

Between Discrimination and Anti-Discrimination concerning Migrants

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I would like to start by explaining the title of my input. As I was working on this presentation, I got the feeling that the title is not very clear. What I want to emphasize in the title as well as in my input is that Discrimination and anti – discrimination are terms to be found at two ends of a pole.

The two terms are two positions at two ends. It is for me like two poles at two ends of a process. From a political and societal point of view it appears that there are two polarized groups – the group that practices discrimination and another group which is doing everything it can to deal with the phenomenon of discrimination. At this conference, we have heard a lot about hate crimes and the importance of anti-discrimination activities. My focus is on the segment between discrimination and anti-discrimination. This input is not based on scientific findings but rather on everyday experiences and what is happening in everyday life. How do migrants cope with a life between discrimination and anti-discrimination? Very often migrants hear about discriminatory behaviour in the media. They talk about it, perhaps also think about what they would do in a similar situation. At the same time, they have to live their everyday lives and this is what I want to talk about in the first part of my input. I have narrowed my input down to individual discrimination and will not touch the topic of structural discrimination. My input is based on my personal experiences as a migrant and the work that I do. I have lived in Graz for the past 35 years. I work at Omega-transcultural centre and am involved in the needs of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

This input will not be complete if I do not briefly go into the state of the art. Migration is not a new phenomenon and therefore discrimination concerning migrants is a part of human history. However, in the last decade, these terms have moved very strongly into the centre of public debate leading to increasing emphasis on anti- discrimination and a better integration of migrants. The terms discrimination and anti-discrimination are at two ends of a highly emotional discourse. At the same time, everyday living in a diverse society shows that between these two extremes there is space and scope to achieve an open and encouraging environment for the socio-economic, civic and political inclusion of migrants. Two-way integration processes that bring about lasting social change are the most sustainable indicators of moving away from both discrimination and anti-discrimination.

Today, one in every 50 human beings is a migrant worker, a refugee or asylum seeker, or an immigrant living in a 'foreign' country. Current estimates by the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration indicate that some 150 million people live temporarily or permanently outside their countries of origin. The European Union is built on the diversity of distinct cultural, religious and social traditions embodied in the cultures of its Member States. It is home to people of many different racial, ethnic, religious and national backgrounds, and its economy and cultures have been enriched by the contributions of migrants from around the globe. In an increasingly globalised world, migratory movements

will continue to shape Europe's society. Europe's demographics, languages and cultural practices will evolve with these developments, and people living in a European context will continually need to adjust to these changes. The greatest efforts of adaptation have already been made by migrants themselves, who built their homes, developed roots, set up enterprises and contributed to economic growth in EU Member States which have not always given them a warm welcome.

European Union institutions have recognised the benefits of realistic and proactive migration policies. They also know that these will only be successful if coupled with the socio-economic, civic and political inclusion of migrants. Many migrants, some after decades of settlement, suffer economic and social disadvantages, are excluded from civic and political participation and face discrimination, racism and xenophobia. Their marginalisation makes them easy targets for scape-goating by far-right parties, which have gained increasing support throughout Europe by exploiting fears and inciting resentment. Public attitudes tend to turn against migrants especially in times when social welfare provisions are rolled back and exclusion emerges as a real threat for many.

The current polarisation of population groups suggests a process of social fragmentation. In the context of economic, social and even physical insecurities, the tasks of appreciating diversity and learning to manage differences is challenging.

I would like to briefly go into some aspects of what happens in everyday life between discrimination and anti-discrimination the way that I have experienced it personally and in my work with migrants.

I am not talking about collective discrimination rather about individual discrimination. Discrimination against an individual is again an individual experience. The situation and the setting could be similar but is still unique.

When a migrant is verbally attacked, it takes some time to register what is happening. The first reaction is to try and be objective although the feeling deep inside is subjective. One wonders whether I heard right. Did I understand, right? Did he or she mean something else?

It remains a unique experience. It depends on the individual migrant. There are so many factors which influence the experience. Some migrants are already prepared to face discrimination. Some think that they will face discrimination even before it happens. Again, there are others who experience discrimination but not everyone and every situation leads to contacting the anti-discrimination office. In many cases migrants, do not know that they can object to actions of discrimination. Very often it just gets brushed off or it is shared with members in the community or friends. This could lead to reporting the incident to the anti-discrimination office. Over the years, there has been a shift in the approach towards migrants. Discrimination has increased. However, migrants should be prepared to talk about discrimination. Many must at first realize that they are facing discrimination and recognize it in their own lives. Many are more occupied with securing their existence and discrimination in a wide sense is not really a pressing issue. There are those who do not want to exercise their rights in case of repercussions.

Although the same laws protect all migrants, there are some factors which make it more difficult for some migrants. These are for example the place of origin or the skin colour. When migrants arrive newly in Austria it could be that the level of information is not very high or that the person's migrant status is not yet settled. A combination of the mentioned factors increases the prevalence of discrimination. Asylum seekers must wait for a long period before they know whether they can stay or will be deported. Those who receive refugee status have other worries and troubles and cannot be bothered with acting against discrimination. Even then it must be made clear that discrimination is no go and that people have rights and the right to fight for their rights.

Discrimination is not any more so open and so obvious because of the consequences. I feel that anti-discrimination laws and actions against perpetrators is having its effects. Individual acts of discrimination have become subtler. It is a certain mind-set that must change in order to deal with discrimination.

Cultural differences play a lead role when we talk about discrimination. Discrimination is also a two-way process and is prevalent in varying intensity on both sides. In my experience, it has a yo-yo effect and it is often difficult to find out where it all started. For example, a migrant woman not wanting to accept European ideals like equality between men and women could lead to her being discriminatory against Austrian women. When the same migrant woman works together with an Austrian colleague she might be reserved and not very communicative because of her opinion on equality. It could be that the migrant woman thinks that the Austrian woman is acting like a man. The Austrian woman in turn might think that the migrant woman cannot speak the language and is therefore silent. One situation leads to another which could lead to an escalation. Parallel societies exist not only because the migrant is discriminated but also because migrants themselves feel that the migrant community has to stay free of certain cultural influences of main stream society. There are both feelings of superiority and inferiority when we speak of discrimination. However, experience shows that the more informed a person is the more superior his position.

Who feels discrimination the most. Those who are like all marginalised groups those who are poor and have multiple areas of discrimination. Discrimination has a lot to do with financial standing – a rich Saudi woman is not the same as a normal migrant wearing a burka. Therefore, there is discrimination in one case and not in the other.

Discrimination and anti-discrimination are at two ends of everyday life. What is happening in between I think are 2 sides of the same coin. I would like to call this coin integration. One side of the coin is what does society in general expect and what can be done by society. The other side of the coin is what does a migrant person expect and what can individuals, ethnic communities etc. do. If integration be two sides of the same coin, it could lead to a better understanding between members of a very diverse society.

We all know that any discussion concerning discrimination is closely associated with integration. Integration is very often understood as the assimilation into a pre-existing social order, with a homogeneous culture and set of values. Integration is thus perceived as a one-way process, placing the responsibility for change solely on migrants. They are expected to undergo a unilateral process of change, particularly in the public sphere, so that they can fit

into a given order. For example, women are expected to work without headscarves when serving customers, as it is thought that customers could be alienated by such changes to staff uniforms. Differences that cannot be tolerated, are required to disappear. There are very apparent expectations of society. What a migrant expects regarding integration is not easy to summarize. His or her expectations depend on many factors. I would like to share some of my personal experiences as a migrant. When I came to Austria in the 80's there was some curiosity about a dark-skinned person. I was treated more with "what is she capable of" but at the same time with kindness and tolerance. 35 years ago, I did not have none of the problems that migrants face today. I was lucky to have family and friends who made me feel very welcome. The biggest handicap was not speaking German. This was the first form of discrimination that I faced. When I was in a group and everyone spoke in German including my husband I felt awful. I could not participate in the conversation and felt left out and isolated. However, this feeling of being passively discriminated made me determined to learn the language. I was fortunate to have education and opportunities come my way. There were persons in my life who were idealists and against discrimination in every form and they gave me a chance to believe in myself. It wasn't easy because I always had the feeling of not being good enough. Over the years, my confidence increased and I probably stopped noticing discrimination. Perhaps it is a form of assimilation, a certain change of identity which has made life easier. A migrant's racial origin, I think makes complete assimilation anyway impossible.

However, the concept of integration is undergoing a change because it is becoming clear that a one-way assimilation is not going to work. The term integration is being replaced by terms like inclusion and participation. Inclusion is probably the term closest to integration. Community organisations emphasise the concept of participation, which denotes democratic notions of access and change.

If integration is implemented to fit migrants into an existing social order, then the focus will always be on adapting on the part of migrants rather than steps that may be necessary to facilitate the inclusion and participation of newcomers. For example, a female migrant could be excluded from receiving preventive health care because the health service provides information only in the main national language. Efforts to include migrant women into the health system could be through providing information in different languages. However, the existing social order may not be ready for changes, as this could affect the structure of the health services. The discussion on an intercultural opening in civil and public services isn't new. Much more must be done in this regard. Right now, it could be said that efforts to retain the existing structure is greater than the impetus to integrate migrants.

There are no rules of integration that generations of migrants and receiving societies could follow. Integration takes place very differently in different walks of life. For example, migrants can be integrated in the labour market but excluded from participation in civil society and political processes. Others can be included as citizens, participate in social and cultural interaction, but lack access to education and employment opportunities. Both cases show partial integration. Integration can also involve completely different kinds of interaction with the receiving society. For example, some migrants might establish social networks through work relationships and perhaps go into a mixed marriage. Many others,

however, rely on family, or neighbours of the same racial or ethnic background, to create stability and develop roots in the receiving society. I personally think that a combination of both networks would be ideal. Denying one or the other is counterproductive.

Cohesion is another aspect which plays an important role concerning discrimination.

The role of social interaction is crucial in the process of integration. It is through social contacts and an environment that is open and inviting which make people develop a sense of belonging in a social space. This is one of the reasons why racism and xenophobia are major obstacles to any integration effort. They produce a context of insecurity, isolation and hostility. The opposite of this negative state is one in which interaction among people, and between people and institutions, is constructive and based on respect for differences. This can foster integration and lead to a cohesive society. The emphasis lies on unity and stability to achieve social cohesion. However, social cohesion does not mean that communities must merge into a homogeneous entity made up of people without any differences and governed by a set of common rules and norms. On the contrary, cohesion can be achieved in a pluralistic society through the interaction of different communities. It is possible to bond by recognizing and accepting differences but at the same time also accepting that members of the community are interdependent. Migrants who have a multi-dimensional notion of identity, a multiple sense of belonging often leads to self-confidence and helps to stabilize existing social networks. Achieving this level of assimilation is not easy and should be respected and recognized. Social interaction grows stronger with every move on the part of both migrants and main stream society, thus deepening the cohesion of communities.

Cohesion that is based on the interaction within the community should be guided by the principle of equality. Social networks based on a recognition of difference is essential for the process of integration. However, integration will not be successful if migrants and ethnic minorities are not treated as equals. State policies must ensure that migrants and ethnic minorities obtain equal rights so that they become full partners and participants in the development of a cohesive society. Any conflicts that arise from a clash of values, which influence cultural practices, can be resolved in a democratic manner by making efforts to negotiate and reconcile.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that efforts to deal with discrimination must consider both sides of the coin. One side of the coin would be to work on promoting respect for diversity and multicultural life. The other side of the coin would be to promote respect for the culture and values of the receiving country. It is important that community leaders speak out against racism and cultural leaders encourage their communities to participate in multicultural activities. Another aspect would be to ensure that the media emphasizes positive images of diversity and avoids negative stereotyping and that cultural associations open their doors and highlight the positive aspects of their culture. It must be a united effort to deal with discrimination. Thank you for your attention