



# 2019 Refugee Women and the labour market in Bulgaria

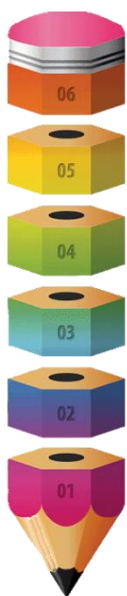


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**Caritas Sofia** was founded in 1993 to assist the most vulnerable and marginalized groups across Bulgaria, including elderly, sick and lonely people, children and adults with physical and mental disabilities, homeless people and those addicted to psychoactive substances, vulnerable women, single mothers, children and families at risk and victims of natural disasters. The organization started working with refugees and asylum seekers in the late 1990s by providing humanitarian assistance to Kosovar refugees. In the last 8 years, following the rise in numbers of asylum seekers from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Africa, as well as the complexity of their needs, Caritas Sofia moved away from providing purely humanitarian assistance and focused on an array of social services to support refugees and asylum seekers on their integration path. This culminated in the setting up of the Migration and Integration Department in 2015 which currently has more than 30 full-time staff working both in the “St. Anna” Integration Centre in downtown Sofia and in the field, i.e. the four open-type refugee reception centres and two detention centres for migrants in Bulgaria.

The majority of staff is based in the “St. Anna” Centre for Refugee and Migrant Integration which offers a comprehensive package of integration services, including case management, social mediation, psychological counselling, career consultations, assistance with preparation of CVs and finding jobs, organizing job fairs and other events with employers, assistance with finding accommodation, Bulgarian language classes, art sessions for women and homework support clubs for children.

In addition, Caritas Sofia has a mobile team that pays regular visits to the refugee reception centres in order to inform beneficiaries of the services that the organization provides and to identify and refer vulnerable cases to different Caritas Sofia projects and programmes or other partner NGOs and institutions. The Migration and Integration Department has 11 full-time staff who organise educational and recreational activities in the four open-type refugee reception centres and the two closed-type centres for migrants in Bulgaria. The purpose is to reduce the vulnerability and psychological distress observed among people in a state of administrative detention and to provide them with cultural orientation classes.



**How to find us:**

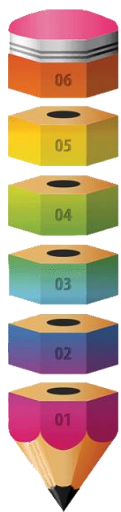
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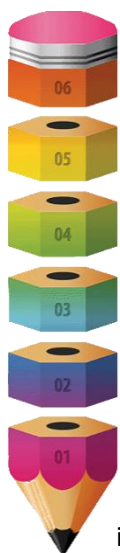
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# I. Introduction

## *i. General context on the migrant situation*

The 2015 migration crisis transformed Bulgaria into an important migrant transit country. The number of arrivals rose sharply from 6000 in 2014<sup>1</sup> to 31000 in 2015<sup>2</sup> and 17000 in 2016.<sup>3</sup> This increase in the number of people entering Bulgaria led in turn to an increase in asylum applications: between 2013 and 2018, 64 270 persons sought asylum in Bulgaria. However, the vast majority of asylum seekers have no intention of remaining in Bulgaria: a survey conducted by UNHCR in 2017 found that only 10% of migrants expressed willingness to actually remain in the country. Many people simply leave without applying for asylum, others who do apply most often continue their journey before their application is processed. And even after being granted asylum, still a few refugees decide to move to Western Europe later on. Yet, some inevitable remain: every year roughly a couple hundred people settle in Bulgaria, increasing the country's refugee population. Large families, for whom travelling presents great risks, and Dublin returnees are more likely to settle in Bulgaria. The first face the difficulties of finding a decent place to live and a job to sustain a family. Although there is no official statistic data, based on the number of beneficiaries living at private addresses, estimates suggest that approx. 2000 refugees are living in Sofia at the moment. This poses a new challenge, that of integrating refugees.

Refugees in Bulgaria face numerous obstacles to integration such as not knowing the local language, lacking a support network which they can rely on for help, being generally unfamiliar with the country, its culture and the social security and other services offered to them. The State provides little assistance to those who seek or receive asylum. Even where help is available, it remains inconsistent and sporadic. Migrants who receive international protection are in principle given 14 days to leave the State-run reception centres, where they receive food, medical care and a number of other basic services. Once out of the centres, refugees are largely left to their own devices to find accommodation and a means of supporting themselves.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, Caritas Sofia opened its St Anna Centre precisely with a view to overcoming some of these obstacles and easing the integration of refugees into Bulgarian society. Since its founding, St. Anna Center included an integration programme offering short-term emergency accommodation for Dublin returnees, long-term housing for vulnerable asylum seeker families, financial assistance to cover rent costs and meet basic needs of families, as well as a long-term support with Bulgarian language classes. Through its case managers, Caritas Sofia also helps refugees' access public services such as healthcare and education for children.

A key factor of integration is employment. According to the Adecco Group White Paper, for refugees to integrate and contribute to the economy and the social system of their host country, a combination of factors must be present, including: early integration and employment but also integration that fulfills education and employment potentials; transparency improvements

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<sup>1</sup>Is Bulgaria's border wall forcing migrants to risk deadly crossings?, 2015

<https://www.euronews.com/2015/04/30/is-bulgarias-border-wall-forcing-migrants-to-risk-perilous-sea-crossings>

<sup>2</sup>Compilation of Available Data and Information, 2015

[https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation\\_reports/file/Mixed-Flows-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-Compilation-Overview-2015.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/file/Mixed-Flows-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-Compilation-Overview-2015.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Flow Monitoring, Arrivals to Europe: <https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals>

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR Report, p.11

concerning skills and qualifications; concentrated effort in language, skills and qualifications; networking on national, regional and company level; increasing refugees participation in the labour market. This also involves interplay of different actors: state, municipalities, companies, NGOs, support networks<sup>5</sup>.

## ***ii. Brief description of Caritas Sofia's integration programme***

To facilitate the integration of refugees in Bulgaria, Caritas Sofia created an employment programme in 2017, offering a combination of skills screening, job interview training, CV support as well as guidance on available opportunities for employment in the country, administrative support and advice. The employment programme organises job fairs and matches refugee job seekers with local companies. Opportunities for employment were found within the existing migrant community but also with Bulgarian businesses where demand for Arabic speakers (especially those who can also speak English and have IT skills) is high and with factories where the demand for labour force is significantly high. Although Caritas Sofia makes certain that working conditions are decent – meaning refugees sign a contract, have adequate working hours and social benefits – wages are often low: the average salary of refugees and asylum seekers who found employment through Caritas Sofia is 815 BGN, above the Bulgarian minimum wage (560 BGN or 320 USD), but just under the national average of 868 BGN.<sup>6</sup> In Sofia, where most refugees in Bulgaria reside and work, the average salary is significantly higher – 1181 BGN.<sup>7</sup> Refugee families, many of whom are relatively large<sup>8</sup> and therefore find it hard to meet their needs.<sup>9</sup> At present the Employment Centre has established relations with 50 Bulgarian employers from numerous sectors, such as factories, call centres and IT companies, hospitality sector, etc.

### **Caritas Employment Programme in numbers:**



<sup>5</sup> 'The labour market integration of refugees' white paper – A focus on Europe, Adecco Group commissioned to the Reallabor Asyl, Heidelberg University of Education, June 2017, pp. 7-12, pp. 36-37

<sup>6</sup> Capital newspaper, Aug 10, 2018

<sup>7</sup> National Statistical Institute

<sup>8</sup> Average size of household has 4 members, however, some families have up to 6-7 members

<sup>9</sup> To give just one example, the average rent of refugees in Caritas' housing programme was around 550-600 BGN

In order to increase family revenues, it is essential for refugee women to find employment. Most of them, however, do not have income generating activities. In the EU as a whole, the employment rate of refugee women is only 45%, far below that of refugee men – 62%.<sup>10</sup> Although no exact data exists for Bulgaria, observations by Caritas Sofia and other NGOs such as the Council of Refugee Women suggest that the situation is roughly the same. The obstacles to finding employment are many – not knowing Bulgarian, lack of formal qualifications, no previous working experience, to name just a few – for refugees in general, but they seem to be even more numerous for refugee women. Although some research on refugee employment in Bulgaria has been conducted, none of it focuses specifically on women. To overcome this knowledge gap, Caritas Sofia conducted a gender assessment, looking more closely into the causes of refugee women’s low activity rate in Bulgaria.

### ***iii. Economic context***

Despite the numerous obstacles to finding employment, especially for women refugees, the job market also offers numerous opportunities. Bulgaria’s economy is relatively vital: in 2018, the growth rate stood at a robust 3.3% while wages continued to grow. The unemployment rate is quite low (5.4%) and is expected to drop below 5% in 2019. Economic prospects are even brighter in the capital, Sofia, where unemployment rate is virtually non-existent (3.2 percent). Sofia is the economic hub of the Bulgaria, producing 40% of the country’s GDP and employing a third of the workers.<sup>11</sup> There are ample opportunities for employment, for both low-skilled and highly qualified workers: 68 per cent of companies in Bulgaria are experiencing difficulties in filling vacancies.<sup>12</sup> Sales and service personnel with a high school education are especially sought after, but manual workers are also in demand. The rapidly growing retail sector for example is in need of low skilled workers for their warehouses and stores. Major retailing companies such as Metro Cash&Carry, Kaufland, Fantastiko and Lidl will continue to expand and hire new personnel. The manufacturing and logistics sectors are also in need of labour. Several suburban areas of Sofia have developed into large production and distribution sites. Important local and multinational companies such as Nestle, Coca-Cola, BHTC, Stomana Pernik and Sofia Med among others, are experiencing huge shortages in staffing.<sup>13</sup> Refugees could potentially constitute an important source of low skilled labor. So far, employers have not fully taken advantage of this, for a number of reasons, one of them being administrative.

### ***iv. Methodology***

In September and October 2018, Caritas Sofia held a total of 19 key informant interviews to determine the obstacles, both real and perceived, to refugee women’s successful integration in the Bulgarian job market. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents representing various groups and perspectives into the employment of refugee women in Bulgaria:

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<sup>10</sup> OECD, European Commission, *How are refugees faring on the labour market in Europe? A first evaluation based on the 2014 EU Labour Force Survey ad hoc module* p. 6

<sup>11</sup> *Bulgarian Labour Market Needs as Key to Refugee Employment*, CATRO and UNHCR, November 2018, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> <https://emerging-europe.com/business/bulgarias-labour-shortage-worsens/>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p.48.

**Fig.1. Respondents' qualitative survey**



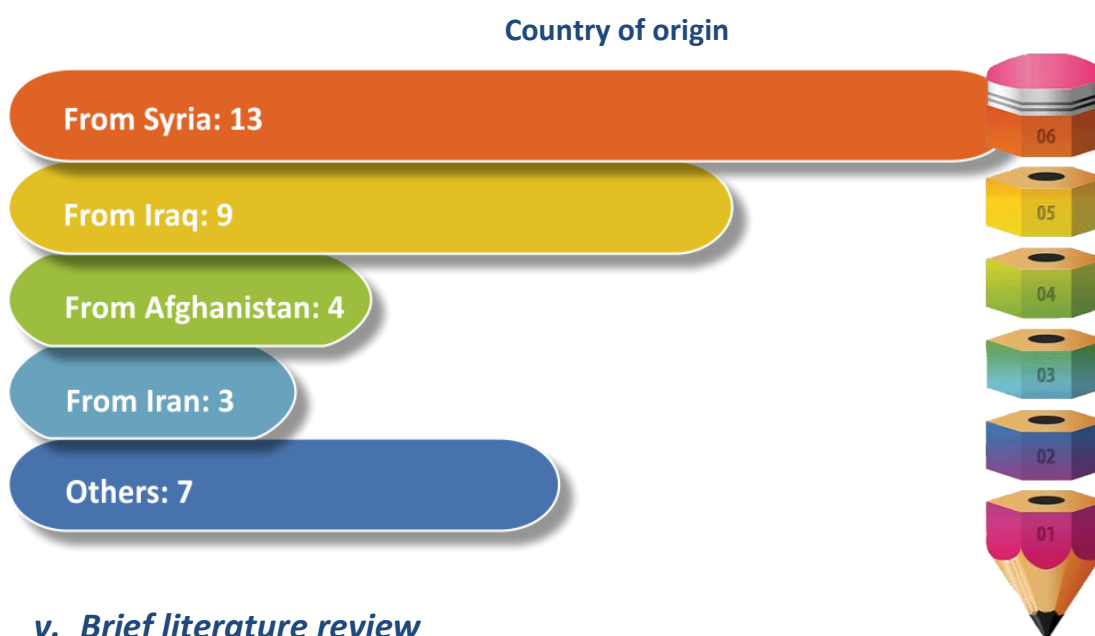
- 1 executive representative of the Council of Refugee Women;
- 2 married men of working refugee women, who have been assisted by Caritas Sofia in finding employment;
- 4 employed refugee women;
- 4 unemployed refugee women;
- 4 companies that hired refugees;
- 4 companies that expressed interest in hiring but did not hire refugees.

The interviews sought to shed light on a number of issues, particularly:

- How refugee women see their roles in their families;
- What motivates or, conversely, discourages them from looking for employment;
- Do women have professional skills and experiences likely to lead to employment;
- What are the local labour market opportunities;
- What are Bulgarian employers' attitudes toward hiring refugee women;
- What services could be offered to enable the employment of refugee women;
- What could motivate refugee women to seek employment and what are the main obstacles they face.
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In addition to the interviews, Caritas Sofia organised a quantitative profile survey with 36 women (18 employed and 18 unemployed) to illustrate the profile of refugee women residing in Bulgaria.

**Fig.2. Profile quantitative survey has been conducted of 18 working and 18 unemployed refugee women**



#### **v. Brief literature review**

The interviews were complemented by secondary literature on the employment of refugee women in various European countries and, more broadly the issue of refugee integration. Much research has been done in recent years on these and related topics but studies dealing with refugee employment and integration in Bulgaria are relatively scarce. Still, a number of useful reports do exist, namely: two recent studies commissioned by UNHCR provide detailed information on refugees and the job market in Bulgaria. *Bulgarian Labour Market Needs as Key to Refugee Employment*, published in November 2018<sup>14</sup> offers an analysis of economic trends in Bulgaria and outlines potential opportunities for the employment of refugees in Bulgaria. It also looks more into the needs and attitudes of employers, trade unions, and employer associations to working with and hiring refugees. Numerous other studies on refugees and the labor market in other countries have been carried out in recent years. *How are Refugees Faring on the Labour Market in Europe?* for example, is a Europe-wide survey on refugee employment. Though not specifically dealing with Bulgaria, the report offers useful insight into some of the recurring problems related to the employment of refugees. *Integration of Refugees in Austria, Germany and Sweden* deals with the broader topic of integration, but discusses employment at length, and the particular problem of integrating women on the job market. Other recent studies have focused more specifically on refugee women and the challenges they face, such as *Triple Disadvantage? The integration of refugee women*<sup>15</sup>, focusing on the Scandinavian countries and *HRD and Employment Preparation of Women Refugees: An Integrative Literature Review*.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the study by UNHCR and Catro points to the main obstacles that refugees and employers face on the labor market<sup>17</sup>. These include lack of language skills, lack of documents proving certain level of education and professional qualifications.

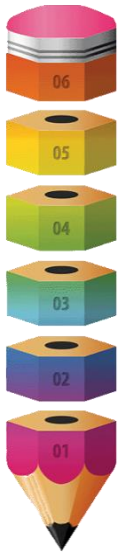
<sup>14</sup> Bulgarian Labour Market Needs as Key to Refugee Employment: Catro and UNHCR, 2018: [www.unhcr.org/bg/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2019/03/CATRO-Employment-Report-EN-FINAL.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/bg/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2019/03/CATRO-Employment-Report-EN-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Triple Disadvantage? The integration of refugee women, OECD, [www.regeringen.se/498070/contentassets/af4fcf856a88413fa51692b0cd00cd6e/triple-disadvantage---summary-of-findings-oecd.pdf](http://www.regeringen.se/498070/contentassets/af4fcf856a88413fa51692b0cd00cd6e/triple-disadvantage---summary-of-findings-oecd.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> HRD and Employment Preparation of Women Refugees: An Integrative Literature Review, Minerva Tuliao, 2015: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1296&context=cehsedaddiss>

<sup>17</sup> Bulgarian Labour Market Needs as Key to Refugee Employment, Catro and UNHCR, 2018, pp.12-13: [www.unhcr.org/bg/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2019/03/CATRO-Employment-Report-EN-FINAL.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/bg/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2019/03/CATRO-Employment-Report-EN-FINAL.pdf)





## II. Cultural barriers to employment

Complexity of gender roles and family dynamics often prove important factors in employing refugee women. Studies point to the fact that albeit less tangible, cultural barriers remain more difficult to overcome. This is due to the variety of interpretation of the cultural norms and roles, the way these interplay with motivation, adaptation and finding suitable job placements. Furthermore, this relates to the gender roles in the public and the domestic sphere, understanding and interpretation of gender roles among the different communities, the way these are perceived by employers and colleagues, the way it impacts decision-making in the family, and child-upbringing. Discrimination further adds to the mix of factors that delineate cultural barriers to employment for women refugees.

### *Gender roles and traditions*

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The majority of refugees in Bulgaria come from countries – Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq – and social environments where gender roles are largely traditional. Men are responsible for providing for the family while women look after the children and the household. These traditional roles, while not as such incompatible with life in Bulgaria or with employment, do often constitute an obstacle to finding a job. A couple of women (2 in the key informant interviews) have stated that they feel discouraged from working by their husbands. The traditional division of roles between the public male dominated sphere and the female domestic dominated sphere is prominent in the perception of traditional roles of men and women. In general, men work and provide for the family, while women take care of the children and the household. However, nuances exist and these assumptions are subject to change and open to discussion.

***“The best place for women is at home. They have to take care of their children and their man. They shouldn’t work.”***

***(Male employer,  
Arab community)***

In many Arab communities it is sometimes considered a shame for men if their wives work. This is taken to mean that husbands are unable to perform their male duty of providing for the family, while women who work may be accused of forsaking their homes and their maternal responsibilities. Several women who found employment at a Middle Eastern restaurant in Sofia felt uncomfortable and judged by the restaurant’s clients, who come from the same region or are refugees themselves. There were also more extreme, though rare, cases of Afghan men, particularly from Azara and Pashto communities, preventing women from working or leaving the house without them.

### *Family obligation and raising children*

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Yet, in spite of such cases, most male respondents seemed open to the idea of women in general, and their wives specifically, working. The initiative, however, is expected to come from the women themselves. Women, on the other hand, often seem to lack the confidence or are sometimes unwilling to broach this topic. During the key informant interviews, women often pointed to the challenges of sustaining a family life and working at the same time. Sharing household responsibilities with their husbands, women pointed out, is a precondition for finding a job. Some respondents also shared that women are often tired and cannot manage the long hours work.

***“She has to be willing to work. Then she can speak to her husband, to calm him down, to explain to him that her working is not humiliating. Sometimes women find excuses in their men for not be willing to work. If she wants to work, she can do it.”***  
***(Refugee woman)***

Taking care of children was frequently mentioned as an important obstacle to finding employment. In most cases, employers require full-time commitment that conflicts with the availability of the women refugees. Where such flexible part time opportunities are offered, income is low and inconsistent. Roughly half of the surveyed women with children are not employed. The number of children does not seem to affect the employment rate of women, however, the age does: the younger the children, the less likely refugee women are to work. This is partly explained by the fact that few refugee parents are able to enroll their children into free of charge public kindergartens, due to long waiting lists and complicated enrollment procedures. At the same

time, refugees from Middle Eastern countries tend to look after children until the age of 6 that is considered relatively late in Europe. Moreover, the study also shows that when faced with a difficult financial situation in the family women decide to look for a job. Survey results show that all 4 single mothers and 9 out of 12 single women work. By contrast, only 9 out of the 24 married women are employed at present.

### ***Distrust and stereotypes in the host country***

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In addition to the lack of motivation and the traditional gender roles which discourage women from seeking additional responsibilities outside of their homes, a general atmosphere of distrust toward refugees and migrants in Bulgaria further complicates integration. At the height of the migration crisis in 2015-2016, far right parties, currently part of the coalition government, have consistently agitated against migrants, calling them a threat to Bulgaria and Europe.<sup>18</sup> Although the influence of these

***“It was difficult and humiliating for people like us. The headscarf brought rejection”***  
***(Refugee woman)***

groups on Bulgarian society is real, the importance of extreme views and violent rallies should not be overestimated. A recent study on the impact of the migration crisis on Bulgarian society found that, though the majority Bulgarians are prone to fears, this fear has not transformed into overt hostility toward migrants and foreigners.<sup>19</sup> Interviews with refugees tend to confirm this view: very few cases of overt discrimination were reported. UNHCR survey shows that fears towards refugees and asylum seekers stem from the differences in customs, religion and cultural traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Though it cannot be said that refugees face systematic discrimination in Bulgaria, comprehensive and holistic efforts to integrate them have been scarce. Tellingly, the National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration for 2014 – 2020 lists the security of the EU’s external borders as a priority while integration takes second place. The Strategy announced an action plan to assist refugees in accessing education, Bulgarian language training, employment, recognition of professional

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<sup>18</sup> Mariya Cheresheva, “Bulgarian Nationalists Accused of Stirring Anti-Refugee Tension,” *Balkan Insight*, September 19, 2016 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/nationalists-want-refugees-out-of-bulgarian-cities-09-17-2016>

<sup>19</sup> Lyubomir Kyuchukov, *Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Bulgarian Society and Politics: Fears But No Hatred*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in Bulgaria 2017: Integration is possible: <https://www.unhcr.org/bg/3882-survey2017.html>

qualifications, accommodation and integration in the “social, cultural and civic life” of Bulgaria.<sup>21</sup> However, the measures remain largely on paper and the allocated budget to municipalities has not contributed to successful implementation. Most recently, Bulgaria refused to join the UN pact on the protection and integration of migrants.<sup>22</sup>

### *Challenges in a new setting*

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Refugees in general, and women in particular, have therefore had to find employment and attempt to integrate into Bulgarian society in a difficult environment. During interviews and regular consultations with Caritas Sofia, women have on numerous occasions described a sense of uneasiness in Bulgaria. They often feel looked at, misunderstood and judged in their everyday lives. They point to the new environment, the new rules, difficulties in orienting in the city. The changing of attitudes, both among refugees and the local population, is a slow and sometimes painful process, but many women, irrespective of their social origins and level of education, have been able to overcome

*“I feel good since I started work and I have a good relationship with my colleagues”*

*“I work so that I can show that women can, to help my family. I like helping”*

*(Accounts from refugee women)*

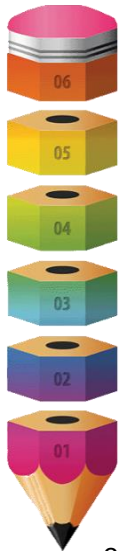
the hurdles. The experiences of refugee women who found a job through Caritas Sofia show that whatever discrimination or prejudice might exist at work is most often dispelled after a certain period. There are successful cases of women from both the Arab and the Afghani communities that managed to settle and sustain a job, being praised by their employers for dedication and commitment. More encouraging still is the fact that working refugee women often feel a sense of achievement and pride. Being able to contribute to the family, being successful in a foreign country is an empowering feeling.

The ability of some women to find employment in a generally unfavorable environment shows that they are not predetermined by relatively traditional gender roles to remain inactive. However, for refugee women to find job, they need not only to overcome cultural barriers, they also must demonstrate a minimum level of qualifications and skills.

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<sup>21</sup> Ilieva, “Migration, Asylum and Citizenship Policies in Bulgaria”

<sup>22</sup> “Bulgaria will shun U.N. migration pact,” *Reuters*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-bulgaria-un/bulgaria-will-shun-u-n-migration-pact-idUSKBN1O41D4>



### III. Lack of Professional experience and qualifications

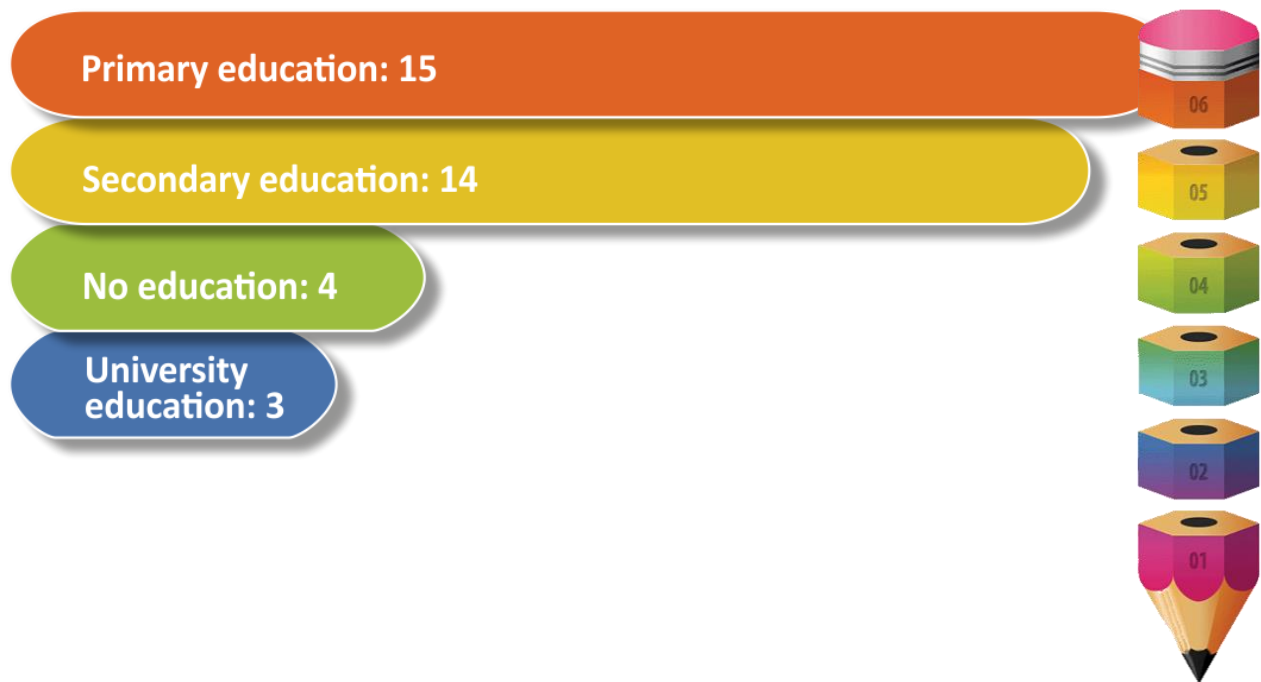
Professional skills, education and knowledge of the local language are preconditions for successful employment. An EU-wide survey conducted in 2014 showed that close to 69% of highly educated refugee women are employed. This is three percentage points higher than highly educated refugee men. By contrast, only 30% of women with a low level of education are employed, while over a third of them (34%) are unemployed.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Low level of education and qualifications*

Data collected by the State Agency for Refugees in October 2018 shows that the refugee population in Bulgaria has a predominantly low level of education: 56% had primary or lower secondary education, close to a quarter – 23% – had no formal education whatsoever, while only 7% had higher education.<sup>24</sup> In the absence of precise statistics on the level of education of refugee women in Bulgaria, Caritas Sofia conducted a small survey with 36 female refugees. The results suggest that most refugee women in Bulgaria have a relatively low level of education: 33% finished high school, 31% primary school, 11% never attended school, another 11% pointed to other forms of education while 8% had a university education (2 chose not to reply to this question). In general, it is harder for women with no formal education or lower level of education to find employment: 17 out of 36 respondents with a low level of education (no formal education, primary or high school) are unemployed. Among the ones that never attended school 3 out of the 4 are unemployed.

Fig 3.

#### Education profile of refugee women



<sup>23</sup> OECD, European Commission, *How are refugees faring on the labour market in Europe?*, p. 20

<sup>24</sup> *Bulgarian Labour Market Needs as Key to Refugee Employment*, CATRO and UNHCR, November 2018, p. 47

## *Recognition of diplomas and finding suitable employment*

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Women with a university education, albeit rare cases, are more likely to find a job. However, they too face challenges. Refugees are often unable to prove their formal education: their diplomas and certificates are frequently lost or have remained in the country of origin. Not only are diplomas difficult for refugees to obtain, but any formal contact with consulates or institutions of their country of origin may, under International Refugee Law, constitute grounds for the termination of their asylum.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, refugees who do have their documents with them sometimes need to have them officially recognized in Bulgaria. However, such procedures are very long, complicated and expensive. As a result, highly educated refugees often at first have to settle for jobs for which they are overqualified.

*There are cases of an engineer, a doctor and a pharmacist for whom it has proven difficult to find a good match to their skills. The pharmacist managed to find a job after one year at a pharmacy owned by a fellow citizen.*  
*(Caritas Sofia accounts)*

## *Knowledge of the host country language*

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An even more important determinant of employment is knowledge of the local language. In the EU, 59% of refugees with an intermediate knowledge of the local language have a job, whereas those with a lower knowledge have an employment rate of only 27%. “Knowledge of the host-country language, one recent study concluded, is such a key determinant of employment that refugees with an advanced level surpass the native-born in terms of employment rates (67% vs. 65% for native-born).”<sup>26</sup> In Bulgaria, nearly all the interviewed employers stressed the importance of having at least a basic level of Bulgarian. Those employers who interviewed refugees but did not hire them stated that this was in large part because of their insufficient language skills. Some of them mentioned that knowledge of English could partly compensate for Bulgarian. For refugee women, around 80%<sup>27</sup> of whom speak neither English nor Bulgarian, the single most important obstacle to finding employment is the lack of language skills. Employers stated numerous instances of mismatch between language skills stated in the CV and the actual ability to use the language. As long as this is so, refugee women will have great difficulties in finding employment.

*“It was really useful that I studied Bulgarian. I met others like us”*  
*(Refugee woman from Syria)*

Data from the Employers Satisfaction Survey conducted by the St. Anna Career Centre show that 66.7% of the companies that hire refugees (both men and women) share that Bulgarian language is an area where they can improve. Furthermore, most beneficiaries of the Career centre that started a job recently stated that their language skills improved considerably. The surveyed refugee women also indicated Bulgarian language as a main obstacle in finding a job. Free of charge Bulgarian language courses are essential for helping refugees and women, in particular, on their integration path. Moreover, attending Bulgarian course has other benefits, such as meeting new friends, socializing, getting acquainted with the city.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *How are refugees faring on the labour market in Europe?*, p.22.

<sup>27</sup> Based on estimates from Caritas Sofia database. This holds true for new arrivals. Bulgarian language courses offered by St. Anna prove an important step on the integration path.

## **Work ethics**

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Besides language skills, employers highlighted lack of motivation and a general absence of work ethics as frequent problems. Refugee women generally seem to find it harder to adapt to a working environment and cope with professional responsibilities than refugee men. This is especially true for women with little or no prior professional experience who are not used to working in groups and generally lack confidence.

Several employers also shared that some of their employees arrive late and, in certain cases, fail to show up at work without prior notice. Another recurring problem among working women is a lack of motivation and interest in improving their skills. However, this tendency cannot be explained merely by a certain lack of work ethics: living in a foreign country and working in a new environment without having mastered the local language can be very intimidating for refugees in general, and women in particular. For them, integrating on the job market is a daunting task as they have to face the double challenge of adapting to a foreign country and taking on professional responsibilities while at the same time continuing to look after the household and the children. The limited professional experience is conducive to more difficulties in adapting to the local context and to find a better paid job. Lack of skills also means lower payment and lower satisfaction. Refugee women are mainly hired in the hospitality industry, retail, production, and cleaning, where salaries are not up to their expectations. In addition, most refugee women prefer to work part-time or from home due to family obligations.

## **Motivation as a factor**

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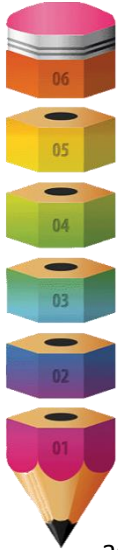
Refugee women seeking employment may have expectations which make finding a job more difficult, such as working in a female only environment or having a part time job. Others often lack the motivation to find a job. Several female refugees who did work went so far as to assert that certain women find excuses and hide behind the traditional roles in order not to seek employment. It has also the case for a number of refugee women we interviewed (2-3) that have never worked in their country of origin and the very idea financial independence is new to them.

The interviews with women reveal that motivation is an important precondition for finding a job and performing it successfully. Some respondents point to the fact that women sometimes struggle with motivation. This involves fears about the workplace, preconceptions about the nature of potential duties, prior lack of work experience. This is often intertwined with cultural traditions and gender roles.

***“Many of them would beg but they would not work. The ones that want to work, work. The ones that are serious about it find a way. They say ‘My husband doesn’t allow, but this is true just in some cases’”***

***(Refugee woman)***

These multiple barriers – the lack of professional experience and skills, the lack of language skills, etc. – make it very difficult for refugees to search for a job, let alone find one. New to the country and not knowing the language, they often don’t know where to start. Furthermore, they are unfamiliar with formal recruitment processes and require assistance in writing CVs, cover letters and preparing for interviews. Refugees in Bulgaria, women in particular, also lack the social networks essential for finding employment.



## IV. Job market obstacles and opportunities

### *Employers and the labour market in Bulgaria*

Based on the 8 semi-structured interviews conducted with employers ranging from large factories to small restaurants, a somewhat nuanced picture could be drawn about the opportunities in the labour market in Bulgaria. Employers are generally willing to hire refugees, but they do share certain concerns. In addition to the above-mentioned barriers, employers point to the uncertainty regarding refugees and asylum seekers' stay in Bulgaria, a transit country. This uncertainty discourages companies from hiring new staff that often requires special attention and investing in their skills on the long run.

Another factor which may discourage companies from hiring refugees is administrative: employers initially believed that hiring refugees required special and potentially time-consuming procedures. This misconception has since been corrected; most companies approached by Caritas Sofia are now aware that hiring refugees is no different than hiring Bulgarian citizens. Right to work is gained three months after submitting documents for an asylum status and the legislation provides a comparatively favourable framework. Nevertheless, refugees can still face other administrative obstacles; for example, prior to signing a contract, refugees must open a bank account, present their birth certificate and fulfill other administrative requirements for which they often need assistance.

The inability to prove official qualifications has been less of a problem than expected, especially for lower skilled position as most companies are ready to accept workers after they demonstrate actual qualifications. For most, moving out of Sofia, where most of the refugee community resides, might prove as another barrier.

According to recent research 68 per cent of companies in Bulgaria are experiencing difficulties in filling vacancies<sup>28</sup>. This holds true for low skilled sectors, especially in restaurants, call centers, hairdressers, tailoring, restaurants and hospitality, processing and manufacturing. Respondents share that refugee women could be most successful in finding a job placement in the service industry, tourism and retail, as well as in hairdressing salons, cosmetics, tailoring, shops, restaurants and hotels. Women who have previous experience and a higher level of education, as well as knowledge of other languages and basic computer literacy manage to find employment in call centres or educational institutions.

*"They are people like us. We have to see them as people first, not as refugees. They want to have a home, work, live with dignity, and find a good education for their kids. It would be a pity if there are people who perceive them otherwise."*

*(Employer, tailoring factory)*

### *Obstacles and opportunities*

Gender inequality at the workplace is a Europe-wide problem, and even more so in Bulgaria. Bulgaria's gender equality index, 38.5, is far below the EU average of 52.9. In fact, Bulgaria is the only country in the EU whose index has worsened in recent years.<sup>29</sup> Refugee women, already members of a vulnerable and marginalized group, therefore face multiple disadvantages. Several interviewed employers have indeed been reluctant to hire refugees, not so much because they were refugees, but

<sup>28</sup> *Bulgaria Labour Shortage Worsens, August 2018*, <https://emerging-europe.com/business/bulgarias-labour-shortage-worsens/>, last visited 26<sup>th</sup> March

<sup>29</sup> *Where there is a Will, there is a Way*, p. 14.

because they were women. One interviewed employer declared that “the best place for women is at home” while another stated that he would not hire women if they had many children. Though such opinions were admittedly the exception rather than the rule, employers are in general more inclined to hire refugee men rather than women, because they are seen as being more reliable.

More broadly, examples of prejudice toward refugees seem to be quite rare; most employers approached by Caritas Sofia are willing to hire refugees provided they have relevant skills. There are also employers that deliberately hired refugees in order to help them integrate. If some did not hire refugees, it was most often because they lacked the relevant skills, or because they feared the refugees might leave the country before the end of their contract, not because of any biases. More encouraging still is that those employers who hire refugees through Caritas, generally show flexibility and a willingness to provide guidance to ease their integration at the workplace. As previously mentioned, there are practically no State-run vocational trainings for refugees,<sup>30</sup> but this is at least partly compensated by on the job-trainings and guidance. Newly employed refugees typically receive orientation and technical training. For example, factories provide induction trainings with the mediation of translators from Caritas Sofia. Good relations with employers proved essential in running a pilot group of Bulgarian language at the workplace and starting a mentoring programme with the involvement of colleagues. Besides language barriers, employers may not be sufficiently aware of the cultural background of refugee women, making their trainings less effective than for Bulgarian employees. Regarding companies that did not hire refugees through Caritas Sofia, one recent study concluded that they were not always eager to invest time and efforts into adequate training, such as mentoring or coaching.<sup>31</sup> Refugee women need further assistance with cultural orientation, socializing and enhancing their skills to have better opportunities to access the labour market. Positive examples in this direction are the computer courses organised for women at Caritas Sofia, cultural orientation groups and art activities.

Just as employers have often shown understanding for the refugees’ particular situation, so too have refugees demonstrated a willingness to adapt to the needs of the Bulgarian job market. There are many examples of refugees, men and women, who now have jobs in a sector that is very different than the one they worked in in their country of origin. Among the women who found employment through Caritas, there is one former police officer who now works in a textile factory, a primary school teacher who found a job at a call centre, and a bank manager working as translator. Two refugee women were trained as hairdressers. There are also examples of women with no prior professional experience that managed to find employment in factories.

Such cases demonstrate that women are able to adjust to a new environment and new professional responsibilities. Besides contributing to family income, women who participated in the research stressed the importance of gaining new skills and knowledge. They often discover talents and abilities they didn’t know they had. Employment is therefore not only a means of ensuring livelihoods for families, but also a way for women to gain more confidence and rethink their role in and outside the family.

*“I want to work to be active like every women and to be a helper at home with my husband”*

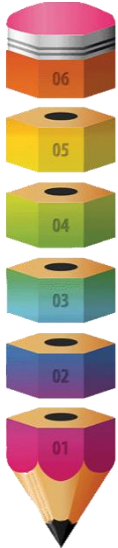
*“I want to have my place in society other than a housewife.”  
(Accounts from Refugee women)*

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<sup>30</sup> The State officially established the National Programme for Refugee Employment which offers language classes, professional trainings and salary subsidies for up to 12 months. In practice however, the programme is not operational and only 2 refugees have attended it in 2015 and 2016. UNHCR p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Bulgarian Labour Market Needs as Key to Refugee Employment*, CATRO and UNHCR, November 2018, p. 32.





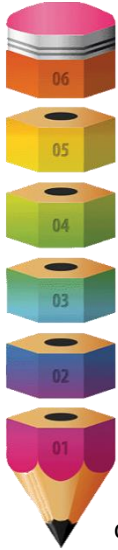
## V. Conclusion

Refugee women in Bulgaria face numerous obstacles to finding employment. Traditional gender roles are one: most refugee women in Bulgaria come from social environments in which they are encouraged to stay at home and look after the children, while men are those who are responsible for feeding the family. For women to look for a job is to transgress to a certain extent these roles, and such a decision is not easy to make. Discouraged by their traditional social environment from seeking employment, women are also discouraged by the general conditions of their stay in Bulgaria: living in a foreign country whose language they don't speak, many women feel confused and disoriented in this new environment which, more often than not, is unwelcoming toward them. Their interactions with the local community are rare and superficial, and they lack the social relations that can ease the job search.

Those women that show initiative and refuse to be discouraged have to face other obstacles still, such as lack formal qualifications or prior professional experience. Even after finding employment, women struggle to keep up with their professional obligations and family responsibilities. For this very reason, certain employers have shown a certain reluctance to hire women, preferring men whom they consider more reliable.

Yet, despite these numerous difficulties, many refugee women have shown a great degree of resilience and ability to adapt to their new environment. Some have even used the environment to their own advantage: there are examples of women who, through employment, were able to gain a sense of pride in the fact that they can contribute financially to the household. They were not only able to overcome the traditional gender roles, but to change the way they perceive themselves and their role in society. As one interviewed refugee woman remarked: "I want to have my place in society other than a housewife."

This process has also been aided by employers, most of whom are willing to hire refugee women and have shown consideration for their particular needs and conditions. With this flexibility and understanding on the part of the employers, and some perseverance on the part of refugees, it will be possible for women to find employment, not least because the economic conditions are favorable. Bulgaria's economy is expanding, the unemployment rates are low, especially in Sofia, and there is a great demand for low skilled labour. If women were to learn Bulgarian and gain basic soft-skills that would ease their integration in a working environment, this would significantly increase their chances of finding employment. How can the non-profit sector assist them to increase their employability?



## VI. Recommendations

To increase the employability of refugee women the following measures are recommended:

- **Organise cultural orientations:** It is essential for women to understand the culture of the host country and be aware that they must show flexibility and a willingness to adapt. Cultural orientations can give practical information on the labour market, job opportunities and support services available for women. Lack of motivation is a frequent problem and such sessions can also be a way to motivate women to work. Refugee women who have successfully found employment can attend such sessions to share their experiences and give practical advice on how to manage family life and professional obligations. Women will begin to understand that they can find support in civil society organisations and other women. Once they see that other women are working they will want to follow their example.
- **Discuss gender roles:** Orientation sessions provide a safe space to discuss gender roles. It is an opportunity to explain that in Europe it is common for both women and men to work and contribute to family income. It is important to speak with both spouses and explain the family model in Europe and the shared responsibilities for the household duties. Many refugee women do in fact want to be financially independent and such sessions may give them the impetus to broach the topic with their husbands.
- **Cultural orientation for men:** Women's willingness to find employment does not depend merely on their motivation, but also on their husband's support and active encouragement. Orientation sessions with men should therefore be considered as a means of influencing refugee men to support their wives' effort to find a job. Using previous experiences, the sessions could also demonstrate the significant increase in family revenues once women start to work.
- **Bulgarian language classes:** Knowledge of Bulgarian is the most important determinant in finding employment. Bulgarian language courses are currently organised only by a very few civil society organizations. This practice should be made more standard and State-sponsored.
- **Improving soft-skills of women:** As many refugee women have little or no professional experience, they often lack necessary soft skills. Prior to starting a job, women should go through an orientation that clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities in their new workplace and explains the sort of simple attitudes and behaviors they will be expected to demonstrate, such as arriving to work on time, showing a certain level of engagement and dedication, etc. Mentoring programs whereby employed refugee women are paired up with one of their Bulgarian colleagues could be a good way to facilitate integration at the workplace.
- **Vocational training and other professional training courses for women:** Most refugee women in Bulgaria have a low level of education and lack formal qualifications. Women should therefore be offered the opportunity to improve their qualifications by attending practical skills-based courses. Trainings and vocational courses should be tailored to the specific needs of refugee women and take into consideration the language barriers and cultural specificities. On the job trainings are a good opportunity for women to improve existing skills and gain new ones. Assistance and support from the NGO sector is crucial, not only in terms of providing language courses but also a form of cultural mediation between employers and refugee women.

- **Establish and deepen cooperation between private and non-for-profit sector:** the relatively few examples of cooperation between the NGO and the private sector have demonstrated positive results. Such links should be promoted and deepened, especially in the realm of vocational training as previously mentioned. Caritas Sofia has been organizing regular small-scale job fairs for refugees that have proven to be quite successful in finding matches between companies and refugee job seekers. Such practices should be continued and generalized.
- **Establish professional mentoring at the workplace:** Companies also have a responsibility to create a motivating working environment and make sure their employees are integrated. Because of their relative unfamiliarity with the host country, refugee women require special attention at the workplace. Professional mentorships enable newly hired refugees to integrate at the workplace much faster: the mentors, who are their colleagues, serve as “coaches”, explaining the job requirements, giving advice, support and more broadly looking after their mentees. Mentorships have the additional benefit of creating closer relations with locals at the workplace, a safer working environment and giving more confidence to refugee women.

