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‘TOO IMPORTANT TO BE NEGLECTED’: REFUGEES IN EUROPE ARE NOW ESSENTIAL TO KEEP SOCIETIES AFLOAT

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Due to Covid-19 lockdown, the importance of ‘key workers’ performing ‘systemically relevant’ jobs is clearer. Many of these are migrants, most of them are women. An ICMPD data survey illustrates the importance of refugees to alleviate the disruption caused by the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not only having a drastic impact on health care systems globally, it is also turning the economic situation upside down in those countries implementing emergency measures to halt the virus. All over the world, schools are closed, production has halted and whole cities and regions are in lockdown. In some sectors, economic activity has come to a complete halt within days. Consequently, millions of jobs have been lost, stock markets tumble and a global recession seems unavoidable.

For most people who have kept their jobs, home office and video conference meetings are the new normal. But not for all: in recent weeks, attention has shifted to those essential workers needed to keep economies and countries running during the crisis. Jobs that cannot be replaced and work that cannot be postponed but must be carried out at the usual work place regardless of any general lockdown. This relates in particular to jobs in the health sector, but also to jobs in the food retail sector, agriculture, transportation and logistics, and the care sector. In some countries, persons in these occupations are now ‘key workers’, in other countries these jobs are referred to as ‘systemically relevant’, a term that in other times was associated with financial institutions and used for banks who were considered ‘too big to fail’. Now societies appreciate the importance of these sectors more and show them the [recognition and respect](#) they deserve but usually do not receive. Overnight, the people holding these jobs have become too important to be neglected any longer.

Countries like Germany have started to turn to migrant communities to help alleviate expected shortages in medical staff. And migrants – among these also refugees who arrived during 2015, are responding by offering help [to the health and care sector](#).

Five years ago and in another crisis, the arrival of a large number of refugees in a short period of time caused deep concerns all over Europe. In the meantime, however, large parts of these

refugees have integrated into their host societies and have become [economically self-sufficient](#). We take Austria as an example but it is evident that the situation is similar in many other European countries. Using data from ICMPD's FIMAS survey (on the refugee population) and the Austrian micro-census Labour Force Survey 2018 (on the total population), we compare to what extent refugees as a subgroup of the Austrian population are working in systemically relevant occupations, and compare their participation in these jobs with participation among the total working population.

[ICMPD's FIMAS refugee survey](#) is a longitudinal survey on labour market integration of refugees in Austria. It provides related information on more than 1,800 Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi and Iranian refugees, the main nationalities who arrived in Europe at the peak of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016. Their employment rate is still lower than the one of the total population, but figures show a clear trend: Refugees take time to integrate in the labour market. However, after five years of stay in Austria, around two-thirds are in employment.

For this short analysis, we specifically look at five job groups that are currently considered as key workers, as classified by the International Standards Classification of Occupation ([ISCO](#)). These occupations include health professionals which require academic degrees such as medical doctors, nursing and midwifery professionals or pharmacists; non-academic health professionals such as nursing and midwifery associate professionals, medical and pharmaceutical technicians or other health associate professionals; personal care workers such as child care workers and care workers in health services; sales workers such as shop and market salespersons or cashiers; and drivers including taxi, bus and truck drivers. Even though this list might be extended to other professions as well (e.g. police, public administration, etc.), the occupations included here feature many of the jobs which currently receive a lot of attention and, often for the first time, also a lot of [gratitude from the public](#).

Persons in selected systemically relevant jobs in Austria
 as percentage of total persons in gainful employment

	Refugees		Total population	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Health professionals	2.0%	6.6%	1.9%	6.7%
Health associate professionals	1.1%	9.2%	0.9%	2.3%
Personal care workers	3.1%	5.6%	0.7%	5.7%
Sales workers	12.4%	23.1%	4.1%	12.0%
Drivers and mobile plant operators	4.3%	0.2%	6.5%	0.4%
Other occupations	77.2%	55.3%	85.9%	73.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: ICMPD FIMAS+Integration² (weighted data); Statistik Austria (Mikrozensus 2018)

The health sector is a female dominated one. In Austria, around 9% of all women in employment work in health occupations, while it is only 3% among the men in employment. For refugees, this trend is even stronger. 16% of employed refugee women work in the health sector, either in academic or non-academic health occupations. Conversely, only 3% of the refugee men in employment work in the health sector. This might come as a surprise, as for medical doctors, recognition of qualification is a rather lengthy process requiring time and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. Less than half of those who have previously worked in a medically related field in their home countries do so in Austria. Other European countries face similar stumbling blocks for labour market integration of highly skilled in key jobs. [German provinces](#) now undertake efforts to engage migrant doctors, even if currently without a license, to make full use of all medical resources available in the country.

The personal care sector is hit particularly by Covid-19. Due to the lockdown of borders, expected shortages in home care are so dramatic that, similar to [Germany](#) with regard to intensive care nurses, Austria decided to [fly in care workers](#) who cannot continue their established practice of commuting from the neighbouring countries in the East and Southeast. In Austria, care work is a domain of female commuters. 6% of the total of all employed women in Austria whilst only 1% of men are working in these occupations. The share of refugee women in care work is similar to that of the overall Austrian female working population, while refugee men are more often in these occupations than other working men in Austria. Thus, there is not only great potential to train currently unemployed refugees to take up jobs in the

care sector but, in view of lasting disruptions due to the Covid-19 crisis, it is also vital to do so.

The largest share of employed refugees - and refugee women more specifically - works in retail, fills supermarket shelves with food and other goods, and handles cash and customers from behind Plexiglas sheeting. 23% of all employed refugee women and 12% of all refugee men work as shop and market salespersons or cashiers. This is more than double the share of the Austrian total working population.

Despite the disproportionate share of women in the key jobs highlighted, it would clearly be misleading to disregard the contribution of refugee men to keep the country going during the Covid-19 crisis. Among these, essential jobs typical for male employment include bus, truck and taxi drivers, who make sure that those not in home office arrive at their work place and [essential goods](#) make it to the supermarket shelves. Approximately one out of twenty employed refugee men works as a driver.

In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, appreciation grows for those workers we realise are most important for keeping up our daily lives. These jobs are predominantly held by women, overwhelmingly by migrant women, they are [badly-paid](#) and have low status.

Now, this is about to change. The Corona crisis shows that many of those who arrived at Europe's borders in the 2015 refugee crisis and who faced an uncertain future are now key to ensuring that European countries find their way through the crisis.

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