IMMIGRANT WOMEN HEALTH ACCESS

Project summary
1. **Access to Health for Women and Immigrant Families in Italy**

Direct experience during these years has been making clear the relevance of the cultural traits on health perception and on the display of support demands. Integration is a basic topic and this is confirmed by the strict correlation between immigrant health problems, social risk factors and exclusion.

Immigrants have to face changing processes that continuously challenge their cultural and historical identities.

Immigrant health is destined to be weakened more and more rapidly by a range of risk factors: psychological uneasiness caused by immigrant condition, wearily and precarious jobs, sometimes risky and not well protected, housing problems, lack of family support and isolation, different climate and different alimentary habits, frequent discriminations, often from the institutions themselves.

In Italy, recent national body of legislation about immigration (outline law 40/1998) and the following execution decree guarantee the right to health and the access to social and sanitary services to immigrants protecting particularly motherhood and women health. Moreover, the National Sanitary Plan 2001-2003 include expressly immigrants within the more vulnerable subjects and it aims to strengthen their tutelage through a favourable legislation, an improvement of information and changes in the organization and management of services.

Nevertheless, as the last report of the Department of Welfare points out, there is a lot to be done in order to guarantee a real access to services for immigrants especially applying an holistic perspective which considers that labour, educational and housing policies affect heavily psycho-physical health of migrants and their possibility of integration. It comes also out that systematic inequality and social differences between social and economic groups of population still exist.

Update and detailed statistical data concern particularly immigrant women reproductive health. These data underline that often motherhood and childbirth are lived by immigrant women alone, with understanding difficulties and feelings of being inadequate. A research of the Superior Health Institute in 1999 highlighted a serious “low access to welfare services” of immigrant compared to Italian women. This low access to care and prevention services, consequently, is followed by a large request of First Aid, an increasing number of childbirth by cesarian section (three times higher than the Italian percentage) and an increasing rate of perinatal mortality. Nowadays, the challenge for health operators is to interweave their knowledge with the different cultures and to test innovating answers and solutions.

There is also a problem in taking advantage of the right to health, acknowledged by law n. 40: data collected at the end of year 2000 point out that only 50% of immigrants who have the right to enter their name to National Sanitary Service concretely sign up. This can not be ascribed to a counselling incapacity or to bureaucratical difficulties. There is a general, structural, social and cultural accessibility problem which is necessary to face in order to make the system of existing services accessible and to improve the efficacy of the meeting between health demand – services offer.

3. **The Role of Local Agencies**

Local and regional services policies in the last five years have been pointing out reflections and experiences and the local level has been the more innovative and solid. Innovative project faced life cycle changing needs, the difficult reconciliation between work and family times, relevant demographic changes and growing inequality. They also experimented new forms of cooperation between public and private subjects, they promoted reciprocity and responsibility relations, they fostered a services culture entailing also a full awareness of care resources and a not discriminant acknowledgement of public and social spaces.

Region Emilia Romagna, besides to a Regional Sanitary Plan, instituted in 1999 the Work Group “social exclusion” which aims to pick out targets and actions in order to guarantee to local immigrant citizens a real health promotion with accessible and usable services.

These innovations confirm that at the local level is possible to listen to and answer to everyday life requests and needs exploiting all the human, projectual and financial resources. It is also possible to support the identification of innovative intervention approaches applying European models and the EEC scheme on development needs.

“Politics of difference” characterized many interventions directed to immigrant women and led consequently to the creation of services ad hoc for them. Nevertheless, they were often ineffective and they hindered women integration processes within Italian society, confining them in emargination and exclusion spaces. The only acknowledgement of cultural difference is not enough to lighten an economic and social oppression deeply rooted which could be overcome only by the assumption of a joint strands of actions including cultural acknowledgement, new wealth
redistribution policies and equal citizenship right promotion.

Paradoxically, the start-up of innovative services for immigrant women, apparently respectful of their cultural difference and of their needs, actually weakened the image of women as entitled to rights and, on the contrary, stressed their vulnerable and care needing image.

1. General objectives of the project

Starting with the most innovative intervention tested in the struggle against immigrant women exclusion and poverty, the project aims:

- to focus on “health” in its widest meaning, entailing phenomena in an holistic perspective, considering not only social aspects, but also economic and cultural ones related to the health and wealth redistribution policies;
- to analyse critically the policies of the difference and of hospitality in local settings, and to start a constructive debate with European partners in order to find out and promote innovative interventions directed to groups of immigrants at the risk of exclusion;
- to identify approaches of intervention, methodologies and strategies effective for vulnerable groups, aiming to assess that the struggle against the exclusion is effective only encouraging a real decentralization of powers and of resources supported by an effective culture of citizenship rights and of equal opportunities;
- to analyse comparatively already existing female practices to identify empowerment intervention approaches and to develop effective and mutual relational networks in order to exchange them to others groups at risk of exclusion.

2. Specific objectives

- To improve the understanding of the causes of social exclusion, particularly directed to women and immigrant families through a methodological comparison at European level and through the continuous exchange between subjects exposed to exclusion, local institutions and university researchers in order to promote a culture of rights and to exploit the cultural value added by the people of every partner’s context;
- to create a local study and assess group in order to monitor permanently migrant phenomena, to carry out the survey and the study of innovative practices, to point out models of effective interventions, proposals of adjustment of local policies through the comparison between European partners. In a middle period: to strengthen regional, national and transnational network;
- to create a virtual transnational forum which will reflect cultural recognition on policies and will analyse the impact of immigrant women and families social integration policies, considering the risks of reproducing exclusion and marginalisation;
- to verify the reproduction of this intervention approach at regional and national level and to project joint actions (housing, educational, labour and health policies)

3. Activities: How the objectives will be achieved

a) Implementation of a research in every partner state:

The aim of the research is to gather information on the existing methodologies relating to
different politics and policies of support carried out by local authorities. In particular, the research will focus on:

- existing practices aimed at fighting social exclusion caused by the difficulty to access to social and health services and to the tutelage of reproductive health for immigrant women and families;
- existing practices aimed at fighting social exclusion caused by the difficulty to access economic and environmental resources (difficulty of access to labour market, lack of relational networks);
- comparative evaluation on the services approaches (insufficiencies, corrective actions, support tools) and on the consequences, not always positive, that the policies of difference had on social inclusion (service quality is measured also by the sensibility toward autonomy and reciprocity of care relations that is, the capacity to add value to social and everyday life knowledge);
- analysis of the policies of the cultural differences acknowledgement which is often not sufficient to lighten oppression and discrimination, if not entailed with wealth redistribution policies (immigrant services, focused exclusively on cultural difference, run the risk to strengthen the image of women as vulnerable and care needing);
- testing of new joint administration models to meet the instances of local authorities and the decisive contribute of social groups and associations of civil society.

Target analysis: local authorities, sanitary services and universities. Women interethnic associations will actively participate to all project steps and provide more efficacious tools in order to assess needs, to give value to competences, knowledge and cultural differences, to project innovative answers and learn operatively how to run a network.

b) Organisation of two transnational meetings, in Italy and in Germany

c) Organisation of a public conference which will be held in Italy

4. The dissemination activity

The dissemination activity will be implemented and ensured through:

- the creation of a web site in which will be gathered all the information relating the analysis and the elaboration carried out. Moreover, the web site will represent a virtual “gate” to the identification of useful information about problems/solutions of immigrated women in the health access in a transnational context;
- the realisation of an European handbook which will gather the survey results, best and worst practices identified, some methodological indications and deepening, recommendations and proposals on legal, theoretical, operative improvements, theoretical suggestions on how to create a permanent study group – organisational and operational model and interaction and feed-back between the network participants.
- the organisation of a final conference in Italy, which will be the occasion to present the results of the project, the best practices singled out, the innovative approaches and policies elaborated, aimed at fighting the social exclusion of women’s access to the health services (social, sanitary and labour market entry) also through the strengthening of relation network.

The official document (resolution) will be delivered to the European Institutions.

Project duration: 18 months