

The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Germany

Susanne Willers and Karolina Barglowski
University of Dortmund, Germany



This briefing outlines the German migration context and provides an overview of the vulnerabilities and heightened inequalities experienced by women engaged in international mobilities in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Migration to Germany

Germany is a country of immigration. In 2019, 21.2 million people in Germany said they had a migration background¹, half of which were women (Destatis, 2021). This represents 26% of Germany's population, with the main countries of origin given as Turkey (13%), Poland (11%), Russia (7%), Kazakhstan and Romania. Two thirds of migrants living in Germany are immigrants from another European country or their descendants. This equates to 13.8 million people, of whom 7.5 million have roots in other European Union member states. Asian migrants make up 22% (4.6 million) of the total, most of whom (3.2 million) have some connection to the Middle East. Finally, a smaller percentage immigrated from African countries (5%) or from the Americas and Australia (3%) (Destatis, 2021).

The main reasons for immigration in given by migrants were family reasons (38%), employment (24%), education (24%) and humanitarian reasons (10%). Of those who came for professional and family reasons, 85% came from European countries, mainly Poland, Romania and Italy. The main countries of origin for people arriving for humanitarian reasons were Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Afghanistan (BMFSJ, 2020). During the pandemic, the number of asylum applications fell, given mobility was restricted due to border closures, and in 2020, there were 26% less asylum applications compared to 2019 (BAMF, 2020).

Germany's economy depends on immigration, above all on workers from other European member states, and increasingly also on refugees. For example, Eastern Europeans make up 65% of all seasonal workers in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Other important employment sectors that rely on migrants are manufacturing,

health and social care, wholesaling and retailing of vehicles, warehousing and transport, but also construction and hotels and restaurants (Rude, 2021).

Polish and Romanian workers have the highest proportion of all EU mobile workers in Germany, at 19.7% and 17.6%, respectively (BAMF, 2019). The distribution of migrants within the German national territory is also very diverse. Most urban centres are migration hubs, such as Bremen (35.1%), Hamburg (33.3%), Berlin (31.6%) and the Ruhr area (30.4%) (BBMFI, 2019). In Eastern Germany (except Berlin), only about 8% of the population has a migration background, compared to an average of 25% in Western Germany (BBMFI, 2019).

The German immigration system

Over decades, migration and integration policies in Germany have perpetuated structural inequalities, including the segregation of the labour market and the concentration of migrants in low-wage and precarious sectors of economy. According to data from the German Federal Statistics Office, in 2019, 55% of workers in cleaning occupations, 38% in warehousing and food production, 30% of those working in the care sector and 28% in food sales had a migration background. At the same time, migrants were under-represented in medical health professions (21%), teaching roles (11%) and court and correctional services (7%) (Destatis, 2021). On average, migrant families have a lower median income and twice as high a risk of family poverty than workers who do not have a migrant background (BMFSFJ, 2013; 2020).

In addition to the concentration of migrants in low-paying sectors and precarious working conditions, they also face major barriers to accessing formal social protection in Germany. The German social protection system is twofold, consisting of: 1) a contributory social protection system based on formal labour, subject to social security contributions and earnings, and 2) a tax-financed residence-based basic welfare system. However, access is non-transferable, and newcomers are mostly excluded from access (Schnabel, 2020). Refugees and asylum seekers

are entitled to receive social welfare payments for subsistence and housing according to the *Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act*, and may only work three months after arriving in Germany (BMAS, 2020). Language and integration courses are also mandatory for many migrants to obtain a residence permit and social security benefits. While EU citizens have a general right to work and move throughout Europe, their access to social benefits in Germany is still contested. EU citizens can only receive basic social security after five years of residence in Germany (Diakonie, 2022). Furthermore there are barriers to access social rights and services due to institutional discrimination (Ratzmann, 2022).

Migration to Germany has been marked by the divided history and policies adopted on immigration. Due to the political division of Germany after 1945, the migration context in East and West German has continued to be quite distinct. In the 1960s and 1970s, immigration to West Germany was limited to those immigrants who came under bilateral guest worker agreements with Turkey, Greece, and Italy. East Germany received guest workers mainly from socialist and allied countries, such as Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, Angola, and Mozambique in the 1980s, although these were lower numbers overall than in West Germany (Hoesch, 2018). After the ending of the Guest Worker agreements in 1973, West Germany migration policy restricted rights to immigration only for family reunification reasons and ethnic German resettlers. After the German reunification, there was a period of increasing xenophobia and racism towards migrants and refugees. During the Yugoslav Wars (1990-2001) and a subsequent rise in asylum claims, the general right to asylum in Germany was restricted in 1993. The so-called "summer of immigration" of 2015 with the arrival of 476,649 refugees marked a new high of refugee arrivals in Germany since the 1990s. However, after closing the main migration routes through Eastern Europe, the number of refugee arrivals has been continuously decreasing in recent years and has only increased slightly in 2022 (BBMFI, 2019; BAMF, 2020; 2022).

Since 1998, the restrictive German immigration law has been gradually liberalised, mainly

due to the forecasts of demographic changes with an increase in ageing population and the shortage of highly qualified specialists in the IT industry. More recent changes are related to the context of harmonisation of the EU legislation. However, visa approvals were tied to an employment contract. It was only in 2020 that the government introduced a new Skilled Worker Immigration Act (*Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz*), which includes vocational training and has lifted restrictions on certain sectors, to attract highly skilled workers. Nevertheless, immigration and related legislation remain a highly politicised topic. The plans of the current Social Democratic government to reform the naturalisation law to ensure better access to citizenship and family reunification have eluded a public debate.

COVID-19 and rising inequalities in Germany

In Germany, migrants and refugees have been more affected than other groups in society by the negative consequences of the pandemic (Rude, 2021). Travel restrictions and border closures in the first month of the pandemic hindered international migration. This also affected resettlement programs for refugees, family reunification and subsidiary protection was temporarily stopped. Asylum applications inside the EU, Norway and Switzerland dropped by around 33 % (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2020). For undocumented and homeless people, the living situation was particularly severe, as they were unable to claim welfare benefits, self-isolate during lockdown and were most significantly impacted by the closure of social services provided by NGOs (Bendel et al., 2021). As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, federal states in Germany implemented regulations on social distancing, closure of public services and facilities, mandatory testing, and vaccination. These regulations have affected different migrant groups to varying degrees and in different ways. These vulnerabilities are stratified and shaped by intersectional factors, depending on individuals' sector of employment, legal status, time of residency and entitlement to social rights, level of education, gender and age. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the intersections of

these variables to understand the impact of the pandemic on individuals and groups.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the poverty risk of people from a migrant background was twice as high (at 27%) than that of non-migrants (11%) (BBMFI, 2022). Migrants and refugees faced disproportionate job losses, isolation due to mobility restrictions, and were most severely impacted by the effects of contracting economies (Bendel et al., 2021). As migrants were mostly employed in precarious jobs or without regular employment contracts, they also suffered from limited access to social protection systems. In addition, they were at higher risk of being exposed to the virus in sectors considered essential, such health, care, food production and distribution. Women, migrants and young people were affected disproportionately by the pandemic as they were employed in sectors hit the hardest, such as manufacturing, hotels and restaurants and the food industry (Rude, 2021). In the health and social sector, 73% of all employees are women, many of them from a migrant background. Unemployment also rose considerably. For example in Munich, unemployment in the service industry among migrants increased by around 48% in 2021, among young people by 64% and among long-term unemployed by 61%, compared to 2019 data (Caritas, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic and related measures also posed new challenges for migrant integration and the education of migrant children, because of unequal access to IT and the conditions for homeschooling. The pandemic has posed many difficulties to the so-called “integration challenge” set by the German state. Migrants had to drop out of language classes and integration courses because of school closures and limitations in access to online learning. At the same time, their work and residency permits are conditioned on attendance of those courses. This delayed migrants’ “integration achievements” required by state authorities. Additionally, living in crowded spaces, with less possibilities to work from home and missing access to healthcare had additional negative effects. Many women were faced with increased childcare responsibilities due to the closure of childcare settings (Bendel

et al., 2021). In addition, xenophobia and racism were exacerbated, with a significant increase in reported cases (Mediendienst Integration, 2022). Furthermore, with lockdowns in place, women’s risk of experiencing gender-based violence and abuse from intimate partners or family members increased (Steinert and Ebert, 2020).

In summary, for many migrant groups in society, the COVID-19 related restrictions have increased the uncertainties surrounding their work and living conditions and have endangered their livelihoods and safety. These new risks have compounded the negative long-term impacts on migrants’ socioeconomic conditions, leaving many as disadvantaged and vulnerable.

COVID-19 and migrant women in Germany

Just over 10 million women living in Germany are from a migrant background (BBMFI, 2022). As a statistical category, “women with a migration background” includes diverse groups of women. Yet, women in this category show lower rates of employment (54%) compared to unemployment rates of non-migrant women, at 76% (BBMFI, 2019). This is only in part a question of qualifications. Although the educational levels of women with a migration background vary widely (Farrokhzad, 2017), even those highly qualified have lower rates of employment, at 65%, compared to 90% of highly skilled women without a migration background (BBMFI, 2022). They also have the lowest income and the highest rates of precarious jobs (BMFSFJ, 2020). Barriers to employment range from legal work restrictions in the case of asylum seekers or restrictions on residence status due to them coming through family reunification routes, to structural and political restrictions, such as the lack of recognition of credentials and labour market discrimination or difficulties to access early childcare education and care commitments (Hillmann and Toral Koca, 2021; BMFSFJ, 2013). Children from migrant families have lower rates of participation in early childhood education (ECEC) due to regional shortage of childcare, lack of information on access, language barriers and discrimination, which affects migrant women’s employment rates (BMFSFJ, 2020; BMFSFJ, 2013).

In Germany, many migrant women are working in precarious jobs in the health and social care, manufacturing, hotels and restaurants, which have all suffered the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. For low-wage earners affected by lockdowns, furlough payments did hardly cover their expenses. At the same time, similar to other countries, health and social services have become “COVID-19 epicenters”, because of the difficult working conditions exacerbating the rapid spread of the virus among workers and service users (Foley and Piper, 2020). As data of a German study showed, people employed in the care and health sectors fell sick five times more often than other groups during the pandemic (Lewicki, 2020). In addition to the risk of contagion, many migrant women, particularly refugees, suffered from limited access to formal social security, limited community ties, and family relationships, affecting their socioeconomic position and well-being. Nevertheless, there are important differences within the group of migrant women as their capacities to confront these negative impacts varies based on their length of residency, education and income, language skills, place of living (urban or rural) and their access to support structures, among other aspects.

A group significantly impacted during COVID-19 were seasonal workers mainly from Eastern Europe, as their work was crucial for the food industry and agriculture (Leiblfinger et al., 2021). The German government tried to facilitate the mobility of seasonal workers through the extension of work permits, international recruitment and rapid recognition of qualifications (BMEL, 2020). However, the precarious living conditions for seasonal workers in overcrowded housing facilities and their difficult working conditions, for example in the meat industry, contributed to the spread of the virus and put workers’ lives at risk. Migrant women in these jobs were thus affected to a greater extent, as they were subject to mobility restrictions if they became ill, the separation of their families, and the challenges arising from a lack of social security coordination, as well as differences in entitlements to labour protection and enforcement of rights. This was also exacerbated by the existing stratification of

EU citizens according to country of origin, length of residence and access to social rights (Szelewa and Polakowski, 2022).

Almost 500,000 migrant women, mostly from Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Ukraine, work in private households as caregivers, many of them without an official work contract (Safuta and Noack, 2020). For these live-in care workers, the pandemic has generated additional physical and emotional burdens, financial precarity and increased dependence on their employers, as they are allowed to work under the EU Directive or self-employed. They are affected by the lack of access to health care services or social protection and limited labour rights (Nowicka et al., 2021). As many of them do not have a German contract, the prerequisite for eligibility to social security services, they were not entitled to access support through the German relief programmes (Leiblfinger et al., 2021; Leiblfinger et al., 2020). Those live-in care workers who were unregistered and worked in the informal economy experienced additional exclusion from bonus payments, relief funds and travel facilitations. They were also more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from their employers, given their confinement to their employers’ homes during lockdowns. In summary, existing risks were thus intensified while new risks emerged for those employed in live-in care (Nowicka et al., 2021).

Undocumented migrant women were also particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and related government measures, as they are generally excluded from access to the health system and formal social assistance programs. Their reliance on informal income opportunities during the pandemic posed additional hardships due to loss of job opportunities and the health risks posed by the virus, while they could not access social relief programs (Volkant, 2020). Refugees under subsidiary protection faced with a suspension of family reunification by law since 2016 (Asylpaket II) experienced further delays and the uncertainty of family reunification, as the program was temporarily suspended. These families were thus faced with the unpredictability and uncertainty of their future together (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen, 2020). At the same time, their integration into the labour

market was jeopardised, as the majority were mostly employed in temporary contracts and the low-wage sectors (Caritas, 2021).

Migrant children were also significantly impacted during the pandemic, as social services, schools and early years setting were closed. Lockdowns increased women's and children's risk to suffer domestic violence and abuse (Steinert and Ebert, 2020). Local aid organisations found themselves at the limit of their capacity in the face of increasing demands from migrant workers who were faced with the multiple crises of unemployment, poverty, and health hazards (Caritas, 2021). At the same time, the indispensable work of migrant organisations and NGOs which support diverse groups of migrants was challenged by the restrictions imposed to contain the virus. Most NGOs registered an increased need for supporting migrant service users in all these aspects: access to labour, violence prevention, access to social security, schooling, legal problems regarding immigration status or refugee proceedings (Caritas, 2021).

Conclusion

As in other countries around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate negative impact on disadvantaged groups in Germany, especially migrants and other minoritised groups. Migrant women's vulnerability increased due to job losses, financial difficulties and poverty, the risks of violence, psychological stress, and the environment of insecurity (UNDP, 2020; Bendel et al., 2021). Therefore, the pandemic has become not just as a health crisis, but a "crisis of inequality" (Gottardo and Cyment, 2020, p. 1). Although migrant women in Germany have been significantly affected by the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, their situation has not received the attention needed to tackle these inequities.

This country briefing has summarised some of the main impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women and their families in Germany, with a focus on those most vulnerable, such as refugees and women in precarious work. Although the pandemic has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable groups, those

groups have not been targeted by the German government's COVID-19 relief policies. This has deepened the negative impact on the socio-economic conditions for groups already significantly disadvantaged in the German society (Rude, 2021). The long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-pandemic measures on migrant women and their families require thus further research.

The GEN-MIGRA Project is jointly funded under the Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities (T-AP). Bringing together researchers and practitioners from four countries- Brazil, Germany, Poland and United Kingdom- it researches the impact of the pandemic on migrant women and their families. Find out more at: www.genmigra.org

Footnotes

¹German population statistics define people with a migration background as “all those who immigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany after 1949, as well as all foreigners born in Germany and all those born as Germans in Germany with at least one parent who immigrated to Germany or was born as a foreigner in Germany” (Federal Statistical Office 2012b). Migrants are all people who “were not born in Germany, but abroad”. They can be German citizens or foreign nationals. (Federal Statistical Office, 2012).

References

- BAMF (2020) *Trend setzt sich fort: Zuwanderung nach Deutschland überwiegend aus Europa*. Pressemitteilung. Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge. Available at: <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2022/220112-migrationsbericht2020.html;jsessionid=816CC1DC199F5208B620058E0C26D129.intranet242>
- BAMF (2022) *Migrationsbericht 2021 - Die zentralen Ergebnisse des Migrationsberichts 2021*. Available at: <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Forschung/Migrationsberichte/migrationsbericht-2021-zentrale-ergebnisse.html>
- BBMFI (2019) *Bericht der Beauftragten der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration. Wichtige Zahlen auf einen Blick*. BBMFI. Berlin.
- BBMFI (2022) *Integrationsbericht 2019. Wichtige Zahlen auf einen Blick. Wichtigen Zahlen auf einen Blick Integrationsbericht*. Available at: <https://www.integrationsbeauftragte.de/ib-de/staatsministerin/integrationsbericht>
- Bendel, P., Bekyol, Y. and Leisenheimer, M. (2021) *Auswirkungen und Szenarien für Migration und Integration während und nach der COVID-19 Pandemie*. MFI Erlangen.
- BMAS (2020) *Arbeitsmarktzugang für Flüchtlinge*. Available at: <https://www.bmas.de/DE/Arbeit/Fachkraeft-esisicherung-und-Integration/Migration-und-Arbeit/Flucht-und-Aysl/arbeitsmarktzugang-fuer-fluechtlinge.html>
- BMEL (2020) *Pressemitteilungen - Corona-Paket der Bundesregierung – wichtige Hilfen für die Land- und Ernährungswirtschaft erreicht*. Available at: <https://www.bmel.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2020/054-coronapaket-der-bundesregierung.html>
- BMFSFJ (2013) *Mütter mit Migrationshintergrund. Familienleben und Erwerbstätigkeit*. Monitor Familienforschung. Beiträge aus Forschung Statistik und Familienforschung. Berlin.
- BMFSFJ (2020) *Familie heute. Daten Fakten, Trends. Familienreport 2020*. Bundesministerium für Familien, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend.
- Caritas (2021) *Migranten unter den Hauptverlierern der Pandemie*. Caritas. Available at: <https://www.caritas-nah-am-naechsten.de/news-detail/6957/--migranten-unter-den-hauptverlierern-der-pandemie>
- Destatis (2021) *Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund 2019 um 2,1% gewachsen: schwächster Anstieg seit 2011*. Statistisches Bundesamt. Pressemitteilung Nr. 279. Available at: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2020/07/PD20_279_12511.html
- Diakonie (2022) *Sozialleistungen für EU-Bürgerinnen und -Bürger Infoportal - Diakonie Deutschland*. Available at: <https://www.diakonie.de/sozialleistungen-fuer-eu-buergerinnen-und-buerger>
- European Union Agency for Asylum (2020) *Asylum applications remain 31% lower than in 2019*. European Union Agency for Asylum. Available at: <https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/asylum-applications-remain-31-lower-2019>
- Farrokhzad, S. (2017) *Potentiale erkennen, Hürden abbauen. Situation von Frauen mit Migrationshintergrund in Bildung und Beschäftigung. Eine differenzierte Betrachtung*. IQ Netzwerk *Integration durch Qualifikation*. 3.
- Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen (2020) *Familiennachzug: Corona-Krise trifft getrennte Familien hart*. Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen e.V. Available at: <https://www.nds-fluerat.org/themen/familienzusammenfuehrung-2/stellungnahmen-und-politische-kommentare/familiennachzug-corona-krise-trifft-getrennte-familien-hart/>
- Foley, L. and Piper, N. (2020) *COVID-19 and women migrant workers: Impacts and implications*. International Organization for Migration. Geneva.

- Gottardo, C., and Cyment, P. (2020) *How Covid-19 affects women in migration*. Available at: <https://www.fes.de/en/displacement-migration-integration/article-page-flight-migration-integration/howcovid-19-effects-women-in-migration-1-1>
- Hanewinkel, V. (2018) *Frauen in der Migration. Ein Überblick in Zahlen. Über lange Zeit galt Migration als männliches Phänomen. Dabei haben heute in den meisten Weltregionen Frauen den größten Anteil am Migrationsgeschehen*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/migration-integration/kurzdossiers/280217/frauen-in-der-migration-ein-ueberblick-in-zahlen/>
- Hillmann, F. and Toğral Koca, B. (2021) “By women, for women, and with women”: on the integration of highly qualified female refugees into the labour Markets of Berlin and Brandenburg. *Comparative Migration Studies* 9 (1).
- Hoesch, K. (2018) *Migration und Integration*. Eine Einführung. Wiesbaden, Germany, Springer VS.
- Leiblfinger, M., Prieler, V., Rogoz M. and Sekulová M. (2021) Confronted with COVID-19: Migrant live-in care during the pandemic. *Global Social Policy* 21 (3), 490-507.
- Leiblfinger, M., Prieler, V., Schwiter, K., Steiner, J. Benazha A. and Lutz, H. (2020) Impact of COVID-19 Policy Responses on Live-In Care Workers in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. *Journal of Long Term Care*, 144–150. <https://doi.org/10.31389/jltc.51>
- Lewicki, A. (2020) *Sind Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund stärker von Covid-19 betroffen?* Aktueller Forschungsstand. Mediendienst Integration. Berlin.
- Mediendienst Integration (2022) *Corona-Pandemie und Migration. Zahlen und Fakten*. Mediendienst Integration. Available at: <https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/corona-pandemie.html>
- Nowicka, M., Bartig, S., Schwass, T. and Matuszczyk, K. (2021) COVID-19 Pandemic and Resilience of the Transnational Home-Based Elder Care System between Poland and Germany *J Aging Soc Policy*. 33(4-5) doi: 10.1080/08959420.2021.1927615
- Ratzmann, N. (2022) “No German, No Service”: EU Migrants’ Unequal Access to Welfare Entitlements in Germany. *Social Inclusion* 9 (4).
- Rude, B. (2021) Der Effekt von Covid-19: Eine Geschlechter-und Migrationsperspektive auf die Beschäftigungsstruktur in Deutschland. *ifo Schnelldienst*, 74(01), 49-52.
- Safuta, A. and Noack, K. (2020) *A pandemic, and then what? The effects of the coronavirus pandemic on migrant care workers in Germany*. Centre on Migration Policy and Society. Available at: <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2020/a-pandemic-and-then-what-the-effects-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic-on-migrant-care-workers-in-germany/>
- Schnabel, R. (2020) Migrants’ Access to Social Protection in Germany. In: Lafleur, J.M. and Vintila, D. (eds.) *Migration and Social Protection in Europe and Beyond* (Volume 1). Cham, Springer International Publishing, 179–193.
- Steinert, J. and Ebert, C. (2020) *Gewalt an Frauen und Kindern in Deutschland während COVID-19-bedingten Ausgangsbeschränkungen: Zusammenfassung der Ergebnisse*. München. Available at: <https://www.tum.de/studium/lehre/36053>
- Szelewa, D. and Polakowski, M. (2022) European solidarity and “free movement of labour” during the pandemic: exposing the contradictions amid east–west migration. *Comparative European Politics* 20 (2), 238–256.
- UNDP (2020) *Gender-based Violence and COVID-19*. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/publications/gender-based-violence-and-covid-19>
- Volkant, P. (2020) „Ich bete jeden Tag, dass es mich nicht erwischt“: Was die Pandemie für undokumentierte Migranten bedeutet. *Der Tagesspiegel*. Available at: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/was-die-pandemie-fur-undokumentierte-migranten-bedeutet-7686703.html>

[Please note all web links were available at the time of publication, in May 2023.]

