

Migrant Women Face a Double Penalty at Work

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Despite the progress made towards greater gender equality at work, many women work jobs that they are overqualified for, especially migrant women. On International Women's Day, Mehtap Akgüç and Jaai Parasnis explain how this double penalty can be overturned.

Birth rates are falling and populations are getting older across high-income countries. But, even as our societies are in dire need of skilled workers, many people do not have the chance to reach their full potential, as both individuals and at work. European economics are increasingly reliant on migrant workers, but these workers often struggle to find quality jobs that match their skills, qualifications and experience. When people are overqualified and skills that could be applied to more complex tasks are under-used or wasted, it is known as "skills mismatch".

In recent decades, migrants have moved to European countries from all across the world for a myriad of historical, political, economic and personal reasons. Just over half of all migrants in OECD and EU countries are women. These migrant women often face exploitation in the job market or are confronted with poor working conditions. But though there is good reason to be especially concerned about the employment prospects of migrant women, most research on skills mismatch focuses on men.

Recent research by the European Trade Union Institute has found that female migrant workers in Europe face a double hit. They are more likely to work jobs that do not match their skills – put differently, where their skills are wasted. The data confirms this disadvantage even when sociodemographic and individual differences are taken into account.

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Recent trends in educational attainment and skills of women

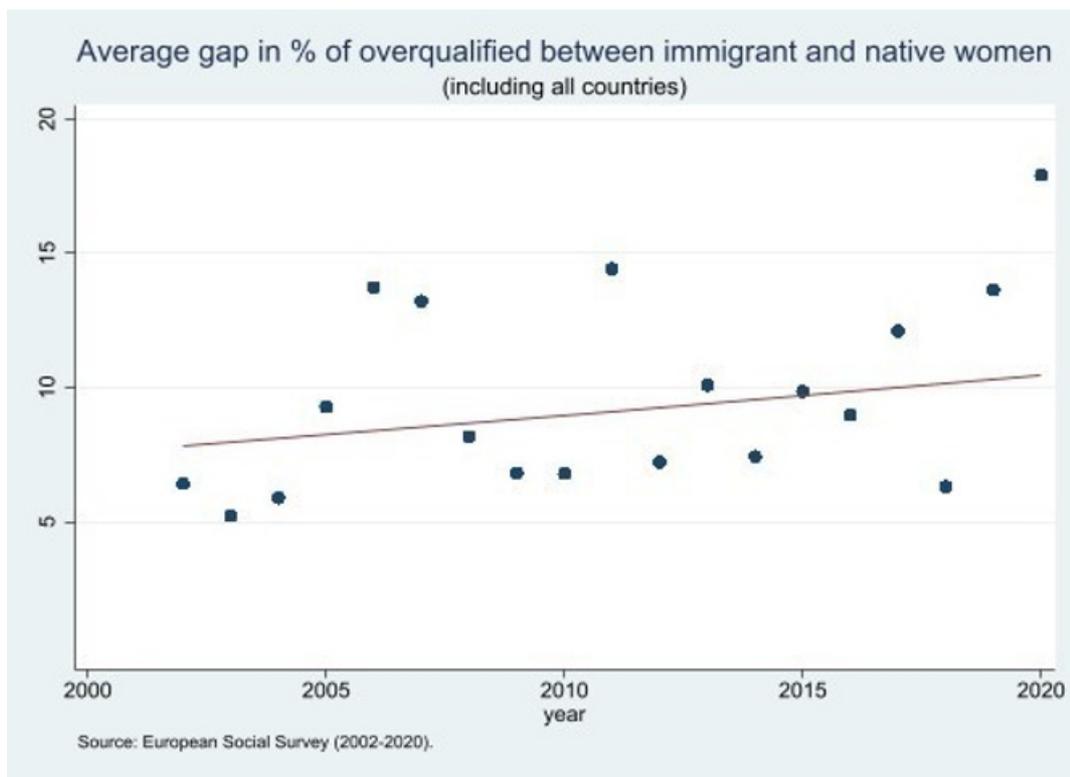
Countries globally have made major gains in improving access to education and training and importantly, in reducing the gender gap in access to education globally. This success is particularly true for high-income countries. Women made up just over half of new entrants into tertiary education in 2019 and more women than men will graduate with a tertiary education degree before the age of 30 if current trends continue. This increased educational attainment is translating into the narrowing of the gender gap in the labour market. However, women still have lower labour force participation than men and are more likely to work part-time. So the question remains: are these gains in education really translating into better jobs or do women end up with jobs that do not match their skills? What about migrant women?

While the mismatch between occupation and qualification has been extensively documented by

research, the focus has mainly been on men. Given their recent gains in education, women should be the focus of our attention when it comes to skills and qualifications going to waste. Looking at the US labour market, [John Addison](#) has found that college-educated women are significantly more mismatched than men. For female migrant workers, this general tendency for women to be overqualified is combined with the challenges migrants can face having their skills and qualifications recognised. In a Europe that is increasingly facing skills and labour shortages in the context of the twin green and digital transition, undervaluing a key part of your population is a major problem.

Looking at the 2002-2020 period across Europe, our research shows that migrant women are overqualified for their jobs compared to native women. [1] In other words, the skills of migrant women are too often wasted.

The graph below shows the incidence of overqualification of migrant women compared to native women, where the dots are the average gaps across countries at a point in time. The trend line shows that the gap is growing over time, which means that the waste of migrant women's skills is becoming more prevalent. On average, one in four migrant women is overqualified in her occupation as opposed to 14 per cent of native-born women.



Ways to address the skills mismatch

The occupation-qualification mismatch is mainly observed for women with post-secondary education levels in low-and-medium-skilled jobs as well as those from middle-income households and migrant backgrounds. Identifying these groups of workers is the first step towards tackling the issue of skills waste.

Parents' educational background also plays a significant role. The higher the parents' level of education, the less likely women are to be overqualified. The parental educational background could translate into

better career advice and guidance by parents, which might reduce the potential for their children to work jobs that they are overqualified for. It could mean that overqualification might lessen over generations as overall education levels increase.

However, the problem of overqualification is not solely driven by the decisions taken by the female workers in question. Institutional settings, such as smoother recognition mechanisms for the skills and regulations of workers, policies that encourage mothers to go back to work (timely and affordable childcare is one example), and other inclusive workplace regulations can help make sure that women find the jobs they are qualified for too. Women's position in the labour force and attitudes towards women's participation in the labour force are also important drivers. Higher average levels of education and employment of women in the workforce reduce the chance of overqualification. Similarly, more supportive attitudes toward women's work have a significant effect. Again, this trend suggests that overall the increasing participation of women and changing attitudes over generations will lessen the mismatch problem over time. However, progress should not be taken for granted. Political efforts that support greater gender equality at work and more generally in society will also enable better use of women's skills.

Formal structures such as trade union membership, public sector jobs and permanent contracts also reduce the chances of overeducation for women. Interestingly, women are less likely to be overqualified in small-and-medium-sized companies. The state, through public sector employment as well as the setup of workplace relations, plays an important guiding role in reducing women's job-education mismatch.

The role of the state is particularly important given the occupational distribution of this mismatch. The overqualification of women is highest amongst elementary occupations and for women from middle-household-income groups. Policies ensuring a better match of women's qualifications to their jobs will also reduce overall inequality in the labour market. Making the most of women's skills is expected to increase in an environment that is supportive of women. Our investigation of the overqualification of women in Europe offers a way forward to addressing this important social and economic issue.

People's skills going to waste is a labour market issue, but, at the core, it is also about the life prospects open to an individual. Wasting the skills, knowledge and talent of women represents a failure to translate the valuable gains made in education into the world of work. Migrant women pay this penalty twice over, disadvantaged at work as migrants and as women. Policy choices that support the transferability of skills for migrants and promote better skill matches for women in the labour market can address this problem, for all women and especially those migrant women at the intersection.

[1] Our methodology is based on observed educational attainment in a given occupation, country and year. We calculate the mismatch as a deviation of a woman's educational attainment from the average educational attainment within that occupation. For more details on the methodology and variable construction, see Akgüç & Parasnis (2023).



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