DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MINI-HANDBOOK

Challenges and Good Practices Regarding Migrants' Access to Basic Services in Germany

This publication was funded by the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. The content of this publication represents the views of the author only and is his/her sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

TABLE OF CONTENT

Migrants' Access to Basic Services in Germany: An Overview of This Handbook

This mini-handbook aims to inform policymakers and service providers about the **key barriers** regarding migrants' access to basic services in Germany, while also sharing **good practices** and **recommendations** on how to overcome such challenges. In doing so, the mini-handbook focuses on migrants' access to services across **5 specific policy areas**: (1) employment, (2) education, (3) healthcare, (4) housing, and (5) social assistance.

The information included in this mini-handbook is based on extensive fieldwork and semi-structured interviews conducted in the cities of Offenbach, Frankfurt am Main, Fulda, and Marburg with 48 migrants (of different nationalities and legal statuses), as well as 31 service providers working with migrant populations in the above-indicated areas. As such, the mini-handbook provides **valuable evidence** that can help refine existing programs, initiatives, and policies aiming to tackle obstacles that migrants still face when accessing basic services in Germany.

Before going into the details regarding migrants' access to different services, it is also worth mentioning that such access remains strongly influenced by the general features of the **German welfare system**, especially its high level of decentralization, low social expenditure, and the existence of different provisions aiming to meet migrants' social needs (see Box 1).

Box 1. Key features and strengths of the German welfare system shaping access to basic services

- Combines social insurance programs based on individuals' labor activity –depending on minimum periods of contributions– and social assistance benefits provided regardless of the contributions.
- The clearing offices (*Clearingstelle*) are intended primarily for newly arrived immigrants who have received a residence permit for the first time and their families. At these offices, immigrants can get information about the regularization process, the recognition of foreign qualifications, advice on benefit entitlements, and resources from the Immigration Advice Service for Adult Immigrants (MBE) and Youth Immigration Services (JMD).
- The Residence Act provides the rules for integrating resources at the federal level, focusing on integration courses. The Asylum Procedures Acceleration Act introduced job-related language training, which explicitly promotes labor market integration through vocational German language promotion courses.
- Resources for primary and secondary education teachers to better support migrant pupils, including "welcome" classrooms (special classes enrolling students with no or little German knowledge), the course of German as a second language (Daz) and the figure of school social workers.
- In Frankfurt am Main, the public health department established humanitarian consultation hours in 2001, aimed at refugees without identity papers and health insurance. Doctors provide immediate free medical assistance anonymously.
- The KoGi pilots: Initiative aimed at training immigrants who are not proficient in German about the functioning of the healthcare system by means of community pilots who act as language mediators in medical consultations.
- Overall, a strong network of NGOs, migrant associations, and public agencies works together to guide and support newly arrived migrants.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Employment

In Germany, access to employment depends primarily on obtaining residence permits, which is a pre-requisite for getting a job in the formal labor market. Yet, other elements such as having a good command of the German language and work experience in Germany can also influence migrants' employability.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Migrants' labor and social precariousness

Long working hours are underlined as the main reason to explain why some migrants cannot attend training courses aimed at improving employability.

- This would be especially difficult for those who, along with precarious employment, have dependent family members and **weak social networks** –relatives and friends– in Germany.
- Labor precariousness is further aggravated among people with no residence/work permit. **Asylum seekers stand out from the rest**, as they are not allowed to work in the regular labor market.

Lack of employment history and job skills to work in Germany

According to job counselors, the German labor market needs highly qualified workers with language proficiency.

- The lack of work experience and training in Germany is perceived as a key factor shaping migrants' labor market inclusion, particularly for middle and high-skilled workers. Yet, **professional and academic credentials of migrant workers obtained in their countries of origin, are not always considered by German employers**. In this regard, job counselors and migrants underline the amount of time and financial resources that migrants should invest in obtaining recognition for their qualifications.
- **Proficiency in English** is also key in accessing high-quality jobs. Therefore, migrants from countries where English is widely spoken would find it easier than those who are only fluent in German.
- **Differences in labor markets in origin countries and in Germany** usually imply a lack of knowledge on how to search a job in Germany. Professionals and migrants emphasized this unfamiliarity is particularly apparent in: (1) the role played by German employment counselors as well as the paperwork required to apply for a job (for example: how to write the CV and the training certificates required); and (2) the functioning of the Dual Vocational Training System.

Digital gap

With the end of face-to-face assistance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants find it more difficult to deal with administrative formalities related to their employment status.

- Before the pandemic, migrants interested in communicating with civil servants could do so in person, sometimes accompanied by counselors, who translated the information provided and ensured that procedures were carried out correctly. **The suspension of in-person attendance during the pandemic led counselors to shoulder the responsibility for assisting immigrants** how to deal with online applications, which was seen as a rather difficult task since: (1) some immigrants are not proficient in German; and (2) some do not have devices (laptops, tablets) nor internet access at home.

Discrimination in the labor market

Employers' practices are determinant in migrants' employability.

- Providers and migrants alike describe situations where (1) **migrant workers' labor rights are not respected** (unpaid holidays, excessive working hours, and unfair dismissals), and (2) have to cope with **racism**. They mention that although there are hostile attitudes towards several groups, including Eastern Europeans and Asians, migrants of **Turkish or Arab origins seem to face stronger rejection** in the workplace.
- Interviews also mentioned the attitudes of personnel working at the **Foreigners' Registration Office**, with several references to their misbehavior towards immigrants who come to the service to apply for residence and work permits.

GOOD PRACTICES

Digital training and spaces with technological devices for immigrants

- Considering the digital barriers that some migrants and asylum seekers face, several public institutions and organizations provide them with digital training **as well as places where they can be guided in processing online applications**.

Long-term immigrants supporting those recently arrived

- Professionals indicate that some NGOs tend to match immigrants with a longer period of residence in Germany with newcomers, so that the former can serve as **role models and support** those newly arrived in their work and training pathways.

Language training for immigrant women

- Bearing in mind the specific constraints that women face in accessing jobs, some CSOs and NGOs provide them with **training specifically tailored to their schedules**, mainly German courses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure migrants' inclusion into the labor market, it is important to facilitate the recognition of their skills and prior qualifications, also meeting the needs of the German labor market.

Additionally, it is necessary to boost communication between civil society organizations and the Foreigners' Registration Office, also enabling employment counselor to accompany migrants to these offices. It would also be useful to lunch awareness-raising campaigns targeting officials of the Foreigners' Registration Offices and human resources staff.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Education

Compulsory education in Germany requires all children aged 6 to 15 to attend school full-time at the primary and secondary levels. Despite a range of programs and resources available to teachers to support migrant pupils, the latter return lower academic performances than native pupils, with this gap being more pronounced in Germany compared to other European countries.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Socio-economic vulnerability in migrants' households

Families' social vulnerability affects migrant pupils' educational inclusion and performance in many ways.

- Migrants' living conditions often goes hand-in-hand with **educational credentials**. Immigrant parents sometimes have scarce time and limited competences to follow the academic development of their children and help them with homework.
- **Families with refugee status** –particularly those living in accommodations for refugees– are in a particularly complicated situations in which their labor and housing circumstances impede the regular follow up of children' educational trajectories.
- Some pupils originating from migrant households face a significant **digital barrier**, which are reflected in (1) the shortage of technological devices such as computers and tablets, even a lack of internet access in some cases, and (2) parents' lack of digital skills. It became particularly evident during the strictest months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when migrant pupils were forced to attend online classes from home.

Linguistic barriers

Learning German remains one of the main obstacles affecting migrant pupils' performance at school.

- The risk of academic failure among migrant pupils is further aggravated **when parents are not proficient in German**, which entails significant difficulties in: (1) helping children with homework; (2) communicating with teachers; and (3) understanding guidelines and recommendations provided by educational centers and their personnel.
- Based on the importance attached to language, early exposure to German language is also **a determinant for the academic development** of immigrant pupils at later educational stages.

Educational divide between the country of origin and Germany

The gap between the educational curricula in migrants' countries of origin and Germany is another significant barrier in the school performance of some immigrant pupils.

- Non-EU pupils (especially those originating from the Maghreb) seem to face greater difficulties because the educational systems in their origin countries tend to be significantly different from the one in Germany.

Cultural distance and gender roles

Educators and migrant parents alike consider that the educational pathways of migrant pupils can also be influenced by cultural patterns, with a focus on gender role models.

- Most references point to the strong **role division among Muslims**, with mothers being primarily responsible for childcare. According to teachers, it usually leads to situations in which their sons seek to strengthen their masculinity by challenging maternal authority.
- Educators also consider that the **expression of Islam through clothing** –mainly the use of the veil– may be perceived as a sign of their lack of interest in integrating with the rest of classmates.
- To provide better assistance to migrant pupils, professionals assess positively the possibility of **attending diversity management courses**. Although most of them report that they have received some training in this regard, it is considered rather scarce.

GOOD PRACTICES

Initiatives to facilitate communication with migrant pupils and their families

- Educators believe that one of the strengths of German schools is their **extensive network with local CSOs** that can help immigrant families navigate the German educational system. At times, these organizations –mainly NGOs– provide schools with interpreters.
- Given the lack of language skills of some migrant parents and their lack of information on how the German educational system works, some schools **have websites with information in several foreign languages**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers emphasize the shortage of personnel and excessive bureaucracy faced in their daily work as the most significant barriers to assisting migrant pupils. Along with parents, they also point to the uneven implementation of educational programs aimed at meeting the specific needs of these pupils across German schools.

Therefore, any measure intended to improve this situation should include hiring personnel (both teachers and administrative staff). There is also a need for training courses aimed at increasing teachers' knowledge of other cultures and curbing the spread of racial prejudice, especially towards Muslims.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Healthcare

Most residents in Germany are covered by the social health insurance, which is mandatory for employees below a certain income threshold. Migrants with resident permit are typically enrolled in this insurance system and have the same entitlements as all others, although on average, they use services less frequently. Most refugees and asylum seekers are eligible for healthcare in Germany under the provisions of the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act and the Residence Act. However, the extent of their eligibility and access to healthcare services and health insurance can vary based on their specific residence status.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Labor precariousness

Migrants' socio-economic vulnerability –which is directly associated with job instability– as a key obstacle for accessing health services.

- Since many immigrants cannot afford health insurance, they are **only entitled to access emergency care**. The situation is particularly serious for specific profiles such as women in prostitution.
- **Asylum seekers are the most disadvantaged group**. Although under the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act, they have access to medical assistance, additional healthcare benefits that go beyond regular care (for instance, extended diagnostic tests or surgeries) require additional permits to cover costs.
- For the most vulnerable profiles, **the Humanitarian Consultations** is the only alternative. However, doctors working for these consultations consider the total number of hours to be insufficient given the increasing number of patients and the shortage of clinicians.

Skills and knowledge of the health system

Access to healthcare services is easier for highly-skilled immigrants who are proficient in German.

- Familiarity with the German healthcare system is related to language proficiency and academic credentials. Therefore**, migrants with little command of German and lower educational levels face major problems in accessing healthcare services**, being strongly dependent on counseling provided by civil society organizations. According to practitioners, this is the case for most African migrants who come to the service. Within this group, women seem to experience lower proficiency in the German language and greater difficulties in learning it because of their lower educational levels.
- Migrants' limited awareness about the functioning of the German healthcare system is also explained by the **differences with the systems in their countries of origin** such as primary care and regular medical check-ups. It may result in the spread of misconceptions about the consequences of accessing the service, particularly among people with irregular status, who often refuse to go to primary healthcare centers out of the fear of being deported.
- Alongside the lack of technological resources, **the digital skills gap** is also considered as a major factor hindering migrants' access to healthcare. From providers' viewpoint, it often prevents immigrants from carrying out online procedures, medical appointments or downloading clinical records, an aspect that was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cultural distance and gender roles

According to clinicians and migrants, the combination of cultural beliefs and customs shape migrants' likelihood of accessing medical services.

- Sometimes, immigrant customs entail difficulties in using health services due to the **different concepts of illness and body** in some cultures, or the spreading of certain ideas, e.g. some Eastern European users refusing to be vaccinated.
- In this scenario, immigrant communities play an important role in supplying medical care, which leads some migrants to use the German healthcare resources in a more sporadic way than non-migrants.
- Cultural differences in **gender roles also affect service provision**, with some male companions speaking on behalf of their wives and showing reluctance to involve women directly in healthcare discussions.
- **A critical barrier for some migrant women related to their differentiated integration into the German society** compared to men, often compounded by a lack of German language skills. This impediment often affects their independence and access to healthcare services. Both professionals and migrants point to the need for adapted communication strategies to effectively engage with female migrants.

GOOD PRACTICES

Collaborative network of organizations

- Alliances with other services –such as Clearing Offices- and civil society organizations are **one of the main strengths of the German healthcare system**. This cooperation allows clinicians to reach out to the most vulnerable groups such as women in prostitution, Roma, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. Also, providers oftentimes ask civil society organizations and migrant local organizations for translators and interpreters.

Information exchange with colleagues

- When clinicians are unaware of the requirements that immigrants and refugees must meet in accessing medical services, they usually **turn to their peers for information**. Although this is an informal practice, they believe that it would be desirable to promote meeting places for sharing experiences and knowledge on how to provide better assistance to refugees and immigrant patients.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As migrants make less use of the German healthcare system when compared to non-migrants, particularly because of language barriers, cultural beliefs and misconceptions, there is a need for more information campaigns on access to healthcare. Counseling by social workers trained both in social law and intercultural competencies is also deemed necessary to help migrants in navigating the healthcare system efficiently. On the professionals' side, initiatives exist to facilitate intercultural mediation, such as KoGi. Likewise, all interviewees reported having received courses on intercultural competency at some point during their academic training and

working career. Yet, it is need to increase their knowledge about the social rights and healthcare resources that migrants are entitled to in Germany.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Housing

In Germany, social housing is based on funding or subsidized loans, which can be obtained by all types of owners who must observe the obligation of restricted allocation; this is, renting out the dwellings to low-income people at lowered rents. This sort of accommodation is managed by the public housing offices. The *Wohnberechtigungsschein* is the official certificate that a tenant must submit to prove entitlement to move into social housing.

Migrants face some important barriers when it comes to renting as a result of general supply-side constraints, namely: dwindling stock of housing, lack of social accommodation, and strict criteria for accessing it. In the case of immigrants wishing to access social housing, only those with a German residence permit linked to a job are eligible.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Precarious living conditions

Migrants' socio-economic vulnerability as the main obstacle to accessing housing, which is closely related with their administrative status.

- On paper, only non-Germans with a residence permit are allowed to register at the housing office. In the case of low-income applicants, part of the housing costs may be covered by public funds, through job offices. Yet, according to providers and migrants, in practice, **candidates of most socially vulnerable groups** (for example, migrants with temporary residence permits or unstable jobs) **are often rejected by housing offices.**

Migrant housing needs

Social housing is not tailored to migrants' profiles and family characteristics.

- For migrants who are legally eligible for social housing, their **family composition** is often a problem. According to providers and migrants, the German housing market is characterized by small flats with no more than two rooms, which make it difficult for larger families to live in them.
- The situation is particularly serious for those with special needs, such as **disabled and elderly migrants**, as the available social housing is often not adapted to their needs.
- **In the case of asylum seekers, shelters are the only alternative**. In these accommodations, large groups of people are forced to share spaces with no privacy. Additionally, although the law stipulates that asylum seekers must live in reception centers for a maximum of 24 months, this period is often exceeded due to: (1) delays in processing asylum applications by German authorities, and (2) lack of housing alternatives.
- In contrast, housing providers argue that **Ukrainian refugees have benefited from a preferential treatment by German authorities**, in light of the provision of both social and private housing specifically allocated to them.

Unawareness of housing services

Professionals state that some immigrants and refugees lack information on how the housing counseling services work.

- This is associated with the non-existence of this resource in some origin countries. In the case of refugees, it implies **many of them are unfamiliar with the waiting times and requirements for accessing social housing.**
- This **lack of knowledge is even greater for non-German-speaking immigrants** who are eligible for social housing. According to providers and migrants' experience, although is not compulsory, a good command of German is often a well-regarded characteristic by housing office personnel when it comes to allocating social dwellings.
- Providers also point to the significant **digital barrier** among immigrants, which is reflected in the shortage of technological devices such as computers and tablets or even internet access. As a result, these immigrants faced serious difficulties in submitting online formalities for accessing social housing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perceptions and attitudes towards migrants

Some migrant groups suffer from greater prejudices by homeowners and personnel of the social housing office.

- **Racialized people and Muslims** stand out above the rest of groups. In providers' view, many homeowners refuse to rent housing to them out of fears of payment defaults and on the grounds that their cleanliness standards fall far short of those required by lessors.
- By contrast, **Ukrainian refugees have a comparative advantage in accessing housing**. Although German authorities have allocated specific accommodations to this group since the beginning of the Russian occupation in 2022, according to providers, without these resources, these refugees would have been able to access social and private housing more easily than other groups because of the greater social acceptance towards them.

Gender aspects

Single mothers with children find it more difficult to access both social and private housing than male-headed households.

- Female migrants tend to have a more precarious socio-economic situation than their male counterparts since they tend to concentrate in part-time jobs that allow them to set time for childcare. As a result, **they usually have lower incomes so homeowners and housing office personnel are often reluctant to rent housing to them**. Consequently, many of these women are forced to move to the outskirts of the city, far from their workplaces and public services.

GOOD PRACTICES

Alliances with CSOs

- In the specific field of social housing, **collaborating oftentimes with civil society organizations is seen as an opportunity** for: (1) guaranteeing dwellings tailored to immigrant and refugees' needs, and (2) providing adequate resources to this population, mainly by referring users. In addition, such collaboration gives providers the possibility to fill some service deficiencies, for instance, by providing them with translators.

Language training for women

- Considering the specific social vulnerability of migrant women, some civil society organizations provide **German courses addressed to them**, which are very well appreciated by these users.

Counseling outside the office during the COVID-19 pandemic

- An innovative initiative developed at that time consisted of counseling outside service providers' offices, **in open spaces where immigrants used to meet with peers**, such as parks. Although professionals and migrants interviewed provide a positive assessment on this initiative, the latter indicate that it is currently not operational as it leads to increasing workloads for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information gathered in the interviews with housing providers and immigrants, it appears necessary to implement legal measures aimed at increasing the supply of housing – both social and private – in German cities with a high proportion of migrants, tailored to the specific needs of this population. In the case of refugees and asylum seekers, measures should also include reducing the waiting times for accessing social housing, so that they can get their lives moving back to normal as soon as possible.

For migrants with resident permit who are registered as unemployed, the responsible authority is the Jobcenter. This institution is in charge of the disbursement of unemployment benefits as well as for the provision of other benefits and measures for integration into the labor market; job training, support with job applications, language courses etc. For persons who are not registered as unemployed (e.g. because they have reached the age of retirement or are unable to work due to health-related reasons), the responsible authority is the Social Welfare Office.

Since August 2016, beneficiaries of protection are generally obliged to take up their place of residence within the Federal State in which their asylum procedures have been conducted for a maximum period of three years. In these cases, social benefits are only provided in that respective municipality.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Socio-economic vulnerability

Social workers are concerned about migrants who struggle to meet basic needs.

- The socio-economic precariousness of some immigrants is particularly acute among **those who do not have regular and stable legal status** –e.g. asylum seekers– especially if they belong to most **vulnerable groups** such as disabled, elderly, and LGTBIQA+ people.
- This precariousness is often associated with a significant **digital barrier** in terms of: (1) scarcity of technological devices at home (laptops, tablets, etc.) and 2) lack of digital skills. The communication with civil servants is frequently done online since the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, immigrants who are not able to deal with Apps –such as elderly individuals–, face serious problems in submitting their online applications.

Limited language and academic skills

Knowledge of the German language and recognition of qualifications obtained in countries of origin are essential to ensure migrants' socio-occupational inclusion.

- The digital barrier is closely linked to immigrants' **language proficiency**: those who cannot understand German find it much more difficult to surf public agencies' websites. Additionally, they are constrained to communicating via telephone with employment counselors or civil servants.
- Language skills are associated with **length of stay and educational background**. Newcomers who arrived with low or non-academic qualifications find it particularly difficult to learn German and are more in need of social assistance. In contrast, long-term residents and those who arrived recently but with high educational credentials –including English proficiency– are more likely to improve their job skills in a short period of time. Among the latter group, interviewees mention especially the cases of Syrians and Ukrainians.
- Social workers and migrants alike concur that obtaining **recognition of prior academic qualifications and training** is a tortuous and costly bureaucratic procedure for newly arrived immigrants, which ultimately represents a major obstacle to access better jobs.
- Overall, immigrants lack information on how the social assistance system works, which frequently leads to **not using social services in situations of need**. The main reason is the different functioning –or even absence– of social assistance services in migrants' origin countries.

Gender aspects

Migrant women often have different social assistance needs than men.

- From female migrants and providers' perspectives, this is associated with the fact that **women tend to be the main responsible for caring for dependent family members**, mainly children, which restricts their possibilities of attending German courses and vocational training given schedule incompatibility.

GOOD PRACTICES

Multiplier actions to empower migrants

- To promote immigrants' independence of social assistance and increase their autonomy, some providers carry out **training actions** aimed at: (1) encouraging social leadership (namely, immigrants helping immigrants), and (2) stimulating their associationism (for instance, by implementing courses on how to set up civil society organizations).

Specific training for migrants

- As female migrants face specific constraints affecting their possibilities to attend training, some civil society organizations provide **German courses adapted to their schedules**.
- Additionally, **practical-oriented language courses for immigrant students** are offered by some organizations, addressed to those who want to improve their speaking skills, for whom regular school lessons are not sufficient.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Facilitating and speeding up the process of recognition of migrants' academic qualifications and skills is necessary to promote their rapid inclusion into the German labor market, which would reduce their dependency on social services. It is also important to allocate resources to promote the labor market integration of newly arrived women, specifically language courses and childcare services adapted to their working hours.