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## ARE RURAL AREAS ACROSS EUROPE VIABLE DESTINATIONS FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEE WOMEN?

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*The majority of the [nearly 7 million](#) Ukrainian refugees who have left their country since the outbreak of conflict in February 2022 are women who seek protection in neighbouring countries. Many of them are currently located in national capitals or large cities. Recent discussion on how to relieve the pressure on the infrastructure of these cities has focused on accommodating refugees in rural areas. Migration and integration research highlights several important aspects regarding the integration of refugees in rural areas.*

In its first 14 weeks, the war in Ukraine forced almost 7 million people to flee their homes and seek protection in neighbouring countries such as Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Moldova. With men aged 18 to 60 required to stay in the country, the vast majority of refugees are women. Most of them fled together with their child(ren). In April 2022, German authorities reported that [70%](#) of the roughly 600,000 Ukrainian refugees registered in that country were women, with an estimated 30-40% being [children under the age of 14](#).

Such disproportionally female mass migration is unprecedented in modern Europe. Moreover, as the demography of refugee movements since 2015 was completely different – the vast majority of refugees were young males – previous lessons learned have to be adapted to the different demographic realities of today's arrivals.

Most refugees move to capital or large cities. In some countries, particularly in Austria, Germany, Poland, and Czechia, this has spurred debate on the possibility of relieving the pressure on the public infrastructure of cities by accommodating refugees in rural areas. As a fast inflow of a high number of people puts strain on infrastructure and services, regional distribution might help to avoid overloading.

Migration and integration research highlights several important aspects for the integration of refugees in rural areas and small towns. Due to the peculiar demographics of the Ukrainian case, undertaking an examination of the integration conditions for women is of particular relevance.

## **Integration opportunities in cities**

In general, during the first phase of refugee movements triggered by war or natural disaster, the outflow tends to centre on cities in the same country or across an international border. These are the places where friends, relatives, or co-national emigrants from the region live and work and can offer housing and support.

When a crisis continues and refugees start to realise that they will not be able to return to their homes as early as they wished, finding employment becomes a central challenge. During this phase, cities are also the place where temporary jobs can be found, or where refugees may be able to earn income by opening small businesses. Schools and educational institutions also tend to be more abundant in the city; in villages typically only primary schools exist. Hospitals, psychotherapists, and other medical specialists are also more readily accessible.

In addition, relevant public administrative authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs), but also language schools and integration projects, are usually located in larger cities rather than in the countryside. Finding housing in larger cities is a main challenge, but as institutions and services needed by refugees are rarely found in villages and small towns, staying in the city is nevertheless a good choice.

In short, cities are the best place following arrival in a new country – when the protection seeker has to orient themselves to completely new living conditions. This is even more so the case for female refugees travelling alone or with children: The infrastructure and institutions to care for their children's needs are mainly found in cities, and in cities they will find a better security situation.

## **What the literature says about migration and integration in cities**

There is a wealth of literature on the importance of cities for the integration of migrants, and in particular refugees. Doug Saunder's book *Arrival City* (2010) praises the Brazilian *favelas*, the Turkish *gecekondu*, the *banlieues* of Paris, London's East End, and Berlin's Kreuzberg as breeding grounds for creativity, innovation, and social cohesion in the face of diversity. This book won the Donner Prize – Canada's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize – and quickly became the new go-to guide for city planners interested in migration.

In Saunder's book, the inclusive power of urban dwellings, their acceptance of ethnic and socio-cultural diversity, and their vibrant labour markets were cited as key to an innovative urban economy and attractiveness for academic and artistic talents, entrepreneurs, and international

businesspersons. Cities are described as the place where cultural differences can be translated into business opportunities and where high labour demand offers newcomers the possibility to survive and prosper – and as a place where people with different skin colours, religions, and cultural traditions can live side by side peacefully, without being forced to assimilate to an often rather closed community culture like that which exists in many small village settings.

In this vein, research on migration to and integration in cities has become more prominent, with an explosion in the number of articles, monographs and edited volumes on migration and urban development. At the same time, city governments have increasingly staked their claim to have a say in migration and integration policymaking. The consensus of research in this area is clear: While large migrant and refugee inflows into cities are not without their challenges and conflicts, large cities are nevertheless a good place for migrants to integrate.

### **The male-dominated structure of rural labour markets**

Rural areas in Europe are facing two general trends, which in general diminish their potential for migrant integration: Depopulation and population ageing, with the associated decline of the regional economy. All over Europe, young people are continuing to leave their villages and smaller towns for education and training opportunities in larger cities. They also tend not to return after earning their diploma – better opportunities for employment, an anonymous private life, and leisure and recreation lead to a widespread preference for larger cities.

However, it is necessary in this aspect to distinguish between rural areas and medium-sized towns (of over 25,000 inhabitants). The specific attributes of the medium-sized town setting is discussed in depth below.

The traditional economic structure of many rural areas is a further reason for this phenomenon. Offering mainly traditionally “male” jobs in the building sector, repair of cars, and agricultural machinery, alongside traditional trade and craft enterprises, trained craftsmen will still find employment in rural areas. Population ageing and the retirement of the boomer generation has even led to slightly improved labour market opportunities for migrant men with vocational qualifications. In rural areas not academics, but vocationally qualified workers, are in demand. The end effect has been that companies that have not previously employed any migrants have started to recruit among this pool.

## **A dim future for qualified workers in rural areas**

In contrast, highly qualified professionals of any gender (e.g. those working in IT, medicine, finance, or the social sciences) will most likely not have a professional future in rural areas. Despite the trend for increased home-office and remote working, professional careers in most sectors will still need regular presence at urban workplaces.

The situation is worse for medium-qualified women than it is for their male counterparts. There are very few sectors offering medium-qualified positions for women in rural areas – mostly in retail, child care, office support, or care for the elderly; or in the hospitality industry, in tourist areas. These jobs are most often part-time, low-paid, and without future career prospects.

However, they do fit with the archetypical [one-and-a-half-earner family model](#) seen in many European villages and small towns, with the man as the main wage earner and the woman as part-time earner caring for the children – a family model not adhered to by many young women today. Child care facilities in rural areas often offer only part-time care, and the lack of public transport makes it challenging to reach a workplace located several kilometres away. Young women searching for greater gender equality in their private life and/or whom are eager to pursue their professional career are thus even less likely to return to their village than young men.

## **Rural areas offer better integration conditions for men than for women**

This movement has not gone unnoticed by migration research. Over the past five years, a growing number of [studies](#) on migrant integration in the countryside have highlighted the specific challenges, but also the advantages, of rural settlements for integration. On the positive side, these studies have highlighted that in some, but not all, villages and small towns, better housing conditions and easy mobilisation of CSOs and individuals, alongside municipal administration support, can improve integration. Intensive personal contacts and direct communication with decision-makers may ease access to information, facilitate fast decisions, and solve misunderstandings through direct exchange. Individuals volunteering to support newly arrived refugees are often much more effective than public administrations – and easier to reach. But short distances in the social world typically cannot compensate for long distances to the workplace and lack of child care facilities, which push migrant women out of the labour market. Negative perceptions of migrants and racist prejudices might also have more [immediate effects](#) than in larger cities.

So, despite all the advantages, there is one common caveat among the various recent studies conducted: Rural areas offer decisively better integration conditions for men than for women, and are particularly challenging environments for single mothers. Labour market integration of refugee women in rural areas will thus need specific structural and individual support actions to be successful.

### **More opportunity in towns**

As mentioned, the situation is slightly different in medium-sized towns, which may offer employment opportunities, better child care provisions, and language teaching and integration support infrastructure. As a [recent study](#) on integration in European regions has shown, integration conditions, integration support measures, and integration policies all vary widely among European regions, ranging from a fully fledged support structure to a total neglect of migrants' integration needs.

In addition, this study highlights that integration support is usually better developed in larger cities than in smaller municipalities.

### **How to integrate refugee women into rural labour markets?**

In addition to the low number of full-time jobs for women in villages and small towns, one has to be aware that sectors with a high share of women participants (such as medicine and retail) are typically located in larger cities – as are administrative headquarters. In an environment where there is high competition for well-paying jobs and social networks play a decisive role in finding employment, refugee women, who are not part of these networks, will need specific support.

To help even out the playing field, these women will not only need to be fluent in the official language of the host country but will also need mentoring to become visible job candidates. Integration projects from rural areas highlight the importance of actively approaching companies in small towns and rural areas to ask for internships and temporary employment to make refugee women part of the pool of potential employees. This is necessary as employers in small companies tend to first choose employees who possess mastery of the local language and are part of their personal networks – and thus have to be convinced to reach out to refugee women.

Due to the low number of jobs for women, most Ukrainian migrants who take up residence in a village or small town will be forced to look for a job within commuting distance of that location. But for this to be viable, issues in two main areas must be solved: child care and mobility.

## **Gender-specific challenges for refugee women in rural areas**

Addressed more generally above, some of the key gendered challenges faced by refugee women are further broken down below.

### *Inadequate access to child care*

As highlighted, the availability of affordable child care is key for the integration of refugee women into the labour market. This is particularly true of rural areas and small towns, where the average number of kindergarten facilities is low. There is also a distinct lack of all-day child care facilities. Often kindergartens require registration months or even a year in advance, and all-day care is accessible only for (full-time) employed parents. Women thus often cannot react to a job offer in time due to the lack of securing a kindergarten place. In systems with half-day schools and kindergartens that close at noon, employment opportunities for refugee women greatly diminish, since most jobs are incompatible with such a schedule. Thus, refugee women, particularly in rural areas, are forced to take up part-time jobs or jobs below their qualification level.

Compared to the general female population, [refugee women tend to have smaller social networks](#). Many might not have their partners, (grand)parents, or other family or friends living in their neighbourhood (who could potentially help provide child care). Therefore, refugee women typically must rely heavily on institutional support for child care. Otherwise, their entry into the labour market is often significantly deferred, or occurs at a level that is below their qualification.

This is particularly pertinent in the Ukrainian case. With men not permitted to leave the country, this source of support has thus been cut off for many Ukrainian women refugees, who now find themselves living outside their homeland without their partner.

### *Low mobility*

While men might still find jobs in rural areas, roles sought out by women are often in sales, health care, or administration and tend to be offered in cities and larger towns, a long commute from rural areas. To reach jobs, vocational training, internships, or child care on time often requires a car, because of the lack of public transport. However, not all refugees can afford the purchase and maintenance of a car or hold a driving licence.

The solution to these barriers vary according to local circumstances: Some integration projects organise shuttle services for their clients, while others convince kindergartens to open earlier. In any case, solutions to these structural challenges need proactive engagement from civil society organisations in support of refugees and sufficiently funded integration projects.

## Navigating the way forward

Summing up: The chances for labour market integration of refugee women in rural areas are considerably lower than for men, as local labour markets tend to be geared toward male employment, while the lack of an expansive social network, adequate child care, and public transport hinders women in finding work.

Given limited resources for integration efforts, it might be better to invest in integration in and around larger cities, as Petra Draxl, the CEO of the Vienna Labour Market Service, [recently stated](#): “These refugees should by no means be transferred to remote and depopulated areas, where they will not stay. We need good integration measures in and around the metropolises.”

*The authors recently finalised a study on the labour market integration of refugee women in Austria, Germany, and Norway ([FARIM](#)).*

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