

## **Cleo-Patria Women's and Neighbourhood Studios**

### **The Netherlands - 2003-2015**

#### **Breaking the isolation of migrant women**

##### **Summary**

From 2003 to 2015, the Rotterdam-based Cleo-Patria Foundation set up 14 women's studios to create a safe meeting place and learning environment in their own neighbourhood for migrant women of all nationalities, run by the women themselves. It specifically targeted migrant women living in isolation or exclusively within their own ethnic circle, who were often illiterate, spoke Dutch poorly or not at all, and often had to contend with multiple problems. Each of the studios was run by one or two paid hostesses who had the final responsibility for the studio. The hostesses were helped by a team of 10-15 volunteers. Two professionals facilitated the proceedings and provided coaching when asked, but they never led or managed the studios and stayed in the background.

The threshold for entry was as low as possible. The hostesses even invited migrant passers-by in for coffee and existing participants brought in relatives. The group of participants was multi-ethnic. The common denominator was being a woman. This allowed women who usually lived exclusively within their own ethnic circle to link with women from other cultures. This opened up the possibility to break fixed patterns and explore new ground.

The core gender dimension to Cleo-Patria's working method was empowerment. The work was demand-driven, and led by the migrant women without external imposition. The focus was the particular isolation being experienced by migrant women. The philosophy was that the women would only be able to start their empowerment process in a safe environment, where they could formulate and pursue what they needed. The women could acquire new skills while taking part in the activities they needed, but also in learning how to set up and run these activities.

Cleo-Patria succeeded in reaching and empowering many isolated migrant women in Rotterdam. The women's studios grew to an annual average size of 250 participants, three quarters of whom were regular. In total, more than 10,000 migrant women have started to participate in society as volunteers or as paid employees during the past 10 years. Funding stopped in 2015 due to unrealistic funder expectations about the number of women that could be supported to enter the labour market and the loss political support when this proved unfeasible.

##### **Inclusion for isolated migrant women**

The first Cleo-Patria women's studio was developed in 2003 as the off-shoot of a programme in a Rotterdam borough to combat crime. Migrant women in the area asked for a safe meeting place to discuss child-rearing problems and other matters and to do so among women. When this meeting was organised, a large group of women turned up. This demonstrated the need for migrant women to connect in a context where they were experiencing significant levels of isolation.

The women did not just live isolated from the wider society, but from the more than hundred non-Dutch nationalities surrounding them in the neighbourhood as well. They were also at a significant distance from the labour market. Integration was a significant challenge. Integration was not promoted by Cleo-Patria as a one-sided adaptation to Dutch society, but as the outcome of communally developed norms, values and mutual respect. Integration was seen as a reciprocal influencing process that would benefit the women, their neighbourhood and society as a whole.

The Cleo-Patria Foundation sought out the most active migrant women and invited them to set up the first women's studio. The aim of the studio was to:

- Reach women isolated migrant women of all nationalities who were illiterate, who seldom went outside their home and lived solely within their own ethnic circle, who spoke Dutch very poorly or not at all, and who suffered from low self-confidence and often had to contend with multiple problems.
- Develop a meeting place and learning environment where these women would feel safe enough to take the first steps towards a greater integration in the wider society.
- Empower migrant women by letting them run their own women's studio on the basis of equality and mutual respect, and providing them with the opportunity to learn the skills they expressed a need for.
- Bring the women involved closer to paid work and more economic independence.

Fourteen women's studios were running over the project's peak years. There were twelve studios in Rotterdam boroughs, one large studio thrived in Amsterdam and another in Uithoorn. Each of the women's studios received their own varying funding, according to a 60 percent to 40 percent ratio of municipal subsidy and private funding. The amount of subsidy varied, depending on the integration and emancipation policies of the different municipalities.

Each studio was managed by one or two hostesses, who earned a small salary and had the final responsibility for the studio. They worked with a team of 10-15 volunteers, who received financial compensation. They had the key and money for groceries, and supervised the building's cleaning and the organisation of activities. The hostesses and volunteers also took on to get new women acquainted with and involved in their neighbourhood's women's studio. Two professionals employed by Cleo-Patria assisted in providing support when asked, but stepped back to leave the final responsibility for what went on in the studios with the hostesses.

## **Empowerment through self-management and learning**

Isolation was a particular experience for migrant women. The core gender dimension to the response to this isolation was a strategy of empowerment. A bottom-up approach gave the women involved a place and space to find ways to overcome their problems and their isolation. This was demand-driven and no programme of activity was imposed beforehand. The empowerment philosophy was that the women would only be able to start their emancipation in a safe environment, where everybody was considered equal, and where there was no pressure from any authority to do anything. This would empower the women to formulate and articulate what they really needed and to further their individual development, at their own level and pace.

The groups' composition was multi-ethnic. The fact that the common denominator was being a woman instead of coming from a particular culture, opened up opportunities for the women to break fixed patterns and explore new ground. The studios were a place to make contact with all other ethnicities in the neighbourhood as women, and to explore mutually respectful routes out of isolation.

The activities that were organised in the different studios included Dutch language lessons, lessons about child-rearing, nutrition, sports and art, and breakfasts with a theme. Learning to speak Dutch or learning other new skills, such as how to organize an activity around a skill they already had, boosted the women's often extreme lack of self-confidence and was a further source of empowerment.

The hostesses were supposed to move on, after two years, to better-paid jobs. Cleo-Patria paid special attention to systematically enhancing their professional skills. The volunteers could ask for shorter, in-house training courses to develop any skill they needed for the situations they encountered, such as holding a

meeting or dealing with disagreements. Several groups of volunteers completed more ambitious courses to become cooks, home helps or foster mothers.

## **Breaking the isolation**

Each studio hosted an annual average of 250 participants, three quarters of whom were constant in their participation. Between 2003 to 2015, this amounted to more than 10,000 migrant women who managed to break their isolation and started to participate in their wider society. They gained access to social network that enhanced their sense of wellbeing. The women started to get involved in neighbourhood activities and their children's schools and this had a knock-on benefit to the local community. They participated as volunteers or as paid employees in a variety of organisations. Economic independence became a reality for some of the women. There was a positive knock-on effect for their families where the women offered new role models. A number of studios also set up men's groups for their husbands, while one studio started a daughter's group. This was all accomplished a wide reach with relatively modest means.

There were barriers faced in the work of the women's studios. Within the project itself there were moments of tension between participants. There were power struggles and quarrels. Women had to be asked to leave the project in some instances. In other instances, the professional involved had to intervene and to give support towards some form of resolution, without breaching the philosophy of empowerment. Finding the right balance between coaching and staying in the background was difficult since, for many participants, every new step in their development caused considerable anxiety.

There was the further challenge posed by the extreme lack of self-confidence of most participants. They route out of isolation towards some form of integration only developed through small steps. Each step took a lot of painstaking effort from the participants and encouragement and coaching from the project.

Dutch policy makers, over the period of economic crisis, have narrowed the definition of social inclusion down to getting paid employment. The project suffered from increasing pressure to guide migrant women quickly toward paid and volunteer employment. In this respect the groups were very diverse. It was easier for younger or more literate women to pick up new skills than it was for older or illiterate women, and their goals and ambitions diverged accordingly. Ideally, participation in a women's studio helped women to bridge the gap to the labour market, but many older women were unable to meet these funder expectations. Paid or unpaid employment proved to be feasible for only a limited number of participants, between 10-15% during 2014 and 2015.

This goal of employment did fit with the project's ambition but did not reflect the more integrated set of ambitions deemed necessary by the project. It became the external standard by which the success of the women's studios was measured. In the meantime, the project's other important social inclusion goals and achievements were overlooked.

Municipal funding for the women's studios was cut in 2014. All the women's studios collapsed within a year. Most of the women simply disappeared into their former isolation, a measure of the need for an initiative that could combine social and economic goals if the particular situation of migrant women is to be effectively addressed.

Any replication of this project would need a sound support base among politicians and policy makers, founded on realistic expectations about the project's goals. It would need structural follow-up opportunities for the women to gain further experience and support for them to move closer to the (paid) labour market.

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**Further information:**

Website of the project: <http://st-smi.nl/cleo-patria/>