

Care to Care?

Assessing the challenges of integrating migrant women into Europe’s labour force

The past 15 years have seen a rise in the number of women migrating to Europe to work. Yet there is a dearth of information on the work they are coming to do and the challenges they face, as studies traditionally focus on the experience of migrant men. In 2008, the EU Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity asked RAND Europe to provide the first analytical overview of the participation of migrant women in the EU labour market and examine how different policies affect outcomes. Our research identified two competing challenges for policy makers: (i) maximising the skills and economic contribution of migrant women while (ii) meeting the needs of EU economies for domestic and care support. We describe these below.

Wasted skills: Engineers working as cleaners

Many EU countries are not realising the full economic potential of their migrant women. In particular, ‘third-country’ migrant women (i.e., those born outside the EU) with high education levels are more likely to be unemployed, or employed in insecure work than native-born women, EU-born migrant women or migrant men with comparable education. Moreover, in spite of the existence of policies favouring highly skilled migrants, one in five highly educated third-country migrant women are employed in low-skill sectors of the economy. They are in jobs that are not commensurate with their qualifications (a phenomenon known as ‘de-skilling’). Specifically, they are twice as likely to be employed in low-skill jobs than EU-born and native-born women with the same level of education.

This process of de-skilling of highly educated migrant women has serious implications both for the receiving country and for the migrants themselves. Improvements in the ways in which these migrants are integrated into the receiving economies could improve economic efficiency

Abstract

The European Commission asked RAND Europe to investigate migrant women’s situation in the European workforce – a largely under-researched area. The study objectives were to (i) increase the understanding of the labour market outcomes of migrant women in the EU given European economic and social agendas for growth, equality and social cohesion, and (ii) to examine the impact of policies on these outcomes. RAND Europe found that migrant women have a ‘double disadvantage’ in the labour market due to being both migrants and women, and are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than native-born women or migrant men with comparable education levels. Women migrants from outside the EU are the most disadvantaged, being disproportionately employed in insecure, low-paid work, especially in the domestic and caring sectors. The findings raise questions about the future of Europe’s care infrastructure against a backdrop of more women entering the workplace, rapidly ageing populations and growing public debate about restricting migration.

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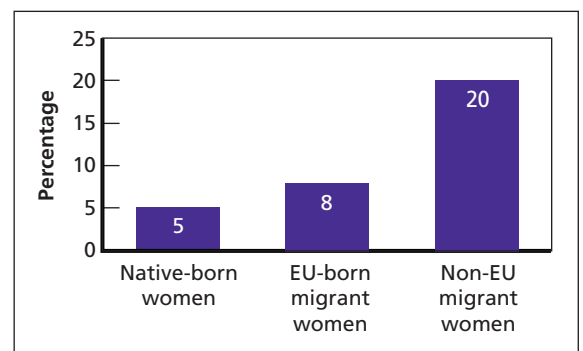
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Figure 1
 Percentage of highly educated workers in low-skill jobs



and fill skill gaps, while also improving quality of life and opportunities for migrants who would access better work. A coherent, coordinated ‘policy mix’ is therefore likely to be required for host nations to gain full economic benefit by utilising the skills of their female migrant populations. Immigration and integration policies should seek to remove the barriers that prevent migrant women finding work commensurate with their abilities.

Who cares? Migrant women and the care infrastructure

The second policy challenge stems from the growing reliance of EU host countries on migrant women to provide domestic and care support. About one in six female domestic and care workers are migrants, with a disproportionate representation (two-thirds) of third-country migrant women.

The growth in participation of native-born women in the workforce has been facilitated in part by the availability of female migrant workers to provide low-paid domestic and care help. European hospitals and nursing homes also rely heavily on migrant women to cook, clean and care for the elderly and incapacitated, as traditional family-centred care structures gradually erode with more women taking up paid employment outside the household.

From an equity perspective, there is growing evidence that migrant women in domestic service are particularly

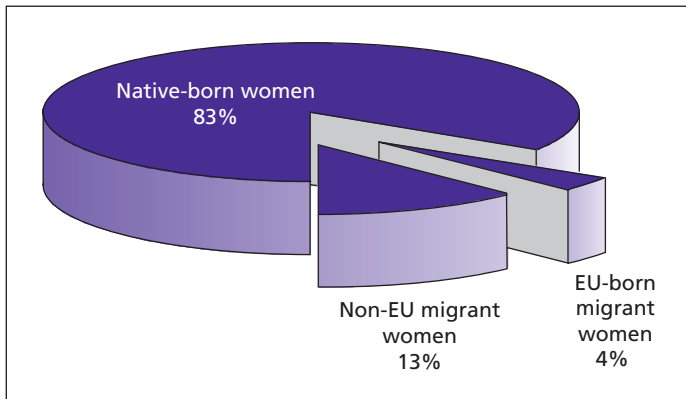
vulnerable to labour exploitation and human rights abuses. Given European social agendas for equality and social cohesion, greater protection for domestic and care workers and provision of security and benefits are crucial to ensure that the economic successes of some are not built on inequalities and the exploitation of others.

What’s the conflict? Reconciling economic and social needs

The discussion above suggests two conflicting demands for migration policy. On the one hand, skill gaps and the EU agenda for equity and growth make the economic integration of highly educated migrants a policy priority. On the other hand, a growing number of women in paid employment, coupled with greater longevity, fuel the demand for public and private domestic and care support. The tension arises from the impetus towards optimising the contribution of highly educated migrant women by providing more opportunities for them to do work commensurate with their skills, while at the same time restricting further immigration, especially of less-skilled migrants. This approach could effectively reduce the number of migrant women available to do domestic and care work, making it difficult for EU households to find the support they need at a price they can afford.

This research highlights a clear need for governments, through further research, to carefully examine the interactions, and possible unintended consequences, of migration policies in the wider context of social, economic and demographic changes. This will renew questions about what otherwise is frequently a relatively marginalised issue – the value of care work and the extent to which growth and competitiveness may depend on a strong caring infrastructure. In part because it has tended to be viewed as informal, private and unskilled, domestic and care work is often unregulated, insecure and badly remunerated. However, as demand for this kind of paid work increases, salaries, conditions and benefits for care work may need to improve substantially to attract workers and ensure that workers in this sector, both migrant and native, have jobs that are secure and properly rewarded. Further research is needed to fully address these conflicting, yet inter-linked challenges. ■

Figure 2
Employment in the domestic and caring sector



Further RAND reading:

Rubin, Jennifer, Michael S. Rendall, Lila Rabinovich, Flavia Tsang, Constantijn van Oranje-Nassau, and Barbara Janta (2008) *Migrant women in the European labour force: Current situation and future prospects*. Cambridge, UK: RAND Europe, TR-591-EC.

Grant, Jonathan, Stijn Hoorens, Suja Sivasadan, Mirjam van het Loo, Julie DeVanzo, Lauren Hale, Shawna Gibson, and William Butz (2004) *Low fertility and population ageing: Causes, consequences, and policy options*. Cambridge, UK: RAND Europe, MG-206-EC.



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