

# Addressing Gender-Specific Needs: The Governance of Integration of Refugee Women in Warsaw

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*The nexus between immigrant integration and gender has primarily been studied in the context of Western European countries with a long tradition of migration. However, there is a clear gap in research on the integration of immigrant women in the context of CEE. Using discourse around and the implementation of immigrant integration policies as they include/exclude gender-sensitive content in the capital city of Poland, this article shifts the perspective to the localised CEE context and bridges the theoretical and empirical gaps. The study developed in two stages. The first stage included policy analysis of 9 governmental documents or directives related to immigrant integration; the second included fieldwork consisting of 12 in-depth interviews with representatives of NGOs, employees of local administration and migration scholars, conducted between May and August 2024. All interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. The results indicate that the gender-specific needs of refugee women are mainly addressed through NGO-run programmes, as opposed to public administration programmes, which favour a mainstreaming approach. Unlike in the Western European discourse, gender is used to distinguish deserving from non-deserving refugees, although not as a part of a national identity.*

*Keywords: gender, integration, governance, refugees in Poland*

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## Introduction

Growing academic attention has been paid to the intersection of gender and migration governance (Benería, Diana Deere and Kabeer 2012; Cleton and Meier 2023; Foley 2023; Mahon 2021). The existing literature demonstrates how gender is used, firstly, to create divisions between the native-born majority – ‘us’ – and the foreign-born minority – ‘them’ – in Europe (Farris 2017; Kofman, Saharso and Vacchelli 2015); secondly, to legitimise border restrictions in order to supposedly protect Western societies from non-Western migrant women, pictured as ‘backward victims of patriarchy’ (Andrijasevic 2009; Farris 2017; Kofman *et al.* 2015; Olwig 2011); and, thirdly, to present patriarchal relations as exclusively related to ‘immigrant culture’ (Farris 2017; Rajas 2012). This binary opposition of the egalitarian, liberal, civilised European self and the patriarchal, uncivilised ‘Other’ reinforces immigrant exclusion and instigates a threat to the achievements of liberal democracies (Farris 2017). Most of the literature, however, uses data from old immigration destination countries of Western Europe (Farris 2017; Hadj-Abdou 2019; Kofman *et al.* 2015; Masoud, Holm and Brunila 2021; Olivius 2014; Olwig 2011; Rajas 2012). The Central and Eastern European (CEE) context is absent in this academic debate, yet it is uniquely different to the Western European one. Unlike in Finland (Rajas 2012) or France, Italy and the Netherlands (Farris 2017), in CEE such politics of gender equality and the conviction that they are part of the national identity were never developed (Perini 2019).

As gender and immigrant integration become important aspects of governing, analyses of gendered rationalities in integration policymaking are necessary in order to explore and better understand the processes that follow them. This study focuses on the governance of the integration of refugee<sup>1</sup> women<sup>2</sup> using the case of Warsaw. It maps out and critically assesses how the gender-related needs of forced migrant women are addressed in the governance of immigrant integration. The paper then demonstrates how gender-specific needs are present or absent in public administration and NGO-run programmes, the reasons why and the results. It examines the governance processes through an analysis of policy documents, as well as interviews with integration governance stakeholders, including non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, employees of local administration and migration scholars. This approach allows me to explore this previously under-researched area and build a coherent overview of the state of affairs.

The study refers to the governance of integration, understood as the regulation and management of migration by various public (administration) and private (e.g. NGO) actors at different policy levels (Geddes 2022). Furthermore, the analysis refers to gender-specific needs, understood as needs resulting from socially constructed male and female roles which are uniquely different in the migration context (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Moussa and Khanlou 2009). Women are disproportionately more vulnerable to various forms of violence in situations of mobility. They also often take on additional care-related roles within the family or community (Hajdukowski-Ahmed *et al.* 2009). As Goździak (2009: 187) explains, ‘Gender is a core organising principle of social relations and opportunities’.

This study is largely exploratory, yet not exhaustive of the gender and migration-governance nexus in the overlooked context of CEE. To reduce the risk of falling into methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller and Wimmer 2002), the study will use a localised perspective. It will focus on the case of Warsaw, the capital and largest city in Poland which, in recent decades, has hosted the largest foreign-born population in the country. In light of recent crises including the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border, as well as the full-scale invasion by Russia in Ukraine, it is increasingly becoming a destination for migrants from various countries across the world (Winiarska *et al.* forthcoming). A case study of Warsaw can therefore provide a unique overview of the governance of refugee women’s integration in the CEE setting.

The article argues that, firstly, gender is a part of public discourses about migration and integration, although not in the same way as it has been described in the Western-based literature. Gender is not seen as

one of the values threatened by the influx of migrants, because gender equality is hardly ever considered to be a part of the national identity ‘in danger’. If present in the discourse, gender refers to distinguishing ‘deserving’ migrants (White, Christian women and children) from ‘non-deserving’ (Black and Brown Muslim men). Secondly, although the gender-specific needs of women are widely incorporated into programmes implemented by NGOs or in cooperation with local administration, this is mainly done at a local level. NGOs are more likely to provide programmes targeted at women, as opposed to public administration which favours the mainstreaming approach. Finally, as in the results of other studies (e.g. Farris 2017; Kofman *et al.* 2015), in the case of Poland, migrant men are often presented as undeserving of assistance and a threat to Polish women.

The article begins with some background information, including the theoretical convictions, the literature on integration and migration governance and the intersection of immigrant integration governance and gender policy-making, as well as the discourse on gender and migration in the CEE setting. Furthermore, the historical context and migration overview in Poland and, more specifically, Warsaw, is introduced. Secondly, this article presents the findings of the study regarding gender in discourses surrounding migration and integration, the presence of gender-sensitive policies in public administration and NGO-run programmes, the reasons for this presence or absence, as well as the results. Finally, the findings are discussed in the context of the existing literature.

## Theoretical background

### *Integration and migration governance*

Analyses of policies targeting and facilitating the process of immigrant integration have typically been conducted within a field of immigrant integration, rather than migration governance. In either approach, immigrant integration itself is defined as a two-way process of mutual accommodation between newcomers and the host society (Garibay and de Cuyper 2018). Public and private actors on both a national and a local level implement ‘integration policies’ to facilitate the process. These policies include, among others, actions facilitating labour and housing-market access, host-country language courses, social work and civic integration courses. However, the literature does not present a unanimous agreement on what constitutes successful integration (Castles, Korac, Vasta and Vertovec 2002; Phillimore 2020).

Over the years, the concept of immigrant integration has been contested for being too simplistic and for being understood primarily through the lens of the individual obligation of migrants (Hadj-Abdou 2019; Schinkel 2018, 2019; Spencer 2022). Consequently, the responsibility for one’s integration – or lack thereof – was typically placed on the migrants. Unlike Schinkel, who calls for abandoning immigrant integration as a field altogether, Hadj-Abdou advocates for strengthening critical approaches through the analysis of immigrant integration as a governance technique, rendering ethno-cultural differences purposeful for certain ends of immigrant integration projects (Hadj-Abdou 2019). Similarly, Phillimore (2020) proposes to focus on the role of the receiving societies and actors in supporting and providing the context for integration, highlighting the need to widen the scope of focus of integration on the role of state and non-state actors and outlining a multi-dimensional integration model.

Integration policies in the local context have been the focus of a growing field of studies. Local policies are often viewed as better fitted to local needs, more efficient and participatory (Filomeno 2017; Glorius and Doornik 2020; Hillmann and Samers 2023; Street and Schönwälder 2021). A handful of studies highlight the challenges of local policy-making – such as under- and unstable funding, the coordination of multiple actors engaged in integration policy-making, the unequal quality of local services and, consequently, unequal opportunities created for migrants (for an exception see: Łukasiewicz, Cichocka and Matuszczyk 2024; Łukasiewicz, Oren and Tripathi 2021). In this local context, the notion of migration and integration governance

refers to the regulation and management of migration by various actors at local levels. It is not only an after-the-fact reaction to migration patterns but, more importantly, a way of shaping them (Geddes 2022). The concept of migration governance helps us to understand international migrations and how they are shaped through processes of inclusion and exclusion by public and private organisations. Migration governance assumes the taking of actions at different levels but also the avoidance of certain of them (Geddes 2022: 312) – for example, by including or excluding some actions from policy documents (Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas 2016: 20).

A growing field of studies on integration literature, at a national or a local level, analyses ‘immigrant mainstreaming’ (e.g. Scholten and van Breugel 2018; Westerveen and Adam 2019), understood as a strategy aimed at accommodating the needs of specific immigrant groups. Scholars, moreover, highlight the need for a ‘twin-track strategy’ and supplement mainstreaming with targeted policies (Westerveen and Adam 2019).

In the field of migrant integration in the context of CEE, the situation of various marginalised groups, including women, remains overlooked. The following section focuses on the nexus between gender and immigrant integration.

### *The intersection of immigrant integration governance and gender policy-making*

Gender mainstreaming, a strategy for responding to inequalities between women and men, has been adopted by national and international institutions worldwide as a means of including gender in the central, ‘mainstream’ institutional activities, rather than of specialised, marginalised bodies only (Caglar 2013; Charlesworth 2005). It underpins the need to entail gender throughout the entire governing process, including immigrant integration governance (Westerveen and Adam 2019). Yet, studies show that the reliance on gender mainstreaming enhanced the risk of ‘diluting gender expertise’ (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2017: 7), increased the lack of binding commitments, as well as the monitoring of activities by a specialised, responsible body (Verloo 2005), or the lack of critical conceptualisations of policy problems (Mazey 2000).

A growing field of studies examines the role and relevance of gender in immigrant integration policy-making (Farris 2017; Hajdukowski-Ahmed *et al.* 2009; Kofman *et al.* 2015; Masoud *et al.* 2021; Olivius 2014; Rajas 2012; Westerveen and Adam 2019). Existing studies use cases mainly from Western Europe, where gender categories construct the divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and shape national and political communities (Kofman *et al.* 2015). Gender equality and sexuality are therefore at the centre of recent debates around cultural differences between majority and minority populations (*ibidem*). In this context, anti-immigrant policies in Europe, including the strengthening of border control, are legitimised in public discourse by using representations of non-Western migrant women as ‘backward victims of patriarchy’ and are problematised as the ‘Other’ in need of protection (Andrijasevic 2009; Kofman *et al.* 2015; Olwig 2011). Rajas’ (2012) analysis examined gender equality in Finnish immigrant integration policies. It revealed how immigrant women were racialised and essentialised by linking gender equality and women’s capacity to be a worker and a citizen in the same way as men. Farris connects such an individualised understanding of gender equality with a retrenching of welfare support and privatisation of care services in Italy, the Netherlands and France (Farris 2017). Women from non-Western countries were deliberately ‘pushed’ into the care and social-reproduction sector through civic-integration programmes (Farris 2017: 16).

### *Discourse on gender and migration in the CEE context*

According to Slany, Małek and Ślusarczyk (2010), early migration studies in Poland largely lacked empirical research and statistical data incorporating the gender variable. As migratory patterns in Poland changed, early studies of integration programmes, although without the focus on the gender perspective, pointed to specific

difficulties that refugee women were facing, including those related to childcare, religious factors or culturally imposed assignments (Pawlak and Ryabinska 2007). Similarly, Kość-Ryżko (2021) described refugee women's experiences and difficulties as significantly different to those of refugee men, mainly in the areas of labour and housing access and building new relationships, as well as due to responsibilities related to childcare and maternity. Yet, research shows that the topic of gender-related needs has been absent in the legislation related to migration (Krzystek and Małek 2008).

Women's rights in Poland are increasingly being limited and gender equality is undermined by conservative campaigners (Bucholc and Gospodarczyk 2024). In this context, an analysis of the relevance of women's rights in terms of the discourses and policies surrounding the topic of immigrant integration in Poland might be a valuable contribution to this field of research. The CEE context is different to that of Western Europe in terms of how the gender and immigrant-integration nexus plays out, due to its unique history, including a lack of overseas colonies,<sup>3</sup> distinct politics of gender equality and the strong influence of the patriarchal Catholic culture (Perini 2019).

Existing studies refer to Islamophobic and anti-immigrant discourses in Polish feminist scholarship and public debate, which have some similarities to those in Western European countries (Bobako 2017). In Poland, one of the key forces blocking women's rights has historically been the Catholic Church and, therefore, the fight for women's rights means contesting religious institutions. The secularism of Western Europe becomes the equivalent of 'European liberal values' which need to be protected from anti-modern religion. These claims reflect Farris' (2017) analysis of the Islamophobia of liberal feminists. Yet, the role of integration policies which, for Farris, is one of the key components of the 'femonationalist' project, remains under-explored in Polish literature. Existing studies point to the representations of 'positive refugeeness' as feminised and depoliticised refugee imagery (Szczepanikova 2010). Women with children are associated with powerlessness and neediness and considered 'deserving' of aid, in stark contrast to migrant men, who are portrayed as a threat and are thus less likely to induce trust and compassion (Klaus and Szulecka 2023; Szczepanikova 2010). Overall, the nation-states' control mechanisms are used to establish divisions between those who are 'desirable' or 'worthy of protection' and those who are 'undesirable' and 'unworthy' (Bloch 2023). A migrant woman fits the former categories much better than a man, due to the nationalist imagery of femininity seen as vulnerability and submissiveness.

#### *Study background: migration and integration in Poland and Warsaw*

Following the collapse of communism in Poland, the country has been shifting from low migration and relative ethnic homogeneity to increased immigration and growing diversity (Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2019; Okólski 2012). Since the second half of the 2010s the migration balance has been positive and the country is evolving into having a net-receiving status (Fihel, Janicka and Okólski 2023). Between 2008 and 2021, asylum applications in Poland varied between 4,070 and 15,240 (Sobczak-Szelc *et al.* 2022: 31). In the last 20 years, the largest group of forced migrants in Poland consisted of Russian citizens (primarily Chechens), with a significant change noted in 2021 when the top 3 nationalities shifted to Belarusians, Afghans and Iraqis (Sobczak-Szelc *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, the situation radically shifted in 2022, with the arrival of 1.53 million people displaced from Ukraine (Łukasiewicz *et al.* forthcoming). For this group, unlike other protection-seekers, a new Temporary Protection law (TP) was put in place, with immediate access to the welfare system and labour market and narrow targeted assistance. The study focuses on Warsaw as the city attracting the highest and most diverse number of foreigners in Poland (Winiarska *et al.* forthcoming). Warsaw's foreign-born population before 2022 was estimated at around 130,000, i.e. 7 per cent of the city's population. After 2022, that number increased by a further 100,000 to reach around 14 per cent (Łukasiewicz *et al.* 2024) (*ibidem*).

Until the 2015 parliamentary elections, won by the conservative Law and Justice party, migration was missing from political and public discourse. However, since 2015, migration has become politicised and the new right-wing government implemented various anti-refugee policies, including restricting access to asylum and defending asylum systems (Carta *et al.* 2022). The anti-refugee discourse and policies escalated further in 2021 with increasing push-backs on the Polish-Belarusian border (Krępa and Judzińska 2023). The violence on the border continued, with 116 deaths documented by the end of March 2024 in the 4 countries experiencing the crisis (Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland); pushbacks continued in 2024 after the liberal Civic Platform won the election in Poland (Bronitskaya *et al.* 2024). However, this hostile approach did not apply to all persons seeking asylum in Poland, as evidenced by the welcoming of Ukrainians fleeing the war in 2022 (Klaus and Szulecka 2023; Laurent and Thevenin 2024).

As of 2024, Poland had no strategic migration and integration plan outlining the migration strategy of the country in a coherent manner. The most recent programme, ‘Poland’s migration policy – current state and postulated actions’ [pol. *Polityka migracyjna Polski – stan obecny i postulowane działania*] from 2012 was annulled in 2016 (Łodziński and Szonert 2023). In the spring of 2024, the new government and a new Ministry of the Interior and Administration developed a migration strategy for Poland for 2025–2030 (MSWiA 2024). The lack of an overarching strategy extended to integration policy. Over the years there have been various attempts to produce a single document outlining the strategy for integration, yet not one has been accepted. However, in line with Sobczak-Szelc *et al.* (2020) I argue that, although Poland’s integration policies are fragmented and incohesive across government sectors, they do exist, though they are quite difficult to map out.

The country’s integration policy is closely connected with its asylum policies. The only tool defined at the central government level is the Individual Integration Programme (IIP), which is available to forced migrants with refugee status and subsidiary protection. IIPs, although designed and funded by the central administration, are implemented by local governments. In the case of Warsaw, that is the Warsaw Centre for Family Assistance (WCFA). Although forced migrants from Ukraine who arrived in 2022 and received temporary protection (TP) – like recognised refugees – gained immediate access to the Polish mainstream welfare system, they remained excluded from accessing IIPs (Łukasiewicz 2017; Sobczak-Szelc *et al.* 2022). Despite this limitation, TP holders could access many specialised integration activities developed at the local level and implemented by the local administration and non-governmental organisations (Łukasiewicz *et al.*, forthcoming). Although Poland’s capital hosted the largest population of forced migrants, immigrant integration has not been at the top of the political agenda of the municipality of Warsaw, and the city did not have a single strategic document addressing the issue (Winiarska *et al.*, forthcoming). Various public and private actors in Warsaw are now engaged in implementing a broad range of integration activities for foreign-born residents, including refugees. The 2022 full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine was a turning point in the overall governance of migration, with significant funds being allocated at the levels of state and local governments, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (*ibidem*).

The city of Warsaw implements gender-specific programmes, such as the Warsaw for Women programme and the Woman’s Council, which have measures aimed at including refugee women’s voices (UM Warszawa, n.d.). Although these activities fall beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that, as part of such gender-responsive strategies, the needs of migrant women might also be addressed.

With regards to the lack of research into the nexus between immigrant integration and gender, the categories identified in previous research might require revisiting in the context of Poland. This study builds on these findings and contributes to the literature on the intersection of immigrant integration policies and gender by analysing integration activities and policies in the CEE context. I will use the case of Warsaw to delineate and critically evaluate the presence – or absence – of gender in the discourses and policies of immigrant integration.

## Methodology

The research results presented in this article are drawn from a broader study entitled ‘Gender and Expert Knowledge. A Study of Migration and Integration Policies in Germany, Poland and Sweden’.

The dataset used for this article includes 9 governmental documents issued between 2012 and the spring of 2024 related to immigrant integration, 6 on the central and 3 on the local level (see Table 1). All documents are available online on government websites. The documents have been uploaded to the qualitative analysis software Dedoose and analysed using thematic analysis.

**Table 1. Analysed documents**

	Document name	Central/Local level	Time when developed	Implementation status
1	Polish Migration Policy – Diagnosis of the Initial State of Affairs	Central	2020	Adopted
2	Polish Policy on Integration of Foreigners – Principles and Guidelines	Central	2013	Developed, not adopted
3	The Act of 12 March 2004 on Social Assistance	Central	2004 (uniform text in Journal of Laws of 2024 item 1283 with further amendments)	Adopted
4	Polish Migration Policy – the Current State of Play and Further Actions	Central	2012	Adopted in 2012, cancelled in 2016
5	Socio-Economic Priorities of Migration Policy	Central	2018	Adopted
6	Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 7 April 2015 on the Provision of Assistance to Foreigners	Central	2015	Adopted
7	#Warsaw2030 Strategy	Local	2018	Adopted
8	2030 Strategy for Solving Social problems	Local	2021	Adopted
9	The Social Diversity Policy of the Capital City of Warsaw	Local	2022	Adopted

The study also uses primary data – i.e. in-depth interviews – which I conducted 4 between May and August 2024 in Warsaw. Participants were recruited using my professional contacts, as well as those of other Centre of Migration Research team members, through email and phone. In total, 12 interviews were undertaken,

including 5 using the Zoom platform and 7 in-person in the interviewees' offices. The interviews were carried out in Polish and lasted approximately 1 hour. I work as an immigrant service-provider in a Warsaw-based non-governmental organisation, which has facilitated the recruitment of the study participants and the process of data collection. In addition to my professional background, the course of the research process was also facilitated by my positionality as a female Polish citizen. The interviews were collected based on purposive sampling and, subsequently, snowball sampling. The sample included representatives of Warsaw-based NGOs (N=8), employees of local public administration (N=2) and migration scholars (N=2) (see Table 2). Of the study participants, 8 were female and 4 were male. None of them had a background of immigrating to Poland.

**Table 2. Sample structure, N=12**

	Participant's gender identification		Total
	Male	Female	
<b>NGO</b>	2	6	8
<b>Local administration</b>	1	1	2
<b>Academia</b>	1	1	2

The dataset used for the qualitative interviews included transcripts of 12 in-depth interviews, all recorded, transcribed and uploaded to Dedoose for thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012).

The methodology used in the study has three main limitations. First, it was only exploratory in nature. Secondly, the study looked at the service-providers without analysing the perspective of the migrant women. Therefore, a further analysis of the subject, which would include looking into the immigrant women's experience of participating in the integration programmes, is recommended. Thirdly, the sample had the following limitations: narrow representation from public administration and, the absence of service-providers with migration background. In future, a study involving a wider sample would be needed to gain these valuable insights. The research involving live subjects was approved by the Ethics Committee at the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw and followed ethical guidelines to minimise the risk of harm and ensure informed consent, the anonymity of participants and confidentiality. The approval certificate number is CMR/EC/V/2024.

### **Results: the intersection of immigrant integration and gender**

This section describes public policies targeting migrants in Warsaw, as laid out in the document analysis and interviews with study participants. For the purpose of this study, the programmes are divided into 3 categories: national-level public policies implemented locally; local-level public policies implemented by public institutions (in some cases in cooperation with local or international NGOs); and local-level public policies implemented by NGOs (see Table 3). The available programmes provide a wide range of activities addressing the various dimensions of integration, including employment, healthcare, housing, childcare and so on.



**Table 3. Programmes referenced by study participants**

<b>National-level public policies implemented locally</b>	<b>Local-level public policies implemented by public institutions</b>	<b>Local-level public policies implemented by NGOs</b>
Individual Integration Programme, available for holders of refugee status or subsidiary protection	Employment services offered in the local employment offices or at the WCFA; Polish language courses at the WCFA; speaking club Polish Cafe at the WCFA; art therapy at the WCFA in cooperation with INGOs or local NGOs; available to different groups of migrants or forced migrants, depending on the funders' goals	Polish language courses; childcare; psychological support; career counselling; maternal and perinatal support; mental health support; housing support; material aid; medical support; workshops and vocational training; intercultural assistantship; available to different groups of migrants or forced migrants, depending on the funders' goals

### *Gender in public discourses on migration*

According to one interviewed migration scholar, the discourses surrounding migration and gender in Poland often closely resembled those of security. The figure of migrant men, in the participant's view, was often related to a threat to security:

*The issue of migration is quite abstract. In the sense that migration was somehow used in election campaigns but through the prism of a threat and mainly then it was associated with men, probably Muslim. In any case, the man was the threat (...). All these election discussions were reproducing, (...) pictures of riots in the suburbs or of some kind of aggression on the part of men (GEN\_ACADEMIA\_2)<sup>4</sup>.*

Gender, if mentioned, was also evoked in the context of migrant men posing a threat to Polish women: 'This is one of the most important themes in the campaigns of these radical circles in Poland. It is the creation of a sense of threat and a vision of streets that will be dangerous for Polish women' (GEN\_ACADEMIA\_1). However migrant women rarely appeared as a subject of discourse other than as people 'deserving aid'. Furthermore, the study participants contrasted gender equality in Poland with that in Western Europe. In their view, it was not part of a national or European identity and, consequently, its acceptance or lack of acceptance did not trigger an 'othering' factor for migrants. One participant, with decades of experience in migrant integration, ended with a conclusion that she wished gender equality was part of discourse and identity: 'Well frankly, I would like us to get to this point in our discourse, that this is our biggest problem [but it is not]' (GEN\_NGO\_8). According to the respondent, the nature and the focus of discourses around gender and migration in Poland are markedly different from those present in the old immigration destination countries of Western Europe.

### *Gender in public integration policies in Warsaw and a broader national-level context*

#### **Gender in policy documents**

An analysis of 9 public policy documents at central and local levels revealed a significant gap in the gender-related governance of immigrant integration. Of the analysed documents at the central level, only 1 referred to the

aspect of gender in immigrant integration. However, this document has never been adopted. The ‘Polish Policy on the Integration of Foreigners – Principles and Guidelines’ (Pol. ‘Polska Polityka Integracji Cudzoziemców – Założenia i Wytyczne’ 2013) mentioned the relevance of gender in 3 contexts. The document recommends paying special attention to gender in the realisation of the following postulates:

1. Polish language courses, with the recommendation to divide the groups based on the gender of participants:

*Professional language education during the procedure – dividing foreigners into groups based on the gender and age of the participants.<sup>5</sup>*

2. Perinatal care as a means of improving the psycho-physical health of foreigners and childcare, a measure for improving the situation of foreigners on the labour market:

*Women with children in their care should be enabled to participate in activities, through care being provided for their children.*

*Ensuring access to medical care for women and informing them about medical procedures and care during pregnancy and childbirth.*

3. Monitoring and evaluation of sensitive groups as a means of promoting integration:

*A systematic survey of the issue and the state’s needs regarding the integration of migrants: the needs of migrants arriving in Poland; their willingness to integrate and the degree of their integration into Polish society, including the monitoring of the situation of those individual national (ethnic) religious groups and migrant groups particularly at risk of social exclusion (e.g. women, children, the elderly): barriers to integration, discrimination, racism and xenophobia.*

The local-level documents discuss inclusion and diversity in a wider, more holistic way than central-level policies. They focus on the broadly understood social cohesion within the local community of Warsaw, yet without specifically targeting any social groups. Although both immigrant integration and gender are mentioned as areas which might require attention, the nexus between these 2 is missing. Importantly, rather than developing targeted programmes for migrants, the city declares the adoption of a mainstreaming approach in the context of all potentially marginalised groups.

### Gender in IIPs

Even though gender-related needs remain largely absent from key policy documents, they could still be indirectly included in available policy tools. The Act of 12 March 2004 on Social Assistance<sup>6</sup> defines a key tool of immigrant integration policies in Poland – an Individual Integration Programme (IIP). Article 92 (§1) determines the types of support granted to foreigners on IIPs: financial support, national health insurance contributions, social work, specialised counselling, the provision of information and support in contacts with other institutions, plus other means of support in the integration process. The Act provides a very broad yet vague framework of support. It fails to specify responses to the different needs of the beneficiaries of IIPs, including those related to gender. However, the programme, by definition, implies that each beneficiary receives individually tailored support, appropriate to their needs, including gender needs. As explained by a local

administration representative interviewed in Warsaw, the available documents serve as a general guideline determining the scope of the IIP:

*(...) There is, so far, no provision in our system for systematically addressing such [gender-related] needs. The Individual Integration Programme, with which I work, is individual by name and by design. This means that if a woman comes to the programme, (...) it is the task of the social worker to identify the individual needs of this person (GEN\_ADML\_1).*

Yet, according to another representative of the local administration, there are very few to no guidelines on how to personalise the programmes and work with women or other groups with special needs:

*A social worker who carries out an integration programme does not have too many tools or guidelines on how to do it. (...) We also always laughed with my colleagues as we read in the [Social Assistance] Act, which is supposed to be our guideline, that the tools of a social worker are to observe [laughs], to draw conclusions. (...) All that we had, what we were able to do, we worked out for ourselves through our experience of working with foreign clients (GEN\_ADML\_2).*

As demonstrated by the respondent, in practice, some social workers are implementing activities designed to address specific gender-related needs. One of the interviewed social workers explained that the quality of support largely relies on the social worker's individual competencies: '(...) We place our hope in what a social worker is capable of and what sensitivity he or she has' (GEN\_ADML\_1).

#### *Gender and administrative and financial constraints*

Study participants attributed the difficulties in implementing gender-related or gender-sensitive activities to administrative and financial constraints. According to an interviewed migration scholar, in case of activities which are not described in detail and/or mandated by law, the administration might limit its actions to the procedural essentials and highlight that efforts are confined strictly to what the procedures dictate: 'The administration often takes the safe position that if something is not clearly mandated by law, it is not there' (GEN\_ACADEMIA\_2). The participants linked the rareness of activities beyond those strictly imposed by laws or, in many cases, even the lack of efforts aimed at assessing the very needs, with the inadequate or scarce allocation of financial and human resources from the level of central government. Furthermore, according to one interviewee, local governments are apprehensive about conducting needs assessments which will reveal significant deficiencies and ineffectiveness, yet might not be followed by financial or staff reinforcements:

*The problem is that, if the local authorities show that they are doing something, they are afraid, in my opinion, that this will convince the central authorities that, since they are doing it, it means that they can do it. They are afraid that they will get more tasks but not necessarily more finances. In my opinion, this is one of the reasons why they do not go much further in identifying integration needs. Because they are simply afraid that if they identify these needs it turns out that these needs are mega-sized (GEN\_ACADEMIA\_1).*

Consequently, in light of the ever-shrinking welfare support systems, with social workers overwhelmed with high caseloads and lacking specific regulations, there is a high likelihood that the modest procedural essentials

will not suffice or will not be appropriate. In addition, the situation in Warsaw, as explained, is probably more specialised than in other parts of the country. As a representative of local administration in Warsaw explains:

*(...) I think that we are lacking clear guidelines – at least, a definition of integration to be used in programmes. It seems that everyone working with the client has their vision of what should be done, how to work, and so on. I don't know, maybe it's a good thing, because maybe, thanks to this, it has a chance of being an individual programme, but I'm sure we could use a bit more general knowledge, about what integration is. We in Warsaw are in a slightly better situation because we specialise, we have employees who deal only with this. I have no other task in my job than to implement integration programmes. In most districts in Poland, however, the integration programme is simply an additional task for the social worker who deals with foster care, violence, addictions, and a bit of everything (GEN\_ADML\_1).*

This opinion is also shared by an NGO worker, who highlighted insufficient regulations at the administrative level on how to modify the programmes to meet clients' gender-specific needs:

*My experience is that if the PCFA<sup>7</sup> or, in the case of Warsaw, the WCFA, has an employee, a social worker, who is very strongly focused on supporting a person, whether it be a woman or a man, whether it be a queer or a non-queer person, this person gets more support, but there are also PCFAs or other such employees who don't deal with these people at all, so here, probably, a focus on some vulnerable groups could also give those people... more support because, if they had this guaranteed by law, I assume that even the employees of such PCFAs would, sort of, have to comply with the law that applies to them. And it still probably wouldn't be equal, but at least in principle we would equalise access. And at the moment people with special needs, or from vulnerable groups are treated just like everyone else (GEN\_NGO\_4).*

This issue also highlights the challenge of accessing information about individual rights. Governmental social-support systems are often complex, making it difficult for people to obtain clear information on available resources and their entitlements. As a result, many individuals are unable to claim the rights to which they are entitled due to a lack of awareness. Ironically, those who stand to benefit the most from these systems are often those who face the greatest obstacles in accessing information about support programmes specifically designed to assist them.

*Once one participant said, for example, that she went to the doctor and something happened there, and the other one said something else that didn't match. Or, what you can get in the OPS.<sup>8</sup> Each of the ladies had a slightly different experience. (...) So they had a meeting with the director of the OPS in the suburban area and they were then able to ask questions that bothered them as well as questions about how it should work. They know that everyone at the OPS was telling them that they couldn't and wouldn't do it, but they were also given information on how it should work so that when they went to the OPS later on, they would be aware that they had the right to some specific services which they had been refused before, because that's how Polish OPSs worked (GEN\_NGO\_4).*

Poor access to information about rights and services can be a major barrier to immigrant integration outcomes.

### *Gender and targeted NGO-run programmes*

Interviewees explained that, following the 2022 mass forced migration from Ukraine, an influx of international funding bridged service gaps through grants offered to local NGO service-providers. The funding mainly targeted TP holders but, in some cases, was also available to other groups of migrants or forced migrants (including holders of international protection). The funds were targeted specifically at so-called ‘sensitive groups’, including women. The interviewees touched upon 2 interesting insights related to this. Firstly, the INGOs emerged as agents of gender mainstreaming. Secondly, our study participants pointed to a rather counter-intuitive observation related to the dynamics of shifting gender roles and an altering position of men as recipients of integration support.

### *INGOs as agents of gender mainstreaming*

According to a representative of an NGO with experience in public administration, all grants funded by INGOs contained requirements for components ensuring the equal treatment of aid recipients and having anti-discrimination measures: ‘We, (...), as a beneficiary of UNHCR funds, have to adapt organisational policies to UNHCR requirements, including anti-discrimination policies, anti-violence policies, and anti-exclusion policies’ (GEN\_NGO\_8).

According to our participants, the character and structure of the streams of funding might support gender mainstreaming due to the obligatory components. On the other hand, as explained by a migration scholar interviewee with an extensive background in the field of migration policies, it does not necessarily support the mainstreaming of immigrant integration as such, in the sense of incorporating gender across implemented programmes: ‘I’m not surprised that we have programmes dedicated to Roma or other groups because we have some funding streams that *de facto* enable or support particular [marginalised] groups. So, paradoxically, funding does not support mainstreaming – rather, it inhibits it’ (GEN\_ACADEMIA\_1). The participant explained that funding was largely devoted to programmes targeted at specific groups. Therefore, NGOs were more likely to seek and receive funding for targeted programmes, instead of addressing gender across all programmes.

*If we start from such an ideal situation, i.e. we assume that we have a certain level of needs satisfaction, then we may wonder whether we have mainstreaming or, rather, targeted activities – but what happens when we know that these needs are not ensured? I mean, is it not then perhaps better, for example, to target these different activities? It may turn out that, on a purely practical level, it is easier – because we can, for example, reach for funds which are targeted, which can be used to support one group and not another. And in this sense, Poland is in an interesting place, but also a difficult one, because we have all these things overlapping (GEN\_ACADEMIA\_1).*

### *Unintended policy outcomes: shifting gender roles*

Another interesting aspect pointed out by our study participants was the change in the dynamics of gender relations amongst recipients of integration support – that is, related to its allocation. As explained in the previous section, financial flows of humanitarian aid to Poland favoured targeted actions aimed at vulnerable groups, including women. Yet, post-2022 forced migration to Poland included a majority of women, children and the elderly. Consequently, a vast majority of programmes were planned for women and children (including

TP-holders and other protection-holders). As one of the participants explained, men were not considered a sensitive group and therefore they were overlooked in integration activities:

*This was shocking but, in connection with this Ukrainian response, (...) suddenly men have become a vulnerable group, which is in general a kind of strange and unexpected finding. You know, there are so many programmes designed – not only gender-based violence but just in general so many programmes are designed – for women (....) (GEN\_NGO\_3).*

An interviewed social worker explained that it influenced migrants' familial relations in that women would take over the role of interacting with private and public support institutions:

*When I had the opportunity to visit the centres for foreigners, [I noticed] that there is a very big offer of activities for women. We cook together, we sew together, we have some other activities together. Men, on the other hand, sit and wait. I haven't come across an offer of activities specifically for men. (...) and observing this, you get the impression that a man in a situation of migration is in a slightly more difficult position, especially if he was previously the dominant person in his family. Dominant in the sense of head of the family, supporting, working and so on. And in a migration situation, he has become powerless. What I have observed is that, very often, women take the initiative, while men sink into themselves. (...) Even observing the activities of various NGOs in Warsaw, everywhere there are these different groups and activities. I see women who go to classes, who show their work, for example. Very rarely do men appear somewhere in these groups of beneficiaries (GEN\_ADML\_1).*

As demonstrated by the interviewee, as a result of the policies, the gender dynamic within forced migrant families changes, such that men shift from being the main provider of the family to the one who relies on his wife's assistance and capabilities. Unfortunately, as this migration scholar explains, such unprecedented empowerment of women results in increasing frustration among men:

*There was research on the Chechen community and such issues of relations in families and problems with violence, which may be a result of men losing their role as the head of the family, the traditional role, or it may be reinforced – let's not conclude about the causality, but it may be reinforced by this. It may also be reinforced by the fact that women are the ones to whom most of the help is directed, they are the ones who go to these offices, they have support for children, they go to the social welfare centres and so on, so they are suddenly the ones who bring this money or some support home, and these cultural roles are reversed, which causes frustration in men, who also find it difficult to find a job (GEN\_ACADEMIA\_2).*

The respondent stresses that, as it relates to complex social phenomena, definitive causality cannot be established. Yet, the perceived shifts in family and gender structures might be an interesting outcome of the governance of immigrant integration.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This study aimed to map out and critically assess how the gender-related needs of forced migrant women were addressed in the governance of immigrant integration. The results reflect Phillimore's (2020) refugee integration opportunity structures, with discourse, structure, initiatives and support as the most visible in the analysed case. Using a gender lens, the current study contributes to Phillimore's framework by highlighting the nuanced nexus

between gender and migration governance. By adopting a gender-oriented, as well as a gender-sensitive perspective, the study uncovered gender as a determinant of the ways in which migration is governed and, by extension of the integration outcomes.

The discursive opportunity-structure – i.e. media and policy – shapes the reception of receiving communities towards newcomers (Phillimore 2020). Farris (2017) reveals how the colonial past determines the orientalised of migrant women, while Finland attributes patriarchal relations exclusively to them (Rajas 2012). Conversely, while in Poland the orientalised of racialised persons also takes place, ‘othering’ strategies vary. As indicated in my results, they rarely address presumed immigrant men’s inherent misogyny, as described by Farris (2017). The figure of non-white migrant men is frequently portrayed as a potential perpetrator of sexual violence against women, contributing to a perceived threat to the safety of Polish women (Bloch 2023:50). However, this discourse is rarely extended to broader conversations about gender equality. Unlike in Finland (Rajas 2012), France, Italy or the Netherlands (Farris 2017), in Poland gender equality is not seen as one of the values threatened by the influx of migrants, because gender equality is hardly considered to be a part of the national identity ‘in danger’. As evidenced by this study, the tendencies and the concepts present in the literature from old immigration-destination Western European countries are not entirely accurate in the context of Poland.

Secondly, the opportunity structure which Phillimore deems crucial in facilitating integration is the availability – or lack – of a range of integration activities at the state level. The current analysis showed that, although the gender-specific needs of women are widely responded to by programmes implemented by NGOs in Warsaw or in cooperation with them, this is rarely done at the state level. Document analysis has revealed how gender remained absent from policy documents. Aside from one document which has never been adopted, no migration and integration-related documents mentioned gender. The only legally defined instrument of immigrant integration, the IIP, offers no gender-specific components dictated by law. Interviewed social workers claimed having received no guidance on how to address the special needs of refugee women. Instead, they relied on their experience. Consequently, on the practice level, some social workers implemented gender-sensitive approaches, while others did not, depending on the workers’ individual capabilities. As previously discussed, government entities might refrain from identifying problem areas to avoid acknowledging the existence and scale of issues which might require urgent action. According to Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016), such a choice for a non-action or non-policy is also a policy in itself, as it demonstrates the state’s rejection of responsibility for issues not deemed worthy of allocating the already scarce resources. While NGOs bridge these service gaps, gender-specific services remain an option but not a migrant right. To some extent, incorporating gender into integration programming has been facilitated by the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border, as well as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which carried along unprecedented extensive financial support from INGO grant donors. As revealed by the study participants, the INGOs required gender-sensitive components or targeted approaches in the programmes they funded.

As indicated in existing studies, structural factors related to immigration and border regimes need to be considered as an opportunity structure limiting integration outcomes (Phillimore 2020). Even though ‘mainstreaming’ has been a strategy in the policy-making of many European countries and has applied to both gender equality and immigrant integration, the approach is often misunderstood and excludes much-needed equity measures (Westerveen and Adam 2019). This trend is also reflected in the Warsaw case analysed in this article. As described by Winiarska *et al.* (forthcoming), the city of Warsaw increasingly adopts mainstreaming strategies of both gender equality and immigrant integration. Yet, as the current study also revealed, programmes where both gender and refugee needs intersect are missing, both at the central and the local administration level. Although the IIPs are, by name and by design, ‘individual’ and therefore should be tailored to the needs of each person, as revealed in this study, the lack of precise guidance on gender needs

results in uneven quality of the services. A refugee woman fortunate enough to encounter a committed and experienced social worker who is not burdened with an excessive workload has a greater likelihood of receiving appropriate assistance. Yet, a less-fortunate refugee client will lack such tailored support and the opportunities that could come out of it. Unlike these public programmes, the NGO-run ones specifically targeted refugee women but they cannot scale up their activities in the way that public programmes can (Łukasiewicz *et al.* 2021).

Gender-sensitive programmes, however, do not guarantee gender equality. As revealed in the current study, women participated in integration activities offered to all migrants, regardless of their gender, more often than men, yet this perceived empowerment of women might be inaccurate, as described by Szczepanikova (2012) in the case of Chechen refugees. Seeking support may simply be considered undignified and thus falling onto the shoulders of women.

To sum up, unproblematised rationalities in the governance of immigrant integration, which lack an intersectionally sensitive perspective, might hinder gender equity and negatively influence the integration outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial that immigrant integration policy-makers and service-providers alike allocate more attention and resources to the matter of gender and the special needs which may result from it in the way in which immigrant integration is governed on all levels. This includes providing mandatory staff training, developing gender-sensitive programmes and ensuring appropriate outreach, engagement and evaluation strategies, implementing wide-range gender-responsive and gender-sensitive policies and designating specific budget streams for addressing equality, as well as equity, in a sustainable, long-term manner.

## Notes

1. I use the word ‘refugee’ to indicate people who applied for and received international protection, i.e. a refugee status or subsidiary protection. The article’s primary focus is NOT on the largest group of forced migrants in Poland, i.e. Ukrainian holders of Temporary Protection, to whom a large number of NGO-run integration activities are addressed. Instead, I look at the groups that are more contested in the public discourse and often viewed as ‘undeserving’ refugees (Klaus and Szulecka 2023).
2. Other gender-specific issues fall beyond the scope of this article and therefore require further studies.
3. Although Poland did not have overseas colonies, like many Western European countries, it is argued that Poland had a colonialist policy towards the former Eastern borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Kresy) – see e.g. Mick (2014).
4. Including 3 conducted together with the PI of the research project.
5. To maintain the confidentiality of my participants, each interview has been assigned a code indicating the participant association: NGO – participants linked to non-governmental organisations; ADML – participants employed in the local administration; ACADEMIA – migration scholars. Additionally, each interview was assigned a number corresponding to the order of interviews in a given category. All quotes are translated from the Polish language by the author of the article.
6. All citations of policy documents were translated from Polish by the author of the article.
7. (pol. Ustawa o Pomocy Społecznej 2004) (uniform text Journal of Laws of 2024, item 1283, 1572 with further amendments).
8. Powiat Centre for Family Assistance.
9. Social Welfare Centre.



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No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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