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## **Summary:** **The Employment of Refugees** From Career Pathways to Company Recruitment Policies

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# The Observatory on Immigration and Asylum

Ifri's Center for Migration and Citizenship founded the Observatory on Immigration and Asylum in August 2018. This forum provides a space for debate and reflection for the different stakeholders involved in asylum and immigration in France and Europe. By analyzing the various actions taken by state and non-state stakeholders and civil society organizations, the Observatory aims to reinforce their coordination and complementarity in addressing refugee and migrant needs, promote innovative solutions, and be a space for the production and dissemination of research on immigration and asylum. For more information see: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).



# Authors

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This study is part of a partnership with the “Work with Refugees” collective that brings together NGOs supporting refugees in their labor market integration: Kodiko, Action emploi réfugiés, JRS France, Les entreprises pour la cité, Konexio, Res Publica, Simplon and Singa France.

The authors would like to thank the members of this collective who actively participated in this study, but also Iasmina Suteu for her valuable contribution at all stages of the work and Matthieu Tardis for his encouragement and review. Finally, this study would not have been possible without the generosity of all the interviewees, company employees, NGO managers and refugees, who agreed to share their opinions.

# Executive summary

The issues of employment and work for refugees have received increasing attention from both the political, NGO and economic spheres in France since 2017, but few studies have yet to address this subject. This study was born out of cooperation between the Observatory on Immigration and Asylum and the “Work with Refugees” collective, that brings together several French NGOs supporting refugees and asylum seekers into employment. Its objective is to help better understand the challenges of employment pathways and working conditions for refugees, and the drivers behind the programs set up in companies and aimed at them.

How can the employment of refugees be promoted? What are the employment and career pathways for refugees? What are their working conditions and how can these be improved? What can companies implement in this area? What role can NGOs and governments play in improving access to employment and working conditions for refugees?

## An innovative methodology

We have used multifaceted methods that combine statistical analysis, interviews and focus group discussions. The statistical analysis focuses on the socioprofessional pathways of refugees and their working conditions, taken from the Longitudinal Statistical Survey on the Integration of Newcomers (Elipa) conducted by the Ministry of Interior that is responsible for migration policies in France. The interviews were conducted with human resources (HR) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) managers from 18 companies committed to integrating refugees in the labor market, or with tangible experience of recruiting them. Additionally, we organized group discussions with representatives from NGOs working with exiles and refugees who shared their experience of seeking employment in France.

## Newly recognized refugees in the workforce: a statistical portrait

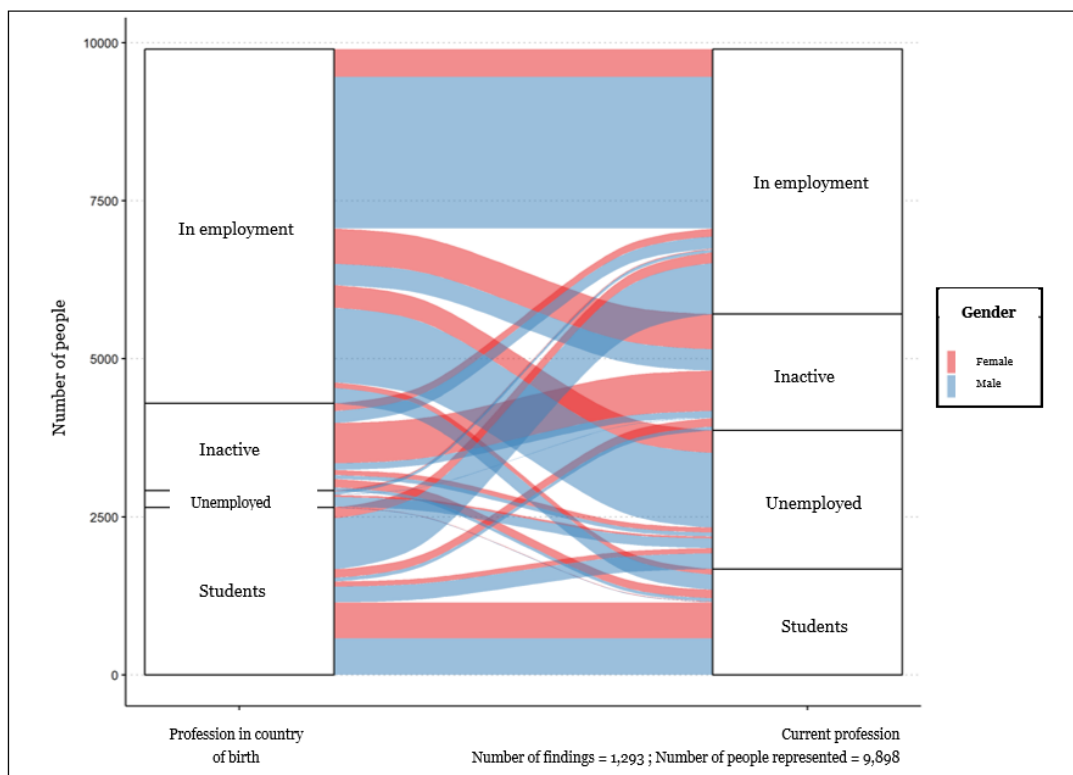
The Elipa 2 survey is a national study conducted by the Ministry of Interior. It includes all people aged over 18 years who obtained their first residence permit with a duration of at least one year in 2018, excluding students, in ten French departments. This survey interviewed 6,547 people in 2019 after randomization that are representative of 59,294 individuals. The sample of people with international protection status since 2018 (convention refugee

or subsidiary protection) is composed of 1,293 individuals<sup>1</sup>, that are representative of 9,898 people.

This survey provides an overview of the employment status of refugees in 2019, one year after obtaining their residence permits. It allows us to simultaneously describe the employment status of refugees at the time of the survey, and link it to their employment status in their country of birth.

## Gendered career pathways

Figure 1: Career pathways of refugees



Elife 2 Survey – wave 1 (2019).

Graph 1 shows the relative significance of pre- and post-migration career pathways for the 9,898 refugees covered by the study.

A year after receiving their residence permit, 42% of refugees were employed, 22% unemployed, 19% inactive<sup>2</sup> and not in education, and 17% were in education. The number of people in employment was lower than in their country of birth, the number of inactive people slightly increased, the number of unemployed people rose sharply and the number of people in education fell.

1. We will refer to these people as “refugees.”

2. By definition, inactive people are those who are neither employer nor unemployed. In this paper, we distinguish between inactive people in education and those not in education.

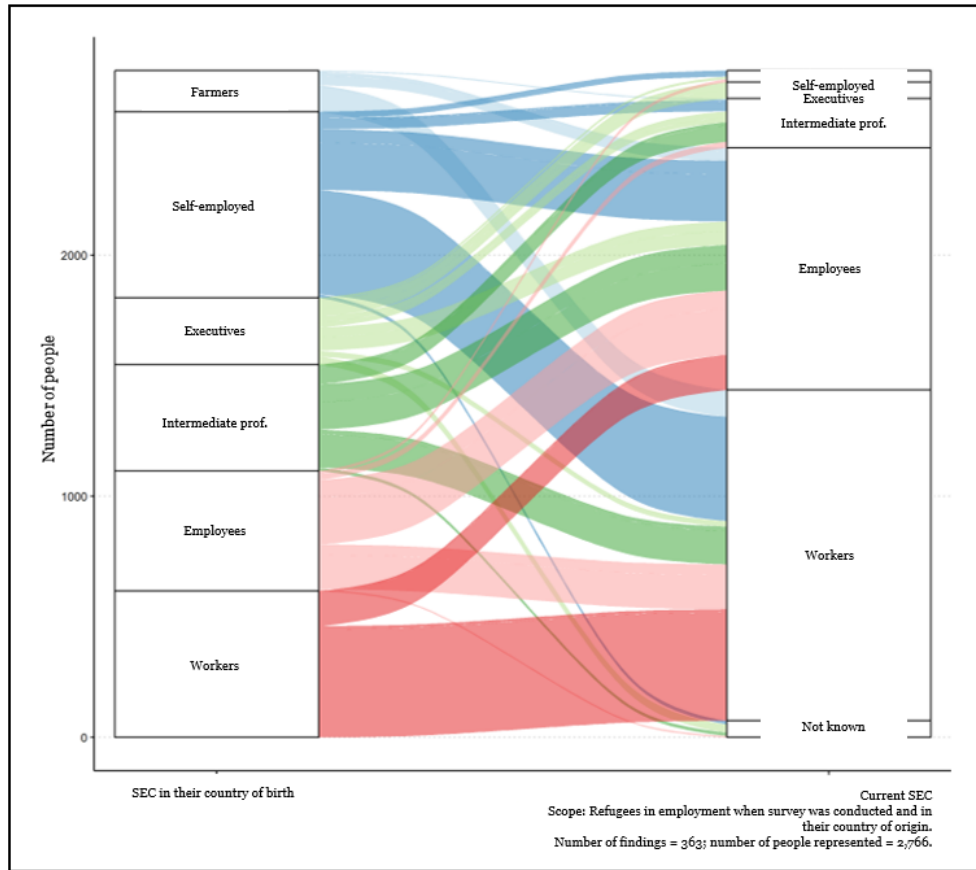
Significant differences appeared when career pathways were distinguished by gender. People who moved from education to employment were mainly men. Those who moved from employment to inactivity were mainly women. Men made up the greater share of people who were employed in their country of birth and at the time of the survey. Conversely, the vast majority of inactive people in their country of birth and in France were women.

### ***Employee rates and downgrading: professional mobility of refugees***

We also examined the relative significance of the different career pathways by comparing the pre- and post-migration occupations and socioeconomic categories (SEC) of 2,766 people employed in their country of birth and in France (graph 2). Two trends emerged. The first is the number of refugees in employment: whereas self-employed people (tradespeople, shopkeepers and business leaders) accounted for nearly one-third of those working in their country of birth, they made up less than 2% of refugees in employment at the time of the study.

The second observable trend was professional downgrading, characterized by an increase in blue-collar workers (from 22% to 46%) and white-collar workers (from 18% to 42%), and a decrease in executives and higher professional occupations (from 10% to 2%) and intermediate professions (from 16% to 7%).

**Figure 2: Career professional mobility**



*Elipa 2 Survey – wave 1 (2019).*

## ***Employment and job-seeking characteristics of newly recognized refugees***

The data show that the majority of newly recognized refugees have sought employment since their arrival in France. If we examine the steps taken to find work, it appears that nearly half of the refugees interviewed who were in employment, found their job through connections or recommendations.

The jobs of newly arrived refugees are concentrated in low-skilled occupations with low wages and in the construction, building and hotel, retail and catering sectors. Their working conditions are mainly unstable, unsatisfactory and precarious.

Taken as a whole, these points emphasize the combined importance of improving access to employment for refugees who want to work, as well as working conditions and level of pay. These issues can be addressed by different types of stakeholders—governments, NGOs, educational stakeholders and companies—and underpin the need for appropriate public policies.

### Focus group with refugees on their experience of working in France

To supplement the statistical analysis and interviews with the companies, we held a focus group with refugees with some experience of working in France.

The refugees listed the steps they had taken to find employment and those that had helped them to actually find a job. They also discussed the steps they would recommend to their friends and family or to refugees they are helping. Use of the *Pôle emploi* (French state employment service) appears to be systematic, but does not seem to be effective, particularly for people who are graduates in their countries. *“Case workers don't know what to recommend to people with a university degree from their home country. The most effective thing would be to have a system and that's exactly what's lacking when you come to France as a refugee,”* says a former teacher from Turkey.

A Syrian refugee recommends going to the workplace to avoid submitting a CV whose experiences might not be recognized by the employer that can be intimidating. Group participants questioned the relevance of including their administrative status on their CV and the effect it may have on an employer. All focus group participants responded to advertisements, but generally this did not result in an interview or job. One participant, a graduate from Sudan, said that searching through advertisements, allowed him to find out about job opportunities, the type of positions offered, to better understand companies' needs and to find out about the conditions for applying for some jobs, particularly the nationality requirements. The use of temporary employment agencies was also mentioned to find a first job, but also requires a network of contacts. Finally, some people appreciated the support from NGOs that has allowed them to redress their lack of a network.

To complement the Elipa 2 survey results, we asked focus group participants about the perception of being downgraded and what they thought caused this trend. Proficiency in French appears to be the main explanation, followed by difficulties in recognizing qualifications obtained in their countries of origin. Although there is a French certification system for qualifications obtained abroad, participants point out that these accreditations are not recognized by employers and seem to regard downgrading as inevitable. Whether they are downgraded or not, participants agree that access to employment is essential in France, especially to find accommodation.

## From the engagement of companies to concrete employment

In addition to this statistical information, we analyzed measures implemented by the private sector to promote the integration of refugees into the French labor market. The managers interviewed shared their analysis of the trends at work in their company, and explained the ways in which their company can engage to integrate refugees.

### ***Reasons and forms of engagement vary depending on the company***

Actual recruitment or programs are often triggered by the engagement and commitment of one person or a small group of people in the company. The argument about recruitment needs and that of corporate social commitment can be found in varying proportions, with the former tending to prevail in sectors currently experiencing a labor shortage in France.

In most cases, these labor market integration programs for refugees are incorporated into broader diversity and inclusion programs. However, few companies still have a stable and developed commitment to employing refugees.

### ***Putting into practice: moving from a CSR to an HR perspective***

Interviewees highlighted the difficulty in integrating the refugee issue into the heart of the company, particularly in the human resources department and in business practices. According to a CSR director of a large catering company, you need to first speak the same language as the HR department, i.e., talk to them, understand specific recruitment constraints, be aware of different roles to be filled, and needs on the ground. Subsequently, handing over the reins to the HR department is an ongoing process of persuasion.

A large number of interviewees stated the need to “move up the decision-making chain” in order to reach site managers and other managers in direct contact with the company's teams after the highest levels of management were informed of this issue. The job of convincing local managers also takes on various forms: discussion workshops, regular updates, training on the right to asylum or on the specificities of refugee status.

Therefore, the critical step is to turn CSR engagement into HR engagement, so that measures undertaken do not just appear as extras for the organization, but can be ongoing long-term projects.

## ***Changing recruitment procedures***

Implementing these measures is also a matter of procedure. Firstly, the recruitment process must be reviewed to accommodate refugees: attention should be paid to job offer channels and new coordination established between the different levels of recruitment. There should also be explicit recruitment objectives for refugees. For example, an HR manager of a large catering company intends to set a certain number of refugee hires for a given year, both for the company and as a target to be announced to an NGO partner.

Finally, some companies even recommend adapting the recruitment process so that it meets the needs of these new employees as closely as possible. This is the case of a large retail company where a specific group training program has been introduced to communicate the company's values, discuss company codes and meet company managers in an informal and in-depth setting. This program aimed at young people with limited employment prospects, anticipates recruitment on permanent contracts with full-time terms and conditions.

## ***Mobilizing internal training tools***

In addition to signing an employment contract, training and internal mobility resources may help with opportunities for career progression and an end to strenuous and low-skilled work that is most often offered to refugees. The training of refugees is seen primarily in its technical aspect. Several companies in our sample have internal training resources that reinforce the matching of refugees' skills with the tasks they are required to perform.

In addition to technical training, there is also the matter of language training. According to the CSR director of a large catering company, the refugees who are hired cannot progress in their jobs without improving their proficiency in French. Finally, some companies insist on providing internal mobility resources in-house, that are particularly relevant for over-qualified refugees.

## **Acting collectively to employ refugees: issues and approaches**

In addition to the internal processes, which are still rarely explored in studies on refugee employment, we have highlighted broader issues regarding access to employment that are not solely linked to companies' strategies and procedures.

## ***Language and skills: the issue of qualification***

The central role of language in accessing and progressing in employment is obvious to all the stakeholders interviewed. They all insist on the importance of access to quality language training. Furthermore, since refugees are most often employed in the least-skilled jobs even though they are graduates, transitional courses for learning French and resuming their studies should be developed.

## ***Dealing with administrative restrictions***

It was also noted that some administrative procedures are burdensome and delay effective access to employment. NGO managers and refugees who were interviewed recommend speeding up the issuing of residence permits when refugee status is recognized<sup>3</sup> and facilitating access to driving licenses and opening bank accounts. Opening up access to regulated professions<sup>4</sup> and simplifying the validation of prior education and the recognition of qualifications would also have a real impact on access to employment.

Finally facilitating the right to work as soon as they apply for asylum, would allow asylum seekers to gain financial independence, practice French in the workplace and build their career pathway in France while waiting for recognition of international protection.

## ***Promoting access to employment for refugee women***

In discussions with the companies and NGOs, it became clear that programs promoting access to employment for refugees overwhelmingly benefit men. Childcare regularly comes up in interviews as a major obstacle for women, including for language training prior to access to employment. The government could fund specific programs and childcare facilities.

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3. In France, *préfectures* are responsible for issuing residence permits to people who have been recognized as refugees or as having subsidiary protection status. As the asylum application is examined by Ofpra (Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons), an independent public body, there is sometimes a long delay between the decision to recognize status and issue the residence permit.

4. In France, the exercise of some professions is subject to nationality requirements or possession of a national qualification. These professions are subject to specific regulations, including ethical obligations overseen by professional organizations (order or chamber). This is the case for professions such as architects, lawyers, chartered accountants, doctors, notaries or auditors. In addition, there is a nationality requirement for government employment. So, a large part of the labor market is *de facto* closed to refugees, while they are not naturalized and if they have not obtained their qualification in France.

## ***Moving from fragmented services to a public service for professional support of refugees***

Several types of stakeholders are involved in refugee employment: support NGOs, private companies, corporate or philanthropic foundations, integration organizations, occupational sectors, NGOs managing reception centers or accommodation, government departments and particularly public employment service organizations. This raises the issue of task sharing between these various organizations and their respective funding. It seems to us that a system providing both proper funding and a clear and legible structure for the professional support of refugees would be a kind of public service for career guidance and support for refugees seeking employment.

## **Conclusion: organize and expand the solidarity movement**

Through the interviews we conducted, we met people with a willingness and desire to create useful initiatives for refugees in their companies. Several of these initiatives were still in the rollout phase or at project stage. Others, we were informed, could be expanded if the support ecosystem was more organized. If there is a process, it is still in its early phases, compared to the challenges posed by access to employment and good working conditions for refugees.

An initial way of expanding the process is to systematically pool all good practices, for example, several companies could work together to set up training programs for the same profession.

A second possible area for improvement is the scope and extent of measures undertaken. Currently, companies are setting up practical measures to meet their recruitment needs with a social dimension. Although such an approach requires significant efforts, it does not really seriously consider the broader issues of refugee employment and its collective improvement, that must be addressed through legal reforms.

The aim of this study was to explore refugees' economic circumstances, to describe the practices and approaches of programs set up in companies to facilitate access to employment for refugees, and to put forward ideas and proposals to improve access to employment and working conditions for migrants based on our multi-method approach.

This study obviously calls for them to be extended. It would be useful to analyze the socioprofessional trajectories of refugees over several years, which will be possible with the next waves of the Elipa survey, but also to analyze the specific situations of refugees more systematically in studies on employment and working conditions, in order to make the link between residence status and economic circumstances. As for the establishment of

refugee programs in companies, quality data would be required, as well as in-depth studies on the implementation of these programs in a given company.

## Recommendations

The interviews with company and NGO representatives helped establish a range of measures that could be implemented by other companies or extended to other departments or other sites. During the focus group, refugees who were interviewed were able to make recommendations to companies and the government. Finally, representatives from NGOs in the refugee labor market integration sector shared their expectations of companies and public stakeholders, as well as the progress they had identified for their own measures.

### *Recommendations for companies*

The recommendations are aimed at companies that would like to set up measures promoting access to employment for refugees, and to others already conducting such measures that would like to go further in their commitment and realization of recruitment: how to act prior to hiring, to adapt recruitment procedures and support refugees into employment.

#### **Carrying out initial measures to promote refugee employment**

- Raise awareness among employees and train them about migration, the asylum application procedure and refugees' right to work.
- Connect with companies that are already engaged in promoting refugee employment.
- Start by trialing recruitment measures involving a limited number of people and encourage discussion between colleagues on these pilot programs.
- Consider refugees as a specific category targeted by CSR commitments and inclusive recruitment measures.

#### **Take action prior to hiring**

- Encourage management to show explicit support for measures promoting labor market integration for refugees.
- Organize sharing of practices between companies trialing programs to promote employment of refugees.
- Implement specific programs to facilitate onboarding for refugees in the company.

### **Adapting recruitment procedures**

- Convince human resources.
- Diversify recruitment processes to make the employment of refugees more effective.
- Make concrete commitments and provide incentives for hiring refugees.
- Evaluate programs promoting the recruitment of refugees in companies.

### **Supporting refugees in employment**

- Ensure refugees can progress in their jobs, particularly when they are employed in roles that do not match their skills.
- Engage with different stakeholders to support refugees after they are hired, without restricting the role of NGOs in identifying candidates.
- Support training for refugee employees and inform them about the right to lifelong learning in France.

### ***Recommendations for NGOs***

- Reach out to new companies.
- Propose measures to promote effective employment.
- Broaden the audience and specifically support refugee women.
- Monitor the employment and training of refugees.

### ***Recommendations for the government***

#### **Promote access to training**

- Offer quality French courses from the start of the asylum application.
- Set up programs to help refugees resume their studies with long-term vocational training and short-term courses.
- Establish a skills recognition system and support by profession.

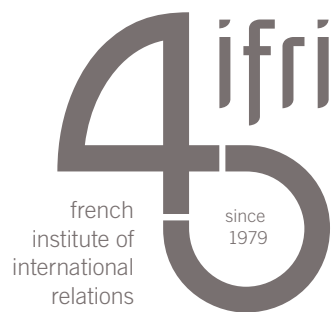
### **Facilitate access to employment**

- Facilitate the right to work when applying for asylum.
- Speed up the process for obtaining residence permits, facilitate access to driving licenses and opening bank accounts.
- Open up access to regulated professions, and simplify the system for validating prior learning and recognizing qualifications.
- Undertake specific measures targeting women.

### **Finance, coordinate and measure**

- Implement and sustain state schemes facilitating employment and vocational training for refugees.
- Develop the profile and coordination of stakeholders involved in refugee employment and training.
- Produce statistical data to analyze the career pathways and working conditions of refugees, and implement appropriate public policies.





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