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National Center of Competence in Research –
The Migration-Mobility Nexus

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**What are the Gender Differences
in Labor Market Integration
among Refugees?**

in a nutshell #27, December 2025



**Swiss National
Science Foundation**

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Messages for Decision-Makers

The study presents a comprehensive analysis of gender differences in labor market integration for the entire refugee population in Switzerland over 20 years.

Refugee women in Switzerland face disadvantages in the labor market compared to men, including lower employment and earnings.

Local labor market conditions at the time of refugees' arrival influence refugee men's and women's patterns of integration.

Refugee women's cultural background plays a role in shaping their labor market outcomes in the medium and long run.

The study highlights the importance of examining the gender dimension of migratory flows to advance an understanding of the determinants of successful and inclusive patterns of integration.

What is meant by...

... gender employment gap

The gender employment gap is the difference in employment rates between men and women.

... labor-market integration

Labor market integration is the process by which migrants participate in the workforce and get access to stable employment in the host country.

... natural experiment

A natural experiment is a setting that allows researchers to test hypotheses in a way that is comparable to an experimental setting (but without the researchers' intervention).

... longitudinal dataset

A longitudinal dataset is a set of data that includes repeated observations for the same individuals over a given time period, and therefore makes it possible to follow the same individuals over time.

Gender dynamics influence how refugees integrate into the labor market in Switzerland, affecting employment and earnings outcomes over time. Understanding these differences between men and women refugees' experiences is crucial to designing effective integration policies. This policy brief presents new evidence from a 20-year study of all refugees in Switzerland, showing how both local conditions at arrival and cultural norms from origin countries influence gender-specific integration trajectories. The findings highlight important considerations for targeted and equitable policy responses.

Global Trends in Forced Migration and Gender Gaps

By mid-2024, over 122 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, including nearly 44 million refugees (UNHCR, 2025). The scale of displacement is growing due to ongoing conflicts, environmental crises, and persecution. Successful integration of refugees includes their participation in the labor market, which is critical for economic stability and social inclusion.

Research on gender disparities in labor market integration mostly focuses on international migrants in general, documenting persistent gaps in employment rates, job quality, and earnings between men and women (Lee et al., 2022). Evidence specifically focusing on refugees is more limited but descriptive research indicates that refugee women face disadvantages compared to refugee men in the host country (e.g., Fasani et al., 2022).

Understanding these gendered patterns in refugee labor market outcomes is essential for designing inclusive and effective integration policies. This policy brief presents novel insights from a comprehensive study of the entire refugee population in Switzerland, shedding light on the factors shaping gender-specific integration trajectories over two decades.

The Swiss Context

Switzerland provides an ideal setting for studying gender differences in labor market integration among refugees for the following reasons. First, Switzerland is an excellent example of a multicultural society, with more than 40 percent of its permanent resident population aged 15 or over having a migrant background (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2025).

Second, it has a long-standing tradition of hosting refugees and has been among the top-receiving countries in per capita terms (e.g., Pigué, 2019).

Third, over the examined time period, the Swiss government relied on a spatial dispersal policy to allocate refugees across cantons. The process employed is overall independent of refugees' characteristics and preferences, which makes it possible to identify the causal effects of the local initial conditions.

Last, an amendment to the Swiss Constitution in 1981 introduced the principle of gender equality, protecting equal rights for men and women in the family, in education and in the workplace. The popular vote on this amendment provides an excellent measure of the long-standing attitudes of citizens toward gender equality, reflecting social norms in the cantons.

Our study (Müller, Pannatier, and Viarengo, 2025) examines gender differences in labor market integration for the entire refugee population in Switzerland over a 20-year period (1998–2018). It employs a longitudinal dataset constructed by combining various data sources, including social security data, employment records, and population census data. It relies on the quasi-random allocation of refugees across Swiss cantons to identify the causal effects of local conditions at the time of arrival on refugees' subsequent labor market integration trajectories. We also aim to advance our understanding of the gender differences in labor market integration among refugees and the factors that explain their evolution over time.

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“To examine the dynamics and the determinants of gender gaps among refugees in the host country's labor market, we analyze the entire refugee population in Switzerland and follow it over an extended period of 20 years (1998–2018).”
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The Role of the Country of Origin's Culture

Cultural values and social norms regarding the appropriate role of women in society, as well as the acceptability of women working outside the household, influence the participation of refugee women in the host country's labor market. Existing research on international migrants has highlighted the long-lasting effects of the values, preferences, and beliefs that migrants bring with them to the host country, these continue to shape their lives even after settling abroad, though the economic conditions and institutional settings of the receiving country also matter.

Our empirical analysis reveals significant differences in gender-specific social norms across the countries of origin of refugee women. Our findings also show that gender-specific social norms related to labor force

participation and fertility choices from refugee women's country of origin affect their labor market outcomes in Switzerland, though with uneven persistence over time. Women from countries with higher female labor force participation are more likely to be employed and to earn higher wages in Switzerland. Conversely, women from countries with higher birth rates tend to have lower employment and income levels. Over time, the influence of fertility-related norms weakens and becomes negligible after about a decade in Switzerland, while the preexisting positive impact of women's participation in the labor market in their country of origin persists. In contrast, men's labor market outcomes in Switzerland are largely unaffected by cultural indicators from their countries of origin.

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The Role of Initial Local Conditions

Where refugees are first placed within Switzerland also matters for the difference in integration trajectories between genders. The existing literature has examined factors such as initial unemployment, the role of co-ethnic networks and attitudes of the native population. We find that higher canton-level unemployment rates at the time of arrival has a negative impact on refugees' job prospects, and this disproportionately affects women.

The effects of co-ethnic networks vary depending on the nature of the network examined and the refugees' gender. For men, the presence of employed co-nationals enhances access to jobs, whereas for women, it is the presence of non-working co-nationals that improves employment

outcomes—likely because these networks provide informal support, such as childcare, which enables women to take on work.

Finally, long-standing attitudes towards gender equality among the native population play a crucial role in refugees' labor force participation and the gender gap. Refugee women benefit from arriving in cantons with more supportive attitudes toward gender equality, as measured by the outcome of the 1981 vote on gender equality.

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Policy implications

Although our study does not explicitly evaluate specific policy measures, our findings suggest areas where targeted policies could be beneficial. First, women from cultural backgrounds that discourage female employment face the highest risks of long-term exclusion from the labor market. They might benefit from particular integration measures. Second, improved access to childcare would benefit all women refugees, but especially those who cannot rely on a support network outside the labor force. Third, the initial placement of refugees should take into account the differential effects of local conditions on men and women refugees. For example, our results show that gender gaps in labor market integration are smaller in cantons with more equal gender norms and lower unemployment. Overall, our study highlights the importance of examining the gender dimension of migratory flows to advance an understanding of the determinants of successful and inclusive patterns of integration.

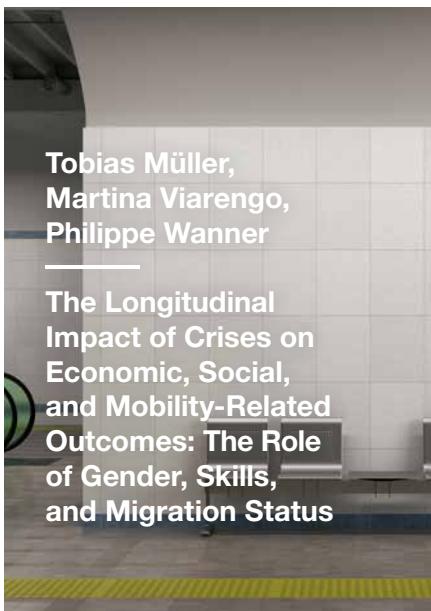
Further Readings

Fasani, Francesco, Tommaso Frattini, and Luigi Minale (2022) “(The Struggle for) Refugee integration into the labour market: evidence from Europe,” *Journal of Economic Geography* 22 (2): 351–393.

Lee Taehoon, Giovanni Peri and Martina Viarengo (2022) “The Gender Aspect of Immigrants’ Assimilation in Europe,” *Labour Economics*, Vol. 78, pp. 102180.

Müller Tobias, Pia Pannatier and Martina Viarengo (2025) “The Gender Dimension of Refugees’ Integration in the Labor Market,” CEPR Discussion Paper No. 20318.

Müller Tobias, Pia Pannatier and Martina Viarengo (2023) “Labor Market Integration, Local Conditions and Inequalities – Evidence from Refugees in Switzerland,” *World Development*, Vol. 170 (October), pp. 106288.



The Longitudinal Impact of Crises on Economic, Social, and Mobility-Related Outcomes: The Role of Gender, Skills, and Migration Status

Prof. Tobias Müller, Prof. Martina Viarengo and Prof. Philippe Wanner

A project of the nccr – on the move

The project employs longitudinal data (registers and surveys) to investigate the extent to which populations of immigrant origin are affected by crises and explore the mechanisms underlying the precariousness of certain communities. Using Swiss and other country-specific data, the researchers will focus on the COVID-19 crisis, as well as on other crises. The aim is to highlight the differential effects of crises on consequences according to migration status, personal characteristics, sector of activity, and to consider the gender dimension and the role of skills. Additionally, different socio-economic and demographic outcomes will be analyzed.

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The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies. It aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics, and law. Managed at the University of Neuchâtel, the nccr – on the move is currently in its third phase (2022–2026) for which it receives SNSF funding of 10.8 million Swiss Francs. The network comprises eleven research projects at eight universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Neuchâtel, as well as the ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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