

# **PARTICIPATION FOR MIGRANT MOTHERS: BARRIERS AND WAYS FORWARD**

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*This brief offers context, challenges, and sustainable practices on a cross cutting issue of integration based on the SPRING review report: Evidence on Integration Policy Practices. This extensive review of integration literature revealed that when integrating into the host society, newly arrived migrants face numerous challenges based on their gender and parental status.*

Societal, cultural, and religious norms represent women as primarily responsible for childcare. Such views support an ideology of motherhood, linking caregiving tasks to femininity. While non-migrant women are also affected in many ways by these gendered structural barriers and stereotypes, newly arrived migrant women often find themselves in even more precarious situation, due to lack of familiarity with the laws and childcare systems, insecurities of migration status, and lack of family and friends networks in the receiving country. These barriers stemming from gender, parenthood and migration background overlay and reinforce one another to reduce female migrants' time and means to participate.

Practitioners in the field of migrant integration must therefore acknowledge traditional gender norms as traps to integration disproportionately affecting migrant mothers. This brief offers practitioners in the field of migrant integration an overview of both common challenges and sustainable practices to tackle those. For instance, training relevant personnel in cultural competence and intersectional approaches to care obligations, including financing gender-sensitive programs, will increase migrant mothers' integration prospects. Moreover, state and non-governmental actors can actively promote and foster female employment and finance individually-tailored programs that stimulate reflection about traditional gender norms among migrants and relevant institutional actors working among specific target groups (e.g. case workers, reception managers, employers, etc). Such initiatives encourage female migrants' autonomy accelerating financial emancipation of mothers of various family and work statuses: married, lone parents, stay-at-home, or part/full-time employed.

## ***Integration Challenges:***

Gendered labour market discrimination: Standard requirements for family reunification and long-term residency include migrants having stable income and independency of welfare benefits. For migrant mothers it is very difficult to fulfill such requirements, due to male-dominated job sectors, work place discrimination and the gender pay gap. To enjoy the right to family life or achieve unrestricted residency permits, female migrants need to overcome double-layered problems that impede applicants' chances for reunification and long-term residency.

*• Civic integration residency requirements (e.g. linked to economic independence) can 'push' women towards taking up less paid jobs as they can help them secure their legal status. This can disservice women since their starting position may prevent them from reaching their future goals of financial independence, becoming a sponsor, or acquiring permanent status. To properly support female migrants in family reunification processes and tackle the adverse effects of separation with children, it is important to acknowledge their structurally disadvantaged position as sponsors, in which gendered labour market discrimination plays a role. This is especially important for non-EU female migrants, refugees and those using welfare benefits.*

• *Biases and Stereotypes: Legal nuclear family bias, stereotypes about religion and discourses on transnational marriages pose obstacles to comprehensive integration of migrant mothers. If they are lone parents or have migrated alone, they face additional challenges due to limited support networks, with no grandparents or other relatives to rely on. Family migration or reunification policy accentuates nuclear family, and such heteronormative gender norms sometimes unwittingly reinforce the traditional male-bread-winner model. In addition, immigration officers might interlink religious belonging with a gender-specific exposure to violence representing Muslim women as potential victims of oppression and Muslim men as perpetrators. Lastly, a mother's willingness and capability to work outside of the home may be disregarded due to the expectation that mothers stay home to care for small children.*

**Lack of childcare:** Limited options for daycare for children is a common integration challenge among migrant mothers, and indeed, non-migrant women as well. Restriction of benefits, insufficient provision of child care and other structural barriers can push women of diverse backgrounds into the pathways of stay-at-home motherhood and restrict their chances for economic self-sufficiency and social participation.

• *Migrant mothers' involvement at a community sport initiative in Germany was largely diminished due to lack of access to childcare services. Participation within the program of both participants and volunteers depends on access to childcare services.*

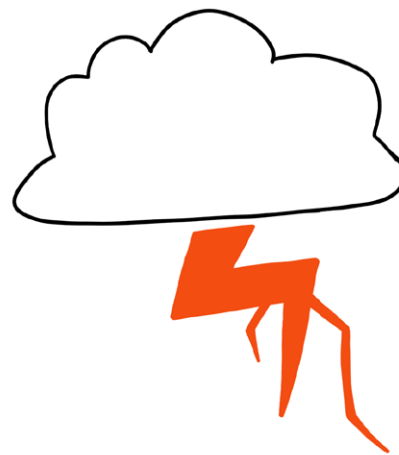
## **Solutions:**

**Adopt inclusive legal language:** National governments should be aware of the legal definition of 'family' and 'dependent', especially when addressing family migration reunification issues, to avoid exclusion of subgroups when creating new policy. Some mothers are married; others are lone parents or form queer families.

• *Among EU Member states, only Spain and Norway identify dependency as a category outside the nuclear family. At the same time, none of the EU Member States with a high number of asylum seekers allow parents to reunite with children older than 18 years automatically.*

**Raise awareness and support for both parents:** Childcare obligations have an enduring influence on the integration of the female population. Nationwide campaigns and further communication measures addressing topics such as women's agency or intersections between female employment and autonomy would increase awareness about migrant mothers' needs among migrants and institutional actors. Also, governments and employers could focus on encouraging fathers to take an active role in child care e.g. by means of mandatory paternal leave.

• *The EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) suggest flexible hours to inspire participation for children of working mothers, single parents, and those from minority or disadvantaged groups, among others. In this regard, area-wide and affordable services significantly promote equity and social inclusion. Separating refugees and asylum seekers often creates a bureaucratic hurdle in organising and managing childcare.*



**Facilitate interaction:** Local municipalities can have a crucial role in the integration process as they can innovatively bring together the newly arrived population with those already residing in the country. Such interactions and joint initiatives can enhance chances for quicker adoption of language competencies.

- *Stadtteilmütter (Borough mothers) is a model Kitas programme in Berlin that mediates between newly arrived families and the institutions. The unique feature of the borough mothers is that they are also refugees, increasing interaction and participation in the local communities.*

**Provide adequate childcare:** Providing childcare workers and educators with adequate training, multi-sectoral coordination and funding on the national level can increase the quality of services and support migrant mothers. System-wide leadership is often needed to introduce new methods of qualifying childcare workers or recruit new staff with language and cultural skills.

- *Gothenburg Language Center in Sweden provides mother-tongue teaching and support for all schools in the city, which relieves the schools enormously with regard to these tasks. It is an excellent example of how the Swedish education authority works closely with municipalities and offers special programmes aimed at newcomers. Preschools offer programs in a mother tongue other than Swedish to develop their cultural identity and knowledge of both languages.*

**Create informal educational opportunities:** Engaging mothers in children's education can be doubly beneficial, and tailored programs can also ease access to other spheres (e.g. health, employment).

- *Post-2014 Greece targeted school-aged children and mothers through various instruments of non-formal education. For example, language training for mothers was used as a 'tool' to enhance results of the formal education (i.e., of the refugee children in the state facilities).*

**Diversify opportunities for emancipation and autonomy:** Governments need to diversify opportunities for emancipation and autonomy among female migrants in terms of more flexible changes of legal permits. This should be an important objective for female migrants who are, e.g. third-country nationals or forced marriages survivors. An intersectional approach can help immigration officials target migrant mothers of diverse backgrounds and life situations.

- *Ireland and Spain have a legal status specifically for victims of domestic violence. Such changes in status facilitate integration, increase personal autonomy, and prevent falling into irregular situations.*

