

SUPPORTING MIGRANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES: MIGRANT WOMEN, YOUTH AND FAMILY IN THE WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

IDM WORKSHOP “SOCIETIES AND IDENTITIES: THE MULTIFACETED IMPACT OF MIGRATION” – GENEVA, JULY 19-20, 2010

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First of all I would like to thank the IDM Workshop and IOM organization for their kind invitation to this very important and prestigious meeting.

The CO.RE.IS. (Italian Islamic Religious Community) which I represent today, is the main organization gathering Italian Muslims, i.e. the “autochthon” Italian Islamic community which represents a small percentage with respect to the totality of Muslims living temporarily or permanently in Italy, which are of immigrant origins for the most.

As it was founded in order to give voice to the religious needs of the *ummah*, the wider Muslim community living in Italy, during the last 20 years the COREIS has undertaken permanent relations with the foreign Muslim communities in Italy and abroad, helping relations and dialogue with the so-called “civil society” and the local and national Institutions: at a local level, the COREIS has set up permanent collaborations with Muslim communities coming from Senegal, Turkey, Bosnia Herzegovina, Morocco and Northern Africa, while at an international level it has relations with Muslim representatives from almost all the Islamic communities worldwide, from Malaysia to the United States, having signed since 1997 a bilateral agreement with the ISESCO, the cultural, educational and scientific institution of the OIC, the Organization of the Islamic Conference which gathers 57 member States.

In this framework, a specific working group about Education and another one about Health have been set up by the COREIS in Italy, in order to study the emerging needs and criticalities from both

the immigrants' and the institutions' point of view, helping institutions understand the religious needs of immigrants and these latter understand the legal and technical needs of institutions and public structures.

The contribution I could bring in many occasions on behalf of the CO.RE.IS., as regards the educational needs of Muslim students in the public school, was first of all about methods and contents of a religious education at school. Actually, from our point of view it must be set as a starting point that religious teaching, though respecting each faith's specificity, must not be afforded in a "catechistic" way, as it must be integrated in the pedagogical and didactical framework which underpins public education in its whole. But school does not only mean knowledge: it also means living together and knowing each other. In this sense, the COREIS has had the occasion to set up important training courses for school teachers about Islamic religion and the religious needs of Muslim students in everyday life. We have brought important issues to the official audit of the Italian Home Office in 2007 about the "Charter of values of citizenship and integration", stating that from an Islamic point of view education must be granted to boys and girls with the same rights, regarding both public education and "private" religious one. Such testimony revealed its necessity as in Milan there had been cases of segregated Muslim girls who were not allowed to attend primary school, as well as unjustified requests of "separated classrooms" for female Muslim students in the secondary school. To follow such a request in the name of "multiculturalism", as it had been the risk, would have signified surrendering the challenge of social participation in the name of a pretended auto-ghettoization of certain specific movements which do not even represent the mainstream in the Islamic world.

In the city of Milan, where the COREIS has its national headquarters and where I live and work, we have conceived for the current year a wider program of "Social Mediation" training which covers juridical, educational, sanitary and cultural topics. As a consequence of this, we are setting up just in these weeks an inter-disciplinary permanent workgroup about health topics, involving the Milanese Municipality's Health Counselor, the CO.RE.IS., an Academy for Inter-religious Studies – the I.S.A. Interreligious Studies Academy in which I'm directly involved as well – and the main Hospitals of the city, some of which have a regional catchment area. We have chosen Milan as a starting point for a work about health because, besides being the second major metropolitan area in Italy after Rome, its province gathers up to 11% of the total immigrant population of Italy, according to the Italian official

demographic and statistical research institutes. Different hospitals have specialized in the relations with specific immigrant communities, which have the tendency to settle together in a same zone. We are working with some hospitals which have a huge Chinese presence and others which have mainly Latin-American or Middle-East immigrants.

We are starting our work with a study seminar about “Women and health in the inter-cultural society”, which is to take place on next September, focusing on emergency management and best practices in the relations with the immigrant patients. We are orienting our work, under the request of Hospital managers, in the direction of a medium-term and long-term study in order to manage the legal and bureaucratic consequences of certain situations, be they concerned with the legal status of the immigrant or with his/her privacy face to other people, or related to the application of particular laws such as the recent European resolution about FGMs or others, which oblige the sanitary operators to immediately involve the police officers, causing as a consequence an even worse situation for the people involved. We believe that better ways may be found in order to manage with intelligence and sensibility certain situations, without overtaking laws which must in any way be respected. In this sense, we believe that intercultural and inter-religious training of both medical operators and police officers should play a key role.

One should first of all get over the prejudice which relegates the concept of “traditional family” or “traditional woman” to one specific religious, cultural or ethnical background (namely a not so well defined “Islamic world”): to give an example, during a conversation with social assistants and linguistic mediators in a hospital, we stressed that the need for respect of a feminine reserve may not be relegated to “Arab” or “Muslim” women only, while on the other hand such a need must not be seen as an obstacle keeping the medical operator from doing his job; we were surprised to discover a sincere agreement by the intercultural mediator (herself a woman) of the Spanish linguistic area, who noticed how some prejudices about Arab women had a negative impact also on the Latin-American women, as these latter were wrongly supposed not to have any special need: as the mediator said, they are supposed to understand Italian, as Spanish “is not so different as a language”; they are as well supposed not to have any special need, “as they are Christian”. In fact, their being Christian coming from places where feminist movements have never taken root makes them nearer to a need of “feminine reserve” than one can imagine. On the other hand, we find that the sensibility and attention of public hospitals about such needs is very high and very honorable, making it possible

to think about an intercultural integration respecting both cultural and religious specificities without giving such specificities more emphasis than they need.

At the present time, support to migrant women in the West seems to suffer from an exclusively “legalist” approach: much is done against family violence and many legal and social assistance tools are given to migrant women in order to free them from their family links. This resolves in a general sense of disaggregation and we must ask ourselves how much such situations are of benefit for children which will live family conflicts and separation besides the difficulty to live in a stranger world. Also in this case, we are trying to give, when possible, the new input of a couple and parental training also for immigrants, in the respect of their traditions, helping mediate when possible the applications of one’s religious and cultural inputs in the modern Western world where they are to live, as we agree with Bauman that a “solid” society is better than a “liquid” one. And we also believe that a “solid” family is the first stone of a “solid” society.

So, besides juridical training courses about family issues, which eventually help immigrants understand the legal framework of Western societies, we also propose a counseling activity for couples in trouble. A non-radicalized religious sensibility together with our cultural background as Italian citizens helps us find solutions in order to resolve the problems - which many times are real ones - without making the error to emphasize such problems from a religious point of view, helping all people involved find a more objective approach.

As a conclusion, to talk about the impact that migration – and in particular women migration – can have on the places of origin, it must be first of all stressed that such an impact must be seen in a wider perspective, as the impact of globalization on the Eastern traditional world; on one hand, there is the negative effect of a standardization which makes some ways of life – also the positive ones – be lost and replaced by “another” way of life, and not always a better one. So, while some practices which come out to be “superstitions” rather than “traditions” can be let apart in the meeting with the West¹, other aspects may perhaps sometimes benefit by a more reciprocal approach: this can be the case of the sense of family and community, the latter almost lost in the West while the former is

1. Such is the case of FGMs, which have been banned by law in most of the States in Africa, including the Islamic ones, stating once and for ever that such a practice has nothing to deal with the Islamic religion.

going to a rapid disaggregation: although the contact with Western societies can help finding a new equilibrium also in Eastern societies, we must point out that certain “sicknesses” which are complained in our society by some sociologists like Bauman should not necessarily be considered as values to be brought abroad.

In other cases, the need for a “juridical dialogue” with the West has brought some States to renew their same laws, building a “civil law” less wide than the Islamic sacred one, yet not contradicting it; such is the case of Tunisia, where polygamy has been suppressed by a State law (basing upon the fact that it is neither compulsory nor encouraged by the Koranic Revelation), or the case of Morocco, where Family Law has been renewed in order to adapt it to the needs of a wider range of social, cultural and juridical relations of Moroccan citizens all around the world. This goes beyond the “added value” that specific social or cultural forms can eventually bring in themselves. Nowadays, we may say as a general rule that a social issue has as much an “added value” as it allows positive and intelligent communication among different creatures, all to be seen as creatures of the Unique God.

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