

From Integration to Inclusion: Empowering Immigrant Women in the EU

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This policy brief examines the socioeconomic integration of immigrant women with a particular focus on their occupational integration and the labor market opportunities available to them.

It explores the challenges encountered by immigrant women in Western European countries and critically assesses the current policy responses to these issues. The study highlights significant shortcomings in employment integration programs, showing their inadequacies in achieving the comprehensive societal inclusion of immigrant women. It offers a series of recommendations aimed at reorienting the concept of integration toward an intersectional lens that fosters the genuine inclusion of immigrant women within the EU.

INTRODUCTION

New trends have been observed regarding feminine migration patterns in the EU. Women no longer migrate solely to accompany or join their partners; they independently undertake immigration, driven by the same aspirations that have historically motivated men to do so: the expectation of improved living conditions in the receiving European countries. However, the labor market prospects for immigrant women often fall short of allowing them to achieve the quality of life they aspire to. Even for native women in Western European countries, labor market participation is hindered by various factors, including structural sexism.

Despite the variety of individual backgrounds and situations, a clear observation can be made: **when the challenges of being a woman are compounded by other forms of discrimination, integration becomes even more difficult.** As labor market integration and wider societal integration go hand in hand, excluding immigrant women from the labor market or confining them to precarious sectors marginalize them in society.¹

Experts are unanimous regarding the **twofold systemic discrimination faced specifically by immigrant women throughout their integration processes.** Pivotal problems persist and are getting worse due to the current backlash against minority rights. Immigrant women are and remain often confined to low-skilled sectors, more likely to experience deskilling, and have limited opportunities to escape precarious situations.² Despite a decade of strong gender language at the EU level, gender mainstreaming is not consistently applied to integration policies and programmes.

These policies often reveal various pitfalls and a lack of efficiency when it comes to addressing the unique and complex challenges that immigrant women encounter when attempting to enter the labor market. This policy brief aims to explore how current integration policies can be reframed to enhance the socioeconomic inclusion of immigrant women.

THE DOUBLE PENALTY: MULTIPLE BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION FACED BY IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Upon arrival in Western European countries, immigrant women are confronted with the so-called “**double penalty**”, a set of barriers to integration due to their dual status. These barriers, which usually occur when attempting to enter the labor market, span multiple areas, including employment opportunities, skills, language proficiency, gender roles, cultural norms, stereotypes and discrimination.

The occupational integration of immigrant women highlights the way the division of labor is heavily structured and gendered. When immigrant women do find employment, they are usually compound to so-called “women’s work” in the following sectors: domestic and care work, hotel and catering, semi-skilled manufacturing.³ These sectors are known to offer low-skilled, insecure and poorly remunerated jobs. Such jobs entail a significant number of disadvantages: restricted access to public services (namely healthcare and childcare) and limited entitlement to contributions-based social benefits.

The lack of or limited labor law protection also exposes these workers to serious risks, with a higher likelihood of being vulnerable to economic exploitation, intersectional discrimination, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) by both employers and intermediaries.

Additionally, skills and qualifications are crucial when it comes to entry into the labor market. High-skilled women tend to migrate more than men, but they paradoxically experience higher inactivity rates and worse employment outcomes than men.⁴ **The perception of women’s skills and their recognition and value on the labor market play a significant part in the definition of opportunities available to immigrant women.** Such difficulties in accessing quality work in the EU labor market are partly due to the underdeveloped system of recognition of non-EU qualifications⁵ which leads to overqualification and so-called “brain waste”.

Women do accept positions that they are overqualified for as they are looking for short-term monetary returns, but responsibility is not just theirs.

Institutional features, in the workplace and in society, are other important drivers that play a role in ensuring relevant matchings in the labor market. Unsupportive attitudes towards women’s participation in the labor force are likely to be prejudicial to the adequate matchings between women’s skills and the available job openings. **Skills necessary for domestic work, perceived as “feminine”, are usually socially and financially undervalued, as they are considered as a natural extension of the role of women within the family.** Low-paid professions are assumed to be directly linked to the required level of skills, which ignores the way **skills tend to be evaluated in society through a stereotyped lens unfavorable to both immigrants and women.** It is crucial to keep in mind that, while many women end up working in the domestic sector, their actual level of qualifications and skills vary significantly, and they are usually overqualified.

Immigrant women need to face **additional structural inequalities combined with gendered stereotypes, in particular a lack of language proficiency and their family responsibilities.**

Care and family responsibilities are the main obstacles preventing women to engage in a long-term job search journey and to properly access any kind of training programmes, language classes or qualitative employment. It is important to keep in mind that these responsibilities are usually faced by all women and can be named as the *motherhood penalty*. It can unfold both in anticipation of motherhood, for instance by discriminatory employment towards reproductive-aged women, or with motherhood directly, where working arrangements fail to meet the demands of childcare responsibilities.⁶ Many studies show that childcare availability and lack of affordable childcare significantly impede women’s participation in the labor market.⁷



Migration penalty and gender penalty (usually combined with the motherhood penalty) create various obstacles to the occupational integration of immigrant women in Western European countries, particularly visible when it comes to job quality and stability.⁸

These multiple barriers occur firstly prior to immigrant women's entry into the labor market and are characterized by short-term oriented decisions due to lack of language proficiency, lack of childcare solutions, difficulties in getting recognition of skills or diplomas and discrimination in hiring. Once employed, these barriers persist and are joined by others: restriction to domestic or care work, deskilling, SGBV and all risks linked to unregulated and informal sectors. **Such obstacles significantly hinder immigrant women's capacity to fully integrate, regardless of their willingness or personal intentions.** The cumulative nature of these obstacles underscores the need for tailored policy responses. Policies and programs aiming at the integration of third-country national women in the EU labor market have been taking these specificities into account since the mid-2010s.

However, **it is evident that the current integration policies of Western EU Member States fall short in addressing most of the challenges faced by immigrant women.**

OVERLOOKING OF THESE ISSUES IN CURRENT EU INTEGRATION POLICIES

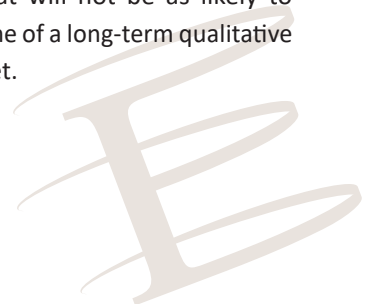
Integration policies are not harmonized among EU Member States, as the integration matter falls within the supporting competencies of the EU.⁹ Policies are designed by each Member State, which wants to keep control over integration policies on their territory. However, **the EU can provide a tendency for the direction to follow in terms of integration, and such inclination is not adapted to promote the full integration of immigrant women.** Directive 2003/86/EC on the right to family reunification is a case in point, as it established the Labor Market Protection period.¹⁰ The latter precludes immigrant women and men from undertaking jobs up to a year from their arrival on the EU territory, allowing Member States to examine the situation of their labor market before

authorizing newly arrived family members to "exercise an employed or self-employed activity."¹¹ Women being the most likely to resort to family reunification, this particular clause is a telling example of the lack of consideration to specific gendered situations and their potential impacts.

Policymaking on integration is often conducted by actors holding different goals, such as the management of migration flows or responses to labor market needs. The lack of synergies between these goals often leads policymakers to adopt gender-neutral approaches that might even become gender-blind. Gender-neutral approaches are not supposedly negative since they emphasize the equal treatment of men, women and people of any other gender legally with no discrimination whatsoever.¹²

It becomes problematic when gender neutrality becomes gender blindness, which implies the inability to perceive the different gender roles, needs and responsibilities of men and women. Such an approach usually results in the failure of policies, projects and programs that do not consider these distinct roles and needs. **Gender-blind programs do women a disservice by not acknowledging their specific needs, hence not addressing the specific challenges they face.**¹³ They maintain the *status quo* and do not participate in the transformation of the unequal structure of gender relations, even risking worsening it.

In addition, integration policies are sometimes **disconnected from the realities of supporting organizations**, that provide language, civic and professional training to immigrants. The reception of subsidies from European or national institutions involves burdensome follow-up procedures. Every action undertaken using these funds has to be justified by multiple reports that are due several times during the process. Due to their time-intensiveness and complexity, **such procedures reduce the time employees and officers of these organizations can allocate to understand the needs of the beneficiaries they accompany.** It results in less tailored support that will not be as likely to provide the expected outcome of a long-term qualitative insertion on the labor market.



The analysis of current integration policies within Member States reveals pitfalls and shortcomings, even when they specifically target immigrant women. **We can mention, among others: the lack of childcare solutions; the requirements linked to the level of education and the lack of clear information on the job market.**

The **short-term perspective** that dominates in the way integration programmes are built, is responsible for most of these pitfalls. Programmes usually last for a few months or years, setting a very clear objective for third country nationals (TCNs) to be economically and socially active by the end of this timespan. However, **the language aspect is not considered when setting such short-term expectations.** Such criticism is often pointed out when it comes to the overall migration strategy of the EU. Experts encourage the different layers of governance to operate a strategic paradigm shift, “departing from security-centered and short-term focus and embracing a more comprehensive, long-term perspective.”¹⁴

Both gender and integration are horizontal policy domains, but they are subject to policy division, with all measures regarding equal opportunities (for women) being treated on the one hand, and separated integration of immigrants on the other. **The siloization of horizontal domains is an obstacle to achieve coherent, far-reaching and truly inclusive policies.**

The negative impact of this fragmentation is even more manifest for immigrant women, who are subject to both areas due to their dual status. **They fall between chairs, not forming a fully-fledged part of either area.** The fact that immigrant women are not collectively organized limits their capacity to influence policy.

Gender equality policies are mostly designed for native women, even if, in rare cases, they include a section dedicated to the specific situation of immigrant women. As far as integration policies are concerned, as mentioned above, they are at best gender-neutral, and often gender-blind. **The fact that the gender-axis and the ethnic-cultural origin axis are not structurally crossed increases the invisibility of immigrant women, leaving their needs relegated to the margins.**

The EU migration and integration acquis contributes to reinforcing some of the barriers immigrant women face when accessing the labor market. For instance, the EU Action Plan on Inclusion and Integration for 2021-2027 does take into consideration the concerns of practitioners by consolidating both immigration and social policies for immigrants and EU citizens with an immigrant background under a unified framework. However, increasing the employment rate of immigrant women is not among its priorities, despite its strong language on gender equality and the multiple mentions of the intersectional and multiple discriminations experienced by immigrant women.¹⁵

On-the-ground labor market integration programs also persist in following a one-size-fits-all approach,¹⁶ despite the multiplicity of backgrounds and realities of newcomers. Such risks **are linked to the narratives on “migration integration” and the way TCNs are perceived.** Most integration measures impose the “European way of life”, adopting an **assimilationist approach which has clear human rights implications,** rather than facilitating access to rights and family life as it is supposed to do.

The core issue that can be identified is linked to the space and position immigrants are given when drafting integration policies and programs. Projects and project funding schemes rarely start by directly asking what makes the immigrants feel included, what inclusion means for immigrant men and women respectively and what could be improved for them to feel more included. Current integration policies largely fail to grasp the realities of immigrant women, as they remain predominantly gender-blind and fail to meet their needs – both in policies targeted at women and those designed for immigrants. It is crucial **to reconsider how this population is perceived and the role they are assigned to in society.**



SHIFTING FROM INTEGRATION TO INCLUSION

The very notion of integration should be questioned. It designates the incorporation of immigrants as equals into a society of individuals originated from different groups. Such conception is already biased, as it emphasizes the immigrant person as the subject who needs “to (be) integrate(d).”

In order to design policies that are fit to respond to the specific needs of immigrant women, **the concept of socio-economic inclusion should be considered**. Socio-economic inclusion does not put the responsibility solely on immigrants.

It preaches for a joint effort from both parties – immigrant people and the receiving society with its different layers – **the latter being responsible for creating a welcoming and prepared environment able and willing to appropriately include immigrants among local citizens**.

When it comes to immigrant women specifically, a change of mindset is also crucial. Despite the typical discourse blaming them for their limited inclusion in the labor market, framing it as a cultural issue inducing their unwillingness to integrate, the pivotal factor in fact comes from the process of policymaking. **The impulse should be given from a higher level to achieve true inclusion**, which goes far beyond poor working conditions in domestic sectors where women are unable to answer their basic needs and those of their families.

Inclusion means qualitative labor market participation, aiming for immigrant women to feel included, to benefit from welfare and housing systems, to enjoy their civil rights and engage in citizenship activities.

ADOPTING AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO ENHANCE THE SOCIOECONOMIC INCLUSION OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN

The observation that current integration policies fall short in ensuring the effective integration of immigrant women should lead policymakers to implement gender sensitive and/or gender-responsive policies. Several key elements need to be reformed or introduced to enhance immigrant women’s labor participation, access to rights and overall socioeconomic inclusion. **This requires a fundamental shift in mindset and perspective - from mere integration to true socioeconomic inclusion - to foster more harmonious relationships with immigrants in receiving societies**, upholding the human rights and dignity of all citizens in Western European countries.

In light of these considerations, the following recommendations aim to better the way policies can respond to the needs of immigrant women, following the postulate that intersectionality is the best approach to successfully do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Changing narratives on immigrant women**, in the labor market and in the overall society.
2. **Draft and implement needs-based integration policies**, the needs being identified by immigrant women themselves.
3. **Promote participatory and inclusive policies at every step**, when designing, implementing and monitoring policy responses. Including women in the processes of policymaking is crucial to address the gaps in the labor market and reduce the unnecessary competition between locals and newcomers.
4. **Establish agency-advancing and empowering policies** to break the negative stereotype that present immigrant women as passive and in need of being rescued, portraying them instead as agents for change.
5. **Ground each policy on the “do not harm” principle**. The respect of such principle increases awareness around the involuntary reproduction of gender stereotypes that target and marginalize racialized women.

Adopting an intersectional approach implies a deeper and long-term rethinking of the perception of integration itself. Such process should ultimately lead to addressing the structural legal and institutional barriers to integration faced by immigrant women. It starts by assessing to what extent existing institutions, policies and practices reproduce gendered and racialized hierarchies and norms.¹⁷ It involves an **important and difficult work of reassessment and reconsideration of the residual aspects of European countries' colonial past and racial, cultural and religious legacies.**¹⁸ In order to go beyond simple declarations and implement this equality commitment at the core of the functioning of European societies, policymakers need to operate a crucial shift from the integration perspective to the inclusion perspective.

CONCLUSION

Current integration policies in Western European countries fail to ensure the effective and long-term insertion of immigrant women in the labor market, which impacts their overall societal integration. A variety of barriers persist and hinder immigrant women from being integrated in the labor market. Integration policies are expected to address these structural barriers and support immigrant women to overcome them, yet the latter remain stuck in precarious employment, subject to deskilling or lack of access to their rights. The fragmentation of different aspects of integration, the unfavorable incentives at European level and the instrumentalization of the gender dimension are ubiquitous and yet highly prejudicial. Such observation calls for a redesign of the entire integration approach. **The transition from mere integration to genuine inclusion naturally stems from the adoption of an intersectional perspective.** Placing immigrant women at the core of their own integration process, empowering them and giving them a legitimate space in the labor market is more than necessary and would greatly contribute to the success of future policies.

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