



**BREAKING BARRIERS**  
**CHALLENGES IN EMPLOYMENT ACCESS FOR MIGRANT WOMEN**



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Migrant and refugee women in Ireland face significant barriers in accessing employment, leading to higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. These barriers include difficulties in qualification recognition, language proficiency, limited access to education and training, and structural challenges such as childcare responsibilities. Addressing these issues is crucial for fostering economic inclusion and social integration.

This research was borne out of our experience in running a Women’s Programme since 2016, during which we observed recurring barriers faced by migrant and refugee women in accessing employment. Over the years, we have worked closely with more than 350 women, providing a variety of support services ranging from financial literacy training and English language classes to mental health and wellbeing initiatives. Our programme began with just over twenty women with refugee status however as our programme grew, so did our understanding of the systemic and deeply ingrained challenges they face when attempting to enter the Irish labour market.

Existing research, including the quantitative study published by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in 2022 has established the structural and statistical disadvantages faced by migrant women in Ireland. *The Integration of Non-EU Migrant Women in Ireland*, highlights the unique challenges faced by non-EU migrant women, who constitute approximately 3.5% of the resident female population in Ireland. The study underscores the “double disadvantage” experienced by these women due to their status as both migrants and females, leading to more precarious residency conditions and employment restrictions compared to their EU counterparts. In 2020 the New Communities Partnership published a useful report *Employability of Migrant Women in Ireland* arising from their Mi-WOW project surveying migrant women in their network. The top three barriers to employment identified by the women surveyed were language, childcare and work permits.

This research has been invaluable in providing a broad overview of employment disparities, yet statistics alone do not fully capture the lived experiences of these women. While we don’t attempt to replicate these reports, we aim to illuminate the human stories behind the data, bringing to life through their own words, the lived experience of those navigating employment barriers.

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the barriers to employment faced by migrant and refugee women in Ireland. Data collection consisted of in-depth interviews and a survey, both designed to capture qualitative and quantitative insights.

- **In-Depth Interviews:** Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with migrant and refugee women who either responded to a call for participation on social media or were already engaged with our service. These interviews provided a rich, narrative-based understanding of personal experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in relation to employment access.
- **Survey:** A short survey was disseminated through our networks, receiving 50 responses. The survey gathered quantitative data on key issues such as employment status, qualification recognition, childcare access, and workplace discrimination. The responses helped identify common trends and validate the themes emerging from the interviews.

The combination of these methods ensured that both statistical trends and personal experiences were captured to provide a holistic understanding of the employment challenges faced by migrant and refugee women.

Beyond the structural challenges within the job market, our engagement with these women has also highlighted the intersection of employment barriers with personal and familial responsibilities. Childcare, for instance, presents a significant challenge, with many migrant women unable to afford or access suitable childcare services. Cultural expectations often place primary caregiving responsibilities on women, further limiting their ability to participate in full-time employment or even vocational training programs. These structural barriers are compounded by a lack of flexible work arrangements, making it even more difficult for mothers to balance employment with their family responsibilities.

Moreover, mental health and wellbeing are often overlooked factors in discussions about employment accessibility. Many of the women we have worked with have experienced significant trauma, whether from displacement, the asylum process, or the challenges of adapting to a new cultural and social environment. The stress of securing employment while managing these emotional burdens can be overwhelming, particularly in the absence of robust support networks. Our Women's Programme has provided crucial mental health and wellbeing support, yet broader systemic changes are necessary to ensure these women are not left behind. Unfortunately, this was beyond the scope of this report, however we would welcome further research in this area.

This report seeks to bridge the gap between quantitative research and qualitative lived experiences. By drawing on direct interactions, testimonies, and case studies from our programme, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers migrant and refugee women face in securing meaningful employment. Through an exploration of underemployment, barriers to education, and structural challenges such as childcare, we advocate for targeted policy interventions that can lead to more equitable and inclusive opportunities for these women.

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

**ETB (Education and Training Board)** - ETBs provide education in primary, post-primary, further education & training and youth services. There are 16 ETBs across the country.

**Critical Skills Employment Permit** – A work permit in Ireland designed for occupations experiencing skill shortages. Critical skills employment permits offer favourable conditions for family reunification and for securing improved access to the labour market after two years.

**General Employment Permit** – A work permit for occupations that do not fall under the Critical Skills category, often requiring a Labour Market Needs Test.

**Informal Learning** – Unstructured learning that occurs outside formal education, such as language acquisition through social interactions or on-the-job training.

**International Student** - Non-EEA students who travel to Ireland for education. International students face higher tuition fees and have restrictions on their residency including limited access to the labour market and prohibitions on access to state supports.

**Labour Market Needs Test** – A requirement for certain work permits where employers must prove that no suitable candidate from within the EU/EEA is available for the job.

**Remote/Hybrid Work** – Employment models that allow workers to perform their duties either entirely from home (remote) or through a mix of on-site and remote work (hybrid).

**Stamp 1G** - A residency permit issued to non-EEA graduates of Irish higher education institutions, allowing them to work in Ireland for between 12 and 24 months.

**Stamp 3** - A residency permit that generally does not allow employment and is often given to dependents (spouses/partners or adult children) of work permit holders. Stamp 3 holders cannot access employment without applying for an employment permit and are often restricted in accessing education and training supports.

**Stamp 4** – A residency permit allowing non-EU nationals to live and work in Ireland without needing an additional employment permit. This is typically viewed most favourably by employers.

**SUSI Grant** – A means-tested financial support scheme for third level students in Ireland, which many migrant women struggle to access due to residency or eligibility restrictions

**Underemployment** - Working in a job that does not fully utilize one's skills or qualifications experience, or education level or earning significantly less than what is considered fair compensation for their level of expertise and experience

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The experiences of migrant women in Ireland's workforce are marked by significant challenges, ranging from qualification recognition issues to structural barriers such as childcare responsibilities. Across the eight interviews, women shared frustrations about their qualifications and prior work experience being undervalued, leading to underemployment or job rejections. At least four interviewees specifically noted that their professional experience in fields such as education, marketing, and social sciences was not recognised, with one stating, *"I have five years of experience in marketing, which is the same internationally, yet it is ignored when pay-scales are discussed."*

Language proficiency emerged as a nuanced issue, with some women facing difficulties due to their accents or perceived lack of fluency, despite being highly skilled in multiple languages. One woman noted, *"I speak three languages fluently, but because my English isn't perfect, I get overlooked."* This points to a broader problem where linguistic diversity is not always recognised as an asset in the Irish job market.

Limited access to education and training further hindered career progression for many women. The high cost of tuition and a lack of tailored support for migrant and mature students made upskilling difficult. *"I wanted to do a PhD, but I couldn't afford the €45,000 fees,"* one interviewee shared. Additionally, several women highlighted that they had to actively seek networking opportunities, as institutional support was often lacking.

Structural challenges such as childcare responsibilities disproportionately affected migrant women, with four interviewees mentioning the high cost of childcare as a major employment barrier. One participant explained, *"It's not even worth working sometimes when all my salary would go toward childcare."* The lack of workplace flexibility further exacerbated this issue, with some women having to reject job offers due to inflexible schedules.

Other challenges included hiring discrimination, a lack of transparency in recruitment processes, and the emotional toll of navigating the workforce in a new country.

Despite these challenges, many interviewees demonstrated resilience, actively seeking opportunities for networking, internships, and further education. However, as one participant noted, *"If even 30% more support came from the system, the rest would have a domino effect,"* underscoring the need for policy reforms and greater institutional support to ensure migrant women can fully participate in Ireland's workforce.

## 2. RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS & EXPERIENCE

One of the most significant barriers migrant women face in accessing the workforce in Ireland is the lack of recognition for their qualifications and prior work experience. Interviewees expressed frustration that their credentials, earned through years of study and professional experience, were undervalued or outright disregarded by employers, treating them as entry-level professionals. This challenge not only affects their ability to secure employment but also impacts their confidence and financial stability.

### THE DEVALUATION OF INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

A common issue raised by multiple interviewees was the tendency for employers to dismiss international qualifications and professional experience. For instance, one woman, who had five years of experience in marketing before moving to Ireland, was shocked to find that her expertise was not being acknowledged in job offers.

“I understand that legal systems and occupations differ, but marketing is the same internationally, so I don’t understand why my five years of experience is not recognised.”

Similarly, another interviewee expressed frustration that despite completing a degree in Ireland, she still struggled to have her previous experience acknowledged:

“I did my college bachelor’s degree here in Ireland for three years. I graduated in October, started looking for a job in February, and didn’t get one until May. And even then, I had to change my last name to something more ‘acceptable’ to start getting interviews.”

This sentiment was echoed by others, particularly those in industries such as marketing, administration, and research, where skills are largely transferrable. One interviewee who pursued a master’s degree in Ireland noted:

“When you’re already juggling arriving in a new country and then someone is belittling your experience, it’s very tough.”

Another woman explained the difficulty of securing a job without Irish experience:

“Without any Irish work experience, I couldn’t get a job doing anything. There were jobs that I would have been overqualified for, but still, I wasn’t even able to get an interview.”

### DIFFICULTIES IN QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION FOR MIGRANT WOMEN IN IRELAND

A related barrier facing migrant women in Ireland is the lack of recognition for their academic or industry qualifications. One interviewee recounted her attempt to become a teacher in Ireland:

“I went to the QQI to see how I could become a teacher with my qualifications. They sent me over twenty forms to fill out and documents to sign. But each time I submitted them, they kept sending them back, saying it was not enough.”



Another woman noted:

“It just felt like the system says no over and over again. I would have loved to sit and talk to someone to see how I could get to a yes. I would have been willing to do another course or get more documentation but without knowing what would be successful, it felt like a waste of my time and money.”

## BIAS IN RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

Another common grievance was the lack of transparency in recruitment practices. Multiple interviewees reported feeling that employers preferred to hire internal candidates or Irish graduates, leaving migrant women at a disadvantage:

“Employers sometimes prefer an internal hire—what is the point of interviewing external candidates if there is a preference for internal hires?”

Some migrant women found themselves ghosted by employers when they sought feedback on their applications:

“I keep hearing about transferrable skills, but employers don’t actually consider them. If 40% of a job description is something I don’t have, but I have the other 60%, they just reject me outright.”

Another interviewee highlighted the impact of anti-immigration sentiment on her job search:

“With the rise of anti-immigration attitudes, it’s hard to want to keep trying. People say, ‘if you’re complaining so much, go back to your country.’ They don’t understand what we go through.”

## SURVEY FINDINGS ON QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION AND EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

Survey responses reinforce the findings from the interviews:

- **38 respondents** reported facing “many difficulties” in getting their qualifications recognised, while **10 reported some difficulties**. Only **1 respondent** said they faced no difficulties.
- **18 respondents** stated that they could not find a job that matched their skills, making it the most commonly cited reason for unemployment.
- **17 respondents** identified a lack of Irish work experience as the biggest challenge in securing employment.

## 3. CHILDCARE

For many parents in Ireland, childcare and family responsibilities pose significant obstacles to entering or remaining in the workforce. Unlike their Irish counterparts who may have extended family support, migrant women frequently struggle with balancing employment and caregiving. Many find it difficult to access affordable childcare, lack community networks, or face structural challenges that make returning to work almost impossible.

### THE BURDEN OF CHILDCARE RESPONSIBILITIES

Many migrant women reported that they had to put their careers on hold due to childcare responsibilities. One interviewee, a former researcher, expressed how difficult it was to return to work after having children:

"I finished my PhD in 2015 and had always intended to stay in research, but that was also the year my first child was born. Without family support, I tapered away from the labour market. Then in 2016, my daughter was born, and I was so busy with motherhood and looking after the children that it didn't really occur to me to apply or look for jobs."

This challenge was echoed by another interviewee, a marketing professional, who emphasised how difficult it was to balance job-seeking with caring for young children:

"I started looking for work again when my youngest started preschool, but I only have three hours free in the mornings. That's not enough to commit to a full-time job."

Several interviewees noted that they were often pushed into taking on roles below their qualifications simply because these jobs provided more flexible hours.

### LACK OF AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE CHILDCARE

For most migrant women, childcare costs make employment economically unviable. One interviewee shared her frustration:

"It's not even worth working sometimes when all my salary would go toward childcare."

One interviewee described how she and her friends tried to solve the problem by creating their own childcare services:

"My friends and I wanted to start a crèche for migrant women, but the cost of insurance and lack of community spaces made it impossible."

The cost of formal childcare is not the only problem. The availability of childcare services in smaller towns is also limited. One mother who lived outside of Dublin described the additional burden of not having any options nearby:

"We moved out of Dublin in 2016, and I remember this being a big factor in me not looking for or accessing work. There were no crèches nearby, and even if I found one, I wouldn't have been able to afford it."

Several interviewees expressed concern that long career gaps due to childcare made it even harder to find work. One woman who had worked in academia before having children described how her absence from the workforce had affected her confidence:

"I feel like I would be a misfit if I tried to go back into my field. It's been such a long gap that I don't know how to navigate back in."

This feeling of exclusion was also shared by a former nurse who found it difficult to resume her career after moving to Ireland:

"I was a senior nurse in [ ], but after taking time off for my family and dealing with my own health issues, I feel like I have to start all over again."

Many women end up taking jobs in sectors where their skills are underutilised because those positions offer flexibility:

"I wanted to continue in research, but I started applying for anything because my childcare responsibilities didn't allow me to take on demanding roles."

### **LACK OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

Unlike many Irish women who can rely on extended family for support, migrant women often face isolation. This lack of support makes it harder to balance work and family. One interviewee, who moved to Ireland with her husband and children, described feeling overwhelmed:

"Trying to balance work, education, and family responsibilities is exhausting, and there is very little support. Irish women have their parents and siblings nearby to help, but I have no one."

Another participant, a former social worker, described the struggle of single migrant mothers:

"Migrant women with children, especially single mothers, have very limited options. There needs to be targeted support for them."

### **SURVEY FINDINGS ON CHILDCARE AND EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS**

Survey responses reinforce the findings from the interviews:

**18 respondents** reported that childcare responsibilities significantly impacted their ability to work, while **5 reported some impact**.

**14 respondents** cited lack of childcare options as a key barrier to employment.

**15 respondents** identified family or childcare responsibilities as the biggest challenge in finding a suitable job.

## **POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES**

Despite the many challenges, some women have found employers and initiatives that support their unique needs. Several interviewees benefited from flexible work arrangements that allowed them to work around their childcare commitments:

"My job allows me to work remotely four days a week, which makes all the difference. I can be home for my kids and still have a career."

Another participant highlighted the importance of networking groups:

"Some women in my community created a WhatsApp group where we share childcare tips and job opportunities. That kind of support is invaluable."

Many women expressed the need for more government-funded childcare programs and workplace policies that accommodate mothers.

## 4. ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Language proficiency is a significant challenge for many migrant women seeking employment in Ireland. While some women arrive with strong English skills, others struggle with the language barrier, which affects their ability to secure jobs, access training, and integrate into the workforce. Even those who are proficient in English often encounter difficulties due to differences in accents, workplace jargon, and employer biases.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVANCED ENGLISH SKILLS

For many migrant women, basic conversational English is not enough to secure employment in their desired fields. Several interviewees noted that while they could speak English, they found it difficult to navigate professional environments where advanced language skills were required. One woman described her struggle:

"Before I can work as a nurse again in Ireland I need to improve my English. I hope to be ready soon, but it has been difficult and expensive to find advanced English language classes in Ireland. Where I live, there are beginners' classes, but there are no classes for anyone above the B2 level. It is difficult to afford these English language classes, but I believe I will get there."

Another interviewee echoed the frustration of finding the right type of language support:

"When I was doing English courses, I wouldn't have done the basic conversational ones I did. I would have done professional/business English because you need a full set of jargon to present your ideas and participate in meetings."

Even for those who have a strong command of English, accents and differences in communication styles can create barriers. One interviewee mentioned how she felt overlooked despite speaking English fluently:

"I had been educated in English as well and spoke English clearly before coming to Ireland (even if the Irish accent took a while to understand)."

Conversely, some women felt that their own accents made them less desirable candidates:

"Even though my English is good, sometimes I feel like people don't take me seriously because of my accent. They assume I don't understand things when I do."

Interviewees specifically mentioned that networking events and job interviews posed particular challenges because they felt less confident expressing themselves in English compared to their native language. One woman noted: *"In a job interview, they judge you immediately on how well you speak, even if the job itself doesn't require much talking."*

One interviewee, who initially came to Ireland in 2018 to learn English, stated: *"Even after studying for years, employers often assume that if you have an accent, you might not be as competent."* This perception contributes to an underlying bias that affects hiring decisions.

### LACK OF TAILORED LANGUAGE SUPPORT



A recurring theme among the interviewees was the lack of advanced English courses tailored to professional settings. Many migrant women found that the language classes available to them were too basic and did not prepare them for working in their chosen fields.

"One of the issues that I've faced was when I was trying to access education. A lot of the programmes that were set up were for women with no literacy skills or women who didn't speak English."

The inability to access suitable language training meant that highly qualified women were unable to pursue careers in their fields. One woman, who had worked in the nonprofit sector in, found it ironic that she needed the same support she had once provided in her home country:

"I specialised in education for girls and women in rural areas, for girls and women in families that traditionally did not support women's education. I therefore found it quite ironic then when I came to Ireland that I needed that type of support myself."

### INFORMAL LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

Due to the lack of formal language support, many women resorted to learning English through informal means, such as conversations with friends, colleagues, or even clients. One woman who worked as a caregiver explained how she tried to improve her fluency:

"I ask the old lady I work for to correct me every time I make a mistake when I'm saying something. Talking to her every day and having her correct my English has helped a lot, but I would still like to have more formal classes."

While informal learning can be beneficial, it does not replace structured education that can help migrants improve their written communication, expand their vocabulary, and learn industry-specific language skills.

### SURVEY FINDINGS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Survey responses reinforce the findings from the interviews:

- **10 respondents** stated that lack of language skills was a key barrier to employment
- **30 respondents** reported taking a language course in Ireland, **9 respondents** stated they would like to take a course but had not.
- **16 respondents** identified free or affordable English courses as the most helpful support in improving their job prospects.
- **32 respondents** expressed the need for specialised support with writing CVs, job applications, and preparing for interviews.

## GOOD PRACTICES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Despite the challenges, some good practices emerged in the interviews:

- **Mentorship and Guidance Programs:** Some migrant women found mentors who helped them navigate the system, improving their chances of re-entering their profession.
- **Flexible and Online Learning:** Remote learning options during COVID-19 allowed for greater flexibility, making it easier for women with family responsibilities to engage in training.
- **Workplace English Support:** Employers offering sector-specific language training on the job can help improve confidence and proficiency.

## 5. URBAN/RURAL DIVIDE

The urban-rural divide had a profound impact on the employment opportunities available to our interviewees in Ireland. Women living in rural areas often face additional barriers such as poor public transport, limited job opportunities, and reduced access to networking and training programs. Many interviewees highlighted how their location influenced their job search, making it significantly more difficult for them to re-enter the workforce.

### LIMITED JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN RURAL AREAS

Migrant women who relocated to rural areas often found that their job prospects were severely restricted compared to those in urban centres. One interviewee shared:

“I moved out of Dublin in 2016, and I remember this being a big factor in me not looking for or accessing work. I studied in DCU, and every now and then when I would look at research positions, I’d be looking at the commute and how I would even be able to make it up to DCU.”

The concentration of employment in specific fields in urban areas meant that women in smaller towns often had to pivot to completely different career paths. One interviewee explained her experience of looking for work in her small rural town:

“There were really limited employment opportunities for me there. I also think there was a level of discomfort with a woman wearing a hijab. I knew from the outset that realistically, I would need to find work that allowed me to work remotely.”

For some women, job recommendations were primarily limited to low-paying or physically demanding roles, as highlighted by another interviewee:

“My neighbours have told me to get into health services and healthcare assistance here in this town. This is one of the two courses that is quite widely recommended, at least amongst people in this town and adult training centres. Another one is childcare services. These are the two main hubs of employment.”

### CHALLENGES WITH PUBLIC TRANSPORT

One of the most commonly cited challenges was inadequate public transport, which made it difficult for migrant women in rural areas to travel to potential jobs, interviews, or training opportunities. One interviewee expressed frustration:

“I would really like transport to be more accessible for everyone. That’s a huge obstacle for so many people and can be nerve-wracking. Transporting yourself from here to DCU, for example, and being able to be home in time for dinner and have enough time to do household tasks is almost impossible.”

Another woman, who had been searching for a job in tech, described how unreliable transportation forced her to use an urban address on job applications:

“I live far from places like Dublin. I’ve tried explaining to some companies and employers that I have my learner’s permit and I’m working towards getting a driving licence, but they don’t want that—they want someone who has a full licence. The timings of the buses are very unpredictable and are scheduled very far apart, so sometimes I’m waiting two hours to get a bus.”

Without reliable public transport, many migrant women were forced to rely on expensive alternatives such as taxis or carpooling, or to limit their job searches to only what was available within walking distance.

### **LACK OF NETWORKING AND SUPPORT IN RURAL AREAS**

Women in rural areas also noted a lack of professional networking opportunities, which made job hunting even more challenging. One woman explained how the absence of strong community support structures in smaller towns left her feeling isolated:

“When I began looking for employment support, they really didn’t know what to do with me. I found that it was almost like applying for a job—I was continuously overqualified for any of the programmes available.”

Another interviewee shared how her lack of local networks meant she had to find resources herself:

“I struggled to find help in the community. A lot of the assistance for new arrivals to Ireland is aimed at people with low English language skills. I had to do a lot of the research myself.”

In contrast, women living in urban areas reported having access to more structured networking opportunities, including mentorship programs and professional development courses.

### **HYBRID OR REMOTE STUDY AND WORKING**

Hybrid and remote work and study options opened up opportunities for some of our interviewees. One interviewee noted: “I am really fortunate to have flexible working because I work in an office with international contacts. A lot of my work can be done either really early in the morning or late in the day, and so my husband and I can balance both of our jobs with our little one. But if I didn’t have that flexibility, we wouldn’t be able to work around the school or creche schedule.”

Meanwhile, another woman who lived outside a major city found that lack of flexibility was a major barrier to employment:

“I need something that I can balance with looking after my three-year-old. Remote learning worked really well for me during COVID because we were living in a small town, and it wouldn’t have been feasible for me to travel given that I didn’t have access to childcare.”

### **SURVEY FINDINGS ON CHILDCARE AND EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS**

Survey responses reinforce the findings from the interviews:

**10 respondents** cited lack of job opportunities in their area as a major employment barrier. family or childcare responsibilities as the biggest challenge in finding a suitable job.

**21 respondents** stated that flexible work options (remote work, part-time, flexible hours) would significantly help them access employment.



## 6. IMMIGRATION-RELATED BARRIERS

The interviewees' immigration status played a critical role in shaping their experience of accessing the Irish labour market. The complexities of employment permits and labour restrictions create additional layers of difficulty for women seeking employment. Employers' lack of understanding of employment permits and delays in processing residency permits contributed to the barriers migrant women face in securing meaningful work. However, interviewees who had a Stamp 4 residency permission which allowed them unrestricted access to the labour market did not raise their immigration status as a main barrier.

### CHALLENGES IN OBTAINING EMPLOYMENT PERMITS

Many migrant women shared their struggles with obtaining the necessary employment permits to be employed in Ireland. One woman described how the process of securing an employment permit was costly and time-consuming:

"I got my 1G visa and then went for the work permit, and the general work permit is such a challenge because a lot of the times the companies that you would work for would not have to deal with the general work permit. A lot of the time they'll have certain work permits they deal with, so that's the easiest step in the work permit scheme, whereas with the general work permit if you tell them that the job needs to go through a Labour Market Needs Test, they're like 'what is that? What does this even do?'"

Another participant explained how the financial burden of securing a work permit fell on her personally rather than her employer:

"Even though it took less than a month to get all my documents in place and get everything done, it was still a big challenge; I had to pay for my own work permit. My company didn't pay for it, so I had to pay that €1000 myself for the two years."

### LACK OF EMPLOYER KNOWLEDGE

Interviewees reported that Irish employers **do not understand the immigration system**, which often results in them avoiding hiring candidates who require work permits. One woman shared her frustration with how uninformed many employers are:

"I think it would be very helpful for companies to see support from advocacy services to explain to them how to work with permits and how they work; I think that's so crucial because a lot of the times HR teams and companies do not understand the system."

Another interviewee described how she had to personally research visa requirements and explain them to her employer:

"I ended up going to a solicitor, paying €200 to get the information, and then delivering it back to HR when they should have that information already handy. With Ireland growing in the number of migrants that are coming in, they should have those services available for them so that an HR person could reach out to an advocacy service and say, 'Hey, I need help with this situation.'"

This lack of understanding means that many migrant women are overlooked for jobs simply because employers do not want to engage with the complexities of work permits.

### **DELAYS IN RESIDENCY PERMIT PROCESSING**

Long waiting periods for residency permit renewals leave many migrant women in a state of uncertainty, making it difficult to apply for jobs or make long-term career plans. One woman described how the delays impacted her ability to start work:

"When I was getting that job with [ ], I had to wait for about three months to actually get my first Stamp 1G visa. So that was a big challenge. There's a lot going on—you're trying to get into a new job, and you also have to deal with all of that at the same time, so it's not a very easy process."

Another participant spoke about how her current immigration status made her future uncertain:

"The charity I work for has given me a temporary contract, and so I'm afraid that if they don't renew my visa, I'll not be able to stay in the country and earn back what I've been spending in the country between looking for employment and studying. I ended up paying around twenty-thousand euros due to the non-EU fees, and so I wanted to be able to get a job quickly to make that money back."

The uncertainty caused by visa renewal delays affects mental well-being, financial stability, and job security.

### **SURVEY FINDINGS ON IMMIGRATION-RELATED BARRIERS**

Survey responses reinforce the findings from the interviews:

- **7 respondents** identified discrimination or bias as a barrier to employment, which is often compounded by immigration-related stigma.
- **10 respondents** cited lack of job opportunities as a key challenge, with many of these positions requiring employment permits that employers were unwilling to sponsor.
- **5 respondents** explicitly mentioned work permits and immigration status as a barrier to securing employment.

## 7. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Education and training opportunities are crucial for career advancement, yet many migrant women face significant challenges in accessing them. Several interviewees noted that while they were eager to upskill, the barriers to entry—including high costs, lack of information, and administrative hurdles—made it difficult.

Several migrant women reported that they struggled to find clear and accessible information about further education and training opportunities. One interviewee explained:

"I contacted [NGO] saying I was in this situation, but I never got a response. If you try and never get responses, it's hard to keep trying."

Interviewees who had experience of universities in Ireland also noted that universities often fail to provide differentiated support for mature students and international graduates.

### HIGH COSTS

Many migrant women find that higher education and professional training programs in Ireland are prohibitively expensive, making it difficult for them to gain necessary qualifications. One interviewee who wanted to pursue a PhD in Ireland explained:

"My research teacher wanted to send me a scholarship and grants to apply for, to get a PhD, but she lacked the awareness of my situation. I don't have the forty-five thousand to spend on that!"

Another interviewee shared her struggle with financing additional education:

"I already had a master's degree in [ ], so I could not qualify for the SUSI grant here in Ireland. Unfortunately, we could not afford the full university fees for me to go back and do a degree."

Some programs are only accessible to those receiving social welfare support, leaving out women who do not qualify for financial assistance but still cannot afford private courses. One interviewee with a Stamp 3 residency permission was frustrated that because of her immigration status, she did not qualify for any financial support. She noted that even ETB English language classes excluded Stamp 3 holders.

### LACK OF SUITABLE TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Several interviewees reported that many available training programs were too basic for their qualifications and failed to provide the specialised skills they needed to advance in their careers. One woman, who previously worked in education, described her frustration:

"Most training programs for migrant women are for those with low literacy levels or no English. I was continuously overqualified for any of the programmes available."

Another interviewee explained how the available courses did not align with her professional background:

"I needed to upskill, but the available programs didn't fit my background. They were either too basic or too expensive. I had to find my own way."

The lack of bridging programmes means that many skilled migrant women are unable to transition smoothly into their professional fields in Ireland.

### **SURVEY FINDINGS ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Survey responses reinforce the findings from the interviews:

- **24 respondents** reported taking a PLC or further education course, while **9 respondents** pursued a degree or postgraduate study.
- **11 respondents** stated they would like to take a course but had not been able to, citing barriers such as financial constraints and lack of awareness.
- **15 respondents** reported that courses were too expensive, preventing them from upskilling.
- **13 respondents** cited family responsibilities as the main reason they could not pursue further education.
- **16 respondents** indicated that free or affordable courses would significantly improve their job prospects.

### **EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

Despite these challenges, some migrant women have found successful ways to access education and training through supportive programs and workplace initiatives.

- **Remote and Flexible Learning Options:** Some women benefited from online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they allowed for more flexibility while balancing family responsibilities.
- **Mentorship and Guidance Programs:** Some migrant women found mentors who helped them navigate the system, improving their chances of re-entering their profession.
- **Bridging Courses for Professional Fields:** Some organisations have piloted bridging courses to help migrant professionals meet Irish qualification standards more efficiently.

One woman who successfully transitioned into a new career shared her experience:

"The company I work for took the time to understand my background and helped me transition into a new career. They valued my experience even though it wasn't Irish work experience."

## 8. CONCLUSION

Migrant women in Ireland face multiple barriers when accessing employment, ranging from qualification recognition, language proficiency, and access to education and training to childcare responsibilities and immigration restrictions. Many of the women interviewed had substantial professional experience in their home countries, yet they struggled to have their skills recognised, often being forced to accept lower-paid jobs or work in unrelated sectors.

Key themes from this research reveal:

- The lack of recognition for international qualifications leaves highly educated and experienced women underemployed.
- Language barriers and the lack of advanced English training options hinder job applications and professional success.
- Childcare responsibilities disproportionately impact migrant women, particularly those without extended family support.
- Structural issues, such as limited public transport and rural isolation, make it difficult for migrant women to access employment opportunities.
- Immigration status, particularly the restrictions of employment permits and Stamp 1 or Stamp 2 visas, creates uncertainty and limits job choices.
- Many migrant women feel isolated and unsupported due to inadequate networking opportunities and employer biases.

Despite these challenges, positive examples of services and employer initiatives were highlighted, particularly mentorship programs, targeted job readiness courses, and flexible work policies that accommodate family responsibilities.

For Ireland to fully harness the skills and contributions of migrant women, significant improvements must be made at policy, employer, and community levels.



# 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. IMPROVING RECOGNITION OF INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

- Streamline qualification recognition processes to allow quicker and fairer access to regulated professions.
- Develop bridging courses and conversion programs to help skilled professionals transition into their fields in Ireland.
- Provide financial support for requalification and professional certification for migrant women, particularly in sectors facing labour shortages (e.g., healthcare, education).

## 2. ADDRESSING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

- Expand access to advanced English and professional communication courses for migrant women, including sector-specific training.
- Provide workplace English support programs to help employees improve fluency on the job.
- Employers should value multilingual skills rather than seeing accents or imperfect fluency as a weakness.

## 3. INCREASING ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- Expand free and subsidised training programs for migrant women looking to upskill or change careers.
- Ensure that adult education and career guidance programs accommodate the unique needs of migrant women, including those with advanced degrees.
- Offer flexible training options (e.g., evening, weekend, or remote learning) to accommodate childcare responsibilities.

## 4. SUPPORTING WOMEN WITH CHILDCARE RESPONSIBILITIES

- Increase affordable childcare options.
- Introduce workplace policies for flexible and remote work to support working mothers.

## 5. ADDRESSING IMMIGRATION-RELATED EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

- Reduce bureaucratic delays in employment permit processing, which create unnecessary uncertainty for migrant job seekers.
- Increase awareness among employers about work permits, to encourage hiring from migrant talent pools.

## 6. ENHANCING EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT AND NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

- Expand mentorship programs specifically designed for migrant women to navigate the job market.

- Encourage companies to adopt diversity and inclusion policies that actively recruit and support migrant women.
- Strengthen public employment services by tailoring supports to migrant women, including one-on-one career counselling and networking events.

## **7. ADDRESSING GEOGRAPHIC AND TRANSPORT BARRIERS**

- Improve public transport access in rural areas, making job opportunities more accessible to migrant women living outside cities.
- Expand remote work and hybrid job opportunities, particularly for migrant women with caregiving responsibilities.

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