



HERIZON PROJECT



COMPARATIVE RESEARCH REPORT



Life Skills for Young Migrant Women's Integration



Findings from a participatory needs assessment with 100+ young migrant women and 15 youth workers across Italy, Denmark and Poland.

In Partnership with:



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PROJECT INFORMATION

HERIZON - Building Essential Life Skills for Young Migrant Women's Integration is an Erasmus+ KA210-YOU project (Project No.: 2025-2-IT03-KA210-YOU-000387764) aimed at empowering young migrant women aged 18-30 through the development of essential life skills, and at strengthening the capacity of the youth workers that support them. The project is a one-year initiative, implemented from April 2026 to March 2027.

This report was developed within the framework of the HERIZON project to support inclusive, gender-responsive and evidence-based youth work across Europe.

HERIZON is a partnership project between:

- **Associazione Nazionale Kirghizistan Italia - ANKI (Italy)**
- **Fundacja EQUALIFY (Poland)**
- **Ishøj Ung Kultur (Denmark)**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This transnational research report presents the findings of a survey and interview study conducted in Denmark, Italy, and Poland within the framework of the HERIZON project. The purpose of this research was to identify the real-life barriers encountered by young migrant women aged 18–30, and to translate these experiences into practical, evidence-based learning resources.

A total of 100+ young migrant women responded to the survey and 15 interviews were conducted with youth workers, community leaders, and migrant women themselves. The findings revealed that the principal barrier facing this group is not a lack of skills or motivation. Just over 72 % of respondents hold a university degree or postgraduate qualification, while only 28.6 % speak the language of their country of residence fluently. These are women whose existing capabilities are not reaching the labour market, and whose difficulties are structural rather than individual.

Across all three countries, recurring challenges included language barriers, absent social networks, non-recognition of qualifications, the requirement for local work experience that newcomers cannot obtain, and limited knowledge of rights and entitlements. **Importantly, participants highlighted that many of these barriers are invisible: unwritten social codes, informal hiring networks, and the slow erosion of confidence through repeated rejection. Three quarters of respondents reported feeling lonely at least sometimes, and more than a third manage without any support at all.**

The research also identified where existing provision fails. **Over half of respondents had never participated in any support programme, yet 96 % of those who had found it helpful — indicating a problem of reach rather than of quality.** No partner country was found to operate a programme designed specifically for young migrant women.

The research resulted in a life skills gap analysis mapping self-assessed confidence against expressed demand across ten competences. This analysis identified knowledge of rights as the largest actionable gap, and also some few skills. These findings form the foundation for the project's Empowerment Labs and Digital Toolkit.

The findings confirm that practical life skills, rights literacy, and peer connection are key competences for young migrant women, enabling them to move from managing daily survival towards genuine participation in the societies where they live. This report contributes to the development of practice-based tools that strengthen integration outcomes and support inclusive youth work across European contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

European societies are becoming increasingly diverse, shaped by migration, mobility, and global interconnectedness. Within this context, one group consistently occupies a position that policy has not adequately addressed: young migrant women, who face barriers arising from migration and barriers arising from gender simultaneously, and for whom these barriers interact rather than simply accumulate.

These intersecting barriers influence far more than employment. They shape access to information, public services, education, social networks, confidence, and the ability to participate fully in society. Integration is therefore not only about entering the labour market, but also about developing the knowledge, skills, and support needed to navigate everyday life in a new country.

The scale of this is measurable. Across the European Union, non-EU women with tertiary education are the group most likely of all to be working in jobs that do not require a degree.

Overqualification is one visible example of a broader pattern. These are not women who arrived without capability. Rather, they face structural barriers that prevent their knowledge, experience, and potential from being fully recognised and utilised across different areas of life.

42.9 %

36.2 %

20.8 %

Over-qualification rates in the EU, 2023. In Italy the rate for non-EU citizens reaches 64%—the second highest in the Union.

Yet the support available to them rarely reflects this. Young migrant women are typically addressed either as migrants or as women, but seldom as both. Programmes designed for the general migrant population often fail to reach them; programmes designed for women often assume a familiarity with local systems that newcomers do not have. A European Migration Network study found that while most Member States operate integration policies, few address women specifically within them. None of the three countries examined in this research was found to run a support programme designed specifically for this group.

The HERIZON project addresses this gap by focusing on the development of essential life skills among young migrant women aged 18–30. The project is built on a distinction that emerged from this research itself: the difference between surviving in a new country and participating in it. Survival requires language, legal status, housing, and knowing how

the system works. **Participation requires networks, recognition, confidence, and the sense that one belongs. Most existing support stops at the first threshold and never reaches the second—which is why women who have been settled for five years still describe themselves as starting from zero.** HERIZON focuses on the practical, context-based competences that carry women across that threshold, and on strengthening the capacity of the youth workers and organisations who accompany them.

This transnational research was designed to capture real experiences from young migrant women and from the practitioners who support them across different European contexts. **Through a survey of 100+ young migrant women and 15 in-depth interviews conducted in Denmark, Italy, and Poland, the project explores how these barriers manifest in everyday practice, from difficulties understanding administrative systems and accessing services to building professional networks, entering employment, and developing a sense of belonging.** The findings show that integration is shaped as much by confidence, information, and social connections as by formal legal status or employment opportunities.

The ultimate goal of this research is to ensure that the Empowerment Labs and Digital Toolkit developed within the project are grounded in real-life situations and respond to actual needs. A community leader interviewed for this study observed that programmes for migrant women are routinely designed without migrant women in the room. This report is an attempt to answer that—not by assuming what this group requires, but by asking, and then listening carefully to the answer.

Survival is not integration

Most support for migrant women is designed to get them through the first year: the documents, the language, the housing. Very little is designed for what comes after — the career, the network, the confidence, and the sense of belonging. HERIZON begins where most support ends. This report explores what young migrant women need not only to settle, but to participate, contribute, and thrive.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research design

This study used a mixed-methods design combining a structured survey with semi-structured interviews. The two instruments were designed to answer different questions. The survey establishes the scale and distribution of need across a larger group. The interviews explain how those needs arise and what they feel like from the inside.

Both instruments were designed by Fundacja EQUALIFY and applied by all three partners in their own countries, in the languages their communities use. This ensured comparability of questions while allowing each partner to reach participants through the relationships they had already built — a decision that shaped both the strengths and the limits of the sample. Data collection ran from May to July 2026. Analysis followed a thematic approach described in Section 2.5.

2.2 Participants and perspectives

A total of 105 young migrant women responded to the survey and 15 interviews were conducted with youth workers, five in each partner country. The survey response exceeds the 90 committed in the project application by 17 %.

Survey — 105 responses	
Country of residence	Italy 35 · Poland 31 · Denmark 31 · Other 8
Age	26–30: 40 % · 22–25: 36 % · 18–21: 22 %
Origin	Kyrgyzstan ~34 %, Türkiye ~20 %, Kazakhstan 8 %, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and others Over 5
Time in country	years 30 % · 3–5 years 30 % · 1–3 years 26 % · Under 1 year 14 %
Education	University degree 48.6 % · Postgraduate 23.8 % · Secondary 13.3 % · Vocational 7.6 % Fluent 28.6 % ·
Language	Basic or intermediate 39 % · Learning 16.2 % · Not yet 16.2 %
Instrument	30 questions across seven areas: ten life-skill competences rated on a five-point confidence scale

Interviews — 15	Participants
Denmark · 5	Community centre board chair; weekend education volunteers; youth support worker specialising in emotional support; community coordinator at a tech-upskilling NGO
Italy · 5	Community leaders, youth workers, community coordinators in NGO, a researcher in digital resilience
Poland · 5	Founders of migrant-led organisations; a software engineer supporting Central Asian students; a youth worker at a dialogue institute; a consular-facing caseworker

Interviews lasted 45 to 65 minutes and followed a common guide covering the same areas as the survey, with scope for participants to develop lines of thought the guide had not anticipated — several of the report’s more distinctive findings emerged this way. They were conducted in Turkish, Russian, English or Italian, recorded with consent, transcribed and where necessary translated.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.3 Analysis

Survey responses were analysed descriptively, with frequency distributions for all closed items and mean confidence scores for the ten life-skill measures. Cross-tabulation by country was performed on all substantive items; differences between countries are reported as indicative rather than statistically significant.

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically. An initial coding frame derived from the research questions was revised inductively as new themes emerged — most notably the distinction between the survival phase and the participation phase, which was adopted as the organising structure for the findings. Themes were retained where both sources supported them. Where a theme appeared strongly in one source but not the other, this is stated explicitly rather than smoothed over.

2.4 Ethics, consent and data protection

All participants received a written explanation of the project's purpose, the use of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any point. Interview participants gave recorded verbal consent and signed a consent form afterwards; survey participants consented through an information page before the first question.

Processing complies with the General Data Protection Regulation. The survey collected no names or contact details unless a respondent chose to provide them for follow-up, and those are held separately from responses. Recordings and transcripts are stored on access-controlled partnership infrastructure and will be deleted at the end of the retention period.

2.5 Limitations

Three limitations bound the claims made in this report. The sample is dominated by women from Central Asia and Türkiye, reflecting the communities the partners serve, so findings should not be generalised to migrant women in Europe as a whole without qualification. Participants were reached through community networks, which means the study almost certainly under-represents the most isolated women — where this report describes isolation, the true picture is likely to be worse than the figures show. And with 31 to 35 responses per country, differences between countries are indicative rather than statistically robust. None of this undermines the principal findings, which rest on convergence between independent sources rather than on any single measure.

3. CONTEXT

This section outlines the structural conditions shaping the experiences of young migrant women. Many of the challenges identified in this study reflect systemic barriers rather than individual circumstances.

The European frame

Young migrant women face barriers linked to both migration and gender, yet policies rarely address these dimensions together. Although the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 recognises the need for gender-sensitive support, none of the three partner countries operates programmes specifically designed for this group.

Integration policies have also become less supportive. MIPEX reports declining integration efforts in Denmark, Italy and Poland, including reduced efforts to inform migrants of their rights—directly reflecting the largest knowledge gap identified in this study. Social isolation is another shared challenge: while the EU’s first loneliness survey found 13% of people lonely most or all of the time, this study recorded 34%.

Denmark

Denmark has comparatively effective integration systems, including fast qualification assessments and strong labour market integration. However, many professions require additional authorisation, policy has shifted towards temporary residence, and interpreter fees in healthcare have created barriers to accessing services.

Italy

Italy records one of the EU’s highest overqualification rates among highly educated non-EU migrants. Residence permit processing often exceeds legal deadlines, qualification recognition remains fragmented, and previous research—consistent with this study—highlights social isolation as a key source of vulnerability.

Poland

Poland has become a major destination for migration from Central Asia, with many women arriving as students or spouses. Long residence permit processing creates prolonged legal uncertainty, qualification recognition requires applicant-initiated nostrification, and healthcare access remains closely linked to employment.

What differs

The nature of barriers differs across countries: Italy is marked by administrative complexity, Poland by prolonged legal limbo, and Denmark by social barriers despite relatively effective institutions. Across all three, however, there is still no support system specifically designed for young migrant women.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the study's findings across ten themes. Each combines survey data, which establishes scale, with interview material, which explains mechanism. Where the two sources diverge, this is stated rather than smoothed over.

The themes are ordered deliberately. The first establishes who responded — a profile that frames everything after it. The next seven examine specific barriers. The ninth reports a finding that revises one of the project's own assumptions. The tenth offers a framework, drawn from a practitioner interview, that organises the preceding nine.

4.1 WHO RESPONDED: THE PROFILE THAT EXPLAINS EVERYTHING

Before examining any specific barrier, one comparison needs stating, because almost everything that follows sits on top of it.

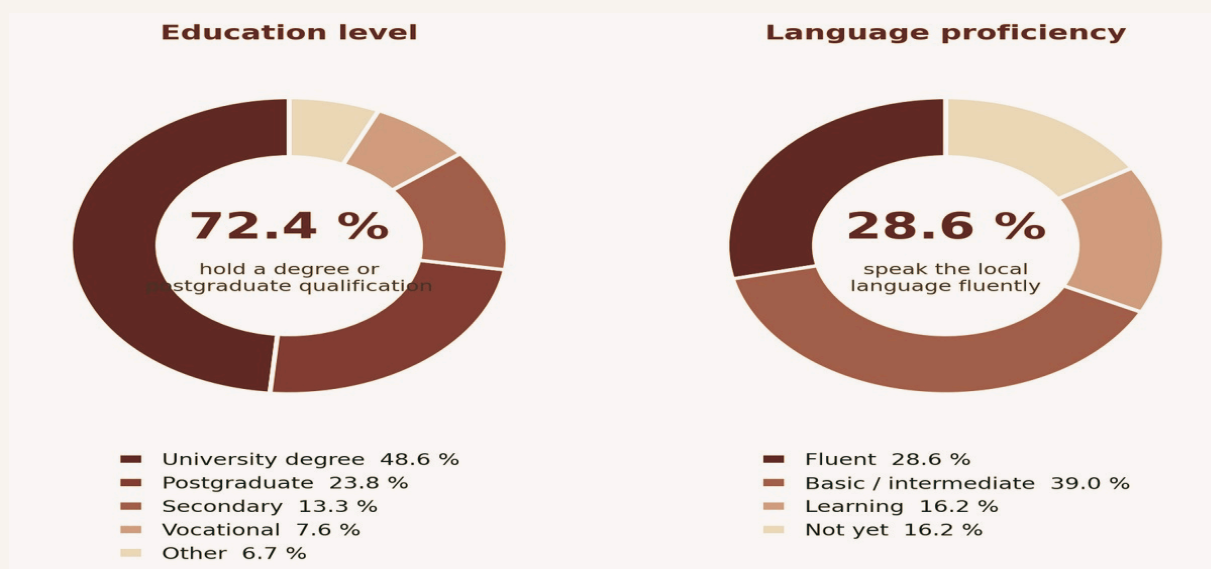


Figure1. Education level and language proficiency among survey respondents (n=105).

These are not women who arrived without capability. Nearly half hold a bachelor's degree (48.6 %) and almost a quarter hold a master's or doctorate (23.8 %). They are, on paper, among the most qualified groups of newcomers in Europe. And yet fewer than three in ten can operate fluently in the language through which that qualification would have to be recognised, presented and used.

Nor are they newly arrived and still finding their feet. Sixty per cent have lived in their current country for three years or more; thirty percent for over five. The difficulties reported in this study are not the disorientation of the first months. They are persistent conditions that time alone has not resolved.

Just over half are students (52.4 %) and just over four in ten are employed (41.9 %), with overlap between the two. Sixteen per cent are unemployed and looking for work. The sample is therefore weighted towards women who are actively engaged in education or the labour market — which makes the barriers they report more, not less, significant. These are the women who are trying.

What this profile implies

A programme designed for this group should not begin from a deficit assumption. The evidence does not show women who lack skills, motivation or ambition. It shows women whose existing skills are not converting into recognition, income or belonging. The intervention required is one of translation and access, not of remedial training.

4.2 LANGUAGE: THE MASTER BARRIER, AND WHAT LIES BEHIND IT

Language was the most frequently cited difficulty at both stages of the migration experience the survey asked about. On arrival, 63.8 % named not speaking the language among their three biggest difficulties. In accessing work or education, 54.3 % named it — again the highest of any barrier.

The pattern holds across all three countries but with variation: Poland highest at 74.2 %, Italy at 68.6 %, Denmark lowest at 58.1 %. The Danish figure is likely depressed by the wider use of English in Danish workplaces and by the presence of second-generation respondents in the sample.

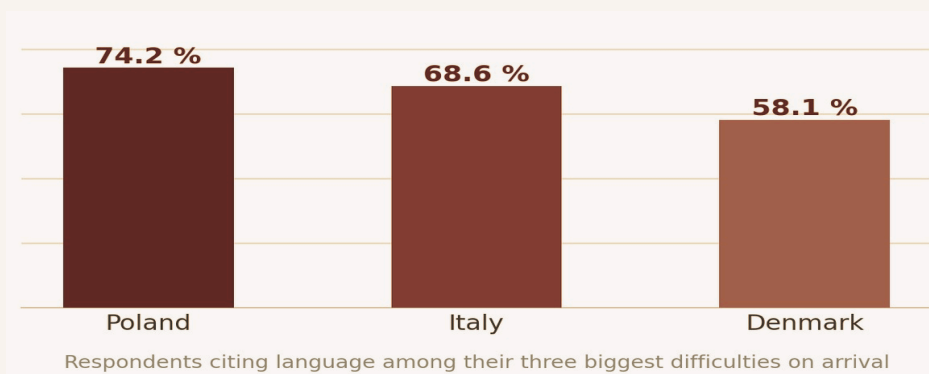


Figure2. Language cited as a difficulty on arrival, by country.

So far this is unsurprising. What the interviews add is the finding that language proficiency does not dissolve the barrier — it relocates it.

“Even job postings that say ‘no Polish required’ will conduct the interview in Polish, making it required.” - survey respondent, Poland

This account was echoed by another Polish respondent independently: employers advertise roles that do not require the national language, then filter by it at interview. The stated requirement and the operative requirement differ, and the applicant discovers this only after investing in the application.

In Denmark the mechanism described was different again. Several respondents who speak Danish reported that fluency was insufficient because the barrier was not vocabulary but social convention.

“Being socially isolated, language barrier — even though you can speak English or Danish, it is not native.” - survey respondent, Denmark

“Danes stick to very few close friends and have a hard time accepting new ones. That’s why it gets hard to make Danish friends or network, because they will not accept you in private.” - survey respondent, Denmark

A community coordinator working with highly skilled migrant women in Copenhagen described this in structural terms: the Danish labour market operates substantially through trust networks, in which people are hired because someone already knew them. Entry to those networks requires social access that language competence alone does not confer.

“There’s a lot of unwritten rules, and when you come as an outsider you don’t really know how to behave. It’s a very homogeneous society that expects you to assimilate.” - Community coordinator, NGO, Denmark

The Design Implication

Language provision remains essential — 42.9 % of respondents named language courses among the support that would help them most. But a programme that treats language as the whole problem will leave fluent participants still excluded. The interviews point to a second requirement: explicit instruction in the unwritten social and professional codes of the host country, which are currently learned by trial, error and exclusion.

4.3 THE DE-SKILLING ENGINE

Section 3 documented that non-EU women with tertiary education are the group most likely in Europe to work below their qualifications — 42.9%, rising to 64% for all non-EU citizens in Italy. This section describes how that outcome is produced. Three mechanisms emerged, and they compound.

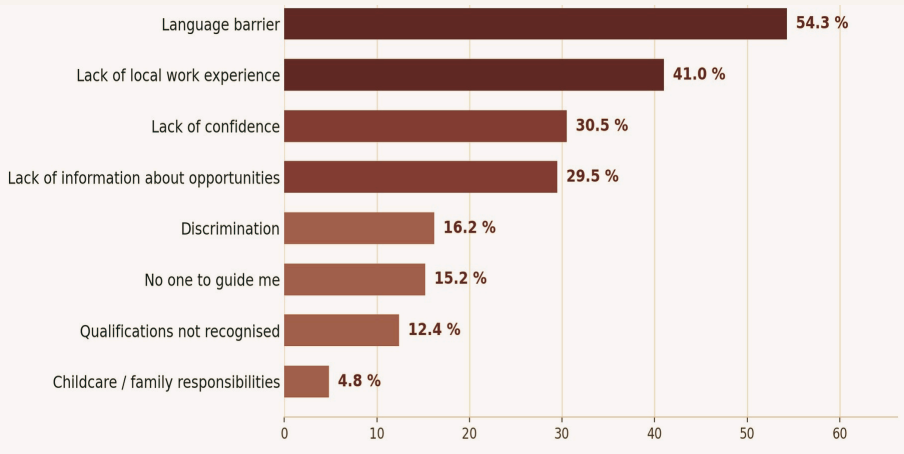


Figure 3. Barriers to finding work or continuing education (n = 105, multiple selection).

Mechanism one: qualifications are not recognised, or recognition is prohibitively slow

Only 7.6% of survey respondents cited non-recognition of qualifications among their difficulties on arrival — a low figure that initially appears to contradict the interview material. The explanation is sequencing. Non-recognition is not felt on arrival; it is felt when one first attempts to use the qualification. In the employment and education context the figure rises to 12.4%, and in Denmark — where more respondents have reached that stage — to 19.4%.

The interviews describe what recognition failure costs in practice. A community leader in Italy described one woman she supports: a professionally trained classical musician, with eleven years of specialist schooling and four years of conservatory training, whose diploma was never recognised. She has worked in hotels, cleaning, bars and private tuition since arriving. A community leader in Denmark described the arithmetic facing qualified professionals: one to two years to reach the required language level, then three years or more to re-qualify.

“Let’s say ten or fifteen years of education and experience in her own country. But here she is starting from zero. Four or five more years — so she has set her life back and extended the adaptation.” - community leader, Denmark

A youth worker in Denmark made the same point about the sequencing being the problem rather than the requirement itself.

“If a doctor could take a targeted course in the specific areas that differ from practice here, rather than going back to secondary school, the impact would be enormous. Right now their qualifications and years of experience are erased by bureaucracy.” - community volunteer, Denmark

Mechanism two: local work experience is required, and is structurally unobtainable

Lack of local work experience was the second most cited barrier to work and education overall (41%), and the most cited in Poland (51.6%). This is a closed loop: employers require local experience; routes that would provide it are not open to those who lack it.

In Denmark this loop has a specific legal form. Unpaid internships are lawful only for students enrolled at a university, which means a qualified newcomer who is not studying cannot take an internship to build local experience.

“Internships are illegal in Denmark if you’re not a student enrolled in a university. But then if you don’t have that local work experience, nobody’s going to hire you anyway. It’s a lot about luck — meeting the right person at the right time.” - community coordinator, Denmark

Mechanism three: the psychological cost compounds the structural one

Both practitioners and women describing their own experience identified a self-reinforcing loop. Repeated rejection erodes confidence; reduced confidence reduces the capacity to apply, negotiate and present oneself; that reduction produces further rejection. A Polish community leader named the underlying condition directly.

“Professional identity loss. Many arrive with strong educational backgrounds, good credentials, professional experience. But they find themselves in survival jobs far below their qualifications — having to constantly explain and justify your worth.” - community leader, Poland

She described a woman who had been a successful marketing professional, completed a master’s degree in Poland with strong marks, spoke fluent English, applied for a very large number of positions in her field and received three interviews.

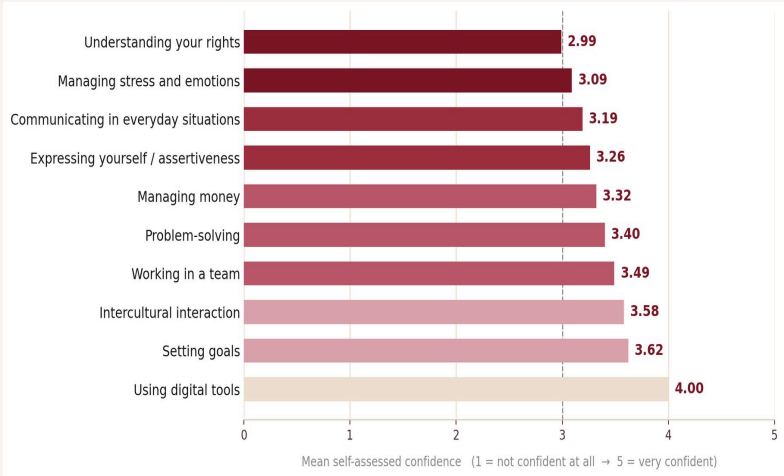
“What stayed with me was not just the rejection. It was watching her slowly lose confidence in herself. She started questioning whether her ideas were valuable, whether she understood things correctly, whether she should just be grateful for any job.” - community leader, Poland

The same pattern was described independently in Denmark by a practitioner working with women in the technology sector, and in Italy by women describing their own trajectories. That three sources in three countries, asked different questions, converged on the same account is the strongest evidence in this report.

4.4 THE LARGEST AND LEAST VISIBLE GAP

Ten life-skill competences were assessed on a five-point confidence scale. Understanding one’s rights — legal, employment and social — scored lowest of all ten. Understanding their rights emerged as the weakest competency, with an average confidence score of 2.99/5. Nearly two in five participants (39%) reported low confidence, while 40% identified it as one of the skills they most wanted to strengthen.

Figure 4. Self-assessed confidence across ten life-skill competences. The dashed line marks the mid-point of the scale.



The combination is what makes this finding significant. Rights knowledge is simultaneously the area of lowest confidence and among the most requested for development. Most gaps are one or the other: either people lack a competence and do not perceive the lack, or they perceive a need in an area where they are already reasonably capable. Here the deficit and the demand coincide.

The country breakdown is instructive. Italy records the lowest confidence of the three (2.74) and the highest demand (48.6 % want to strengthen it). Poland follows at 3.16 confidence and 45.2 % demand. Denmark records similar confidence (3.13) but markedly lower demand (22.6 %) — consistent with a context where information is more accessible, if not always found.

The interviews explain how rights information currently travels.

“They learn by rumour — one tells another, and accuracy varies. Is this correct information or incomplete? They cannot know. It would be much better if the information were clearer and more accessible.” - community leader, Denmark

A practitioner in Denmark who has herself migrated was candid about the limits of her own knowledge of the system she works within — she could describe what she had heard about entitlements but not confirm who qualified for what. If practitioners cannot reliably describe the entitlement landscape, the women they support certainly cannot.

Open-text survey responses named the specific content required with unusual precision:

“It would be helpful to learn how to correctly fill out residence permit documents, how to get health insurance, how to find housing — which websites or apps to use — and how to properly understand and read a rental contract.” - survey respondent, Italy

“Rights as a worker, rights regarding gender discrimination, workplace cultural integration — how to interview, how to talk about your experience without sounding boastful, expectations of women in the workplace.” - survey respondent, Poland

Why this is the toolkit's centre of gravity

Section 5 sets out the full gap analysis, but the direction is already clear. Rights and systems knowledge is the single largest actionable deficit identified by this study: high need, high demand, low current provision, and — unlike language or confidence — addressable through well-designed information rather than through months of instruction.

4.5 LONELINESS AND THE ABSENT NETWORK

Loneliness is often treated in programme design as a wellbeing concern secondary to employment or language. This study found it to be structural, pervasive, and directly implicated in the other barriers.

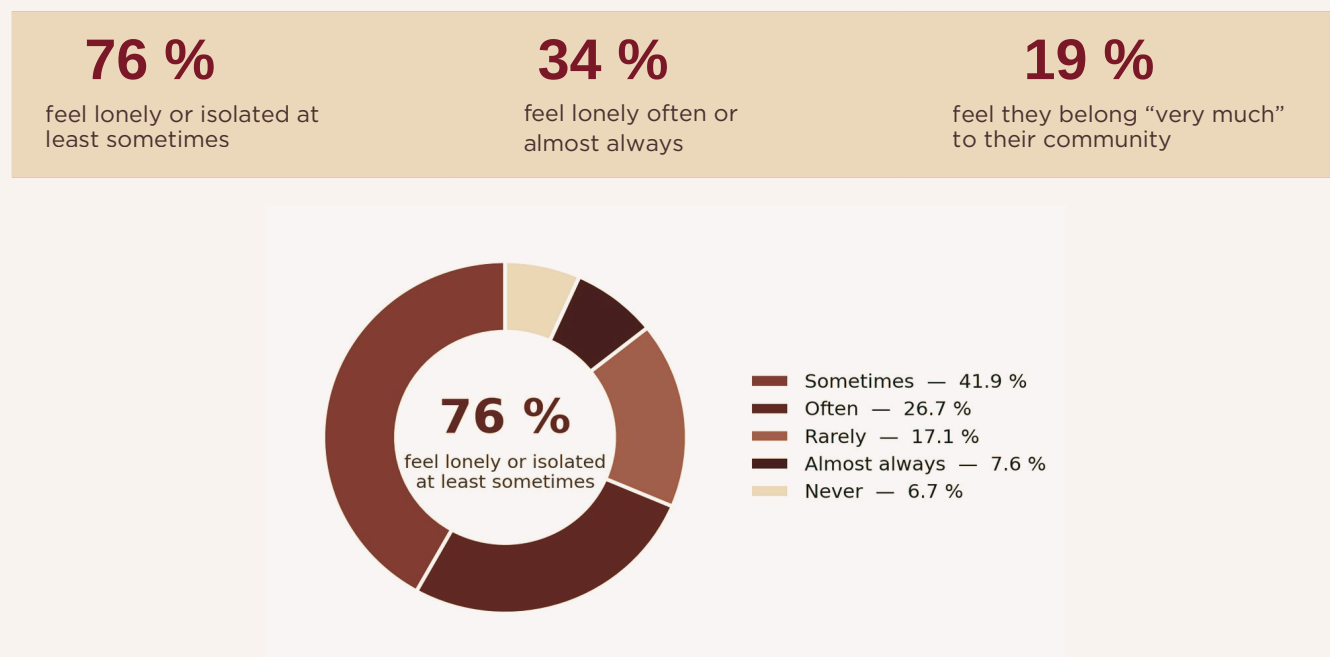


Figure 5. Reported frequency of loneliness or isolation

Not knowing anyone was the second most cited difficulty on arrival (46.7 %), and in Denmark it was the most cited of all (51.6 %). Denmark also records the highest rate of persistent loneliness: 12.9 % report feeling lonely almost always, compared with 6.5 % in Poland and 2.9 % in Italy.

A Polish community leader gave the phenomenon a name and located its cause precisely — not in the absence of friends, but in the absence of the ordinary infrastructure of everyday life.

“A loneliness epidemic. Young migrant women lack the informal support networks that local women take for granted. When you’re struggling with a difficult decision, or you need someone to watch your children for an hour — you have no family, no childhood friends. This isolation profoundly affects mental health and decision-making capacity.” - community leader, Poland

The phrase “decision-making capacity” matters. Isolation is not only painful; it removes the informal consultation through which people ordinarily check assumptions, hear about opportunities and calibrate risk. A woman without a network makes every decision alone, on incomplete information.

The survey data on help-seeking bears this out.

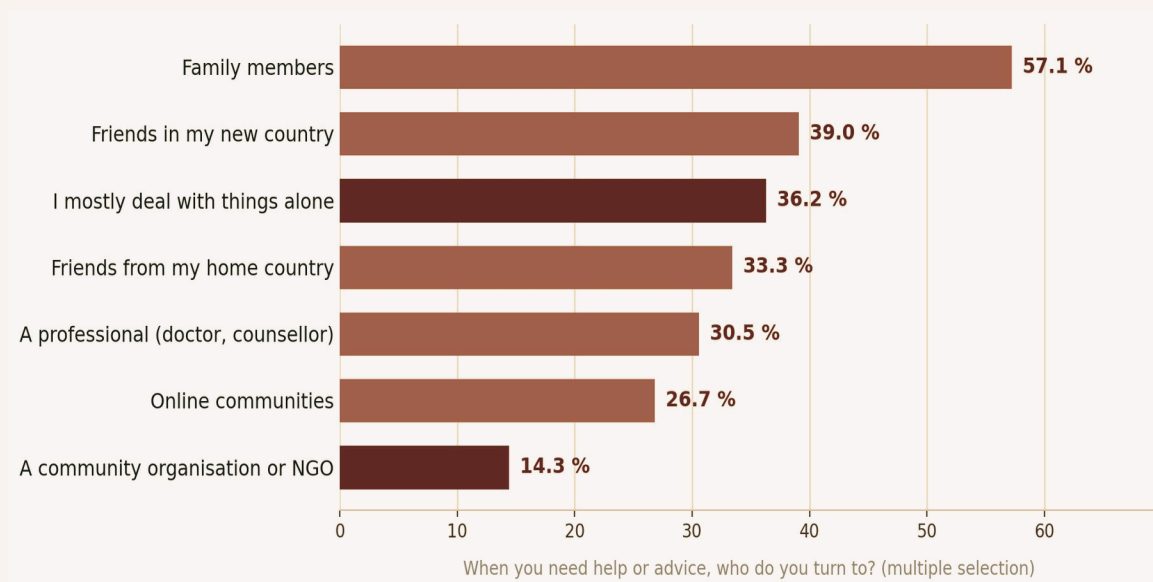


Figure 6. Sources of help and advice (n = 105, multiple selection).

More than a third of respondents manage alone. Only one in seven turns to a community organisation or NGO — the very institutions designed to provide this support. Family, often in another country and several time zones away, carries more of the load than every formal structure combined.

Women describing their own arrival made the emotional texture of this concrete.

“During my first two weeks in Italy, I woke up every morning with a heavy feeling in my throat. I felt isolated, confused and afraid. Everything began to change only when I met other international students.” - A youth worker in Italy recalled how one young woman described her first weeks.

“Starting everything from the beginning like a child, and there was no one to show what and how to do.” - survey respondent, Denmark

The reverse is equally clear in the data on what would help. Networking with women in similar situations (42.9 %) and mentorship from someone with a similar background (41 %) ranked third and fourth among all forms of requested support — above psychological counselling and above rights information. Respondents are not asking primarily for services. They are asking for people.

4.6 GENDER-SPECIFIC BARRIERS

The project’s founding premise is that young migrant women face a double challenge — barriers arising from migration and barriers arising from gender, which interact rather than simply adding. The interviews identified five distinct mechanisms through which gender changes the migration experience. Several appear in no general migration literature and none were prompted by the interview guide.

Housing: safety constraints that carry a financial penalty

Shared accommodation is the standard entry-level housing solution for students and newcomers. For women it is frequently not available on the same terms.

“Men can live wherever they want. But in Warsaw or Kraków it's very hard to find apartments with only girls. They sign a contract for one year, and women lose money because they cannot live with men — it's dangerous and very stressful, financially and for security.” - software engineer and student mentor, Poland

The mechanism is precise: a safety requirement that applies to women and not to men translates into a narrower housing market, longer search times and forfeited deposits. One survey respondent proposed a solution directly — a network of women-only accommodation.

Care responsibility across borders

A Polish community leader identified a form of obligation entirely invisible in support programming: financial and emotional responsibility for family in the country of origin, carried simultaneously with the work of establishing oneself.

“Many young migrant women support families back home, financially and emotionally, while managing their own lives in a host country. They are caregivers across borders. This is a huge burden and it is exhausting — but it remains completely unseen in support programmes.” - community leader, Poland

Reproductive and gender-specific health access

This theme emerged only in Poland, and only because a practitioner raised it unprompted. She described women postponing gynaecological care until they could return to their home country, because of language barriers, cost or uncertainty about entitlement — with the delay itself worsening outcomes. She then described a case in which the gendered consequences of a shared situation fell entirely on one party. A couple, both students, faced an unplanned pregnancy; the woman travelled to her home country for a termination, was prevented from returning by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, continued the pregnancy, and lost two years of study. She subsequently faced repeated visa refusals arising from the interrupted enrolment. Her male partner completed his degree on schedule.

“Even within the same family, she was the one who had to leave. She lost those two years of education. The guy finished the university on time. This is a good example of how it affects a woman more negatively.” - case worker, Poland

A survey respondent in Poland independently identified the same territory as a training

need — noting that long-distance migration disrupts menstrual cycles, that stress affects hormones, and that unfamiliar products in unfamiliar shops make even routine self-care difficult.

Visible religious identity

Women who wear a head scarf described an additional layer of exclusion that male co-nationals do not encounter.

“They are luckier than us — especially if you are a Muslim woman and you wear a hijab, they can see you are Muslim. A man doesn’t have that problem, unless his name is Muhammad or something like that.” - youth worker, Poland

A community coordinator in Italy described a case she had supported directly: a young woman asked by a male professor, before an examination, to remove her hijab because he suspected she might have something concealed beneath it. She complied under the threat of losing her scholarship if she could not sit the exam. ***“What stayed with her wasn’t only the request itself, but the feeling of not being respected for who she is. She kept saying people should be evaluated for their knowledge and abilities, not their identity.”***

Safety and the constant alertness it requires

A community leader in Italy summarised what she hears repeatedly from the women she works with: ***“Opportunities may be similar for men and women, but the emotional and physical vulnerability women experience is different. Even when nothing happens, the constant need to be alert affects daily life.”***

A Danish practitioner extended this to the transit and reception phase: shared bathrooms, shared kitchens and shared accommodation with strangers present a risk profile for women, and particularly for Muslim women observing modesty requirements, that is qualitatively different from that faced by men in the same facilities.

A note on what the survey did not capture

Only 4.8 % of survey respondents cited childcare or family responsibilities as a barrier to work or education. This almost certainly reflects sample composition — the respondents are predominantly students and young professionals, over half of them under 26 — rather than the true weight of care responsibilities among migrant women generally. The interviews, which reached practitioners working with a broader population, describe care work as a major constraint. Section 7.2 returns to this.

4.7 DISCRIMINATION AND BELONGING

Just over half of respondents — 53.3 % — reported having experienced discrimination because of their background, gender or nationality. A further 6.7 % preferred not to answer, a response that is itself informative and concentrated in the Italian sample (17.1 %).

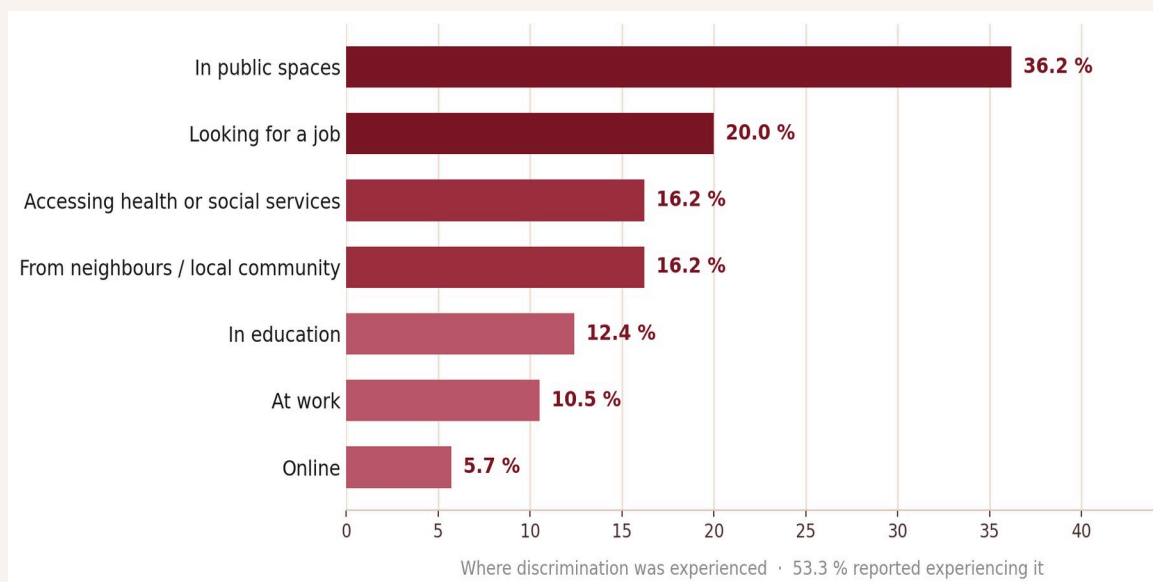


Figure 7. Where discrimination was experienced (n = 105, multiple selection).

The distribution matters for programme design. Discrimination is reported most often in public space — that is, in unstructured everyday encounters rather than in institutional settings where a complaint procedure might exist. The second most common site is job-seeking, where discrimination is least visible and hardest to evidence: a CV that receives no reply leaves no record.

Two respondents described discrimination at the point of accessing services in terms that reveal how it operates:

“At the bank, where even though they serve international customers, they refused to help me in English.” - survey respondent

Youth worker in Italy, herself supporting Central Asian women in Sicily, located the cause of much of the hostility her community encounters not in malice but in ignorance: ***“Many people don’t know anything about Kyrgyzstan. They confuse us with Russians or Chinese. Our culture is deep, rich and very different. Lack of knowledge creates stereotypes, and stereotypes create distance.”***

A Ukrainian respondent in Poland described the reverse trajectory — a context that became less safe over time:

“Lots of racist people popped out, and speaking my language in public — overall identifying myself as Ukrainian — became scary to me, because people started to react aggressively once they heard my origin.” - survey respondent, Poland

Belonging

Only 19 % of respondents feel they belong “very much” to the community where they live. A further 57.1% feel they belong “somewhat” — the modal response, and one that describes partial, provisional attachment rather than settlement. Just under a quarter (23.8 %) feel they do not really belong or feel actively isolated.

Feeling welcome and feeling that one belongs are not the same thing, and the data separates them. A quarter of respondents feel very welcome; only a fifth feel they belong. Hospitality is being extended without membership following from it.

Perhaps the most striking finding in this section comes from respondents who were born in the country where they live:

“Even though I’m born and raised in Denmark, some people and politicians will never accept me.” - survey respondent, Denmark

“I was born and raised in this country, so my experience is different from women who migrated themselves. However, I believe support programmes should also recognise the experiences of second-generation women who navigate multiple cultures and identities.” - survey respondent, Denmark

Integration as a moving target

If women born and educated in the host country, fluent in its language, still report exclusion on the basis of background, then belonging cannot be treated as an outcome that integration measures reliably produce. This has a direct implication for programme design: interventions that frame belonging as something the migrant achieves through effort place responsibility in the wrong place. Section 8 returns to this.

4.8 Mental health and the psychological support gap

The absence of accessible psychological support was raised independently in all three countries, by practitioners and by women describing their own experience. It is one of the three findings on which every source in this study converged.

In the survey, 34.3 % named psychological support or counselling among the three forms of support that would help them most — rising to 41.9 % in Denmark, where it was the second most requested form of support overall. Yet only 9.5 % of respondents reported having received any psychological or wellbeing support, making it among the least-provided of all support types.

Confidence in managing stress and difficult emotions scored second lowest of the ten competences assessed (3.09), with 30.5 % reporting low confidence. In Denmark this was the lowest-scoring competence of all (2.97) — lower than in either other country, and notably lower than the same country’s scores on practical competences.

Practitioners were unambiguous about the scale of the need.

“Free psychologists, psychological support. Some migrants come by choice; others are forced to leave. Those who had no choice need to process what they went through — for

themselves and so that their children do not inherit the trauma. Because this support does not exist, we try to fill the gap ourselves. But it is not our profession.” - community leader, Denmark

A youth worker in Denmark identified a structural obstacle that undermines even the provision that exists: ***“It should absolutely exist. But there is a language barrier. If you request a psychologist, there will be a translator in between — and with someone in between, a person cannot open up. That is a real problem.”***

This is a significant finding for the project. It indicates that scaling conventional psychological services would not, on its own, resolve the gap: interpreted therapy imposes a cost on precisely the disclosure that therapy requires. Peer-based and community-based approaches, delivered in the participant’s own language by someone who shares the experience, may reach where formal provision cannot.

Two practitioners described exactly such an approach operating informally. A Danish youth worker working with young women aged 18 to 22 described a year-long process of emotional recovery conducted through shared reading, discussion and mutual disclosure, with observable results — participants who initially would not speak now initiating contact when distressed, and academic performance rising to match Danish peers.

“At first they were deeply withdrawn. Now she calls me when she feels bad. She says: I need to talk. She is no longer afraid to reach out. And her grades have risen — she is getting marks equivalent to Danish students, having arrived two years ago.” - youth worker, Denmark

A student in Italy proposed a non-verbal route to the same end:

“Support doesn’t always need to be based on conversation. Activities like art, music or creative expression can help women process emotions and feel less alone. Sometimes expressing yourself without words can be more healing than speaking.” - student, Italy

Open-text survey responses reinforced the point that the need is specific rather than generic: ***“How to protect our psychology in a foreign country — because even if I can speak their language it’s not working like my home country, and no matter what you do, somehow you feel lonely.”*** - survey respondent, Denmark

4.9 DIGITAL COMPETENCE

4.00

mean confidence in using digital tools —highest of all ten competences

13.3 %

report low confidence— the smallest proportion of any competence

21 %

name digital skills among what they want to strengthen — second lowest of eleven

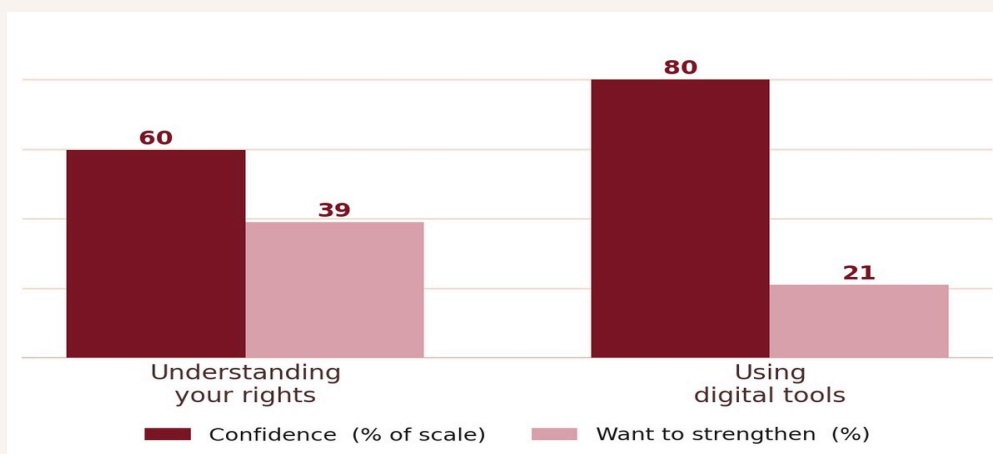


Figure 8. Confidence and demand compared: the largest gap and the smallest.

Digital competence is, on this evidence, the strongest of the ten skills assessed and among the lowest priorities for development. The pattern holds in all three countries: Poland 4.16, Italy 3.97, Denmark 3.97. Demand for digital training is lowest in Denmark (9.7 %) — the most digitalised society of the three.

The explanation is straightforward and should have been anticipated. The respondents are young: 76 % are under 31 and 22 % are under 22. They are highly educated. They reached this survey through online channels. Generic digital literacy — email, browsers, social media, smartphones — is not a gap for this population, whatever it may be for older or less-educated migrant groups.

What this does not mean

It would be a mistake to conclude that digital content should be dropped. Two specific digital needs emerged clearly from the interviews, neither of which the survey question captured, because neither is a matter of general competence.

Need one: digital safety

A researcher in Italy whose master's thesis addressed digital resilience among migrants set out the risk profile with precision. Newcomers are targeted because they cannot yet distinguish legitimate from fraudulent, and because they are transacting under pressure — needing housing, documents and income quickly, in an unfamiliar system.

“There are real digital risks: scams, fake landlords, phishing, fraud. Migrants are vulnerable because they don’t know how things work. A digital safety section would be extremely helpful. Digital safety is not just a technical issue; it is a matter of emotional security. When you know how to protect yourself online, you feel more confident in your daily life.” - researcher, Italy

Fraudulent accommodation listings recurred across the Italian interviews. Multiple respondents described using Telegram groups and personal networks to verify listings precisely because they could not trust the platforms. The competence required here is not

the ability to use the internet — it is the ability to assess risk within it, which is a distinct skill and one that no respondent claimed to have.

Need two: navigating digitalised public administration

All three countries have moved core administrative functions online, and in each the interviews recorded people falling through the resulting gaps. Denmark is among the most digitalised states in the world; Poland moved residence permit applications to the MOS portal in December 2025, with mandatory e-signature and digitally signed institutional annexes.

“Even a letter from the state — I had to get my new health card, and it couldn't be sent by post, so I got an email saying I had to pick it up somewhere. If you don't even know how to log into that service, which nobody tells you about, you just have to figure it out.” - community coordinator, Denmark

The difficulty is not operating the interface. It is knowing that the service exists, that it applies to you, and where within a national digital architecture it sits. That is systems knowledge, and it belongs with the rights and entitlements content identified in Section 4.4 rather than with digital skills training.

The implication for the Toolkit

Digital content should be retained but redirected. Rather than general digital literacy — where this population is already competent — the Toolkit should cover digital safety and fraud recognition, and navigation of national digital public services. Both are specific, both were requested, and neither is served by existing generic provision. Section 8.2 sets out the module structure.

One further note. The finding above applies to this sample. Practitioners in Denmark described a separate population — women with limited prior education, longer settlement and lower digital literacy — for whom basic digital training remains essential. One organisation had been obliged to close its beginner digital programme in Copenhagen for lack of funding, removing an access point for precisely those women. The finding here is that this project's target group does not need that provision, not that nobody does.

4.10 FROM SURVIVAL TO PARTICIPATION

The preceding nine sections describe barriers. This one offers a framework for organising them, and it comes not from the research literature but from a practitioner interview in Denmark.

Asked how the needs of the women she works with had changed over time, she described a shift in the questions they ask.

“When young migrant women first arrive, their concerns are very practical. Learn the language, understand how the system works, find housing, continue education, look for a job. Even simple things — making a doctor’s appointment, opening a bank account, dealing with official documents — can feel overwhelming. After these basic needs are addressed, other challenges become visible. Over time the focus shifts from survival to participation. Instead of asking ‘How do I manage my daily life here?’, they start asking ‘How can I build a career? How can I contribute to society? How can I feel that I truly belong here?’” - youth worker, Poland

This distinction organises the findings of this study more usefully than any thematic grouping. The barriers in Sections 4.2 to 4.9 do not all operate at the same stage, and a programme that treats them as a single undifferentiated list will misallocate effort.

	Survival phase	Participation phase
The question being asked	How do I manage daily life here?	How do I build a life worth having here?
Dominant barriers	Language basics · legal status · housing · access to services · financial precarity	Credential recognition · professional networks · belonging · confidence · career progression
What the data shows	Cited most by respondents under 3 years in country; concentrated in Q8 arrival responses	Cited most by respondents over 3 years — 60 % of this sample
What is needed	Information, orientation, practical navigation, rights knowledge	Networks, mentorship, recognition pathways, peer community, psychological support
Failure mode if mismatched	Overwhelm and disengagement	Stagnation, de-skilling, professional identity loss

Two observations follow, and both bear directly on programme design.

The phases are not sequential for everyone, and people move backwards

A change in legal status, the loss of a job, an interrupted study programme or a delayed residence permit can return a woman who had reached the participation phase to survival conditions. The Polish student described in Section 3.4, who completed three years of study and could not finish because her residence card was not issued, is an example: she was operating in the participation phase and was returned to survival by an administrative delay she did not cause and could not influence.

This means a programme cannot be designed as a linear progression. Participants will arrive at different stages, and some will move between them during the programme itself.

Motivation follows participation — not the reverse

The same practitioner made a second observation that inverts a standard assumption in programme design.

“She saw that motivation is not coming from the air. You have to do something, and then motivation will come. So not in the beginning you have to be motivated — after you are doing something, you will be motivated.” - youth worker, Poland

Most outreach is built on the opposite premise: that people must first be motivated in order to participate, and that the task of recruitment is therefore to persuade. The account here — supported by the finding in Section 6 that 96 % of those who did participate found it helpful — suggests that the binding constraint is the threshold to first participation, not the willingness to engage once inside.

She described the trajectory of one woman as a chain of small steps rather than a single opportunity: attending events to practise the language, then volunteering, then building friendships across both migrant and local communities, then moderating an event, then finding work related to her interests.

“Integration is often not about one big opportunity. It's usually a series of small steps. First meeting new people and gaining confidence, learning the language, and feeling that you belong. Once people have that support, they can achieve much more than they initially believe.” - youth worker, Poland

The organising principle for the Empowerment Labs

If motivation follows action rather than preceding it, and if integration proceeds through accumulated small steps rather than single interventions, then the design priority is not content quality but threshold height. A programme that is slightly less comprehensive but substantially easier to walk into will produce more change than the reverse. Section 8.1 develops this into concrete design principles.

5. LIFE SKILLS GAP ANALYSIS

This section converts the findings of Section 4 into a specification. It identifies which competences the Empowerment Labs and Digital Toolkit should address, in what order of priority, and with what weighting in each country.

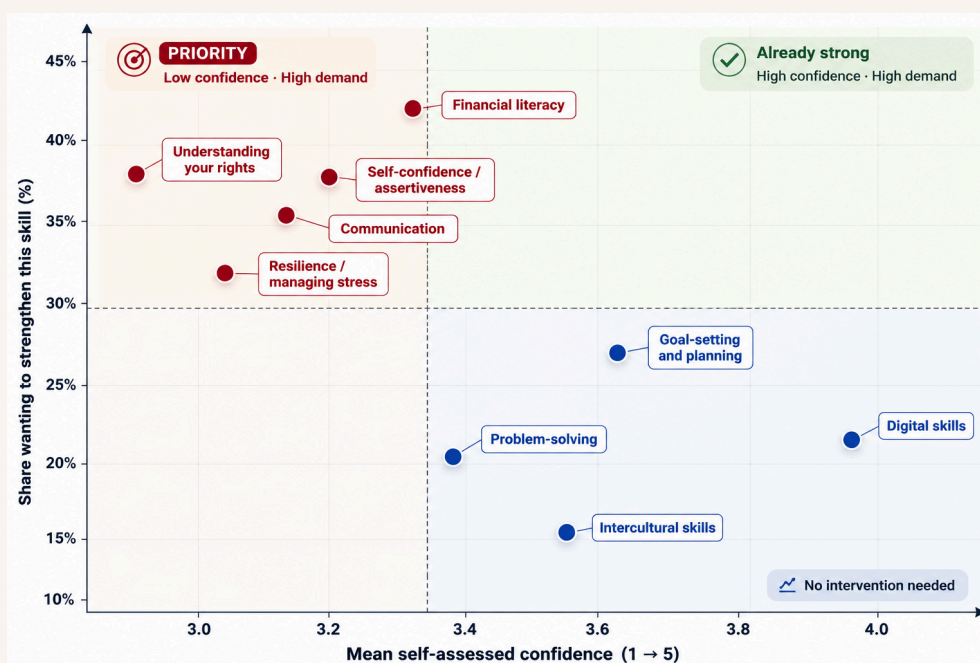
5.1 HOW THE GAP WAS MEASURED

The survey asked two distinct questions about life skills. The first asked respondents to rate their confidence in ten specific competences on a five-point scale. The second asked which skills they would most like to strengthen, permitting up to three selections.

Neither question alone identifies a training priority. Low confidence on its own may indicate a competence the respondent neither needs nor wants. High demand on its own may reflect a skill in which the respondent is already capable but ambitious. A priority exists where the two coincide: low confidence and high demand together.

Eight of the ten confidence items map directly onto items in the demand question, allowing them to be plotted against each other. Two demand items — language skills and job-related skills — have no confidence counterpart and are treated separately in Section 5.5.

5.2 THE GAP MATRIX



Five competences fall in the priority quadrant: understanding your rights, financial literacy, self-confidence and assertiveness, communication, and resilience. Four fall clearly outside it: goal-setting, problem-solving, intercultural skills and digital skills.

The separation is unusually clean. In most needs assessments the distribution is diffuse and priorities must be argued for. Here the two groups are distinct, and the item furthest into the priority quadrant — understanding your rights — is also the item with the lowest confidence score of all ten.

5.3 THE FIVE PRIORITIES

1. Understanding your rights

Confidence 2.99, the lowest of ten competences, with 40 % of respondents reporting low confidence. Demand 39 %. This is the clearest gap in the dataset and the one most amenable to intervention: unlike confidence or language, rights knowledge can be transferred through well-designed information rather than through months of practice. Section 3 documented why the gap exists — the mechanisms that would deliver this knowledge are being withdrawn rather than strengthened, and practitioners in all three countries described information travelling by rumour.

2. Financial literacy

Demand 42.9 %, the joint highest of any skill. Confidence 3.32 — mid-range, but the demand signal is strong enough to place it firmly in the priority quadrant. Interview material indicates this is not abstract budgeting but concrete system navigation: opening a bank account, understanding a contract, knowing what a payslip should contain, and managing income that is often irregular.

3. Self-confidence and assertiveness

Demand 40 %, confidence 3.26. This is the competence most directly implicated in the de-skilling loop described in Section 4.3, in which repeated rejection erodes the capacity to present oneself, which produces further rejection. It is also the hardest to teach directly, and the evidence in Section 6 suggests it is built through participation and peer contact rather than through instruction.

4. Communication

Demand 39 %, confidence 3.19. Distinct from language proficiency, which is treated separately. This concerns how to speak in a professional setting, how to describe one's experience without appearing either boastful or apologetic, and how to interpret the unwritten conventions described in Section 4.2. One survey respondent named this precisely: how to talk about your experience without sounding boastful, and what is expected of women in the workplace.

5. Resilience and managing stress

Demand 32.4 %, confidence 3.09 — the second lowest of ten. This connects directly to the psychological support gap in Section 4.8. The distinction matters for programme design: this is not clinical treatment, which the project is not equipped to provide, but the

everyday capacity to absorb setbacks without internalising them as evidence of personal inadequacy.

5.4 WHERE INVESTMENT IS NOT REQUIRED

Four competences sit outside the priority quadrant and should not absorb programme resources.

Competence	Confidence	Demand	Assessment
Digital skills	4.00 highest	— 21.0 %	Strongest competence, near-lowest demand. Discussed in Section 4.9. Redirect towards digital safety and public-service navigation rather than general literacy.
Intercultural skills	3.58	14.3 %	Lowest demand of any item. This group navigates multiple cultures daily and does not perceive a deficit.
Problem-solving	3.40	20.0 %	Above-average confidence, low demand. Only 3.2 % of Danish respondents selected it.
Goal-setting and planning	3.62	26.7 %	Second-highest confidence. Respondents know what they want; the obstacle is not the plan but the route.

A finding that should change the design

Digital skills and intercultural competence appear in the project application among the competences young migrant women lack. The survey contradicts this on both counts. Retaining them at their originally intended weight would direct effort towards the two areas in which this group is most capable and least interested. Section 8.2 sets out the revised module structure.

5.5 TWO DEMANDS WITH NO CONFIDENCE MEASURE

Two of the most requested skills were not among the ten competences rated for confidence, and therefore do not appear on the matrix.

Language skills were selected by 42.9 % of respondents — joint highest with financial literacy. Section 4.2 sets out both the scale of this barrier and its limits: language provision is necessary and insufficient. Job-related skills were selected by 37.1 %, rising to 41.9 % in Denmark. Interview material indicates this refers less to technical competence than to labour-market literacy — CV conventions, application processes, and how hiring actually works in the destination country.

Neither can be omitted from the Toolkit. Both should be treated as delivery contexts rather than standalone modules: language practice embedded in the sessions, and job-market content integrated with the communication and rights modules rather than separated from them.

5.6 COUNTRY WEIGHTING

The five priorities are shared, but their relative weight differs substantially between countries. A single undifferentiated curriculum would over-serve some contexts and under-serve others.

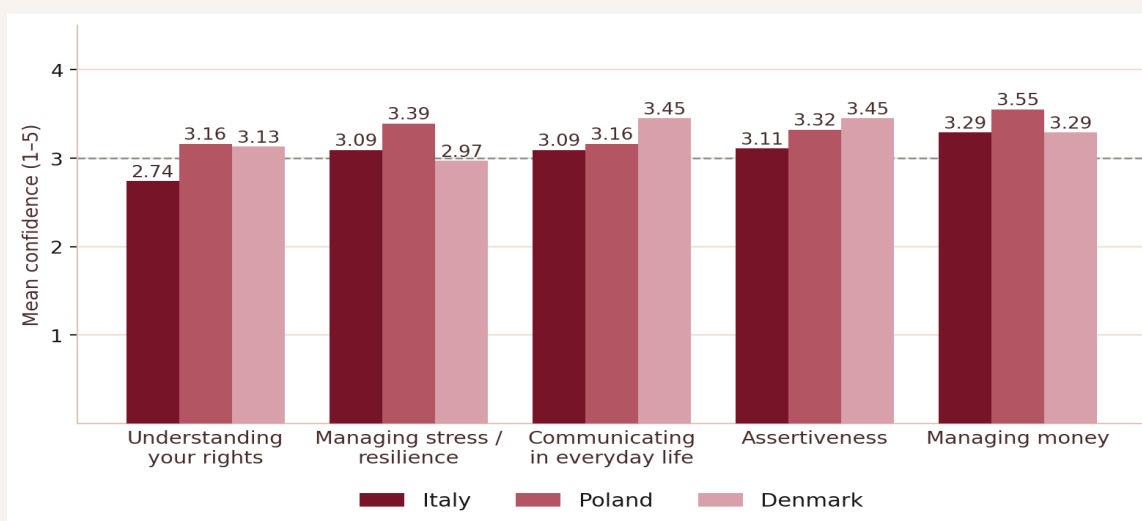
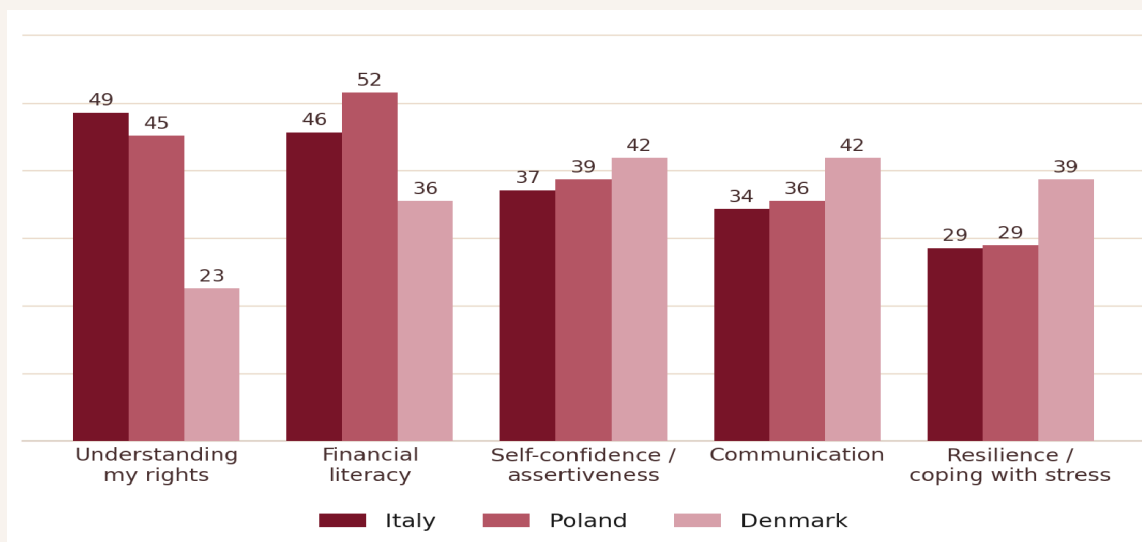


Figure 11. Confidence in the same competences, by country. The dashed line marks the mid-point of the scale.

Three distinct profiles emerge.

The dominant gap		Evidence
Italy	Rights and information	Lowest rights confidence of the three (2.74) and highest demand (48.6 %). Also lowest confidence in communication and assertiveness. Section 4.7 records the highest rate of respondents declining to answer the discrimination question.
Poland	Financial literacy and rights	Highest demand for financial literacy (51.6 %) and second-highest for rights (45.2 %). Confidence is mid-range across the board — no acute deficit, but broad and consistent demand.
Denmark	Resilience and emotional capacity	Lowest resilience confidence of the three (2.97) and highest demand (38.7 %). Rights demand is markedly lower (22.6 %), as is digital (9.7 %) and problem-solving (3.2 %). The gap here is not informational.

The Danish exception

Denmark inverts the pattern found in the other two countries. Where Italian and Polish respondents ask predominantly for information and practical navigation, Danish respondents ask for emotional capacity. This is consistent with Section 3.2: Denmark's formal systems function comparatively well, and the barrier lies elsewhere. A Toolkit weighted towards rights and bureaucracy would be substantially less useful in the Danish context than in the other two.

5.7 FROM GAPS TO MODULES

The analysis above translates into six modules. The weighting column indicates the proportion of total content each should occupy, derived from the combined confidence and demand scores.

Module	Content	Weight	Country emphasis
1. Understanding Your Rights	Residence and work entitlements; healthcare access; anti-discrimination; where to seek help; how to verify information	High	IT, PL
2. Managing Money and Systems	Bank accounts; contracts; payslips; benefits; managing irregular income; recognising financial risk	High	PL, IT
3. Communicating with Confidence	Professional communication; describing your experience; workplace conventions; assertiveness	High	All three
4. Building Resilience and Wellbeing	Coping with rejection; separating outcome from self-worth; peer support; when and how to seek help	High	DK
5. Navigating the Labour Market	CV conventions; how hiring works; networks; recognising and building local experience	Medium	DK, PL
6. Navigating Digital Systems Safely	Fraud and scam recognition; verifying listings and offers; navigating digital public services	Medium	All three

Three design constraints follow from the wider findings and apply across all six modules. Content should be deliverable in a mix of online and in-person formats, the preference of half of all respondents. Sessions should be scheduled in the evening, the preference of 42.9 %. And delivery should be peer-based wherever possible: mentorship from someone with a similar background was requested by 41 % of respondents, and Section 6 sets out why this format outperforms the alternatives.

6. EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

Respondents were asked whether they had taken part in any training, workshop or support programme since arriving, and if so whether it had helped. The two answers, read together, locate the problem precisely.

51.4 %

have never taken part in any support programme

96 %

of those who did find it helpful

Of the 51 respondents who had participated, 28 found it very helpful and 21 somewhat helpful. Two did not. This is not a quality problem. Provision that reaches people works; it simply does not reach half of them. Participation was lowest in Italy at 40%, against 58.1% in Poland and 61.3% in Denmark.

What people had received was also narrow. Language courses (28.6%) and social or networking activities (27.6%) accounted for most of it. Mentoring reached 13.3%, psychological support 9.5%, and vocational or professional training 1.9% — despite career guidance being the single most requested form of help.

What made provision work

Four factors recurred across the interviews, and only one of them concerns content. Practitioners and participants alike named the atmosphere first: whether people were greeted, remembered and made to feel expected. One volunteer described events at which she knew almost no one and was never once made to feel outside the group. Second, the quality of facilitation — a participant who had joined a well-run project in Greece concluded that the subject mattered less than the facilitator's ability to hold a mixed group and give everyone room to speak. Third, peer delivery: staff at a Danish organisation observed that a former participant returning to describe her own route carried more weight than any presentation by staff. Fourth, designing after listening rather than before — one youth worker described asking her group what they needed rather than assuming, and adjusting the programme accordingly.

What failed, and why

The clearest failure described was not a badly executed activity but a well-executed irrelevant one. A practitioner recounted young people aged 18 to 30 being transported from a reception centre to another town every three months for an organised activity; the activity was cooking, each time, at the same venue. The logistics worked. The premise did not.

The second failure is harder to correct because it is a matter of framing. Several respondents described being addressed as a labour shortage rather than as people —

welcome because they fill a gap, rather than because they are there. One practitioner put it plainly: the message received is that the country needs migrants, not that it wants these particular people to stay.

What this means for the Empowerment Labs

The evidence does not suggest that better content is the binding constraint. It suggests that reach, threshold and atmosphere are. A programme that is marginally less comprehensive but substantially easier to walk into — and warmer once inside — will produce more change than the reverse. This is consistent with the finding in Section 4.10 that motivation follows participation rather than preceding it.

7. GAPS IN THE SUPPORT LANDSCAPE

Section 6 established that provision works when it arrives. This section examines why it so often does not.

36.2 %

mostly deal with things alone

14.3 %

turn to a community organisation or NGO

More than a third of respondents manage without support of any kind. Only one in seven turns to the organisations designed to provide it — fewer than turn to online communities. Family, frequently in another country, carries more of the load than every formal structure combined. This is the reach problem in its simplest form, and it is the most actionable finding in this report.

Who is not being reached

Practitioners were consistent, and unusually candid, about the limits of their own reach. Six groups were named repeatedly. Seasonal and shift workers, whose hours make participation impossible and who are often located outside cities. Women who arrived on a spouse's permit, whose legal standing is derivative and who may have no independent institutional contact. Young women aged 18 to 22 in reception accommodation, which is by design located away from population centres. Mothers with young children and no childcare. Women whose digital literacy is genuinely limited — a smaller group than assumed, but one for whom online outreach is useless. And women who avoid visibility for political reasons connected to their country of origin.

A seventh group emerged unprompted: second-generation women, born and educated in the destination country, who reported exclusion but fall outside every category that migrant support is organised around.

A limitation that is also a finding

This study reached participants through community networks and partner organisations — which means it too under-represents the groups listed above. Practitioners said the same of their own work. Where this report describes isolation, the true picture is almost certainly worse than the figures show. Outreach that relies on existing networks reproduces the gap it is intended to close.

Section 3 established that none of the three countries operates a support programme designed specifically for young migrant women, consistent with the European Migration Network's finding that few Member States address women within integration policy at all. Provision exists either for migrants generally, in which women's specific barriers are invisible, or for women generally, in which familiarity with local systems is assumed.

8. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out what the findings require. Recommendations are grouped by audience: the Empowerment Labs, the Digital Toolkit, outreach, policy, and the partnership's own remaining activities. Each is traceable to a specific finding, and the section reference is given.

8.1 DESIGNING THE EMPOWERMENT LABS

The evidence points consistently in one direction: the binding constraint is not the quality of content but the height of the threshold and the warmth of the room. Six principles follow.

1. Design for the lowest possible threshold to first participation.

Half of all respondents have never taken part in any programme, while 96 % of those who have found it useful (6). Motivation follows participation rather than preceding it (4.10). The first session should therefore ask as little as possible of a participant: no prior commitment, no requirement to speak, no assumption of language level, and no application process. Recruitment effort spent persuading people to attend is better spent removing reasons not to.

2. Deliver in a mix of online and in-person formats, in the evening.

A mixed format was preferred by 49.5 % of respondents, evening sessions by 42.9 %, and small peer groups by 41 %. Daytime-only delivery excludes those in work, and online-only delivery loses the relational element that Section 6 identifies as decisive.

3. Build the programme around peers, not around trainers.

Mentorship from someone with a similar background was requested by 41 % of respondents, and networking with women in similar situations by 42.9 % — ranking above psychological support and above rights information. Practitioners independently reported that a former participant describing her own route carries more weight than any staff presentation (6). Every Lab should include at least one facilitator or contributor who has been through the same process.

4. Sequence the two days around the survival and participation phases.

Section 4.10 sets out the distinction. Day one should address the survival layer — rights, systems, money, immediate navigation. Day two should address the participation layer — communication, confidence, networks, planning. Participants will arrive at different stages and some will move between them; the sequencing should be legible rather than enforced.

5. Treat the atmosphere as a programme component, not a courtesy.

The single most consistent explanation practitioners and participants gave for why something worked was that people were greeted, remembered and made to feel expected (6). This is a design decision with resource implications — arrival time, room setup, food, who is at the door — and should be planned rather than left to the goodwill of whoever is facilitating.

6. Ask the group what it needs before finalising the session plan.

The clearest failure recorded in this study was a well-organised activity built on an untested assumption (6). A short structured consultation with the local cohort before each Lab, and a documented adjustment to the plan following it, would prevent the equivalent.

8.2 DEVELOPING THE DIGITAL TOOLKIT

Section 5 identifies six modules and their weighting. Three further specifications follow from the wider findings.

7. Reweight away from digital literacy and towards rights and systems.

Digital skills recorded the highest confidence of ten competences (4.00) and near-lowest demand (21 %), while knowledge of rights recorded the lowest confidence (2.99) and among the highest demand (5.2). Retaining the original weighting would direct effort to the area of greatest existing capability. Digital content should be retained but redirected towards fraud recognition and navigation of digital public services (4.9).

8. Develop one common Toolkit with flexibility for different national contexts.

The five priority competences are shared across all three countries, but their relative importance varies. Rather than producing separate national versions, the Toolkit should provide a common framework enriched with country-specific examples, practical information, and signposting where appropriate. This will ensure that the resource remains relevant across different contexts while maintaining a single, coherent structure.

9. Point to existing authoritative sources rather than restating them.

A participant with research expertise in this area advised against explaining national systems in the project's own words when well-maintained official explanations already exist; the value the Toolkit adds is knowing which source to trust and where to find it (4.9). This also addresses maintenance: curated links can be updated, whereas restated content becomes inaccurate.

8.3 REACHING THOSE CURRENTLY MISSED

This is the most actionable area identified by the study. Only 14.3 % of respondents turn to a community organisation or NGO, and 36.2 % manage alone (7). Outreach that relies on

existing community networks reproduces the gap it is meant to close — a limitation this research shares.

10. Recruit through institutions that already hold contact, not only through community networks.

Practitioners named the points at which otherwise unreachable women are nonetheless in contact with an institution: language schools, reception centre administration, consular services, healthcare providers, and their children's schools. Partnerships with these touchpoints reach people that social media and community channels do not.

Group	Why current outreach misses them	Channel most likely to reach them
Seasonal and shift workers	Long hours; often located outside cities	Employers; consular services; asynchronous online content
Women on a spouse's permit	No independent institutional contact	Children's schools; healthcare; family-oriented events
Women aged 18–22 in reception accommodation	Accommodation is sited away from population centres	Centre administration; organised transport
Mothers without childcare	Participation is not logistically possible	Provide childcare; schedule around school hours
Women with limited digital literacy	Online outreach is invisible to them	Printed material at mosques, churches, community centres, libraries
Women avoiding visibility for political reasons	Public events carry perceived risk	Closed groups; personal referral; no photography policy
Second-generation women	Fall outside every migrant-support category	Youth organisations; explicit inclusion in eligibility criteria

11. Make the offer visible in the languages people actually search in.

Respondents described finding information through informal channels — friends, WhatsApp and Telegram groups, and community organisations — rather than through official sources. Material should be produced in the principal community languages and distributed through those channels rather than only in the national language on institutional websites.

8.4 FOR POLICYMAKERS AND FUNDERS

Four findings in this study concern conditions the project cannot itself change.

12. Reform qualification recognition so that it tests the gap, not the whole qualification.

Non-recognition was raised independently by practitioners and by migrant women in all three countries (4.3). The specific proposal made by participants was consistent: a targeted course covering what differs between the origin and destination systems, rather than a requirement to repeat secondary and tertiary education. The current arrangement can add four to five years to a professional trajectory (3.2).

13. Remove cost barriers to interpretation in health and psychosocial care.

Denmark's interpreter fee, introduced in 2018, applies after three years of residence and

ranges from approximately EUR 26 to EUR 225 per consultation. Among those needing interpretation, 42 % refrained from seeking healthcare and 73 % used relatives as ad hoc interpreters (3.2). Language is the working instrument of psychological care; pricing it removes access to the service rather than incentivising language acquisition.

14. Introduce binding maximum processing times for residence permits.

Average waits exceeded 300 days in Poland in 2025, reaching over 500 days in one voivodeship (3.4). During the wait, applicants cannot leave and re-enter the country. This study recorded a student unable to complete the final semester of a three-year degree for this reason.

15. Fund provision designed specifically for young migrant women.

No partner country was found to operate such a programme, consistent with the European Migration Network’s finding that few Member States address women within integration policy at all (3.5, 7). Provision exists either for migrants generally, in which gendered barriers are invisible, or for women generally, in which familiarity with local systems is assumed.

8.5 FOR THE PARTNERSHIP

Four implications bear directly on the remaining project activities.

Activity	Implication
A3 Peer exchange and co-design	The module structure in Section 5.7 and the weighting in 8.2 should be the starting point for co-design rather than an open question. Country differentiation (5.6) should be an explicit agenda item.
A4 Local Empowerment Labs	Apply the six design principles in 8.1. Each partner should conduct the pre-Lab consultation recommended in principle 6, and adjust the shared methodology to the national weighting identified in 5.6.
A5 Digital Toolkit	Reweight per 8.2. Build the digital module around safety and public-service navigation rather than general literacy. Curate sources rather than restating them.
A6 Dissemination	Treat this as an outreach problem, not a communications problem. The institutional partnerships in 8.3 should be established during the project rather than at its end.

One recommendation that applies to all of the above

A community leader interviewed for this study observed that programmes for migrant women are routinely designed by people with no connection to the group. Every recommendation in this section will be better executed if at least one young migrant woman is present when it is implemented — not consulted afterwards, but present during. This is the least expensive recommendation in the report and the one most likely to be omitted.

9. CONCLUSION

This research shows that the **barriers facing young migrant women are structural, multidimensional, and cumulative, arising simultaneously from migration and from gender and interacting rather than simply adding.** It highlights that qualifications alone do not ensure access: without recognition, networks, and confidence, high levels of education do not translate into employment, security, or belonging. Seventy-two per cent of respondents hold a university degree or postgraduate qualification, yet across the European Union non-EU women with tertiary education remain the group most likely of all to work below their qualifications.

Findings from Denmark, Italy, and Poland reveal that many of the most consequential barriers are invisible rather than overt. They lie in unwritten social codes, informal hiring networks, administrative delay, and the gradual erosion of confidence through repeated rejection. More than half of respondents reported experiencing discrimination, yet the obstacles that most shaped their trajectories were rarely deliberate and almost never documented. Three quarters reported feeling lonely at least sometimes, and only one in five felt they belonged to the community in which they live — indicating that legal presence and social inclusion are not the same achievement.

The study confirms that essential life skills are key competences for integration. Knowledge of rights, financial and administrative literacy, professional communication, self-confidence, and resilience together enable young migrant women to navigate unfamiliar systems, assert their entitlements, and sustain themselves through prolonged uncertainty. Importantly, these competences are practice-based and relational: they are developed through participation, peer contact, and accumulated experience rather than through instruction alone. Respondents themselves prioritised networking and peer mentorship above formal counselling and above information provision.

The research further demonstrates that the three national contexts fail differently, and that transferable tools must account for this. **In Italy the dominant barrier is bureaucratic opacity combined with the lowest rights knowledge of the three countries; in Poland it is administrative delay producing legal limbo, alongside financial insecurity; in Denmark, where formal systems function comparatively well, it is social closure and the absence of accessible psychological support.** The five priority competences are shared across all three, but their relative weighting is not, and a single undifferentiated intervention would serve none of them fully.

A key contribution of this research is the development of a life skills gap analysis, plotting self-assessed confidence against expressed demand across ten competences

9. CONCLUSION

and generating a six-module structure for the Empowerment Labs and the Digital Toolkit. This analysis also required the partnership to revise one of its own assumptions. Digital literacy, identified in the project design as a competence this group lacks, proved to be their strongest skill and among their lowest priorities — a correction that would not have been made without asking.

The research also calls for a shift from provision to reach. **Half of all respondents had never taken part in any support programme, while ninety-six per cent of those who had found it helpful. Existing provision is effective; it simply does not arrive.** More than a third of respondents manage without support of any kind, and only one in seven turns to a community organisation or NGO. Outreach that depends on established community networks reproduces the exclusion it is intended to address, and reaching those currently missed requires partnership with the institutions that already hold contact: language schools, reception centres, healthcare providers, and schools.

At the same time, **systemic support is essential. Reform of qualification recognition so that it tests the difference between systems rather than repeating an entire education; removal of cost barriers to interpretation in health and psychosocial care; binding limits on residence permit processing; and dedicated funding for provision designed specifically for young migrant women.** Without these, competence-building alone will continue to encounter conditions it cannot overcome.

Finally, **the study calls for a shift from designing for young migrant women to designing with them.** The clearest programme failures recorded in this research were not poorly executed but built on untested assumptions — the product of design processes that included no one able to identify the error in advance. **Participatory design is not a matter of principle alone; it is a condition of accuracy.**

In conclusion, effective support for young migrant women requires both competence and reach, and both practical tools and structural change. The HERIZON project contributes by providing evidence-based, country-differentiated, and peer-delivered resources for more inclusive and responsive practice across Europe.