension, all dimensions of the person's identity must be taken into account, derogatory generalisations must be avoided, actions analysed in order to understand their meaning, etc.);

- The intercultural resources and skills of the public (young people, families, various communities) must be developed; there must be a focus on potentially positive analyses rather than problem areas (without, however, minimising the problems and the risks); a wide range of practices must be introduced which are suitable for dealing with the lifestyles and values of the community concerned; estrangement must be avoided, resistance anticipated, the people concerned must be informed and supported in making decisions and taking practical steps; those who should benefit from projects should be allowed to help to formulate them and carry them out; the community's confidence should be fostered and developed; social and educational initiatives should be made relevant to people's everyday life, allowing genuine participation;
- No prejudice must be shown towards what the audience concerned does not automatically understand; channels of information and resources relevant to the community in question should be developed; an open mind should be kept on those aspects of the audiences concerned which are most 'different' (e.g. concepts of time, space, the status of the individual, the relations between the sexes, the status of children, etc.); the community's contradictions must be accepted; fears and anxiety relating to difference and change must be overcome (the fear of invasion, alienation, of identity loss, tensions, authoritarian reactions and stereotypes, exclusion, misrepresentations, prejudices, denials, personal hang-ups, etc.);
- The development of 'spaces' (conceived of in both spatial and temporal terms) for contact, confrontation, mediation, and (intercultural) negotiation; information and permanent democratic dialogue with the young people and their parents; the removal of obstacles to peaceful communication, submitting to testing by the audiences, making interventions and objectives transparent; allowing the audience concerned to express itself and make its own evaluations (in the conflictual aspects as well); helping it to strive for social and psychological equilibrium;
- The reconciliation of respect and approval for differences with the task of assimilation or cultural 'normalisation' which implicitly falls to the social and educational institutions and social-welfare services; the evaluation and regulation of practices carried out in and with the communities concerned.

Most of these professional skills are addressed to communities which are hierarchic and conservative, in other words communities which must strive to work through their multiple allegiances. The particular skill of the social worker in a pragmatic approach dealing with the everyday reality for these 'different' groups is to create and maintain conditions in which all parties can participate in the 'negotiation' establishing social relations without imposing an outcome on it. The intercultural process and the psycho-social integration of people in an unequal and conflictual multicultural situation are only possible when scope is given to actively articulating original features which adhere to the norms of the immigrant society in question, without allowing these to be distorted by excessive conservatism. In this way a balance may be reached between *respecting individuals, minorities and the majority*.

Other skills needed by those working with young people from an immigrant background have to do with *their relations with both direct and indirect hierarchy and other social workers and institutions either operating locally or in the same field*. This may be termed 'professional interculturalism' (interdisciplinary work, partnerships, collaboration with colleagues from different backgrounds, etc.):

- Learning about and developing data bases about practices and resources related to the activities of the institutions, and carrying out or initiating information-gathering projects and projects for continued awareness and training (especially in situ guidance);

- Developing precise and structured practical and political positions, and relating actions at a macro and micro level, as called for by the nature of the work;
- Addressing colleagues and or management in the appropriate terms (negotiation, mediation, etc.); placing intervention within a more general scheme of action; contributing to understanding and decision-making; making changes and innovations, anticipating future developments as well as resistance and obstacles; developing spaces permanently dedicated to information and exchange; taking on board the contributions of colleagues in other disciplines, and other cultures;
- Developing practices in association with other youth workers; avoiding clashes; sharing the know-how acquired, negotiating qualifications and contributions (of an intercultural nature);
- Maintaining partnerships involving trusted individuals or specialists with different outlooks and backgrounds who may also intervene in emergencies (as mediators, interpreters, messengers, referees, community representatives, etc.); evaluating and regulating actions with colleagues, partners and decision makers.

One might also speak of *collective intercultural skills*, meaning an ability to organise and regulate interaction within a socially and culturally heterogeneous group in order to promote understanding and common projects which will benefit from different types of contribution. The institution's skills may be of considerable importance and may influence the practices of working groups, intervention teams etc. The institution's overall effectiveness requires the following:

- Setting up an initial project to bring about cohesion; a collective record of the project to increase knowledge (abstractions from particular situations) and expertise (derived from experience); a space and a capacity for auto-regulation (space for dialogue);
- An organising function within a network, action in teams, specialised branches; a regular practice of adaptability in professional practices; organising the work in such a way that it is encouraging and stimulating and qualifies workers; a pooling of resources, knowledge, means, and decision-making
- Cultural openness and adaptability which may contribute to the speed and quality of the mutual acculturation which occurs between trained personnel and the audiences concerned.

Finally, it may be said that the most important of the institutions' intercultural skills is their inherent capacity to promote the full flowering of the *intercultural intelligence* of the people and the trained personnel working together: the positive paradox is that *the problems of institutions may be solved by the people*.

### **Action with the communities**

It is necessary to give the people concerned feedback in the form of observations made in order to prevent or deal with the problem of violence among immigrants. Thus discussions and discussion-panels may be organised in schools (with girls and boys from an immigrant background), in local associations or in institutions providing assistance to women from an immigrant background, in immigrant associations (workers' associations, mosques, etc) and within professional institutions (or their federations) dealing with these questions. The aim is to integrate, disseminate and increase the store of information collected, as well as testing theories which emerge from research and practical work.

Links should be forged between local institutions and organisations within the communities which can be of real assistance in times of crisis. Indeed it is most important to establish relations between the institutions of the host country and local organisations set up by immigrants. For example, we know that through the legitimacy conferred on them by participation in associations and religious activities women from an immigrant background often acquire an appreciable public presence and freedom of movement within their community.

Students, for example, may use their Islamic activities as a guarantee of their morality in order to be allowed by their parents to finish their studies.

The women's branches of these associations are places of informal exchange among women experiencing the same social conditions. Given the generally low level of education among immigrant women, the role such groups play in raising the women's self-awareness is of considerable interest. Areas of life which may be addressed are consumption, domestic hygiene, the education of children, sexuality, contraception, and last but not least the contradictions between a 'macho' mentality and some Islamic teachings more favourable to women which have been repressed by tradition. The existence of such meeting places releases many Muslim women from solitude and isolation.

It would be useful for youth workers to establish connections with community organisations of this kind, on the basis of a negotiated concept of collaboration. This could produce concrete results such as the respect for and recognition of the 'other' within legitimate structures, thereby allowing local institutions to establish a relationship of trust which may be crucial in times of crisis, etc.

In practice, actions of this kind will allow the acquisition and diffusion of information, which can be of considerable importance when dealing with conflicts within immigrant families and between them and the institutions of the host country; the definition from all of the perspectives concerned of the changing expectations and anxieties of the immigrant parents, the expectations and anxieties of young people from an immigrant background, and the roles, possibilities and difficulties for social workers and their institutions; practical and legal information on violence and its consequences; examples of success on the part of young people who have combined their original culture and their integration into their host country in a creative way. Integration may be regarded as a negation of the parents but nothing will alienate children more than violence against them. Working at establishing links between communities may lead to the construction of new symbols and a negotiation of power in an intergenerational and intercultural framework.

### **Research and the dissemination of information**

A number of tools and working documents must be produced and disseminated in order to assist the processes described above: reports, articles in professional journals, bibliographies, monographs, brochures, practical documents, tools for identifying problems (such as 'photo-language' exercises), audio and video materials, internet sites, accounts of individual experience, etc. This material will form a basis for discussion of the question of violence against a background of immigration and of the ways in which it can be prevented through applying the concept of negotiation and through focusing on intercultural skills. Dissemination involves providing information to and increasing the sensitivity of social workers, future social workers, young people and their parents through meetings, seminars, etc.

Finally, a number of points remain to be clarified regarding the mechanisms of discrimination and violent practices affecting girls and women from an immigrant background.

There is thus a need for a specific study into the exclusion of Muslim women on the job-market and in professional training (e.g. the prohibition on wearing a chador and discriminatory practices among technical and professional workers). In the same way, preventative action in combating violence would benefit from a study of the official and unofficial social meeting places for Muslim girls in working class areas (associations, clubs, groups, etc.) in order to define their potential for action and mobilisation, and learn of their various difficulties and aims (practical functions, providing models for guidance, etc.)

In conclusion, it is imperative that the research should also include the perspectives of the Muslim fathers and mothers regarding the difficulties of bringing up their daughters in an immigration situation. Their expectations, mental blocks and resources must be defined in the course of co-operation with the social and educational institutions of the host country.