

The integration of migrant women in the labour market and society at large is an important objective for equity consideration alone. It is also, in many cases, a prerequisite for closing socio-economic gaps between men and women in general and a strong driving force to promote the successful inclusion of children of migrants.

This Migration Policy Debate summarises OECD work on how to strengthen the integration of migrant women.¹ It provides an overview of challenges faced by migrant women, notably those in family migration pathways. It depicts migrant women's education level, their labour market integration, their reconciliation of work and family life as well as the associations with the outcomes of children of migrants and attitudes on gender equality and includes a number of policy implications.

How to strengthen the integration of migrant women?

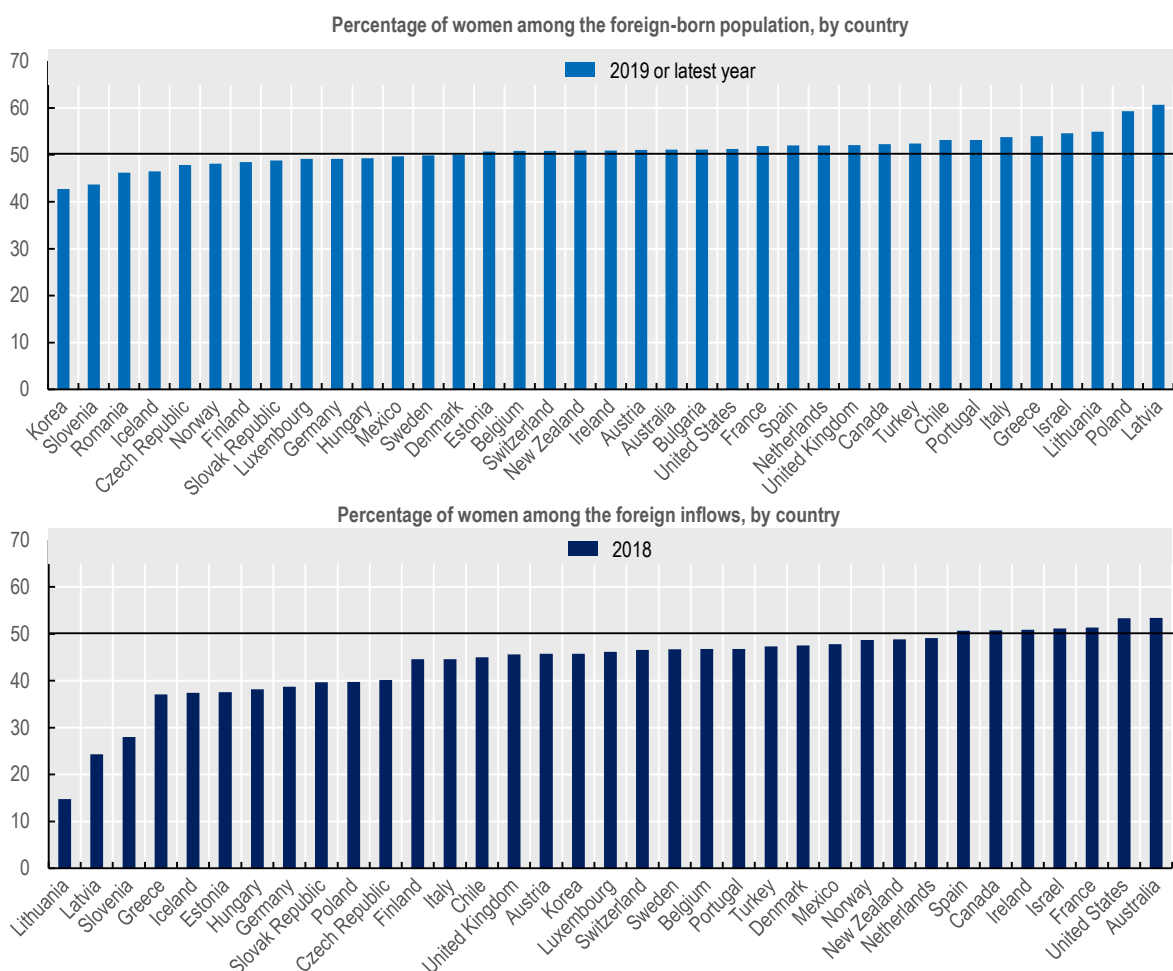
Key policy lessons based on recent OECD work on the integration of migrant women (see bibliography)

- **Achieving equal opportunity for migrant women** is not only a legitimate objective in itself, but in many cases, it is a **precondition for closing the socio-economic gaps between men and women in general** and a driving force for promoting the successful inclusion of children of migrants.
- **Migrant women are a large and diverse group whose potential is largely underutilised, in spite of improvements.** About a third of migrant women in Europe come via family migration, hence without a labour market connection.
- **Isolated migrant women require special attention**, notably those who came through family migration. Neighbourhood initiatives, intercultural mediators from the local community and “second chance” programmes can support reach out. Migrant mothers can be contacted via their children's' schools.
- **Migrant women need to be able to attend integration courses.** Mother-and-child programmes and flexible childcare solutions during training have shown positive results.
- **Affordable public childcare and information on rights and possibilities to take career breaks can benefit migrant women.** A re-evaluation of cash-for-care subsidies on the labour market integration of migrant women is needed.
- **Migrant women might need encouragement to engage (or re-engage) in training or to take up employment**, notably when they come from countries where women are underrepresented in the labour market.
- **Access and participation of migrant women in training and other active labour market policies (ALMP)**, who are underrepresented in these schemes, despite being overrepresented among the unemployed improves integration. Available evidence suggests better outcomes of such programmes among immigrant women – especially when offers are well targeted.
- **Family migrants on a path to permanent residence need access to the labour market and to integration services.** Counselling for family migrants upon arrival can outline available services. Family migrants require formal eligibility to access integration services.
- **Early family reunification can support integration.** Spouses who arrive with delay exhibit lower language proficiency after five years or more in the host country and a lower employment probability in European OECD countries.
- **A gender-equal society benefits migrant women.** Society impacts migrants' attitude towards gender equality. In contrast to wide-spread belief, migrants largely adapt to such societal norms.
- **Research and evaluation of available programmes with a specific lens on gender issues enhances the evidence-base.** Intersectionality and the various forms of overlapping challenges migrant women face (women, migrant, ethnic minority, refugee) needs to be included.

Migrant women in the OECD and EU

Just over half of all migrants in OECD and EU countries are women.² Their shares are particularly high in parts of Central and Southern Europe. However, women are underrepresented among new migration inflows: their share is below 50% in most countries, and this share has not substantially changed over the past five years. Inflows of women are somewhat higher than those of men in the OECD settlement countries (such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada), where migrants arrive as family units, and in longstanding destinations with a large share of highly educated immigrants such as the United Kingdom and the United States.

Figure 1. Share of women among the migrant population and migration flows, 2018 & 2019



Note: Shares refer to foreign women in Japan and Korea in both graphs.
Source: OECD International Migration Database, 2020.

Reasons for this imbalance – higher share in stocks and lower in flows – are manifold. One key factor is that women are overrepresented among family migrants who often tend to stay longer. About 40% of all permanent migration to the OECD is made of family migrants, of which 60% are women. Family migrants are a diverse group of migrants, spanning all ages and skill levels. As they are not migrating to take up a job or education, they have less prior attachment to the labour market than other groups of migrants. They also tend to have lower language skills and fewer professional and social networks. Their education level,

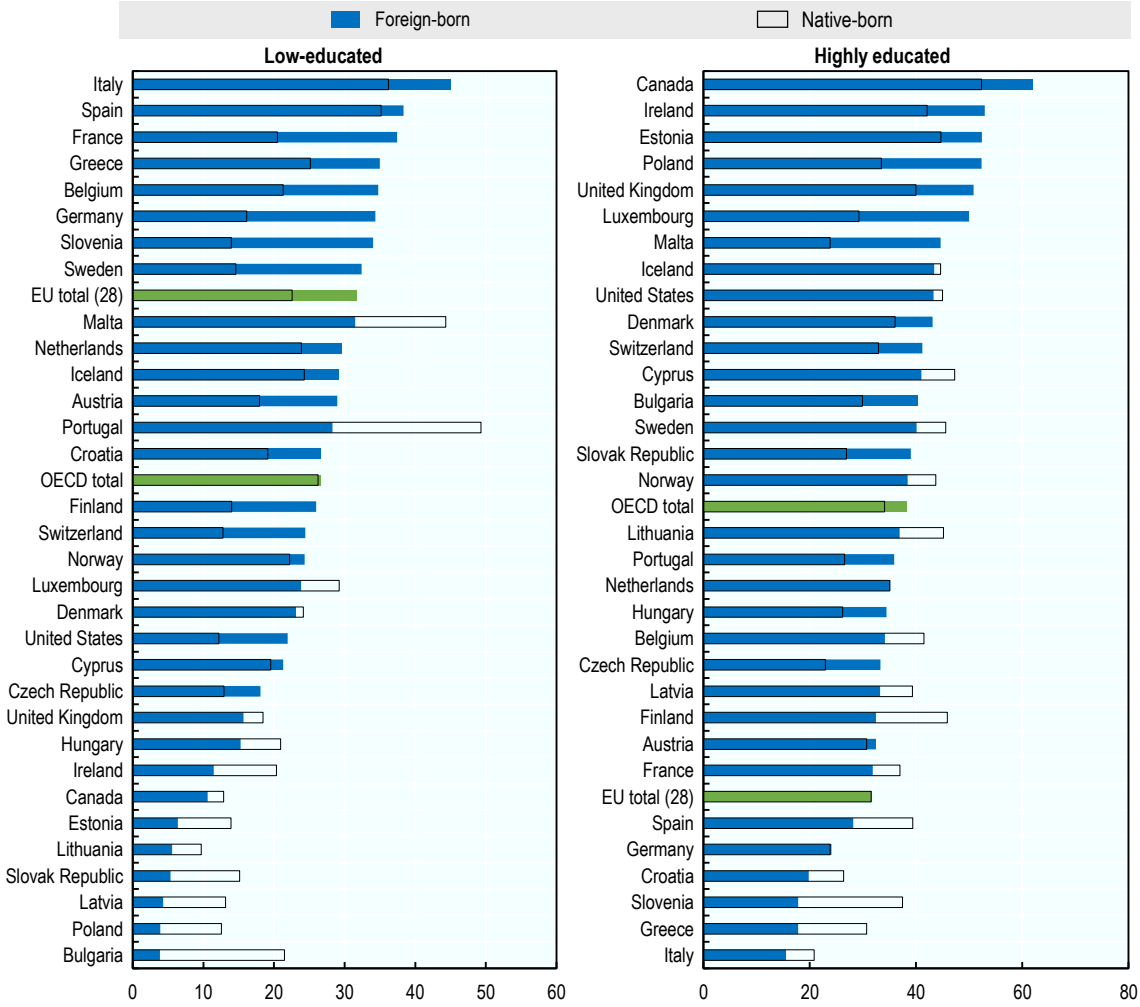
however, tends to mirror that of their sponsors. What is more, for those joining a spouse already present, they are often not included in introduction measures for new arrivals. In many ways, family migrants have often been the “blind spot” of integration policy in the past – especially those who join a migrant already working (and thus not dependent on social assistance).

Another factor likely to play a role in explaining the gender differences between stocks and flows is the difference in life expectancy by gender which are observed in all OECD and EU countries and this also applies to migrants. Last but not least, in many countries, male migrant workers are overrepresented among temporary migrants, notably in sectors like construction or agriculture, while migrant workers who are women are more often employed in care activities where the demand is more structural.

Migrant women’s education level

Figure 2. Education level among women by place of birth

Percentages, 15- to 64-year-olds, 2019 or latest year available



Note: Data for OECD total, Canada, Portugal, Ireland and Denmark refer to 2017. “Low-educated” refers to less than upper secondary attainment, “Highly educated” to tertiary education.
 Source: European countries: Labour Force Surveys (Eurostat); United States: Current Population Surveys. Canada: Labour Force Surveys.

Migrant women, like migrant men, tend to be overrepresented at both ends of the education scale in OECD countries. They are more likely than native-born women to be highly educated and more likely to be low-educated. In the EU in 2019, shares of highly educated women among foreign- and native-born are equal at 32%. In the OECD, a full 38% of migrant women have completed tertiary education, about 4 percentage point higher than native-born women. However, almost one in three migrant women in the EU has only low levels of formal education, while this is true for less than one in four among native-born women. Shares are 32% vs. 23%. Across the OECD, equal levels of foreign- and native-born women are low-educated: 26%. Compared with migrant men in the EU, migrant women have a slightly more advantageous education level: they are on average more likely to be highly educated, and less likely to be low educated than their male counterparts. The same is true OECD-wide.

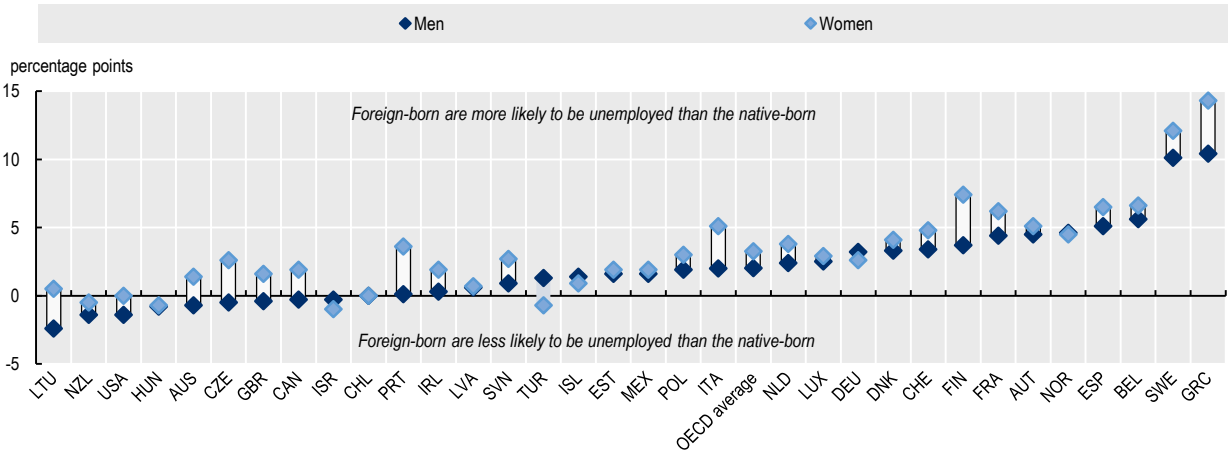
Highly educated have accounted for growing shares of migrant populations between 2008 and 2017 in most OECD countries. In the EU, the increase has been stronger for migrant women (+8 percentage points) than for migrant men (+6 percentage points). Elsewhere in the OECD, shares increased at roughly equal levels (+6 percentage points both for men and women). In some countries, this share rose even more among migrant than native-born women. This is notably true in Poland, the United Kingdom and Denmark. Earlier research also suggests that women who migrate as family migrants are increasingly highly educated. In 2014, they exhibited a greater share with a high education level and a smaller share with a low education level than their peers in the labour migration and refugee categories.

Migrant women’s labour market integration

Migrant women face persistent disadvantage in the labour market, sometimes referred to as a “double disadvantage” based on being a women and being a migrant. They generally have lower employment and higher unemployment rates than both – foreign-born men and native-born women, and actually the gender gaps are often larger for immigrants than for the native-born. In virtually all countries, migrant women have higher unemployment rates than their native-born peers.

Figure 3. Unemployment rate gaps between foreign- and native-born by gender, 2019

Difference in percentage points between foreign- and native-born



Source: OECD International Migration Outlook 2020.

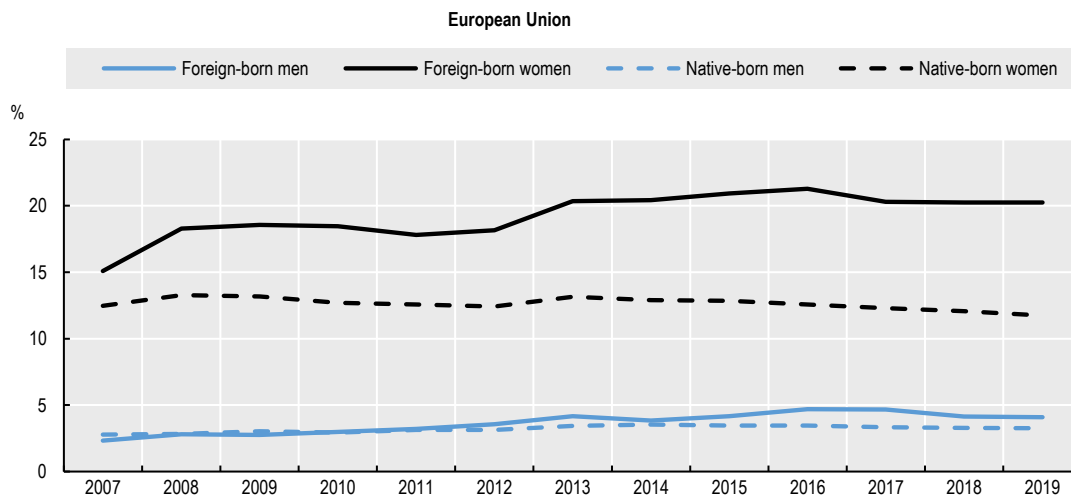
Gender differences in unemployment rates among migrants are particular large in several Southern European countries such as Portugal, Italy and Greece, but also in Finland, where migrant women have

significantly higher unemployment rates than migrant men. This is partly linked to lower education levels, but much of the difference remains unexplained and could be linked notably to a labour market penalty for having young children (see below).

In the OECD, among migrant, working women, 23% are in low-skilled employment, 8 percentage points more than among native-born women. The difference in the EU is 10 percentage points, and more than one in four migrant women are working in low-skilled jobs (26%). The skill-level of foreign-born women's employment is related to their sectoral distribution. In the EU, the industries that employ most migrant women are often sectors with a high number of low- and middle-skilled jobs. In particular, migrant women in the EU are strongly overrepresented in household services. Close to one in twelve migrant women (8%) works in household services whereas the share among native-born women is a mere 1%. Differences tend to be smaller outside of Europe. In the United States, for example, the share among foreign-born women working in household services is only 2%.

A key issue for the labour market integration and career advancements of foreign-born women is that they are unwillingly stuck in part-time work. In the EU, foreign-born women are much more likely than their native-born peers or migrant men to be unable to find a full time job, even if they would like to work more. In the EU for instance, 11% of foreign-born women find themselves in this situation – more than twice the share among migrant men (5%), while the share among native-born women is only 6%. Note that family obligations are not the reason for this challenge, as in most countries roughly equal shares among foreign- and native-born women state family obligations as reason for working part-time.

Figure 4. The incidence of involuntary inactivity in the European Union, by place of birth and gender, 2007-19



Note: The risk of involuntary inactivity is defined as the share of persons who are not in employment and are not looking for work because of family responsibilities or because they think that no work is available or for reasons other than illness, education or training. It excludes persons who are retired and persons who are awaiting recall work. The reference population is the population aged 15-64.

Source: OECD International Migration Outlook 2020.

Migrant women remain disproportionately at higher risk of exclusion from the labour market. In the EU, foreign-born are significantly more likely than native-born to experience long-term unemployment, and foreign-born women consistently more so than foreign-born men since 2007. In 2019, 4.1% of unemployed women were out of work for more than one year, compared with 3.2% for their male counterparts. By contrast, long-term unemployment concerns only 2.4% of native-born men and women. What is more, the share of involuntary inactivity among foreign-born women in the EU has increased by more than five

percentage point since 2007, while it has decreased by one percentage point among native-born women. In 2019, more than one fifth of foreign-born women (20.2%) were in situations of involuntary inactivity, compared to only 11.7% for native-born women.

However, migrant women are not at a particular disadvantage compared to migrant men regarding temporary employment and formal over-qualification. While migrant women are more likely than native-born women to work in temporary employment, putting them at a higher risk of job loss (17.6% versus 13.6%), they are not at a disadvantage compared to migrant men where this share is 17.9% among migrants and 12.4% among native-born.

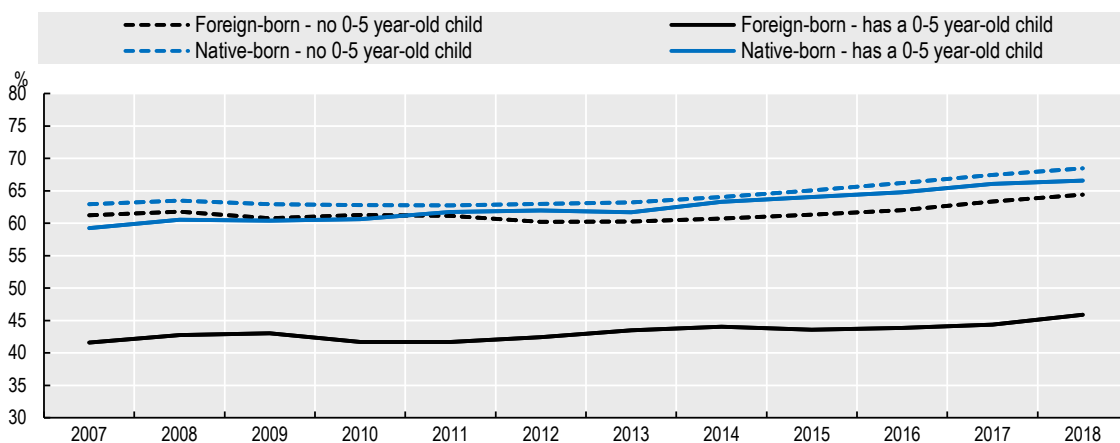
Also, the prevalence of so-called over-qualification, when migrants hold a job below their formal qualification level, is only slightly higher among migrant women than among migrant men: 34% for men and 36% for women, OECD-wide. However, over-qualification remains a key challenge for all migrants. In the EU, 34% of migrants versus 21% of native-born are formally overqualified, with even higher shares for those with foreign degrees. OECD-wide, the incidence of formal over-qualification stands at 35% among migrants and 31% among native-born. In the United States, the difference is a mere 1 percentage points, however at high overall levels: 36% for native-born and 37% for migrants.

Migrant women’s balance of work and family life: evidence for European countries

Migrant women’s integration path differs from the path of migrant men with regards to one key element: the work-life balance. Migrant women in Europe face a strong penalty for having a child under the age of 6. While native-born women with and without young children as well as foreign-born women without young children have roughly equal employment rates across Europe (between 64% to 69% in 2018), the employment rate of migrant women with young children is only a mere 46%. Migrant women with a young child have an employment rate which is over 18 percentage points below that of their peers without children. By contrast, having a young child is associated with a reduction of the employment rate of native-born women by only 2 percentage points.

Figure 5. Employment rate of women in Europe, 2007-2018

Percentages, by place of birth and by the presence of young children, EU28



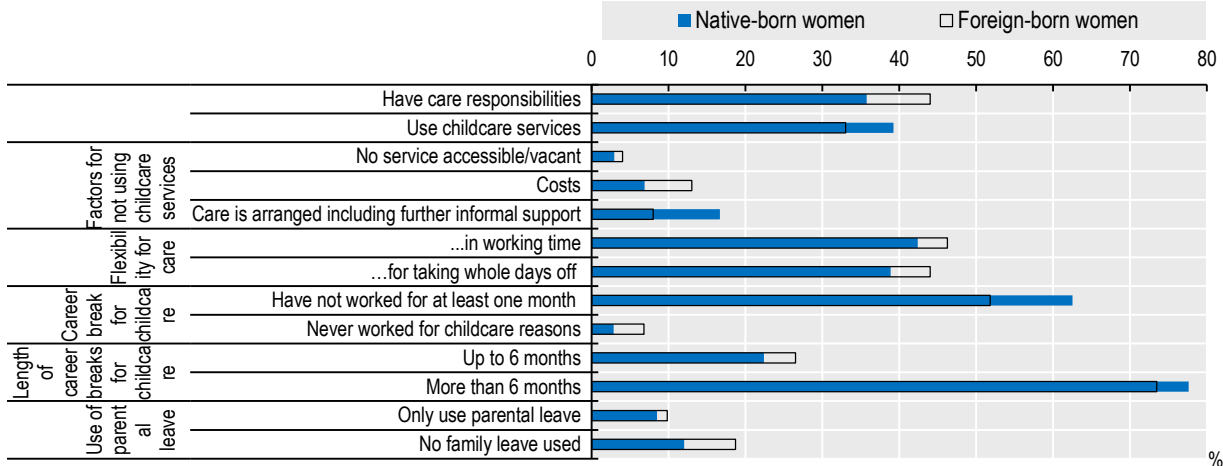
Source: OECD International Migration Outlook 2020.

Notably, while progress has been made to activate women with young children in European countries, this has been more successful for native-born women with young children. For these, the employment level reached 66.6% in 2018, an increase of 7.4 percentage points since 2007. By contrast, over the same period, the employment rate of migrant women with small children only improved by 4.3 percentage points.

Migrant women face the reconciliation between personal and professional life differently than native-born women. Despite on average having more children (the fertility rate of foreign-born women in the EU is 1.8 versus 1.5 among the native-born), foreign-born women are 6 percentage points less likely to use childcare services than native-born women. The main reasons as expressed in surveys are the availability of childcare services and their cost (twice as often than native-born women).

Starting a family also has different consequences on foreign-born and native-born women’s careers. Native-born women take career breaks to start a family (often of more than 6 months) while foreign-born women are more likely to leave the labour market when having children. In fact they may not even enter it in the first place, as foreign-born women are more than twice as likely to have never worked for childcare reasons compared with native-born women (respectively 7% and 3%). However, the group of foreign-born women who stay in the labour market tend to take relatively shorter breaks than native-born women and are almost twice as likely as native-born women not to use any family leave.

Figure 6. Reconciliation between work and family life of women in Europe



Note: For variables referring to past situations (for career breaks and the use of parental leave), only migrant women who arrived prior to the age of 20 are considered. Career breaks cover individuals who did not work for at least one month to take care of own or partner’s children; this refers to women who worked before.

Source: European Labour Force Survey (Eurostat), 2018 ad-hoc module. OECD International Migration Outlook 2020.

Migrant women’s empowerment brings benefits to subsequent generations

Supporting immigrant parents to be fully and autonomously functional in the society is not only important for the migrants themselves but also a precondition for better outcomes of their children. Indeed, the transmission of disadvantage across generations is much stronger for immigrants in Europe than in other OECD countries such as Canada or the United States. However, some European countries fare relatively well in this respect – notably the Scandinavian countries. One key observation of OECD work in this area is that immigrant mothers’ labour market participation can have a crucial impact on the outcomes of their children, more than for their peers with native-born parents. While this is observed for both genders, the association is particularly strong for daughters.

Having had a working mother at age 14 (as opposed to a mother staying at home) increases the employment probability for native-born children of immigrants from a non-EU country by about twice as much as for their peers with native-born parents (4 percentage points). For daughters of non-EU-origin women, the difference is most pronounced: having a working mother instead of one staying at home increases daughters' employment rate by 16 percentage points.

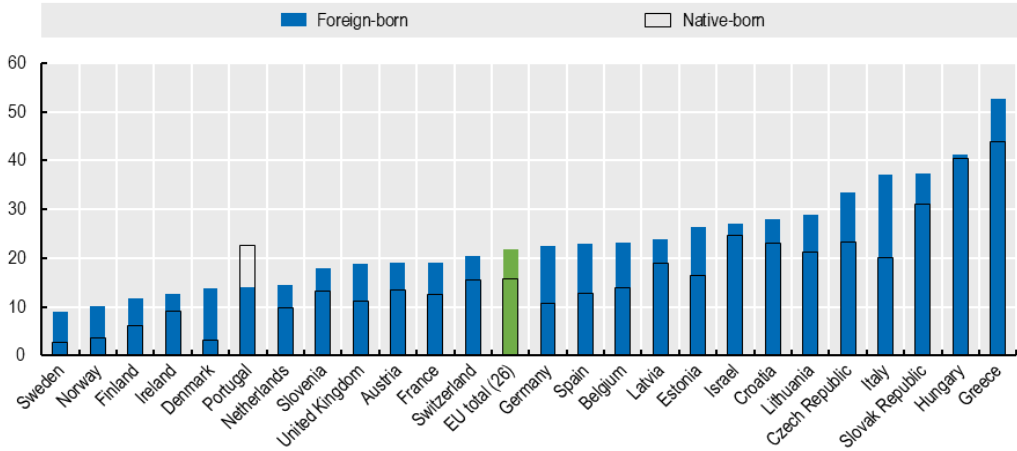
Society impacts attitudes, notably on gender equality

Finally, attitudes in society towards gender equality, are shaped not primarily by origin or upbringing, but also by the values commonly present in the society. Across the EU, 22% of the foreign-born population and 16% of the native-born population agree with the statement that “when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women”. Women are generally less inclined to agree with this statement but gender gaps are wider among immigrants.

Remarkably, in countries where approval rates on gender equality in job access among native-born are very low (very high), they are also low (high) among immigrants. An example is Sweden as shown in the graph below. Only a small share of immigrants in Sweden agree with the statement that when jobs are scarce, men should have priority, depicting much more gender-equal views than the majority of native-born in other EU countries.

Figure 7. Attitudes towards gender equality in job access

Percentages who agree with the statement: “When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women”, 2008-16



Source: OECD/EU (2018): Settling In: Indicators of Immigrant Integration.

Box 1. Recent work on the integration of migrant women by the OECD

OECD flagship publications on migration and integration:

- OECD (2020), International Migration Outlook 2020, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ec98f531-en>.
- OECD/European Union (2018), Settling In 2018: Indicators of Immigrant Integration, OECD Publishing, Paris/European Union, Brussels, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264307216-en>.
- OECD (2017), International Migration Outlook 2017, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/migr_outlook-2017-en.

Gender and diversity:

- OECD (2020), All Hands In? Making Diversity Work for All, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/efb14583-en>.
- Liebig, T. and Tronstad, K (2018). "Triple Disadvantage?: A first overview of the integration of refugee women," OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers 216, OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1815199X>
- OECD (2017), The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264281318-en>.

Family migration and children of immigrants:

- OECD (forthcoming), Making Integration Work: Young People with Migrant Parents.
- OECD (2018), Catching Up? Country Studies on Intergenerational Mobility and Children of Immigrants, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264301030-en>.
- OECD (2017), Catching Up? Intergenerational Mobility and Children of Immigrants, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264288041-en>.
- OECD (2017), Making Integration Work: Family Migrants, Making Integration Work, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279520-en>.

¹ This brief has been prepared for the Informal exchange on integration and social cohesion on November 9, 2020 under the German EU presidency.

² This brief uses the words “migrants”, “immigrants” and “foreign-born” synonymously. Unless mentioned otherwise, it includes all persons born abroad, regardless of their migration category, legal status, or nationality. Likewise, native-born include all persons born in the country, regardless of the country of birth of their parents or of the ethnic minority to which they may belong. Children of immigrants, in contrast, includes all persons with foreign-born parents. It thus includes children who are born in the country but have immigrant parents.

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Useful links

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