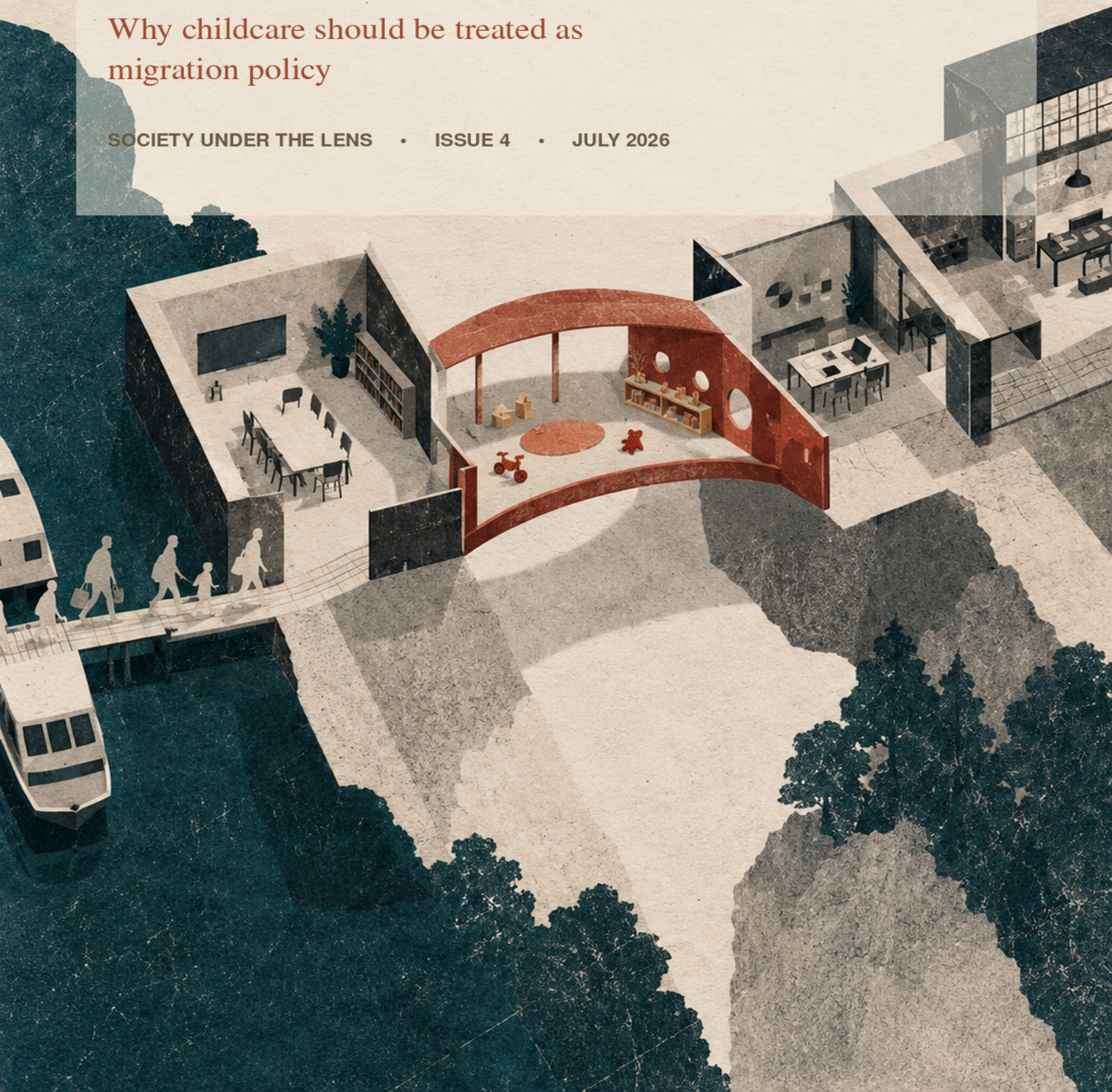


THE MISSING INFRASTRUCTURE OF INTEGRATION

Why childcare should be treated as
migration policy

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1. Executive summary

Migrant integration policy is often judged by the existence of services: a language course is available, an employment office accepts referrals, a vocational programme has opened enrolment, and a municipal help desk has been established. These are necessary provisions. They are not, however, reliable evidence that people can use them. For migrant and refugee women who carry primary responsibility for young children, the operative question is whether care is available at the same time, in a reachable place, at an affordable price, and for long enough to cover both participation and travel. Where those conditions are absent, formal entitlement coexists with practical exclusion.

This paper argues that childcare should be understood as part of integration infrastructure. The proposition rests on a straightforward institutional diagnosis. Language instruction, skills recognition, employment counselling and job placement are expected to produce integration outcomes, yet childcare is commonly financed, scheduled and administered elsewhere. The resulting separation transfers coordination costs to the participant. A woman may be eligible for each service and still be unable to assemble them into a viable week. The fact of the matter is that access fails at the points where administrative categories meet ordinary life.

The argument is informed by comparative evidence from Türkiye and Europe. Cross-national research covering 21 European countries found that immigrant families were, on average, less likely than native families to use formal childcare, with wide variation between countries.¹ Research from Germany goes further. A causal study of refugee families found that early childhood education and care improved mothers' integration, particularly their language proficiency and employment prospects.² A more recent study of Ukrainian refugee mothers estimated that childcare access increased participation in language or integration courses by 73 percentage points and employment by

¹ Wim Van Lancker and Emmanuele Pavolini, "Understanding the Immigrant-Native Gap in Childcare Use: An Empirical Exploration for 21 European Countries," *Acta Sociologica* 66, no. 1 (2023): 74-95, first published online May 24, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00016993221102506>.

² Ludovica Gambaro, Guido Neidhöfer, and C. Katharina Spiess, "The Effect of Early Childhood Education and Care Services on the Integration of Refugee Families," *Labour Economics* 72 (2021): 102053, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2021.102053>.

14 percentage points for mothers whose use of childcare responded to local supply.³ These estimates are unusually large and must be read with the authors' instrumental-variable design in mind, but they make it difficult to treat childcare as a peripheral amenity.

The cases also counsel against a simplistic conclusion. Germany's course-linked childcare programme addresses a concrete access barrier and creates a training route for childcare supervisors, but its published architecture does not itself establish a pathway from language learning to sustained employment.⁴ The SADA Women's Empowerment and Solidarity Centre in Gaziantep brought childcare, language learning, vocational courses and protection referrals into one physical setting. It achieved substantial reach, yet its evaluation identified weak employer matching, occupational saturation in some courses, continuing childcare constraints and dependence on donor finance.⁵ In Greece, a UNHCR-supported initiative used a child-friendly space both to enable women's participation and to employ trained refugee childcare assistants. The design is promising; the available numbers remain small and do not show retention.⁶ Dutch register evidence, meanwhile, demonstrates how family status and motherhood shape the probability of refugee women entering a first job even within a comparatively developed welfare state.⁷

Taking this evidence into account, Part II proposes a Childcare-Enabled Integration Pathway. The programme begins with one intake and a binding care plan, then sequences language learning, skills assessment, qualification recognition, employment preparation, placement and retention support. Licensed early childhood education and care is the default. Supervised course-linked care is retained as a time-limited bridge when regular places are unavailable. The model also incorporates transport, protection referrals, employer engagement, partner participation and decent-work standards for care workers. This is necessary for the reason that a programme which merely helps women accommodate an unchanged division of unpaid care may improve attendance while leaving the underlying inequality intact.

³ Ludovica Gambaro et al., "Overlooked Potential? Childcare Services and Ukrainian Refugee Mothers in Germany," *Demography* 63, no. 3 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-12665544>.

⁴ German Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, "Integrationskurs mit Kind Plus: Perspektive durch Qualifizierung," programme period 2024-2027, <https://www.fruehe-chancen.de/informationen-fuer-traeger-politik-verwaltung/integrationskurs-mit-kind-plus/ueber-das-programm>.

⁵ International Labour Organization, *Independent Mid Term Evaluation of the Project Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities in Turkey* (Geneva: ILO, 2019), especially 25, 47-49, and 55, <https://webapps.ilo.org/ievaldiscovery/files/file/391077>.

⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Greece Update 6* (Athens: UNHCR, December 2023), <https://data.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/107299>.

⁷ Roos van der Zwan and Marcel Lubbers, "Refugee Women, Family Status and Finding a First Job in the Netherlands," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-025-01321-6>.

The proposed pilot would operate in four municipalities with approximately 400 participants over 24 months and an 18-month outcome window for each participant. A staged rollout would allow implementers to compare early and later sites while respecting operational realities. The principal measures are course retention, language progression, employment entry, six- and twelve-month employment retention, income, job formality, skills use and childcare continuity. Programme counts remain useful for management, but they are not treated as proof of integration.

Three policy conclusions follow. First, every integration programme serving adults with children should assess care needs before assigning a course or activation obligation. Second, integration budgets should finance childcare as a core delivery cost rather than an ad hoc accommodation. Third, public agencies and international organisations should publish outcomes disaggregated by caregiving status and child age. Without those changes, the prevailing modus operandi will continue to record available services while obscuring inaccessible lives.

2 Scope and analytical approach

This is a research-informed policy analysis rather than a systematic review. It brings together peer-reviewed research, official programme documentation and evaluations selected for their relevance to the relationship between care, language acquisition and labour-market participation. The geographical emphasis is Türkiye and Europe. The cases were chosen to illuminate different institutional mechanisms: universal early childhood systems, course-linked care, municipal co-location, dual-purpose training and employment, and family-status effects in longitudinal administrative data.

The analysis distinguishes three kinds of evidence. Causal estimates are used only where the research design supports that interpretation. Descriptive associations and register comparisons are described as such. Programme counts show reach and implementation, not impact. This distinction matters because policy papers often move too quickly from the number of participants served to claims about integration. Considering the fact that employment, earnings and social connection develop over time, a credible assessment must follow people beyond the classroom door.

The paper uses integration in a broad but operational sense. Ager and Strang's framework identifies employment, housing, education and health as important markers and means, alongside social connections, language, safety, rights and citizenship.⁸ That multidimensional view remains

⁸ Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (2008): 166-191, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>.

indispensable. The present paper nevertheless concentrates on the sequence linking childcare, language learning and labour-market participation. This narrower focus permits a more exact account of programme design without implying that paid work exhausts the meaning of integration.

3 Part I Research informed analysis

3.1 Available services can remain inaccessible

An integration system can be generous on paper and exclusionary in operation. A municipality may offer free language tuition, subsidised vocational training and employment counselling. If the scheduled hours overlap with nursery closure, if the nearest place requires two bus journeys, or if a child's adaptation period produces repeated absences, the services do not form a usable pathway. Each agency may still report that its own offer was available. The exclusion emerges between agencies, where no single institution owns the participant's week.

This distinction between formal availability and effective accessibility is more than a semantic refinement. Availability describes supply and entitlement. Effective accessibility describes whether a person can enter, attend and complete a service under actual conditions. It is shaped by cost, distance, opening hours, eligibility, trust, disability access, documentation and the predictability of care. Migrant families may also have fewer relatives nearby and less familiarity with enrolment procedures. Consequently, the same formal childcare offer can impose different transaction costs on households with different migration histories.

Van Lancker and Pavolini's analysis of EU Labour Force Survey data for 21 European countries captures the structural character of this problem. Immigrant families were on average six percentage points less likely than native families to use formal childcare. Adjusting for education and social class did not remove the gap. Maternal employment was strongly associated with childcare use, which raises a familiar policy circularity: work facilitates access to care, while care facilitates access to work.⁹ Country variation was considerable, and the use rates of immigrant and native families moved closely together across national systems. That pattern suggests that the quantity and affordability of services matter for everyone, even though migrant families face additional barriers.

⁹ Wim Van Lancker and Emmanuele Pavolini, "Understanding the Immigrant-Native Gap in Childcare Use: An Empirical Exploration for 21 European Countries," *Acta Sociologica* 66, no. 1 (2023): 74-95, first published online May 24, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00016993221102506>.

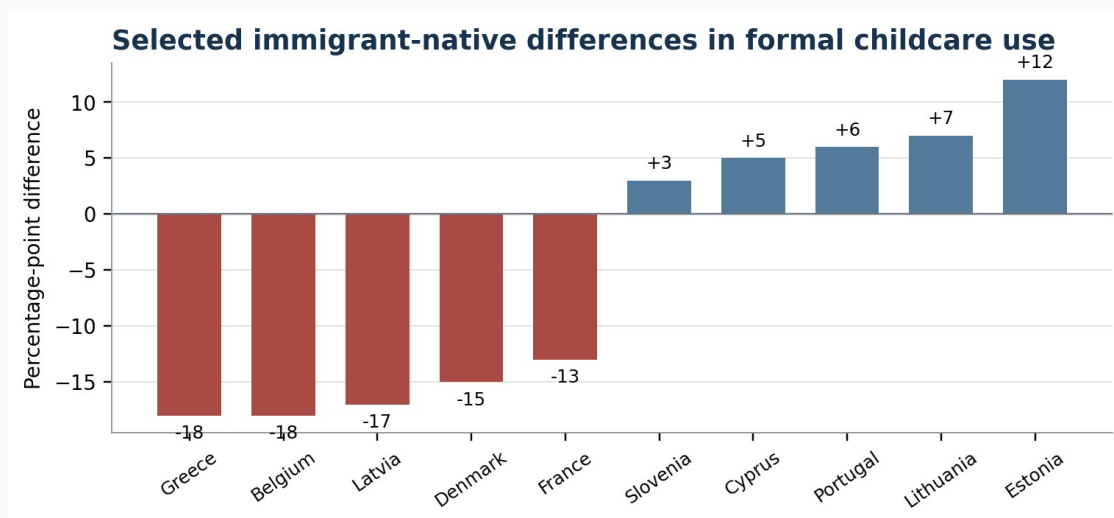


Figure 1. Selected percentage-point differences in formal childcare use, immigrant minus native households. Source: Van Lancker and Pavolini, using EU-LFS 2010. The selected countries illustrate variation and do not constitute a complete ranking.

Research on recently arrived non-EU migrant families in France reaches a compatible conclusion. Eremenko and Unterreiner found that lower enrolment in formal care was closely connected to socioeconomic disadvantage, while migration-specific resources and origin also influenced access.¹⁰ This matters analytically. A cultural explanation may appear plausible when parents use services less often, but it can conceal rationing, affordability, employment-linked entitlement or limited information. Policy should therefore test institutional barriers before attributing non-use to preference.

Table 1 sets out the conceptual shift required for programme design.

Conventional treatment of childcare	Infrastructure approach	Practical implication
Optional support offered after enrolment	Precondition assessed before pathway assignment	Care needs are recorded at intake and resolved before attendance is expected
Separate social-service referral	Component of language and employment delivery	Budgets, schedules and accountability are shared
Short session matching	Coverage for travel,	The care window exceeds the course

¹⁰ Tatiana Eremenko and Anne Unterreiner, “Access to Formal Childcare among Families of Newly Arrived Migrants from Non-EU Countries in France,” *Genus* 79 (2023): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-023-00205-w>.

Conventional treatment of childcare	Infrastructure approach	Practical implication
classroom hours	transitions and work preparation	timetable
Participant responsible for coordination	Named case coordinator responsible for continuity	Agencies resolve gaps rather than returning the participant to a referral loop
Success measured by places or attendance	Success measured by completion and later outcomes	Monitoring follows language progression, employment and retention

3.2 Care constraints accumulate rather than operate alone

Childcare is rarely the only barrier facing a migrant woman. It intersects with language, legal status, transport, household income, health, discrimination, credential recognition and the structure of local employment. OECD research describes refugee women as facing a triple disadvantage associated with gender, migration and refugee status. Across the evidence reviewed in that report, refugee women entered employment more slowly than refugee men and other migrant women, while those who did find work were often part-time or overqualified.¹¹ More recent German research confirms that the employment gap widens after arrival and that heavier childcare responsibilities contribute to women's lower returns from human and social capital.¹²

The sequence is important. A mother who misses language classes may acquire proficiency more slowly. Lower proficiency restricts access to occupational training and weakens her ability to navigate recognition procedures. Delayed recognition pushes job search towards low-skilled sectors with irregular hours. Those hours are hardest to reconcile with formal childcare, which may then lead to withdrawal from employment. The effect is cumulative and partly self-reinforcing. A short interruption at the beginning of the pathway can alter later options.

¹¹ Thomas Liebig and Kristian Rose Tronstad, "Triple Disadvantage? A First Overview of the Integration of Refugee Women," OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers 216 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1787/3f3a9612-en>.

¹² Yuliya Kosyakova, Zerrin Salikutluk, and Jörg Hartmann, "Gender Employment Gap at Arrival and Its Dynamics: The Case of Refugees in Germany," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 87 (2023): 100842, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2023.100842>.

This process should not be reduced to individual motivation. Salikutluk and Menke, using the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, found that qualifications, family structure, institutional support and networks explained part of the gender difference in labour-force participation in Germany.¹³ Their analysis also cautions against treating gender-role attitudes as a sufficient explanation. Institutions decide when courses occur, which absences are tolerated, who qualifies for subsidies, how quickly credentials are assessed and whether employers are approached. These decisions translate care responsibilities into labour-market penalties.

Constraint	Immediate effect	Subsequent programme consequence	Observable outcome risk
No stable childcare place	Missed sessions and late arrival	Course interruption or sanction	Lower completion and slower language progression
Care hours do not cover travel	Participant leaves early	Reduced contact hours and weak continuity	Lower test performance
Employment begins before care is secured	Reliance on informal or unstable arrangements	Repeated absence during probation	Early job exit
Training is unrelated to local demand	Time in low-value course	Qualification without employer transition	Occupational saturation and discouragement
Credential support begins late	Prior skills remain invisible	Entry into low-skilled work becomes the default	Overqualification and limited wage growth

¹³ Zerrin Salikutluk and Katrin Menke, “Gendered Integration? How Recently Arrived Male and Female Refugees Fare on the German Labour Market,” *Journal of Family Research* 33, no. 2 (2021): 284-321, <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-474>.

Constraint	Immediate effect	Subsequent programme consequence	Observable outcome risk
Services use separate eligibility rules	Repeated assessments and referrals	Administrative fatigue and delay	Dropout before placement

3.3 Fragmentation is a programme design failure

The usual administrative response to a missing service is referral. Referral is necessary when specialist expertise is required, but it becomes dysfunctional when it serves as a substitute for coordination. A participant sent from a language provider to a municipal childcare office, then to an employment service, then back to a course provider carries the integration system on her own shoulders. Each referral transfers information, risk and time. None guarantees that hours, eligibility or location will align.

Fragmentation also weakens accountability. If a participant leaves a language course because childcare has collapsed, the course provider may record a personal withdrawal. The childcare service sees no unmet demand because the family never completed its application. The employment office records inactivity. No dataset contains the institutional sequence that produced the result. For that reason, the policy system tends to overestimate personal choice and underestimate coordination failure.

Multi-level governance research helps explain why the problem persists. Integration is governed across national, regional and municipal levels and involves public agencies, civil society, employers and service providers.¹⁴ Childcare often sits in a different policy portfolio from adult education or employment. Budgets follow those divisions. The resulting modus operandi favours contracts for discrete activities rather than a participant-level pathway. When programmes do add childcare, it is often an ad hoc budget line vulnerable to annual renewal.

This institutional separation also distorts value for money. A language course can appear inexpensive if the childcare needed to attend is charged to another budget or left unpaid within the household. Conversely, childcare can appear as an additional social expenditure even when it prevents

¹⁴ Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas and Rinus Penninx, eds., *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe: Contexts, Levels and Actors* (Cham: Springer, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21674-4>.

expensive course dropout and increases employment. Taking into account that public accounting allocates costs by department, the programme logic must reconnect costs that the administrative ledger has separated.

3.4 Germany shows that childcare changes adult integration

Germany offers the strongest causal evidence in the present review. Gambaro, Neidhöfer and Spiess examined refugee families seeking asylum between 2013 and 2016. They used regional differences in early childhood education and care supply, together with Germany's dispersal arrangements, to estimate the effect of children's attendance on parents. Their integration index covered economic, cultural and social dimensions. Early childhood attendance produced a substantial increase in mothers' integration, with particularly strong effects on self-assessed language proficiency and perceived employment prospects. The authors found no comparable effect for fathers.¹⁵

The finding is conceptually important because it changes the unit of analysis. Early childhood education is usually justified through child development and educational equality. Those objectives remain primary. Yet the service also changes the social and economic opportunities of parents. It creates time for classes and job search, and it connects families with staff and other parents. The institution functions simultaneously as education for the child and integration infrastructure for the household.

A later study of Ukrainian refugee mothers in Germany provides more direct outcome evidence. Gambaro, Huebener, Schmitz and Spiess linked survey data to county-level childcare supply and used an instrumental-variable strategy. For mothers whose childcare use responded to local supply, access increased language or integration-course participation by an estimated 73 percentage points and employment by 14 percentage points. The study also found improvements in German proficiency and contact with Germans, but no detectable effect on maternal well-being.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ludovica Gambaro, Guido Neidhöfer, and C. Katharina Spiess, "The Effect of Early Childhood Education and Care Services on the Integration of Refugee Families," *Labour Economics* 72 (2021): 102053, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2021.102053>.

¹⁶ Ludovica Gambaro et al., "Overlooked Potential? Childcare Services and Ukrainian Refugee Mothers in Germany," *Demography* 63, no. 3 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-12665544>.

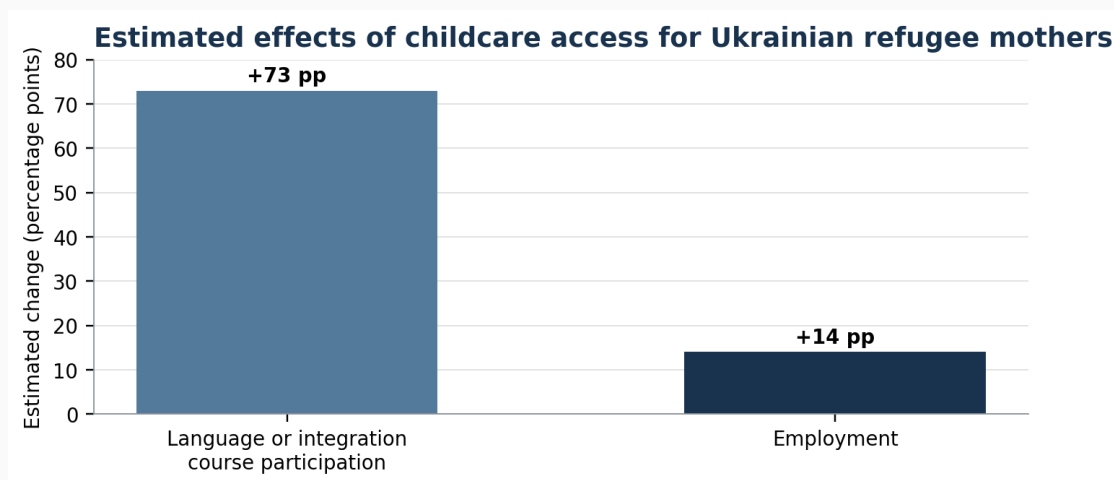


Figure 2. Instrumental-variable estimates for Ukrainian refugee mothers. The estimates are local effects for mothers whose childcare use changed with county supply and should not be read as universal average effects. Source: Gambaro et al.

The size of the course-participation estimate demands careful reading rather than rhetorical inflation. Instrumental-variable estimates apply to a particular group of mothers affected by differences in local supply. The study occurred under the distinctive circumstances of displacement from Ukraine and temporary protection. Even so, the direction and breadth of the effects support a strong inference: childcare altered more than attendance. It affected several domains that integration policy explicitly seeks to influence.

Germany's national *Integrationskurs mit Kind Plus* programme converts part of this evidence into delivery. The programme provides course-linked care for parents of non-school-age children who lack a regular childcare place. The 2024-2027 phase also qualifies childcare supervisors through modules covering pedagogy, child protection, legal responsibilities, migration, trauma and inclusion. Regional coordinating nodes are intended to connect the arrangement with municipal structures.¹⁷

The programme solves a precise problem: parents should not have to wait for a regular early childhood place before starting an integration course. Its training component may also expand the childcare workforce and create employment routes. The limitation is equally precise. Course-linked supervision is a bridge, not a substitute for regulated early childhood education, and the published programme description does not establish a complete route through qualification recognition,

¹⁷ German Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, "Integrationskurs mit Kind Plus: Perspektive durch Qualifizierung," programme period 2024-2027, <https://www.fruehe-chancen.de/informationen-fuer-traeger-politik-verwaltung/integrationskurs-mit-kind-plus/ueber-das-programm>.

employer matching and job retention. The transferable lesson is therefore to preserve the bridge while connecting it to the rest of the integration pathway.

3.5 Türkiye shows the value and limits of colocated services

The SADA Women's Empowerment and Solidarity Centre in Gaziantep offers a highly relevant Turkish case. Developed through cooperation among UN Women, the International Labour Organization, the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants, and Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality, the centre created a women-only space combining Turkish language learning, vocational training, protection and referral services, empowerment activities and childcare.¹⁸ Co-location reduced the number of institutions participants had to navigate and made it possible for women to attend courses while their children used the centre's kindergarten.

The published reach was substantial. By April 2018, 767 women had graduated from Turkish-language or vocational courses, 420 had participated in awareness seminars, and 360 children had benefited from kindergarten.¹⁹ A UN Women account of the programme described how participants could use childcare while attending Turkish, computer and patient-registration courses.²⁰ Such accounts help explain the mechanism: care created usable time within a trusted setting.

¹⁸ UN Women, "Syrian Refugee Women Find Safety and Economic Opportunity in Turkey," August 2018, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/8/feature-syria-humanitarian-update>; UNHCR, "Municipality Improves Inclusion of Syrian Refugees in Turkey," Global Compact on Refugees Digital Platform, <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/municipality-improves-inclusion-syrian-refugees-turkey>.

¹⁹ International Labour Organization, "Media Advisory on UN High Level Visit to Gaziantep," April 26, 2018, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/media-advisory-un-high-level-visit-gaziantep>.

²⁰ UN Women, "Syrian Refugee Women Find Safety and Economic Opportunity in Turkey," August 2018, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/8/feature-syria-humanitarian-update>; UNHCR, "Municipality Improves Inclusion of Syrian Refugees in Turkey," Global Compact on Refugees Digital Platform, <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/municipality-improves-inclusion-syrian-refugees-turkey>.

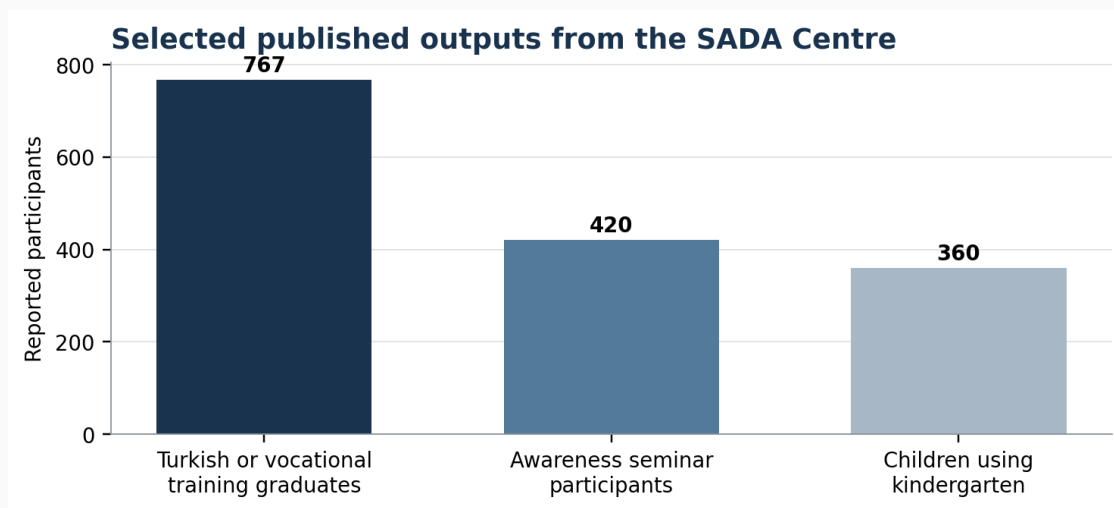


Figure 3. Selected SADA programme outputs reported by the ILO as of April 2018. Categories may overlap and must not be added. These figures demonstrate reach, not sustained employment impact.

The evaluation provides the more instructive evidence. Twenty-six per cent of surveyed participants reported childcare as an obstacle to attending courses, notwithstanding the childcare component.²¹ This may reflect limited capacity, hours, age eligibility or care needs outside the course itself. The evaluation also found that training in hairdressing and make-up faced local-market saturation, while employer engagement and demand-side matching remained insufficient. Financial sustainability was uncertain without continued donor support. Meetings with husbands and other male family members were used to build support for women's participation, but that element required continued attention.²²

The case therefore supports co-location while exposing its limits. Childcare can improve attendance without guaranteeing a viable occupation. Vocational training can confer a certificate without changing employer demand. A safe centre can strengthen social connection without resolving the continuity of care once a participant starts work. The lesson is not that SADA failed. It is that an integrated centre must extend its integration logic beyond the building and beyond the end of the course.

²¹ International Labour Organization, *Independent Mid Term Evaluation of the Project Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities in Turkey* (Geneva: ILO, 2019), especially 25, 47-49, and 55, <https://webapps.ilo.org/ievaldiscovery/files/file/391077>.

²² International Labour Organization, *Independent Mid Term Evaluation of the Project Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities in Turkey* (Geneva: ILO, 2019), especially 25, 47-49, and 55, <https://webapps.ilo.org/ievaldiscovery/files/file/391077>.

This lesson remains current in Türkiye. An ILO focus-group study published in 2025, based on 126 Turkish and Syrian women in Bursa, Istanbul and Gaziantep, identified family responsibilities, discrimination, poor working conditions and structural barriers as persistent influences on access to decent work. Syrian women experienced the combined effects of gender and refugee status. The report recommends affordable childcare, job-oriented training and routes into formal employment.²³ Considering this fact, a contemporary programme should treat employer demand, job quality and care continuity as part of the same intervention.

3.6 Greece offers a two sided model

The Refugee Women Academy and the related Child Care Assistants initiative in Greece demonstrate a useful two-sided design. Launched with support from UNHCR, Piraeus Bank and Odyssea, the Academy combined vocational preparation, language support, mentoring and networking. A child-friendly space allowed mothers to participate. By the end of 2023, 31 women had taken part and 13 had secured jobs immediately after training.²⁴

The childcare component did more than remove an attendance barrier. A pilot trained refugee women as childcare assistants and connected them to Greece's national Neighbourhood Nannies roster. Thirty women completed the courses, five had found childcare jobs by the reporting date, and two worked in the Academy's child-friendly space.²⁵ The same intervention therefore expanded care supply, enabled other women to attend training and created a potential occupation for participants.

This circularity is attractive, but it must be handled carefully. Care work is often low-paid and socially undervalued. Directing migrant women into childcare can reproduce occupational segregation unless training leads to recognised qualifications, decent wages, labour protection and progression. The ILO's care-economy framework is useful here. Its five principles call for states and employers to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care, and to reward and represent paid care workers.²⁶ A migration programme should apply all five. It should not solve one group's care problem by creating precarious work for another.

²³ International Labour Organization, *Decent Work for Turkish and Syrian Women in Türkiye's Labour Market: Focus Group Study* (Ankara: ILO, 2025), <https://www.ilo.org/publications/decent-work-turkish-and-syrian-women-t%C3%BCrkiye%E2%80%99s-labour-market-focus-group>.

²⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Greece Update 6* (Athens: UNHCR, December 2023), <https://data.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/107299>.

²⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Greece Update 6* (Athens: UNHCR, December 2023), <https://data.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/107299>.

²⁶ International Labour Organization, "Resolution Concerning Decent Work and the Care Economy," 2024, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/record-decisions/resolution-concerning-decent-work-and-care-economy>.

The published Greek figures also lack longer follow-up. Immediate job placement is encouraging, but the relevant questions are whether those jobs were formal, whether wages were adequate, and whether participants remained employed after six or twelve months. For that reason, the model is best treated as a promising design mechanism rather than conclusive proof of impact.

3.7 The Netherlands reveals a sequencing trap

The Netherlands illustrates how childcare, family status and labour-market entry remain connected even within a developed welfare state. Van der Zwan and Lubbers analysed administrative data for 28,943 refugee women who received residence permits between 2014 and 2018, covering more than 1.3 million person-months. Young children and the transition to motherhood reduced the probability of entering a first job. Single women entered employment faster than married women, and large gaps by family status remained several years after residence was granted.²⁷

For early Syrian cohorts, the employment rate reported for 2022 was about 26 per cent for women and almost 70 per cent for men. The corresponding general-population rates reported for 2021 were 77 and 87 per cent.²⁸ These comparisons use different populations and years, and they do not attribute the entire gap to childcare. They do, however, show the scale of the inequality within which programme decisions operate.

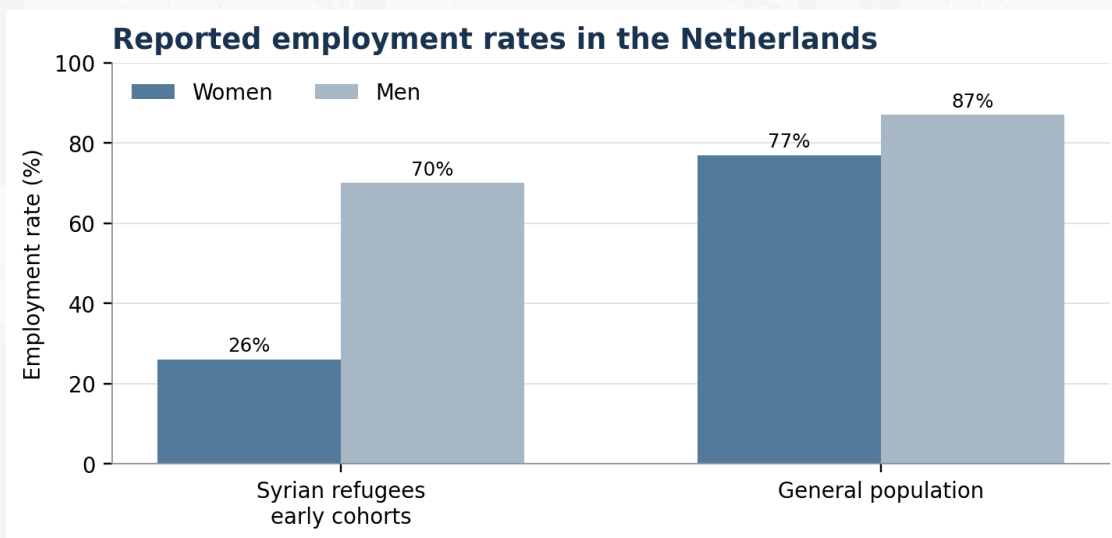


Figure 4. Descriptive employment rates reported in the Dutch study. Reference years differ. The figure does not imply that childcare alone caused the gaps.

²⁷ Roos van der Zwan and Marcel Lubbers, "Refugee Women, Family Status and Finding a First Job in the Netherlands," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-025-01321-6>.

²⁸ Roos van der Zwan and Marcel Lubbers, "Refugee Women, Family Status and Finding a First Job in the Netherlands," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-025-01321-6>.

The authors describe a policy context in which full-time formal childcare for children under four was uncommon for the cohorts studied because of cost and waiting lists, while childcare subsidies were connected to parental work or study.²⁹ Such arrangements can create a sequencing trap. A parent needs recognised participation to obtain affordable care, yet she needs care to begin the participation that qualifies her. The 2022 civic-integration framework gives municipalities a stronger coordinating role, which creates an opportunity to resolve this problem, but municipal responsibility is valuable only if care is incorporated into the personal integration plan at the outset.³⁰

3.8 Comparative synthesis

The cases do not support one universal childcare modality. They support a common architecture. Germany demonstrates that ordinary early childhood provision and course-linked bridges can change adult outcomes. Türkiye demonstrates the practical value of co-location and the danger of ending integration at course completion. Greece shows how care supply and employment pathways can reinforce each other if job quality is protected. The Netherlands shows that entitlement design and service sequencing can produce exclusion even when relevant systems exist.

Case	Mechanism	Evidence available	Principal limitation	Transferable lesson
Germany	Regular ECEC plus course-linked bridge	Causal family-integration estimates; programme architecture	Local effects; bridge does not by itself secure employment retention	Resolve care before course assignment and link bridge care to regular ECEC
Türkiye SADA	Co-located childcare, language, training and protection	Evaluation, participant accounts and output data	Employer matching, training saturation, continuity and finance	Preserve co-location but extend the pathway to labour demand and retention

²⁹ Roos van der Zwan and Marcel Lubbers, “Refugee Women, Family Status and Finding a First Job in the Netherlands,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-025-01321-6>.

³⁰ Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, “Integration in the Netherlands,” accessed September 12, 2026, <https://www.inburgeren.nl/en/integration-in-the-netherlands/>.

Case	Mechanism	Evidence available	Principal limitation	Transferable lesson
Greece	Child-friendly space plus refugee childcare-assistant training	Administrative placement counts	Small scale and no long-term outcome evidence	Expand care supply and employment together under decent-work standards
Netherlands	Municipal integration responsibility within broader childcare system	Large register-based event-history analysis	Study cohorts predate the current integration regime	Prevent work-study-care eligibility loops through early municipal coordination

Three findings emerge. First, childcare affects integration through time, participation and social connection. Second, availability alone is insufficient because geography, scheduling, eligibility and continuity determine use. Third, childcare cannot compensate for weak vocational design or discriminatory labour markets. It is enabling infrastructure, not a solitary remedy.

4 Part II Programme design

4.1 Childcare Enabled Integration Pathway

The proposed Childcare-Enabled Integration Pathway is a municipal programme for migrant and refugee caregivers who wish or are required to participate in language learning, skills development or employment services. Women are likely to constitute most participants because they bear a disproportionate share of unpaid care, but eligibility is gender-inclusive. Fathers, partners and other caregivers may enter where care responsibilities constrain participation. The programme treats childcare as a financed component of integration delivery and treats licensed early childhood provision as the preferred long-term arrangement.

The design follows one governing rule: no participant should be assigned to a course or employment activity until the programme has established how dependent children will be cared for

during participation and travel. This rule changes administrative responsibility. The participant still chooses among appropriate options, but the programme owns the coordination problem.

Design problem identified in Part I	Programme response	Accountability test
Formal availability without usable access	Care assessment and confirmed place before pathway start	No attendance requirement is activated without a recorded care arrangement
Separate services and repeated intake	One intake, shared consent and named coordinator	Participant information is collected once and reused lawfully
Course hours narrower than care needs	Care covers travel, transition and placement activity	Scheduled care window exceeds required activity window
Supply-side vocational training	Local demand assessment and employer agreements	Each occupational stream has documented vacancies or placement capacity
Placement without continuity	Six- and twelve-month retention support	Case remains open through the retention window
Output-heavy monitoring	Outcome dashboard and participant feedback	Reports distinguish reach, intermediate outcomes and sustained outcomes

4.2 Population and entry

The primary target group comprises adult migrants, refugees and beneficiaries of temporary or international protection who care for a child below compulsory school age and face a care-related barrier to language, training or employment. Priority should be given to single parents, households with very low income, survivors requiring confidential support, caregivers of children with disabilities, and people whose qualifications or work experience can be connected to a realistic employment route. Status-based eligibility should remain as broad as national law permits. Narrow eligibility increases the likelihood that families move between programmes as documents change.

Entry occurs through municipal integration offices, employment services, language providers, schools, health services and civil-society organisations. A no-wrong-door protocol allows any partner to initiate referral. Within ten working days, a pathway coordinator conducts a joint assessment covering care, language, education, qualifications, work history, transport, digital access, health, protection and household constraints. The assessment does not presume that every participant should move immediately into employment. It identifies the sequence most likely to produce durable participation.

4.3 The care plan

The care plan is the programme's binding operational document. It records each child's age, developmental or disability-related needs, existing arrangements, preferred language support, authorised collection persons, transport time and contingency options. It also specifies the hours required for classes, interviews, work trials and travel. Consent and data-sharing fields are separated from service eligibility so that participants can decline optional information sharing without losing core support.

Four care modalities are available. The first is a subsidised place in a licensed early childhood centre near the participant's home or integration activity. The second is an extended-hours arrangement for early morning, evening or variable work. The third is a regulated childminding option where centre-based provision is unsuitable. The fourth is supervised course-linked care, used as a temporary bridge while a regular place is arranged. Course-linked care must meet child-protection, staffing, space and insurance requirements. It should never become a low-cost parallel system for migrant children.

Continuity is protected for at least three months after employment begins. Ending the subsidy on the first day of work creates precisely the instability the programme is intended to prevent. A gradual contribution schedule may begin as income rises, taking into account household income and care costs. Sudden eligibility cliffs should be prohibited.

4.4 Sequenced service pathway

Phase	Timing	Core activities	Decision required before progression
Stabilisation and assessment	Days 0-30	Safeguarding, documentation, language baseline, skills map, care plan, transport	Care arrangement is confirmed and urgent protection needs are addressed
Foundation	Months 2-3	Language instruction, digital orientation, qualification triage, career exploration	A realistic occupational pathway is agreed
Occupational preparation	Months 4-6	Occupation-specific language, recognition support, training or bridging modules, employer contact	Participant meets course or placement readiness criteria
Placement	Months 7-12	Interview preparation, work trial or job placement, workplace mentoring, care continuity	Employment terms and care schedule are compatible
Retention and progression	Months 13-18	Follow-up, workplace mediation, skills-use review, wage and hours progression	Exit plan is agreed with referral routes for continuing support

The phases are indicative rather than rigid. A participant with recognised qualifications and adequate language may move to employer matching earlier. Another may need an extended foundation period. What must remain fixed is the logic of dependency: care precedes attendance, recognition precedes avoidable occupational downgrading, and continuity follows placement.

The wider integration literature supports this emphasis on sequence and intensity. A randomised programme in Gothenburg began shortly after residence was granted and combined intensive language learning, supervised work practice and professional job-search assistance. It increased employment by about 15 percentage points and cost less than several longer, less intensive

alternatives.³¹ The intervention was not childcare-specific, so it cannot establish the effect of care. It nevertheless shows why the proposed pathway concentrates complementary services within a defined period instead of distributing weak interventions across several years.

Language instruction should combine a general foundation with occupational modules. A nurse, welder, teacher and hospitality worker need different vocabulary, documentation practices and interaction skills. Scheduling should include daytime and evening options, but flexibility must not be used to move the burden onto participants through erratic timetables. UNHCR guidance already identifies family responsibilities, childcare and transport as practical barriers that employment and language programmes should address.³²

Skills assessment should distinguish evidence from assumption. Participants may lack documents while retaining substantial competence. The programme should finance translation, recognition fees and practical assessments where permitted. Where full recognition is not immediately possible, bridging modules should be tied to a defined occupation and employer demand. The SADA experience makes the danger of generic course supply plain: training that is easy to procure may have little value in a saturated local market.

Employer engagement begins during pathway design, not after graduation. Municipalities and chambers of commerce should identify sectors with vacancies, obtain commitments for work trials or interviews, and screen employers for legal compliance. Employment services should verify contracts, hours, wages, social-security registration and compatibility with care arrangements. Informal or unsafe work is not counted as a successful placement.

4.5 Theory of change

The programme's theory of change can be stated without pretending that every link is automatic. If migrant and refugee caregivers receive safe, affordable and predictable childcare that matches the timing and location of integration activities, they will be better able to enter and remain in language, skills and employment services. If those services are sequenced around assessed capabilities and connected to real labour demand, completion should lead more often to appropriate employment.

³¹ Matz Dahlberg et al., "Labor Market Integration of Refugees: RCT Evidence from an Early Intervention Program in Sweden," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 217 (2024): 614-630, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2023.11.026>.

³² UNHCR, "Employment and Training," *Integration Handbook*, <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/ih/employment-training/employment>; UNHCR, "Language Training Programmes," *Integration Handbook*, <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/ih/language/language-training-programmes>.

If childcare and case support continue during the transition into work, early exits should decline. Over time, sustained employment, income security, language use and social connection should improve.

Level	Programme logic	Main assumptions to test
Inputs	Licensed care capacity, coordinators, language providers, recognition support, employers, data system	Providers can recruit qualified staff and partners can share information lawfully
Activities	Care planning, childcare, language and occupational preparation, matching, retention support	Schedules align and participants consider care safe and acceptable
Outputs	Confirmed care places, completed assessments, course hours, recognition applications, interviews	Delivery reaches priority groups without creaming
Intermediate outcomes	Higher attendance and completion, language progression, more job entry	Employer demand exists and discrimination does not negate preparation
Longer outcomes	Six- and twelve-month retention, higher income, better skills use and social connection	Care remains stable and employment meets decent-work standards

Two assumptions deserve particular scrutiny. The first is trust. A place technically available but regarded as unsafe will not produce participation. Refugee-led organisations and participant advisory groups must therefore shape provider selection and communication. The second is labour demand. Childcare can create time, but it cannot create suitable vacancies. Programme managers must be prepared to close or redesign an occupational stream when placement and retention data show that demand is insufficient.

4.6 Governance and staffing

The municipality serves as accountable lead because it can convene childcare, integration and employment services at local level. National authorities finance entitlements and define quality standards. A licensed early childhood provider manages care. A language provider delivers general

and occupational instruction. The public employment service or a contracted specialist manages employer relations and placement. A refugee-led or migrant women's organisation supports outreach, trust and feedback. Protection agencies receive confidential referrals. Labour inspectorates or equivalent authorities support compliance where risk is identified.

Function	Lead	Supporting partners	Minimum accountability
Intake and pathway plan	Municipality	Civil society, employment service	Plan completed within ten working days
Childcare quality and safeguarding	Licensed provider	Municipality, child-protection authority	Regulatory compliance and incident protocol
Language and skills	Education provider	Employers, recognition bodies	Progress assessed against defined levels
Employer matching	Employment service	Chambers, sector bodies	Vacancy and contract quality verified
Protection and psychosocial referral	Specialist service	Coordinator, health service	Confidential referral and informed consent
Participant accountability	Independent feedback lead	Refugee-led advisory group	Published response to recurring issues
Evaluation	Independent research partner	Municipal data unit	Pre-specified questions and disaggregated reporting

Core staff include a programme manager, pathway coordinators, a childcare liaison, language and skills specialists, employer-engagement officers, safeguarding personnel, a data and evaluation officer, and interpreters. Caseloads should be calibrated during the pilot. A nominal ratio of 40 active participants per coordinator may be used for budgeting, but it should not become a target before complexity data are available.

Partner and father engagement is included without making women's participation contingent on family approval. Voluntary sessions address shared care, schedules, labour rights and the economic implications of women's employment. Where coercive control or violence is suspected, ordinary

partner engagement is inappropriate and specialist safeguarding takes precedence. This distinction is essential. A gender-responsive programme must not convert family participation into a gatekeeping mechanism.

4.7 Pilot and evaluation design

The proposed pilot covers four municipalities and approximately 400 participants. Sites should differ in childcare supply, labour-market structure and migrant population. A 24-month implementation period permits staged enrolment and system adaptation. Each participant is followed for 18 months from intake. The first six months should include a controlled inception period in which staff test intake, data sharing and safeguarding before enrolment reaches full scale.

A stepped-wedge rollout offers a pragmatic evaluation design. All four sites eventually receive the programme, but they start at different predetermined times. Outcomes in sites that have begun can be compared with those still operating under the usual model, subject to adequate sample size and common measurement. Assignment of start dates should be independent of short-term performance pressures. The evaluation should report intention-to-treat estimates and include a process study explaining where delivery differed from the design.

Random assignment at individual level may be ethically and operationally difficult where care is a prerequisite for mandatory activity. The stepped-wedge design is not automatically superior; it depends on comparable sites and stable measurement. If those conditions are absent, the evaluation should use a matched comparison group and difference-in-differences analysis, accompanied by sensitivity tests. The selected method must be specified before outcome data are examined.

Qualitative research is indispensable. Interviews at months three, six and twelve should examine trust, care quality, household negotiation, employer treatment and reasons for withdrawal. Participant accounts are not substitutes for outcome data, but they reveal mechanisms and unintended effects that administrative records miss.

4.8 Monitoring and outcome framework

The monitoring framework separates outputs, intermediate outcomes and longer-term outcomes. It also records denominators. A completion rate without the number eligible to complete is of little use. All measures should be disaggregated by caregiving status, child age, single-parent status, disability, migration or protection category, municipality, education and occupational stream, subject to privacy and sample-size safeguards.

Time	Indicator	Definition	Data source
Baseline	Care constraint severity	Hours of required care not covered in a typical week	Structured assessment
Month 3	Participation retention	Share of enrolled participants still active	Attendance and case records
Month 3	Childcare continuity	Share with no unplanned care break longer than five working days	Provider and case records
Month 6	Language progression	Movement on an approved language scale from baseline	Standardised assessment
Month 6	Training completion	Share completing the agreed module among those eligible	Provider records
Month 9	Employment entry	Share entering registered paid employment	Administrative and contract data
Month 12	Six-month employment retention	Share still employed six months after first placement	Social-security or verified employer data
Month 12	Job quality	Formal contract, hourly pay, predictable schedule and leave entitlement	Contract and participant survey
Month 12	Skills utilisation	Share reporting and demonstrating use of prior or newly recognised skills	Survey and occupational coding
Month 18	Twelve-month employment retention	Share still employed twelve months after first placement	Administrative follow-up
Month 18	Income progression	Change in equivalised disposable household income from baseline	Confidential survey and administrative data

Time	Indicator	Definition	Data source
Month 18	Social connection	Change in frequency and diversity of local social contact	Validated survey items

The participation gap is a cross-cutting indicator. It compares retention and completion among participants with stable childcare, participants experiencing care interruptions, and a comparable group under usual services. Because stable care is not randomly assigned within the programme, the measure is descriptive unless supported by the evaluation design. Its practical value lies in showing whether care breakdown remains a principal source of attrition.

Employment retention should be reported separately from job placement. A placement entered for one week is an activity count, not an integration outcome. Income must be interpreted alongside hours, household composition and benefit withdrawal. Skills utilisation should distinguish between any employment and employment commensurate with experience. These distinctions prevent the dashboard from rewarding rapid movement into unstable work.

Provisional pilot targets may be set for management, but they should be recalibrated after baseline and should never be presented as prior evidence of effect. Suitable initial thresholds include a childcare arrangement confirmed for at least 90 per cent of participants before activity starts, programme retention above 75 per cent at six months, and verified follow-up for at least 85 per cent of those placed in work. Outcome effect targets should await baseline distributions and power analysis.

4.9 Cost and sustainability

The economic case should compare the programme with the cost of fragmented delivery, not with a fiction in which unpaid care has no cost. The cost model should include childcare places, staffing, transport support, recognition fees, language provision, data systems and evaluation. It should also record the cost of unused course places, repeated intake, interrupted training and early job exit under the existing system.

Three unit costs are central: cost per participant entering the pathway, cost per participant completing the agreed learning phase, and cost per participant in registered employment six months after placement. A fourth measure, incremental cost per additional sustained employment outcome, requires a credible comparison group. These figures should be published with assumptions and sensitivity ranges.

Financial sustainability depends on institutionalisation. Donor funds are suitable for design, testing and evaluation. They are a poor long-term basis for an entitlement that determines access to public integration obligations. Municipal and national budgets should therefore establish a joint financing line by the second year of the pilot. Childcare providers should be paid for reserved capacity and adaptation support, while avoiding contracts that reward attendance volume without regard to quality.

4.10 Risks and mitigation

Risk	Why it matters	Mitigation	Early warning indicator
Reinforcing women as default carers	Participation may improve without redistributing unpaid care	Gender-inclusive eligibility, partner engagement, ILO five-R framework	Fathers' participation and change in reported care sharing
Creating second-tier childcare	Migrant children may receive lower-quality temporary supervision	Licensed ECEC default, time limit and common safeguarding standards	Share remaining in bridge care beyond three months
Occupational segregation	Childcare training may channel women into low-paid care work	Recognised qualifications, wage standards and multiple occupational routes	Concentration by sector and wage distribution
Employer discrimination	Preparation may not translate into fair hiring	Employer screening, anti-discrimination protocol and escalation	Interview-to-offer gap by migration category
Training saturation	Certificates may accumulate without vacancies	Quarterly labour-demand review and closure of weak streams	Placement and retention by course
Eligibility cliff	Work entry may cause care loss and job exit	Three-month continuity guarantee and tapered	Care termination within 30 days of

Risk	Why it matters	Mitigation	Early warning indicator
		contribution	employment
Data misuse	Sensitive status and protection information may cause harm	Data minimisation, role-based access and independent audit	Unauthorised access or unnecessary fields
Donor dependence	Services may end when a project closes	Public co-financing and transition plan from inception	Share of recurring costs covered by core budgets

Safeguarding requires a separate protocol, trained staff, safe recruitment, background checks where lawful, reporting routes and referral agreements. Children and participants should be able to complain without jeopardising immigration, benefit or programme status. Data systems must separate protection information from routine performance management.

4.11 Policy recommendations

National governments should recognise childcare as an allowable and expected cost within integration funding. Regulations should permit childcare support during language learning, qualification recognition, job search, work trials and the first months of employment. Where childcare subsidies depend on employment or study, integration participation should qualify and municipalities should have authority to bridge administrative delays.

Municipalities should adopt a single pathway plan covering care, language and employment. They should map childcare supply against course and employer schedules, reserve flexible places, and publish waiting times. Procurement should reward continuity, safeguarding and outcomes rather than enrolment alone.

International organisations and donors should require outcome reporting beyond attendance. Every programme proposal involving adult training should state how participants with care responsibilities will attend, how care quality will be protected, and how continuity will be financed after placement. Evaluations should follow employment and care stability for at least twelve months where feasible.

Language and vocational providers should schedule services only after reviewing local care coverage. Occupational modules should be selected with employers and revised when placement or retention falls. Providers should share withdrawal reasons through a common taxonomy so that childcare failure is not misclassified as lack of motivation.

Employers should be engaged as delivery partners and regulated labour-market actors. Their role includes offering placements, adjusting predictable schedules where possible, preventing harassment and registering employment. Public agencies should not count a placement with unlawful conditions as programme success.

Finally, participants should have a formal feedback loop. Feedback should be classified, assigned to a responsible unit, answered within a stated period and summarised in a public “you said, we changed” report. Participant advisory groups should review recurring issues and proposed programme changes. Consultation acquires institutional value only when it can alter the service.

5 Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this paper supports a specific policy conclusion. Childcare is not merely adjacent to migrant integration. It shapes whether adults can enter language courses, use their qualifications, search for work, sustain employment and build social connections. The strongest German studies show effects across several of these domains. The cases from Türkiye and Greece show how programmes can integrate care into service delivery, while also revealing the danger of stopping at attendance or immediate placement. Dutch evidence shows that family status continues to structure labour-market entry even where public systems are comparatively extensive.

No childcare programme can repair a discriminatory labour market, an irrelevant vocational curriculum or an inaccessible recognition system. Considering this fact prevents the analysis from making childcare carry more explanatory weight than the evidence allows. It also clarifies why the solution must be architectural. Care, language, skills and employment have to be planned as one pathway, with separate professional responsibilities but shared accountability for the participant’s outcome.

The proposed Childcare-Enabled Integration Pathway translates that conclusion into an operational model. It begins with care, sequences services, tests labour demand, protects continuity and measures results over time. Its success would not be demonstrated by the number of children supervised or women enrolled. It would be demonstrated by fewer avoidable withdrawals, stronger

language progression, appropriate employment and lower early job exit. Taking this into account, governments should treat the integration budget that omits childcare as incomplete by design.

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