Project

Opening participatory routes: Mentoring and building capacity for active citizenship from a gender perspective

(Parti GE.MI.)

2nd Policy Brief

Participation in Trade Unions: barriers, resources and strategies

The European project “Opening participatory routes: Mentoring and building capacity for active citizenship from a gender perspective” aims at developing knowledge about innovative and effective gender sensitive policy measures for the support of the participation of third country migrants in European societies. The aim is to broaden participatory opportunities especially in the fields of political and trade union participation as well as parental participation in school councils. In the second project Policy Brief, we present the results of qualitative analysis to assess the participation of TCNs in the Trade Unions in Germany. For the German case, we conducted 20 autobiographical narrative interviews and a Focus Group with migrant women and men from Turkey, Morocco, Iran, Afghanistan, South-America, and Sub-Saharan African countries. For the investigation of Trade Union participation, we conducted 10 autobiographical narrative interviews with first- and second- generation migrants who are active at different levels within the trade union hierarchies. From the analysis of the autobiographical narrations, we identified barriers hindering participation and reconstructed supportive structures.

a) Biographical patterns, motivating factors and supportive structures

Collective labour relations in Germany are structured in a dual system, i.e. of trade unions and workers’ councils. There are no formal barriers to the participation in these bodies that officially exclude migrants working legally in Germany. Yet, in spite of high levels of organisation of migrants overall, there are low levels of representation in the higher levels of the organisational hierarchies, indicating the existence of informal barriers. Moreover, the level of organisation and representation of migrants in trade unions varies between the different branches. The specific form of organization of work, the opportunity for
communication among workers and the numerical presence of migrants in a firm are major preconditions for migrants to organise and participate in trade unions.

Through the analysis of the interviews with migrants who actively participate in trade unions, we detected some specific structures relevant to the participation processes. These include the role of biographical resources acquired during the course of life, comprising motivational structures, knowledge, and competencies. Some of the first generation migrant interviewees came to Germany in order to access higher education. They had at their disposal the cultural and human capital needed for quick adaptation to their new working and organizational environment. Many of them had already been politically active in their country of origin and in left wing political groups in particular. Political socialization equipped them with social and communicative competencies and skills relevant to sustain activity within the trade unions. With these skills, and the ability to learn the language, they could soon act as “natural helpers” for their co-ethnics. They practice ethnic solidarity, taking responsibility for other co-ethnics/migrants struggling to resolve issues they encounter in the new social environment. Being a “natural helper” also means functioning as a mediator between the ethnic group, the firm management and the trade union organization. Another category of migrants active in the trade unions are second generation migrants, who have been educated in the German school system and learned the language this way, as well as becoming familiar with German culture and principles of social organization. It transpired that also many of these persons had been functioning as “natural helpers” prior to joining a trade union, and had become mediators between the group of the co-ethnics, and the organization.

While, for some of the interviewees, the motivation to become active in the organisation was due to growing awareness about discrimination against migrants, it was the relationship to significant others within the trade union hierarchy that turned out to be the main reason why they became active. These significant others functioned as role models for the interviewees, but they also directly motivated them to enter the trade union or to stand for positions within the organisation. They gave advice, confirmed the ability of the migrant and empowered him/her. In this way, we detect a kind of informal “mentoring” practice - motivated by the needs of the organisation to recruit appropriate members - that seems to be most helpful in furthering participation of migrants.

Those interviewees who succeeded in rising within the trade union hierarchies in an impressive manner were also engaged in other organisational fields and in political parties. They had helped to establish ethnic and trans-ethnic associations in order to foster the interests of their co-ethnics, and in order to support their social integration through enabling contact with the natives. Thus, they became accepted leaders in their ethnic community and able to function as “integration” makers. The relevance of the support of the co-ethnics demonstrates, however, that members of small ethnic communities have not enough support to join workers’ councils, as only within the large ethnic communities is it possible to create such broad bonds of loyalty.

**b) Barriers and mechanisms of exclusion**

Only a few of our interviewees referred to organisational barriers that they might have been confronted with on their way to upward mobility within the organisational structure of trade unions and workers’ councils. Instead, the interviewees put emphasis on the broader official migration and integration policies leading to the exclusion of migrants.

Concerning the organisational barriers to the realisation of formal participation rights, our analysis of the biographical narrations revealed different types of more and less successful ways of coping with these barriers. Some interviewees clearly describe experiences of exclusion. They show how the native members in the higher levels of the hierarchy make effective efforts to limit access to attractive positions. Higher positions can be exclusively reserved for native members by *instrumentalisising language competencies*, for instance, making these a precondition for effectively representing workers’ interests – proficiency in
German being assumed to be achieved by natives only. Emphasis on language skills and knowledge about the social, economic and cultural structures is the main mechanism used to keep migrants out of the higher levels of the organisation. Others demonstrate a successful struggle to overcome barriers, for instance countering successfully the unwillingness of the trade union representatives to include them in the list of candidates for the workers councils. The competition with the established trade union members – who are mainly Germans – when trying to access resources and organisational power is the main barrier that has to be overcome by migrant trade union members in order to achieve better representation within the organisation. Interviewees see the key exclusionary mechanism as being the propensity of those already occupying a most desired position to employ all means at their disposal to defend their position against the aspirations of the others. The divide that becomes visible is thus the battle of the “established” against the “newcomers”, rather than the conflict of ethnicity.

c) Gender specific participation barriers

Our male interviewees showed that successful participation in the trade unions and the workers’ councils is coupled with excessive working hours. They mention multiple participation in ethnic and non-ethnic local organisations as being important for getting the chance to participate in the workers’ councils. These time structures rarely suit the limited time resources of women, who bear the responsibility also for the care tasks in their family. Interviewees stress the gendered division of labour at home and that decision making is regarded as a male prerogative. Women have to ask for their husband’s permission in order to participate in trade union activities that take place in their free time.

Organisational structures also hinder women from taking part in the training courses. On the one hand, training courses for trade union members take place in specific locations outside of the cities where the participants live and work. This arrangement aims to shield people from their everyday routines so that they can concentrate on the training topics. This, however, can be a hindrance for women with children who would wish to go home in the evening. On the other hand, meetings of the trade union shop stewards take place outside working hours and should be arranged within working hours, if women are expected to take part.

The findings from the qualitative analysis have been taken into account while planning the mentoring program that followed in the second phase of the project.

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