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Democracy Embraces Diversity: Celebrating and Empowering Migrant Women's Participation



Photo: Piroshki



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Citizens' association "Atina," together with the [European network Women in Development WIDE+](#) and [Oxfam Italia Intercultura](#), organized an event called *"Democracy Embraces Diversity: Celebrating and Empowering Migrant Women's Participation"* on Friday, October 20, 2023, at "Miljenko Dereta" space in Belgrade. This also marked the end of the working visit of the WIDE+ network representatives, who were in Belgrade and with "Atina" during the week within the joint ERASMUS+ project "We Empower: Expanding Tools in Addressing Barriers for Migrant Women to Participate in Democratic Life."

The event was divided into three panels, within which those present could hear about the findings of research on the political and democratic participation of migrant women in several European countries, the steps for the participation and integration of migrant women in Serbia, and the experiences of migrant women themselves, members of the Advocacy Group of women with the experience of migration gathered around "Atina."

Gea Meijers, from the WIDE+ network, greeted the attendees at the very beginning and opened the event, but was also the first speaker in the first panel, during which the [research findings on the political and democratic participation of migrant women in Europe](#) were presented. In this regard, Gea Meijers spoke about why this topic is essential, i.e., why it is crucial to ensure the participation of migrant women within their integration processes. She also talked about the challenges migrant women in Europe face and how these obstacles could be overcome. After her, representatives of several organizations participating in the work of the WIDE+ network addressed the audience and spoke about the research findings in their national frameworks. Marie Sobolewski from the Progressive Women's Movement "Gabriela," from Germany, talked about [the position of migrant women in Germany](#). The research findings on the political participation of migrant women in that country emphasize that they still face numerous obstacles despite the positive individual examples of migrant women in political life and high positions in the Bundestag.



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Stephanie Ingrid Höglund, from Women and Development (KULU) from [Denmark](#), stated that even in that country, there are still obstacles in the participation of migrant women, emphasizing the problem of negative media presentation of this group, which has been strengthening in recent years. Laura Albu, from the Romanian Women's Lobby, spoke next and shared the findings of research conducted in cooperation with ADRI, an organization from [Italy](#) that is working to improve the position of Romanian women in that country. Albu first mentioned the fact that about 4 million migrants are living in Italy, 1 million of whom are from Romania, and that 60% of them are women, primarily employed in helping professions. She spoke about the perspective of female citizens from one EU member country (Romania) who live in another (Italy) and the obstacles they face in the context of political participation and integration in general.

After that, Edme Dominguez and Lisa Sutton, from the organization Gender and Development in Practice (GADIP) in Sweden, spoke about the political participation of migrant women in that country. They pointed out the need to respect the differences among migrant women when designing migration policies in general, and especially policies concerning their participation. They also presented some good practices that could be applied in other countries. The final speaker of the first panel, Jelena Hrnjak from "Atina," thanked everyone for taking part in the roundtable on behalf of the organization and then spoke about the findings of the research on the [political participation of migrant women in Serbia](#). In this regard, she talked about various aspects related to the participation of migrant women in democratic life in Serbia. She referred to different obstacles that migrant women face in that domain, highlighting the problem of stereotypical representation of migrant women in the media. This was followed by a series of recommendations to improve the position of this group in Serbia.

The topic of the second panel was the participation and integration of migrant women in Serbia, and the speakers were representatives of relevant state institutions and international organizations operating in Serbia. [Ms Nina Mitić](#), from the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, addressed the audience first and pointed out that Serbia has adopted numerous laws that should improve the position of vulnerable groups. Still, she mentioned that there is a particular problem that society needs to deal with - femicide and that the ministry she comes from advocates for the improvement of legislation in that domain.

[Ms Tatjana Prijić](#) from the office of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality spoke next, presenting an overview of the competencies of this body and referring to good cooperation with the



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civil sector, citing as an example the response to the complaint of the organization "Atina" (due to offensive anti-migrant posters in public transport vehicles in Belgrade, which were then removed). She also mentioned the situational analyses carried out by this office concerning the employment of migrants and other related topics.

The next speaker was **Jelena Šurlan**, advisor from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, who gave a brief history of this institution and then provided data on the current migration profile in Serbia (the number and structure of migrants). In this regard, she stated that in the period January 1 – October 15, 2023, 89,826 newly registered persons from the migrant population were recorded in the centers managed by the Commissariat, as well as that on October 19, 1,751 persons from this population were accommodated in the centers, among whom 91% were adult men, followed by 4% adult women. The rest were children from families and unaccompanied minors (17 of them). Šurlan also underlined good cooperation with the civil sector, including the activities carried out by the organization "Atina" in the reception and asylum centers under the jurisdiction of this institution.

The final representative of state institutions in this panel was **Ivana Martinović** from the Office for Asylum under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia. She spoke about different stages in the asylum procedure. Also, she presented current data related to the number of submitted asylum requests by migrants in Serbia, as well as the

handling of those requests. In this regard, she stated that from January 1 to October 19, 2023, 1,362 persons expressed their intention to apply for asylum in the Republic of Serbia, and only 152 of them applied in that period. The refuge was also granted for 6 persons, subsidiary protection for 2 persons, temporary protection for 273 persons, and a decision to extend temporary protection for 738 persons.

The second part of this panel was reserved for representatives of relevant international organizations operating in Serbia. **Jovana Mihajlović** from the Swiss Embassy and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation spoke first and emphasized that their agency monitors the context of migration and, in that regard, designs interventions and provides support to other institutions and organizations. She added that for them, in terms of cooperation with local institutions and organizations, the priority topics are the asylum and migrant protection systems on the territory of Serbia.



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Then **Bojana Balević** from the Danish Refugee Council spoke and reflected on the development of their program in Serbia, which was launched in 1993. Since this organization supports refugees and migrants, Balević referred to specific difficulties faced by this vulnerable group in Serbia regarding the realization and protection of their rights and access to services, with a call to resolve these difficulties.

The last speaker on this panel was **Katarina Mitić** from the International Rescue Committee (IRC). She spoke about the IRC's activities in the previous decades in Serbia, stating that the organization first acted in an emergency, and then their actions became more developmental. In this sense, they have partnered with various actors, including the organization „Atina“. Mitić also mentioned their work in the community, both in Serbia and the region, as an important segment of the IRC's work. Milan Aleksić from the organization "Atina" facilitated both of these panels.

Lidija Đorđević moderated the last panel from "Atina," and the speakers were migrant women, members of the Advocacy Group of women with the experience of migration gathered around the organization "Atina". This panel aimed to share the experiences within the system, that is, personal stories of these women on how they exercised their rights and what obstacles they encountered, as well as to share recommendations for improving the work of that system. The panelists were Christa Maniratunga and Ingabire Lola Brigitte, who came to Serbia from Burundi.

Lidija Đorđević opened this panel with two strong messages from the members of the Advocacy Group about the fact that home is always the most beautiful place but that sometimes it has to be rebuilt and that we need to treat refugees the way we would want others to treat us in such a situation. Then, **Christa Maniratunga** spoke about the work of the Advocacy Group and its goals. In this regard, she said that participating in the work of the Advocacy Group was a meaningful experience for her since it helped her go through the asylum procedure in parallel. She added that the significance of the Advocacy Group lies in advocating for improving the position of other migrant women and their easier "passage" through the asylum procedure.

Ingabire Lola Brigitte then spoke about her challenges since she came to Serbia in 2022, primarily related to the asylum procedure and exercising the right to asylum. In that regard, she mentioned that there is no specific system of support and assistance for people who apply for asylum and that she had to do everything herself. This, she added, is incredibly challenging for the persons who do not know Serbian or English. The panelists also talked about other challenges related to the integration of



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migrants in Serbia. They listed some suggestions to improve the system, underlining the importance of the participation of migrants in creating solutions to the problems they face.

The panel was followed by a short discussion with the attendees, after which the moderator, **Milan Aleksić** from "Atina," presented concluding observations. He pointed out that everyone present had the opportunity to hear about the research on the political and democratic participation of migrant women in Europe, which in many countries, including Serbia, is still a far-fetched topic, as well as about the work of the institutions and organizations in Serbia in this field. He also concluded that discussions show there is a will for the cooperation of various actors, as well as the need to deepen this cooperation when it comes to improving the position of refugees and migrants and their integration. Aleksić added a conclusion that there is a need for greater involvement of the migrants themselves when it comes to devising solutions to existing problems and challenges to ensure that their voices are heard.

The video from the entire event can be found on [Atina's YouTube channel](#).

Photographs from the event can be seen [here](#).

Photos are taken with explicit and free consent by the participants including speakers during events organized in the context of the WE-EMPOWER project. Consent has been given at the beginning of the event.



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