RAISE

Funded by the European Union

Grant Agreement Number: 101094684

Project name: RECOGNITION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF INJUSTICE TO STRENGTHEN EQUALITY

Project acronym: RAISE

Call: HORIZON-CL2-2022-TRANSFORMATIONS-01

Topic: HORIZON-CL2-2022-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-08

Type of action: HORIZON Research and Innovation Actions Granting authority: European Research Executive Agency

Project starting date: fixed date: 1 May 2023

Project end date: 30 April 2027

Project duration: 48 months

# Navigating the Labour Market: Intersectional Disadvantages Faced by Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities in Belgium, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Poland

A Comparative Analysis of Focus Group Insights on Intersectional Inequality in Employment Among Migrant and Minority Groups

Deliverable 3.2 (WP3) – May 2025

Authors: Vera Messing, Ágnes Kende

Central European University

Disclaimer:

“Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.”

Dissemination Level: Public

**Contributions from:**

Belgium: Lindsy Desmet, Annemie Dillen (Catholic University of Leuven)

Hungary: Zsuzsanna Árendás (Central European University)

The Netherlands: Ilse van Liempt, Raphael Jacobs, Klara Schmock (Utrecht University)

Poland: Katarzyna Kubin, Marta Kindler, Marie Ashimwe (University of Warsaw)

**Acknowledgement**

We are deeply grateful to the immigrant and ethnic minority individuals who participated in the focus group discussions, generously shared their experiences, and dedicated their time to this research. We would also like to thank our colleagues Marcel Lubbers and Zuzanna Brunarska for their thoughtful feedback on the initial draft of the report. Special thanks goes to Simon Milton for his careful and accurate language and copy editing. Finally, we are especially appreciative of Viktoria Kőszegi, whose support with administrative and financial tasks was invaluable to the completion of this work.

**Table of Contents**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This comparative report explores the mechanisms of inequalities by which structural racism is reproduced, focusing specifically on the labour market. We look at how race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and migration status intersect to shape people's labour-market (LM) opportunities and positions in Europe. Unlike individual acts of bias, structural racism is embedded in the everyday workings of institutions through the norms, policies, and practices they maintain that reproduce consistent disadvantages for certain groups. These mechanisms are often subtle and deeply woven into political and social power structures, making them hard to detect, especially for those who benefit from or help maintain them (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). One of the clearest expressions of this is the ongoing inequality in access to the labour market, which tends to affect racially, ethnically, or religiously minoritised individuals the most, especially when these identities intersect with gender or migrant status (Phalet et al., 2010; Li et al., 2020). The RAISE project is grounded on the idea that structural racism persists through processes of boundary-making. The latter refers to social divisions that involve categorising and ranking people in everyday institutional settings. These boundaries influence how people are seen, treated, and what opportunities they can access. The first work package (WP1) of the RAISE project investigated processes of boundary-making in everyday settings of parenting. In the third work package (WP3), our aim is to go one step further and investigate how the dynamics of boundary-making translate into intersecting disadvantages and structural discrimination in the labour market using a mix of qualitative and quantitative research. In doing so, we contribute to a growing body of work that views racism not as a set of isolated biases, but as a complex, layered social system.

The key aim of the research in WP3 is to understand the interlocking and mutually constitutive nature of social identities and labour-market opportunity structures in Europe (Collins, 2000; Verloo, 2006). We used mixed-method research to achieve this goal, including:

- a quantitative pillar, that utilises existing open-access data (such as the Labour Force Survey, European Social Survey, and EU-FRA Survey on Minorities and Discrimination) to analyse intersectional identities and their role in shaping and/or reproducing inequalities in the labour market (Hajdu and Messing 2025), and
- a qualitative pillar that includes data collected from focus groups carried out in four countries with participants who shared their perceptions and experiences about access to the labour market. The qualitative pillar is intended to help explain, deepen and add sophistication to the findings of the quantitative data analysis.

While datasets that highlight ethnic disparities tend to be large-scale, producing generalised data, the focus group research will complement analysis of data on the European level and help 'look beyond' the data to understand the deeper mechanisms and complexities of how these play out in the everyday lives and personal experiences of racialised/ethnicised minorities. This dual approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how unequal

treatment based on specific intersecting identities affects individuals' chances of accessing the labour market across different European contexts.

Intersectionality serves as a powerful analytical lens for understanding the complexities of the above disadvantages and how they operate in an overlapping form, intensifying one another. As mentioned earlier, the primary purpose of our research is to understand how intersectional identities impact labour market opportunities, and the focus group research aims to deepen understanding of the mechanisms underlying intersectionalities and to complement the analysis of large-scale comparative European data on this issue. The first results of the analysis of European comparative data (Hajdu and Messing 2025) show that certain demographic characteristics in intersectional relationships increase the likelihood of unemployment and of holding a low-prestige job. These patterns, however, differ in Western and Eastern European countries to some extent. While in Western Europe, immigrant status, in intersection with religion, more specifically with non-Christian religious affiliation and gender, is the most important predictor of labour-market position, in Eastern Europe, immigrant background impacts the likelihood of unemployment to much lesser extent, but does impact the likelihood of having a low prestige job. More importantly, belonging to an ethnic minority, and gender, are strong predictors of unemployment and low LM position by themselves, but also intersectionally.

WP3 also aims to contribute to the theoretical debates on the relationship between structure, agency, and identity in the production of inequality, thereby advancing understandings of structural racism and discrimination in Europe. By documenting some of the labour-market experiences of minoritised groups, it also provides empirical evidence to inform the design of more effective equality policies.

The following comparative report begins with a description of the data and methods used in the research, as well as the selection criteria and composition of the focus groups. The analytical part first offers an overview of participants' labour-market trajectories before delving into four key areas of analysis: opportunities and barriers to employment, the impact of intersecting identities on the chances of securing employment, experiences of discrimination, and the coping strategies of migrants and racialised minorities. The key focus of the analysis is how participants' identities (e.g., as women, migrants, racial or religious minorities) intersect to shape their opportunities and vulnerabilities. The conclusion reflects the researchers' interpretation of key insights and identifies mechanisms of structural discrimination based on class, gender, ethnicity, migration background, and religion.

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

The focus group method employed in this project served as a key qualitative tool for exploring how intersecting identities shape perceptions and experiences of labour-market inequalities. By bringing together participants from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and gender backgrounds in four European countries – Hungary, Poland, Belgium, and the Netherlands – these focus group discussions allow for in-depth, collective reflection on structural discrimination and perceived sources of disadvantage.

The selection of focus group participants involved a deliberative process: while common criteria and guiding principles were provided to country-level teams, each country developed its own recruitment strategy tailored to its local context (see below for further details on selection criteria).

### Identifying focus group composition

All focus groups were unified in their focus on minoritised populations with diverse socio-demographic profiles, educational backgrounds, and legal statuses. A core principle of the research design was that each national team would identify the groups most at risk of minoritisation based on the intersections of biases that could produce greater levels of disadvantage in the local context, and organise the focus groups accordingly. At the same time, to ensure a minimum level of comparability across countries, a set of common selection criteria was established to guide participant recruitment. Each country was asked to ensure that, across their selected groups, key profiles would be represented: immigrants, refugees or asylum-seekers, women, women in caregiving roles, and highly educated individuals. Immigrants and refugees, as well as women in caregiving roles, emerged as an obvious category when considering intersectional disadvantages in employment. The category of 'highly educated persons' was included to mitigate attributing labour-market disadvantages of minoritised groups solely to low educational attainment. Namely, by conducting research with highly educated individuals, we aimed to counter the argument that minorities struggle to access good jobs simply because they lack sufficient education.

These categories were not assigned to separate focus groups but rather served as guiding dimensions, allowing for overlap within individual groups. This flexible approach both ensured relevance to national contexts and cross-country comparability in terms of the most important drivers of labour-market disadvantage.

In total, data were collected from 16 focus groups,[1] comprising 85 participants. The gender distribution reveals a significant predominance of women (n = 68), with men representing a

[1] Not 16, as in the Netherlands, the summaries of two group discussions (one with two refugees and one with four asylum seekers in a reception centre) were combined, and it is thus impossible to disentangle which quotes come from which. They will be referred to in this report as NL3_4.

smaller proportion (n = 17). Regarding the technical approach, four focus groups were conducted online, while the remaining twelve were held offline.

### Composition of the focus groups in the four countries

As a result of the above design, the focus group compositions differed across the four countries taking part in the research.

**In Belgium,** the focus groups brought together participants whose stories reflect the layered realities of migration, faith, language, and work. The first FG (B_1) included highly educated Muslim women with Belgian and Moroccan backgrounds. The conversation, held online, allowed them to share how religion, especially regarding its visible markers such as the hijab, interacts with gender and class in shaping workplace experiences. The second FG (B_2) included foreign professionals and international students from Turkey, the UK, Cameroon, and Ethiopia, all currently working in Belgium but dealing with issues like visa dependency and limited Dutch proficiency. The third FG (B_3) included immigrant women: mothers from diverse national backgrounds, like Syrian and Nepalese, with several participants choosing not to disclose their exact origins. Several participants in this group had limited language skills and faced exclusion not only from the labour market but also from everyday bureaucratic systems. The related session, held at a local after-school program, highlighted the often-invisible barriers facing women who do not fit into the "professional migrant" category. Finally, the fourth FG (B_4) included individuals of Christian faith from the Philippines and Poland who were highly educated but struggling to find jobs in education or academia due to language requirements and recognition of their qualifications. Despite their different paths, all groups shared the experience of navigating structural bias and cultural expectations in the Belgian labour market.

The focus groups in **Hungary** were selected to include the two largest groups subject to recurring racialised exclusion: immigrants and Roma. Unlike immigrants, Roma participants are Hungarian citizens who have lived for many generations in the territory of the country, yet their racialised exclusion is comparable to that experienced by precarious migrant populations. Two of the groups included Roma women, and two included refugees and immigrants. The first group (HU_1) included highly educated refugee women of the Muslim faith from Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan who had lived in Hungary for over a decade. Despite having professional backgrounds, they were working in low-wage jobs like caregiving or cleaning. Language barriers and the lack of state-provided integration support were key themes, alongside issues with naturalising their qualifications. They were recruited through a self-support group, which was helpful because the close-knit nature of the group created a safe space for emotional reflection and, ultimately, open conversations about discrimination. The second FG (HU_2) involved young third-country nationals (TCN) from Nigeria, Syria, and the Philippines with different legal statuses and migration stories, highlighting the layered challenges of precarity and race in accessing stable employment. The third FG (HU_3) focused on Roma mothers in a rural town who balanced caregiving, household duties, and physically

demanding jobs often without formal contracts. Most had entered the workforce at a very young age and cycled through various forms of insecure employment, shaped by intergenerational poverty, systemic discrimination, and entrenched racial hierarchies. While a few had completed secondary or even tertiary education, the majority had limited formal schooling and struggled to access stable employment. The fourth FG (HU_4), by contrast, brought together highly educated Roma women (with at least an MA degree) living in Budapest, many of whom worked in the civil sector, in education, and advocacy. Despite their qualifications, they described precarious working conditions, short-term contracts, freelance arrangements, and project-based NGO roles, highlighting that upward educational mobility does not necessarily lead to secure or valued positions.

In the **Netherlands,** the focus groups were meant to capture the experiences of two very different groups: international students making the leap into the labour market, and asylum seekers or refugees facing long-term precarity. The student groups (NL_1 and NL_2) were diverse in terms of nationality, with participants from countries like China, India, Latvia, Russia, and Moldova. Most had studied or were studying in Dutch universities and were either working or looking for jobs. While they generally had strong educational backgrounds, they still faced barriers to entering or remaining in employment, including visa limitations, contract insecurity, and mismatches between their qualifications and available jobs. The refugee and asylum seeker groups (NL_3 and NL_4) highlighted a very different set of issues: legal limbo, limited employment options, and restricted access to formal work. Recruitment was a slow and difficult process, and participants mostly relied on voluntary work to stay active while waiting for their legal status to be resolved.

In **Poland,** the focus group research brought together a range of participants whose experiences shed light on how race, gender, migration background, and legal status shape access to the labour market. All participants held a BA degree or higher and had worked in Poland for over a year, excluding student jobs. Two of the groups (PL_1 and PL_3) included citizens of African countries living in larger cities, with a mix of men and women working in both professional and lower-skilled sectors. The focus group sessions were conducted in English and included participants with diverse migration paths and residency statuses. Another FG (PL_2), held in a small town, included Ukrainian and Belarusian mothers, some displaced by the ongoing war in Ukraine, and others who had arrived prior to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The women in this focus group spoke about the challenges of re-entering the labour market while managing care responsibilities. The fourth group (PL_4) was organised in a large city and brought together women from diverse backgrounds with varied employment histories. PL_2 and PL_4 were conducted in Polish. Table 1 summarises the most important information about the composition of each group discussion.

*Table 1. Summary of composition of the focus groups in the four countries*

| Country | FG code | Category | No. participants | gender | education level | Status | age | method |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Belgium | B_1 | Muslim women from Flanders | 4 | women | highly educated | | 25-46 | Online |
| | B_2 | Highly educated immigrants | 4 | 3 f/1 m | highly educated | foreigners | 26-32 | Online |
| | B_3 | Mothers, mostly non-native Dutch speakers | 10 | women | low educated | Belgian citizens and immigrants | Est. 20-35 | Offline |
| | B_4 | Highly educated Christian immigrants | 3 | 2 f/1 m | highly educated | immigrants | Est 40-55 | Offline |
| Hungary | HU_1 | Highly educated Muslim women, refugees | 5 | women | mixed | immigrants/refugees from non-EU countries | 35-55 | Offline |
| | HU_2 | Non-EU women 2 | 4 | women | mixed | All from non-EU countries | 20s-30s | Offline |
| | HU_3 | Roma mothers in a small town – rural | 8 | 7 f/1 m | mixed | Roma | 20-40 | Offline |
| | HU_4 | Highly educated Roma women | 5 | women | highly educated | Roma | 26-37 | Offline |
| Netherlands | NL_1 | International students in the Netherlands | 6 | 5 f/1 m | highly educated | international students | 25-30 | Online |
| | NL_2 | International students making the transition to the Dutch labour market | 5 | 4 f/1 m | highly educated | international students | 25 around | Online |
| | NL_3-4 | Asylum seekers and refugees in the Netherlands | 6 | 2 f/4 m | higher level | asylum seekers or refugees | over 18 | Offline |
| Poland | PL_1 | Migrant workers in a town | 7 | 3 f/4 m | higher level | from African countries with different statuses | mid 30s-mid 40s | Offline |
| | PL_2 | Women from Ukraine (1 from Belarus) in a town | 5 | women | higher level | mothers | 30-40 | Offline |
| | PL_3 | Women from Ukraine (1 from Vietnam) in a town | 6 | women | higher level | | 30-45 | Offline |
| | PL_4 | Highly educated with African descent | 7 | 3 f/4 m | higher level | from Africa | Early to mid-30s | Offline |

## Organisation and topics of the focus group discussions

Although the composition of the FGs varied, all discussions were organised according to the same guidelines, developed in collaboration with the research team. The guide outlined the main topics to discuss but offered some flexibility depending on the group's composition, the discussion context, and participants' interests and involvement.

All groups began with a standardised introductory section. This included greeting participants, explaining the research purpose and ethical aspects (GDPR, consent), and establishing ground rules to ensure respectful, inclusive, and confidential discussions. Participants were informed that the session would be audio-recorded for anonymous transcription and comparative analysis and were asked for their consent. Each of the four countries obtained ethical approval from its respective institutions to conduct the focus group research.

The discussion guides were tailored to each group type and focused on the influence of ethnicity, migration status, and other identity markers on labour-market experiences, perceptions of discrimination, and access to job opportunities. The guide included reflective questions on work culture, identity-based tensions, and the reconciliation of home and work norms. Participants were encouraged to share personal experiences.

FG were recorded and transcribed in the original language. Later, researchers were asked to draft a summary of each group in English, structured around predefined topical areas – such as barriers to employment, intersectional identities, coping strategies, and discrimination – and to add relevant quotes to the analysis, translated into English. The comparative analysis is based on these summaries.

# 3. RESULTS

In the following chapter, we will provide a comparative summary analysis of the most important findings from the focus group research across the four countries. The analysis is far from complete. Each person's story is different and complex in its own right, and the analysis cannot reflect all the valuable information they shared with us. The comparative report is limited to presenting the most typical employment and immigration histories of our discussion partners first. Then we will move on to guiding the reader through the many barriers members of minoritised groups experience when accessing or staying in employment. There is a great level of similarity across countries in how immigrants and racialised minorities explain their impediments to employment, including experiences of direct and institutional discrimination, language barriers, and/or the lack of acknowledgement of their qualifications. We also saw differences among the four countries in the levels and accessibility of support for immigrants and refugees. In the third subchapter, we turn our gaze to intersectionality and highlight some of the complexities of intersecting barriers to employment. The fourth sub-chapter concentrates on experiences of discrimination and its consequences as explained by FG participants. The final subchapter will provide insight into the most prevalent strategies for coping with multiple and intersectional disadvantages that minoritised people encounter.

## *3.1. ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT, INDIVIDUAL LABOUR-MARKET TRAJECTORIES*

In each group, the first question invited participants to discuss their current employment situation and briefly describe their work trajectory, with particular emphasis on how these were influenced by migration.

A common theme across all countries was the experience of occupational downward mobility, particularly among immigrants with higher education qualifications. Many focus group participants had been employed in their home countries in professional roles, such as university lecturers, engineers, social workers, teachers, or financial directors, but were unable to access similar jobs in the host countries. This was attributed not only to language barriers and the non-recognition of foreign qualifications, but also to mismatches between local labour markets and migrants' existing networks and knowledge. In Poland, for example, highly educated African and Ukrainian migrants, medical students, spoke of being pushed into production-line jobs or informal work such as food sales, despite nearing the completion of their medical degrees. Similarly, in Hungary, university graduate women from Syria, Afghanistan, and Nigeria were forced into caregiving, cleaning, or warehouse work, even though they held degrees in law or social work.

In Belgium and the Netherlands, many participants were international students or recent graduates who had entered with the hope of building careers consistent with their education.

However, they often experienced a disconnect between their qualifications and the available job opportunities. For example, in the Netherlands, a Chinese graduate with a degree in urban planning ended up working in supply chain management because that field offered a decent salary and visa sponsorship. However, the job ultimately proved unsatisfying and disconnected from her academic training. Similarly, in Belgium, participants such as Turkish and Cameroonian women described prolonged periods of job search, visa-related obstacles, and informal discrimination despite holding master's degrees in fields like business or development studies.

Despite these commonalities, there were important differences in how participants navigated labour-market entry and adapted their career strategies in the four countries. Poland's labour market emerged as one where migrants often gained initial access through student status or international corporations willing to hire English speakers. However, participants consistently emphasised the limitations of this model: without fluent Polish, career advancement was limited, and many described being 'stuck' in temporary or low-skilled positions regardless of their qualifications and aspirations. Some, like one of the participants from Algeria, had managed to build stable careers in corporate environments by leveraging their rare language skills (e.g. French), while others, like another participant from Kenya, found that teaching English, although nominally a white-collar job, was less remunerative than factory work. Among the women who had arrived from Ukraine or Nigeria, there was frequent movement between temporary jobs in logistics or restaurants, with career stability often postponed until further education or personal contacts enabled better prospects.

In contrast, Hungary presented a harsher environment for immigrants, where systemic barriers, especially the lack of diploma recognition and publicly funded language training, made meaningful labour-market integration nearly impossible for non-EU women. Even participants with substantial professional experience were forced to start over entirely, frequently taking up jobs in cleaning or caregiving. One participant with a law diploma tried to requalify in Hungary but dropped out due to a lack of scholarship funding, and eventually resorted to community organising and volunteering. While a few managed to secure NGO jobs (e.g. through SOS Children's Villages), these opportunities were rare and often accessible only through personal referrals. Hungarian TCN focus groups highlighted the rigid segmentation of labour, with migrants pushed into the lowest-paid sectors despite high-level qualifications, and little room for upward mobility.

By contrast, the Netherlands appeared to offer a more fluid and internationalised environment, particularly for those with university backgrounds; however, in practice, limited proficiency in Dutch proved a significant barrier, underscoring that Dutch language skills were more crucial for employment than expected. Many participants came as students and attempted to remain after graduation. However, nearly all encountered a dual challenge: visa insecurity and employers' reluctance to sponsor their visa application and/or hire them. For instance, several focus group participants explained that they had applied for hundreds of

jobs, only to be rejected due to their need for visa sponsorship or because employers preferred Dutch speakers. Still, some success stories were cited: one participant had secured a PhD after navigating several temporary positions (but only in the international English-speaking environment), while others transitioned from internships to contract work. The Dutch context rewarded those who could 'hang on' long enough through part-time jobs, shared housing, or support networks to eventually move into more stable positions. Most expected it would be easier than it actually turned out to be. As a result, mental health issues were a recurring theme, with participants reporting burnout, depression, and anxiety due to the prolonged uncertainty. In the Belgian focus group with Muslim women in Flanders, participants highlighted how the visibility of their faith, particularly the wearing of the hijab, restricted their access to certain roles and led to exclusion even within sectors such as education or care work. Although this will be discussed in more detail later, it is also important to mention here, since the issue of wearing a hijab also influenced their employment trajectories.

The situation of Roma women in Hungary, particularly those in small towns and rural areas, revealed distinct patterns of direct, institutional and structural discrimination. Despite having Hungarian citizenship and often years of work experience, many Roma women were similarly relegated to precarious, low-paid work. Even among highly educated Roma women working in Budapest, – including sociologists, economists, teachers, and a communication specialist – there was a shared experience of exclusion from mainstream career pathways. Their professional choices were often guided by a commitment to supporting their communities, leading many to pursue roles in civil society or public service. However, even within these sectors, they faced limited job stability, institutional barriers, and symbolic marginalisation. In this way, the career trajectories of Roma women reflected layered exclusion – both classed and racialised – from full participation in the Hungarian labour market, despite their formal inclusion.

Across all contexts, gender and caring responsibilities were important in shaping labour-market opportunities. Many women had adapted their career trajectories around caregiving or child-rearing responsibilities, particularly in rural or small-town settings. For example, one participant, originally from Ukraine, but now living in a village in Poland, had been a financial director in Ukraine but found herself working as a school librarian and teacher's assistant after moving to Poland and the birth of her daughter. In Hungary, Roma participants described working 12–14-hour shifts while re-training or supporting children in school, while in Belgium, women balanced multiple part-time jobs with caring for children, often in situations of linguistic isolation.

## 3.2. Barriers to Employment for Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities

The diversity of focus group participants in terms of legal status (students, economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers), ethnic and racial backgrounds, and gender highlighted that ethnicity and migrant status, in particular, undergird the complex barriers involved in accessing meaningful or at least sustainable employment across the respective labour markets. Challenges stem from legal, linguistic, and cultural factors, and are often deepened by personal and institutional discrimination and systemic inequalities. In the following section, the most important barriers will be reviewed one by one: some are relevant across most focus groups, while others are specific to certain immigrant groups or countries. These barriers help explain the unequal outcomes observed in the quantitative data, as examined in this same work package.

### Language Proficiency

A major barrier to employment across all immigrant groups was limited knowledge of the local language. In Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and Hungary, participants consistently reported that not speaking Flemish, Dutch, Polish, and Hungarian significantly restricted their job opportunities – even in sectors where English is commonly used, such as in international companies. This barrier was perceived as particularly pronounced in Poland and Hungary, but also quite substantial in Belgium and the Netherlands. Despite the widespread use of English in the Benelux region, FG participants shared that employers expected fluency in the local language. International students and refugees in these countries expressed the view that language requirements served to control access to national labour markets, especially given the growing presence of young, highly educated international populations. They perceived this expectation as a structural barrier that disproportionately affects foreigners, regardless of their qualifications or English proficiency. *'Especially in a foreign country like this. I have learned that the nationalistic trend is also impacting the job market, that they have become strict, or stricter in terms of language requirements'. (B_4).*

In most focus group discussions, refugees and immigrants reported that limited language proficiency confined them to lower-quality jobs. A common consequence of this barrier was career downgrading: even highly educated individuals – some holding master's degrees – were often forced to seek unskilled employment in sectors such as manufacturing or services, where language skills were less essential.

In one Polish group, participants discussed differences in the opportunities to learn Polish depending on whether the individual's native language was Slavic (Ukrainian, for example) or not (Vietnamese), and how this produced further inequalities within the group.

Hungary is an especially difficult environment for overcoming language barriers, as Hungarian is a linguistically unique language, and proficiency in other widely spoken languages offers little assistance with learning Hungarian. Additionally, in Hungary, the lack of institutional support and limited access to Hungarian language courses made immigrants' situation

especially challenging. '*The state does not provide any language learning opportunities; earlier, some of the pro-immigrant civil organisations [made such offers based on] project-based funding, but recently such opportunities have dwindled away'. (HU_1).*

A lack of language proficiency can expose immigrants to heightened risks of exploitation. Focus group participants in Poland (PL_1) emphasised that not speaking Polish not only limited their access to the labour market and made their employment conditions more precarious – such as being unable to understand employment contracts presented exclusively in Polish – but also increased their vulnerability to unfair treatment in the workplace. Many participants recounted experiences where colleagues or supervisors had exploited their limited language skills to their disadvantage.

A notable contrast emerged between the attitudes of immigrants in Western and Eastern Europe. While frustration over language-related barriers was common across all countries, participants in Hungary and Poland often expressed a degree of internalisation of employers' perspectives. Several comments reflected an understanding – even acceptance – of the notion that insufficient language skills could negatively affect individuals' performance and team dynamics:

'*They told me you should speak Hungarian. [This is] correct because in my job I need to communicate with customers'. (HU_2)*

*'I understand it's really hard to communicate with colleagues. So it makes a problem for the managers. Yes, [I know this] because of my experience in this factory. The others don't know any English, and I don't know any Hungarian. So we have too many problems with each other, and we couldn't talk together [although] we have to work as a group, as a team'. (HU_1)*

The Vietnamese participant in Poland emphasised her commitment to learning Polish, recognising this as the only viable path to better employment opportunities.

'*But I knew that [learning the] language is a must. I had language classes four times a week*'. (PL_3)

She described how the experience had stretched her to the limit – both in terms of time and financial resources – but she had persevered, nonetheless.

In contrast, in Belgium and the Netherlands, although participants expressed similar frustration over the widespread requirement for local language proficiency for most jobs – even for positions where they felt such a requirement was unnecessary – few reported actively pursuing language learning. The reason(s) for these differences remain unclear: they may stem from the differences in the composition (and thus experiences) of the focus groups in the four countries, or from differing levels of societal tolerance of non-native speakers.

### Visa and Legal Constraints

Another significant barrier to employment that was mentioned and discussed in nearly all focus groups concerns visa-related challenges, which severely restrict access to the labour market. While the specific regulations and their consequences vary across countries and depend on the type of visa – whether work, family, student, refugee, or asylum seeker – the participants consistently emphasised the complexity of these processes. Across all contexts, the procedures were described as opaque, time-consuming, and resource-intensive.

Most focus group participants across all four countries agreed that obtaining a work visa is a complex and time-consuming process. In several countries, the responsibility for securing a work visa falls on the employer, which often leads to a strong preference for hiring local candidates to avoid administrative burdens. While the duration and bureaucratic complexity of the visa process vary by country, participants across all countries agreed that it is a cumbersome procedure that many employers are reluctant to undertake.

Student visas generally allow immigrants to work in all four countries, although with certain limitations. For example, in the Netherlands, students are typically restricted to part-time jobs or internships, but in Poland, there is no restriction on working with a student visa. As a result, many international students seek to extend their studies to maintain their legal status and continue participating in the local labour market.

In both Poland and Hungary, work visas include an additional restrictive element: they are often tied to a specific employer. This arrangement can lead to highly exploitative situations. If an immigrant holding such a visa is dissatisfied with their job and wishes to resign, they risk losing their legal right to remain in the country within 30 days. Several focus group participants described how this constant pressure created significant stress, negatively impacting not only their career trajectories but also their personal lives and mental health. Due to the complexity and inflexibility of work visa regulations, many immigrants turn to student visas as an alternative pathway. A strategy commonly mentioned by participants in Poland involved (re)entering higher education to obtain a student visa, which permits full-time employment. However, this workaround is often exhausting, financially burdensome, and emotionally taxing.

'*And for me, that's one of the problems. Like the policies for foreigners, if you're not a student, you need to get an extra work permit. […] You have to combine work and school. That's what I have to do now to get the job, I had to re-enrol in school to get a job. It's crazy*'. (PL_4)

Refugees and asylum seekers face a somewhat different set of circumstances regarding access to the labour market. Refugees generally have the right to work, while asylum seekers may or may not require a work permit, depending on the national context. According to international protection standards, asylum seekers are typically entitled to some form of state support – though Hungary is a notable exception in the current context.

In the Netherlands, regulations have evolved in two stages to improve labour-market access for asylum seekers. Since 2008, the latter have been permitted to work up to 24 weeks per year. More recently (in 2023), the law was amended to allow full-time employment after six months of residence. In Poland, Ukrainians who arrived after February 2022 have a special protected status that allows them to work without additional work permits. In contrast, the situation in Hungary is markedly different. Since 2017, the Hungarian state has ceased providing financial support to refugees, effectively forcing them to seek employment by any means necessary – even though this practice contradicts international standards of protection.

Transitioning between visa categories – such as from a student visa to a work visa, or from a family reunification visa to an employment visa – is often a complex and opaque process, which can lead to exclusion from the labour market. Students in the Netherlands and Belgium highlighted these difficulties during focus group discussions. Although this issue was not explicitly raised in the Hungarian and Polish groups, it is likely that similar challenges exist in those contexts as well.

Visas issued on the basis of family reunification or family membership were rarely discussed in the focus groups. The topic emerged only in the Hungarian sessions, where participants highlighted employment restrictions for family members. In Hungary, individuals holding this type of visa are required to obtain an additional work permit, which is reportedly very difficult to secure. This requirement came as a surprise to a woman from the Philippines who had joined her husband in Hungary and found out that she couldn't engage in employment, and her health insurance wasn't covered:

'*So when we got here, it was a surprise to me that even if my husband is employed, we should pay separately for our health insurance. Both me and my daughter, we have health insurance, but not that type*. *So with regard to benefits, we don't get any […]*'. (HU_2)

Barriers linked to visa requirements are further complicated by increased bureaucracy and a lack of transparency regarding the visa process. Refugees in the Netherlands explained about the bureaucratic barriers they encountered during the process of gaining a formal status. While the opportunity to work has been gradually introduced for asylum-seekers, and they are now allowed to work full-time, there are still bureaucratic barriers, such as registering for a BSN number, which seem quite difficult and time-consuming.

### Recognition of Qualifications

The non-recognition of foreign qualifications emerged as a significant barrier, particularly in Hungary and Poland. The process of validating or 'naturalising' foreign diplomas is overly complex and time-consuming, according to discussion partners. As a result, several individuals reported choosing to restart their university education locally, finding it to be a faster and more straightforward path to accessing the labour market.

*'The key [issue regarding] the job barriers and also the certificate diploma [was that] I had my own country['s] diploma. And nowhere is it recognised at all. To work as a professional. So, this is a big issue for me and of course [for…] others'.* (HU_1)

Several focus group participants shared that they chose to pursue higher education again, despite already holding high-level qualifications, because they could not afford to wait for the lengthy and uncertain process of diploma recognition. Enrolling in local universities also served as a strategic way to bypass the strict work permit requirements and associated restrictions. For many immigrant women, this pathway offered a safer environment in which to restart their careers compared to entering the labour market directly. However, this option is financially demanding and therefore only accessible to those with sufficient economic resources.

Others who could not afford to enrol in higher education or faced significant language barriers were forced to downgrade their careers. Because their qualifications were not recognised, they were unable to continue working in the professions they had trained for in the host country.

*'I have been living in Hungary since 2015, so almost 11 years. My qualification or profession [involved working] as a lawyer in Afghanistan. But when I came to Hungary, in Budapest, I started working as a social worker at the beginning, and then as a coordinator'. (HsU_1)*

### Racism and discrimination

Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and national origin is widespread – particularly in Poland (notably against African and Ukrainian individuals) and in Hungary (against Roma communities and immigrants more broadly). While such discrimination is also present in Belgium and the Netherlands, it tends to be less overt. A detailed discussion of the discrimination experiences shared by focus group participants is provided in Chapter III.4. Here, we highlight that discrimination – whether based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, parenthood, or educational background, and especially when these identities intersect – constitutes a significant barrier to labour-market access across all four countries.

### Religion and 'Visible Identity'

Religion was not mentioned as a barrier to employment except for the group of Muslim women in Belgium. The group was specifically organised by a Muslim grassroots community, and the whole discussion centred on religious identity and its relationship to labour-market participation. Participants spoke in depth about the barriers they faced not only due to their religious affiliation, but also because this was visibly identifiable – unlike, for example, Christian identities, which are often less outwardly apparent.

All Muslim women in the focus group wore the hijab as an expression of their identity. This visible marker of religious affiliation emerged as a particularly significant barrier to employment. One illustrative case was that of a Belgian-born Muslim woman with no

immigrant background. Her experience helped us disentangle the effects of religious identity from those associated with immigrant status in shaping labour-market disadvantage.

Her account made it clear that visibly expressed Muslim identity can lead to both overt and subtle forms of discrimination. She reported facing similar challenges to those experienced by immigrant Muslim women, including being passed over for jobs for superficial reasons, enduring microaggressions from colleagues, and encountering bias in everyday interactions. In addition, she experienced explicit exclusion from certain roles – most notably, being barred from employment in the public sector, which was justified on the grounds of maintaining secularism. '*The women stressed that their hijab is the most significant aspect of [reason for] exclusion. The women explained that [they are excluded from different sectors] (such as education, hospitals, and the administrative counters of local governments) because they won't hire people who wear a hijab.*' (B_1). Even in sectors that do not formally exclude Muslims, there is often a preference for individuals who do not display visible signs of their religion. According to the accounts of Muslim women, those who wear the hijab frequently experience microaggressions in the workplace.

In one of the Hungarian focus groups, which was predominantly composed of Muslim women, participants emphasised that their disadvantages as refugees – particularly the lack of language skills – were more significant than those related to their religious identity. However, one participant shared her experience that actually revealed how anti-Muslim discrimination is normalised. She explained that she considered herself fortunate to have found a job where wearing a headscarf was required for hygiene reasons. This allowed her to wear it without needing to justify or explain her choice:

'*As a social worker, we have to cover our heads [all the time]. This is not a problem, but if I do […] this when I go out, when I go in, they will look at me. "Uh-huh. Are you Muslim? Uh-huh"'.* (HU_1)

Religion as a barrier to employment was not mentioned in other groups; on the contrary, Catholicism was described in one Belgian focus group as an advantage in certain professions and jobs, such as education (religious schools) or social care. It can be concluded that it is not religious affiliation itself, but rather the racialization of certain religious identities and associated practices that constitute a significant barrier to labour-market access.

### Residence and Regional Disparities

Geographic location also plays a significant role in shaping employment opportunities, with rural-urban divides emerging as a barrier to accessing employment. These disparities were particularly evident in Hungary and Poland, but were also mentioned in the Netherlands.

Members of one focus group held in a refugee reception centre in a remote area of the Netherlands highlighted how living in rural, poorly connected locations can further disadvantage refugees in the labour market. Participants explained that, beyond challenges related to their legal status and language barriers, the physical isolation of their residences –

combined with limited public transportation – excluded them from many job opportunities, particularly in sectors like services and agriculture that often require irregular work or working early/late.

*'One day, I found a job, but the place was very far from me. If I want[ed] to go to that place, I [would have to] take three buses. It is very difficult for me. Three buses, yeah. Yes. I [would] spend like six hours [travelling]. This is almost impossible. After that, I [would] work like eight hours – this is fourteen hours'. (NL_3_4)*

In both Hungary and Poland, living in rural areas presents multiple disadvantages in terms of employment opportunities. First, job availability in these regions is typically limited to low-skilled, physically demanding work, regardless of the individual's qualifications. Opportunities for higher-skilled employment are scarce and often confined to positions in the local public sector, where hiring practices are frequently influenced by personal connections rather than merit.

Discrimination tends to be more overt and entrenched in rural areas. In the rural town where one of the Hungarian focus groups was conducted, Roma women described discrimination as a normalised part of everyday life. Local employers in the service sector – such as shops and restaurants – simply do not hire Roma individuals, a fact widely acknowledged in the community. As a result, Roma residents often do not even attempt to apply for these positions. Such blatant exclusion would be far less likely in Budapest or other urban settings. Consequently, Roma women – regardless of their qualifications – are left with limited options: they can either take jobs in local firms where Roma are typically employed, such as poultry processing plants or agricultural businesses, which are known for harsh working conditions (e.g., 12-hour shifts, frequent night and weekend work, and elevated health risks), or they must commute to multinational companies in nearby areas (e.g., logistics centres or car factories), or relocate to Budapest in search of better opportunities.

Similarly, immigrant women living in rural Polish towns reported facing challenges due to the traditional, conservative, and religious nature of their local environments. These difficulties are further compounded by the political climate, as support for the nationalist-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party is often taken for granted in these areas. This political and cultural context makes it even more difficult for immigrants – particularly women – to pursue professional careers and integrate into the local labour market.

In all countries, immigrants generally face significantly fewer barriers to employment in urban areas than in rural areas. This trend likely applies to non-immigrants as well. However, in rural settings, factors such as stereotypes, discrimination, limited access to quality jobs, limited knowledge of foreign languages, and the critical role of personal networks in job searching tend to have a greater impact. These dynamics place immigrants – particularly those who are highly qualified and come from urban backgrounds – at a disadvantage when seeking employment in rural areas.

### Networking and Social Capital

The lack of relevant social connections was a recurring theme across several groups. In many contexts, personal referrals or simply 'knowing someone' in the local community or within a company can provide a significant advantage. Immigrants, who often lack local networks, are therefore at a disadvantage in this regard as well. This also holds for Roma in Hungary, who endure historic exclusion from the labour market, which has the consequence of their lacking 'good' contacts with firms which offer good jobs and the kinds of social connections that lead to quality job opportunities.

For international students, internships and volunteer work can serve as valuable pathways to building professional networks and gaining exposure to the local labour market. However, these opportunities are typically unpaid or poorly compensated, making them accessible only to those with sufficient financial resources. Students without such means are often forced to take on jobs unrelated to their field of study to support themselves. This not only limits their ability to gain relevant experience but can also weaken their CVs, putting them at a disadvantage in the job market.

International students in the Netherlands and Belgium reported intense competition in their respective labour markets. Following the expansion and internationalisation of higher education in these countries, entry-level positions have become increasingly competitive. Without knowledge of the local language, personal networks, or the ability to easily navigate visa and work permit requirements, international students face significant barriers to entering the workforce.

### Gender, Parenthood

Finally – and importantly – gender-based barriers faced by women were reported primarily in Poland and Hungary.

Women face various forms of disadvantage in the labour market. Young women, in particular, are often in a weaker position compared to men due to prevailing societal norms. There is a widespread expectation that they will eventually have children, and if they do, it is often implicitly assumed that they will step away from the workforce to take on caregiving responsibilities. '*W. noted that young women also experience discrimination because employers assume they will want children'.* (PL_3). This phenomenon is especially pronounced for professional jobs.

Highly educated Roma women spoke at length about the impact of societal expectations on their labour-market opportunities. They described the challenge of balancing modern professional demands – often involving multiple jobs in international environments – with traditional family expectations, particularly gender roles that assign them primary responsibility for household duties. They shared their ongoing struggle – and sense of purpose – in challenging or renegotiating these traditional norms within their families.

*'The guy at the interview looked at me and said, "Three kids? So that's ten years gone, right?" And I had to justify how long I [had] breastfed for. If a man has two kids, it's seen as a plus – he must be reliable, have a family. When a woman has kids, it's automatically a minus'. (HU_1)*

*'I had to explain why I [had] stayed home with my sick kid. Would they ask a dad the same thing? Being a mom is not a gap in my CV – it's a full-time job [that helps build] a lot of transferable skills'. (HU_1)*

The issue of the glass ceiling for women in professional roles was raised in one of the Polish groups, as well as by the Hungarian group of highly educated refugee women. However, participants in Belgium and the Netherlands did not identify gender as a significant barrier to labour-market access in their discussions.

Being a woman was often cited as a disadvantage in the labour market, particularly when intersecting with caregiving responsibilities. Mothers reported facing distinct barriers and generally agreed that it is easier for men to find employment. Women with young children are often disadvantaged during the hiring process due to the assumption that they are primarily responsible for childcare and household duties. A quote from a Ukrainian mother living in a small town in Poland illustrates how traditional mindsets can severely limit mothers' opportunities to pursue work and build a career:

'*[A] woman [mother] has limited time. She has to take the child to the preschool, and then she has time to find work or to find two jobs, so the first would be between 8 and 12, and then she has to pick up the child, take them to after-school activities, or [perhaps] the child is still very little and needs attention. [A] man […] can be confident and just pursue the job he wants*'. (PL_2)

This challenge is particularly pronounced for immigrant mothers, whose caregiving responsibilities further compound their already disadvantaged position. One key issue is the lack of extended family support – such as grandparents or other relatives – to help with childcare. Additionally, managing their children's education and integration into the school system adds another layer of responsibility. This became especially evident in one of the Polish groups, where a participant noted how exceptional it was to have a supportive 'grandma' figure, highlighting the rarity and value of such support in immigrant contexts.

'*For me, things are easy because we have a wonderful grandma. My daughter only went to preschool when she was four years old because she had cried too much before. I could see that it would be too difficult for her… Grandma understood me; she was also a teacher, so [my daughter] stayed with Grandma, and they're a wonderful couple. They spend a lot of time together'.* (PL_2)

These challenges are even more pronounced for immigrant women, as their children often face significant difficulties of their own – learning a new language, adapting to an unfamiliar environment, and building social connections. In this context, the presence and support of

mothers are especially crucial. Refugee mothers, in particular, face additional hardships, especially if they are single parents, as is often the case among Ukrainian refugees:

'*But a woman with a child also needs work and to make money. The mom won't always have a husband who she can count on, or she may not have a grandma. She also would like to have a job, but they'll say, "Oh, you have a 1.5-year-old child, no, we can't take you because you'll always be on medical leave". What is she supposed to do? She also needs a job, to have a life, buy food, pay for rent'.* (PL_2)

Interestingly, some mothers in the rural Roma group in Hungary face somewhat similar challenges since many male partners are forced to find work abroad because of the widespread institutional and individual discrimination. For mothers, inflexible work schedules and expectations of overtime (often unpaid) make employment difficult, particularly in the manufacturing and logistics sectors in which most jobs for immigrants and ethnic minorities are accessible.

#### Political views

Political views were mentioned as a barrier to employment in only one group: young Roma professionals in Hungary. Roma women working in NGOs or activist spaces reported being excluded from government and public sector jobs due to their political beliefs. *'If you're Roma and anti-Fidesz, that automatically limits your job options in the public sector. I even debated whether I should change my political views just to get a job'. (HU_4)* This phenomenon captured in this quote is important not only because it shows how political views in an autocratising regime may become a barrier to employment, but also explains that ethnic minority groups are exceedingly exposed to political discrimination.

### *3.3. Intersectional Disadvantages in Labor Market Access*

In the previous section, we explored how individual traits or identities influence opportunities in the labour market. However, the group discussions revealed that these characteristics do not operate in isolation. Instead, their combined effects significantly shape who gets access to which types of jobs. The interplay of gender, race, ethnicity, Muslim religion, age, migration status, language proficiency, and caregiving responsibilities creates complex barriers that cannot be adequately captured by one-dimensional analyses. We are not able to present all the intersectionalities that impact employment, but instead point out some examples that are significant in certain contexts and/or affect a large number of people.

**Example 1: Refugee status in intersection with gender, spatial location and religion** may significantly influence labour-market participation across several of our research sites. In the Netherlands, focus group participants residing in asylum-seeker reception centres reported that their geographic isolation posed a major obstacle to employment. These centres are often situated in remote areas with infrequent public transportation, severely limiting access

to job opportunities. This challenge is further intensified by difficulties in the recognition and accreditation of foreign qualifications (as discussed in the previous section), which restricts many asylum seekers to low-skilled employment. Such positions typically require being available for irregular and multiple shifts, making them particularly inaccessible to individuals with mobility constraints. An important dimension that further complicates the intersection of spatial constraints, gender, and refugee status is religion. Muslim women residing in reception centres in the Netherlands reported that the only reliable means of commuting to available jobs was by bicycle. However, they noted that their religious norms regarding modest dress made it difficult or impossible to wear clothing suitable for cycling.

**Example 2: Asylum-seeking or refugee mothers who have migrated alone,** which is the case for most Ukrainian war refugees in Europe and a prevalent phenomenon among other asylum-seeking populations. Here, parenting responsibilities introduce an additional layer of disadvantage that severely limits their ability to engage in paid employment. The focus group discussion conducted in the reception centre in the Netherlands, as well as the rural Polish town, revealed that employment opportunities are extremely limited for sole caregivers of young children, even among those with high levels of education. This is particularly true in rural settings, where access to childcare services, transportation, and flexible work arrangements is often limited, further exacerbating barriers to employment.

Gender and parental responsibilities exacerbate the exclusion of women from the labour market, as traditional assumptions about women's domestic roles still persist in many rural contexts. '*It is more difficult for people with children. Even if they are allowed to work, they often cannot because it's very expensive to have somebody take care of your children'. (NL_3_4)* The responsibility of navigating unfamiliar educational systems for children further increases the challenges faced by migrant mothers.

In Poland and in Hungary**, the intersection of a discriminatory environment, immigrant status and limited knowledge of the language** may lead to immigrants working in precarious and exploitative conditions, particularly in low-wage sectors such as production lines. Focus group participants of African descent in Poland, as well as Muslim immigrants in Hungary and in Belgium, explained that due to visible racial markers, they regularly experience prejudice in the hiring process.

Immigrants reported that language barriers combined with socioeconomic disadvantage significantly restrict access to employment opportunities. Hungarian language proficiency is a prerequisite for most jobs, yet only those with sufficient financial resources can afford formal language education. This dynamic reinforces existing inequalities, especially in Hungary and Poland, where language courses for foreigners are offered only by private businesses, privileging more affluent immigrants while further marginalising those with limited means.

'*They told me "you should speak Hungarian" … [But] I have to pay, it's nearly 50,000 or 75,000 [HUF] … It's hard […]. We are survivors*'. *(HU_1)*

A **special case** of intersecting disadvantages is that of **nationals from countries under international sanctions**, such as Syria, Cuba, and Libya. One Syrian national explained that international sanctions and the local language requirement exclude them from both international and domestic labour markets.

'*I am an engineer. Okay. But here in Hungary, I couldn't work as an engineer because of the language barrier again. … So I tried many times to get a [job] offer, but also my nationality is not the best because we [are under] sanctions as Syrians, USA sanctions. So we cannot work in international companies if [the work is] related to the USA… Then I took out my English and I applied for UN jobs. I started with FAO and then tried, tried, tried many times*'. *(HU_2)*

**Example 3:** Narratives from Hungary illustrate how **discrimination, gender, intergenerational poverty and caregiving responsibilities** intersect and create a complex web of disadvantages. In the focus group composed of Roma women, participants agreed that Roma men often face even greater discrimination in the local labour market than women, as employers tend to perceive Roma men – particularly those with darker skin tones – as more threatening *'People still see Roma men as aggressive. They don't see a lawyer – they see a threat. My brother is well-educated and kind, but because of his dark skin and beard, people treat him like he's a criminal*'. (HU_4).

Such discrimination has led Roma men to seek employment opportunities abroad. As a result, women are often left behind, simultaneously navigating caregiving and employment responsibilities. These dynamics are rooted in the long-standing racialisation and systemic exclusion of Roma communities, which manifest not only in labour-market discrimination but also in educational segregation – contributing to persistent intergenerational social exclusion. Even young Roma who manage to overcome these structural barriers by attaining a higher education and qualifications continue to face significant obstacles to employment and social mobility within their local contexts. For many, migration and working abroad represent one of the few viable strategies for upward mobility. However, Roma women who remain in rural areas face additional pressures. Societal expectations around childbearing further multiply their challenges, as employers often presume that mothers – regardless of their educational attainment – will be unreliable workers. This reinforces gendered and racialised stereotypes, limiting Roma women's access to stable employment:

*'They didn't even look at my experience or qualifications. As soon as I said I had three kids, I was out….' (HU_4)*

**Example 4:** One of the most pronounced intersectional disadvantages in the Western European labour market is shaped by the **interplay of Muslim religious identity, racialization, and immigrant background** – often signalled by family name. In Belgium, visibly Muslim women face significant barriers to employment due to religious markers such as the hijab, which are frequently perceived as symbols of cultural or ideological otherness. This form of discrimination is further intensified when an immigrant background is inferred from a non-

Western family name. Participants in a focus group composed of Muslim women unanimously reported that wearing the hijab effectively excluded them from many public sector jobs and posed substantial disadvantages in many private sector roles as well. In response, women described two primary strategies: either refraining from applying for certain jobs altogether or concealing aspects of their identity to avoid discrimination. '*I am not wearing a hijab right now, because I think I will face less discrimination this way*'. (B_1)

In Hungary, similar phenomena were recorded: Muslim refugee women experience enhanced barriers to secure employment and experience various types of micro-aggression in their work environment, such as minor comments, looks and avoidance by colleagues. '*We are all on the same level [in terms of] working, but they don't even like to look at me, and they will never talk to me and never say hi. … they made me cry always."* (HU_1)

In Hungary, the broader political climate – characterised by government-led propaganda that vilifies refugees, particularly those of Muslim faith – places refugee women in an especially vulnerable position. One participant described how this hostile environment had shaped her employment choices, leading her to seek work in the care sector, where head coverings were part of the professional dress code. In this context, the requirement to cover her head aligned with her religious practice, allowing her to maintain her identity while avoiding overt discrimination

*'In my workplace, I have some kind of [bonnet], so I don't put my [usual head covering] on my head. As social workers, we have to all the time cover our heads. This is not a problem, but if I [dress with the hijab] when I go out, when I go in, they will look at me'.* (HU_1)

**Example 5:** A special case of the **intersection of gender, ethnicity and education** resulting in labour-market disadvantages emerged in several groups of highly educated women belonging to minoritised groups in the respective societies. In these cases, the commonly cited barrier of low educational attainment was absent, allowing for a clearer examination of the systemic obstacles that persist for minority groups despite high levels of qualification.

Refugee, immigrant, and ethnic minority women with higher education degrees frequently reported experiences with encountering a glass ceiling, or, using the words of a Roma woman in Hungary, 'not a glass ceiling, but a concrete ceiling'. They explained that they were often perceived as deviating from normative expectations – specifically, the stereotype that minority women are not suited for professional roles – which further marginalised them within the labour market. (B_1), (HU_4). *'White men with half the experience get treated like experts, while we have to prove ourselves ten times over*'. *(HU_1) 'We're always stuck in lower positions. Leadership roles? Forget it*'. *(HU_1)* Highly educated Roma women in Hungary, as well as refugees and immigrants in Poland and Belgium, face constrained occupational opportunities due to persistent stereotyping. These biases often result in their exclusion from high-ranking and leadership positions, forcing many into lower-status roles or compelling them to abandon their original professions altogether.

*'I was doing the job of a senior manager, but my title and salary stayed [at a] junior [level]. They never said why*'. *(HU_1)*

'*She is Black, and she said she has a PhD. She works on research, medical research, and some kind of vaccines. She said that in her whole team, she's the only one that has a PhD there, but despite that, she works more than everybody. She gets less pay than everybody, and every time they still complain about her*', – reported one participant in PL_3 about his friend living in Germany.

Intersectional disadvantages manifest not only in access to employment but also in the types of roles deemed 'appropriate' for individuals from marginalised groups. Employers frequently channel members of minoritised communities into care or social work positions, based on stereotypical assumptions, while viewing them as unsuitable for fields such as science, business, or technology. '*There's this assumption that Roma women are naturally good at caregiving or raising kids. That's the space we're expected to stay in*'. (HU_1). The highly educated Ukrainian women in Poland also faced multiple barriers when seeking jobs that reflected their qualifications. One of them explained she had to change her original approach to her career and life-planning: '*I always planned my life. [Back in Ukraine] I was a financial director, and planning was 80% of my job. But then there's force majeure…Now I don't plan anything anymore. I understand that I have to figure out a new profession and get a degree that will allow me to work [here in Poland]*'. (PL_3)

In conclusion, intersectionality reveals how overlapping identities – particularly those related to gender, race, religion, migration status, and socioeconomic background – produce unique configurations of disadvantage in the labour markets of Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and Hungary. While these intersections vary across groups and contexts, they consistently reshape and override the conventional hierarchies of factors influencing access to and the quality of employment.

### 3.4. LABOUR-MARKET DISCRIMINATION ROOTED IN INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

As outlined in the preceding sections, discrimination in both access to the labour market and within the workplace remains a pervasive experience for individuals with migrant, refugee, and minority backgrounds across the four countries examined in this study. While individual experiences vary, qualitative data from Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and Hungary reveal recurrent patterns of unequal treatment rooted in intersecting social categories such as religion, race, migration status, gender, and legal status.

Occasionally, it is difficult to disentangle discrimination (meaning the treatment of a person 'less favourably' than someone else, because of protected characteristics [Oxford Dictionary]) from subjective accounts of differential treatment. It also remains unclear whether the narratives reflect experiences of individual, institutional, or systemic forms of discrimination.

It is important to acknowledge that the insights presented in this chapter are drawn from the narratives of focus group participants, and the researchers had no means of independently validating these accounts. Nevertheless, as lived experiences – whether they reflect instances of direct discrimination, systemic dynamics, or outcomes shaped by legal and institutional frameworks – these testimonies are important for understanding the everyday realities and opportunity structures that shape the employment experiences of racialised minorities.

A case that illustrates the difficulty of determining whether actual discrimination has occurred involves international students in Belgium and the Netherlands. These students reported feeling discriminated against in the labour market, attributing their experiences to the highly competitive nature of the job market, compounded by their limited work experience and lack of proficiency in the local language. This ambiguity highlights the challenge of disentangling perceived discrimination from structural barriers related to employability and integration. One of the FG participants translated his lack of Dutch knowledge and employees' disregard for other language proficiencies as a form of discrimination:

'*…they [foreign students] can speak other languages, Chinese, Indian [which] would be a big advantage [..] which would benefit companies with international connections*'. *(NL_2)*

Several international students interpreted visa regulations as a form of discrimination. They reported feeling disadvantaged in the labour market because their student visas restricted their ability to engage in unlimited formal employment, while the complexity and difficulty of obtaining a work permit or transitioning to a work visa discouraged employers from hiring them, limiting their opportunities for labour-market integration.

'*[Even] when applying for jobs next to my studies, my manager told me that there was insider pressure and that he was advised not to hire me because they didn't want to go through the process of, like, you know, going through bureaucracy and sponsoring the work permit*'. *(NL_1)*

These accounts appear to reflect a misunderstanding of the purpose and function of visa regulations, rather than instances of direct discrimination.

Direct discrimination by employers was reported in all countries. In Belgium, the most prominent basis for such discrimination was **religious identity**, particularly in the case of visibly Muslim women. Participants described being treated unfairly in employment contexts due to their refusal to conceal their religious identity – specifically, through the wearing of visible symbols such as the hijab. They explained that certain jobs in some secular states disallow employees from expressing their religious identity. These include various public sector roles – such as police officers and teachers – as well as some positions in the private sector. During the employment process, many women wearing a hijab were also subjected to stereotypes that cast doubt on their professional competence or cultural compatibility. Notably, religion was not cited as a source of discrimination in relation to other faiths or in any other context.

**Race and racialization** emerged as a factor of discrimination in Poland with regard to immigrants of African descent, in the Netherlands as a secondary experience towards Asian immigrants, in Belgium with reference to darker skin and in Hungary with regard to Roma and to coloured refugees.

In Belgium, one discussion partner explained that her mother was seen as dirty because of her darker skin tone: '*You are dirty, you need to wash. Look*'. (B_3) She explained that she had applied for a job, but the employer only wanted to hire white employees for cleaning jobs.

In the Netherlands, one discussion partner explained his friend's experience of Asian people being discriminated against in the job-selection process:

'*Friends from India and from Korea, and they've experienced some sort of like soft racism in the Netherlands while looking for jobs*'. (NL_1)

In the Netherlands and Belgium, direct discrimination was not reported as a personal experience by the focus group participants, but rather as a secondary experience (an incident that had happened to someone they knew).

In contrast, in Poland and Hungary, racial discrimination was a general experience of coloured people. African immigrants employed in professional roles in Poland shared their experiences of bias and prejudice related to their skin tone, particularly in accessing the labour market. While the focus group participants did not describe overtly racist incidents, they recounted situations in which they felt they were treated less favourably than their white colleagues – regardless of whether those colleagues were Polish or foreign nationals. The recurring themes and patterns in their narratives suggest the presence of indirect racism operating at systemic and institutional levels.

'*You know, I already know that as a Black man you have to prove yourself that you are worthy of something…So I would push myself to do extra...So I was trying to prove, you know, that I can do it*'. (PL_4)

Discrimination was also a recurring theme in the focus group with highly educated refugee women in Hungary, where experiences were particularly related to hiring practices, workplace treatment, and professional growth opportunities. Speaking of discrimination-related experiences, one participant stated: *'I feel that this [racial discrimination] is a very big issue*'. *(HU_1) Another participant said: 'Yes, I can add, I mean, I have some experience [related to what I have] I heard from people. Sometimes there is a racist activity and also a lack of trust among companies towards applicants of refugee background*'. *(HU_1)*

Roma in Hungary are also subject to recurring racial discrimination in various fields of life, including employment. While the two focus groups with Roma participants provided numerous accounts of discriminatory treatment, we offer three examples provided by participants in a rural town to illustrate the everyday nature of such experiences. These examples reflect the routine and systemic character of the bias they encounter. In the focus

group conducted in a rural town, all women agreed that certain jobs are simply not accessible to Roma locally. These jobs often include positions in the service sector, where employers justify discriminatory practices by citing customer preferences:

*'I was in a similar situation. There is a grocery store in the town and the owner told me that she was sorry, but she wouldn't employ me, because I was a Gypsy and the customers wouldn't accept me*'. *(HU_3)*

However, the most obvious case of racial discrimination was shared by one of the discussion partners who, after graduating from upper secondary school ('Gymnasium'), studied further to become an administrative legal assistant:

*'As soon as I graduated from secondary school and passed the matricula, I studied in K. to become a legal assistant. This is quite a complex thing. I was told to apply to the court in K. for an internship, because they accept students from this school as interns, because they have lots of positions. So, I submitted my application, my school records, and everything they asked for. My name is not a traditional Gypsy name, so this was not a problem for them. Only after everyone in the applicant group had been called in for an interview did I find out that I was still sitting in the waiting room and waiting to be called, even though I had been the first to arrive. They didn't even come to call me, so after waiting for a very long time, I knocked on the door and told them that I was still waiting for the interview. And then, I was told: "But you won't be [called in], you are a Gypsy, aren't you?" "Yes, I am" [I replied]. "Then, you won't get in here, you can't be an intern at the court". Wow, this was such a shock that I became a [manual labourer] afterwards. They were very rude to me, telling me that Gypsies should not work in an office, and stuff like that. I would rather not tell you [more details of the story], because I still get very nervous. So I closed the door on them, said bye, and left'.* (HU_3)

This episode stood out as the most alarming example of racial discrimination uncovered in our focus group research – particularly because it was practised openly by a key legal institution (the Court) whose role is to uphold justice and protect individuals against discrimination. The incident targeted an individual born in the country and holding citizenship, with no issues related to language or visa status. The sole reason for her mistreatment appeared to be her membership of a racialised ethnic minority and her darker skin tone.

In addition to racial discrimination, the biased treatment of women, and especially women with children, was prevalent in most countries.

The **intersections of gender and parenthood** emerged as a particularly significant source of discrimination for mothers with immigrant or Roma backgrounds. In Hungary, mothers were often assumed to be unreliable employees, expected to stay home if their child fell ill – even in cases where the father was unemployed (HU_3). Stereotypes about Roma women's presumed high fertility rate further contributed to their exclusion from employment. These gendered and racialised assumptions created what some participants described as a '**concrete**

**ceiling**' to career advancement. Not only did mothers face disadvantages when seeking employment, but young women in their mid-twenties did as well. Since Hungarian labour law requires that mothers be re-employed after their state-supported maternity leave (2 or 3 years following the birth of a child) expires, employers prefer not to hire young women at all. This is even more pronounced in the case of Roma women, who are seen by employers as likely to give birth to several children and thus only return to work after an extended period of maternity leave.

The situation of being a mother of an immigrant background was also discussed in great detail in some of the Polish groups. Participants explained that they were discriminated against for certain jobs because it was expected that they would stay home if their children became ill or had school holidays. This assumption was further reinforced by the fact that many of them lacked nearby family members who could step in to support their parental responsibilities in such situations.

**The tokenistic nature of positive discrimination or affirmative action within diversity employment policies** emerged as a recurring theme in the experiences of highly educated women from minoritised backgrounds. Several focus groups discussed how highly qualified individuals from these communities were often hired primarily to signal an organisation's commitment to diversity and inclusion, rather than being genuinely valued for their expertise or given equitable opportunities for advancement. Such employment practices were received ambiguously by focus group participants:

*'It's frustrating to always be the one who "brings colour" to equality and justice events, while white people talk about diversity',* – explained a Roma woman who works at a multinational firm in Hungary. (HU_1)

A highly qualified employee at a multinational firm in Poland shared similar feelings: '*They want an African to be at the front because they want to be able to say, "Yes, we have [include] everybody". There's one African on this side. There's one Asian on that side, and then everybody at the back is European. …They just want it for the publicity. They want it there to be able to say, "Oh yes, we're inclusive"'.* (PL_1)

Diversity hiring practices – when individuals are recruited due to their membership in an underrepresented minority – often lead to the latter's competence being questioned within the organisation. This not only affected how they were perceived by others but also contributed to self-doubt and diminished self-esteem: *'Sometimes I feel like they keep me around just to say they have a Roma colleague*'. *(HU_1).* Explicit diversity quotas are usually not welcomed, even by those who benefit from them, *'…For me, that was pretty offensive*', – said a Nigerian man with a PhD, now working at a Polish university.

Many minority professionals shared that they felt they had been hired and treated merely as part of a 'checkbox' requirement to fulfil diversity policy requirements. *'They really needed a Roma employee, so I knew they wouldn't fire me no matter what I did. We even joked: if we*

*set the office on fire, they still wouldn't let us go*'. –'*I didn't want to be boxed into being "the Roma professional". But I kept being steered back to it*'. *(HU_1)*

One Roma woman described how relieved she felt working at a company where race and other aspects of identity were not remarked on – especially after having previously held roles that were explicitly tied to her ethnic background. *'My current workplace is an international company, mostly foreigners. They don't care where you come from – just do your job well. The fact that it's mostly expats really helps. I'm not exoticised here. I'm just a colleague*'. (HU_4)

## *3.5. COPING STRATEGIES*

Focus group discussions conducted with immigrant and ethnic minority participants in Belgium, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Poland revealed that, despite facing numerous barriers rooted in intersectional disadvantages presented in the previous sections – including gender, ethnicity, migration status, and socioeconomic background – participants developed a remarkably diverse and adaptive set of strategies to navigate these challenges. This chapter presents a synthesis of the most prevalent resilience strategies identified across the groups. Notably, many of these strategies were employed irrespective of national context or specific group characteristics, suggesting a shared repertoire of coping mechanisms among marginalised populations in European labour markets.

### Downgrading job expectations

A common strategy among focus group participants was to alter their career trajectories, often resulting in a lower level of employment than their previous professional level and qualifications. This pattern was observed among refugees, immigrants, and racialised minorities alike. However, factors such as the length of time since migration, the reasons for migration, and experiences of severe discrimination played significant roles in shaping these strategies. Those least affected by professional downgrading were individuals who migrated specifically for employment and secured positions at multinational companies. International students also represented a distinct group: while many took on internships or traineeships, these roles were generally viewed as stepping stones to future career opportunities. A few participants mentioned working in low-skilled hospitality jobs to support themselves during their studies – a practice not unique to immigrants, as it is also common among local students.

However, many of the focus group participants had migrated either for humanitarian reasons or as spouses. For them, downgrading career expectations was definitely a major strategy for coping with the barriers described in the previous sections. Many with BA or MA degrees were forced to (re)start their careers in blue-collar or service-sector jobs, where language barriers or issues with the recognition of their qualifications were less likely to hinder employment.

'*I was a teacher in my own country, but here I work in a factory as a worker. Yes, I'm working*'. *(HU_1)*

Such jobs often trap individuals in low-ranking positions within the labour market, creating a vicious cycle. These roles are typically low-paid, physically demanding, and time-consuming. As a result, immigrants working in these positions have little time or energy left to address the disadvantages they face – such as learning the local language or building professionally meaningful networks. This situation can also hinder their ability to process and recover from the trauma of migration. While the limitations on the length of this report do not permit the inclusion of the many individual work histories – each unique and nuanced – the overall pattern was strikingly clear.

In Hungary, both Roma women from rural towns and refugee women reported being hired for blue-collar or low-level administrative jobs, regardless of whether they held advanced degrees such as MAs or PhDs. (In contrast, this was not the case for highly qualified Roma women in Budapest, all of whom were employed in positions that matched their high qualifications.) In Poland, the life stories of highly qualified Ukrainian, Filipino, and African immigrants revealed that, even those who had now secured relatively strong positions in the labour market, had initially been forced to restart their careers from very low-level jobs.

The focus group discussions revealed a wide range of responses to the forced downgrading of participants' career paths. Some expressed deep resentment over the injustice they had experienced, while others took a more accepting stance – highlighting the practical benefits of low-skilled jobs and emphasising that work is ultimately about income and survival, not status. They rejected the notion of elitism, asserting that all forms of labour deserve respect. '*Some friends would advise me: "Don't do that [job]" or "don't take it, because you have studied this much, why would you do that?" They could not comprehend it, but for me… why not, you know? They give me good pay also. Proportionate to my dignity as a person. So I don't see anything wrong*'. *(B_4)*

A respondent in the Netherlands emphasised that rebuilding a career is a gradual process that requires patience. Taking on volunteer roles or low-paid jobs, they explained, is part of that patience – an investment that eventually pays off over time.

*'Some people look for something like short-term. And they're like, Oh, I don't know. I want to work. And they start with, like, a minimum salary. Minimum salary. And then after two or three years, they will get the same minimum salary. But if you build your CV […] after three years, you will start with a high salary. And then you get like more and more*'. *(NL3-4)*

Experiencing open discrimination can be deeply traumatic – sometimes to the extent that it derails a person's career aspirations. One Roma woman, quoted earlier, who held a post-secondary qualification as a legal assistant, recounted how being openly discriminated against during an internship application at the local court had led her to abandon her professional path. Instead, she chose to pursue a blue-collar job. This is how she explained her decision:

### Re-starting education

Another strategy that resurfaced in several FG discussions was restarting higher education. This strategy responds to a number of barriers, simultaneously including the issues of the naturalisation of diplomas, language barriers and visa issues, while it also involves the opportunity to build connections (weak ties) to the local labour market (internship, classmates, teachers). The following quote from a participant from Poland tells the story of a person employed in the tech sector who had to change his job, but lacking a Polish diploma, this seemed to be highly challenging and risky:

'*When I came to Poland, I was forced to (re)do my master's here to access the labour market […] Polish people […] can access the labour market, but not foreigners. So you are forced to do more stuff. Once you graduate and hold a Polish diploma, then you can access the labour market as well. So my aim is to do a master's because of this only. I'm already overqualified for this position, but I was forced to do the master's to access the labour market*'. (PL_1)

Some participants explained that re-entering higher education was a strategic response to visa-related challenges. Since obtaining a work visa in Poland and Hungary is often difficult and comes with significant restrictions, enrolling in a higher education program and securing a student visa presented a more feasible alternative. Individuals with legal status based on student enrolment are typically allowed to work legally, making this pathway a practical solution for maintaining both residency and employment opportunities, even though it comes with a significant cost.

'*And for me, that's one of the problems. Like the policies for foreigners, if you're not a student, you need to get an extra work permit. Or if you're not a graduate from a school here, you have to get an extra work permit. It's really hard…You have to combine work and school. That's what I have to do now to get the job, I had to re-enrol in school to get a job. It's crazy. I don't know if it's going to change, but I think it's only going to get harder*'. (PL_4)

Several participants from the highly educated immigrant groups in Hungary were also pursuing additional studies or a second master's degree, despite already holding one. However, this strategy often comes at a significant personal and financial cost. First, studying and working simultaneously is extremely exhausting physically, mentally and psychologically: '*Can you tell me how a student is supposed to attend a day at a university and work at night?*' (PL_3). '*I am doing my social worker training again from zero, and I'm going to school plus training. So, I have school two days, one day training, and four days I am working*'. *(HU_1)*

Moreover, pursuing studies as an international student is expensive, making it an option only for those with sufficient financial resources – thereby adding another layer of inequality.

### Self-exploitation: 'Do whatever it takes'

A recurring theme in the focus group discussions with immigrants and racialised minorities across all four countries was the perceived need to work harder than others to prove one's competence and secure employment.

*'You know, I already know that as a Black man you have to prove […] that you are worthy of something…So I would push myself to do extra*'. (PL_4)

Such an experience was replicated in most focus groups in different forms. This overperformance often manifests in long working hours, multiple jobs, and a lack of work-life balance. While some viewed this as a resilience strategy, others highlighted it as a source of vulnerability and exploitation. For example, in the focus group held in rural Hungary, Roma women expressed pride in their ability and determination to face challenges and 'do whatever it takes.' However, such a strategy takes its toll: women who work multiple jobs, week and weekends, in physically demanding positions, experience health issues at a very early stage. All of them explained their health issues; for example, one woman who had worked in a poultry factory for almost a decade, doing multiple shifts and extended hours with her hands soaked in cold water and standing in the freezing cold, had developed arthritis by the age of 28. Others explained that their daily schedule, which included full-time work, school, and/or voluntary work for the local NGO, or child care, did not allow for more than three or four hours of sleep daily. These examples of self-exploitation are consequences of the multiple intersecting inequalities that women of racialised minorities endure.

However, exploitative working conditions are not exclusive to blue-collar jobs: A Ukrainian woman living in a Polish town was working various jobs, including language teaching, simply to make a living. It was only after she began working a regular job in a shop – with predictable hours and a fair salary – that she realised how exploitative her previous roles had been.

The visa system – specifically the requirement to maintain continuous employment as a condition for legal residency – places immigrants in a particularly vulnerable and exploitable position in both Poland and Hungary. Many are compelled to work multiple jobs simply to ensure they meet this requirement and avoid jeopardising their legal status:

'*Maybe not all of the newly arrived ones will know [this], but you can't have a break in your employment. Period. You just can't. If you quit one job, you have to inform immigration within 14 days that you have ended your job in one place, and then you have 30 days to find a new job. In sum, you have a month and a half to just get anything, anything just so you don't have a break in your employment, so you don't have a break in your income. […] I came to understand that physical labour isn't that bad compared to intellectual work. We always say [that what] we want and […] our goal is to work in a warm office with people, a printer, and a computer. But in sum, if the physical job is ok, at least no one puts pressure on you, you don't take work back home on the weekends or anything like that*'. [PL_3]

### The role of NGOs and civil society in coping

Civil organisations, whether local grassroots or professional NGOs, were mentioned in most of the focus groups as a source of support. Immigrants, refugees, and racialised minorities all shared stories of encounters with civil organisations that had provided help in important moments in their lives: either navigating the labyrinth of bureaucracy, sharing locally relevant information, helping with language education, providing a letter of support, or improving mental health. (We should provide a note about the methodology here: several of the focus groups were organised through or with the help of NGOs; thus, even though representatives of the organisations were not present during the discussion, it is possible that FG participants felt the need to emphasise the respective NGO support. Despite this risk potential bias (which we consider small), we still conclude that NGOs and grassroots organisations play an important role in accessing and navigating the labour market or mitigating barriers in all countries).

Refugees in Hungary, the Netherlands, and Poland all emphasised that at some point in their journey, they had relied on NGO support. In Hungary, refugees shared that NGOs that assist immigrants had played a crucial role in helping them navigate language courses and provided letters of reference for job applications. More importantly for Muslim immigrant women, the grassroots organisations they were involved in offered a safe space to meet, share experiences, and express their feelings without fear of discrimination. These groups were vital for their mental well-being and sense of comfort.

In Belgium, one of the focus groups consisted of asylum seekers residing in a reception facility. They highlighted the importance of NGOs operating within the facility, particularly in helping them navigate complex bureaucratic systems and access the labour market.

NGOs also played a significant role in the lives of Roma women. All participants from this group were engaged with NGOs in some capacity – either as employees or volunteers. It was evident that NGOs were instrumental in shaping their life trajectories and in helping them cope with the discrimination they faced in their everyday environments.

# 4. CONCLUSION: FORMS AND MECHANISMS OF STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION ROOTED IN INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

Work Package 3 (WP3) seeks to contribute to the scholarly and policy debates on the interplay between various identity categories in the reproduction of inequalities, thereby deepening our understanding of structural racism and discrimination in Europe. It employs a multi-method approach, incorporating the analysis of large-scale European data and qualitative focus group research.

This report presents a comparative analysis of focus group discussions conducted with members of minoritised communities in Belgium, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Poland. While its findings are valuable in their own right, this study aims to complement the analysis of large-scale comparative European data conducted in this work package. It is intended to enrich and refine findings that are representative at the continental level and help interpret European-level data by providing contextual depth. By documenting the labour-market experiences of minoritised groups, this research provides empirical evidence to inform the development of more effective and inclusive equality policies.

Given the significant variations in the local labour-market contexts, the composition of immigrant populations and the role of the state in supporting immigrants, the methodological approach had to be adopted accordingly. The focus group research was thus designed to simultaneously ensure relevance to national contexts and allow cross-country comparability regarding the key drivers of labour-market disadvantage and intersectionality. The selection of focus group participants was part of a deliberative process undertaken by the research team: while certain common criteria – such as legal status, gender and parenting role, and belonging to a minoritised/racialised community – and the guidelines of the discussion were consistent across countries, each country developed their own recruitment strategy tailored to its local context. Participants from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and gender backgrounds, as well as legal status in Hungary, Poland, Belgium, and the Netherlands, took part in focus group discussions that facilitated reflection on structural discrimination and perceived sources of labour-market disadvantage. The research's primary objective was to explore the everyday mechanisms of structural discrimination as experienced by immigrants and racialised minorities, shaped by intersecting identities in various national contexts.

The report has identified the most significant barriers to accessing and progressing in the labour market for immigrants and racialised minorities. Despite the focus group's diverse composition, there was a striking consistency in several challenges they reported. These included individual and institutional discrimination, limited proficiency in the local language, complex bureaucratic procedures, weak personal networks and social capital, social class constraints, and gendered expectations around parenthood in the workplace.

While each of these barriers presents a significant challenge on its own, it is often the combination of certain identity traits that renders labour-market participation particularly challenging for immigrants, refugees, and racialised minorities. The analysis highlights several critical intersections – such as immigrant status, gender, and parenthood; residence status, educational background, and language proficiency; and the interplay between a prejudiced social environment, visible religious markers, and gender – that intensify disadvantage and deepen exclusion.

Discrimination emerged as a particularly prominent and recurring theme in the narratives shared by our interview participants. However, its manifestations varied considerably across national contexts, local settings, and forms of minoritisation. For example, in rural areas of Hungary, discrimination against Roma communities and immigrants is often normalised and socially accepted. Likewise, individuals of African descent and Ukrainian refugees frequently reported experiencing overt prejudice and social exclusion. In contrast, while racism – Islamophobia in particular – is present in Belgium and the Netherlands, it tends to be more subtle and less openly expressed. In these contexts, discrimination is often embedded within institutional regulations and structural barriers, which systematically disadvantage immigrants and racialised minorities without necessarily involving explicit acts of bias. Although religion in general was rarely mentioned as a source of discrimination in the focus group discussions, Islamophobia emerged as a pervasive, everyday experience among focus group participants in Belgium. This suggests that it is not religious affiliation per se, but rather the racialisation of certain religious identities and associated practices – particularly those linked to Islam – that constitutes a significant barrier to labour-market access.

The situation of asylum seekers and refugees diverges notably across Belgium, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Poland. In the former communist countries, such as Hungary and Poland, a more prejudiced social climate – combined with limited or entirely absent support systems – significantly constrains integration opportunities for asylum-seekers and refugees. This results in markedly different experiences for asylum seekers within the European Union.

In conclusion, we would like to stress how gender shapes the structures of inequalities. In contexts where traditional gender roles are deeply rooted, women face significant barriers to entering the labour market and advancing in their careers in line with their qualifications. As soon as they try to enter the labour market, employers often exhibit bias against hiring women, perceiving them as unreliable because it is assumed they will take maternity leave and be absent for extended periods. Women who are mothers encounter even greater challenges in securing stable, well-paid employment. In societies shaped by conservative values, caregiving responsibilities are typically assumed to fall on women, reinforcing the belief that they will be unavailable during school holidays or when children are ill. These challenges are especially pronounced for immigrant women and those from racialised minorities, as they are often subject to stronger stereotypes and, in many cases, are the sole caregivers (such as Ukrainian refugees and Roma women).

When examining the coping strategies, we found that many immigrants are compelled to downgrade their professional aspirations due to discrimination, non-recognition of prior

qualifications, and language barriers. The deskilling of the immigrant workforce represents a significant loss of human capital, as highly educated individuals are often confined to low-paid, blue-collar jobs. Such systemic inefficiencies not only hinder the potential of individuals but also constitute a broader economic loss for national labour markets.

## REFERENCES


Bonilla-Silva, E. (2015). The structure of racism in color-blind, "post-racial" America. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *59*(11), 1358-1376.

Collins P. H. (2000) Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. New York: Routledge

Gruber, J. (2021). White Innocence/White Supremacy: Exploring the Theo-political Intersections of Race and Salvation. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, *7* (2), 515-538.

Hadu, G. and Messing, V. (2025). *Intersecting identities and their consequences on inequality structures in the labour market in Europe.* RAISE D3.3. Budapest: Democracy Institute

Li, Y., & Heath, A. (2020). Persisting disadvantages: a study of labour market dynamics of ethnic unemployment and earnings in the UK (2009–2015). *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *46*(5), 857-878.

Phalet, K., & Heath, A. (2010). From ethnic boundaries to ethnic penalties: Urban economies and the Turkish second generation. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *53*(12), 1824-1850.

Ray, V. (2019). A theory of racialised organizations. *American Sociological Review*, *84*(1), 26-53.

Verloo M. (2006). Multiple Inequalities, Intersectionality and the European Union. *European Journal of Women's Studies*. 13(3): 211-228.

Wimmer, A. (2008). Elementary strategies of ethnic boundary making. *Ethn. and racial studies*, *31*(6), 1025-1055.