



# Women on the move: Understanding the female face of migration to develop targeted policies

European View  
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## Abstract

Women migrants and refugees are playing an increasingly important socio-economic role in our societies. As gender has an impact on their experience and on their integration process, it is necessary to develop a gender-sensitive, targeted approach, which enables their contribution to society to be fully appreciated. Female migrants and refugees may face stronger, and double, discrimination and experience further barriers to integration in their host countries. Yet, the societal inclusion of women is key for their families; has multiplier effects; and can stimulate changes in social norms, gender relations and discriminatory practices. Furthermore, investing in women contributes to economic growth, social cohesion and stability. Therefore, promoting gender mainstreaming in migration policies is both a social and an economic necessity. It must not be overlooked.

## Keywords

Migration, Asylum, Women migrants, Women refugees, Gender-sensitive approach, EU

## Introduction

Trends and numbers suggest that migration plays a significant role in shaping the demographics of the EU and has an impact on the average age of the population. On 1 January 2022, 23.8 million citizens of non-member countries resided in an EU member state, representing 5.3% of the EU population. Their median age was 36.6 years, compared to

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45.4 years among the native population (Eurostat 2023b). In recent years migratory flows to Europe have been consistent; however, in 2023 the EU witnessed a sharp rise in asylum applications, which totalled 1.1 million (European Union Agency for Asylum 2024).

Among those migrants and refugees, women are playing an increasingly important socio-economic role. Researchers are talking about a ‘feminisation’ of migration: every second migrant and third asylum seeker is female. Moreover, while in the past most women were travelling with their partners or joining them, in recent years women have also been migrating on their own for economic or educational reasons. In contrast to past decades, they are often searching for a job and are economically active.

The increasing importance of the migration phenomenon has prompted EU member states to develop forward-looking and long-term policies, paying specific attention to the integration of migrants. As women form almost half of the migrant population, and their gender has an impact on their experience, it is necessary to develop a gender-sensitive, targeted approach which takes into consideration this specificity and allows the host societies to fully value their contribution.

This article sheds light on the gender impact on migration and on the positive contribution of women’s integration, in part by using the specific case of the most recent wave of migrants, Ukrainian refugees. It then reflects on the development of targeted policies, taking the aforementioned impact into account.

## **Why gender matters in the migratory process**

Women represent one of the most vulnerable categories of migrants and refugees. Sexual and gender-based violence has been identified as both a reason why refugees and migrants might leave countries of origin, and a reality along the route or upon arrival. It is also well established that women’s and girls’ lives are disproportionately affected by humanitarian emergencies—and that these crises often exacerbate pre-existing discriminations and inequalities. According to the UN Population Fund, ‘women and children account for more than 75% of the refugees and displaced persons at risk from war, famine, persecution, and natural disaster’ (UNFPA n. d.). Once in Europe they may face stronger discrimination and experience additional barriers to integration in the host countries, with persisting unequal access to resources, education, protection, the labour market and decision-making.

One of the biggest challenges is gaining access to the job market. Men and women in the EU do not participate equally in the labour market: the gender employment gap is around 11% (Eurostat 2023a), which causes an economic loss of €370 billion per year (European Commission n.d.; on this, see also EIGE 2017). This disparity is reflected and even amplified in the situation of women migrants and refugees, leading to ‘double discrimination’. Some of the challenges include family constraints and the unequal division of unpaid care work in households, a lack of language skills and social networks, and

gender norms that limit women's mobility. Moreover, female refugees and migrants often tend to work in informal, low-paid and unregulated sectors, such as domestic and care work, and are more affected by the 'de-skilling' process. For instance, in 2019, 40.7% of migrant women of working age were likely to be overqualified for their job, compared to 21.1% among native women (European Parliament 2023, 6). Admission schemes designed by the EU institutions to attract talent and high-skilled migrant workers also prioritise professions characterised by a predominance of men, such as information and communications technology, engineering and finance, without a significant impact on the situation of women migrants.

The European Institute for Gender Equality confirms that 'migrant women are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than any other group in the EU labour market' (EIGE 2020, 4). This creates a vicious circle, as it can cause increased responsibilities for women within families, further reducing their employability or their ability to attend courses.

For those who join the EU for family reunification reasons, the situation is particularly complex as their legal status for five years after their arrival is dependent on that of their sponsor (the inviting partner) (Council of the European Union 2003). They not only have lower employment rates than those migrating for work or studies (EIGE 2020, 4), often being socially excluded, but may fear the risk of expulsion and therefore submit to a harmful relationship and/or be fully dependent on their spouse as a result.

Women refugees, in particular, are more exposed to violence (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security 2023). Despite their increased vulnerability, only a minority of women are granted refugee status, partly because gender-related causes of persecution are rarely accepted as a valid basis for seeking asylum, and partly because women often lack the education and knowledge needed to complete the application process (Caritas International 2012, 13). An important step was made at the beginning of 2024, when the European Court of Justice (2024) ruled that women who suffer from or are at risk of 'physical or mental violence, including sexual violence and domestic violence' on account of their gender in their country of origin could apply for protection and be granted refugee status.

## **Women's agency: migrants as drivers of change**

Looking at women migrants as a vulnerable category, and acknowledging that women experience migration in a different way because of their gender, is essential to designing appropriate and targeted policies. However, it would be a mistake to see women migrants simply as passive victims, thus amplifying their discrimination and isolation, instead of recognising their agency and the positive impact of their integration. The correlation between women's empowerment, gender equality, economic stability, peace and security has been well proven by numerous studies and data (see, e.g. World Bank 2023; UN Department of Peace Operations 2020; Council on Foreign Relations 2019).

Strengthening the participation of women in the labour market and in society should be considered an investment in society and future generations, as women are often on the front lines to face crisis and transfer their experiences directly to their children, and in this way can contribute to social integration. Women can also be drivers of change: the act of migration is in itself an empowering experience and often a way to gain independence. Women's participation can break down stereotypes and stimulate a change in social norms, gender relations and discriminatory practices, starting within the family; and have a multiplier effect on other women, who may be inspired and encouraged to play a more active role in society. As women are increasingly migrating on their own, they assume the role of the main economic provider, leading their household and sending remittances to their families and communities left behind, thus changing the way these groups see women (Caritas International 2012, 10; 2017, 16). In this regard, data show that although the amounts sent as remittances by men and women are very similar, their behaviours are different, as women send a larger part of their usually lower salaries (Caritas International 2012, 10; 2017, 16).

Women also contribute to social integration, influencing the social support networks and the civic participation of migrants. Engaging women and diasporas and consulting them systematically in the design of policy responses and measures to address global migration and refugee crises could result in more sustainable and responsive solutions, as their input would better reflect the diverse reality.

Women migrants and refugees should also be seen as political actors, able to contribute in a positive way to the stability of their countries of origin. Women and girls are often exposed to greater threats during and in the wake of humanitarian emergencies due to the breakdown of social order. This often excludes them from the processes, platforms and discussions surrounding conflict mediation and natural-resource management, and the formulation of global responses. However, policymakers could benefit from the participation of women in these processes in order to reach fairer and more sustainable solutions, as their input would provide greater diversity of perspective. One specific example is related to peace talks: when women are meaningfully involved, peace talks are more likely to address root causes and yield more sustainable results, resulting in the likelihood of a peace agreement lasting at least 15 years increasing by 35% (Coomaraswamy 2015, 41–2).

Women migrants and refugees who are in Europe can also use their voices and their deep knowledge of the cultural context of their countries of origin, together with their access to local communities, to inform political decisions on foreign policy, development and humanitarian aid. As in the case of Afghan women, refugees in Europe might be in a better position to speak out and it is therefore in the interests of stakeholders (i.e. governments and institutions) to unleash this often unseen and unvalued potential.

## **The specific case of Ukrainian refugee women**

The EU has recently experienced an exceptional influx of women refugees from Ukraine. According to data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2024), currently around six million people fleeing the war in Ukraine have been recorded in Europe,

with more than 90% of these being women and children (Ukraine Response Regional Gender Task Force 2023, 2).

The case of Ukrainian women refugees exemplifies the active role of the diaspora. Since the war erupted, many prominent civil-society activists have become part of a new class of unofficial wartime ambassadors and the voice of the many silenced and hurt women (and men) in their country, dedicating their activities to advocacy and to fostering a better understanding of the situation.

The prolonged solidarity with Ukraine expressed by European governments and citizens, with the activation for the first time of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (Council of the European Union 2001), makes the Ukrainian case quite exceptional. There are many reasons behind the warm welcome from the public and politicians, but the fact that the majority of the influx of refugees is female may also have contributed to them being perceived differently. Women and children tend to be viewed as less of a danger or threat than the young adult males that made up higher proportions of previous migrant flows, and this has led to a greater willingness among Europeans to accept Ukrainian refugees (see e.g. Moise et al. 2024).

Despite numerous challenges, Ukrainian women are better positioned than many other refugee women. From a legal point of view, they benefit from favourable policies—for instance, they have immediate access to employment after registering with the authorities, and a high number of Ukrainians are active in the labour market. They also have relatively high educational levels and can rely on social networks—there are pre-existing expatriate communities—and a sense of widespread solidarity. All ‘these factors are likely to improve their socio-economic integration prospects’ (OECD 2023, 1) compared to those of other refugee women.

Their experiences and the success of their integration could stimulate and pave the way for the formulation of more gender-sensitive and targeted integration measures, as well as contributing to shaping a different narrative on forced migration. This is particularly the case in countries where radical and extremist parties fuel xenophobic sentiments, which are often accompanied by misogyny and a strong opposition to gender equality.

Some studies have already shown that there is a positive spillover from the attitudes toward Ukrainians to attitudes towards other refugee groups (see Moise et al. 2024). We cannot yet predict how long this will last, but we can assume that further support for the successful integration of women could also have a positive impact in terms of narrative and perceptions.

## **Looking forward: towards tailored policies and a gendered approach to integration policies**

A better understanding of the impact of gender on all phases of migration is essential and this means collecting more disaggregated data that clearly shows the drivers of female integration and measures the positive returns on investing in women. This will help to

support the introduction of evidence-based policy measures. To collect this data will entail the setting up of platforms and consultative mechanisms to gather women migrants' perspectives and channel them into the decision-making process. Although gender equality is usually an underfunded policy area (Albrecht et al. 2021, 45), specific and dedicated funds and programmes are essential, and their potential benefits far exceed the initial investments (UN Women and UNFPA 2020).

Along with the right to protection, migrant women also need to be recognised and seen for their agency (including political agency) and positive contribution, and encouraged to be active citizens. A holistic approach is needed, involving coordination of all the actors in the process (in the countries of origin, transit and destination), including the public and the private sectors and the migrants themselves. It should include thoughtful consideration of the gender impact of the measures put in place and long-term investment in mutually reinforcing areas of action. Measures could combine lifting barriers to integration, such as low investment in female education, restricted access to services and low participation in the labour market, with targeted interventions, for instance, providing women with an independent legal status, adopting a women-specific enhanced employment policy, attracting female talent and enhancing women's digital skills. The approach could also prioritise projects led by women and on women's empowerment, such as mentoring or training for migrant women, enabling the recipients themselves to then provide support to other women during the integration process. Furthermore, resources could be made available for networks and civil-society organisations which promote inclusion, provide space for discussion and information-sharing, and raise awareness of gender-related issues.

Women should also be empowered to meaningfully participate in the decision-making, peace-building and political processes in their own countries of origin, for example, through effective implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda adopted by the UN Security Council in 2000. This would enable refugee and migrant women to be recognised as political actors, allowing them to become real drivers for peace and stability, and even alleviate some of the causes of migration.

Although the EU does not have specific competences in integration policy, the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (European Commission 2020a), combined with the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (European Commission 2020b), would provide a good framework to further develop tailored national policies and encourage the exchange of best practices among member states, recognising the need to mainstream gender issues and ensure the inclusion of all. The New Pact on Migration (European Commission 2020c) also contains specific elements, such as the Talent Partnerships, which could be better exploited and adapted to correct existing disparities; while other suggested measures that would have an impact on migrants and 'vulnerable groups' should be considered and implemented, taking a gender perspective into account.

## Conclusion

A better understanding of the impact of gender on all the phases of the migratory experience is essential to develop tailored, gender-sensitive and gender-responsive policies that address the specific needs and situations of migrant women and girls. This will also allow the host countries to benefit from the contribution of migrant communities, and women in particular, by ensuring that they are supported to reach their full potential.

Starting from an awareness of the development of the migration phenomenon and the new protagonism of women, and by collecting relevant data, member states should invest in targeted measures to encourage women to be active citizens, integrating in the host societies at both the social and the economic level, and acting as drivers of change. The peculiar situation of Ukrainian refugees, who are generally better positioned and better perceived than other women refugees, could pave the way for this.

Normative and political frameworks, as well as some successful policies and programmes, are already in place and should be further leveraged and strengthened. Others, such as the Pact on Migration, the Talent Partnerships and the Directive on Reunification, should be reconsidered and adapted, taking a gender perspective into account. This shift is imperative. It is not only a matter of gender equality for all, but is necessary and advantageous for the whole society, and an opportunity which cannot be missed.

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