

ADDRESSING WOMEN'S NEEDS IN LOCAL INTEGRATION STRATEGIES

A Policy Brief by
the European Network of Migrant Women, in collaboration with Eurocities & MigrationWork



JUNE 2025

INTRODUCTION

As migration in European cities becomes complex, local authorities are playing an increasingly vital role in shaping effective integration policies.¹ Among the groups requiring urgent attention are **migrant and refugee women**, who face not only the general challenges of settling in a new country, but also compounded barriers resulting from systemic sex discrimination, legal precarity, and care-related responsibilities.²

While many municipalities have developed gender equality policies or migrant integration frameworks, few consider how these two domains intersect.³ An effective integration strategy must consider those most affected by exclusion, particularly **single mothers, survivors of violence, undocumented women, and those working in informal or precarious sectors.**



Municipalities are uniquely positioned to adopt **a women-centered approach to integration** that can mitigate barriers and foster long-term inclusion at the local level.

WHY A WOMEN-CENTERED APPROACH MATTERS IN LOCAL INTEGRATION STRATEGIES

Migrant women's pathways to integration are shaped by a multitude of interlocking factors: their legal and administrative status, socio-economic background, education level, language proficiency, family responsibilities, and exposure to violence against women. The interplay of these factors has the potential to create obstacles across every domain of life: **employment, housing, healthcare, civic participation, and education.**

Language barriers remain a major challenge for migrant women, worsened by the lack of affordable, tailored courses with childcare. Digital exclusion further limits access to information, services, and jobs. **At a structural level, intersectional discrimination is poorly addressed in EU and national laws, which treat sex, ethnicity, and status separately.** As a result, migrant women struggle to prove compounded discrimination, and the **lack of disaggregated data renders their experiences largely invisible in policymaking.**^{4;5;6}

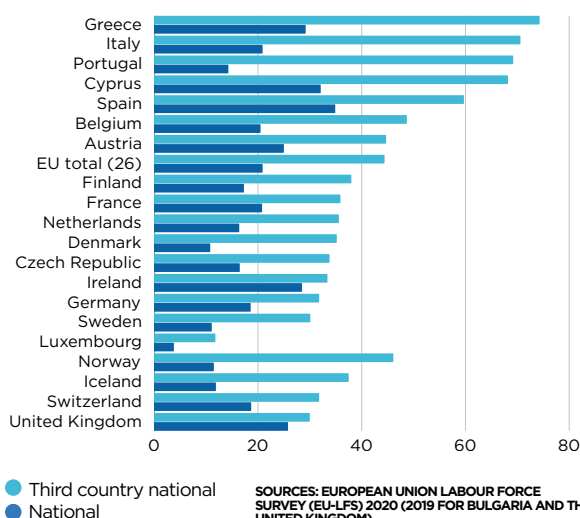
FIVE FACTS THAT REVEAL THE INTEGRATION GAP FOR MIGRANT WOMEN:

1 Overqualification in Employment: In 2019, **40.7% of migrant women of working age in the EU were overqualified for their jobs**, compared to 21.1% of native-born women.⁴ This phenomenon is known as **"deskilling"**, where highly educated women are funneled into low-paid, precarious sectors with low social recognition, such as domestic work or caregiving.

2 Educational Attainment Disparities: Migrant women are twice as likely as native-born women to lack upper secondary education (34% vs 17%). **Limited access to education in countries of origin and disruptions during migration deepen this gap, restricting their access to employment and civic participation and reinforcing socio-economic exclusion.**⁸

3 Limited Access to Healthcare Services: Migrant women often face obstacles in accessing healthcare due to language barriers, lack of information, and legal status. They are also **more likely to experience discrimination in peri- and postnatal maternal care.**⁹

OVER-QUALIFICATION OF MIGRANT WOMEN COMPARED TO NATIVE WOMEN



4 Burden of Care: Lack of accessible childcare is a major barrier to migrant women's labour and civic participation. Often sole carers, many face unequal care burdens, limited state support, and precarious legal status, factors that lead to lost qualifications and prolonged exclusion. **With 85% of single-parent households in the EU headed by women, migrant mothers are at heightened risk of poverty and isolation.**¹⁰

5 Exposure to Violence Against Women: Migrant and refugee women in Europe face **high risks of sexual violence and major barriers to justice.** Prior victimisation increases the risk of further abuse. **Unstable housing, language barriers, fear of deportation, and distrust of authorities often lead to underreporting and impunity for perpetrators.**^{11;12}

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION AND SUBSTANTIVE EQUALITY

Intersectional discrimination arises when multiple factors, such as sex, ethnicity, religion, or legal status, combine to create unique disadvantages. A migrant woman may face layered discrimination not just for being a woman, but also for her race, religion, or immigration status, challenges not captured by single-axis approaches.

To address this, **we must move from formal to substantive equality, which requires targeted measures like legal aid, childcare, or tailored language courses to ensure fair outcomes.** As recognised by CEDAW Article 4, such actions are not preferential, but necessary to correct systemic injustice.

WHAT CAN CITIES DO? - TOOLS FOR LOCAL ACTION

Closing the integration gap requires not only targeted support for migrant women but a rethinking of how inclusion is defined and delivered. Across Europe, cities have launched promising initiatives: mentoring programmes linking migrant women to professionals, peer-led outreach to build trust, and mother-friendly language courses with childcare. In Athens, the Melissa Network, a migrant women-led organisations, works with local authorities to co-design services and support survivors of violence, bridging grassroots and municipal efforts. Yet many **policies remain short-term and fragmented.** Cities often respond to crises but lack sustainable, long-term strategies. **Success depends on political will and consistent funding.**



To ensure **integration strategies benefit migrant women, municipalities must mainstream gender equality across all departments,** housing, health, education, employment, and social services, using **cross-sectoral coordination like interdepartmental groups or equality focal points.** Services should move beyond a “neutral user” model and reflect the realities of vulnerable women, including women-only spaces in shelters.

SEVEN KEY ACTIONS FOR CITIES TO IMPLEMENT WOMEN-CENTRED INTEGRATION STRATEGIES:^{13, 14}

- 1 Secure Political Commitment:** Define a long-term vision for gender equality and migrant inclusion across political cycles.
- 2 Invest Strategically:** Support migrant women-led groups and create safe, empowering community spaces.
- 3 Map Services and Gaps:** Identify existing services and underserved groups to avoid duplication.
- 4 Foster Partnerships:** Link city departments with civil society, schools, and migrant-led initiatives.
- 5 Improve Data Collection:** Use sex-disaggregated data and research partnerships to fill knowledge gaps.
- 6 Undertake Needs Assessments:** Conduct participatory assessments with migrant women.
- 7 Co-Design Services:** Involve migrant women in shaping services to improve relevance and uptake.



Long-term success depends on **sustainable funding and embedding women-centered integration goals into municipal strategies** to withstand political change.

CONCLUSION

Integrating migrant and refugee women is essential for social justice, democratic inclusion, and urban resilience. **Without targeted action, existing policies risk deepening marginalisation and inequality.** But with coordinated, women-centred strategies, cities can become spaces of protection, opportunity, and participation, where migrant women are recognised as key contributors to society. **The frameworks and tools are in place, what's needed now is political will, adequate funding, and true partnership to turn promises into progress.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fund Childcare in Integration Programmes: Childcare is essential for migrant women's participation in language, employment, and civic activities.

- **How?** Use municipal or EU funds to provide free/subsidised childcare in integration settings, in partnership with NGOs or providers.

Develop Women-Centred One-Stop Shops: OSS can offer coordinated support across services in one location, reducing bureaucracy.

- **How?** Train staff in women-centered approaches, partner with women-led NGOs, and ensure accessibility and sex-disaggregated data collection.

Prioritise Survivors in Housing Policies: Safe housing is critical for survivors of violence.

- **How?** Adapt criteria to prioritise survivors, train housing officers, and coordinate with shelters and women's NGOs.

Support Migrant Women-Led Organisations: These groups build trust and provide vital outreach.

- **How?** Create municipal grants, simplify applications, and invest in long-term partnerships and capacity building.

Conduct Intersectional Needs Assessments: Disaggregated data is vital for targeted policy.

- **How?** Use focus groups and community surveys; partner with universities and NGOs to collect and analyse results

Launch Mentoring & Job Matching Programmes: Address de-skilling and isolation.

- **How?** Link women with mentors and support skills recognition and job orientation.

Create Safe Women's Spaces: Women-only hubs offer support, confidence-building, and access to services.

- **How?** Use municipal venues for legal aid, workshops, and peer-led sessions in partnership with community groups.

Train Municipal Staff: Staff need shared knowledge of migrant women's realities.

- **How?** Implement mandatory training on women's rights, trauma, and discrimination, delivered with relevant organisations.

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CONSOLIDATE

Led by Eurocities, **CONSOLIDATE** will set up Communities of Practice that take stock of the most efficient tools and transferrable best practices; and accompany – through financial and technical support – 12 local authorities in designing innovative policy pilots for more effective support in the following areas:

1. Effective labour market integration for refugees and other newcomers.
2. Local support instruments for refugees towards housing autonomy.
3. One Stop Shops as an accessible and efficient model for coordinated service provision.

Furthermore, **CONSOLIDATE** will provide training to partner and external cities and identify best practices in responding to the cross-cutting challenges of

- Collecting and sharing client data in integration support.
- Developing women-centred approaches to integration.
- Managing the transition from emergency to a strategic approach to integration

CONSOLIDATE aims to:

1. Support development and implementation of new and more effective local integration strategies.
2. Identify and disseminate best practice and key knowledge to improve local integration policies.
3. Improve transnational engagement and cooperation between integration stakeholders.
4. Increase engagement of migrants and their organisations at national level.

DISCLAIMER

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Co-funded by
the European Union