DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MINI-HANDBOOK

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

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TABLE OF CONTENT

Migrants' Access to Basic Services in Hungary: 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 Hungary, 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 Budapest, Mogyoród, Debrecen, and Gödöllő with 40 migrants (of different nationalities and legal statuses), as well as 20 service providers working with migrant populations in the above-indicated areas. This document 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 Hungary.

Before going into the details regarding migrants' practical access to different services, it is also worth mentioning that such access remains strongly influenced by the general features of the **Hungarian welfare system,** especially the work-based redistribution system and the lack of public expenditure in housing and employment (see Box 1).

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

- A work-based redistribution system: the main beneficiaries of the various social benefits are those who are/were in paid employment. Beneficiaries of international protection, temporary protection applicants, persons holding permanent residence permits, and (with certain limits) holders of a student residence permit can take up employment without a work permit. These groups have the same social rights as Hungarian citizens.
- Healthcare institutions operate on a territorial level, based on the address of residence. People with a declared job can receive free public healthcare as part of their tax is taken from social security contributions. This applies to beneficiaries of international protection, persons with permanent residence permits and third-country nationals with work permit. Refugees and persons with permanent residence permits who are not working must pay a monthly social security contribution (just like Hungarian nationals).
- Primary schools also operate on a territorial basis, with a compulsory admission requirement for children living in the school area. Admission to secondary schools and universities is by entrance examination. There are government-funded English-language scholarship programmes for non-EU university students.
- Beneficiaries of international protection and persons with permanent residence permits have access to mainstream social housing options: homeless shelters, homes for abused women, and temporary accommodations for families in need. They can also apply to municipalities' social rental housing tenders. For people with a work residence permit, it is common for employers to arrange accommodation in a work shelter.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Employment

Several barriers hamper migrants' integration into the Hungarian labor market, especially in higher quality jobs. Migrant workers often take up jobs with low salaries and long working hours.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Socio-economic vulnerability and skills

The socio-economic vulnerability of immigrants forces them to accept undignified working conditions because they cannot risk losing their source of income and residence.

- This dependence on their jobs implies that even if they are informed about their employment rights, they often do not enforce them out of fear of being fired. Interviewees pinpoint that **immigrant workers tend to be concentrated in low-skilled jobs**, some of them under exploitation. Additionally, most of them are **often employed through temporary work agencies**, which may apply different regulations.
- **The lack of a social support network** often makes it more difficult for immigrants to access the Hungarian labor market. The role of personal connections is essential, and often becomes the lifeline for many immigrants in securing employment.
- Highly qualified immigrants also face **difficulties inrecognition of labor experience and academic qualifications from abroad**. Therefore, they are unable to access a job similar to the one they previously had. This downgrade is also associated with the **language barrier**.
- Employment counselors observe that migrant **women usually have more limited language skills**, previous qualifications, or work socialization, which hinders their access to employment.

Discrimination in the labor market

Job counselors and migrants draw attention to prejudices from Hungarian employers and colleagues towards immigrant workers.

- Prejudices are deeply connected to specific origins/nationalities, with **immigrants from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia experiencing more instances of discrimination**. Professionals and migrants alike also underline the Islamophobia faced by Muslims.
- Employment counselors note that **English-speaker migrants who work at multinational companies** in highly qualified positions concurring with their qualifications, **face little to no discrimination** by other Hungarian co-workers or employers since they work in a more multicultural environment.
- Migrants may also experience **prejudices from their coworkers**. In predominantly domestic work environments, **racialized migrants are more prone to feel discriminated against** and to hear inappropriate comments about their physical appearance and their command of the Hungarian language from their colleagues.

Bureaucracy

The complex and time-consuming paperwork that migrants must deal with to regularize their status often delays their access to the labor market.

- **Changes in migratory statuses** – particularly from student to employee– can be tortuous, according to migrants and job counselors, which often **discourages employers from hiring immigrants.**
- **Obtaining the social security number** that allows immigrants to work in Hungary is the most challenging bureaucratic hurdle identified. Non-Hungarian speakers often resort to immigration lawyers to collect these administrative requirements, since the procedures may be particularly difficult for them.

Gender aspects

Employment barriers are gender-biased, with women facing specific hurdles.

- Professionals state that **female immigrants often have lower language proficiency, qualifications, and work experience than their male counterparts**, which hamper their access to the Hungarian labor market.
- In addition, women also cope with **further difficulties in balancing their responsibilities** as workers and mothers. Since they are often responsible for the care of other family members (particularly children), child-friendly jobs –characterized by low salaries– tend to be the only alternative for them.
- Interviewees also point to **specific prejudices towards immigrant women by employers**, even for those with high educational credentials, which constrains their chances of pursuing a career in Hungary.
- According to job counselors, the integration of **female Muslims** into the labor market may be particularly difficult, with abundant references to their feeling of uncomfortableness because of working with male colleagues.

GOOD PRACTICES

Alliance with social entities

- When immigrants visit job centers with problems that go beyond job search (for example, finding accommodation or school enrolment), professionals working in those centers often **contact other organizations or social workers who can assist in specific cases**.

Employment facilitators

- In an attempt to avoid discrimination and racism toward immigrant workers by employers and co-workers, some job counselors often **accompany them during the first day of work**.
- Some labor advisors also organize **community events to raise awareness about the culture and characteristics of different countries**. They also indicate that some human resources departments and job-seeking organizations hold seminars on the history and religion of Hungary, to ensure that immigrant workers are well informed about the local culture.
- Certain NGOs have created **labor market projects with local companies**, fostering communication channels and matching immigrant workers with companies with specific labor demands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Facilitating bureaucratic processes, particularly for the recognition of migrants' prior skills and qualifications acquired in their countries of origin, is crucial for their inclusion into the Hungarian labor market. An effective and less time-consuming recognition system could increase migrants' probability of accessing similar job positions, helping to overcome labor precariousness. Facilitating the process of obtaining a social security number is also needed to overcome informality in the labor market.

Additionally, awareness campaigns on the benefits of migration and integration dynamics in the workplace could be useful in tackling the discrimination often experienced by immigrant employees in the workplace.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Education

Education is compulsory for children aged 3-16 who have the right to reside in Hungary for more than three months. In educators' view, there are no substantive differences between Hungarians and non-EU foreign residents in terms of access to education. Yet, they indicate two major challenges when it comes to migrant pupils in compulsory education regarding integration (both academically and socially) and incomplete information from their families or legal guardians about how the Hungarian educational system works. Educational professionals believe that these problems are associated with families and pupils' lack of skills, the shortage of personnel in schools, and the absence of government orientation in this area.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Language barriers

Learning Hungarian is one of the main obstacles affecting migrant pupils' performance at school.

- In the case of newly arrived migrant pupils, the **lack of linguistic proficiency in Hungarian** affects both their academic success and social integration at school, often leading to isolation and a sense of exclusion. Educators believe that such challenges can be overcome when parents and educators speak English. When this is not the case, the lack of a mediating language hampers direct communication about migrant pupils' needs.
- In educators' view, **Chinese and Vietnamese pupils encounter more difficulties** since most of them are neither proficient in Hungarian nor English.
- **Pupils who join the Hungarian educational system in secondary schools are particularly disadvantaged,** as they have not had the time or skills –primarily the language– to accommodate to the class rhythm or pace as soon as possible.
- Educators also highlight the **lack of orientation or aid from the government** to help schools with the integration of non-Hungarian pupils. Concerns focus on the scarcity –even absence in the case of some schools– of language training courses **and Hungarian as a foreign language teachers**.

Little awareness on the functioning of the Hungarian educational system

Educators and immigrants feel that no detailed information is provided to migrant families about the requirements and procedures for school enrollment.

- Overall, **the Hungarian educational system seems to be difficult to understand** for both nationals and immigrants. The website of the education authority offers pertinent information, but only in Hungarian. Thus, the linguistic barrier generates a structural divide between Hungarian citizens and immigrants.
- With this in mind, immigrant parents often seek **information through informal channels** such as Facebook groups, usually grouped by nationality.

The digital gap, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic

Limited technological resources in immigrant households may affect pupils' performance at school.

- Since the COVID-19 pandemic, **online education created a digital divide** that affected both Hungarian and immigrants' households, especially low-income families with no or limited digital devices or even access to the internet at home.
- Educators observed that while migrant children were often comfortable with using apps and online programs, they did **not participate in online classes as much as in on-site settings**, which made it difficult to interact with them during the pandemic. This digital divide was most prominent among pupils who were not proficient in Hungarian since only written and verbal communication was possible.

Differences between educational systems and perceptions of cultural differences

Differences between the educational systems of origin countries and in Hungary constrain migrant pupils' success at school, especially in the case of non-Europeans.

- For students coming from academic backgrounds with different pedagogical approaches, integration into the **Hungarian schools might be particularly difficult** since the latter is seen as very rigid, old school and non-multicultural friendly by the educators and migrants interviewed.
- According to teachers, Hungarian schools often reject enrolling **Syrian and Arab children**, arguing that their ways of life and customs make it difficult for them to integrate into school.
- Professionals point to the **need for tutoring, language courses and integration programs** designed to address the specific needs of migrant pupils in Hungary.

GOOD PRACTICES

Networking with parents

- Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, educators mention how important it was for them to have the contact details of **families' social support workers**, particularly in cases of vulnerable migrant households.
- In some schools, teachers implemented a register of absences through ***Google Drive***, more user-friendly for immigrant parents. Some educators also **contacted parents every week** to monitor the situation of each family.

Informal interpreters

- Providers mentioned that although in some schools interpreters can attend the meetings with parents if requested, since there is no funding for this service, either **educators or pupils are often the ones who end up translating** and facilitating the communication when there is no professional available. Although this is a widespread practice, some educators warn that in these situations children become parentified.

Mentors

- Educators emphasize **the positive role of mentor teachers**. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, many pupils –mostly immigrants– started to receive the support of mentors, which proved to be a great help in improving pupils' educational achievements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Bearing in mind that language is the main hurdle identified by both professionals and migrants, it becomes necessary to increase the number of HFL teachers (Hungarian as a foreign language) and to extend this program to all schools counting with a high percentage of immigrant pupils. The institutionalization of this service, ensuring retribution for these educators, could be a way to guarantee that this needed assistance is adequately provided.

In addition, it would be desirable for educational authorities to provide detailed information to migrant families on the functioning of the educational system in their languages of origin.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Healthcare

Migrant patients encounter several barriers to accessing medical care in Hungary. To obtain a residence permit, non-EU residents must prove that they can live in Hungary without state support, i.e. being able to be self-sufficient. In particular, immigrants must have health insurance or sufficient means to cover healthcare costs on the spot to apply for a residence permit.

Refugees and persons with permanent residence permits who are not working must pay a monthly social security contribution. Those who cannot afford it may ask the state to cover the cost of the assistance, but only for one year. People without health insurance who are in need of medical care must pay the treatment costs (even the cost of urgent care) at the hospitals.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Limited awareness about the Hungarian healthcare system

The language barrier is the main obstacle to third-country nationals' access to medical assistance.

- **The lack of language skills is correlated with non-EU migrants' lack of knowledge about how the Hungarian healthcare system works**. Migrants and refugees usually rely on the help of social workers when seeking medical assistance. English-speaking migrants provide a positive assessment of English-speaking doctors. Yet, this is not the general rule since most migrant patients do not speak Hungarian or English, and most doctors do not speak English, making it extremely difficult for them to understand the medical diagnosis and treatments.
- The Hungarian healthcare system has been digitalized in the National eHealth Infrastructure (EESZT). However, **health apps and online platforms are usually not available in foreign languages**, which poses significant challenges for immigrants who are not fluent in Hungarian.
- This lack of knowledge about the health system and healthcare rights leads **many immigrants to resort to private clinics**, even though they are entitled to access public healthcare.

Bureaucracy and socio-economic vulnerability

Access to the Hungarian healthcare system depends on having certain economic resources, which leads to the exclusion of migrants in vulnerable living conditions.

- Access to healthcare services is hampered by two administrative procedures, namely: 1) **the social security number,** which involves a long bureaucratic process, and 2) **the health insurance**. Immigrants without health insurance must pay the full price for every medical service, even if they attend public healthcare.
- Immigrants tend to concentrate in unstable and low-skilled jobs with few social benefits, including health insurance. If residence permit holders cannot afford health insurance costs, they do not meet the 'means of subsistence' requirement for residence – thus, their **residence permit can be revoked**. If refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, holders of permanent residence permits cannot afford to cover their health insurance costs, they may apply to the government office for "medical care for persons in need".

- The procedures for making appointments or for getting the results of medical tests have been digitalized over the last years through the National eHealth Infrastructure. Bearing in mind **the lack of digital skills and technological devices of some migrants,** it is extremely difficult for many of them to access these services.

Cultural differences in healthcare practices and gender aspects

Cultural differences regarding healthcare practices and gender aspects can also constrain the provision of medical care for migrants in Hungary.

- Medical professionals state that the Hungarian weather makes individuals particularly predisposed to certain **ear or sinus infections that require early care**. Yet, immigrants used to warmer climates are not necessarily familiar with such risks, thus making less use of medical assistance for these prevention measures.
- Practitioners highlight the **differentiated practices for healthcare and treatment** observed among some migrant communities. For instance, the use of traditional Chinese medicine makes Chinese migrants less likely to go to Hungarian healthcare centers unless they face a significant worsening in their state of health. Professionals also mention cases in which migrants from Afghanistan sometimes try to bargain for dental services at private dental practices, as these services are not covered by public health insurance..
- Professionals also mention how **gender aspects** sometimes shape migrants' access to health services. Especially in the case of **Muslim patients**, women often ask to be assisted by a female doctor, particularly in gynecological matters or childbirth. Meanwhile, Muslim male patients tend to be reluctant to be cared for by female clinicians, especially in medical checks involving physical contact.

GOOD PRACTICES

Facilitating health information to non-Hungarian speakers

- A significant initiative promoted by healthcare providers consists of **translating healthcare guidelines into English –if possible– and emailing them to migrant patients**. This initiative is very appreciated by immigrants, since having the information written down allows them to translate it with *Google Translate* or similar apps if needed. More information is also available in English at **www.egeszsegvonal.gov.hu/en** .

Providing psychological assistance and fostering social inclusion

- Migrant patients often experience problems that go beyond physical distress. Some practitioners mentioned the case of African immigrants who are occasionally reluctant to accept psychologist or psychiatrist assistance. In this context, providers put them in **contact with religious communities and churches** that align with their beliefs, both to improve their mental health state and to promote their social inclusion.

Immediate assistance from Humanitarian organizations

- Upon arrival in Hungary, refugees receive medical care from charities. For instance, in 2022, **tents near major railway stations in Budapest** were set up by various NGOs to assist newly arrived refugees from Ukraine.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given that the language barrier hampers a proper medical diagnosis and follow-up, interpreter services in hospitals and similar healthcare institutions could significantly improve the communication between health professionals and migrant patients as well as upgrade the quality of healthcare services. Additionally, it is recommended that hospitals and general practitioners try to provide medical information in different languages, especially regarding the right to access public healthcare. Information campaigns and public courses on how to enter and navigate through the National eHealth Infrastructure website could also help tackle digital barriers, especially in the case of elderly immigrants. There is also a need to facilitate the bureaucratic processes to obtain health insurance and the social security number, since they are important prerequisites for receiving public medical care. A useful measure in this regard would be the distribution of informative leaflets explaining step by step the administrative procedure to follow.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Housing

In the context of the diminishing social housing sector affecting the country, immigrants encounter major barriers to accessing secure and stable accommodation. No housing subsidy scheme supports access to affordable housing, and renting a property requires certain financial resources that migrants often lack. Moreover, homeowners frequently display discriminatory attitudes towards immigrants, showing reluctance to rent their properties to certain groups, especially families with children.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Socio-economic vulnerability

Migrants' labor and social precariousness hamper their chances of renting a property.

- In the case of refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and temporary protection holders, some housing organizations can provide rental support or economic aid raised through international funders, but this solution only covers, as best, half of the lease. As Hungarian homeowners usually require the payment of a deposit alongside the rent, lower-income families cannot access these housing programs since they must have certain resources to begin with. Therefore, **housing is closely connected to employment** since access to accommodation is easier for immigrant families with at least one member in stable employment.
- In 2022, refugees fleeing from Ukraine frequently utilized **solidarity accommodation**, which typically offered lodging either free of charge or for a nominal fee. These accommodations varied from hostels and repurposed offices to short-term apartment rentals provided by landlords.Yet, these were temporary options that sometimes did not meet the minimum conditions for living.
- **Language** also remains a barrier. Migrants who do not speak Hungarian find it more difficult to understand how the Hungarian housing system works. Oftentimes, neither the administrative staff nor the homeowners are fluent in languages other than Hungarian. Sometimes, it leads to situations in which migrants are unable to properly assess the conditions of renting or buying.
- Migrants counting on **relatives and friends who can act as translators** find it easier to access housing in Hungary.

Discrimination and gender aspects

Landlords sometimes display prejudices towards immigrants.

- Providers report situations where **homeowners refuse to rent to immigrants** when negotiations for the rental of the property are at an advanced stage, once they become aware of the tenants' origin.
- According to housing counselors**,** many **landlords are particularly reluctant to rent their homes to migrant (or Hungarian) families with children for long stays**. The homeowners are often afraid that if the families are unable to pay the rent, they cannot process the eviction because of the children.
- Concerning **single mothers**, in providers' view, most landlords assume that they have unstable circumstances and low-paid jobs and refuse to rent housing to them out of fear of payment defaults.

The housing crisis

The shortage of public and private accommodation forces people to live in poor conditions.

- Professionals complain about the **lack of government support for social housing**, stressing that although this is a worsening problem and the demand is growing every yearthese inequalities are not seen as a major problem by the authorities, and therefore, they are not addressed.
- In principle, immigrants with permanent address in Hungary may apply to request accommodation in the **municipal rental system**. Yet, since registration in this system requires having a social security number –which implies a time-consuming bureaucratic process– this is not a permanent solution. Thus, most migrants find accommodation by themselves, using the Internet, Facebook or *ingatlan.com* (one of the largest real estate websites in Hungary).
- On the basis that landlords often rent their properties to immigrant families only for short periods of time, **they are forced to move out constantly**.

GOOD PRACTICES

Financial support from social entities

- Housing organizations give subsidies in the form of **allowances to migrant families**. These subsidies are paid by the organisations on the basis of a valid tenancy agreement on which homeowners are obliged to pay taxes. Although suppliers provide a very positive assessment of these allowances, they also warn that some homeowners prefer to avoid paying taxes, which contributes to preventing the availability of housing.

Collaboration with other social organizations

- Considering the lack of government aid, housing organizations' effectiveness is contingent upon networking with other entities. **Housing NGOs work closely with social workers, job counsellors and trade union members to help migrants** with matters beyond their competencies.

Negotiation with homeowners

- Housing organizations often negotiate **the terms and conditions of rental contracts** with landlords, thus facilitating migrants' access to housing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary to implement legal initiatives towards expanding the social housing available for immigrants and refugees. Increasing economic aid, such as rental support, could also improve access to housing and avoid instability. Additionally, it is necessary to regularize solidarity accommodation to ensure that housing complies with habitability conditions. Easing the process of obtaining a social security number can also facilitate foreigners' access to the municipal rental housing system. Furthermore, the discriminatory behavior often displayed by landlords must also be tackled and sensibilization campaigns or economic incentives for landlords to rent their properties to migrants could help address this challenge.

Key Challenges and Good Practices in the Area of Social Assistance

Social assistance services involve several areas, with social workers assisting migrants in accessing housing, education or healthcare, while also advising them on the management of online procedures. Thus, social workers play a central role as mediators between immigrants and public administrations. Additionally, they often accompany immigrants in vulnerable situations to appointments with public services to ensure that they understand the procedures and the information provided by civil servants.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Socio-economic vulnerability

Financial struggles contribute to migrants' social exclusion and the need for social assistance support.

- Social workers state that immigrants' socio-economic vulnerability is closely linked to their **labor precariousness** since they are often employed in unstable and low-paid jobs.
- This socio-economic vulnerability is also connected to the **lack of state financial support** for individuals without sufficient resources.
- While refugees receive governmental subsidies, other non-EU foreign residents must demonstrate at the time of application that they are able to live in Hungary without public support, and have health insurance and accommodation. The **most vulnerable groups** –such as elderly people– **are particularly in need of assistance since they are often excluded from the labor and housing markets**.

Linguistic barriers

Immigrants who are not proficient in Hungarian are particularly exposed to the risk of social exclusion.

- The social workers and migrants interviewed mentioned that the **administrative personnel do not usually speak foreign languages**, and frequently, they do not assist people who do not speak Hungarian. Since this barrier affects all services, professionals related to social services perceive that their physical presence is essential during the administrative appointments and meetings that migrants have with service providers.
- Interviewees observe that language difficulties are particularly evident among **African migrants**, hindering their interaction with service providers and civil servants.

Gender aspects

Migrant women often face major barriers in accessing social assistance services.

- In professionals' view, there are some migrant communities in which **women are often solely responsible for domestic chores and childcare**, which prevents them from having closer contact with the Hungarian culture and lifestyle, thus limiting their possibilities for social integration.
- In the case of **single women with dependent children**, social workers indicate that they tend to be the main beneficiaries of welfare services as they face greater social vulnerability.

GOOD PRACTICES

Integration programs

- Additionally, **since stay-at-home immigrant women may be more isolated, social workers of NGOs have created smaller groups and social clubs** to enable them to meet other women and learn more about the Hungarian culture and lifestyle.
- Some professionals have also implemented **Hungarian language training courses**, which are supplied by teachers and volunteers, to learn the local language and to prepare immigrants for the citizenship exam.

Intercultural mediators

- Professionals mention that no official translation services are available to facilitate communication with migrants who are not fluent in Hungarian. Thus, they often use alternative tools, such as **translation apps/ websites and intercultural mediators** to smoothen the communication with migrants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Professionals demand increased public spending on housing and employment to facilitate migrants' access to these basic services. It is particularly necessary to expand public housing available for lower-income migrant families who cannot rent a property even with rental support. If these essential services were to be provided by the government, social workers' role could be complementary to the state aid and not the only resource available. Moreover, it is important to generalize the interpreter service in the appointments of third-country nationals with administrative personnel, to avoid miscommunications and workload for social workers. Any measure to improve this situation should promote migrants' labor inclusion, particularly migrant women, by offering language courses and public childcare services adapted to their work schedules.