



DLA Piper's new research shows how COVID-19 has affected refugee women in the UK, France, Italy, and Germany

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The devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been felt across every sector and by every person in the world. Refugee women, who faced significant challenges to economic integration even before the pandemic, were some of the first to suffer from the economic downturn.

Elevating refugee perspective

We have conducted research to provide information, analysis, and personal accounts of the barriers to integration faced by refugee women and help inform future policies on the economic integration of refugees in OECD countries. We included the testimony of 15 refugee women and 10 experts from NGOs supporting refugees in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Our aim is to present the voices of each refugee and convey the unique struggles that they faced, particularly in finding employment. It draws on their accounts as individuals rather than statistics.

Barriers to economic integration

We found that the pandemic particularly exacerbated several barriers to the economic integration of refugee women. Disproportionate childcare responsibilities, became an insurmountable challenge when school and childcare facilities became unavailable, and many employers failed to accommodate women through flexible working. Moreover, women were particularly dependent on a range of informal opportunities and voluntary workshops that were the first to be cut as a result of the pandemic. Limited access to technology and a lack of digital literacy was particularly challenging when most services were moved online for months.

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Discrimination and trauma

Additionally, we found that there are many persistent barriers that impede equal opportunities for refugee women. The first and foremost is discrimination. Refugee women face intersectional discrimination in all areas of society, which greatly impedes efforts to find employment. Moreover, refugee women often suffer from trauma which remains unaddressed due to a lack of psychological support. Many of our interviews noted that there was a persistent lack of services tailored to refugee women, and that men were able to more easily take advantage of opportunities offered to the refugee community. Other systemic difficulties included cultural and language barriers, as well as inadequate and remote housing, and a lack of early measures to help women integrate. Although some of these barriers were made worse by the pandemic, they will persist even as the public health situation improves.

Impact and next steps

Finally, interviewees highlighted the impacts of the barriers that they faced. Refugee women explained that the many impediments that they faced in accessing employment resulted in a wage gap between them and men. They often found themselves relegated to the informal economy, in conditions rife for exploitation. All of the women we spoke to told us that they sacrificed their professional ambitions due to a lack of opportunity.

Our recommendations highlight the need for collaborating to provide comprehensive and context-sensitive training and education, the lack of which emerged as a primary concern among interviewees. We also stress the need for increased services for mothers, who were most isolated as a result of the pandemic. We urge all actors to include refugee women in the decision-making processes that affect them, as this is the only way to ensure that their concerns are truly taken into account.