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**Article**

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Clara Albrecht, Maria Hofbauer Pérez and Tanja Stitteneder<sup>1</sup>

# The Integration Challenges of Female Refugees and Migrants: Where Do We Stand?

Female migrants and refugees face similar but probably greater integration challenges than their male counterparts. It is not only language, culture, access to work and western school systems that present obstacles. Women are traditionally also confronted with additional household and childcare duties. Their challenges are thus twofold.

Why is it important to strengthen the participation of female migrants, and especially refugees in education, the labor market and society? The answer is evident: first, women are first responders and transfer their experiences directly to their children. It is thus essential to improve options for women today in order to strengthen female labor market and education outcomes of younger generations in the future. Second, almost half of all migrants and one-third of all refugees in the EU are women—thus comprising a significant share of the population (European Commission 2018), and it is a matter of equal opportunity for all.

In light of the intuitive need for gender-specific options, it seems somewhat odd that they have been given relatively little consideration in integration policy in the past. Although this shortcoming has of course been noticed in recent years, and appropriate actions to improve it have been initiated, there remains a lack of equal opportunities in the political and economic arena for women in general, and female refugees in particular. This article looks at the integration challenges female migrants and refugees face in terms of education, work and society, while also considering those same challenges their male counterparts and native-born women face. Furthermore, this article identifies some existing initiatives and concludes that there is a lack of guidance at the international level.

## FEMALE MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND NATIVE-BORN WOMEN IN THE EU

Women make up about half of the world population, at 51%, which is also the case in the EU28. The share of women among migrants has remained fairly stable at 45% over the last decade. Among refugees,<sup>2</sup> this number has traditionally been lower. However, the percentage share of refugee females has recently

<sup>1</sup> All ifo Institute. The authors thank Leon Prag for his excellent support in preparing this article.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, no distinction is made between refugees and asylum seekers/applicants.

### ABSTRACT

The challenge of integrating migrants and refugees is a widely known and discussed topic among policymakers within the EU, though a comprehensive gender-specific approach is still lacking. Migrant women and especially refugees deserve special attention, since nearly every second migrant and every third asylum seeker is female. However, many of these women are poorly educated, lack work experience and labor market participation. In this article, we examine gender-specific challenges of female migrants and refugees and look at strategies and existing initiatives suitable for overcoming obstacles and promoting their integration into host country labor markets and societies.

increased. Now more than one in three refugees is female (see Figure 1).

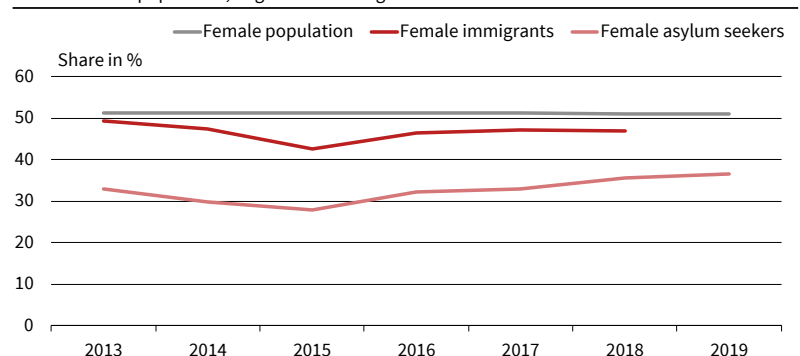
Female refugees in particular are a group of the population that deserves more attention. Eurostat data shows that while the absolute number of female refugees has decreased by around 130,000 since 2016, the share of women has increased by almost 14% in the EU28. In contrast, both the absolute number of women and the percentage share of women among immigrants have increased. Among native-born women, these figures have remained almost unchanged.

Figure 2 shows the share of women among migrants and refugees in selected countries—all coun-

Figure 1

#### Women's Share in the EU28 over Time

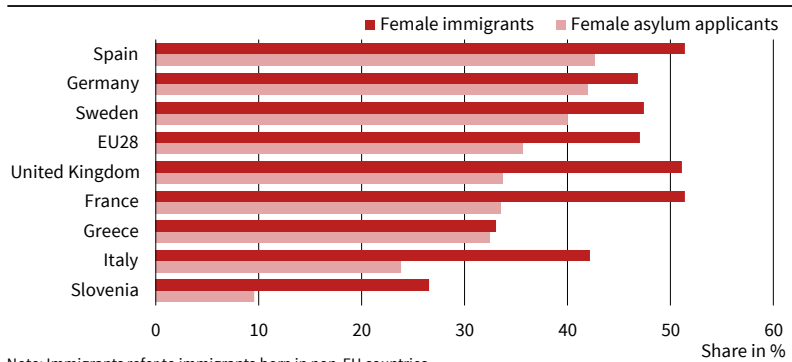
General female population, migrants and refugees born outside the EU28



Source: Eurostat (2020).

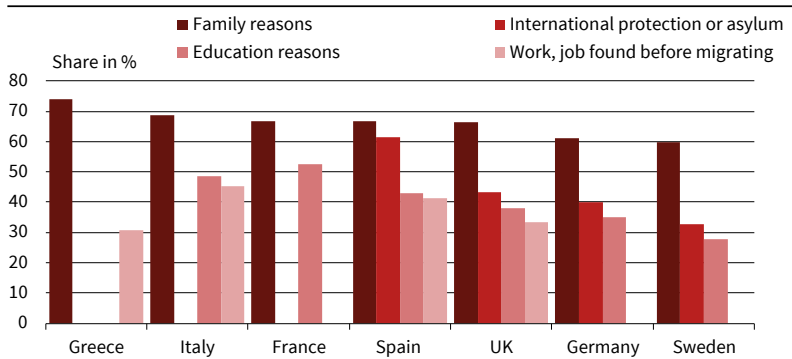
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**Figure 2**  
**Share of Females among Asylum Seekers and Migrants**  
 Selected countries, 2018



Note: Immigrants refer to immigrants born in non-EU countries.  
 Source: Eurostat (2020). © ifo Institute

**Figure 3**  
**Migration Reasons of Female Migrants**  
 Non-EU citizens, 2014



Source: Eurostat LFS 2014 ad hoc module (2020). © ifo Institute

tries presented had a greater percentage of females among migrants than among refugees. In Spain, France and the UK, more than 50% of migrants were female in 2018. In Slovenia, it was less than one third. The percentage share of women among refugees was highest in Spain, Sweden and Germany, all of them at 40% or more. All 3 of these countries were also above the EU28 average. Again, the smallest share of female asylum seekers was found in Slovenia at roughly 10%.

When it comes to the question why women migrate in the first place, a clear pattern emerges. Figure 3 shows four reasons for migration and per reason how many women are among first-generation immigrants. Across all countries presented, at least 60% of the migrants who moved for family reasons are women, with the highest percentages occurring in Greece and Italy. On the other hand, men more often tend to migrate for work and educational reasons. However, family reunification is among the top reasons for migration for both men and women and is an important aspect of the decision to migrate—for women in particular.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> It has to be noted that the questionnaire covers all non-EU citizens currently living in the respective reporting country and is thus not limited to refugees. The figure also does not show migrants seeking international protection in Greece, Italy and France. This is probably due to the fact that the survey took place in 2014 and an update is planned for 2021. More recent results are likely to paint a different

But what does their life look like when they come to Europe and what are the most pressing challenges they face? To answer this question, we first resort to general challenges for women in education and employment before turning to the more specific challenges of migrant and refugee women.

**CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN: THE GENDER EMPLOYMENT GAP AND THE UNEQUAL DIVISION OF LABOR**

Men and women in the EU do not equally participate in the labor market, even though overall female labor market participation has risen over the last several decades. According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2020, a global gender gap of 31.4% on average remains. In the area of “Economic Participation and Opportunity,” the gender disparity is even larger with a gap of 57.8%. Considering the slow speed of narrowing the gap between 2006 and 2020, it will take 257 years to fully close this gap at the current rate of participation (World Economic Forum 2020). One of the main drivers for the persistent disparity is the unequal participation in the labor market of women and men. While globally, 78% of men actively participate in the labor force, the same is true for only 55% of women. Within the EU, the gender employment gap is less pronounced, but still as high as 12%.

A major factor influencing this disparity is the unequal division of unpaid care work in households. There is no country in the world where men spend an equal amount of time on unpaid work as women do. Also, women in the EU conduct most of the unpaid care and housework, regardless of their employment status. The gap in paid and unpaid work further increases with parenthood—while 88% of mothers with children under 18 engage in unpaid care work on a daily basis, only 64% of fathers do (compared to 81% for women and 48% for men in general). In countries where unpaid work is shared more equally, employment rates for women tend to be higher and gender gaps in earning lower (European Institute for Gender Equality 2020). When combining unpaid and paid work, women in OECD countries on average spend 25 minutes more working (OECD Report 2020a). As a consequence, employed mothers are far more likely to work part-time in comparison to fathers. While 36.5% of women with children under the age of six in the EU27 are employed part-time, the same is true for only 5.3% of fathers (Eurostat 2020b). The gender imbalance in the context of parenthood and employment also becomes obvious when looking at who reduces working hours to facilitate childcare responsibilities. In this aspect as well, women clearly take the lead as the female percentage amounts to 82% (Eurostat 2020c).

picture and a comparison of the 2014 and 2021 results will be highly interesting.

## CHALLENGES FOR FEMALE MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES: INTEGRATION INTO THE LABOR MARKET AND SOCIETY

Many migrant and refugee women face very similar challenges as native-born women do and often find themselves confronted with additional obstacles.

### Challenge 1: Gaps in Education and (Documented) Work Experience

Education is one influencing factor of labor market integration, as it facilitates integration, especially through diploma or qualifications and work experience. In addition, the training itself can provide skills that contribute to rapid integration into the labor market.

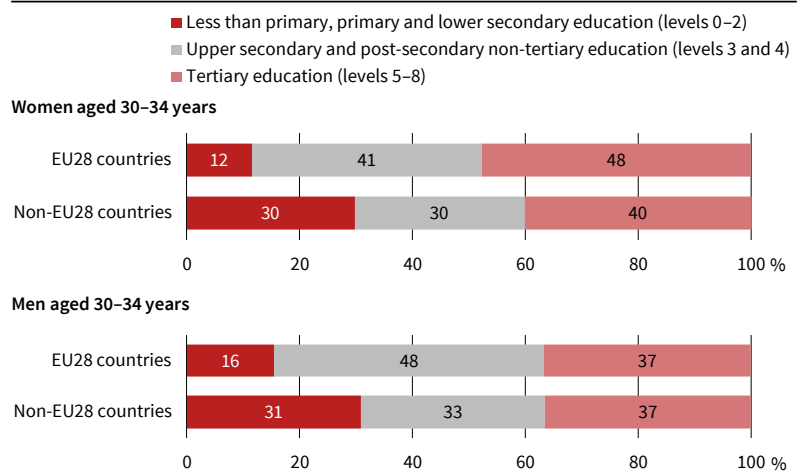
In general, refugees tend to have lower skill levels than the native population, with refugee women being particularly poorly educated. These low levels of education greatly influence a refugee woman's employment prospects and hence constitute a principal obstacle to the integration of female refugees (OECD 2019). In order to examine the educational differences between refugee women and native-born women within the EU28,<sup>4</sup> Figure 4 compares the shares of native- and foreign-born females between 30 and 34 years old at three different levels of education (low, medium and high) following the International Standard Classification of Education.<sup>5</sup> Low education refers to less than primary (ISCED level 0), primary (ISCED level 1), and lower secondary (ISCED level 2) education. Medium education includes upper secondary (ISCED level 3) and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED level 4), whereas the high education levels refer to tertiary education (ISCED level 5-8). These educational gaps point to disadvantages female refugees face in terms of education. In 2019, the tertiary education gap between women who lived in the EU28 and who were also born in the EU28, and women who lived in the EU28 but were born outside the EU28 was -7.4 percentage points. This indicates that the percentage of women with tertiary education is 7.4 percentage points lower among women who were not born in an EU country than among women who were. This gap amounted to -10.7 percentage points for the upper secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary educational levels. But most importantly, the gap for low educational levels was, in contrast, 18.2 percentage points, suggesting that the percentage of females with low educational levels at 18.2 percentage points is larger for females born in non-EU28 countries than for females born in EU28 countries.

For men, the gap in levels 0-2 is 15.4 percentage points and thus comparable to the one for women.

<sup>4</sup> The EU28 countries include the UK.

<sup>5</sup> We approximate the educational level of refugees comparing non-native females living in EU28 and native-born females in EU28 as recent data referring explicitly to refugees are to the best of our knowledge not available at the EU level.

Figure 4  
Educational Level and Country of Birth, 2019



Source: Eurostat (2020).

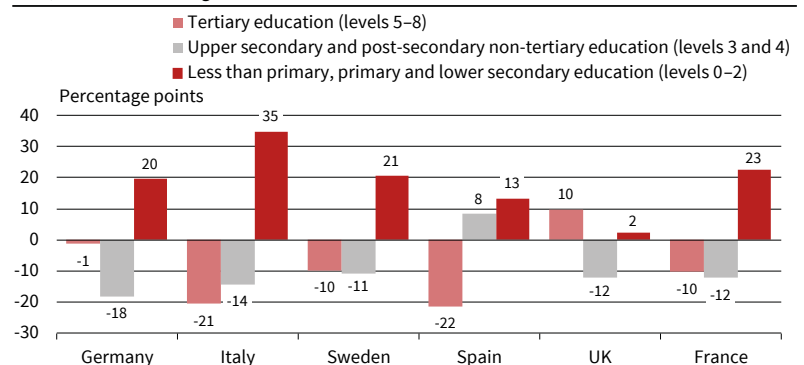
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For levels 3-4, the gap is 15.2 percentage points and larger than for females, while it is only 0.2 percentage points in tertiary education.

For the main European destination countries except UK, the gaps show on average a similar pattern (Figure 5). While the share of native (here: EU28-born) females in tertiary education and upper secondary/post-secondary education is larger than the share of females born in countries outside EU28,<sup>6</sup> a significantly larger share of them reports levels of less than primary, primary or lower secondary education. In Italy, the difference in the percentage of poorly educated foreign-born women in comparison to native-born women is 34.9 percentage points and is particularly high. The lowest difference in this context is reported by Spain with 13.3 percentage points. Overall, this points to the educational challenge that refugee women are facing due to on average low levels of education. Therefore, educational disadvantages especially for very low skilled female refugees must

<sup>6</sup> It must be noted that the share also includes immigrants from third countries who are not refugees. Therefore, the numbers refer also to females who live in the respective European countries for other reasons than asylum.

Figure 5  
Female Educational Gaps by Country and Country of Birth: Non-EU28 vs. Reporting Country 2019, share of females aged 30-34



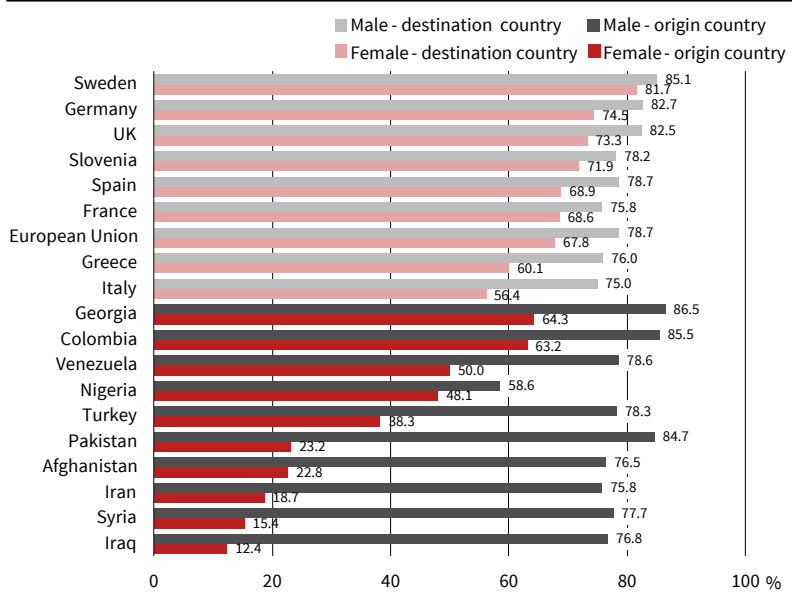
Source: Eurostat (2020).

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Figure 6

**Female and Male Labor Force Participation Rate**

% of female/male population aged 15–64; modeled ILO estimates, 2019



Source: World Bank (2020).

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Figure 7

**Employment and Unemployment Rates, 2019**



Source: OECD (2020).

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be addressed by integration programs aiming at integrating them into the labor market.

Given low levels of qualification, female refugees are additionally confronted with obstacles in the labor market if they have little or no work experience, especially in the labor market of the destination country

(Degler et al. 2017). However, the work experience attained in the countries of origin also influences and benefits the labor market integration prospects of female refugees to a high extent as any labor market experiences can be advantageous in an employment search.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the female labor participation rate in countries of origin can be considered a good predictor of female refugee labor market integration (Knize Estrada 2018; Frank and Hou 2015).

Figure 6 displays the female and male labor force participation rate in selected European destination countries (pink and grey bars) and the ten most common asylum seekers' countries of origin (red and black bars) in 2019 (Eurostat 2020).<sup>8</sup> In most countries of origin, the female employment rate is lower than in the European destination countries. While the average rate in the origin countries amounts to 35.6%, the European countries report an average female labor participation rate of 69.4% (the EU average is 67.8%). The countries of origin with the lowest female participation in the labor market are Iraq (12.4%), Syria (15.4%) and Iran (18.7%), while the rates in Georgia (64.3%), Colombia (63.2 %) and Venezuela (50.0%) are comparable to the rates of European destination countries such as Italy (56.4%) and Greece (60.1%). In contrast, European countries such as Sweden (81.7%), Germany (74.5%), the UK (73.3%) and Slovenia (71.9%) report substantially higher female labor participation rates.

The grey and black bars document the male labor force participation rate. While in European destination countries the differences for females and males are on average moderate, the discrepancies between the participation rate in the countries of origin are substantial, which indicates that female refugees have special needs due to the lack of work experience gained in the countries of origin compared to male refugees—an important factor that should be considered in integration programs.

Figure 7 zooms in on the labor force participation and shows the employment and unemployment rates of men and women in selected European countries. In all countries, the employment rates of native-born women are higher than those of foreign-born women (see the upper graph).<sup>9</sup> This is not necessarily true for men: in Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Spain and the UK, the employment percentage is higher among foreign-born men than those of native-born men.

In contrast, the lower graph shows the unemployment rates for the same groups. Again, the unemployment rates of foreign-born women by far exceed the rates of native-born women. Especially in Greece, unemployment is high among women of both backgrounds. The unemployment rates of men

<sup>7</sup> Work experience in the country of origin is clearly connected to persistent social norms and cultural backgrounds (see also challenge 2 below).

<sup>8</sup> The UK is included as it was part of the European Union until December 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign-born is not limited to any countries of origin and thus may include immigrants from all over the world and who have migrated for multiple reasons.

follow similar patterns across countries but are less pronounced in all of them. Thus, women are not only disadvantaged in their home labor markets but also in the European ones.

Related to work experience and educational level, another challenge is that female refugees tend to work in informal employment capacities such as domestic work. Therefore, female refugees are likely to work in jobs with low pay that are poorly appreciated (Kabir and Klugman 2019).

We have shown that female refugees are confronted with dual discrimination in the labor market of being female and having an asylum status that impedes permanent integration into the labor market and prevents female refugees from having a job that matches their skills and knowledge. As the European Commission stated in 2018, the double discrimination of refugee women has not yet sufficiently been the focus of policymakers.

### Challenge 2: Gender Norms

Deriving from the field of social psychology, economists have developed a gender identity model that explains different labor market behavior of men and women (Akerlof and Kranton 2000). Following this model, prevailing social norms about what is appropriate for each gender to do have implications for the labor market behavior of men and women and contribute to the gender gap in labor market outcomes (Bertrand 2011).

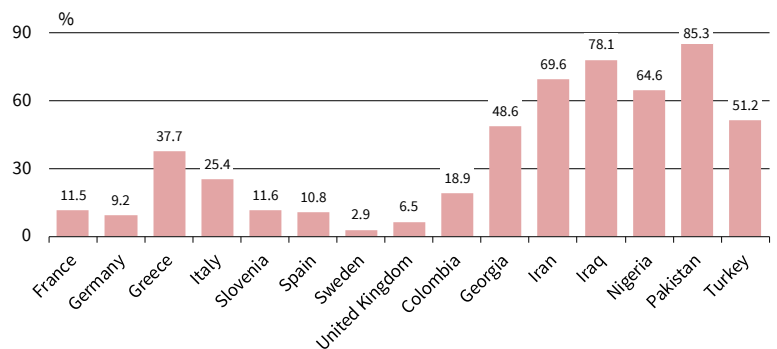
Fortin (2015) investigates the impact of gender role attitudes on women's labor market outcomes across OECD countries and finds that traditional gender role values (captured by the agreement or disagreement with the statement, "When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women, Q33," World Values Survey) are strongly and negatively associated with female employment rates. Given the fact that beliefs and attitudes are established early in life and are transmitted inter-generationally, the culture of female migrants consequently plays a crucial role for their labor market behavior in the host countries.<sup>10</sup>

To what extent culture matters for female labor market outcomes is the research question of an influential paper by Fernández and Fogli (2009). The authors examine second-generation immigrant women's behavior on the labor market, using female labor force participation in the country of ancestry as a quantitative proxy for culture, as the decision to become active in the labor market depends on the distribution of preferences and beliefs. Their findings suggest that culture is a significant determinant of women's work outcomes, depending not only each woman's preferences, but also on her husband's preferences if she is married.

<sup>10</sup> Guiso et al. (2006) define culture as the customary belief and values that ethnic, religious and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation.

Figure 8

### Gender Role Attitudes in Selected Migrant Countries of Origin and Host Countries When Jobs Are Scarce, Men Should Have More Right to a Job Than Women



Source: World Values Survey Wave 7: 2017–2020, Q33.

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When looking at female labor market participation in the main countries of origin of asylum seekers in Europe (Figure 6) in combination with prevailing gender role values (Figure 8) and the scorings in the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum 2019),<sup>11</sup> a strong correlation between the three indicators is noticeable—countries with very low female employment rates and/or a large gender employment gap generally show extremely poor outcomes in terms of gender equality and highly traditional gender role attitudes, whereas those with female labor force participation rates similar to the European Union ones (e.g., Colombia and Venezuela) show better outcomes in terms of gender equality and have fewer traditional gender norms. Extreme examples are Iraq and Pakistan, which occupy the second last and third last rank in the Gender Gap Index (out of 153 included countries), which at the same time show gender employment gaps of over 60 percentage points and range among the countries with most traditional gender role attitudes.

As a result, the successful labor market integration of migrant and refugee women is also highly dependent on their (and their husband's) gender norms in their countries of origin. Policies aiming at increasing female labor market participation should also take persisting gender role attitudes into account in case the target group's country of origin is one with a big gender equality gap. Moreover, as men's attitudes toward working women also play a crucial role for female labor market participation, initiatives that address men and their traditional gender norms should not be neglected.

### Challenge 3: Lack of Language Skills and Information about Initiatives

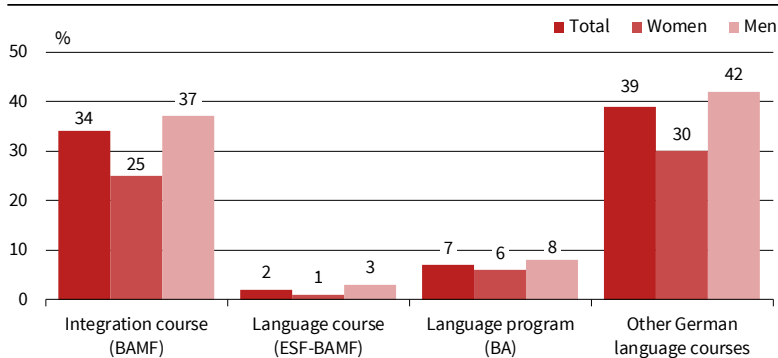
In addition to disadvantages in education, at work and due to cultural backgrounds, the lack of language

<sup>11</sup> The Global Gender Gap Index comprises and measures gender gaps in four fields: "Economic Participation and Opportunity," "Educational Attainment," "Health and Survival," and "Political Empowerment."



Figure 9

### Integration and Language Course Participation Refugees in Germany, 2016



Source: DIW (2017) based on IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey 2016, weighted.

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skills and knowledge about what is on offer in the host country also play a role. Without doubt, mastering the host country's language is beneficial to the social and economic integration of migrants and refugees (Chiswick and Miller 2001; Ager and Strang 2008). This is especially true if language skills are promoted early after arrival. Language and integration courses are designed to provide foreign-born individuals residing in the EU with at least basic language skills and knowledge about the host country's cultural norms. The European Labor Force Survey (LFS) from 2014<sup>12</sup> interviewed first-generation immigrants about their language skills in the host country's language. Especially in Spain and the UK, relatively high percentages (around 50%) reported "mother tongue" or a "proficient" level. Whereas in Greece, Germany and Slovenia, the percentages were much lower.<sup>13</sup> Due to the scarcity of cross-country data on refugees, we resort to national data from Germany to gain deeper insight into female participation in language courses and potential gender differences.

Figure 9 shows the percentage of refugees who have participated in different language and integration courses in Germany in 2016. This figure demonstrates that men and women do not participate equally often. Only 25% of female refugees participated in an integration course offered by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) compared to 37% of male refugees. The difference in participation is similar to other language training and mentoring programs. Mentoring programs in particular present another good policy tool for fostering the integration of refugees and improving their language skills (DIW 2020). Resnjanski et al. (2021) show that mentoring can significantly increase the labor market opportunities of school-attending adolescents from disadvantaged families which often include refugees. The authors find positive effects on first-generation mi-

<sup>12</sup> More current data regarding language course participation and effects are unfortunately not available on a European level, making it difficult to analyze and evaluate the potential costs and benefits of such programs.

<sup>13</sup> See Eurostat's data set on "Skills in host country language by migration status and citizenship [LFSO\_14BLANG]" from 2014.

grants' math performance, patience and social skills as well as on their labor-market orientation. A rough cost-benefit-analysis thereby suggests that the benefits of the program outweigh the costs by almost 31 to 1.

In recent years, there has been a growing call for more specific job-related language courses (Extramiana 2012) to prepare migrants as much as possible for the world of work. However, such courses would predominantly target migrants with a job or good labor market prospects, but do not necessarily provide a solution for women who have migrated for their partners or families (as seen in Figure 4) and are likely to have poorer labor market prospects. In an effort to even out gender differences, Germany has implemented courses that specifically target women.<sup>14</sup> The program includes language and orientation lessons for migrant mothers so that they can learn and network with other migrant mothers, who have not been able to attend regular language or integration courses in the past due to childcare or household responsibilities. Such initiatives address gender-specific challenges and aim to help female refugees acquire the necessary skills to manage their daily lives in Germany. Ultimately, these courses are a first step toward integration into society.

#### Challenge 4: Experiences of Trauma and Physical Abuse Before and During Refugee Flight

Another potential challenge, especially for refugee women, is coping with trauma and/or physical abuse. NGOs and the media frequently report on the scandalous conditions in refugee camps and the dangerous journey to Europe (UNHCR and MMC 2020). While this alone is an enormous challenge for refugees in general, women in particular are too often victims of (sexual) violence (OECD 2019). The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs states that one in three women experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, which is associated with higher rates of HIV, depression and pregnancy-related problems (UN OCHA 2018).

Access to medical and psychological care is thus crucial in overcoming such traumatic experiences. While in theory, health care is available to all migrants and refugees in the EU, in practice many barriers remain. Lebano et al. (2020) review the existing literature on the provision and access to health care and conclude that there are large differences across member states. The authors note that in particular mental health care, preventive care and long-term care for older people need to be improved. Kohlenberger et al. (2019) examine survey data on refugees' access to health care in Austria and find that refugees' self-assessed health is lower than that of the native population, even though basic health care is available

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see BAMF (2020).

to both segments of the population. The barriers to health care are related to language, (hidden) costs and socio-cultural factors. The authors conclude that the specific health needs of refugees are poorly understood and rarely adequately addressed, leading to health inequalities that hinder integration. This is particularly the case for women and Afghan refugees.

### HOW TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES APPROPRIATELY AND EFFECTIVELY?

Apart from the difficulties arising from migrating or refugee flight itself, foreign-born women face additional gender-specific challenges. Female refugees in particular typically arrive in Europe poorly educated with little work experience, and have often been victims of abuse and physical (sexual) violence.

Initiatives addressing female refugee and migrant acquisition of skills needed for specific jobs is important, but it should be kept in mind that women often migrate in a family context. Specifically designed and tailored courses can help mitigate existing gender differences and promote social integration of migrant and especially refugee women. Some countries, e.g., Germany, already offer such programs. Also, Spain tackles this issue with the SARA program at the Institute for Women in the Spanish governmental department for equality. This program aims at motivating and supporting migrant women with social and labor integration (Instituto de la Mujer 2018 and 2020). Furthermore, it helps female refugees develop confidence and improve social and communication skills on the one hand, and become aware of their professional objectives and integrate more strongly into society on the other hand. The program includes motivational and occupational training, support in job searches and entrepreneurship, and an internship (Instituto de la Mujer 2018). Between 2018 and 2019, 578 women participated in the program and approximately 20.2% of them were employed six months after having finished the program (Instituto de la Mujer 2020). In Vienna, the Austrian capital, the program “Mama lernt Deutsch” (Mom is learning German) is intended for women with no or little knowledge of German who have not attended school for more than eight years. The course aims at teaching German as a second language as well as some basic skills in reading and writing. As a special feature, childcare is offered to women with kindergarten- or school-age children (Station Wien 2021).

Such programs are a great first step. In recent years, more initiatives and programs for women and girls have become available, yet gaps still remain. Additionally, in countries of origin, gender-nuanced approaches are lacking (UN Women and UNFPA 2020). The OECD (2020b) reports that only 4% of development aid was funded to programs dedicated to gender equality and women’s empowerment in 2016 and 2017. In contrast, 64% of aid was gender blind. Also in the EU, differences continue to exist across the member

states, where gender equality still tends to be underfunded. More data and research are needed to better understand the drivers of female integration and to support evidence-based policy advice in the area of gender equality and equal opportunities between migrant and native (female) populations.

Integrating refugees and especially refugee women is of global importance, so initiatives should be available on an international level and for different subgroups and specializations. The potential benefits of closing the funding gap would far exceed the investment costs needed to implement programs for women and girls. Estimates for the potential benefits of gender-sensitive programs range from USD 1.7 to USD 150 for every US dollar spent (UN Women and UNFPA 2020). Integrating female migrants and refugees therefore deserves to be a core topic on the European political agenda.

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