



## Executive summary

Barriers to economic integration faced by refugee women in OECD countries post COVID-19

France | Germany | Italy | the United Kingdom

### Overview

According to the [UNHCR](#), women and girls make up around 50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population. There are numerous reports indicating that among this population, women who are unaccompanied, pregnant, heads of households, disabled or elderly are especially vulnerable. Gender-based violence, discrimination on the basis of sex and other human rights violations against women have contributed to making women refugees' integration process in host societies harder than their male peers. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) stresses the importance of gender analysis to understand and address the barriers for refugee integration, particularly when it comes to the labour market.<sup>1</sup> Improving women refugee's access to decent employment (whether formal jobs or informal income-generating activities) is significant to the achievement of the UN Sustainable

Development Goals 1,5, and 8 (SDGs). By highlighting the barriers and stressing the need for action, we work towards the objective of leaving no one behind.

The global coronavirus pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the employment situation for most refugees, with women disproportionately impacted (UNHCR, 2021). The pandemic has affected women refugees' lives in an unprecedented way by creating more challenges and obstacles that make the integration process increasingly complex. We have conducted research focused on providing information, analysis, and personal accounts of the barriers to integration faced by women refugees at the time of crisis. The research report includes the testimony of 15 women refugees and 10 experts from NGOs supporting refugees in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Cheung, S.Y. and Phillimore, J (2017). *Gender and refugee integration: A quantitative analysis of integration and social policy outcomes*. Journal of Social Policy, 46(2), pp.211-230.

The research team was led by Dr. Awmaima Amrayaf – a refugee from Libya and a legal assistant in DLA Piper's Pro Bono team. Dr Amrayaf designed the research and conducted subsequent analysis of the data. This research presents the voices of each refugee and conveys the unique struggles they faced, particularly in finding employment. The report draws on their accounts as individuals rather than statistics. Dr. Amrayaf commented:

*"It is crucial that women refugees are able to tell their own story, in their own words. I am so proud of all the brave women we interviewed, and I appreciate their consent to share their stories to help others."*

## Key objective

The research addresses the question: "How have barriers to women refugees' economic integration have changed after the COVID – pandemic?"

## Qualitative research

A qualitative approach was used for this study. This approach was chosen to capture the lived experiences of women refugees and understand in detail how COVID-19 has impacted their economic empowerment. The study comprised three stages: collection, coding, and analysis of data. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary research approach. These interviews provide a wealth of qualitative data from the accounts of refugee women as individuals rather than statistics.

## The findings

The findings of the report are presented in three main parts. First, we highlight the barriers particularly exacerbated by COVID-19, such as increased childcare responsibilities due to the closing of schools. Although the closing of schools impacted families globally, we found that cultural factors meant that women refugees were more likely to absorb the childcare responsibilities and give up their work. Second, we examine persistent barriers. Although these barriers, such as discrimination and stigma, were undoubtedly increased by the pandemic, they continue even as the public health situation improves, and various lockdown measures are lifted. Third, we present the impacts on the career prospects of women refugees.

### A) BARRIERS PARTICULARLY EXACERBATED BY COVID-19:

We found that the pandemic particularly exacerbated several barriers to the economic integration of women refugees. Disproportionate childcare responsibilities

became an insurmountable challenge when school and childcare facilities became unavailable, and many employers failed to accommodate women through flexible working. Moreover, women were particularly dependent on informal employment, and training workshops were the first to be cut as a result of the pandemic. Limited access to technology and a lack of digital literacy was particularly challenging when most services were moved online for months. We found that women refugees who did not have laptops could not access job applications from their mobile phones. Even for those who have access to a computer at home, the priority was to use it for children's home-schooling. Women refugees were more likely to give up their computers for the children and priorities their education due to the lack understanding of the support that schools and social services can provide as well as the stress of motherhood in a foreign country and general insecurities.

### B) PERSISTENT BARRIERS:

The most persistent barrier that impedes equal opportunities for women refugees is discrimination. The women we spoke to all identified suffering from intersectional discrimination, which greatly impedes efforts to find employment. They felt that the accompanied factors of gender, religion, race, and refugee status make them more limited in the type or amount of paid work they could do and more likely to be economically inactive than refugee men and other women and men in host country. Moreover, women refugees often suffer from trauma which remains unaddressed due to a lack of psychological support. Many of our interviewees noted that there was a persistent lack of services and support tailored to women refugees, and that men were able to more easily take advantage of opportunities available. For example, as men refugees often have less burden of care and more experience working in industry related sectors such as delivery, they are usually able to do more voluntary and paid work and precede women in obtaining local experience. Other systemic difficulties included cultural and language barriers, as well as inadequate and remote housing, and a lack of early measures to help women integrate.

### C) CAREER PROSPECTS:

Finally, interviewees highlighted the key impacts of the barriers that they faced. Women refugees explained that the many impediments that they faced in accessing employment resulted in a wage gap between them and men. They often found themselves relegated to the informal economy, in conditions ripe for exploitation. All of the women we spoke to told us that they had sacrificed their professional ambitions due to a lack of opportunity.

## Case Studies

### CASE STUDY (1) (AMINA)

Amina, who is a Pakistani mother of a disabled young boy, used to work as an administrator and was relying on her family and friends to help her with childcare. She is now struggling to find meaningful employment in the UK. She lost her job at the beginning of the pandemic because of her request for flexible working hours, despite begging many times. Working for 40 hours a week was practically impossible for her with young a kid with special needs who was no longer in school.

She described losing her job as a painful and confidence-diminishing experience. She said to us: "I am a refugee, female, brown, a mother who is not armed with 'normal' mainstream skills. All of this put me in the last spot of the last row, so far behind that, I am mostly invisible everywhere."

Amina told us of her deeply troubling experiences with organisations intended to support women. She thinks that if she was given information and training since the beginning, she would have had a successful career by now rather than be working in various places and keep trying to learn and earn for so long. Amina thinks that finding jobs would definitely be easier for a man in her situation. He would be able to go far and to more places to get help.

Amina gave up her dreams and worked everything possible. She wanted to support herself and her kids. She found that many employers, regardless of their business size or nature, practise exploitation. The mistreatment does not stop at just wage discrimination but in a lot of cases goes to sexual harassment.

### CASE STUDY (2) (SARAH)

When Sarah from Iraq was child, she wanted to be a doctor or to study music – she had lots of different dreams. Now she doesn't think about her dreams but about what she is able to do under her current circumstances. She is willing to take any work that is available and just thinking about ways to survive. The pandemic made it a lot harder for Sarah to gain work experience as lots of companies were closed. She explained her frustration to us: "It was hard to tell the reason that I couldn't find a job – I don't know whether it was because I am a woman or because of my immigration status, or because of my background."

Our recommendations:

### The need for collaboration

Our recommendations cover all of the actors that can support women refugees in finding opportunities for economic integration: governments, employers, and civil society. The report highlights the need for collaborating to provide comprehensive and context-sensitive training and education, the lack of which emerged as a primary concern among interviewees. It also stresses the need for increased services for mothers, who were increasingly isolated as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, the report urges all actors to include women refugees in the decision-making processes that affect them, as this is the only way to ensure that their concerns are truly taken into account.

### Governments role

This report suggests that Governments in OECD countries should integrate women refugees into the economy and employment straight away. Research suggests that improving women refugees' access to decent work provides significant gains for them and the host country's economy (Kabir and Klugman, 2019).<sup>2</sup> Governments should support municipalities in implementing a strength-based case management approach towards integration services. This refers to a collaborative process that assesses, plans, implements, coordinates, monitors and evaluates the options and services required to meet women refugees' needs. They also need to review processes by which women refugees are informed about training and work opportunities and provide specific initiatives and incentives to businesses for hiring them. This could be a certain tax credits or an economic incentive for each women refugee they hire. Attention should also be paid to transparent accountability systems to ensure that women refugees are able to complain effectively when facing unfair and illegal employment practices. Governments should also ensure the accessibility of the process by which women refugees demonstrate the equivalence of their qualifications and simplify procedures for obtaining essential documentation. Governments should work with civil society organisations and businesses to conduct awareness campaigns to ensure that businesses know and understand the rights of refugees in the workplace and ensure that suitable work opportunities are available for women refugees.

<sup>2</sup> Kabir, R. and Klugman, J., (2019) *Unlocking Refugee Women's Potential: Closing Economic Gaps to Benefit All*. New York, NY: International Rescue Committee and Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

## The role of civil society organisations

Civil society organisations have a key role to play to ensure that all support for women refugees is individualised and designed to response to a need to provide more tailored integration support for this population. They should devise support programmes with long-term, strategic aims that meaningfully integrate these women into the workforce and map out all initiatives carried out on a national and local level to provide a better understanding of the state of economic integration for women refugees. Civil society organisations should also create and promote opportunities for engagement with home and host community members who can serve as mentors or coaches, and which can enable women refugees to build social connections and reinforce ongoing learning and application of new skills and behaviours. To address funding issues, direct multi-year and flexible funding to civil society organisations is needed.

## Conclusion

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation of women refugees who already had limited access to economic opportunities and support. The crisis has intensified the anxiety and uncertainty that these women face in accessing the labour market. This findings from this study indicate that women refugees, who have always faced the problem of economic integration in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, were some of the first to suffer from the economic impact and recession caused by the pandemic. There is an urgent need to revise policies on the economic integration of refugees in OECD countries. Our recommendations highlight the need for stakeholder collaboration to provide a powerful approach to respond to complex problems faced by women refugees. This collaboration is key to expand access to information, provide the necessary tools for women refugees and to create opportunities for economic independence.