

“Leading Resilience” Webinar Series



The Covid 19 and Women's Leadership Potential - Urdu

24 July 2020

The New Women Connectors (NWC) organized a webinar, “Women’s Leadership Potential in Covid 19 Crisis” on July 24, 2020.

The webinar invited a panel from South Asian countries, mainly women with amazing stories of courage, endurance, self-confidence, sacrifice, resilience and leadership.

Natasha Noreen (Italy), Dr Anum Zahra (Netherlands), Dr Sindhuja Sankaran (Poland) shared their experiences with the team, “Women Inclusion and Participation in Europe”.

Anila Kayani (UK), Bushra Iqbal Malik (Germany) explore the theme, “Host Societies and Migrant Women” while Dr Roshni Sengupta (Poland) and Sumeera Hassan (Netherlands) shared their experiences under the theme, “The Otherness-Unpacking Resilience”. Asif Khan (Sweden/Denmark) and Sofia Saeed (Germany) gave special comments as concluding remarks.

The Welcome Note

Anila Noor

Welcoming participants, Anila Noor said New Women Connectors aimed to inform, connect and amplify the voices of refugee and migrant women across Europe, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. She said it was a platform to function as a cross-border virtual space of solidarity where the needs and challenges of migrant and refugee women during COVID-19 become visible and heard, and where experts and peers will support in finding common solutions and to compile information on coping strategies, resilience and needs of refugee and migrant women through self- representation. This is done by identifying lack of representation in policy and decision-making processes and forums by connecting both the ends (migrant/refugee women and policy makers).

Women’s Inclusion and Participation in Europe

Ms. Natasha Noreen, a Pakistani resident of Italy, started the discussion by appreciating the initiative of bringing South Asian women on a platform to discuss their common issues and common solutions. She pointed out “low visibility” of South Asian women as their basic problem. She said Brexit has aggravated this issue in other European countries because they are small communities compared to UK where a huge South Asian community is living side by side for generations. Giving an example of an Arab woman representing South Asian women, she said South Asian people were not engaged with each other despite the similar nature of their issue.

She said women were discriminated and suppressed in the name of tradition and culture, but all such blatant violations of their human rights were kept strictly under the carpet. She said a great surge in domestic violence was seen during Covid-19 but nobody raised voice against it and this is the reason that general perception in Europe is that South Asian women are child producing machines who don't want to be the active part of the society. She said representation was a form of empowerment. South Asian women needed to represent themselves in the society.

Dr. Anum Zahra migrated to Amsterdam six years ago. She said migration is both ordinary and extraordinary situation for women. There are always commonalities and exclusivities at the same time. Language barrier is a common hurdle for all, but specific family conditions also play a major role in determining their individual story. She strongly advised migrant women to keep their individual identity alive rather than ignoring their dreams and wishes. Secondly, she said we needed to prepare ourselves with hard work, learn language excellently and get ready to answer the question that host community ask about our culture, traditions and religion. She said we need to open with confidence. This way, we change ourselves and others.

She said she did medical in Pakistan, which was best at that time and situation. But after migration she realized that she needed to change her field. She chose a distant learning course on "Epidemiology". While raising a child, she started painting again and founded an initiative, Amaya Initiative that works on the Child Health sector in Pakistan. She said that facts and figures about children in Pakistan was worst in the world. "Health, Education and well being of our children should be our top priority as a society", she said.

Dr. Sindhuja Sankaran is a migrant Indian living in Poland. She gave a little presentation titled, "Re-humanizing Refugees" against the ongoing process of de-humanizing them by reducing them to statistics and stereotypes that portray them as illiterate, disempowered, alienated, extremists or unskilled burden on the host economy. She did her Phd in Social Psychology from UK and then migrated to Poland for post doctorate. Sharing her personal experiences, she said we should not confuse integration with assimilation as sense of identity is most important aspect of life as an individual and community especially after migration. She said she was struggling with Polish language, but she loves Polish Jazz music, which was another way of integration.

The process of integration, for her is the openness towards the host culture without embarrassment for one's own. She gave examples of the foul perceptions about the refugees and migrants from highest political personalities who used terms as "swamps" and that "refugees carry parasites and infections" etc. She said this language formulates the people's policy maker's perceptions, which allow discrimination. Discussing the media coverage, she pointed out that media always took long distant shot showing refugees in conflict with law enforcing agencies rather than showing them interacting with people.

Emphasizing upon the human aspect, she shared stories of two refugees, Asif from Afghanistan and Mohammad from Iraq who love music and wanted to integrate with dignity. Their message with, "Don't Stop People, Stop Wars". She also talked about the plight of refugees in Morya Camp in Lesbos, Greece where 20000 refugees were living in a place prepared for 3000.

Host societies and migrant women

Ms. Anila Kayani, a migrant Pakistani in UK, talked about her experiences as teacher. She emphasized upon the need of good preparation before migration especially in terms of language and papers needed to get jobs. She said migration brings you back to the basics and you must start from zero. She said she was a school principle and an NGO director in Pakistan, but she started as teacher assistant in UK.

Sharing the experience of her stay in Portuguese, she said language was the key to success for migrants and refugees. Secondly, she said she thought local people were very reserved and unwelcoming but when she took initiative and started talking to them, she realized that they were very loving and caring.

She advised that anybody experiencing racism or discrimination should immediately resort to the laws, which were very strict against racism and religious discrimination. She said Indian community helped her and took care of her. She said we should be confident of our goodness and promote positive image of our country by being positive ourselves.

Ms. Bushra Iqbal Malik is a prominent Pakistani educationist, teaching Urdu language in a German university for twenty years. She said we should try to fully understand education policies, local laws, systems, politics and cultural sensitivities. She said we are isolated because we are socially ghettoized. South Asian women keep them hidden so general people think that they are all Muslim.

Secondly, she said we had ourselves adopted the dress code of Arab women. She pointed out the fact that South Asian mostly come here not for integration or education but to earn money. She also pointed out the positive trend that South Asians were very serious about the education of their children unlike Arab communities.

About social interaction, she said we start from negativity and differences rather than commonalities. That is why we don't invite our neighbor and don't respond to neighbor's invitation because of our sensitivities about haram halal etc. Our children interact very well with their grand parents in Pakistan but receive outdated biases from them as well. So we start with fearful psychology.

She said migrant communities usually concentrate in one area and send their kids in local school, which give less opportunities of interaction with host culture.

The Otherness: Unpacking Resilience

Dr. Roshni Sengupta lived five years in Netherlands for post doctorate after doing her studies in JNU and MET in India.

Now settled in Poland, she shared her experiences as a single woman. She said she felt safe in Europe unlike India where women were subjected to violence and harassment. She said she taught three years in Netherlands and her experience as single migrant woman was different because she must make her own social support in the absence of family support. She advised to get away with our native culture and psychology of asking personal questions and judging a woman from her marital status.

A passionate activist for South Asian fraternity, she said she had very good friendships with Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Surinamese communities. She said she was a great fan of Pakistani cricket team and she loved Pakistani music. She told that she was co-editing a book, "Post Partition Media and Literature in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh". She appreciated New Women Connectors for bring South Asian communities closer to each other. She said we needed to resort to our South Asian identity besides our national, cultural, religious or individual identities.

Sumeera Hassan was born in Pakistan and live there till the age of 23. She did fellowship in Baku, Azerbaijan for two years and then did her studies in Human Rights and Law from Netherlands. She said she had tough experiences with host community of Dutch people. She found her uncompromising and unwelcoming not allowing anybody to enter in their close circles. Moreover, they are inflexible towards language and without language it is so tough to secure a job.

She gave a presentation on, "Migrant Women and European Economy" which demonstrated many trends and patterns in the society. She said EU countries had big demand for unskilled labor as well, but South Asian women are negligible in labor force. Moreover, migrant women had added disadvantages in terms of unemployment, temporary contracts, no job security and underemployment. The presentation showed that migrant women are mostly in elementary jobs such as office clerks, teaching assistants, cleaning, and in sales and service. They are represented in health sector but still not enough. Finally, she said that Covid 19 has impacted migrant women as 12.1 million of them lost their jobs.

The Special Contributions

Mr. Asif Khan has studied International Migration and Ethnic Relations as well as Gender Studies from Erasmus Program. He has been engaged in many EU institutions and organizations as consultant. He talked about a unique situation of migrants in Sweden and Denmark especially in Malmö city of Sweden with a population of 350,000 of which 60% are from foreign born. He talked about Öresund bridge that connect Sweden and Denmark.

He people preferred living in Sweden and working in Denmark so practically they don't belong to any of the two countries. During Covid crisis, there was no lockdown in Sweden but there was complete lockdown in Denmark, which created tough situation for the citizens who commuted between these two countries.

Ms. Sofia Saeed belong to Karachi Pakistan and currently living in Germany. She shared her experienced as first girl of her family who traveled abroad to study. She said women in Pakistan feel many invisible impediments deeply rooted in culture, traditions, systems and resultant mentality and that was the reason that women were not encouraged to take part in politics. She told about her research on the women participation in Pakhtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM).

She said social media has contributed positively to bring women in politics. She said that the sense of belonging or not belonging and identity crisis plays a big role in the migrant women as far as political participation is concerned. She talked about her organization through which she was trying to promote culture, social cohesion and political participation.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The panelist during their presentations and discussions forwarded following suggestions:

- Finding that migrant and refugee women face many cultural barriers mitigated by language and other factors, panelists found it to be extremely important that they should receive proper training and that would prepare them to face and adapt to the new culture, including but not limited to language training, before and upon their arrival to their host countries.
- They should also be made aware of their rights and obligations in their new communities. Along with the tools for them to pursue their personal and professional development away from the limitations they had in their home countries.
- Host countries should provide integration courses, which include information about basic services such as: education policies, opportunities, systematic provisions, government policies, laws and politics.
- Integration courses should also include social integration tools and access to local community to guarantee a smooth transition.
- Host countries, with local and international organizations should facilitate community building activities for migrants and locals to interact and learn about each other to create social bonds.
- Local and European organizations should provide the opportunity to involve migrant families and women in the decision-making process both locally and nationally.
- Integration process needs to include knowledge of human rights and resources to handle domestic violence and forced marriages. Along with legal help if needed.

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR SUPPORTERS

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The logo for New Women Connectors consists of a stylized fan-like shape made of several curved lines in shades of blue, green, and orange. To the right of this shape, the text "NEW WOMEN CONNECTORS" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font, with "for inclusion & social justice" in a smaller font below it.

**#Coping2Gather
#Growing2Gather**

**A Virtual Gathering of
Refugee & Migrant Women**

Leading Resilience
We invite you to join us and share your stories of resilience

**Solidarity and collaboration form the core essence of
New Women Connectors, a step further and share
the space to imagine and build together 'The New
Normal' during and post COVID-19**

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