

Policy Recommendations

for the Inclusion of Highly Skilled Refugee and migrant
Women in the Nordic Labor Market

*Developed by FLA in Collaboration with
Diversify
Startup Refugees
W.O.M.E.N. in Iceland*



TABLE OF *CONTENTS*

Introduction	1
Background	3
Purpose and scope	4
Summary of key barriers	5
The main barriers related to Individual Characteristics	6
The main barriers related to Employers and Labor Market Structures	11
The main barriers related to Public Services	13
Recommendations	15
Structural Recommendations for Policy Makers	16
Practical Recommendations for Policy Makers	20
Structural Recommendations for Private and Public Workplaces	22
Practical Recommendations for Private and Public Workplaces	26
Structural Recommendations for Job Counsellors	28
Practical Recommendations for Job Counsellors	31
Proven Approches – CSO Program Example	33
Norway	34
Finland	35
Iceland	36
Denmark	37
Appendix	38
Country report Denmark	39
Country report Norway	51
Country report Finland	63
Country report Iceland	71
Barriers in the Labour Market and Employer Practices (BEL)	76
Policy Recommendations	79



diversify
COME AS YOU ARE




Lige Adgang
til job, uddannelse og fællesskaber

INTRODUCTION

This policy guide aims to address the barriers faced by women with refugee and migrant backgrounds, including both those who have arrived as refugees or migrants and their descendants, with mid to higher educational backgrounds (hereafter mentioned as ‘women with refugee and migrant background’) in entering, retaining, and advancing in the Nordic labor market. We use the term migrant, as a person who moves to another country for reasons such as work or study, with the intention of long-term residence, and is distinguished from a refugee, who leaves due to war or persecution.¹

Specifically, the guide presents policy recommendations for large companies, job counsellors and policy makers in the Nordic countries on how to create equal access to entry level jobs that align with the qualifications of women with refugee and migrant backgrounds. Entry level positions cover internships, student jobs, and junior positions with up to three years of experience. The recommendations are focused on approaches developed in cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs).

Drawing on research, mapping exercises, and the exchange of better practices, this guide provides an overview of key trends and barriers affecting the employment of highly skilled women with refugee and migrant backgrounds in the Nordic labor market. It highlights challenges related to individual circumstances, employer practices, labor market structures, and public services, with particular attention to areas where targeted support in collaboration with CSOs can improve access to jobs that match qualifications.

This guide is a result of a collaboration between four Nordic CSOs, each of which bring extensive experience in promoting the labor market integration of highly skilled migrant and refugee women, or their descendants. It was developed as a part of the project Advancing Migrant and Refugee Women’s Access to the Nordic Labor Market Focusing on Entry Level Jobs (AMARA), financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

¹<https://www.eu.dk/da/leksikon/Migrant>

The partner CSOs are:

The Association Equal Access (Foreningen Lige Adgang) is a Danish non-profit association that promotes equal opportunities by addressing barriers related to ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic factors. They collaborate with individuals, companies, and partners to promote diversity in the labor market, offering programs like mentoring, internships, and job opportunities for refugees and migrants. Also, they collaborate closely with Danish business in how to work with and implement diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) on a systemic level.

Diversify is a Norwegian non-profit organization that advances health promotion, economic justice, societal integration, and the bridging of global inequalities. They tackle systemic inequities through targeted interventions that are co-created with the very communities they serve. They offer professional training, mentorship, and networking opportunities to help refugees and immigrants secure employment and start businesses. They also facilitate workshops and training for companies in DEIB.

W.O.M.E.N Iceland is a non-profit organization advocating for women of foreign origin in Iceland. They focus on employment, education, and gender violence, collaborating with stakeholders to support refugees, migrants, and second-generation individuals through various programs. W.O.M.E.N partners with companies and municipalities.

Startup Refugees (SUR) is a Finnish non-profit organization facilitating the integration of asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants in Finland. They connect newcomers with opportunities, providing support in finding employment, developing skills, and starting businesses through their platform and extensive network.

BACKGROUND

Women with refugee and migrant background are increasingly represented in the Nordic labor market, yet many face significant challenges. There is a notable overrepresentation in low-paid and unskilled positions, and underrepresentation in senior roles. For example, among the 100 largest companies in Denmark, individuals with roots in Turkey, North Africa and the Middle East hold only 0.15 percent of manager positions and only 1.66 percent are board members, although these citizens represent 4.90 percent of the Danish population¹.

Refugees in particular experience high levels of overqualification. An OECC study shows that nearly 60 percent of employed tertiary-educated refugees in the EU are overqualified for the jobs they hold. This is more than twice the level of the native-born and higher than others.²

Gender also intersects with migration backgrounds to affect employment outcomes. The employment rate for refugee women is on average 45 percent, which is 17 percentage points lower than that of refugee men and 6 percentage points lower than that of other women born outside the EU³. Factors influencing this disparity include caregiving responsibilities, lower rates of formal childcare use compared to native-born mothers, and a higher prevalence of involuntary part-time work⁴.

Reports from the EU highlight the phenomenon of “deskilling” among highly skilled female migrants, where employment is often found in sectors unrelated to their qualifications or in positions below their qualifications⁵. Discrimination further compounds these challenges. A Danish study shows that applicants with Middle Eastern names must send 52 percent more applications than applicants with ethnic Danish names, and women who wear religious veils must send 60 percent more applications than majority ethnic applicants to get a job interview⁶.

In addition, employers frequently face difficulties attracting and selecting qualified refugee candidates, who often lack the networks that can introduce them to employers or provide job leads. Furthermore, public employment services often have limited experience in identifying the skills of refugees and effectively matching their profiles with employers⁷.

¹ <https://www.lederstof.dk/vi-har-maal-for-hvor-mange-kvinder-vi-vil-have-i-ledelse>

² [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264311312-7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264311312-7-en#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20it%20takes%20refugees,lowest%20of%20all%20migrant%20groups.&text=Source%3A%20EU%2FOECD%20\(2016%5B1%5D\).](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264311312-7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264311312-7-en#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20it%20takes%20refugees,lowest%20of%20all%20migrant%20groups.&text=Source%3A%20EU%2FOECD%20(2016%5B1%5D).)

³ [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264311312-7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264311312-7-en#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20it%20takes%20refugees,lowest%20of%20all%20migrant%20groups.&text=Source%3A%20EU%2FOECD%20\(2016%5B1%5D\).](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264311312-7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264311312-7-en#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20it%20takes%20refugees,lowest%20of%20all%20migrant%20groups.&text=Source%3A%20EU%2FOECD%20(2016%5B1%5D).)

⁴ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/79d0e353-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/79d0e353-en>

⁵ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/migration>

⁶ <https://bss.au.dk/om-aarhus-bss/nyheder/vis/artikel/peter-kommer-lettere-til-jobsamtale-end-ali>

⁷ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264311312-7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264311312-7-en>

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

To address the challenges faced by women with refugee and migrant backgrounds, this policy guide offers policy recommendations aimed at creating a more accessible and inclusive Nordic labor market by focusing on entry-level positions.

The focus on entry level positions is based on studies from Denmark showing that 74 percent of graduates with student jobs of over 15 hours per week secured employment within two months of graduation¹. However, newly graduated academics from migrant and refugee backgrounds take longer to find employment than their peers, with a gap exceeding 16 percentage points after five months². Moreover, entry-level roles require fewer competencies and less experience, allowing increased flexibility and openness to testing and reassessing recruitment, career development, and retention processes. This can help reduce bias and unconscious ethnic discrimination.

This guide also aims to strengthen the cooperation between companies and CSOs specializing in employment-oriented integration. According to OECD reports, CSOs play a critical role in helping companies integrate refugees and immigrants, enabling them to fully utilize their skillsets. The expertise, resources, and networks of CSOs empower both employers and refugees and immigrants³. Collaborating with CSOs helps companies overcome barriers such as language challenges, hiring discrimination, unfamiliarity with social norms, lack of professional networks, and difficulties recognizing qualifications acquired outside the EU.

In turn, CSOs provide refugees and migrants with essential support including language training, counseling, and mentorship programs, equipping them to succeed professionally. CSOs can also assist companies in recruiting and retaining talent through DEIB training, acting as liaisons that foster understanding and promote inclusive workplaces.

¹ <https://www.danskindustri.dk/om-di/kontakt-os/presse/arkiv/pressemeddelelser/2022/1/di-studiejob-oger-chancen-for-job-markant/>

² <https://akademikerne.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ledig-flere-bump-paa-vejen-mod-foerste-job.pdf>

³ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264311312-7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264311312-7-en>

Summary of key barriers

The summary of key barriers is designed to inform policymakers, employers, and practitioners. It offers actionable insights for creating inclusive policies and support structures. These measures aim to reduce deskilling, improve credential recognition, and expand access to employment opportunities that match the skills of highly skilled women with refugee and immigrant backgrounds.

Drawing on the methodology from the report *Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Groups in the Nordic Countries: Toward a More Inclusive Labor Market in the Nordics*¹, which builds on the OECD project *Faces of Joblessness*, barriers to employment are categorized into three main groups:

- Barriers related to Individual Characteristics
- Barriers related to Employer and Labour Market Structures
- Barriers related to Public Services

¹<https://www.norden.org/en/publication/barriers-employment-vulnerable-groups-nordic-countries>

The main barriers related to Individual Characteristics

These barriers concern personal factors that affect an individual's capacity or circumstances influencing labor market participation.

Non-Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Highly skilled refugee and migrant women often face challenges in having their foreign credentials recognized and translated. Many foreign degrees, especially those obtained outside the EU, are downgraded or considered only partially equivalent. For example, a bachelor's degree may be recognized as equivalent to a high school qualification. Retrieving the necessary documentation for credential recognition can be challenging, depending on the applicant's country of origin and their relationship with the country's authorities.

In addition, the local recognition process itself can be lengthy and complicated, lacking clarity, transparency, and adequate guidance. Bridging identified competency gaps after an evaluation is completed can be particularly challenging when there is limited information or support regarding next steps. Competencies and qualifications acquired through previous education or professional experience are often not considered directly relevant within the local labor market, particularly without local references or networks. This challenge is further compounded by the fact that many jobs are filled through informal networks or referrals before they are even advertised, placing refugee and migrant women at a disadvantage if they lack established professional connections. These unmet expectations can furthermore contribute to a sense of personal disappointment and a loss of professional identity, which may lead individuals to disengage from their previous career paths. Ultimately, many refugee and migrant women end up in precarious or unskilled jobs despite holding substantial qualifications and work experience

Difficulties Obtaining Local Language Proficiency

Limited language proficiency remains one of the most significant barriers to labor market integration for migrant and refugee women in the Nordic region. Despite motivation and existing qualifications, many face challenges in reaching the level of fluency required for skills-aligned employment.

Public language courses often fall short in preparing participants for real-world communication, especially in professional or sector-specific contexts. In some Nordic countries, these courses are compressed into short timelines, pressuring participants to complete them before they feel ready and capable. After passing the final exam, many receive little or no structured support to continue practicing the language in meaningful ways. This gap can hinder language progression.

In Iceland, the challenges are somewhat different, where access to courses is itself limited due to factors such as affordability, timing flexibility around work and family responsibilities, availability of qualified teachers, and the lack of a standardized curriculum.

A lack of flexible, profession-specific language training options, combined with limited opportunities to practice outside the classroom, further restricts development. Many women face barriers such as inflexible course schedules, few workplace-integrated learning opportunities, and limited access to

native speakers or safe, inclusive environments for everyday conversation. In some contexts, public tolerance, political attitudes, and general awareness of how language is learned also significantly shape how inclusive and supportive public spaces are for learners.

The result is often a growing mismatch between the language expectations of employers and the actual language skills of job seekers. This can lead to feelings of exclusion, discouragement, and, over time, burnout or disengagement from both the language-learning process and the labor market. In the end, many migrant and refugee women remain at basic proficiency levels and are steered into low-skilled or precarious jobs, often at the expense of utilizing their full range of skills and qualifications. Even for those who achieve fluency, persistent challenges remain, including hidden expectations to speak like a native, and, in some cases, experiences of harassment or discrimination due to accents.

Seeking and Receiving Public Job Support

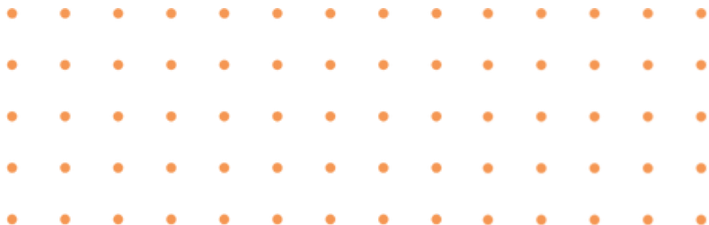
Migrant and refugee women often face considerable challenges when navigating public employment support systems. For those not covered by (refugee) integration programs, accessing accurate and timely information can be particularly difficult. The lack of clear, accessible guidance leaves many uncertain about where to begin, what services they are eligible for, and what rights they hold as jobseekers.

Among those who engage with public employment services, support is often limited to low-skilled or short-term placements. For example, short deadlines for activation can restrict job counsellors to arranging easily accessible internships, as required by legislation, typically in sectors such as cleaning, hospitality, or retail. In addition, counsellors may prioritize roles listed on the national shortage (positive) list, often overlooking individuals' existing education, qualifications, and professional experience. Employment support systems generally do not require counsellors to have training or qualifications in multicultural competence or sensitivity, which can limit how well the available support meets the needs of jobseekers from diverse backgrounds. As a result, upskilling opportunities are rarely explored, and few jobseekers are offered clear pathways for advancement within their fields of expertise.

This approach can leave individuals feeling unseen and disconnected from their long-term career aspirations. Over time, repeated experiences of being directed into precarious or underqualified roles can diminish trust in public systems and reinforce perceptions of bias, gatekeeping, and a lack of institutional accountability.

Seeking Further Education

There is a lack of accessible information about available training and educational opportunities, coupled with insufficient guidance on how to apply or where to find reliable resources. This uncertainty often leads to doubts about one's preparedness and the value of previously acquired knowledge, which can cause individuals to hesitate or limit themselves when pursuing opportunities they are fully qualified for.





Demonstrating Qualifications and Gaining Local Work Experience

Employers across the Nordic region can prioritize local work experience and familiarity with workplace norms, labor laws, and industry-specific practices. This creates significant barriers for skilled refugee and migrant women, as their experiences are not recognized despite having the necessary expertise. Job descriptions are often experienced as vague, with unclear role expectations, and although many positions state that local language skills are not required, fluency is often expected and basic language proficiency rarely sufficient.

Additionally, assumptions and a lack of recognition of foreign education and past experience force many applicants to apply for jobs below their qualifications simply to remain active in the job market. Without initial opportunities to gain local experience, individuals risk becoming trapped in a cycle where they are excluded from roles that would allow them to build the credentials employers seek.

Navigating the Job Application and Hiring Process

Many job postings lack detailed role descriptions or contact information, and when contact persons are listed, they may be difficult to reach or unwilling to provide further information. There is often a mismatch between the requirements listed in job ads and the expectations communicated during the recruitment process. For example, requests for academic transcripts or documentation that is later deemed irrelevant. This inconsistency leads to frustration and mistrust in the system.

Despite submitting numerous applications, many candidates receive little or no feedback on rejections, and in some cases, even after interviews, employers fail to follow up. While this can affect local candidates as well, women with migrant and refugee backgrounds are more likely to internalize these experiences as personal shortcomings, rather than recognizing them as poor hiring procedures. Local candidates, by contrast, may more readily externalize the issue and attribute it to organizational practices.

In addition, interviews sometimes include inappropriate or overly personal questions with inquiries about social status and background. The lack of transparency and meaningful communication throughout the process contributes to feelings of discouragement, self-doubt, and pressure to constantly upskill in order to remain competitive. Some applicants start avoiding in-person interviews to reduce stress.

Limited Access to Networks and Understanding of Nordic Workplace Culture

Access to local social and professional networks is critical for learning about job opportunities, securing referrals, and understanding Nordic workplace culture. Workplaces in the Nordic region are often characterized by low hierarchy and informal management, which can create misunderstandings for newcomers from cultures with more hierarchical structures. In these contexts, potential job candidates may be less accustomed to demonstrating self-management and proactivity, which are competencies that are often highly valued in Nordic settings.

Such intercultural differences can create misunderstandings that ultimately affect hiring outcomes. For instance, women with migrant and refugee backgrounds may refrain from asking questions in a job interview as a way of showing respect for the employer and signaling that instructions have been clear. However, Nordic employers may interpret this behavior as a lack of curiosity, engagement, or proactivity, which can result in the candidate not being offered the job.



For many newcomers, especially during the early stages of settlement, forming informal connections is difficult. This challenge is especially pronounced in Nordic countries such as Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, where research points to higher levels of social distance and perceived unfriendliness toward newcomers. As a result, migrants and refugees may face isolation and exclusion, further limiting their access to opportunities.

Workplace Inclusion and Career Advancement Challenges

When entering employment, many refugee and migrant women continue to face exclusion in the workplace despite organizational efforts to promote DEIB. Unconscious bias and microaggressions often persist, undermining inclusivity and diminishing their sense of belonging.

Promotion processes are often perceived as lacking transparency, with colleagues of lesser seniority advancing more quickly. This erodes confidence and fosters a persistent need for validation.

In some cases, women report being treated differently from their peers for example, being excluded from team events or having personal information shared without consent. Such experiences contribute to feelings of insecurity, invisibility, and self-doubt about their qualifications, value, and sense of belonging in the workplace.

Care Responsibilities and Constraints

Cultural expectations and traditional gender roles frequently assign the primary caregiving responsibilities to refugee and migrant women. Childcare and eldercare duties may limit their ability to work full-time, pursue education, or engage in integration and mentoring programs.

Barriers such as limited access to affordable childcare, insufficient supportive networks, and unfamiliarity with workplace parental leave norms exacerbate these challenges, increasing the risk of career interruptions or withdrawal from the labor market.

Caregiving responsibilities also require a considerable degree of flexibility in daily life, such as being available for school schedules, after-school activities, or care during illness. However, many of the jobs most readily available to refugee and migrant women, particularly in restaurants, hotels, cleaning, other service roles, or freelance event work, tend to involve irregular or inconvenient working hours, including early mornings, evenings, night shifts, or long shifts over weekends. For those with limited family networks or informal support systems, managing such schedules is particularly challenging – especially for newcomers, who often lack extended family and have limited access to alternative caregiving support.

Health Conditions & Mental Well-being

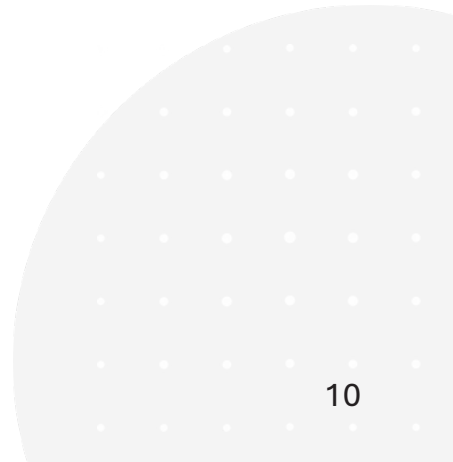
Refugee and migrant women can carry trauma and stress linked to displacement, migration, and integration. Limited access to culturally competent mental health services, combined with stigma surrounding mental health can hinder recovery and support. Health-related barriers are frequently underestimated, leading to unrealistic expectations about adaptation and workplace performance. Disabilities and chronic conditions add further complexity, particularly when foreign diagnoses are not readily recognized. In addition, differing cultural perceptions of illness and sick leave can create further barriers to participation in the labor market.

Women from minoritized racial, ethnic, or religious groups may also experience minority stress, a socially rooted condition that negatively affects both physical and mental well-being. This can undermine motivation and erode confidence in professional competencies.

Intersectional Challenges and Discrimination

Women belonging to racial, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups face overlapping forms of discrimination that intensify labor market exclusion. Visible religious expression, racial bias, disabilities, and restrictive gender norms combine to limit employment opportunities and career progression.

These intersecting barriers often lead to slower adaptation, reduced participation, and increased vulnerability to low-paid and precarious jobs.



The main barriers related to Employers and Labor Market Structures

These structural barriers stem from institutional practices and labor market dynamics that affect access to employment for highly skilled refugee and immigrant women.

Limited Job Opportunities and Lack of Recognition of Qualifications

Many highly skilled professionals find themselves working in low-wage sectors, reinforcing patterns of underemployment and deskilling, contributing to the phenomenon of brain waste, where highly skilled migrant and refugee women end up in low-wage sectors without full utilization of their expertise. Additionally, unclear hiring procedures and lack of consistent guidance deepen information gaps, further limiting equitable access to meaningful employment.

Hiring Bias and Discrimination

Refugee and migrant women experience significant barriers in recruitment and advancement due to structural discrimination and unconscious bias. Applicants with foreign-sounding names or international qualifications are less likely to be invited for interviews, while employers often perceive foreign credentials as less reliable, even when formally recognized.

A common obstacle is the emphasis on “cultural fit” in hiring decisions, which tends to prioritize conformity with existing workplace norms and social codes that are often shaped by dominant cultural and class backgrounds. This focus can exclude candidates who bring different cultural perspectives and experiences, framing difference as a risk rather than an asset. Limited intercultural understanding and low awareness of DEIB principles further allow stereotypes to influence decisions, reinforcing homogeneity rather than valuing diversity as a strength.

Gendered assumptions further compound these challenges, with minority ethnic women often viewed as less career-focused or more likely to prioritize caregiving responsibilities. Together, these factors create systemic barriers that exclude qualified candidates and result in the widespread underutilization of highly skilled refugee and migrant women.

Language Barriers

Language requirements remain a major barrier to employment for skilled migrants and refugees. Proficiency in the local language is often treated as a prerequisite for hiring, even in roles where it is not essential for job performance. Employers frequently cite language skills as a key reason for rejecting candidates, while accents and cultural differences are sometimes associated with lower productivity. This dynamic excludes qualified applicants early in recruitment processes and can create challenges with integration, retention, and advancement for those hired. Structured approaches to supporting language acquisition in the workplace remain underdeveloped, further limiting inclusion and skill utilization.



Residency Status & Administrative Barriers

Residency status and the related administrative procedures pose significant challenges for migrants and refugees seeking employment. Employers often perceive the complex requirements for residency and work permits as bureaucratic obstacles or legal risks, which can make them reluctant to hire or invest in migrant and refugee employees.

Temporary residence permits further reinforce uncertainty, discouraging both employers and migrants and refugees from pursuing long-term commitments. Misunderstandings about legal rights and eligibility to work can also deter employers from hiring qualified candidates. In addition, persistent misconceptions, such as the belief that foreign workers are more likely to leave the country, contribute to discriminatory hiring practices.

Career transitions after migration, including periods of language learning and resettlement, are often misinterpreted as gaps in ambition or competence, further undermining skilled migrants' and refugees access to meaningful employment and career progression.

Affirmative Action and Support Measures

While the Nordic countries have implemented affirmative action policies aimed at improving employment opportunities for certain groups, targeted measures addressing ethnic discrimination are limited or non-existent. In Denmark, for example, initiatives and legal protections focus on age and disability but do not extend to actively combating barriers faced by ethnic minorities in the labor market. This lack of targeted affirmative action reinforces persistent inequalities and exclusion experienced by migrant and refugee women.





The main barriers related to Public Services

These barriers are related to the service provision of the public authorities, especially public employment services.

Resource Constraints

Public employment services face significant resource limitations, with high caseloads per counselor. This restricts the ability to provide tailored, in-depth support, particularly for migrant and refugee women who often face multiple barriers to employment. The excessive workload prevents counselors from delivering the level of guidance needed to bring jobseekers closer to sustainable employment.

Language & Communication Barriers

Limited understanding of how language acquisition varies, including the time it takes and the different ways individuals learn, can create incorrect assumptions about learning speed and ability. Migrants and refugees also face social and emotional challenges compared to natives learning a foreign language in school. These factors can lead to unrealistic expectations and ineffective guidance.

Limited language proficiency can hinder access to employment services. While some services offer interpreters or language assistance, these are not consistently available or adivual aspirations, reskilling needs, and prior professional experience.

Structural Constraints in Activation and Career Guidance

Due to legislation, job counsellors are required to secure rapid activation, such as arranging internships at very short notice, leaving little or no time to identify industry-specific opportunities that could accelerate re-entry and support skill adaptation. The pressure to accept any available internship or job, rather than receiving tailored career guidance, can lead to deskilling and long-term entrenchment in low-wage employment. Within the legal framework, counseling often overlooks individual potential and long-term career objectives, further constrained by high caseloads and limited resources.

Skills Assessment & Recognition

Employment services often face challenges in evaluating international qualifications and prior work experience, which limits the recognition of migrant and refugee women's skills. Limited capacity for individualized support means many women with refugee and migrant backgrounds are left to navigate complex processes on their own, demanding significant personal resources. Linguistic barriers add to these difficulties, as support opportunities are typically restricted to the local language and English. While internships can provide valuable pathways to demonstrate



competencies, employers frequently expect immediate full performance, leaving little room for gradual adaptation.

Systemic Gaps in Employment Service Engagement

Public employment agencies often remain concentrated in low-skilled sectors, with limited engagement beyond them. An overreliance on formal credentials and weak collaboration with other industries contribute to an ongoing mismatch between job opportunities and the skills of highly educated migrant and refugee women. Negative past experiences with employment services can also discourage employers from pursuing future partnerships. In addition, job centers frequently rely on low-wage employers, further restricting opportunities for highly skilled jobseekers. Employer perspectives are often absent, as employment services differ in their ability to build and sustain relationships with a broader range of workplaces.

Intercultural Skills Gap

Insufficient intercultural competencies among employment counselors hinder the capacity of public employment services to provide adequate support to migrant and refugee women. Limited understanding of cultural norms, migration experiences, realistic language learning processes, and gender-specific barriers can result in guidance that is generic and misaligned with women's qualifications, skills, and career aspirations. Furthermore, while certain forms of systemic barriers are increasingly addressed by public job counselors and tailored programs, such as initiatives for applicants above 50 years of age, similar efforts targeting ethnic discrimination and unconscious bias remain limited. This lack of understanding and training can reduce the capacity to identify and challenge systemic barriers faced by ethnic minority groups, including migrant and refugee women.

Program Participation & Outcomes

Participation in active labor market programs among migrants remains low despite higher unemployment rates. Outcomes are often limited because there is little monitoring or data collection to inform improvements, and support is frequently generalized rather than tailored. In addition, the lack of integration of multicultural perspectives further reduces the effectiveness of programs, leaving migrant and refugee women without the targeted support needed to succeed.

Balancing Authority and Support to Build Trust

The dual roles of employment agencies, both regulating legal status and providing job support, can create hesitation among the target group to fully engage with services. Limited community presence further undermines accessibility and trust. Employment counselors face the ongoing challenge of balancing their authority function with their role as supportive guides. For many refugee and migrant women, this distinction is difficult to see, as job centers also control access to financial support. Trust is further complicated by experiences from societies where confidence in authorities is low. As a result, women may experience fear, reluctance to share openly, and limited engagement with employment services.





RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are organized at two levels:

- Structural
- Practical

The practical strand is centered on collaboration with CSOs. Each set is further grouped by the audience:

- Policy Makers
- Private and Public Companies
- Job Counsellors

Structural Recommendations for Policy Makers

- ✓ Enable rapid labor market entry for all refugees.
- ✓ Adjust legal frameworks
- ✓ Strengthen individualized support within employment services
- ✓ Reform activation systems to support skills-aligned, paid employment
- ✓ Strengthen career guidance across integration pathways.
- ✓ Affirmative action targeting ethnic minorities.
- ✓ Prioritize practice-based, industry-aligned language training.
- ✓ Introduce structured follow-up support after formal courses.
- ✓ Address gender and health in support programs.
- ✓ Streamline and fast-track recognition of foreign qualifications.
- ✓ Investigate overqualification and unlock underused skills.
- ✓ Reduce caseloads for job counsellors with citizens with an integration background.
- ✓ Scale inclusive integration programs.
- ✓ Strengthen the relational dimension of employment services.
- ✓ Integrate services to address structural barriers.
- ✓ Integrate services to address multiple barriers simultaneously.
- ✓ Provide culturally competent mental health and psychosocial support.
- ✓ Reduce inter-regional disparities.
- ✓ Enhance data, monitoring, and legal frameworks.
- ✓ Broaden equal-pay certification and equality plans.



Elaborated Structural Recommendations for Policy Makers

Entry & Activation

- **Enable rapid labor market entry for all refugees.** Apply lessons from recent emergency responses with Ukrainian refugees: grant swift work permissions for refugees, cut administrative delays, and prioritize rapid job access for work-ready individuals by integrating employment with host-language learning.
- **Adjust legal frameworks** to balance rapid activation with long-term qualification matching. This includes creating pathways that recognize prior professional experience and allow highly skilled migrant and refugee women to pursue jobs aligned with their education and skills, rather than only short-term placements.
- **Strengthen individualized support within employment services** to ensure migrant and refugee women are not left to navigate the process alone. Greater investment in tailored support, reskilling opportunities, and structured language training should be prioritized to prevent deskilling and reduce the risk of long-term entrenchment in low-wage employment.
- **Reform activation systems to support skills-aligned, paid employment.** Offer short-term upskilling programs and strengthen incentives for employers to provide meaningful, paid roles that make use of existing qualifications. Shift the focus from compliance to professional development, continuous upskilling, and clear career progression.
- **Strengthen career guidance across integration pathways** to ensure that the target group receives early and continuous support tailored to their needs. Provide a clear welcome guide for both EU and non-EU citizens, including accessible informational materials that reference existing resources such as career centers and mentoring programs. Proactively promote vocational education and training (VET), entrepreneurship schemes, and adult education through targeted outreach, ensuring that guidance is culturally and linguistically accessible. Emphasize understanding of the local labor market and the requirements set by employment legislation as a key part of the guidance process.
- **Affirmative action targeting ethnic minorities.** Implement targeted measures to address ethnic discrimination and structural exclusion in the labor market. Introduce incentive schemes and targeted hiring commitments in both public and private sectors. Ensure that affirmative action extends beyond general inclusion policies to specifically support racialized and ethnic minority groups, including refugee and immigrant women, in accessing skilled employment and career advancement opportunities.



Language & Learning

- **Prioritize practice-based, industry-aligned language training** – Focus on approaches where participants actively apply language skills in real or simulated work settings, combining learning with job-relevant tasks to build both confidence and job readiness. Provide practical conversation practice and support in real-world contexts with the help of specialized consultants or volunteers. Scale up sector-specific courses tied to actual job requirements and embed learning in on-the-job experiences wherever possible. Expand access through flexible formats, including evening, weekend, online/hybrid, and workplace-based options to meet diverse needs. Strengthen onboarding and goal-setting for employees still developing local language skills, providing clear milestones and targeted support throughout the process.
- **Introduce structured follow-up support after formal courses.** Establish low-cost follow-up options, such as conversation groups or volunteer-led mentoring, to support continued language development. These initiatives can provide a more accessible alternative to private tutoring and help learners sustain and deepen their fluency beyond the classroom.
- **Address gender and health in support programs.** Ensure language and integration services respond to the specific challenges migrant and refugee women face. This includes recognizing how stress and mental health affect learning and performance, and how gender bias and unequal expectations limit women’s assessments and opportunities. Programs that account for these realities are more effective than generic, one-size-fits-all approaches.

Skills Recognition & Utilization

- **Streamline and fast-track recognition of foreign qualifications.** Prioritize shortage sectors by providing clear, user-friendly guidance, available in multiple languages beyond the local language and English.
- **Investigate overqualification and unlock underused skills.** Map underutilized qualifications, assess labor market alignment, identify roles not requiring full host-language proficiency, and design transitional solutions that connect talent to appropriate jobs.
- **Reduce caseloads for job counsellors with citizens with an integration background.** Smaller caseloads enable stronger relationship-building, which is essential for the target group. Closer engagement allows counselors to identify hidden barriers or talents that would otherwise remain unnoticed, thereby improving the effectiveness of employment support.



Inclusive Program Design

- **Scale inclusive integration programs.** Guarantee meaningful access for all migrant groups. Tailor support using data and lived experience to deliver culturally responsive, context-specific guidance.
- **Strengthen the relational dimension of employment services** by creating dedicated spaces where migrants and refugees can openly discuss their concerns and receive clear information about the supportive role of job centers early in the integration process. Increase community presence and outreach to build trust and ensure that services are perceived as accessible and supportive, not solely regulatory. Where possible, adjust implementation of legislative frameworks to balance rapid labor market entry with the need for relationship-building and tailored support that fosters long-term integration.
- **Integrate services to address multiple barriers simultaneously** and approach labor market integration holistically by developing coordinated models that link public employment services together with education providers, childcare, mental health services, CSOs, and employers.
- **Provide culturally competent mental health and psychosocial support** within employment and language initiatives, ensuring services are available in native languages. Acknowledge that insecure residency status can negatively affect well-being, hinder language acquisition, and limit employment prospects.

Governance, Data & Accountability

- **Reduce inter-regional disparities.** Adopt a coordinated national approach that ensures consistent quality and equal access to integration services across regions, adjusted to the scale of local integration needs.
- **Enhance data, monitoring, and legal frameworks.** Ethically collect disaggregated data (e.g., gender, ethnicity, migration background) and information on DEIB practices. Mandate well-being and DEIB surveys, require diversity reporting from public employers, and monitor internal vs. external recruitment to address bias and network-based hiring barriers. Set employment targets for migrant women and embed gender-responsive, intersectional practices into integration legislation and policies.
- **Broaden equal-pay certification and equality plans.** Extend beyond gender to reflect the full anti-discrimination framework and drive equitable workplace practices.

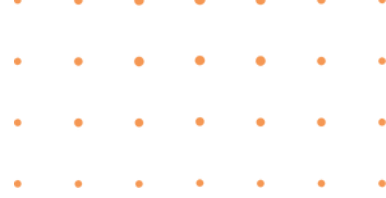


Practical Recommendations for Policy Makers

- ✓ Create multi-year core funding lines for CSOs.
- ✓ Introduce “evidence-to-scale” continuation grants.
- ✓ Core funding should also benefit smaller and local CSOs.
- ✓ Recognize CSOs and volunteers as equal partners to the welfare state.

Elaborated Practical Recommendations for Policy Makers

CSOs consistently deliver strong employment outcomes for women with refugee and migrant backgrounds. Yet systemic constraints especially, insecure and short-term financing, limit scale and continuity. Public budgets rarely provide multi-year core funding, while private foundations often expect successful pilots to be “anchored” in municipal or governmental structures. In practice, this is frequently unfeasible and can erode what makes CSOs effective: volunteer engagement, independence, and a non-sanctioning support role. The result is stop-start programming, staff turnover, and fewer women reached.



Sustainable Funding & Scaling

- **Create multi-year core funding lines** for CSOs with documented outcomes, allowing overhead recovery and working-capital pre-financing to prevent stop-start delivery.
- **Introduce “evidence-to-scale” continuation grants** so proven pilots become stable programs without forced municipal takeover that could undermine CSO independence.

Local Capacity & Reach

- **Provide core funding to small and local CSOs** whose place-based knowledge, trusted networks, and volunteer base help reach both highly skilled refugee and migrant women as well as those furthest from the labor market and tailor support to local employer needs, especially in municipalities or regions where public job counselling services have fewer resources for personalized support.

Recognition & Partnership

- **Recognize CSOs and volunteers as equal partners to the welfare state;** their independent, non-sanctioning role enables trust-based, equitable relationships with marginalized groups and thereby improves access to services and employment.



Structural Recommendations for Private and Public Workplaces

- ✓ Drive systemic change in hiring and promotion.
- ✓ Systemic Change, Inclusive Hiring, & Intercultural Literacy.
- ✓ Adopt inclusive, bias-aware recruitment.
- ✓ Diversify outreach strategies and attract talent in new places.
- ✓ Build intercultural literacy and recognize international experience.
- ✓ Ensure transparency in the hiring process.
- ✓ Develop clear job descriptions.
- ✓ Recognize cultural adaptation challenges.
- ✓ Promote fair consideration across language backgrounds.
- ✓ Provide language learning opportunities during working hours.
- ✓ Provide dual pathways for non-fluent employees.
- ✓ Prioritize progression as well as entry.
- ✓ Promote fair and transparent career progression.
- ✓ Foster inclusive and supportive workplaces.
- ✓ Ensure compliance with anti-discrimination acts.
- ✓ Create a safe and culturally sensitive reporting environment.
- ✓ Measure inclusion and employee well-being.
- ✓ Regularly gather anonymous employee feedback on inclusion and psychological safety.



Elaborated Structural Recommendations for Private and Public Workplaces

Systemic Change, Inclusive Hiring, & Intercultural Literacy

- **Drive systemic change in hiring and promotion** by ensuring that job postings are inclusive and accessible. Limit requirements to essential competencies, apply bias-free language, and clearly indicate when local language fluency is not required. To broaden outreach, include key elements such as the job title and opening sentence in English, advertise on platforms familiar to migrant communities, and encourage recruitment agencies to make ads public for greater visibility.
- **Adopt inclusive, bias-aware recruitment** practices by using anonymized screening where feasible, valuing lived experience as a competence in its own right, and providing structured interview guides to all candidates. Standardized evaluation criteria should be applied consistently to counter bias and ensure a fair and transparent process for all applicants.
- **Diversify outreach strategies and attract talent in new places.** Actively target people and communities who are underrepresented in the workforce, including partnerships with local CSOs, community centers, and vocational programs.
- **Build intercultural literacy and value international experience.** Train managers and teams to navigate cross-cultural norms to prevent misinterpretation of qualified candidates and missed hiring opportunities. Evaluate international experience on par with local credentials by focusing on demonstrated skills, practical knowledge, and growth potential rather than specific degrees or universities.
- **Ensure transparency in the hiring process.** Clearly communicate the recruitment stages, timelines, and selection criteria. Provide accessible contact information for the hiring manager or a designated contact person who can respond to inquiries throughout the process.
- **Develop clear job descriptions.** Create job postings that accurately reflect the qualifications and competencies used in selection and assessment processes, including clear and upfront language requirements. Avoid introducing local language proficiency as a criterion late in the process or imposing local language expectations after hiring.
- **Recognize cultural adaptation challenges.** Provide targeted support through onboarding and ongoing mentorship, including clear communication about workplace norms, salary ranges, promotion pathways, and thorough familiarity with the organization's core policies. Implement formal sponsorship systems, where experienced employees or managers guide newcomers, help increase their visibility, and provide access to networks and growth opportunities.

- **Promote fair consideration across language backgrounds.** When local language proficiency is not a formal requirement, ensure that all qualified candidates, regardless of their native language, are evaluated equally. Provide language support post-hire and avoid informally using language skills as a selection barrier. Integrational support should be addressed in onboarding, not a hidden factor in hiring decisions.

Language & Workplace Learning

- **Provide language learning opportunities during working hours.** Offer protected, on-the-clock study hours and flexible scheduling so women with primary caregiving responsibilities can combine language training with work and progress toward skills-matched roles.
- **Provide dual pathways for non-fluent employees.** Where appropriate, adopt multilingual workflows while also establishing a clear language policy. Define whether the workplace will operate as multilingual or primarily local language speaking and provide structured support for language learners. Ensure expectations for both practical and social language use are consistent, transparent, and clearly communicated across the organization.

Career Progression

- **Prioritize progression as well as entry.** Pair hiring with structured on-the-job training, mentorship, and clear pathways to higher-skilled roles; invest in skills development and track wage parity and progression. Encourage employees to explore untapped or underused skills that may benefit their role and offer ownership of meaningful tasks and projects that align with their strengths and aspirations.
- **Promote fair and transparent career progression.** Provide transparent, constructive input on performance, communication, and growth opportunities to support individual development. Build bias awareness and apply competency-based promotion criteria through structured reviews, calibrated panels, and flexible timelines, ensuring women with refugee and migrant backgrounds, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, are not disadvantaged. Transparency is key: clearly communicate performance metrics, promotion criteria, salary bands, and potential development scenarios. Support this with annual development plans and regular check-ins to align expectations, track progress, and adjust pathways as needed.
- **Foster inclusive and supportive workplaces** by providing accommodations for employees with caregiving and family responsibilities through flexible policies and practices. Recognize that employees, particularly those with a refugee background, may have unique mental health needs related to trauma or the stress of temporary residency, and ensure access to appropriate support. Establish employee resource groups and international women-focused networks to strengthen connection, representation, and professional growth. Value diversity as a strength by creating environments where all employees feel genuinely seen, supported, and safe.





Compliance

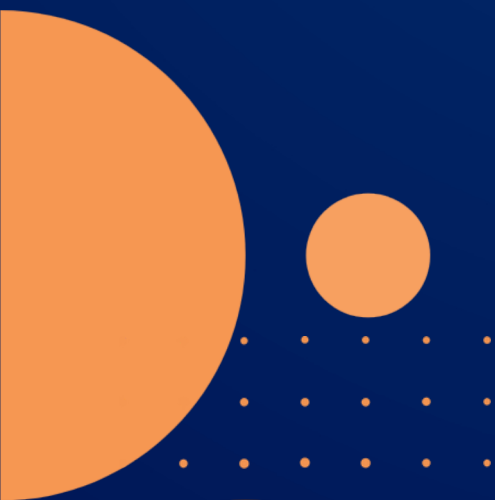
- **Ensure compliance with anti-discrimination acts.** Implement comprehensive DEIB policies, a code of conduct, and confidential whistleblowing channels; apply them consistently and cover protected characteristics beyond gender including nationality, race, ethnicity, and religion.
- **Create a safe and culturally sensitive reporting environment.** Be transparent about how the organization addresses cases of discrimination, racism, or other misconduct, and clearly communicate where employees can access information and who they can approach for confidential support. Acknowledge cultural differences in hierarchy, trust, legal status and risk-taking, as these factors strongly influence whether women with refugee and migrant backgrounds feel safe to report incidents.
- **Measure inclusion and employee well-being** by systematically collecting data on outcomes disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and migration background to identify disparities and areas for improvement. Where direct data collection is restricted by national legislation, engage neutral third parties to gather and analyze information, ensuring anonymized reports that protect employee privacy while still enabling meaningful action.
- **Regularly gather anonymous employee feedback on inclusion and psychological safety** through confidential surveys, complemented by monitoring both internal and external recruitment processes. Use these insights to inform policies, leadership practices, and team dynamics, and repeat the process routinely to track progress, strengthen transparency, and enhance fairness and accountability in hiring and workplace practices.





Practical Recommendations for Private and Public Workplaces

- ✓ Partner with CSOs on corporate volunteering and mentoring.
- ✓ Engage CSOs to design inclusive recruitment, retention, and well-being practices.
- ✓ Prioritize entry-level hiring and partner with CSOs as recruiting agents.
- ✓ Collaborate with CSOs on work-permission and residency compliance.
- ✓ Partner with CSOs for language training and mentoring.



Elaborated Structural Recommendations for Private and Public Workplaces

Partnerships & Corporate Volunteering/Mentoring

- **Partner with CSOs on corporate volunteering and mentoring.** Allow employees to use on-the-clock time for corporate volunteering, connecting them with highly skilled migrant and refugee women to support language development, skills recognition, reciprocal intercultural learning, and network building. Such initiatives can accelerate skills-matched hiring and improve retention.
- **Engage CSOs to design inclusive recruitment, retention, and well-being practices.** Co-develop building skills intelligence, onboarding, workplace language learning, mentorship on the job, and supportive services that strengthen belonging, performance, and progression for migrant and refugee women.

Entry Pathways & Recruiting

- **Prioritize entry-level hiring and partner with CSOs as recruiting agents.** Define entry-level as internships, student jobs, and junior roles (up to three years' experience). CSOs can surface hidden talent and match women from refugee and migrant backgrounds to workplace needs, creating skills-aligned entry points and faster, fairer hiring.

Legal Compliance & HR Literacy

- **Collaborate with CSOs on work-permission and residency compliance.** Build HR literacy and clear case-handling protocols so qualified candidates aren't rejected due to misunderstandings. Use CSO guidance to plan lawful start dates, renewals, and required documentation.

Language & Culture Learning

- **Partner with CSOs for language training and mentoring.** Provide language-and-culture mentors and offer workplace-based classes, sector-specific courses aligned to job requirements, and accessible digital platforms so employees develop language while gaining work experience.

Structural Recommendations for Job Counsellors

- ✓ Build holistic skills recognition by valuing formal, informal, and non-formal experiences.
- ✓ Clarify career pathways by highlighting opportunities for progression.
- ✓ Reform activation toward skills-aligned, paid employment.
- ✓ Build more personalized career plans within available resources.
- ✓ Offer targeted upskilling and cultural orientation.
- ✓ Adopt an intercultural integration approach.
- ✓ Embed culturally competent mental health and psychosocial support.
- ✓ Strengthen partnerships with employers.
- ✓ Clarify residency and work-permission pathways.



Elaborated Structural Recommendations for Job Counsellors

Skills Recognition, Career Guidance & Activation

- **Build holistic skills recognition by valuing formal, informal, and non-formal experiences,** including transferable skills, multilingualism, caregiving, community involvement, and prior international work experience. Support the recognition of international education and professional backgrounds through equivalency tools, streamlined processes, and accessible requalification pathways. Build counselor literacy to engage effectively with employers, ensuring highly skilled migrant and refugee women are matched to roles that reflect their competencies.
- **Clarify career pathways by highlighting opportunities for progression,** including how initial roles below education level can help strengthen language proficiency and local experience, ultimately leading to positions aligned with formal qualifications. Incorporate the assessment of soft skills such as leadership, adaptability, and entrepreneurship to ensure a comprehensive understanding of migrant and refugee women's potential and to support long-term integration into meaningful career paths.
- **Reform activation toward skills-aligned, paid employment.** Align integration activities with individuals' competencies and professional backgrounds by moving away from reliance on short-term internships or low-skilled placements. Instead, incentivize employers to provide meaningful, paid roles that utilize existing qualifications. Shift the focus from compliance to professional development, upskilling, and transparent career progression.
- **Build more personalized career plans within available resources.** Develop individualized employment pathways that reflect each person's prior education and job experience, identifying transferable skills and sector-specific opportunities, with tailored support for requalification where needed.

Intercultural Integration & Psychosocial Support

- **Offer targeted upskilling and cultural orientation** through short-term training and workshops on Nordic workplace culture, including employee rights, management styles, and norms around feedback and decision-making. Provide practical guidance on how to access professional networks and connect with like-minded communities to strengthen both social and economic integration.
- **Adopt an intercultural integration approach** by embedding intercultural literacy into career support. This helps mitigate cross-cultural misunderstandings and ensures women with migrant and refugee backgrounds receive practical orientation to local workplace norms, expectations, and rights, enabling them to navigate the labor market with confidence.



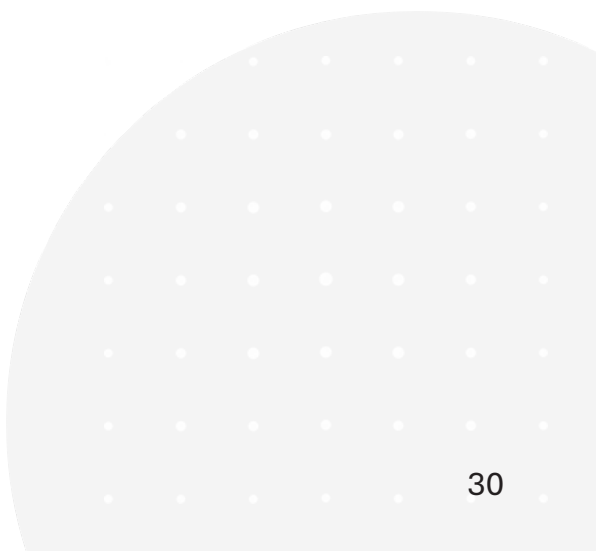
- **Embed culturally competent mental health and psychosocial support** within employment initiatives, ensuring services are available in native languages. Normalize access to such support during career counseling, recognizing that many migrant women face significant stressors but may feel uncomfortable seeking help within their own families due to cultural stigma. By making psychosocial support a routine part of integration and employment services, women are more likely to access the assistance they need to manage stress while trying to access the labor market.

Partnerships

- **Strengthen partnerships with employers** by collaborating with both SMEs and larger companies to build sustained pipelines into roles that align with migrant and refugee women’s qualifications. This includes brokering introductions, matching vacancies with verified competencies, and converting skills trials into paid positions. Partnerships should also focus on creating professional networks that expand opportunities and provide better insight into local labor markets and industries.

Residency Status & Work-permission Guidance

- **Clarify residency and work-permission pathways.** Ensure employment services maintain up-to-date knowledge on lawful hiring under temporary permits, renewal timelines, and routes to permanent residency. This helps prevent migrant and refugee women from being excluded due to employer misconceptions about their legal status or long-term employability.



Practical Recommendations for Job Counsellors

- ✓ Partner with CSOs for integrated mentoring.
- ✓ Build counsellor capability on bias and inclusion.
- ✓ Embed gender-responsive, intersectional design.
- ✓ Partner with CSOs to mobilize employer networks.



Elaborated Practical Recommendations for Job Counsellors

Mentorships & Skills Recognition

- **Partner with CSOs for structured, industry-specific mentoring.** Collaborate with CSOs to provide career, language, and intercultural mentors who can help surface both formal qualifications and soft skills, while expanding professional networks. Develop mentoring programs that accelerate re-entry into relevant careers, for example through corporate volunteering. To ensure long-term impact, move beyond project-based initiatives by fostering sustained collaboration between municipalities, civil society, and employers, creating scalable and sustainable practices that support integration.

DEIB, Lived Experiences & Intersectionality

- **Build counsellor capability on bias and inclusion** by providing targeted training on unconscious bias, intercultural awareness, anti-discrimination, and trauma-informed support. Include training on intersectionality, the notion that a person can face several kinds of challenges at the same time, for example, being a woman, a migrant, and a caregiver, and that these overlap and shape how we experience the world, often creating unique experiences of privilege or the lack thereof. Strengthen collaboration with CSOs to identify and address these barriers, ensuring that guidance reflects the real-life challenges migrant and refugee women experience.
- **Collaborate with CSOs** to draw on their unique insight into the lived experiences of migrant and refugee women. Such partnerships help recognize and validate women's realities while developing effective strategies to address barriers and support labor market integration.
- **Embed gender-responsive, intersectional design in labor market programs** and use CSOs as facilitators in co-designing them with the women. Offer flexible pathways such as part-time, modular, or remote formats that accommodate caregiving and health responsibilities. Provide supportive measures to ensure accessibility and equitable participation.

Partnerships & employer engagement

- **Partner with CSOs to mobilize employer networks.** Co-broker warm introductions to SMEs and knowledge-based workplaces, and co-deliver mentoring, job shadowing, internships, and vocational bridge programs that convert into skills-matched hires.





Proven Approches
CSO Program Example

Norway

Organization: Diversify

Program: The Zenith Mentorship Program in Norway supports skilled immigrants and minorities, with women as a core focus, to secure meaningful employment or grow their businesses. It offers one-on-one mentorship, advisor access, peer learning, workshops, and networking. The program addresses barriers such as limited networks, unfamiliar hiring processes, and workplace culture gaps. By providing targeted career and business support, Zenith enhances integration into the labor market.

Relevant link:

- <https://diversify.no/zenith/>
- <https://diversify.no/>

Organization: Caritas Norge

Program: Caritas' Women's Group provides a weekly meeting place for immigrant women to learn about Norwegian culture and society while sharing experiences in a supportive community. The group is part of the Resource Center's broader services, which include language training, job-seeker courses and free guidance and legal assistance. This integrated approach helps participants build confidence and networks while creating clear pathways from community support to practical steps toward employment and integration.

Relevant Link:

- <https://caritas.no/en/aktuelt/event-category/moteplass/>

Organization: Recruit Refugees Training Center (RRTC)

Program: The Recruit Refugees Training Center (RRTC) provides free membership for refugees in Norway, offering access to events, workshops, and support with CVs and job applications. Membership is linked to an online job board where jobseekers can create profiles and apply directly, while employers post vacancies free of charge to connect with refugee talent. This combination of coaching and job matching creates a direct pathway into employment. Women are a core focus of the program's membership.

Relevant links:

- <https://jobs.recruitrefugees.no/>
- <https://rrtc.no/join-our-community/>

Finland

Organization: Startup Refugees

Program: The RISE program (Resilience, Inclusion, Support, Empowerment) is a two-month coaching and peer support initiative for highly educated immigrants navigating the Finnish job market. It combines weekly expert-led sessions in English with practical upskilling on CVs, personal branding, and networking strategies. Alongside career tools, the program emphasizes well-being and resilience during the job search process. Peer mentoring and employer engagement strengthen community ties and create direct pathways to employment, supporting effective international labor market integration.

Relevant Link:

- <https://startuprefugees.com/>

Organization: WOMENTO by The Family Federation of Finland (*Väestöliitto*)

Program: The WOMENTO program is a professional mentoring initiative for highly educated immigrant women seeking to enter the Finnish workforce. By pairing participants with experienced mentors in their fields, the program expands networks and deepens intercultural understanding of local work practices. Its one-on-one guidance bridges the gap between foreign qualifications and Finnish opportunities, empowering women to secure employment that reflects their skills and experience. The program's core aim is to accelerate international labor market integration.

Relevant Link:

- <https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/en/our-work/immigrant-integration/womento-mentoring/>

Organization: Neighbourhood Mothers (*Naapuriäidit*) by Nicehearts ry

Program: Neighbourhood Mothers is a community-based peer mentoring program that fosters intercultural understanding and support among immigrant women in Finland. Experienced immigrant women are trained to guide and support newly arrived women, sharing knowledge about local services and creating safe spaces for connection. Beyond individual mentoring, participants organize activities such as language practice groups and workshops, building both community and confidence. The model reduces isolation for newcomers while equipping mentors with leadership skills that strengthen their own pathways to professional integration.

Relevant Link:

- <https://www.nicehearts.com/in-english/>

Iceland

Organization: WomenTechIceland

Program: WomenTechIceland is a platform for events, news, and dialogue on women and technology, linking Iceland's tech community with global networks and highlighting women's contributions to innovation. Founded and still majority-led by women of foreign origin, it has been a strong advocate for diversity in the growing Icelandic tech sector. The initiative amplifies expert voices, addresses key issues facing women in tech, and fosters international connections. Its Women Innovators Incubator, a year-long mentorship program, supported women in developing their ideas and building technical and business skills, even as newcomers to the field.

Relevant link:

- <https://www.womentechiceland.com/>

Organization: W.O.M.E.N. (Women of Multicultural Ethnicity Network in Iceland)

Program: The *Mállíðan* project, developed by W.O.M.E.N. supports immigrant women facing unique challenges in learning Icelandic. Combining language learning with wellbeing, it highlights how stress and emotional strain impact memory, focus, and learning outcomes, particularly under gender-related pressures and responsibilities. Through workshops with psychologists, teachers, and community partners, the project provided practical information, mental health tools, and guidance for participants. It also worked to identify gaps and improvements in existing resources and services, ensuring more holistic support for women's successful language acquisition and integration.

Relevant link:

- <https://womeniniceland.is/en/mallidan/>

Organization: *Símenntun á Vesturlandi*

Program: *Fjölmenningskóli Vesturlands* (West Iceland Multicultural School) is a non-profit lifelong learning initiative that promotes empowerment, inclusion, and democratic participation for immigrants. It provides Icelandic language training, career counselling, skills mapping, and tailored support to help newcomers integrate into society and the workforce. As the only specialized multicultural labor-support school in Iceland, it plays a nationally unique role. Beyond direct services, it also offers courses for companies and institutions on inclusion and multicultural competence, fostering stronger and more inclusive communities across the country.

Relevant link:

- <https://simenntun.is/forsida/fjolmenningarskoli-vesturlands/>

Denmark

Organization: *Foreningen Lige Adgang* (The Association Equal Access)

Program: The Career Bridge (*Karrierebroen*) program by Foreningen Lige Adgang connects volunteer mentors with refugees and migrants to build stronger links to the Danish labor market. Through tailored mentoring, participants receive guidance in specific industries, language support, networking opportunities, and insights into Danish workplace culture. Mentorships typically last six months, with structured support to help mentees progress toward employment. Mentors are well-prepared through training, thematic webinars, ongoing guidance, and access to a nationwide mentor network. The program operates across Denmark, promoting integration and labor market inclusion.

Relevant links:

- <https://ligeadgang.dk/en/>
- <https://ligeadgang.dk/en/2025/09/30/karrierebroen/>

Organization: ReDI School

Program: The Digital Women Program by the non-for-profit organization ReDI School Denmark supports women and gender-diverse individuals in overcoming barriers to education by providing an inclusive and supportive learning environment. It empowers participants to build digital skills for both everyday life and employment, fostering social inclusion and career opportunities. Courses range from basic computer and online essentials to more advanced training, delivered through a teaching-coaching approach. To ensure accessibility, the program provides laptops and childcare during course sessions.

Relevant links:

- <https://www.redi-school.org/women-courses>
- <https://www.redi-school.org/>

Organization: *Foreningen Sammen på Tværs* (The Association “Together Across”)

Program: *Foreningen Sammen på Tværs* is a Danish non-profit that runs language programs pairing seniors (65+) with migrants and refugees. Through its company program, international employees are matched with local seniors for one-on-one Danish conversation in a safe and supportive setting. Beyond language improvement, participants gain insights into Danish culture and community life, strengthening their sense of belonging. Employees meet with their volunteer senior for one hour weekly over 12 months, during or outside working hours. This sustained exchange promotes both language development and deeper cultural integration.

Relevant links:

- <https://www.xn--sammenptvrs-38ap.dk/virksomhedsmatch>
- <https://www.xn--sammenptvrs-38ap.dk/>

Appendix

Country Report – Denmark

Country Report – Norway

Country Report – Finland

Country Report – Iceland

Country report

Denmark

Introduction

Foreningen Lige Adgang / The Association Equal Access (FLA) is a non-profit association created in 1998 that promotes equal opportunities by addressing barriers related to ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic factors. They collaborate with individuals, companies, and partners to promote diversity in the labour market, offering programs like mentoring, internships, and job opportunities for refugees and migrants.

Note on Terminology

The terms 'Western' and 'non-Western' are used in accordance with Statistics Denmark's categorization. However, as this distinction is considered discriminatory by FLA, because it draws on a colonial legacy and reflects a Eurocentric perspective that reduces global diversity and reproduces historical power hierarchies, the term 'so-called' is used before each categorization. Statistics Denmark categorizes these countries as Western: EU countries, Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, Great Britain, Andorra, Monaco, Liechtenstein, San Marino, Vatican City, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada. All other countries are categorized by Statistics Denmark as so-called non-Western.

The report focuses on adult female immigrants, refugees, and their descendants, collectively referred to as 'minority ethnic women.'

National Legal and Public Framework

Population Demographics and Labor Market Overview

In 2024, individuals with a so-called non-Western background made up 10.1 percent of the population in Denmark. Between 2013 and 2023, employment among people with non-Western backgrounds increased by 418,500, representing a 15.5 percent rise. By comparison, employment among individuals of Danish origin grew by 7.4 percent during the same period. Among immigrants and descendants from Western countries, employment increased by 79.9 percent, while those from non-Western countries saw a 101.8 percent increase in employment¹.

Over the past decade, the number of so-called non-Western immigrant women in wage employment in Denmark has more than doubled rising by 53,900, or 105 percent, compared to a 17 percent increase in total wage employment. For so-called non-Western immigrant women, employment increased from 33.4 percent in 2014 to 48 percent in 2024 a gain of 14.6 percentage points². So-called non-Western immigrant women are employed, primarily in health and social services, as well as in sectors like cleaning, retail, and hospitality.

This rise in employment is mirrored by improvements in education. In 2022, 65 percent of all immigrant women had completed vocational or higher education, up from 50 percent in 2012. As a result, the employment gap between immigrant women and Danish women has significantly narrowed from 14 percentage points in 2012 to just 2 percentage points in 2024³.

National Legal Framework Governing Labor Market Access

Several key laws and policies shape labor market access and employment protections for migrants and refugees in Denmark:

The Immigration Act outlines the legal framework governing the entry and residence of foreign nationals in Denmark. It covers a range of areas including visa regulations, asylum procedures, family reunification, issuance of permanent residence permits, revocation and withdrawal of residence rights, expulsion, and refusal of entry. It also includes provisions on the accommodation and financial support of asylum seekers.

The Integration Act establishes the foundation for supporting newly arrived refugees and family-reunified individuals in Denmark. It includes regulations on housing arrangements, integration programs designed to promote self-sufficiency and social inclusion, and introductory courses aimed at equipping immigrants with essential knowledge about Danish society, culture, and labor market access.

The Repatriation Act was adopted in 2021 as part of a broader strategy to prioritize return over long-term integration for foreign nationals in Denmark, a policy shift referred to as “the paradigm shift”. It establishes the legal framework for the return of foreign nationals who either choose to return to their country of origin or no longer have legal residence in Denmark, including individuals whose asylum applications have been rejected or whose residence permits have expired. The Act outlines procedures for return and includes provisions for repatriation counseling, reintegration support, self-support and return or transition allowance. One key instrument is the self-support and return or transition allowance⁴, which represents the lowest level of financial support available to refugees and immigrants. This allowance is designed to incentivize employment by offering only a minimal safety net. To further reinforce this return-oriented approach, the Act grants authorities enhanced enforcement tools, including the right to access mobile phone data for tracking purposes.

The Integration Basic Education (IGU)⁵ scheme was introduced in 2016 and is a two-year program that combines practical work experience with education. This initiative targets refugees and immigrants, equipping them with skills that enhance their employability in Denmark⁶.

The Employment Requirement Policy, from 2025, mandates that refugees and individuals reunified with family members must engage in employment-related activities for a minimum of 37 hours per week. The policy primarily targets recipients of cash benefits, with a particular focus on individuals with a so-called non-Western background – especially women. The policy is intended to promote self-sufficiency and social integration through active participation in the labor market, and it will be expanded in 2025 to include individuals who arrived in Denmark in 1968 or later^{7,8}.

Work Permission and Permits: Refugees and migrants with valid residence status in Denmark are generally eligible to work without restrictions after six months. Individuals without residency or EU/Nordic citizenship can also obtain a work permit if they meet specific criteria. These permits are typically job-specific, limited in duration, and require a new application if changing jobs. The schemes for work permits include the **Positive Lists**, updated biannually, which identify occupations with labor shortages; the **Pay Scheme**, applicable to jobs with an annual salary of at least DKK 445,000; and the **Fast Track Scheme**, which allows certified companies to quickly hire highly skilled workers, with the employer handling the application process.

The Special Act (Særloven) was introduced in 2022 in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine to grant certain refugee groups, particularly Ukrainians, residence status. Unlike other asylum seekers, who must wait until their residency status is granted and a six-month waiting period expires, individuals under this law can start working as soon as they arrive. This exception facilitates quicker integration into the workforce, addresses urgent labor shortages, and promotes socio-economic inclusion. Initially set to expire in 2024, the law has been extended until 2026⁹.

Danish Lessons. Most foreign nationals who move to Denmark are entitled to municipality-funded Danish language instruction. For refugees and their family members, language training is integrated into the municipality's self-sufficiency and repatriation program or introduction program. Immigrants who are not part of these programs are offered Danish lessons as part of a municipal introduction course, but it is not mandatory to accept the offer¹⁰. The purpose is to give adult foreigners the prerequisites to succeed in jobs, in education and as citizens in Denmark¹¹.

Anti-Discrimination Legislation

The Danish Anti-Discrimination Law (Forskelsbehandlingsloven) mandates equal treatment in employment decisions, which means that employment decisions must be based solely on qualifications and that positive discrimination (affirmative action) is not applicable for ethnic minorities

Employers are prohibited from collecting data on ethnicity, race, or religion, limiting targeted diversity initiatives¹².

Union Membership and Unemployment Insurance

As of 2023, union membership in Denmark totaled 1,935,320, an increase of 14,200 members from the previous year¹³. By 2024, membership in unemployment insurance funds reached 2,257,125. For example, The Union FOA's unemployment insurance fund had 17,780 members from non-Western countries in 2022, accounting for 13.1% of its total membership. Despite this growth, language barriers and limited understanding of the Danish trade union system continue to hinder greater immigrant participation¹⁴.

Barriers related to Individual Characteristics (BIC)

Successful labor market integration requires addressing key structural and individual challenges that disproportionately affect ethnic minority women in the Nordic region. Several barriers hinder their access to employment and long-term workforce participation in Denmark.

Historically Denmark's labor market has posed significant challenges for migrants, refugees, and their descendants due to a combination of policy choices, social dynamics, and structural barriers. Early refugee arrivals often faced unaddressed trauma and were placed on early retirement rather than receiving adequate psychological or employment support, leaving many unequipped to enter the workforce.

Labor migration policies in the 1960s and 1970s prioritized short-term labor needs over long-term integration, and later restrictions left many migrants socially and economically marginalized. Geographical segregation reinforced this by concentrating migrants in designated housing areas, limiting their interaction with Danish society. In recent years, Denmark has implemented housing policies targeting these areas, referred to as "ghettos", based on criteria such as income, education, employment, crime, and the proportion of residents from non-Western backgrounds. The policies have led to forced relocations, the erosion of tenant rights, and the privatization of public housing disproportionately affecting ethnic minorities¹⁵.

Lack of clear labor market expectations and traditional gender roles, particularly among non-Western women, contributed to lower employment rates. Descendants of migrants have faced intergenerational challenges due to the absence of role models and limited access to professional

networks. Language barriers and unfamiliarity with Danish systems further hinder integration, especially when families retain cultural norms from their countries of origin.

Distrust in authorities from the country of origin also affected the engagement with support services. Additionally, language gaps within families, where children learn Danish but parents do not, have led some to avoid enrolling their children in daycare, delaying language development and reducing future educational and employment opportunities.

Language proficiency remains one of the most significant barriers to labor market integration in Denmark although many Danes speak English fluently. In addition, migrants with temporary residency often lack motivation to invest in learning Danish due to uncertain long-term prospects. Also, many migrants work in low-skilled roles with minimal interaction with Danish-speaking colleagues, limiting opportunities to practice the language informally. Strong Danish skills, however, are linked to higher employment rates and access to education. So-called non-Western women, despite being highly motivated, often fall behind men in language acquisition. This gap is attributed to lower educational backgrounds, fewer Danish-speaking social networks, limited participation in extracurricular activities, and disruptions from work, family responsibilities, maternity leave, or illness. Mental health challenges, particularly among female refugees, further hinder their ability to learn the language effectively¹⁶.

Lack of recognition of foreign qualifications poses a key obstacle to entering the Danish labor market, as it places a high value on formal education but often disregards qualifications obtained outside of Denmark. Furthermore, the Danish educational system differs significantly from those in many non-EU countries, making it difficult for migrants and refugees to transfer and validate their qualifications within a Danish context¹⁷.

Lack of Danish work experience also presents a major hurdle. Many migrant and refugee women have not previously worked in Denmark, which makes it significantly harder for them to secure employment¹⁸. Their unfamiliarity with Danish job market expectations, application processes, and workplace norms adds another layer of difficulty, leaving them at a disadvantage compared to native-born job seekers.

Lack of network also create a barrier as many jobs in Denmark are filled through informal networks. Without access to these professional and social connections, their entry into the labor market is delayed or entirely prevented. The importance of networks is particularly evident in industries where recruitment is based heavily on referrals, making it even harder for newcomers to compete for opportunities¹⁹.

Intersectional challenges further complicate integration. Intercultural differences in workplace norms and expectations can create misunderstandings, leading to slower adaptation²⁰. Women face special challenges in terms of coping with everyday life, motivation and health²¹. In some communities, traditional gender roles or negative social control discourage women from

participating in the labor market, limiting their employment opportunities. Additionally, ethnic minority women can face intersectional discrimination, not only because of their gender but also due to factors such as race, ethnicity, and religious expression, including the wearing a headscarf²².

Migrant mothers face significant barriers to employment, particularly those with young children²³, with refugee mothers experiencing especially low employment rates. Since the asylum centers are not required to provide childcare for children aged 1–3, the responsibility falls on the mothers, preventing their participation in language programs. As a result, when they enter the Self-Sufficiency and Return Program, they are already at a disadvantage compared to other asylum seekers²⁴.

Barriers Related to Employers and Labor Market Structures (BEL)

Highly skilled migrant and refugee women in Denmark face a complex web of structural and employer-related barriers that limit their access to meaningful employment and career progression.

The lack of recognition and validation of foreign qualifications poses a major challenge. A key barrier for highly skilled migrant women is the limited recognition and validation of their foreign qualifications. Employers often struggle to assess credentials from other countries, leading to skepticism, even when official recognition is granted. As a result, many are steered into low-paid, low-status jobs in sectors such as cleaning, caregiving, and hospitality, where their expertise goes unused. This contributes to widespread deskilling, which occurs in two main forms: working in sectors unrelated to their training and being employed below their qualification level²⁵.

Language barriers are a significant obstacle to employment for skilled migrants. While Danish proficiency is essential for some roles, employers often treat it as a prerequisite even when not strictly necessary, limiting opportunities. Research shows that employers frequently cite lack of local language skills as a primary hiring barrier and may equate deviations from ‘Nordicness’, including accents or cultural differences, with lower productivity²⁶.

Organizational obstacles. While workforce diversity offers many benefits, employers may face challenges integrating immigrants due to language barriers, cultural differences, and the absence of support structures like mentoring, language training, or cultural orientation. Without these measures, diversity can shift from being a strength to an obstacle. Small businesses, in particular, may struggle to adopt inclusive practices due to limited resources and the need for quick employee adaptability.

Bias and discrimination also play a role. Managers are more likely to support diversity initiatives when these align with their personal values or past positive experiences with specific ethnic groups. This can be preference-based, favoring native-born applicants, or perception-based, where cultural stereotypes lead to biased assumptions about competence. Employers may also view certain immigrant traits, such as unfamiliar cultural norms or limited language skills, as individual barriers to

employability, further limiting opportunities for successful integration²⁷.

Gender bias affect women. Highly skilled refugee and immigrant women often face additional discrimination rooted in cultural biases and stereotypical perceptions about women's caregiving roles. Some employers may question their commitment to work, assuming they prefer to stay at home with their children. These gendered assumptions, prevalent in both host and origin societies, can reinforce existing inequalities and further limit women's access to meaningful employment opportunities²⁸.

Residency status also poses a structural barrier to employment. From an employer's perspective, administrative and legal complexities, such as work permit requirements, can reduce perceived employability and make companies hesitant to recruit or invest in migrant employees. These obstacles place refugees and asylum seekers at a particular disadvantage, limiting their access to stable jobs and career development opportunities²⁹. Moreover, the temporariness of short-term residence permits used increasingly under the policy paradigm shift reinforces uncertainty that can discourage employers as well as refugees or migrants from pursuing long-term employment commitments.

Barriers Related to Public Services (BPS)

Many public employment services in Denmark, such as job centers, face significant resource constraints, leading to high caseloads per job counsellor. This limits the ability to provide personalized support, particularly for migrant and refugee women who face multiple barriers to employment.

Danish language barriers prevent many women from fully accessing employment services. While some job centers offer interpreters or language assistance, these services are not consistently available or tailored to different proficiency levels.

Individualized job search support is generally available only to those formally registered as unemployed and entitled to public benefits. Others can access digital resources but typically do not receive personalized counselling or targeted guidance, limiting their access to measures designed to support sustainable employment and workforce participation.

The lack of tailored job-matching efforts further exacerbates labor market challenges, as employment services often prioritize quick job placements over long-term career development. As a result, many migrant and refugee women are steered towards low-wage, low-skill jobs such as cleaning and elderly care without consideration for their qualifications, skills, or career aspirations³⁰.

A common issue within job centers is the practice of 'cream skimming', where job seekers who are easier to place, such as those with strong Danish skills, local experience, or transferable qualifications, are prioritized³¹. This leaves migrant and refugee women with more complex needs,

such as limited Danish work experience or childcare responsibilities, receiving less intensive support³². Those facing the highest employment barriers are often subject to ‘parking,’ where they are placed in passive activation measures such as internships with little real possibility of securing stable employment, rather than being offered meaningful training or employment programs.

Another concern is the focus on sanctions over support, with some migrant and refugee women experiencing pressure from job centers to accept any job rather than receive tailored career guidance. This leads to deskilling and traps them in low-wage employment.

Job centers often face difficulties in accurately assessing international qualifications and work experience, leading highly skilled migrant women to be directed toward jobs that do not match their expertise.

Public employment services often have limited connections to industries beyond low-skilled sectors and rarely apply competency-based assessments. This results in an overreliance on formal credentials, overlooking valuable transferable skills such as leadership, adaptability, and problem-solving. Weak collaboration between job centers and private sector employers further compounds the issue as a mismatch between available job opportunities and the skills of highly educated migrant and refugee women makes it difficult for them to secure roles that reflect their qualifications.

Lack of dedicated focus on integration in some municipalities, entails that migrant and refugee women are grouped with the general population of social welfare recipients. This results in a lack of tailored support and limited awareness of intercultural differences. Moreover, labor market integration outcomes vary significantly across municipalities, reflecting inconsistent approaches and resource allocation.

Lack of intercultural competencies among job counsellors, lead to a gap in training to recognize unconscious bias or address the specific challenges faced by migrant women. Without adequate understanding of cultural barriers, discrimination in hiring, or gender-specific issues like childcare and traditional gender roles, employment services often fail to offer effective or equitable support.

Fragmented support systems also create additional barriers, as employment services do not coordinate effectively with other integration services such as language training providers, childcare services, or mental health support. This lack of coordination makes it even more difficult for migrant women to balance job-seeking efforts with family responsibilities.

Public employment services play a critical role but often fall short in supporting this group effectively. Job centers tend to prioritize short-term placements over long-term career development, frequently guiding highly skilled women into low-skilled roles. Many employment counselors lack intercultural competencies and gender-sensitive approaches, resulting in generic guidance that fails to leverage individuals’ actual qualifications and career aspirations.

Recommendations for Policy Action

To improve labor market integration for migrant and refugee women, policy efforts must focus on strengthening early employment initiatives, recognizing foreign qualifications, enhancing language training, expanding civil society involvement, and fostering greater collaboration between key stakeholders.

We should draw lessons from the labor market integration of Ukrainian refugees and extend similar opportunities to all refugees, regardless of their country of origin. This includes granting swift work permissions and reducing bureaucratic delays across all refugee groups. In addition, rapid access to employment for work-ready individuals should be prioritized by closely integrating job opportunities with Danish language training, ensuring that refugees can contribute to the labor market while building the linguistic skills necessary for long-term success.

Language training should be tailored to the needs of different industries through sector-specific Danish courses that directly align with job requirements. In addition, workplace-based language learning opportunities and accessible digital platforms should be expanded to support migrants and refugees in developing their language skills while actively gaining work experience, facilitating both immediate job access and long-term integration.

Job counselors must develop greater awareness and understanding of foreign qualifications to effectively collaborate with employers and match highly skilled migrant women with appropriate job opportunities. The current process for recognizing foreign degrees remains a major barrier to employment and should be streamlined to avoid unnecessary delays that hinder both individual career prospects and Denmark's access to needed talent. A more efficient system must include clear, accessible requalification pathways and incorporate the assessment of soft skills, such as leadership and adaptability, to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive recognition of migrants' and refugee's competencies.

Businesses and civil society must be actively engaged in job placement efforts alongside municipalities to create more sustainable and inclusive pathways into the labor market. Civil society organizations should play a larger role in providing job mentorship and language training, as their voluntary initiatives often foster more equal and trust-based relationships than those found in formal integration programs. To ensure lasting impact, stronger and more coordinated cooperation is needed between municipalities, employers, and civil society actors.

Activation programs should be reassessed to ensure they align with individuals' actual competencies, professional backgrounds, and long-term employment potential. Rather than relying heavily on short-term internships or low-skilled placements, there should be stronger incentives for employers to offer real, paid employment opportunities that make meaningful use of migrants' existing qualifications and skills. Activation efforts should shift from a compliance-based model to one that supports professional development, upskilling, and career progression.

Holistic integration requires that employment services are not siloed but instead work in tandem with systems that address the broader social and structural barriers. Improved coordination between job centers, educational institutions, childcare services, and mental health providers is essential to ensure comprehensive and effective support for migrant and refugee women entering the workforce.

It is essential to implement targeted bias training for job counselors to equip them to support individuals in overcoming discrimination and structural barriers in the labor market. These training programs should place a strong emphasis on integration and be designed to enhance awareness of unconscious bias, improve cultural competency, and incorporate intersectional perspectives.

Employers must be actively engaged in diversity and inclusion efforts. Inclusive hiring practices should be encouraged to counter unconscious bias and discrimination, ensuring fair evaluation of all candidates.

Partnerships between job centers and small- to medium-sized enterprises can create new employment opportunities for migrant and refugee women. It is equally important for job counselors to build stronger connections with knowledge-based workplaces to help highly skilled women access roles that match their qualifications. This not only supports the women's professional integration but also ensures that Danish society benefits from their expertise and talent.

Efforts must be made to reduce the disparities between municipalities to ensure equitable labor market integration across the country. A more coordinated and inclusive national approach is needed, one that guarantees consistent quality and access to integration services regardless of geographic location.

Job counselors and employers should be informed about how women's residency permits impact their ability to secure employment, ensuring that employers are not deterred from hiring refugees and immigrants due to concerns over temporary residency. It is important to raise awareness that temporary residency status does not necessarily limit an individual's long-term work potential, and to clarify the pathways that lead to permanent residency, which can help alleviate any uncertainties employers may have.

The labor market integration should be approached holistically and from an intersectional perspective. Successful integration into the Danish labor market and language proficiency requires ensuring that women with immigrant and refugee backgrounds receive the necessary support, such as accessible childcare for all age groups. Integration programs should be tailored to address the unique needs of women, offering flexible employment opportunities and pathways for upskilling. Additionally, mental well-being plays a crucial role in learning a new language and integrating into the labor market. Therefore, attention must also be given to residency status, as temporary permits can negatively impact well-being and, in turn, hinder successful integration, including language acquisition and employment prospects.

Used Sources

(Endnotes)

- 1 <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/nyheder-analyser-publ/nyt/NytHtml?cid=49918>
- 2 <https://smvdanmark.dk/seneste-nyt/nyheder/analyse/i-flere-kommuner-rykker-ikke-vestlige-indvandrer%C3%A6nd-nu-fra-de-danske-m%C3%A6nd-p%C3%A5-arbejdsmarkedet>
- 3 <https://www.danskerhverv.dk/presse-og-nyheder/nyheder/2024/marts/rekordmange-kvinder-fra-ikke-vestlige-lande-er-i-job/>
- 4 <https://bm.dk/satser/satser-for-2025/selvforsoergelses-og-hjemrejseydelse-eller-overgangsydelse>
- 5 <https://www.uvm.dk/integrationsgrunduddannelsen-igu/om-igu>
- 6 [Bredgaard og Thomsen.pdf s. 19-20](#)
- 7 <https://bm.dk/arbejdsmraader/aktuelle-fokusomraader/et-mere-enkelt-kontanthjaelpssystem/>
- 8 <https://star.dk/implementering/nyt-kontanthjaelpssystem-inklusiv-ny-arbejdspligt/om-ny-arbejdspligt>
- 9 <https://www.danskindustri.dk/vi-radgiver-dig/personale/nyhedsarkiver---personaleforhold/nyheder-personalejura/2024/10/ukrainerloven-forlanges-til-17.-marts-2026>
- 10 <https://danskogproever.dk/borger/gratis-danskuddannelse/danskuddannelser/>
- 11 <https://siri.dk/integration/#accordion-danskuddannelse-og-danskprover>
- 12 <https://bm.dk/arbejdsmraader/arbejdsvilkaar/forskelsbehandling/forskelsbehandlingsloven/?utm>
- 13 <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/nyheder-analyser-publ/nyt/NytHtml?cid=49006>
- 14 <https://www.information.dk/indland/2022/04/gennem-ti-aar-flere-ikkevestlige-indvandrere-kommet-job-tendensen-kan-vende-bare-tager-givet>
- 15 <https://www.almenmodstand.dk/>
- 16 <https://kvinfo.dk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Barrierer-for-kvinder-med-indvandrer-og-flygtningebaggrund-paa-det-danske-arbejdsmarked.pdf>, **page 97**
- 17 <https://kvinfo.dk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Barrierer-for-kvinder-med-indvandrer-og-flygtningebaggrund-paa-det-danske-arbejdsmarked.pdf>, **page 49**
- 18 <https://kvinfo.dk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Barrierer-for-kvinder-med-indvandrer-og-flygtningebaggrund-paa-det-danske-arbejdsmarked.pdf>, **page 57**
- 19 <https://kvinfo.dk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Barrierer-for-kvinder-med-indvandrer-og-flygtningebaggrund-paa-det-danske-arbejdsmarked.pdf>, **page 99 and 100**
- 20 <https://www.vive.dk/media/pure/yxdneovg/5596718>, **page 46**
- 21 <https://www.vive.dk/media/pure/yxdneovg/5596718>, **page 45**
- 22 <https://menneskeret.dk/nyheder/minoritetskvinder-toerklaede-fravalgt-paa-arbejdsmarkedet>
- 23 <https://nordicwelfare.org/en/publikationer/the-labour-market-integration-of-migrant-mothers-and-fathers-in-the-nordic-countries/>
- 24 <https://refugees.dk/en/focus/2020/december/the-danish-asylum-and-integration-systems-discriminate-against-women-from-start-to-finish>
- 25 <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/migration>
- 26 <https://pub.norden.org/nord2023-043/3-literature-review-employers-perspectives-on-and-experiences-with->

[hiring-immigrants.html](#)

27 <https://pub.norden.org/nord2023-043/3-literature-review-employers-perspectives-on-and-experiences-with-hiring-immigrants.html>

28 <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/migration>

29 <https://pub.norden.org/nord2023-043/3-literature-review-employers-perspectives-on-and-experiences-with-hiring-immigrants.html>

30 <https://kvinfo.dk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Barrierer-for-kvinder-med-indvandrere-og-flygtningebaggrund-paa-det-danske-arbejdsmarked.pdf>, **page 29**

31 <https://www.vive.dk/media/pure/yxdneovg/5596718>, **page 10**

32 <https://www.vive.dk/media/pure/yxdneovg/5596718>, **page 58**

AMARA PROJECT COUNTRY REPORT - NORWAY

TABLE OF *CONTENTS*

1. Introduction	52
2. National Legal and Public Framework	52
3. Employment Barriers and Challenges in Norway	56
4. Best Practices and Positive Developments	59
5. Policy Recommendations	61

1. Introduction

Diversify is a non-profit organization in Norway working at the intersection of health promotion, economic justice, social inclusion, and opportunities for women, BIPOC, and marginalized groups in the Nordics and globally. Our mission is to create spaces where people feel seen, heard, and empowered to thrive—personally and professionally.

For mid- to highly-educated migrant, refugee, and descendant women, we offer tailored mentorship programs to support access to employment, incubator programs for aspiring entrepreneurs, and events that foster community, peer support, and professional networks.

2. National Legal and Public Framework

Population Demographics and Labor Market Overview

Immigrants currently make up **17.3%** of the total Norwegian population, with women constituting **49%** (472,585 individuals) of this group. Additionally, individuals born in Norway to immigrant parents represent **4.1%** of the population, with women accounting for **48.6%** (112,004 individuals). Among immigrants aged 20–66, the employment rate is 67.7%, compared to **76.9%** in the general population.

According to the OECD Economic Survey of Norway 2024, Norway maintains a high employment rate compared to other OECD countries. The labor market is described as “tight,” indicating that there are more job vacancies than available candidates. However, despite sector-specific labor shortages—particularly in healthcare and elderly care, education, IT and technology, construction, and hospitality—many skilled migrants and refugees remain excluded from these opportunities. Barriers such as language requirements, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, and lack of Norwegian work experience contribute significantly to this mismatch.

National Legal Framework Governing Labor Market Access

Several key laws and policies shape labor market access and employment protections for migrants and refugees in Norway:

- **Immigration Act (Utlendingsloven):** This is the foundational legal framework governing immigration, residence, and work permits. It outlines the rights and obligations of foreign nationals, including asylum seekers, labor migrants, and those seeking family reunification.
- **Integration Act (Integreringsloven):** Enacted in 2021, this law replaced the earlier Introduction Act and introduced targeted measures to accelerate labor market integration through education and employment support.
- **Professional Qualifications Act:** Regulates the evaluation and recognition of foreign educational and professional qualifications, aiming to streamline access to regulated professions.

- **Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act:** Prohibits discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, and other factors. It mandates equal pay and compels employers to promote equality in recruitment and workplace practices.
- **Working Environment Act (Arbeidsmiljøloven):** Ensures safe and inclusive working conditions, regulates working hours and temporary employment, and protects against workplace harassment and exploitation.

Public Employment Services and Integration Measures

Norway's public sector plays a central role in supporting migrant and refugee labor market integration:

- **Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV):** As the primary employment agency, NAV provides job counseling, placement services, internships, and financial support. It collaborates with the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills to facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications.
- **Municipalities (Kommuner):** Local governments implement the Introduction Program (Introduksjonsprogrammet), which offers language training, career guidance, and vocational education for newly arrived refugees and family members.

Key programs include:

- **Introduction program (2–3 years):** Combines Norwegian language and social studies (minimum 600 hours), vocational training, internships, and educational pathways.
- **Job opportunity program (Jobsjansen) and Fast-track Programs (Hurtigsporet):** Designed for skilled immigrants in sectors with labor shortages, such as healthcare and engineering.
- **NGOs and Civil society organizations:** Provide job readiness support, professional networking, and advocacy for diversity hiring, particularly targeting highly educated immigrants.

Legal and Regulatory Challenges

Despite progressive frameworks, several legal and regulatory challenges persist:

- 1. Data management and inclusion metrics:** The Norwegian Personal Data Act, aligned with the EU's GDPR, restricts collection of diversity-related data, limiting the ability to monitor and evaluate inclusion initiatives.
- 2. Recognition of foreign credentials:** Although mechanisms exist, many migrants and refugees face delays or denials in having their qualifications recognized, contributing to underemployment.
- 3. Residency and work permit barriers:** Migrants must maintain a work-related residence permit for three years to qualify for permanent residency. Losing a job requires securing new employment within six months. If the new role differs substantially, a new permit must be granted before starting work, creating instability and limiting career advancement.

The Role of Unions in Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Workers in Norway

Norway's labor market is characterized by a highly unionized workforce, with approximately 50% of employees being union members. The country adheres to the "Nordic model" of labor relations, which encompasses centralized wage bargaining, strong worker protections, and active labor market policies. Under this model, unions play a critical role in ensuring fair treatment and working conditions for all employees, including immigrants. However, there are both advantages and challenges for migrant workers in this system.

Unionized labor market in Norway

Norway's centralized wage bargaining system involves unions and employer associations collectively negotiating wages, ensuring that fair compensation is provided across sectors. The country also has robust worker protections, which include safe working conditions, paid leave, and rules against unfair dismissal. Additionally, active labor market policies see the government and unions collaborating on job training and integration programs, which are vital for helping immigrants transition into the Norwegian workforce.

For immigrant workers, the benefits of union membership are significant. Unions work to ensure equal pay and prevent exploitation, which can be common among migrant workers. However, there are also challenges, particularly in sectors with strict union-controlled entry requirements, such as skilled trades, where immigrants may face barriers to full participation.

How unions can support immigrant workers

Unions in Norway support workers, which is especially important for immigrant workers in following ways:

1. Workplace protection and equal rights

Unions enforce collective agreements that apply to all workers, irrespective of nationality. They

are instrumental in fighting against discrimination and wage undercutting, ensuring that immigrant workers are not exploited by employers seeking to pay less than the standard wage for the same work.

2. Fighting exploitation in vulnerable sectors

Immigrant workers are often overrepresented in sectors such as construction, cleaning, hospitality, and transport, where unions like Fellesforbundet and Handel og Kontor actively combat undeclared work and unsafe working conditions. These unions advocate for stricter enforcement of labor laws to protect temporary migrant workers, particularly those from Eastern Europe.

Challenges for immigrants in unionized sectors

Despite the positive role unions play, there are challenges that immigrant workers face in fully benefiting from union membership:

1. Closed-shop practices in some professions

Certain skilled trades, such as electricians and plumbers, require union-approved certifications, which can be a barrier for immigrants with foreign qualifications. Norway's strict occupational licensing requirements often mean that immigrants must retrain or pass additional exams to qualify for work in their field, delaying their ability to enter the workforce.

2. Language and cultural barriers

Many unions operate primarily in Norwegian, which can exclude non-native speakers from accessing vital support and resources. Immigrants who are unfamiliar with Norway's labor model may also struggle to understand the benefits of union membership or how to join, further limiting their ability to access union services.

3. Temporary and seasonal workers

Migrant workers on temporary or seasonal contracts, such as those in agriculture and fishing, are less likely to unionize due to job insecurity. Many employers hire foreign workers through agencies, which can complicate union representation and undermine the ability of immigrants to benefit from collective bargaining.

Affirmative Action in Norway

In Norway, affirmative action policies are primarily governed by the **Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act (Diskrimineringsloven)**. This law aims to promote equality and prevent discrimination based on a variety of characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, and sexual orientation. The law provides a framework for addressing inequality in both public and private sectors.

Section 3 of the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act explicitly allows for active measures to ensure equality. These measures are designed to counteract underrepresentation or systemic disadvantages faced by specific groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities. The purpose of these active measures is to create conditions that enable all individuals to participate on equal terms in society, particularly in areas such as education, employment, and decision-making roles.

The law provides a flexible framework for institutions to adopt affirmative action policies, but it places an emphasis on the idea that such measures should be time-limited and proportionate. The goal is to address disparities without perpetuating unequal treatment in the long term. While the law supports active measures, it also includes safeguards to ensure that these measures do not unfairly disadvantage other groups.

Example of promoting gender balance through affirmative action

One of the most prominent affirmative action measures in Norway is the gender quota law for company boards. Passed in 2003, this law mandates that both women and men must make up at least 40% of the board members of public limited companies. This quota system has been a critical step in improving gender representation in the corporate sector and has been widely discussed as a pioneering model globally. While gender quotas are not applied across all sectors, the measure highlights Norway's commitment to advancing gender equality through targeted affirmative action.

This policy has seen significant success in improving gender balance on boards of public companies. As of 2020, women make up approximately 40% of board members in listed companies, marking a dramatic shift in a traditionally male-dominated space. However, there are ongoing debates about whether similar measures should be introduced in other areas, such as executive positions or other sectors of the workforce.

It is important to note that this measure does not specifically address the intersectional identities of women and minorities, which can often result in the unique challenges faced by, for example, immigrant women or women from multiple marginalized backgrounds, being overlooked.

3. Employment Barriers and Challenges in Norway

3.1. Barriers Related to Individual Characteristics

Immigrant and refugee women face a number of personal and structural barriers that limit their access to meaningful employment. These challenges are often interrelated and compounded by intersectional forms of discrimination.

- **Non-recognition of foreign qualifications**

Many skilled refugee and immigrant women arrive in Norway with educational qualifications and professional certifications that are not automatically recognized by Norwegian authorities or employers. This issue is especially pronounced for women from outside the EU/EEA, where educational systems differ significantly from Norwegian standards. The recognition process can be lengthy, complex, and opaque, with outcomes that are often uncertain. As a result, a gap emerges between the individual's existing qualifications and the requirements of the Norwegian labor market.

- **Lack of local work experience**

Norwegian employers frequently prioritize local work experience, including familiarity with workplace norms, labor laws, and industry-specific practices. This makes it difficult for skilled newcomers to demonstrate their suitability for roles, even when they possess the necessary technical expertise. Without initial opportunities to gain such experience, refugee and immigrant women can become trapped in a cycle where they are excluded from roles that would otherwise

help them build the necessary credentials.

- **Language and communication barriers**

Proficiency in the Norwegian language is essential for integration into the labor market. While immigrants often attend language courses, these may not adequately prepare them for the professional or technical vocabulary required in specific sectors such as healthcare, education, or customer service. This gap between general language skills and sector-specific fluency significantly delays access to suitable employment.

- **Lack of professional networks**

Refugee and immigrant women often lack access to the informal networks that facilitate job searching and career advancement in Norway. These networks are typically built through education, work, or community involvement - opportunities that may be limited for newcomers.

- **Care responsibilities and family dynamics**

Cultural expectations and traditional gender roles may influence labor market participation. Refugee and migrant women often shoulder a disproportionate share of caregiving duties, such as childcare and elder care. This limits their availability for full-time work or continuing education.

- **Health conditions and mental well-being**

Many refugees experience trauma related to displacement, conflict, or persecution. Mental health issues such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression are common, yet often go unaddressed due to a lack of culturally competent services or stigma surrounding mental health. These factors can interfere with the ability to maintain employment or participate in training programs.

- **Intersectional challenges faced by racialized and religious minority women**

Discrimination is often intensified for women who belong to racial, religious, or other minority groups. These individuals face layered disadvantages that affect their access to the labor market.

- **Religious attire and bias**
Women who wear visible religious symbols, such as the hijab, often face discrimination during the hiring process and in the workplace. They may be perceived as incompatible with Norwegian workplace norms, particularly in customer-facing roles.
- **Racial discrimination**
Black and brown women, especially those from non-Western countries, often face higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. Despite having relevant qualifications, they are frequently confined to low-status, low-wage jobs with limited career mobility.

- **Double discrimination against women with disabilities**
Refugee and immigrant women with disabilities face compounded challenges, including workplace inaccessibility and exclusion from even basic employment opportunities. Employers often lack the infrastructure or willingness to accommodate disabled workers.

3.2. Barriers Related to Employers and Labor Market Structures

Structural issues within the Norwegian labor market contribute to the underemployment and exclusion of refugee and immigrant women.

- **Limited job opportunities in relevant sectors**
Many refugee and migrant women are pushed into precarious, low-paid work due to a lack of opportunities in their trained professions. Professions such as healthcare and education often require extensive requalification, creating high entry barriers.
- **Bureaucratic qualification recognition**
Even when legal frameworks for recognizing foreign qualifications exist, the actual processes are slow and difficult to navigate. Some fields require additional Norwegian certifications regardless of prior professional experience abroad.
- **Hiring discrimination and unconscious bias**
Studies show that candidates with non-Norwegian names are less likely to be called for interviews. Refugee and immigrant women are often perceived as less competent or less committed, which can hinder both hiring and promotion.
- **Employer concerns about language, cultural fit, and integration**
Employers may overstate the need for Norwegian fluency or express concerns about potential cultural conflicts. These concerns often lead to exclusionary practices that limit diversity in hiring and promotion.
- **Misunderstandings about legal status**
Employers may lack understanding of the legal rights of refugees and migrants, particularly regarding work permits. This uncertainty can deter employers from offering jobs to qualified candidates.

3.3. Barriers Related to Public Services

Public employment services in Norway are crucial to integration efforts, but often fall short in addressing the specific needs of refugee and immigrant women.

- **Limited resources and language support**

Many job centers offer generic support that is not tailored to highly skilled immigrants or those with limited language proficiency. A lack of interpreters and specialized guidance reduces the accessibility of these services.

- **Inadequate skills assessment and job matching**

Public employment agencies like NAV often struggle to assess and validate foreign qualifications and work experience. Without a standardized system for evaluating international credentials, job matching is frequently ineffective.

- **Lack of anti-discrimination training for public counselors**

NAV staff often lack training in identifying and addressing bias, which limits their ability to support immigrant and refugee women effectively. Counselors may unknowingly reinforce stereotypes by steering women into low-skill employment regardless of their qualifications.

- **Weak coordination across institutions**

Collaboration between NAV, educational institutions, and private employers is often fragmented. As a result, many employers remain unaware of public programs and resources available to support diverse hiring practices.

Immigrant Women’s Voices: Experiences from the Field

A qualitative glimpse into the lived realities of refugee and immigrant women participating in Diversify’s programs reveals the emotional and structural weight of these barriers. In response to the survey question, “What is your biggest challenge in Norway?”, participants shared:

- “My skin color”
- “Discrimination because of origin”
- “Unwillingness of Norwegians to work with/socialize with people of non-Norwegian backgrounds”
- “Not enough opportunities for immigrants”
- “Not being Norwegian”
- “My nationality”

These responses underscore the depth of exclusion felt by many highly skilled women navigating the Norwegian labor market.

4. Best Practices and Positive Developments

Many companies, public job centers, and civil society organizations in Norway are addressing the employment challenges faced by female migrants and refugees. There are successful initiatives focused on improving access to entry-level jobs and fostering long-term career growth, especially in the civil society sector.

Example of a successful company initiative

1. **IKEA Norway** has launched initiatives to enhance workforce diversity by recruiting immigrants and refugees, such as the “Bridge to Work” program in collaboration with NAV, which combines Norwegian language training and work placements, resulting in many participants securing positions within IKEA or other employers. Additionally, IKEA’s “Skills for Employment” program offers refugees work placements and language courses to improve employability in retail, with positive results observed in other countries. IKEA also provides mentorship to help refugees adapt to workplace culture.

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs)

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in bridging employment gaps and supporting integration by offering tailored programs for migrant and refugee women.

1. **Diversify** is committed to increasing labor market access for skilled migrant women. The organization connects women with Norwegian employers through professional networking events and offers workshops on leadership, negotiation, and workplace inclusion. Diversify’s mentorship programs, with industry professionals, help skilled migrant women secure jobs that match their qualifications and build long-term careers in Norway.

2. **MiRA** provides career counseling, mentorship, legal help, and psychological support to migrant and refugee women. The organization advocates for anti-discrimination policies, ensuring employers create inclusive work environments. MiRA has been a significant support network for women, assisting them in navigating the Norwegian job market.

3. **Caritas**, a humanitarian organization, offers tailored job search assistance, including CV and interview training, legal guidance on workers’ rights, and connections to potential employers. The program has helped migrant women navigate the job market effectively, securing roles in sectors like hospitality, caregiving, and education.

4. **Sammen om en jobb (SAJO)** offers mentorship opportunities to highly skilled immigrants and refugees seeking jobs in their field. Through a 6-month program, mentors with extensive experience in the Norwegian labor market are paired with immigrants and refugees to help them integrate into their professional careers. This program has helped many women find jobs aligned with their qualifications.

Government policies and public employment services

The Introduction Program (Introduksjonsprogrammet) and the Integration Act (Integreringsloven) have already been discussed, but their success has been very limited, particularly for mid- and highly educated immigrant and refugee women.

5. Policy Recommendations

To improve the labor market integration of refugee and immigrant women in Norway, coordinated efforts are needed across public institutions, employers, and civil society. The following recommendations aim to address structural barriers, enhance inclusive practices, and promote long-term, equitable employment outcomes.

1. Improve recognition of foreign qualifications and experience

To enhance the labor market integration of migrant and refugee women, it is crucial to simplify the process for recognizing foreign qualifications and work experience. Policymakers should establish a centralized system for recognizing foreign qualifications and work experience, akin to systems used in other countries. This system would help match migrant and refugee women's skills with appropriate roles, making it easier for them to access employment opportunities aligned with their qualifications.

Additionally, public employment services such as NAV should increase support for qualification assessments and skills verification. These efforts would improve job matching and ensure that migrant and refugee women are placed in roles that best utilize their expertise.

2. Targeted interventions to improve recruitment, retention, and career progression

Companies should implement inclusive hiring practices that focus on recruiting migrant and refugee women, particularly for entry-level positions. It is essential that employers offer structured on-the-job training and mentorship programs to ensure their career progression. By providing these opportunities, employers can contribute to closing the employment gap for migrant and refugee women and help them transition into higher-skilled roles.

Public employment services, including NAV, should also offer specialized training for counselors and employment service providers. This training should focus on supporting skilled refugees and immigrants entering the Norwegian labor market, including unconscious bias training, cultural competency, and job-matching and career counseling. These measures would help ensure that employment service providers are equipped to support migrant women effectively.

3. Promote diversity and inclusion strategies in businesses

Policymakers should provide incentives for businesses that implement diversity hiring policies and demonstrate a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their recruitment practices. These incentives could include tax breaks or subsidies, which would encourage employers to priori-

tize diversity in their hiring processes. By supporting businesses in this way, policymakers can create an environment where diversity is valued and migrant and refugee women are better represented in the workforce.

Sources and additional resources:

- Birkelund, G. E., Rogstad, J., Heggebø, K., Aspøy, T. M., & Bjelland, H. F. (2014). Diskriminering i arbeidslivet: Resultater fra randomiserte felteksperiment i Oslo, Stavanger, Bergen og Trondheim. *Sosiologisk Tidsskrift*, 22(4), 352-382. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-2928-2014-04-02>.
- Brochmann, G. (2025). Norway: Rising Immigration in a Welfare State. Migration Policy Institute.
- Djuve, A. B., Kavli, H. C., Sterri, E. B., & Bråten, B. (2017). Introduksjonsprogram og norskopplæring. Hva virker - for hvem? Fafo-rapport 2017:31. Fafo.
- Fedoryshun, N. & Falch-Monsen, B. (2024). Etnisk mangfold og inkludering i arbeidslivet: Indikatorer, status og utviklingstrekk. Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet.
- Hermes, V., Arendt, J., Jona, P. A., & Tronstad, K. R. (2019). Nordic Integration and Settlement Policies for Refugees - a Comparative Analysis of Labour Market Integration Outcomes. Nordiska Ministerråd.
- Kolsrud, D., Røed, M., Schøne, P., & Simonsen, K. V. (2016). Bidrag og belønning: Om innvandrere i det norske arbeidsmarkedet. Rapport 2016:04. Institutt for Samfunnsforskning.
- Larsen, E. N., Rogne, A. F., & Birkelund, G. E. (2018). Perfect for the Job? Overqualification of Immigrants and their Descendants in the Norwegian Labor Market. *Social Inclusion*, 6(3), 78-103. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v6i3.1451>.
- Midtbøen, A. H. (2016). Discrimination of the Second Generation: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Norway. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 17, 253-272. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-014-0406-9>
- NAV (2025). 202502_A085. Arbeidssøkere. Innvandrerbakgrunn. Januar 2025.
- OECD (2024). OECD Economic Surveys: Norway 2024.
- Olsen, B. & Snellingen Bye, K. (2025). Flyktninger i og utenfor arbeidsmarkedet 2023. Statistisk Sentralbyrå.
- Røed, M. Schøne, P., & Umblijs, J. (2019). Flyktningers deltagelse i arbeid og utdanning, før og etter introduksjonsordningen. Rapport 2019:8. Institutt for Samfunnsforskning.
- SSB (2022). Hvor mange innvandrere er overkvalifisert?
- SSB (2024). 05182: Personer, etter innvandringskategori, statistikkvariabel, år og kjønn.
- SSB (2024). Befolkning.
- SSB (2024). Innvandrere og norskfødte med innvandrerforeldre.
- SSB (2025). 05182. Persons, by immigration category and sex (C) 1970-2025.
- SSB (2025). Employment among immigrants, register-based.
- SSB (2025). Immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents.
- Tronstad, K. R. (2010) Mangfold og likestilling i arbeidslivet: Holdninger og erfaringer blant arbeidsgivere og tillitsvalgte. Fafo-rapport 2010:30. Fafo.
- Ugreninov, E. & Turner, L. M. (2023). Next to Nothing: The Impact of the Norwegian Introduction Programme on Female Immigrants' Labour Market Inclusion. *Journal of Social Policy*, 52(1), 107-28.
- Umblijs, J. (2020). Kunnskaps-oppsummering om deltakelse i arbeidslivet for kvinner med innvandrerbakgrunn. Rapport 2020:2. Institutt for Samfunnsforskning.

Country Report: Employment Needs and Barriers for Female Migrants in Finland

TABLE OF *CONTENTS*

1. Introduction	64
2. National Legal and Public Framework	64
3. Employment Barriers and Challenges	65
4. Best Practices and Positive Developments	66
5. Policy Recommendations	68

1. Introduction

Startup Refugees is a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering refugees and migrants in Finland by fostering entrepreneurship and creating pathways to employment. We connect refugees, migrants, and their families with businesses, public services, and civil society organizations to promote labour market integration. Our mission is to support migrants and refugees by offering services that cater to their individual needs. These include job counseling, entrepreneurial mentoring, skills development training, and tailored matchmaking with employers. We collaborate with businesses and public sector actors to help overcome the barriers refugees and migrants face in accessing sustainable employment. We focus on highly educated female migrants, refugees, and their descendants, guiding them into the labour market through tailored employment services, skills recognition, and mentorship.

As of January 2024, Finland's population included approximately 386,100 third-country nationals, representing 6.9% of the total population, and an additional 134,100 EU citizens, accounting for 2.4% of the population (EU Commission, 2024). By the end of 2024 the number of foreign language speakers in Finland was over 610 000. 48% of them are women (2024). This demographic shift underscores the importance of effective integration strategies to harness the skills and talents of migrants and refugees, particularly women. Based on the statistics from 2023, the employment rate of foreign women was 66% and 40% of foreign labour force were women. The employment rate was slightly lower for women who had refugee status. Furthermore, 48% of unemployed foreigners were women, and 51% of people outside the labour force were women (e.g. retired, on family leave).

2. National Legal and Public Framework

Finland's legal framework aims to promote equality and integration for migrants and refugees, aligning with EU regulations.

- **Key Laws and Policies:**

- labour market access is governed by the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014), the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010), the Finnish Constitution, and the Aliens Act (301/2004). These laws prohibit discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or gender and ensure equal employment rights.
- Refugees and migrants are generally entitled to the same employment rights as Finnish citizens once their asylum application is approved or residence permit granted. Refugees and those under temporary protection (like Ukrainians) can work upon arrival without a separate work permit. Asylum seekers can work after three or six months, depending on ID documentation.
- Specific protections include the right to equal pay under the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986), protection against exploitation via labour laws and the Occupational Safety and Health Act (738/2002), and protection against workplace harassment.

- **Public Employment Services (PES):**

- Employment services are offered by municipalities as the new employment regions took over the responsibility from the state on 1.1.2025. They offer job counseling, career guidance, job placement, skills recognition support, and integration training (including language courses and civic education).
- As of January 2025, municipalities also took over primary responsibility for integration services from the state, aiming to enhance migrants' active role and non-discrimination.
- The Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) assumed sole responsibility for employment-based residence permits in 2025 to streamline the process.
- **Legal and Regulatory Challenges:**
 - Recognition of foreign qualifications remains a significant challenge, the process often being slow and complicated.
 - Managing data related to diversity and inclusion initiatives is difficult due to legal constraints on data collection regarding ethnicity. This limits evidence-based policymaking and monitoring of DEIB initiatives.
 - While affirmative action is legally allowed, it is rarely implemented.
 - Coordination between services can be inconsistent, and there are regional variations in support levels.

3. Employment Barriers and Challenges

3.1 Barriers related to Individual Characteristics (BIC)

- **Skills and Education:** Lack of recognition for foreign qualifications and work experience is a major barrier. Many highly educated women work in roles below their qualification level. Difficulty adapting qualifications to the Finnish context limits access to professional fields.
- **Language:** Insufficient Finnish (or Swedish) language proficiency is a primary obstacle cited by migrants. Lack of access to advanced language courses suitable for professionals hinders career progression. While courses exist, they may not be sufficient, especially for those with care responsibilities.
- **Personal Barriers:** Care responsibilities (for children or family members) limit working hours and job choices, and can prevent participation in e.g. integration or mentoring programs. Health conditions and mental well-being, sometimes linked to trauma from migration or displacement, restrict workforce participation.
- **Intersectional Challenges:** Women from ethnic or religious minorities (e.g., Muslim women) or racialized backgrounds face compounded discrimination and stigma. Gender, age, and nationality are perceived factors in employment discrimination. Structural racism and limited networks add to these issues.

3.2 Barriers Related to Employers and labour Market Structures (BEL)

- **Structural Barriers:** Migrant women are often concentrated in low-wage sectors (cleaning, caregiving, hospitality) with limited career advancement opportunities. For instance, there can be a limited number of suitable vacancies in their specific trained sectors, partly due to credential requirements.
- **Information Asymmetries:** Lack of recognition for foreign qualifications persists despite labour shortages in certain locations or sectors, e.g. healthcare, early education. Migrants often rely on informal networks for job searching due to limited access to information.
- **Employer Concerns & Biases:** Employers may hold biases regarding e.g. language skills, cultural fit, and qualifications. Foreign-sounding names can lead to lower callback rates. Discrimination can extend to promotions and career progression. Even when hired, women may face marginalization. The need for employers to meet specific requirements when hiring foreign workers can also be a deterrent.

3.3 Barriers Related to Public Services (BPS)

- **Service Gaps:** Public employment services often lack tailored support for migrant and refugee women, especially the highly educated. Resources can be limited, and language-aware or culturally/situationally sensitive support may be insufficient.
- **Structural Inefficiencies:** Practices like ‘cream skimming’ (prioritizing easier-to-place clients) and ‘parking’ (providing minimal support to those with greater challenges) disadvantage women with multiple barriers. Standard skills assessments often don’t account for international experience.
- **Institutional Challenges:** Identifying, assessing, and matching skills effectively remains challenging. Recognition of foreign qualifications is slow or inadequate.
- **Training Gaps:** Public job counselors may lack adequate training in anti-discrimination, bias awareness, cultural sensitivity, trauma-informed support, and addressing intersectionality.
- **Coordination Challenges:** Lack of coordination between PES, employers, municipalities, and NGOs leads to fragmented support and inefficiencies.

4. Best Practices and Positive Developments

Despite challenges, several initiatives show promise in Finland.

- **Successful Initiatives/Policies:**
 - Refugees and those under temporary protection have the right to work upon arrival.
 - The transfer of the responsibility for business, employment, and integration services to municipalities aims for more localized support.
 - Migri’s consolidation of employment permit decisions aims to streamline processes.
 - Several cities, NGOs, and other organisations are supporting migrant women with specific programmes or activities.
- **Case Studies:**

- **Startup Refugees:** Connects skilled migrants with employers via tailored recruitment, training, mentorship, and matchmaking. Startup Refugees offers e.g. Working Life in Finland training, job search training, and business courses. In the past 10 years, SUR has helped 1900 migrants find employment. Up to 42% of clients served in current ESR+ projects for employment are female.
- **House of Helsinki (City of Helsinki pilot):** Provided integrated employment counseling, childcare, housing assistance, trauma-informed services, and Finnish classes, e.g. for Ukrainians, with positive employment outcomes reported.
- **Company Initiatives:** Some companies (e.g., Ikea Finland, those in healthcare/cleaning) have implemented programs for hiring refugees, offering language training, mentoring, and inclusive onboarding.
- **Public Service Tools:** KELA has improved multilingual service delivery. Migri offers a Finnish Society Course for asylum seekers. The Work Help Finland app educates on employment rights, guides such as Welcome to Finland provide information for newcomers, etc.
- **Education Programs:** VALMA and LUVA preparatory programs enhance pathways to vocational/academic studies. KOTO programs combine vocational prep with language training.
- **Spouse programmes:** Several cities and universities offer special programmes for international spouses, the majority of which are women, to support building networks, developing skills, finding employment, etc. Examples include the Spouse Program by the City of Helsinki, Vaasa Spouse Programme, HEI LIFE Spouse Network by capital region universities, and the University of Oulu Spouse Network.
- **Role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):**
 - CSOs like Startup Refugees, Monika - Multicultural Women's Association, and the Finnish Refugee Council play a vital role in supporting refugees and asylum seekers integrate and build a comfortable life in Finland.
 - They bridge gaps left by public services, offering networking, training, tailored coaching (including trauma-informed), peer support, legal advice, and emotional support. They are essential for fostering an inclusive labour market.

5. Policy Recommendations

Based on the identified barriers, the following recommendations can be proposed:

1. Tailor Integration & Employment Services:

- Adopt gender-sensitive, intersectional approaches in integration programs. Co-design programs with migrant women.
- Offer flexible (part-time, remote), modular programs accommodating care responsibilities and health limitations. Provide free childcare during training.
- Enhance public employment services counselor training on anti-discrimination, cultural competence, intersectionality, bias awareness, and trauma-informed support. Avoid ‘cream-skimming’ and focus on those with multiple barriers.

2. Improve Skills Recognition & Language Training:

- Streamline and fast-track recognition of foreign qualifications, especially in shortage sectors. Provide better guidance.
- Expand access to higher-level, sector-specific language courses. Fund dual-language vocational training (e.g., healthcare, IT).
- Promote peer mentorship, job shadowing, internships, and vocational bridge programs to provide Finnish work experience and networks.

3. Strengthen Employer Engagement & DEIB:

- Introduce financial incentives (subsidies, tax benefits) for companies hiring/retaining migrant women.
- Encourage/require employers (especially public sector) to adopt inclusive recruitment (e.g. anonymous recruitment practices), onboarding, and development guidelines. Enable job coaching/mentorship within companies.
- Promote evaluation of international experience equally with local credentials.

4. Enhance Data, Monitoring & Legal Frameworks:

- Enable ethical collection of disaggregated data on diversity (gender, ethnicity, migration background) and DEIB practices to guide policy and measure outcomes. Mandate DEIB/well-being surveys.
- Require diversity reporting from public employers. Set national employment targets for migrant women in the public sector.
- Amend the Integration Act to formally include gender-responsive and intersectional practices. Ensure migrant women participate in relevant policy-making.

5. Integrate Support Services:

- Promote cross-sector collaboration (public services, CSOs, employers) through funding joint projects and coordinated service models.
- Embed culturally competent mental health/psychosocial support within employment initiatives, available in native languages. Normalize access during career counseling and in working life.

By implementing these recommendations, Finland can move towards a more inclusive labour market that fully utilizes the skills and potential of female migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, etc. now and for future generations.

References

- Startup Refugees.** (n.d.). *Startup Refugees – Empowering newcomers through work and entrepreneurship*. Retrieved from <https://startuprefugees.com>
- Startup Refugees,** Study on the employment of Ukrainians in Finland 2022-2023 https://startuprefugees.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Startup-Refugees_Ukrainians-in-Employment.pdf
- Startup Refugees,** Report on employment of asylum seekers by SUR 2015-2019 <https://startuprefugees.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Employment-of-asylum-seeker-in-Finland-by-Startup-Refugees.pdf>
- House of Helsinki.** (2024). *Mapping the Needs of People Who Fled the War in Ukraine and Now Reside in Finland*. Retrieved from <https://www.houseofhelsinki.fi/post/mapping-the-needs-of-people-who-fled-the-war-in-ukraine-and-now-reside-in-finland>
- Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL).** (2023). *Employment of Ukrainians in Finland*.
- Nordic Council of Ministers.** (2022). *Barriers to Employment for Vulnerable Groups in the Nordic Countries*.
- Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland.** (n.d.). *Integration and Public Employment Services*. Retrieved from <https://tem.fi/en/integration>
<https://tem.fi/en/public-employment-services>
- Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014).** (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2014/en20141325.pdf> <https://yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu.fi/en/discrimination>
- Occupational Safety and Health Act (738/2002).** (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2002/en20020738.pdf>
- Equality Act (609/1986)** – Finnish Equality Ombudsman. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://tasa-arvo.fi/en/legislation>
- Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010).** (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://tem.fi/en/legislation-and-guidelines>
- Public Employment Services.** (n.d.). *Public Employment Services in Finland*. Retrieved from <https://tyomarkkinatori.fi/henkiloasiakkaat>
- OECD.** (n.d.). *Migration Policy and Integration*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/policy-issues/migration.html>
- Monika – Multicultural Women’s Association.** (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://monikanaiset.fi/en>
- KELA – The Social Insurance Institution of Finland.** (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.kela.fi/web/en>
- VALMA & LUVA Educational Programs** – Finnish National Agency for Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.oph.fi/en>
- THL – Refugees and Mental Health.** (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://thl.fi/en/topics/migration-and-cultural-diversity/immigrants-health-and-wellbeing/mental-health-of-migrants/refugees-and-mental-health>
- European Migration Network report on integration of migrant women in Finland** (2022) https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/emn_integration_of_migrant_women_fi_national_report_final.pdf
- Finnish Refugee Council.** (n.d.). *Pakolaisapu*. Retrieved from <https://pakolaisapu.fi/en/>
- News article about employment of foreigners 2023 (in Finnish) <https://stat.fi/tietotrendit/artikkelit/2024/ulkomaalais-taustaisten-tyollisyyden-kasvu-pysahtyi>

Country report

Iceland

Introduction

W.O.M.E.N. is a non-profit organization for and by women of foreign origin in Iceland. Our goal is to unite, to express, and address the interests and issues of women of foreign origin living in Iceland in order to bring about equality for them as women and as foreigners in all areas of society.

Since 2003, we have maintained a strong focus on employment and social issues, advancing economic mobility and labour market inclusion. We deliver diverse community initiatives, including workshops for migrant women and employers, and engage in advocacy across grassroots and institutional levels. These efforts are complemented by our peer-support program and other various initiatives, such as in language and health, that closely link to the status and opportunities of women of foreign origin.

National Legal and Public Framework

Local Context

Iceland has experienced the fastest-growing migrant population among all OECD countries over the past decade; from 8% in 2013 to 18% in 2023 (OECD, 2024). Today, approximately one-fourth of the workforce is of foreign origin (OECD, 2024).

Around 80% of these migrants come from the European Economic Area (EEA), although humanitarian arrivals remain high (OECD, 2024).

Discourse regarding migration in Iceland is often tied within larger debates of the tourism industry. Rapid expansion of this sector over the past decade has resulted in heavy reliance on migrant labor that continues today (Sigurðsson and Magnúsdóttir, 2023; OECD, 2024). A common misconception is that migrants come specifically for these low-skilled jobs, when in fact they often find such roles as the most readily available (OECD, 2024).

Educational qualifications of migrants and natives are relatively similar, yet migrant overqualification is one of the highest in the OECD, with one-third of highly educated migrants in roles requiring lower skill levels, compared to just 10% of natives (OECD, 2024). Migrant women, on average, are more likely to be in overqualified positions than their male counterparts, with gaps even more pronounced for humanitarian arrivals (OECD, 2024).

Another misconception is that migrant workers are temporary or seasonal. In reality, Iceland has one of the highest migrant settlement rates in Western Europe, with over 50% of migrants staying for more than five years (OECD, 2024).

However, support programs mainly target specific refugee demographics, leaving other migrant groups with limited access (OECD, 2024). Iceland invests less in these programs compared to other Nordic countries (OECD, 2024).

Despite being only a quarter of the workforce, people of foreign origin make up about half of the unemployed (Sigurðsson and Magnúsdóttir, 2023). They also reportedly make up the majority of work violation complaints to unions (ASÍ, 2019). Discriminatory attitudes are often stated as key barriers to migrant workforce integration, although discrimination largely remains an under-researched issue, alongside limited data collection on migrant demographics (IWW Iceland, 2021)(OECD, 2024).

It is the belief of W.O.M.E.N. that common misconceptions and knowledge gaps regarding the real experiences of migrants underpin and reinforce available support, highlighting the key need for women of foreign origin's involvement in mapping and addressing the barriers that affect them.

Constitution and Penal Code

Iceland's Constitution and Penal Code offer broad protections against discrimination, hate speech, and hate crimes. More specific workplace protections have been added in recent years (Government of Iceland, 1940).

Act on Equal Treatment in the Labour Market (No. 86/2018)

This law prohibits direct and indirect discrimination in hiring, pay, promotion, and working conditions based on race, ethnic origin, religion, disability, reduced working capacity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual characteristics, or gender expression (Government of Iceland, 2018). These recent expansions were called for by international bodies, including the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), who notably now emphasized the usefulness of the law leverages on its awareness and enforcement (see Equality Complaints Committee below) (ECRI, 2023).

Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights Irrespective of Gender (2020)

This act expanded gender protections and introduced Equal Pay Certification, requiring companies with 25+ employees to prove gender pay equality every three years and also incorporate gender equality plans into personnel policies (Government of Iceland, 2020). While effective for gender, it doesn't extend to other protected diversity dimensions.

Affirmative Action

Both acts permit affirmative action measures, but only on a temporary basis and seem to be uncommon. Internships for minority groups are among the limited examples found (Government of Iceland, 2018; Government of Iceland, 2020).

Data Collection

Iceland neither mandates nor prohibits collecting demographic data beyond gender. However, collecting data on race or ethnicity is rare and culturally unfamiliar, likely due to Iceland's historically homogenous population (Warner-Søderholm et al., 2022).

Equality Complaints Committee

This body reviews discrimination complaints but may lack expertise in some diversity areas outside of gender, as committee requirements only explicitly require one person with gender expertise and

another with expertise in a “broader sense” (Ministry of Justice, n.d.). Filing complaints does not necessarily require legal support, but is a common service of local law firms and further follow-up may require legal support, which can be costly and not always covered by unions (Practice Areas, 2022; OECD, 2024; IWW Iceland, 2021). In the 65 cases between 2020–2022, 40 were in regards to gender, but only 4 were on ethnic origin, 1 on race, and 1 on religion (OECD, 2024). These complaints are in stark contrast however to complaints made to unions (OECD, 2024). ECRI’s most recent 2023 report emphasized a lack of awareness of the new anti-discrimination framework, although welcomed, could account for this; adding further, “The provisions governing the establishment of the Directorate of Equality and the Equality Complaints Committee regarding competences, effectiveness and independence are still not fully in line with ECRI’s General Policy Recommendation” (ECRI, 2023).

Unions

With about 90% of workers unionized, unions play a key role in career advice and advising fair employment agreements reflective of workers’ qualifications (Vandaele, 2019).

While unions advocate for migrant rights, some migrant worker concerns persist, e.g., service delays, limited outcomes, and being advised to find new jobs rather than pursue lengthy and uncertain complaint processes (IWW, 2021). Reports also show similar support limitations in bullying and harassment cases, despite union data suggesting higher rates of such incidents among foreign workers (VR, 2024).

Public Employment Services

The Directorate of Labour is the national employment service providing registration, benefits, counselling, and job placement. It coordinates with municipalities who offer extended support, especially for those ineligible for standard benefits or for those in refugee resettlement programs.

Job counselling is a licensed profession in Iceland requiring university study. In addition to the Directorate, counsellors may also work in other places where such counselling is offered, such as private lifelong learning centres or private recruitment agencies.

Credential Recognition

Licensing is required for over 180 regulated professions via 10+ authorities (OECD, 2024). A 2024 portal improved access, but processes remain complex — especially for non-EU applicants (OECD, 2024). Pursuing appeals or addressing qualification gaps can also be unclear (OECD, 2024). Despite increased digitization of the process, wait periods have gone from weeks to months due to recent, increased demand (OECD, 2024).

Barriers Related to Individual Characteristics (BIC)

Health:

Insufficient understanding and support for mental health remains a major barrier. Trauma and stress—whether from past experiences or from the integration process itself—can significantly impact migrants’ ability to adapt and transition into the labour market. Without adequate support, these challenges are often misunderstood or minimized, leading to unrealistic expectations around performance and timelines for integration.

There are also cultural differences in how health and wellbeing are viewed. Iceland has a strong work-life balance culture and formal mental health protections, but other working cultures may have very different work-life norms (Snaebjornsson, Edvardsson, 2017) . This disconnect can affect how individuals navigate both work and healthcare support.

Disabilities:

Women with disabilities face compounded challenges. Foreign diagnoses can be difficult to get recognized, and local reassessments can be expensive and slow (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2023). Cultural stigma around disability may also discourage disclosure or limit help-seeking, and migrant communities may generally lack awareness of available support (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2023).

Childcare:

Parental leave presents another key barrier. Without strong social networks, knowledge of norms for typical leave negotiation, or roles that often offer much leave flexibility, migrant women are disproportionately at risk to take unfavorable leave plans or exit the market entirely (OECD, 2024). Migrant mothers especially struggle then to re-enter, with migrant families demonstrating higher uptake of cash-for-care subsidies; further harming re-entry and child development (OECD, 2024). Immigrant families who often struggle with an unemployed or low-income parent then fall into risk factors of their children falling into the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) category, where immigrant children are overrepresented even if they were born and grew up in Iceland (Gísladóttir, 2021).

Cultural Differences:

Gendered expectations also vary culturally for how women pursue, are pressured, and perceived at work. This includes the time commitment and types of roles that are deemed appropriate, and expected behaviors of feminine professionalism in the workplace. Attire such as hijabs, prayer routines, avoiding handshakes, or reduced eye contact can also be misinterpreted as a lack of professionalism or confidence. These differences affect how a person is assessed as a “team fit” and their general experience in the team.

Networks:

Without access to insider knowledge or informal mentorship, navigating Icelandic workplace norms

becomes harder without comparable professional and social networks. Much of this learning happens on the job, making the first step into employment even more difficult.

Language:

Iceland has the lowest self-reported host-language proficiency in the OECD (18% vs. 60% average), where practical barriers like high costs, varying quality, inflexible timings, and rarity of employer support are commonly cited (OECD, 2024). W.O.M.E.N. emphasizes that language learning is itself a form of labour—though rarely recognized as such (Sigurðsson, 2025). The same barriers that limit migrant women’s access to the labour market also restrict their ability to fully participate in Icelandic language education (Sigurðsson, 2025).

Language acquisition as a migrant is unique in that it is embedded in larger integration experiences where trauma, grief, and anxiety can directly impact one’s ability to learn (Shiholo, 2024; Tomren 2024). Educators may not necessarily be prepared to address such issues effectively with approaches not geared toward migrant contexts, similarly so with healthcare providers or career counsellors that may address the issue within a generalized scope of self-esteem but miss critical migrant factors like forming dual identity, coping with prejudice, internalized discrimination, and the emotional labour of navigating an unfamiliar place.

Women may also face more second language anxiety, echoing broader trends in gendered findings for other forms of anxiety (Gargalianou et al., 2015)). Unique gendered circumstances including: the emotional labor of relationship management, preservers of family reputation, more likely to be socialized to draw personal value and self image based on their relationships and how others see them, extra subjection to social policing, increased expectations of coming off as caring and polite pressuring careful tone and word choices etc. - can all affect language expression differently for women.

Without informed support, many women become isolated and stagnate at beginner levels, compounding barriers to work and overall wellbeing.

Barriers in the Labour Market and Employer Practices (BEL)

Language Culture

Icelandic fluency is required in many roles, but for others such as in the growing local IT sector often may not be required for the work itself (James, 2021). Tasks may be done without Icelandic for example, but team culture, documentation, and social events are still in Icelandic (James, 2021). This mismatch often filters out qualified candidates at the hiring stage or leaves them isolated after onboarding, creating long-term retention and promotion challenges. Resources for employers adapting to either a multilingual workplace or an Icelandic-workplace that offers structured planning and support for transitioning language-learners is in great need of further development.

Cultural Fit Bias

Employers often default to hiring people who feel familiar. Difficulties exist in formally getting cre-

dentials recognized, but even when they are, migrants may lose out to less-qualified candidates who studied at Icelandic institutions simply because they seem like a “safer” choice. This may stem from unconscious bias or a more explicit preference for local programs that employers are familiar with and trust—where they feel more confident about the training standards and curriculum, compared to foreign institutions they know less about.

Cultural differences can also often be misinterpreted as risks rather than assets. DEI trainings addressing unconscious bias and dimensions of diversity relevant to migrants are largely uncommon.

Misconceptions About Stability

There’s a persistent (and incorrect) belief that foreign workers are more likely to leave Iceland and are therefore a “flight risk”(OECD, 2024). This unfounded bias disadvantages many applicants, regardless of their actual intentions or long-term plans.

Misreading Integration Timelines

Migrants often face a “career penalty” after relocating—taking lower-skilled jobs while balancing language learning, caregiving, and resettlement. Recruiters and hiring managers may have misinformed expectations regarding such integration transitions and how long they should realistically take, potentially misreading these gaps or transitions as a lack of ambition or skill.

Barriers in Public Employment Services (BPS)

Public Perception:

The Directorate of Labour holds a unique position in Iceland’s public employment system, as it is responsible not only for supporting jobseekers but also for overseeing work permits and labour market registration. For many migrants, this dual role can create tension—as the institution tasked with helping you find work also has the authority to impact your legal status. In W.O.M.E.N.’s experience with our community, this dynamic can lead to fears or hesitations in fully engaging with the services offered. Similar feedback was shared when the Multicultural Information Centre was brought into the Directorate of Labour in 2023, where W.O.M.E.N. experienced increased traffic following its closure. We suspect this also may be in part due to the former centre arguably having more of a community presence in migrant spaces.

ALMPs:

Immigrants participate in Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs) at lower rates than Icelandic-born jobseekers, despite higher unemployment (OECD, 2024). Those who do participate often see limited benefit, and it’s hard to know why, as outcome monitoring does not take place (OECD, 2024).

Multiculturalism:

Career related content may be more generalized towards women, confidence-building, interview strategies etc. but lack multicultural, migrant context. Migrant content (how to navigate Iceland, laws etc.) may be offered as an additional resource but not necessarily an integrated perspective

with differing approaches and advice. Only one adult education center (Símenntun á Vesturlandi), unfortunately outside the capital area where most migrants live, seems to explicitly advertise multicultural career counselling. Career counselling in Iceland is a licensed profession, however it is not clear from the University website if and how multiculturalism may be incorporated into the studies. Símenntun á Vesturlandi informed W.O.M.E.N. its multicultural expertise stemmed from additional university education.

Subsidy limitations:

Wage subsidies exist for companies hiring refugees or those on unemployment, yet there's untapped potential in incentivizing employers to support on-the-job language learning or adopt inclusive hiring practices (OECD, 2024).

Best Practices and Positive Developments

Internship and Scholarship Programs

The LS Retail Future Leaders Program offers internships and tailored mentorship for minority students, aiming to increase access to leadership opportunities (LS Retail n.d.). While broader affirmative action efforts remain limited, initiatives are emerging—particularly in education. Universities are actively expanding access for Icelandic learners, enabling more practical pathways to build qualifications or bridge recognition gaps in foreign credentials (University of Iceland, 2024).

Some preparatory programs also exist specifically for women and minority groups in STEM, such as Stelpur Forrita (Girls Who Code) and Stelpur Diffra (Women of mathematics) both associated with the University of Iceland, and Girls in ICT Day at Reykjavík University (Stelpur Diffra, n.d.)(Stelpur Forrita, n.d.)(University of Reykjavík, 2024).

Civil Society Organizations

FKA New Icelanders: A sub-group of the Association of Businesswomen in Iceland (FKA), supporting professional and entrepreneurial development for women of foreign origin (FKA, n.d.)

WomenTechIceland: Founded by women of foreign origin, this non-profit works to increase gender diversity in tech by connecting underrepresented groups and providing mentorship and visibility (WomenTechIceland, n.d.)

DEI Advancements

DEI awareness is slowly gaining traction. The Icelandic term for inclusion—Inngilding—has only recently entered more regular use (Awad, 2024). Unions and Associations are more recently hosting speakers and sharing knowledge on such topics. Stjórnvísi is one such example of a platform offering dialogue and training on inclusive management and leadership practices (Stjórnvísi, n.d.).

Immigration White Paper

An immigration policy for 2024-2038, titled “A Society for Everyone” aimed to foster an inclusive,

multicultural society where immigrants have equal opportunities to participate in all aspects of life, emphasizing matters such as: improving the foreign qualification recognition process, increasing research and data of immigrant issues, and improving language education accessibility and quality (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024). However, it remains uncertain whether the policy will be implemented, and if so, how the process and resource allocation—such as funding and execution—will be handled. As well as while the consultation process involved multiple groups, W.O.M.E.N. included, concerns have been raised that while such a policy is incredibly important the white paper may not yet have been comprehensive (Ingólfssdóttir, Árnason, 2024)

Multicultural School of the West

The Multicultural School of the West is an interdisciplinary project with an emphasis on inclusion, multicultural skills, service and information flow. It is in conjunction with the aforementioned learning center offering multicultural career and study counselling, Símenntun á Vesturlandi (Símenntun Vesturlandi, 2024). It also offers multicultural education to professionals working with diverse groups, complementing growing offerings in this area at the University of Iceland (Símenntun Vesturlandi, 2024)

Policy Recommendations

In addition to broader opportunities raised in this report, W.O.M.E.N. highlights the following recommendations in partial reference of a recent OECD report, *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Iceland (2024)*. We also draw attention to its full set of recommendations, especially those further concerning children and family issues that impact the status of migrant mothers.

Data and monitoring

- Improve general data collection for a stronger focus on migrant metrics, e.g. background, language, household structure, and access to key services.
- Track outcomes of ALMP participants and assess barriers to uptake and impact.
- Strengthen data-sharing between UTL, the Directorate of Labour, and Statistics Iceland.
- Expand pay certification audits and equality plans to reflect all anti-discrimination legislation, not just gender.
- Invest in a focused investigation of overqualification among migrants, mapping underutilized skills and qualifications, assessing alignment with labour market needs, identifying roles that do not require full Icelandic proficiency, and exploring transitional solutions to better connect migrant talent with job opportunities.

Language and integration

- Establish national standards in language training, with public funding tied to curriculum and assessment quality.
- Expand access to affordable, flexible language programs and incentivize qualified language teachers.
- Expand and strengthen existing integration programs to ensure meaningful access for all migrant groups. Tailor guidance to the diverse contexts and experiences of migrants, using data and lived experience to ensure culturally responsive, relevant support that reflects their diverse realities.
- Ensure language education includes courses and approaches that directly address gendered and health-related barriers; promote awareness among professionals and the public about realistic, locally grounded experiences and needs in Icelandic language acquisition.
- Investigate and develop best practices for integrating non-fluent talent, ensuring employers have guidance on both options: transitioning to multilingual workplaces or building structured onboarding for language learners into Icelandic-speaking environments; consider financial incentives for companies piloting these approaches.
- Partner with immigrants themselves and immigrant-led organizations for language and integration efforts utilizing for-us-by-us models. Ensure immigrants contributing to such initiatives are paid fairly and not treated as data-sets or volunteers.

Career access and skills recognition

- Enhance career guidance within integration programs to ensure early and ongoing support for all migrant groups, promoting currently underutilized options such as Vocational Education and Training, entrepreneurship funding and support schemes, and adult education opportunities through targeted outreach.
- Mandate multicultural and DEI training for job counsellors' licensure, and include it in HR education. Seek local DEI expertise for trainings and consultations before seeking abroad DEI resources unfamiliar with the Icelandic context. Reach out to immigrant communities and civil society organizations for referrals as needed.
- Raise awareness of qualification recognition processes among migrants, and improve digital systems to speed up processing times.
- Subsidize bridging programs and promote Recognition of Prior Learning, especially for humanitarian migrants.
- Leverage existing global data to promote the business value of diverse teams to employers.
- Explore embedding professional mentorship programs into integration initiatives to support migrant talent development and create opportunities for participating companies to engage in knowledge sharing and benefit from diverse expertise.

- Promote awareness and support targeted training for HR professionals and hiring managers on the common misconceptions and biases related to diverse applicants, fostering inclusive practices in hiring and management.
- Expand ‘Know Your Rights’ initiatives to include local work culture norms and expectations.

Discrimination and belonging

- Ensure the Equality Complaints Committee includes race/ethnicity expertise.
- Address gaps between high union complaints and low complaints to the Equality Complaints Committee by improving awareness, accessibility, and ensuring better coordination between the two.
- Ensure meaningful penalties for companies violating anti-discrimination laws, particularly repeat offenders, e.g. scaling fines according to their revenue.
- Promote the inclusion of migrants as part of Iceland’s core value of equality. Foster pride in Iceland’s multiculturalism, and establish belonging as both a norm and a fundamental principle in public policy, education, media, and community initiatives.
- Explore an integration policy developed with a for us, by us approach. If the former White Paper is carried forward, seek out and give special attention to all concerns raised.

References:

Alþýðusamband Íslands (ASÍ) (2019) Íslenskur vinnumarkaður 2019: Erlent launafólk og brotastarfsemi á vinnumarkaði. Available at: <https://www.mbl.is/media/95/11195.pdf>.

Áreitni og ofbeldi í starfi útbreitt vandamál (n.d.) *VR stéttarfélag*. Available at: [https://www.vr.is/um-
vr/frettir/almennar-frettir/areitni-og-ofbeldi-i-starfi-utbreitt-vandamal/](https://www.vr.is/um-
vr/frettir/almennar-frettir/areitni-og-ofbeldi-i-starfi-utbreitt-vandamal/).

Awad, M.P.Ó. (2024) *Inngilding – nýyrði sem enginn skilur?* - *Vísir*, *visir.is*. Available at: <https://www.visir.is/g/20242647544d/inn-gilding-ny-yrdi-sem-enginn-skilur->.

Equality Complaints Committee (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.government.is/topics/human-rights-and-equality/equality/legislation/equal-treatment-of-individuals-regardless-of-race-and-ethnic-origin/equality-complaints-committee/>.

Fjölbreytileiki og inngilding (e. diversity & inclusion) (n.d.) *Stjórnvísir*. Available at: <https://www.stjornvisi.is/is/faghopar/fjolebreytileikioginnngilding>.

FKA (n.d.) 'New Icelanders'. Available at: <https://www.fka.is/nefndir/new-icelanders>

Gargalianou, V. *et al.* (2015) 'The Effects of Gender and Personality on Foreign Language Anxiety among Adult Multilinguals' Available at: <https://d-nb.info/1067210229/34>.

Gísladóttir, K.H. (2021) *NEET-hópurinn: Staða og bakgrunnur ungmenna af erlendum uppruna utan vinnumarkaðar og skóla*. Available at: https://62bf3681-af0c-4f9c-bd81-0939bc371ea4.filesusr.com/ugd/61b738_2a98ecb61e8c4945a8e964b0a75d6733.pdf.

Government of Iceland (1940) *General Penal Code*. Available at: https://www.government.is/library/Files/General_Penal_Code_sept.-2015.pdf.

Government of Iceland (1944) *Constitution of the Republic of Iceland*. Available at: <https://www.government.is/publications/legislation/lex/2021/05/12/Constitution-of-the-Republic-of-Iceland-No.-33-1944/>.

Government of Iceland (2018) *Act on Equal Treatment in the Labour Market*. Available at: <https://www.government.is/library/04-Legislation/Act%20on%20Equal%20Treatment%20on%20the%20Labour%20Market%20No%2086%202018%20m%20br%20Final%20SENT%20230519.pdf>.

Government of Iceland (2020) *Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights Irrespective of Gender*. Available at: <https://www.government.is/library/04-Legislation/Act%20on%20Equal%20Status%20and%20Equal%20Rights%20Irrespective%20of%20Gender.pdf>.

Ingólfssdóttir, A.Ý. and Árnason, S. (2024) 'Hvítbók í málefnum innflytjenda', ÖBI, 20 June. Available at: <https://www.obi.is/umsogn/hvitbok-i-malefnum-innflytjenda/>.

IWW Iceland (2021) *Hidden People: Stories from Foreign Workers in Iceland*. Available at: https://iwwisland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/iww_001_hidden-people-07.pdf.

James, D.E. (2021) *Migration of foreign specialists into the hightech sector in Iceland and the role of Human Resource Management*. University of Reykjavík. Available at: <https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/39943/1/Dominique%20El%C3%ADsabet%20James%20-%20Master%20thesis%20-%202021.pdf>.

LS Retail Future Leaders Program (n.d.) *LS Retail*. Available at: <https://careers.lsretail.com/pages/futureleaders>.

Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (2023) *A Society for Everyone: Iceland's future and policy on matters of immigrants - Green Paper on Matters of Immigrants*. Available at: https://stjornarradid.is/library/02-Rit--skyrslur-og-skrar/A_Society_for_Everyone_Iceland's_future_and_policy_on_matters_of_immigrants_Draft_policy_to_2038.pdf.

Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (2024) *A Society for Everyone: Iceland's future and policy on matters of immigrants - White Paper on Matters of Immigrants*. Available at: https://stjornarradid.is/library/02-Rit--skyrslur-og-skrar/A_Society_for_Everyone_Iceland's_future_and_policy_on_matters_of_immigrants_Draft_policy_to_2038.pdf.

OECD (2024) *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Iceland*. OECD (Working Together for Integration). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/96adc300-en>.

'Practice Areas – Claudia & Partners Legal Services ehf.' (2022), 7 January. Available at: <https://cpls.is/practice-areas/>.

Shiholo, M. (2024) 'Language Ideologies and Identity Construction in Immigrant Communities', *European Journal of Linguistics*, 3(2), pp. 29–43. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47941/ejl.2045>.

Sigurðsson, B. and Magnúsdóttir, Á.H. (2023) *Hátt í helmingur atvinnulausra erlendir ríkisborgarar - RÚV.is, RÚV*. Available at: <https://www.ruv.is/frettir/innlent/2023-09-27-hatt-i-helmingur-atvinnulausra-erlendir-rikisborgarar-392646/>.

Sigurðsson, L.L. (2025) *Icelandic Learning is a Gendered Health Issue - Vísir, visir.is*. Available at: <https://www.visir.is/g/20252708615d/icelandic-learning-is-a-gendered-health-issue>.

Símenntun Vesturlandi (2024) 'Fjölmenningskóli Vesturlands | Símenntun á Vesturlandi', 16 April. Available at: <https://simenntun.is/forsida/fjolmenningarskoli-vesturlands/>.

Snaebjornsson, I.M., Edvardsson, I.R. and Littrell, R.F. (2017) 'Societal Culture in Iceland and Lithuania: Managerial Implications', *SAGE Open*, 7(2), p. 2158244017704023. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017704023>.

Stelpur diffra (n.d.) *Stelpur diffra*. Available at: <https://www.stelpurdiffr.is>.

Stelpur Forrita (n.d.). Available at: <https://stelpurforrita.club/>.

Tomren, J.F. and Opaas, M. (2024) 'Adult refugees' perspectives on the impact of trauma and post-migration hardships on learning', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 15(1), p. 2403249. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008066.2024.2403249>.

University of Iceland (n.d.) *Opinberu háskólarnir vinna saman að fjölgun innflytjenda í háskólanámi, Háskóli Íslands*. Available at: https://hi.is/frettir/opinberu_haskolarnir_vinna_saman_ad_fjolgund_innflytjenda_i_haskolanam.

University of Reykjavík (n.d.) *Empowering girls in the technology sector | Háskólinn í Reykjavík*. Available at: <https://www.ru.is/en/news/empowering-girls-in-the-technology-sector>.

Vandaele, K. (2019) *Bleak prospects: mapping trade union membership in Europe since 2000 | etui*. Available at: <https://www.etui.org/publications/books/bleak-prospects-mapping-trade-union-membership-in-europe-since-2000>.

Warner-Søderholm, G. *et al.* (2022) 'Ethnicity in management studies: To ask or not to ask, that is the question', *Management*, 27(2), pp. 41–59. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.30924/mjcmi.27.2.4>.

WomenTechIceland (n.d.) *WomenTechIceland*. Available at: <https://www.womentechiceland.com>.

Policy Recommendations

for the Inclusion of Highly Skilled Refugee and migrant
Women in the Nordic Labor Market

Developed by FLA in Collaboration with

Diversify

Startup Refugees

W.O.M.E.N. in Iceland

