

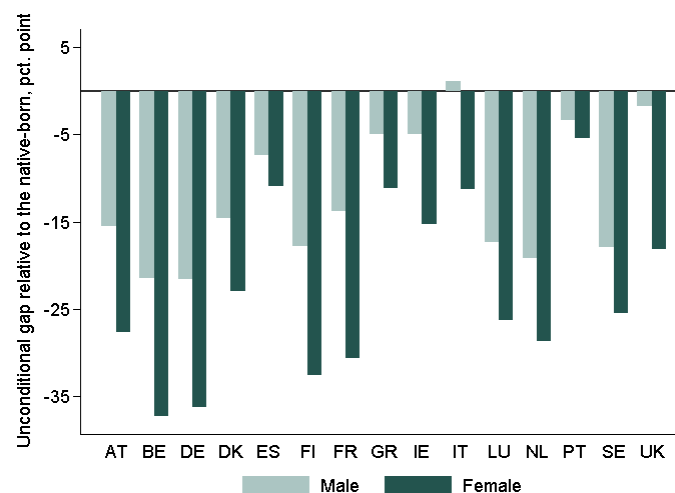
On International Women’s Day: More focus needed on integrating migrant women

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Female non-EU immigrants make up about 6% of the prime-age population (25-54 years old) in the EU15 countries. Their lack of integration into the labour market is not only a story of lost opportunity at the individual level. It also carries important macroeconomic implications.

Take the example of Germany or Belgium, where the difference in employment rates between native- and non-EU born women is more than 35 pct. points (Figure 1). Catching up with native-born would mean an increase in total employment of almost 2%. Even the more modest ambition of reducing the employment gap for women immigrants to that of their male counterpart would have a significant employment effect, which, even in the face of documented discrimination in the labour force, should be attainable.

Figure 1. Employment gap of non-EU immigrants relative to the native-born in the EU15 in 2016, by gender



Note: Age group 25-54. For Germany, data on the country of birth are not available, therefore, immigrants are defined based on the nationality.

Source: Eurostat, 2016.

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A part of this large gap can be explained by the fact that non-EU immigrant women are on average different from native-born women in important aspects relating to employment. Immigrant women have less education and are generally younger. Once this is taken into account, the differences in employment become smaller but they are still substantial. For instance, in Germany, once age and education are taken into account, the employment gap drops to about 10 pct. points. Yet for most EU member states, differences in education and age composition are only part of the explanation. Furthermore, in most countries the excess gender gap in employment – the larger employment gap between non-EU men and women than between native-born – persists. While the probability of employment increases for female non-EU immigrants with their years of stay in the host country, even after 20 years of residence, their employment gap relative to native-born women is still larger compared to that of men.

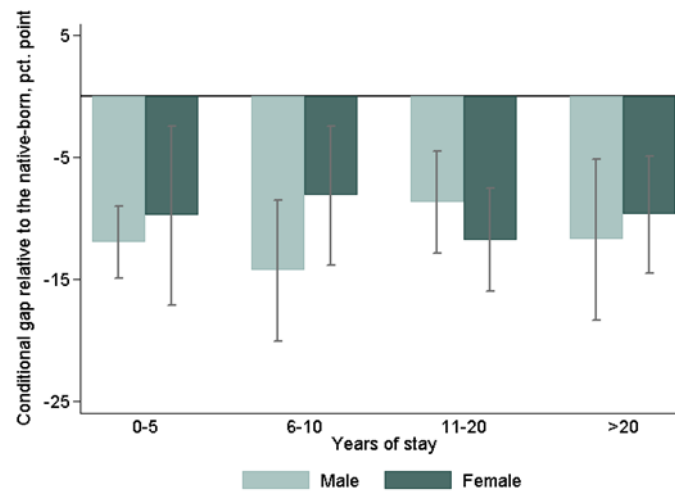
The role of persistent culture

If not age or education composition, what else can explain low employment rates among non-EU women immigrants? One commonly cited factor is the persistent influence of one's original culture. An important consideration is that female labour market participation is traditionally low in many countries of origin of non-EU immigrants. As an example, in Syria the economic activity rate of women was 15% in 2011 (Barslund et al., 2017). Conservative cultural norms regarding female economic participation are likely to explain the differences between men and women's labour market integration early after arrival, and in particular the differences in their speed of integration (Alesina & Giuliano, 2010; Blau et al., 2011 and Fernandez & Fogli, 2009). This issue is particularly pronounced among Muslim immigrants who tend to retain close connections to their native culture even over generations (Bisin et al., 2007).

Data from the European Social Survey show that if non-EU immigrants from a given country are, on average, more likely to think that women should “cut down on paid work for the sake of family”, women originating from this country are less likely to work. Moreover, as shown in Figure 2, attitudes toward women's role in the labour market change very slowly, if at all.

The persistence of such cultural norms is worrying given the importance generally attributed by the host population to the social integration of immigrants. In particular, because immigrants' attitudes toward female economic participation represent the major concern voiced among the host population, ranking even higher than immigrants' religiosity or low level of civil engagement (Sobolewska et al., 2017).

Figure 2. Conditional gap in attitudes towards female economic participation relative to the native born in the EU15, by gender and years of stay in the host country



Notes: Age group 25-54 year olds, controlling for age, education, wave of the survey, and country of residence. On the x-axis: years of stay in the host country. On the y-axis: conditional gap in attitudes towards female economic participation relative to the native-born. To proxy attitudes towards female economic participation, we use the following question in the survey: “Women should be prepared to cut down on paid work for the sake of family, 0 – Agree strongly (step 0.25) 1 – Disagree strongly”.

Source: European Social Survey, 2002-2016 waves.

Important to remove structural constraints to female employment

Changing cultural norms and preferences of immigrants can be a challenging task for policymakers. Yet, comparing how immigrants’ economic outcomes and attitudes change the longer they live in the host country suggests that there is scope for more direct (on-the-ground) policies to promote the economic participation of female immigrants: while immigrants’ attitudes hardly change, the employment rate of female immigrants, albeit slowly, does converge to that of the native-born women over their years of stay in the host country. This could suggest, that beyond skills and persistent culture, structural factors in the host country – equal access to work, education and social institutions – play an important role for non-EU women immigrants, especially in the first years since arrival to the host country. It is therefore unfortunate, that only one project in the Commission’s ‘repository of promising practices’ specifically targets women. Identifying and relaxing structural constraints that women immigrants, in particular, face is an important (and feasible) step towards increasing their economic participation.

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