

EMPLOYMENT, EMPOWERED

BARRIERS TO MIGRANT WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE IRISH LABOUR MARKET

2024 RESEARCH REPORT



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AkiDwA

AkiDwA (Akina Dada wa Africa, Swahili for 'sisterhood') is a migrant women's network based in Ireland. Established in 2001, AkiDwA's mission is to promote equality and justice for migrant women living in Ireland. Our vision is for a just society where there is equal opportunity and access to resources in all aspects of society: social, cultural, economic, civic and political.

About this Project

Employment, Empowered (EM & EM) is a research project funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth as part of the inaugural Ireland Against Racism Fund, with the goal of enacting aspects of the National Action Plan Against Racism.

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BACKGROUND

Migration in Ireland: Context and Recent Trends

Ireland experienced significant immigration and increased ethnic and national diversity during the economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Once a country of mass emigration, Ireland rapidly emerged as a new destination for immigration, particularly from outside the European Union (Ruhs & Quinn, 2009).

Immigration flows peaked in 2007 but declined sharply during the 2008 recession before rising again with the economic recovery starting in 2010. Recent data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2024) shows that between April 2023 and 2024, 86,800 non-EU migrants entered Ireland, with Ukrainians representing the largest group of inflows.

In terms of gender, 49.4% of non-EU migrants living in Ireland in 2020 were women. Whether arriving alone, joining partners, or entering the country through documented or undocumented means, women are changing patterns of migration and have shifted labor market needs, which were once predominantly met by migrant men.

Asylum applications began rising from the early 2000s onward, leading to the need for further development of immigration policies to address these changes (McGinnity et al., 2018; Ruhs & Quinn, 2009).

Some of these changes in immigration law included the revocation of birthright citizenship, the establishment of so-called 'safe countries of origin' for asylum applicants, and the tightening of Ireland's formerly more liberal work permit policies for non-EU nationals, in an effort to address labor shortages by prioritizing workers from within the EU (Ruhs & Quinn, 2009). Following the EU's Talent Pool Strategy (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2023), which aims to match EU employers with non-EU jobseekers, work permits have been further restricted to those with specific qualifications.

Furthermore, before 2018, international protection applicants did not have the right to work in Ireland at all. A turning point came when a Burmese asylum seeker, who had spent eight years in Direct Provision, won a Supreme Court appeal for the right to work. This case was a landmark in the evolution of Irish immigration law, with the judge describing the right to employment as "a part of human personality that cannot be withheld absolutely from non-citizens" and a constitutional right (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2017).

BACKGROUND

Integration of Migrant Women in the Irish Labour Market

In recent years, demographic migration trends have significantly shaped perceptions of migration, with men traditionally dominating both migration movements and the types of jobs typically associated with migration. However, globally, including in Ireland, women now represent half of the migrating population. This shift may push women toward what are perceived as traditional female jobs, such as hospitality, caregiving, or domestic work. These gender biases, combined with the challenges migrant women face—such as caregiving responsibilities, language barriers, and the lack of recognition of skills and qualifications—have contributed to poor integration into Irish society (Stapleton et al., 2022).

Although non-EU migrant women have higher levels of education than both non-EU migrant men and Irish women, they experience higher unemployment rates compared to these two groups. Moreover, underemployment is also linked to other factors, such as trafficking and gender-based violence, particularly among women residing in Ireland on a spouse visa, known as Stamp 3.

Until recently, women on Stamp 3 visas were not permitted to work, and their residency status depended entirely on their spouses' visas. This policy left many women vulnerable to remaining in abusive and controlling relationships. While a May 2024 policy change allowing working rights for women on Stamp 3 marks significant progress, years of being unable to work in Ireland have severely hindered their employment prospects and integration into society.

Language proficiency is often seen as a barrier to employment, and a factor leading to many women accepting jobs below their level of qualification (Stapleton et al., 2022). However, studies have shown that non-EU migrant women, particularly those from India, Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, tend to have higher levels of tertiary education than Irish women, and arrive with high levels of language proficiency (Privalko et al., 2023; Stapleton et al., 2022).

Despite these advantages, many women from these regions continue to face high unemployment rates or are forced into jobs unrelated to or at levels below what their qualifications warrant, suggesting that other factors, beyond language proficiency, contribute to their employment challenges.

BACKGROUND

AkiDwA's Previous Research into Women International Protection Applicants' Labour Integration

While existing research has provided a mixed overall picture of migrant women's employment outcomes in Ireland, when it comes to women in the international protection process, the statistics tell a much more dire story.

Research by AkiDwA in 2020 suggests that women in Direct Provision and women of African descent remain have not only the lowest employment rates among all migrant women, but are also stereotyped. For instance, black women experienced a sort of "double discrimination" whereby certain jobs were deemed as being more 'suitable' for them (i.e. care-related jobs such as nursing assistants or at-home carers), regardless of their actual interests or qualifications. This discrimination not only affects their financial status but also their confidence in their own ability to progress in professional jobs.

According to the European Commission (2023), one in five non-EU migrant women are over qualified for the jobs they are in. Known as 'de-skilling' process, 40.7% of migrant women were likely to be overqualified compare to 21.1% native women. These findings are consistent with the racial stratification theory whereby race is a "default starting position" (Joseph, 2020).

AkiDwA's 2020 report further highlighted some of these structural barriers in the Irish International Protection Applicant context.

Employers are often not aware that many people in the asylum process are actually eligible to work, and therefore automatically place them out of contention for jobs.

Furthermore, the discrepancy in the appearance of the Labour Market Access Permission (LMAP; the work permit issued to asylum seekers) and work permits that people from other migration pathways receive, is a major hinderance: while 'regular' work permit holders receive both a work permit letter and a plastic residence permit card which states their right to work, IP applicants (as they are not yet approved for residence permits), only receive a letter on paper stating their labour market access permissions. Understandably, when employers are used to being presented with the plastic residence permit when requiring proof of working rights, they may not be aware that the LMAP is also a legitimate work permit.

The duration of the LMAP also poses a barrier, as each LMAP is only valid for one year, and the renewal process can take several months. Considering the time it takes to find a job in the first place, this effectively means that asylum seekers can only be legally employed for a few months of the year before the expiry of their work permit.

These along with the aforementioned barriers were found in AkiDwA's report to seriously impede women asylum seekers' career progression and ability to gain independence.

RESEARCH AIMS

Follow-up research was needed to investigate the impact of discrimination and racism on migrant women in the employment sector.

HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED, AND WHAT HAS REMAINED THE SAME?

AIM 1:

To investigate the barriers and facilitators to labour market access for migrant women from a range of migration pathways



AIM 2:

To capture civil society organisation perspectives on the challenges of improving migrant women's access to the labour market

AIM 3:

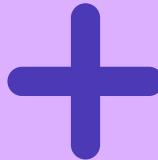
To present suggestions to relevant government departments and employers for short- and medium-term changes to improve migrant women's labour market access



METHODOLOGY

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1 2 3 A QUANTITATIVE METHODS

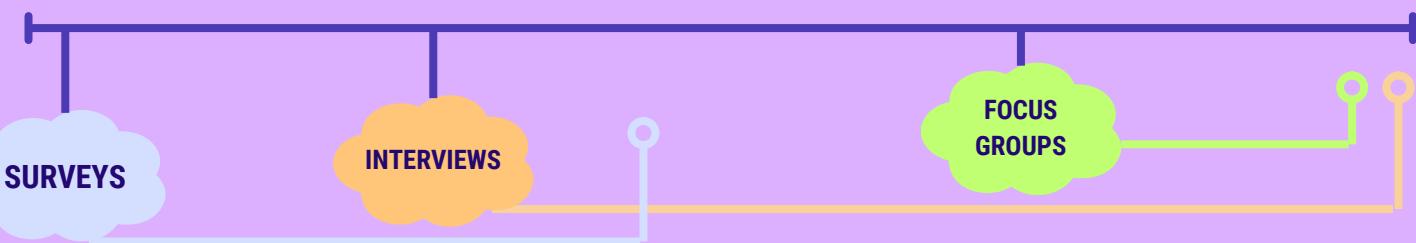


QUALITATIVE METHODS



brief interviews
in-depth
focus groups
interviews

Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sept



SURVEYS

FOCUS GROUPS

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Who participated?

- Migrant women
- Community Employment Schemes
- Civil society organisations

- Migrant women from diverse migration pathways

- Migrant women
- Civil society organisations
- Employer-adjacent organisations

What questions were asked?

- Demographics
- Field of employment
- Opinions on employment supports for migrant women
- Suggestions for improvement
- Challenges

- Experiences with the job search
- Experiences while in employment
- Challenges re: employment and specific immigration status

- In-depth questions about experiences in the job market + immigration system
- Challenges service providers have faced re: hiring migrant women

How did we collect data?

- Online
- Sharing via social media, personal + professional contacts, and CE Schemes

- In-person focus groups at locations convenient to our participants
- 1 online focus group

- In-depth interviews in person and online
- Brief interviews at employment-related events

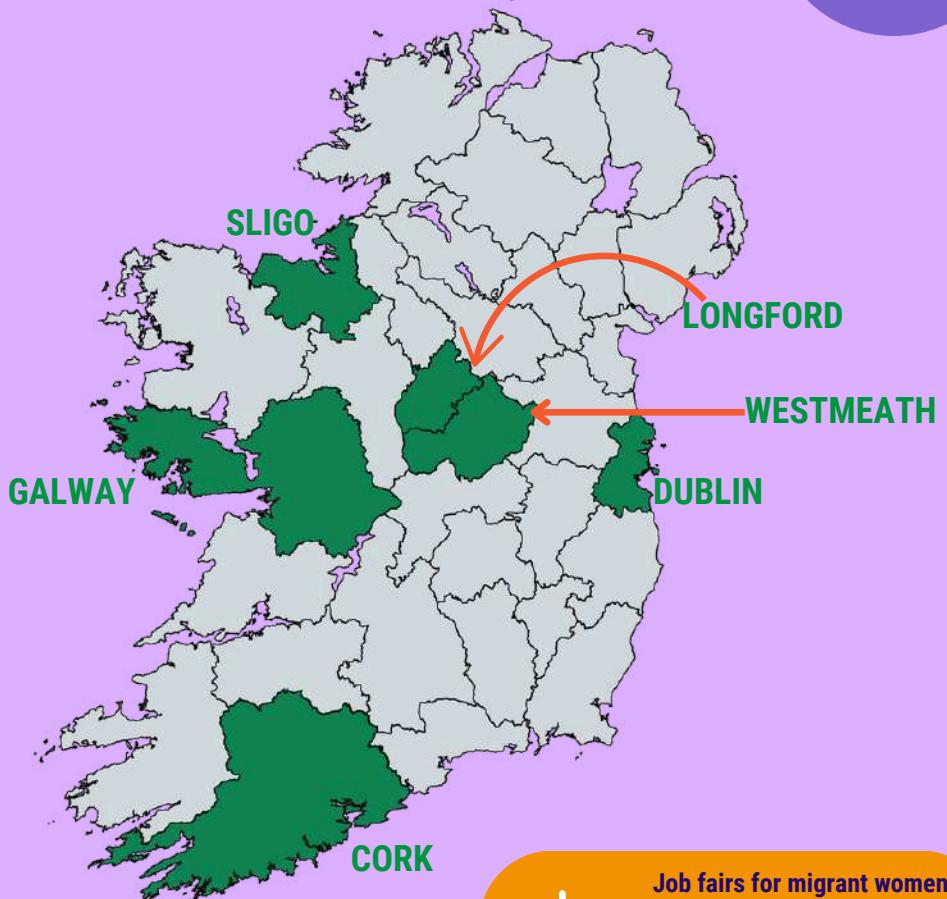
OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS AND PROCESS



9
FOCUS GROUPS CONDUCTED

6
COUNTIES REACHED

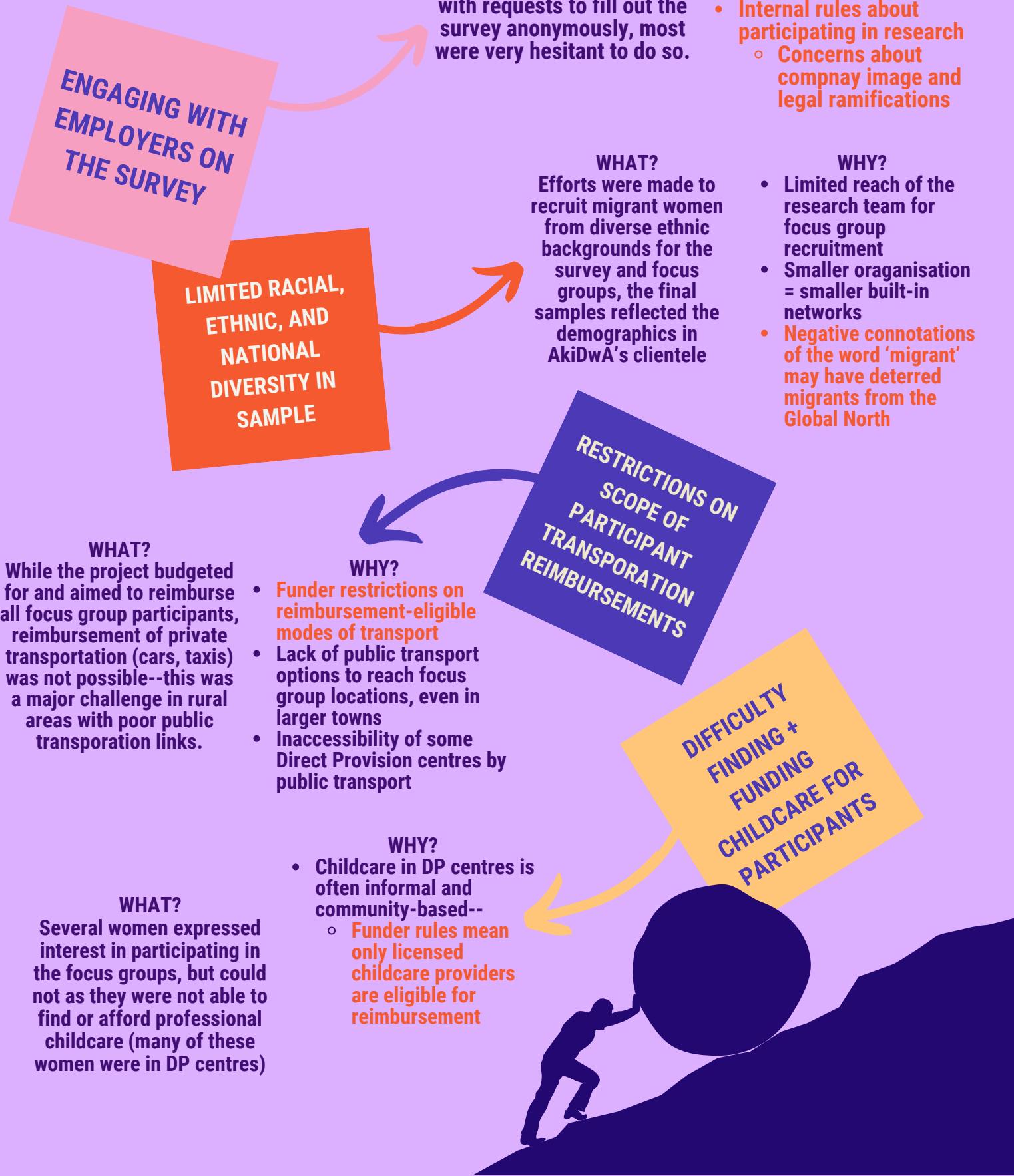
3
JOBS + SERVICES FAIRS HELD



Job fairs for migrant women were held to support the project's employment-related goals, while also serving as an avenue to recruit participants for interviews and focus groups.

DATA COLLECTION CHALLENGES

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DATA COLLECTION LEARNINGS



Advisory committee for ethical guidance

An advisory committee of experts in the field of migration and research was created to:

- Approve focus group and interview recruitment strategies
- Serve as an ethics committee
- Provide guidance on the recruitment strategy



Engaging with local 'mobilisers'

Identifying and connecting with key women in communities of interest was crucial to:

- Developing trust between participants and the research team
- Increasing the number of women attending the focus groups
- Fostering longer-lasting connections between service providers and communities



Supporting migrant women's businesses

We always catered lunch for our focus group participants, as many women living in DP centres had to skip their designated lunch hours to attend the focus group. Where possible we used the catering services of migrant women themselves.



Relevant forms of compensation

When considering forms of compensation for participants, the relevance of certain forms of compensation, and limitations around what we could offer, had to be balanced:

- Direct cash compensation is generally not allowed by funders unless for transportation reimbursement
- One4All vouchers were found to benefit participants from a range of migration pathways, as they could also be used at some grocery stores
- Physical One4All cards were offered rather than digital ones to account for lower digital literacy levels in many participants

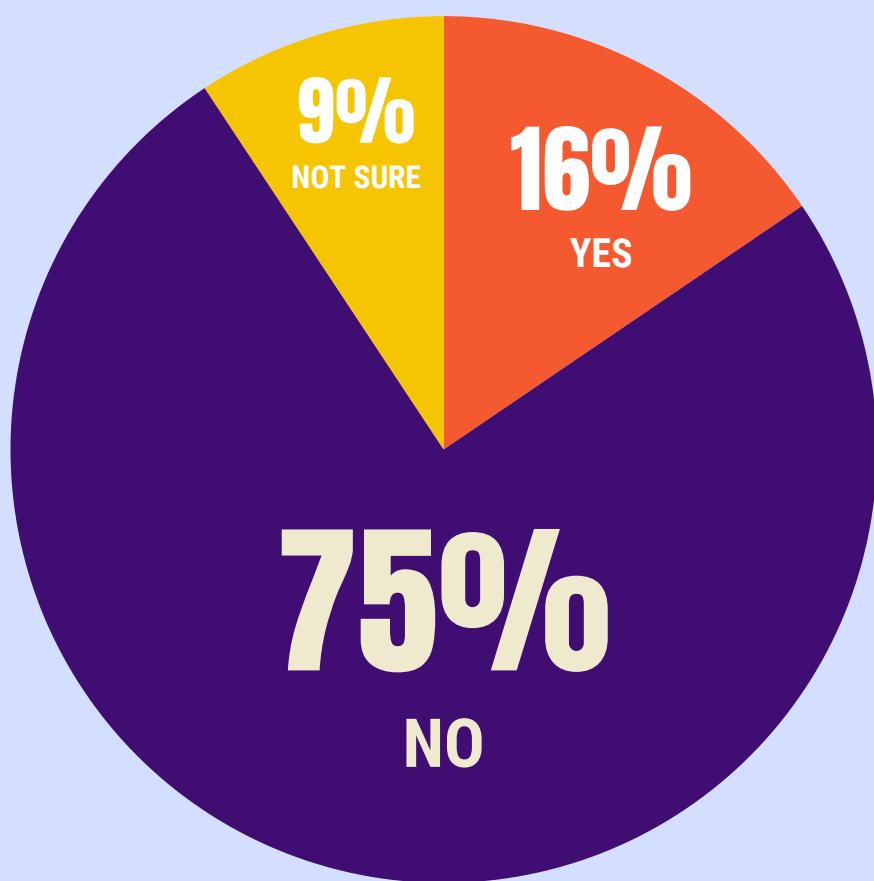
SURVEY RESULTS

CE SCHEMES + CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

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129 RESPONDENTS
WIDE GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD

“Does your organisation have a dedicated programme for migrant/refugee engagement?”



Opportunities respondents see in recruiting migrant women:

- Diversifying the set of skills in the organisation
- The opportunity for organisations to build confidence of migrant women
- Helping migrant women integrate into community
- Offering a stepping-stone to people who may need it
- Filling roles that are needed--skills of migrant women can fill these gaps

SURVEY RESULTS

CE SCHEMES + CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

CHALLENGES IN RECRUITING MIGRANT WOMEN:

- Difficulty in finding childcare during shifts
- Language barrier - English proficiency not as high as needed
 - Lack of options for women to receive advanced language training
- Difficulty in completing Garda Vetting
 - Unable to produce police clearances from other countries (**this is not a requirement in vetting for refugees or people in the IPA process*)
- Cultural differences
- Lack of appropriate qualifications for the role

POLICY-LEVEL CHANGES THAT MIGHT HELP RESPONDENTS

RECRUIT MORE MIGRANT WOMEN:

- Greater childcare supports
- Financial supports for transportation/better transportation infrastructure
- Free advanced language classes outside of work hours
- Formal intercultural training for employers
- Department of Social Protection referring more migrant women to CE Schemes



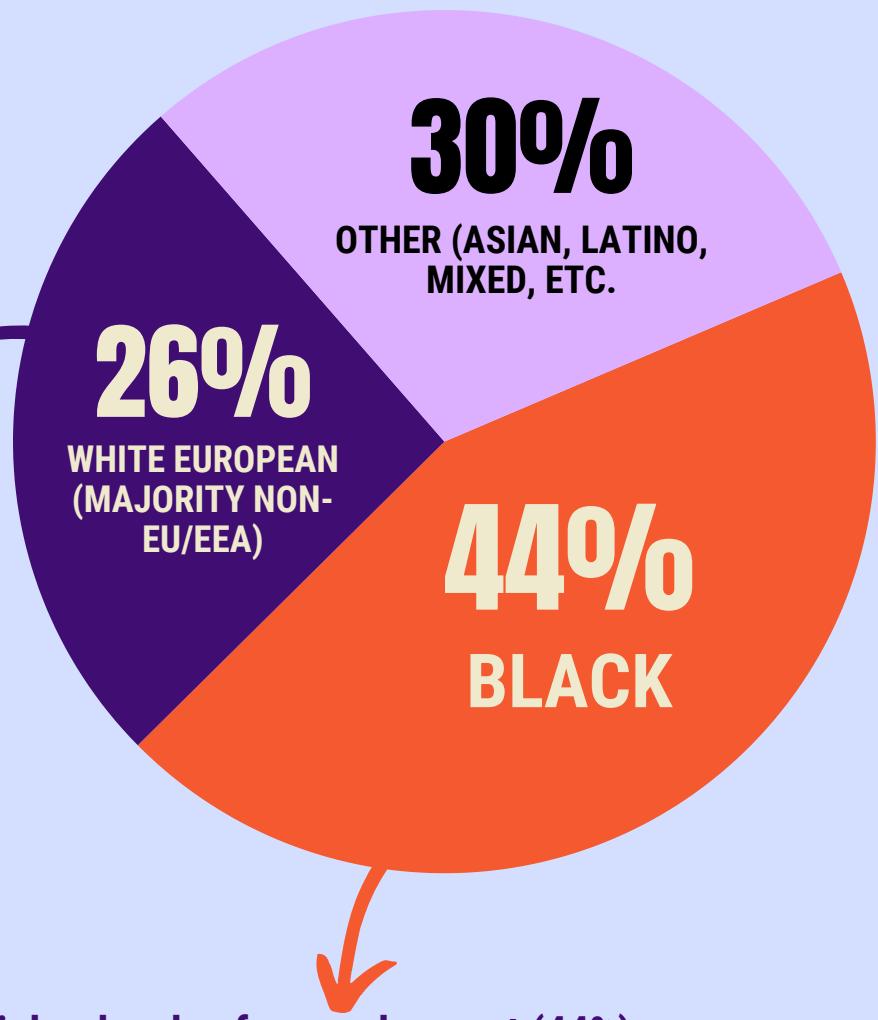
SURVEY RESULTS

MIGRANT WOMEN

126 RESPONDENTS

Racial/Ethnic Breakdown

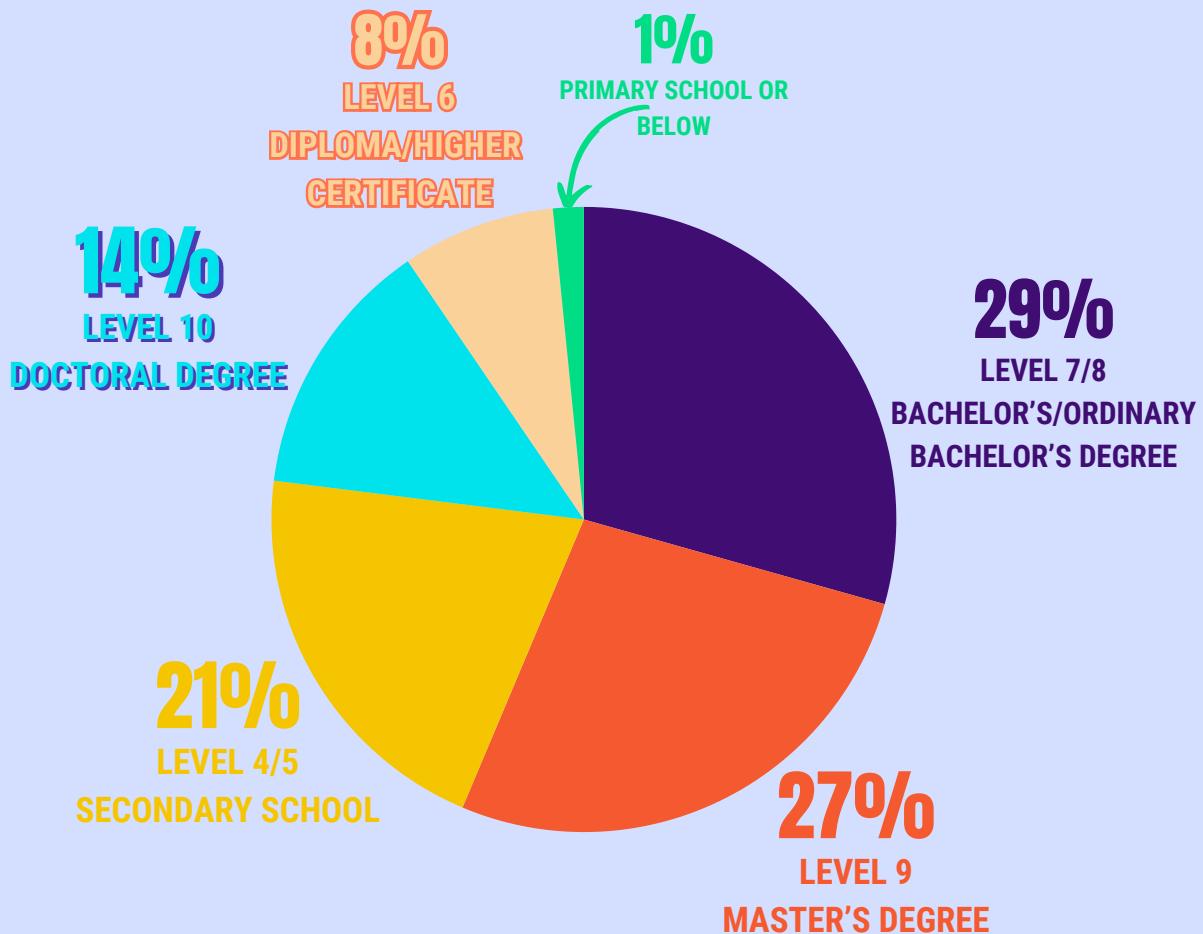
- Of non-EU/EEA white respondents, 66% were employed or in education, and 34% were unemployed
- Of those unemployed, all but one were from Eastern Europe (most likely Ukraine), and had been in Ireland for less than 5 years
- Of those unemployed, all had at least a post-secondary level degree



- Black respondents had higher levels of unemployment (44%) compared to respondents of other racial categories
- Almost all Black respondents who were not employed are very recent arrivals (less than 1 year)
- Among those not employed, all respondents had at least leaving-cert level education

SURVEY RESULTS MIGRANT WOMEN

Educational Qualifications



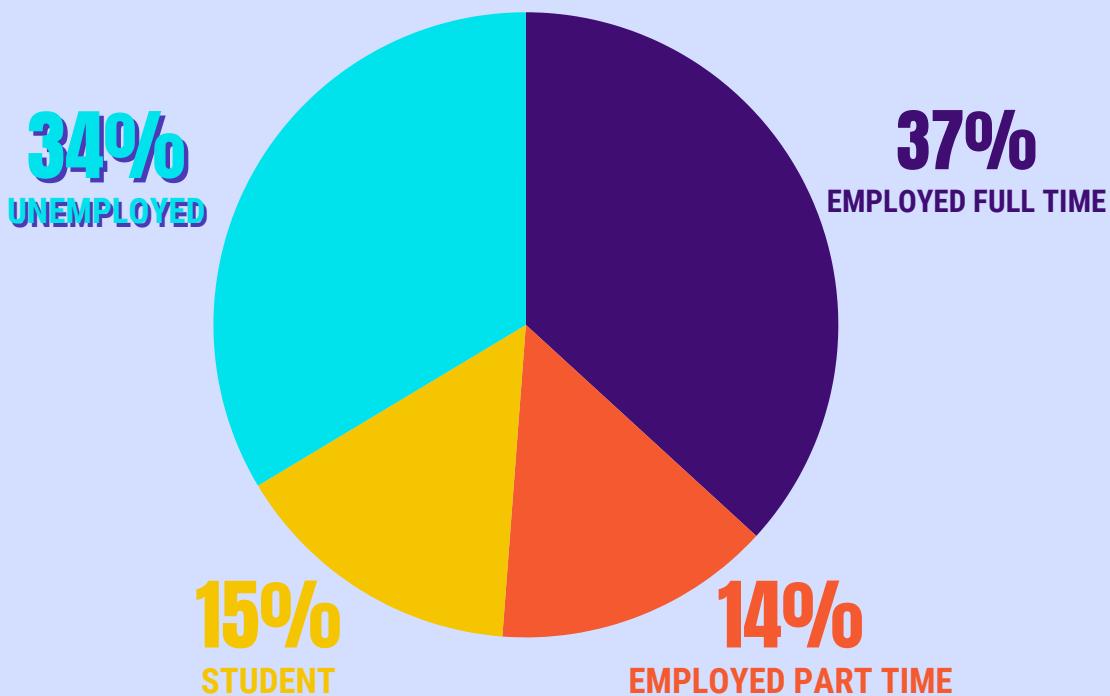
- The majority of the respondents (70%) had at least a bachelor's degree at the time of the survey
 - To avoid collecting potentially identifiable information, questions on where degrees were obtained were not included
- Figures seem to follow trends of previous research on migrant women
- Self-selection bias should be considered: those with higher verbal and digital literacy levels are more likely to fill out research surveys

SURVEY RESULTS

MIGRANT WOMEN

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Employment Status

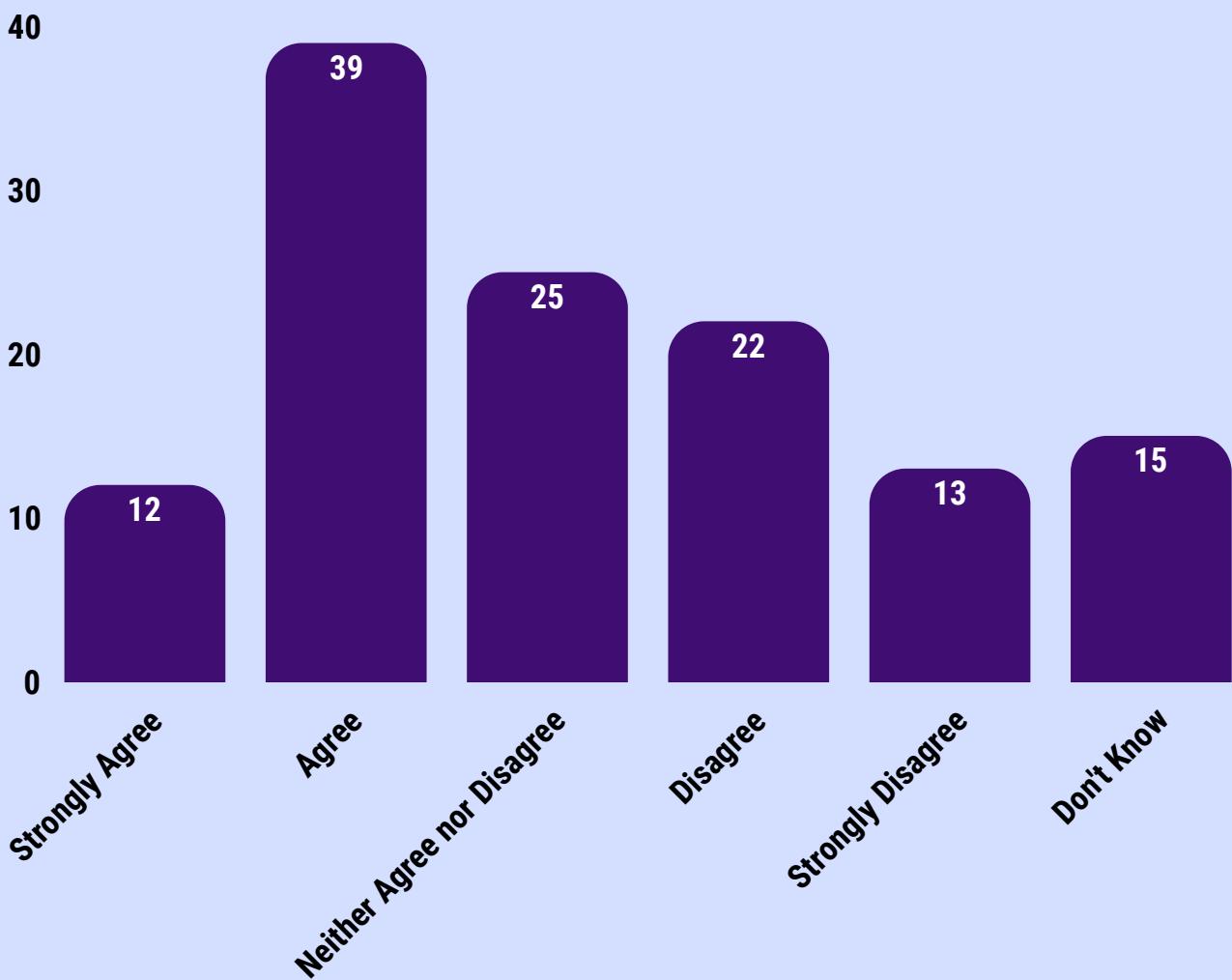


- The majority of respondents to our survey were employed in some capacity.
 - Employment sectors ranged from professional services (finance, engineering, HR, administration), education and research (school and university teaching, research jobs), healthcare (healthcare assistants, nursing), civil society, and retail
 - As expected, the vast majority of those employed possessed at least a bachelor's degree (NFQ Level 7/8)
- Around half of those who were unemployed did not have an educational qualification beyond NFQ Level 6

SURVEY RESULTS

MIGRANT WOMEN

"The culture in Ireland is inclusive and friendly of migrant women when it comes to employment."



"I think the main reason people don't get a good job is they are new in country and don't have good references."

"In general terms the culture is welcoming but I have heard many complaints of harassment happening at lower-paying positions."

"The other day someone asked me where I'm from and after I replied "Brazilian" she asked "so, do you do cleaning?" So much about stereotypes."

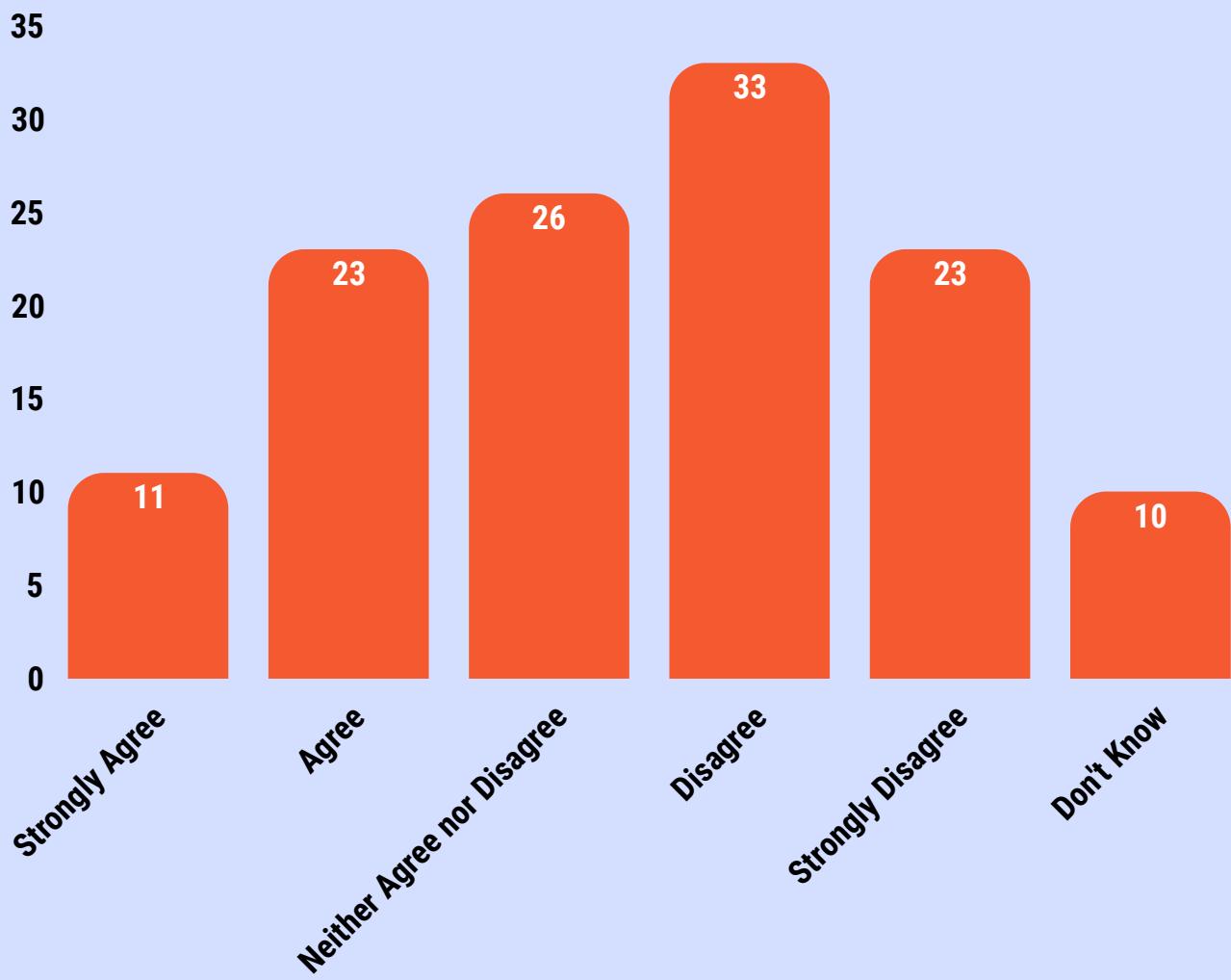
"Ireland gives chances to people a lot more than in my home country."

SURVEY RESULTS

MIGRANT WOMEN

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“Employment policies are inclusive for all (e.g. recognition of qualifications not obtained in Ireland or EU countries).”



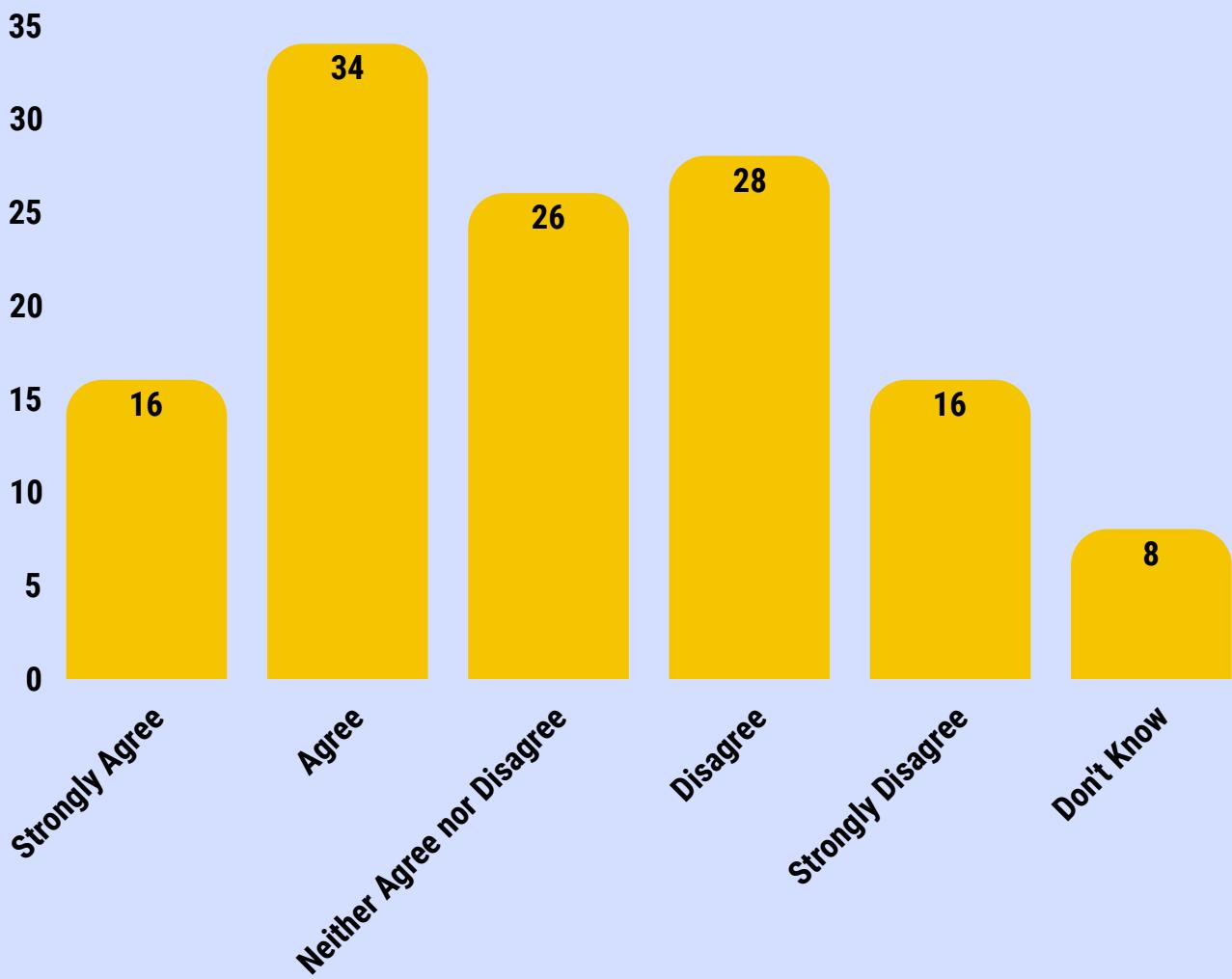
“I am aware of many migrants who have held MD or doctor-level qualifications (from abroad) and found it extremely hard to get a job within their profession.”

“I am a qualified teacher registered with the Teaching Council but because I have been rejected by educational institutions due to lack of experience of teaching in Ireland, and yet the educational institutions do not offer volunteer teaching to help me gain experience. I have ended up working as a Health Care Assistant.”

SURVEY RESULTS

MIGRANT WOMEN

“The government makes an effort to promote equality and inclusivity of migrant women in the employment sector.”



“The government funds integration and inclusion activities, yet this same inclusion is not reflected in their offices.”

“If the government cannot convince employers that they can hire someone on a Stamp 1G, it should not give this visa to migrants. If they do, they should be able to make it valid in all companies. Just a half an hour before filling out this form, I had a job interview that lasted three minutes and they did not continue the interview because I did not have Stamp 4 or an EU passport.”

“It's very difficult to find employment with a non-EU passport in Ireland. Employers are rarely interested in taking on the burden of hosting an employee who needs a visa to work in Ireland. Situation is especially dire for women working as PhD researchers, as our lack of employment status means no healthcare or maternity leave.”

QUALITATIVE RESULTS OVERARCHING BARRIERS

173 PARTICIPANTS (FOCUS GROUPS + INTERVIEWS)



Non-recognition of foreign qualifications
Irish work experience preferred over foreign work experience
Cultural and racial discrimination in the workplace
Employer knowledge gap regarding visa system
Difficulty in navigating the immigration system
Difficulty in accessing affordable childcare

ACROSS ALL
MIGRATION
PATHWAYS,
SEVERAL COMMON
BARRIERS EMERGED

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

OVERARCHING BARRIERS

Non-recognition of foreign qualifications:

For migrant women who come to Ireland on dependent visas (spouse/family of work permit holders and students, for example), and through the International Protection process, employers' unwillingness to recognise qualifications obtained in their home countries is a major barrier to entering the workforce. This barrier is particularly high for women whose qualifications were obtained in non-EU/non-Global North countries.

Often candidates with foreign qualifications are rejected by default at the initial stages of the job application, by human resources staff or application software. One participant in our focus group, a migrant woman who herself came to Ireland on a work visa with a multinational company and works in a manager-leve role, came to the realisation that this might be the reason that she was rarely forwarded migrant candidates for jobs for which she was on the interview panel.

While degree conversion/equivalency pathways exist within some fields of work like healthcare (where increasingly doctors and nurses are being recruited from abroad, and where such strict regulations are more fitting), we found that this issue pervades all sectors regardless of how standardised the work environments of certain sectors are across the globe (e.g. human resources positions in multinational coporations).

Irish work experience preferred over foreign work experience:

In a similar vein, women with years or even decades of work experience outside of Ireland in their field of qualification reported that employers would often only be interested in knowing about their Irish work experience--consequently, many women were taken out of contention for jobs due to this perceived deficit. On the one hand, while familiarity with local working culture is beneficial to a certain extent, on the other, this pattern seems to indicate that employers may be underestimating the ability for migrant candidates to adapt to new working cultures, as well as discounting the benefits that their international experience brings. Employers may also be unwilling to adapt themselves to colleagues from different cultural backgrounds.

When it came to asylum seekers in particular, many women cited being directed to volunteering at charities as a way of gaining Irish work experience and recommendations for jobs applications. However, what this approach does not take into account is that this experience may be completely unrelated to the kinds of jobs the women are looking for, thereby having them use their time for something that will only marginally serve them in the job market.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

OVERARCHING BARRIERS

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Employer knowledge gap regarding visa system:

Another major barrier reported by women from all migration pathways is many employers' lack of awareness of the work permit/immigration process. Specifically, HR departments at many companies (especially smaller ones) do not possess formal knowledge of visa sponsorship or stamp types, which as a result makes them hesitant to even consider migrant candidates for jobs. This was even the case for many women on a spousal Stamp 1G, which entitles them to work without requiring sponsorship for as long as their spouse's work permit is valid. It seems that employers seem to be aware that people with Stamp 4 have the right to work with no restrictions, but there is a clear gap in knowledge of any other stamp types that afford the right to work.

Additionally, the assumption many employers have is that visa sponsorship is not only expensive for the company, but also very long and convoluted. And while this may be true to a large extent, there are also ways to ease the burden on employers that many are not aware of. For example, candidates themselves can (and often do) opt to pay the sponsorship fee (this is an issue in itself). Furthermore, services exist to advise and help employers with the administration side of the sponsorship process. With the aid of the Department of Enterprise in perhaps providing this kind of information to employers on a larger scale, this knowledge gap can be effectively addressed in a short period of time.

Difficulty in accessing affordable childcare:

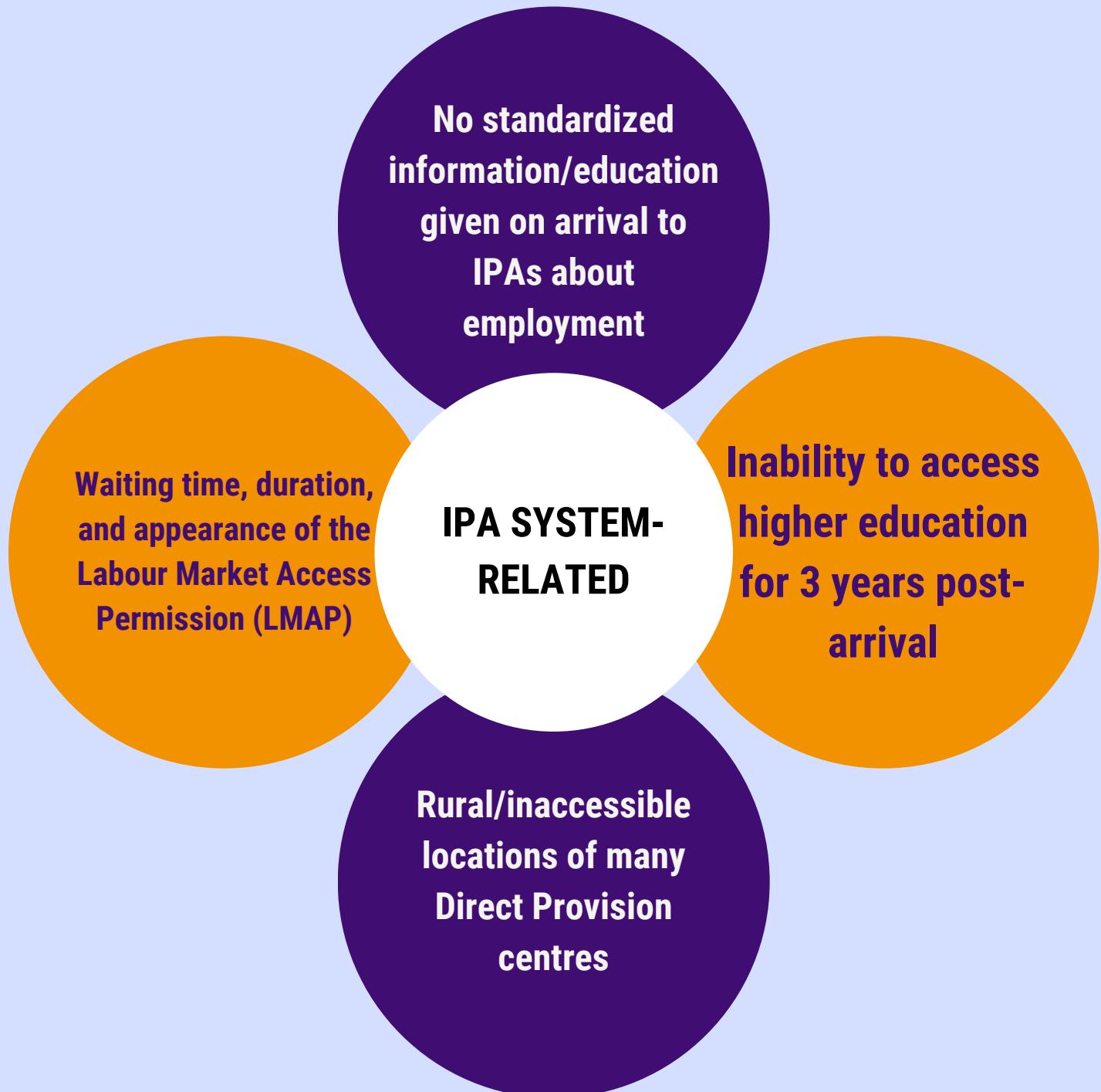
One of the major barriers that is specific to women, is the difficulty in accessing and affording childcare, particularly in Direct Provision settings. As childcare responsibilities tend to fall on women, this barrier greatly disadvantages migrant women jobseekers, who, unlike locals, often do not have an extended family or community system they can engage for childcare.

Many women in the IP system arrive with just their children (potentially seeking asylum from abusive partnerships and communities in the first place), and therefore do not have partners or grandparents who to mind the children during work hours. Moreover, many are unable to even find external childcare if their accommodation centres are located remotely, and generally are unable to afford private childcare.

Even women who are able to afford childcare reported that it was very difficult to find creches or childminders that were accepting more children, particularly if they did not have existing connections in the community to leverage.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION APPLICANTS

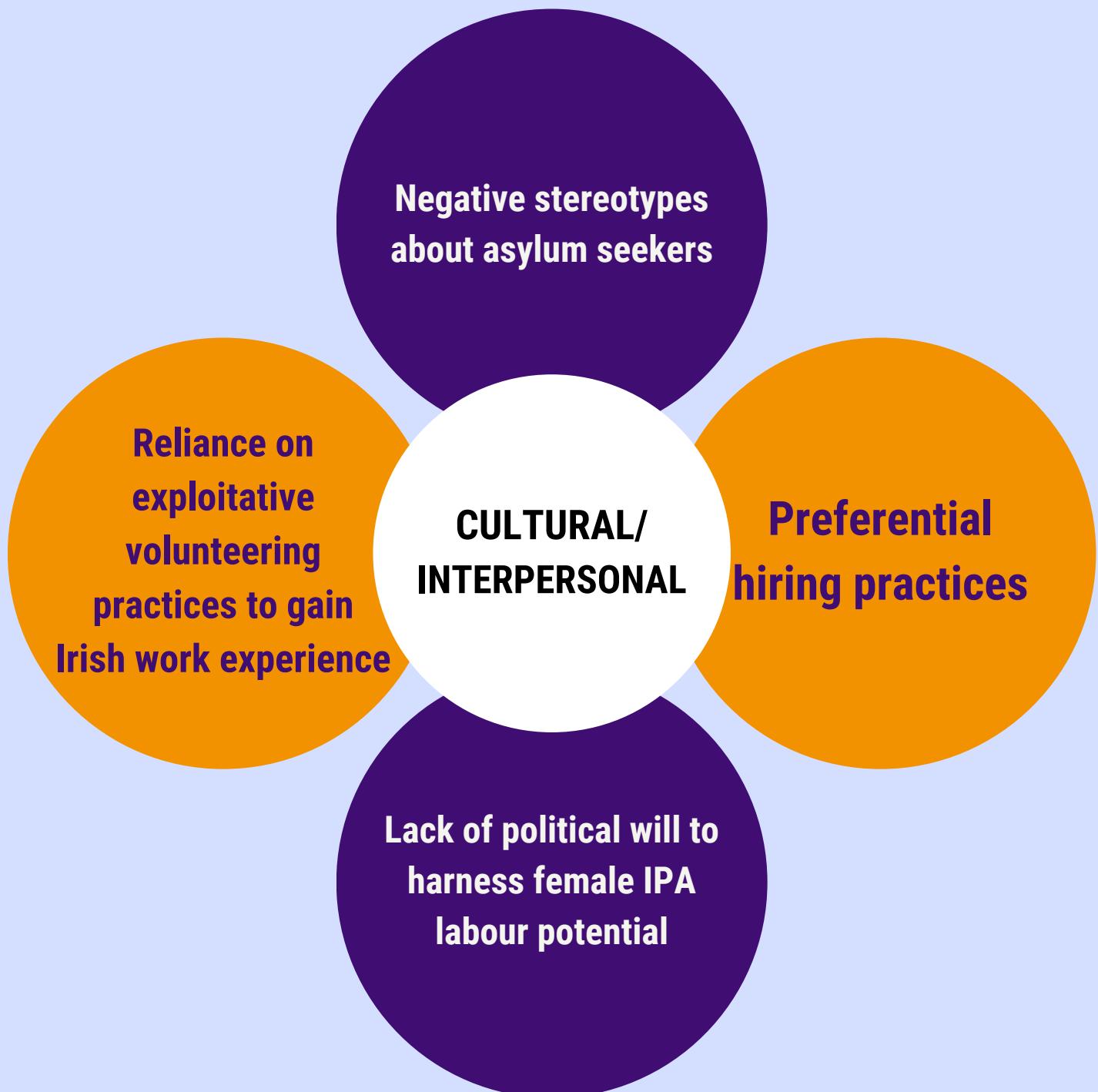
MOST COMMON BARRIERS



QUALITATIVE RESULTS INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION APPLICANTS

28

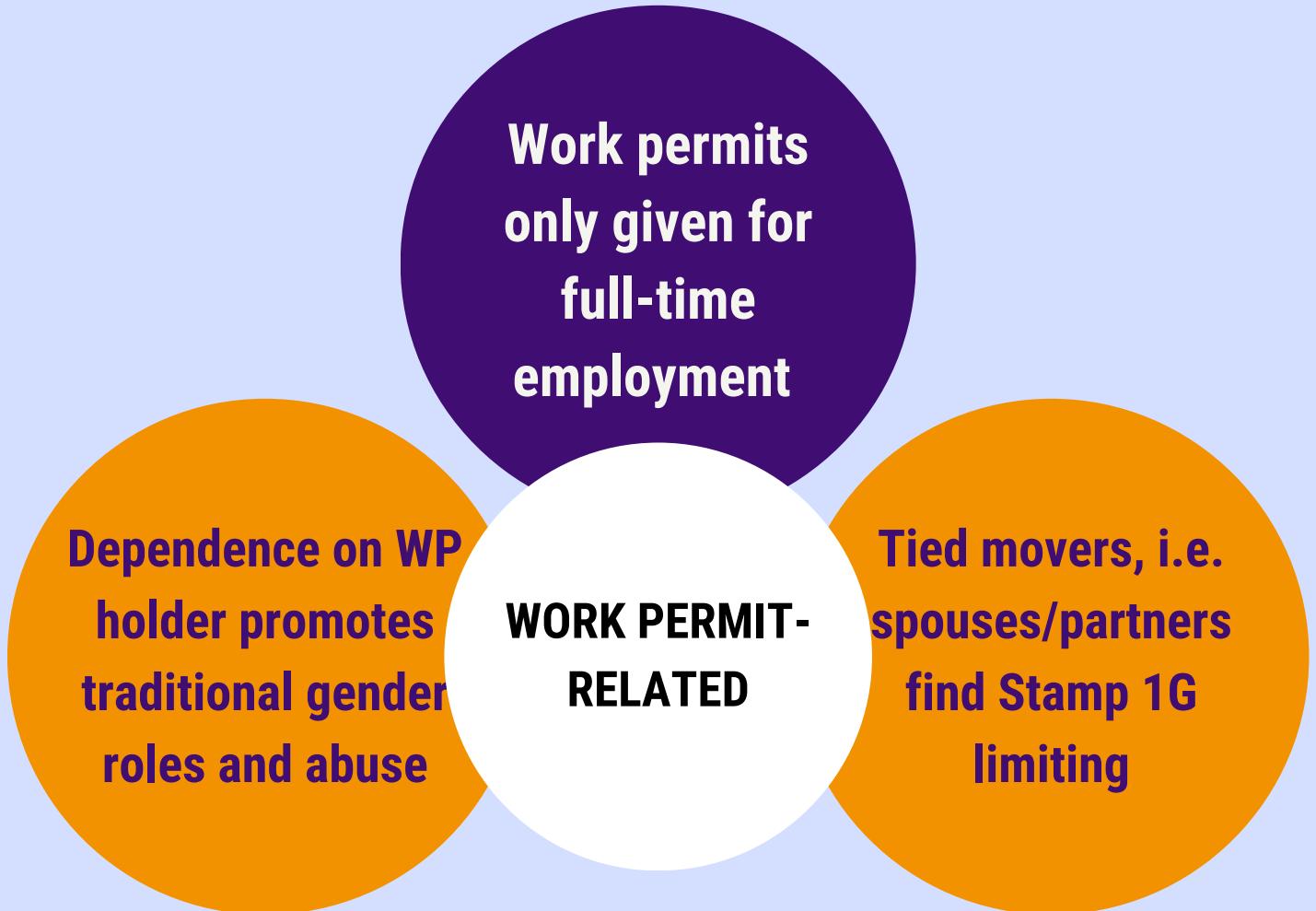
MOST COMMON BARRIERS



QUALITATIVE RESULTS

WORK PERMIT HOLDERS AND SPOUSES/PARTNERS

MOST COMMON BARRIERS



Work permits
only given for
full-time
employment

Dependence on WP
holder promotes
traditional gender
roles and abuse

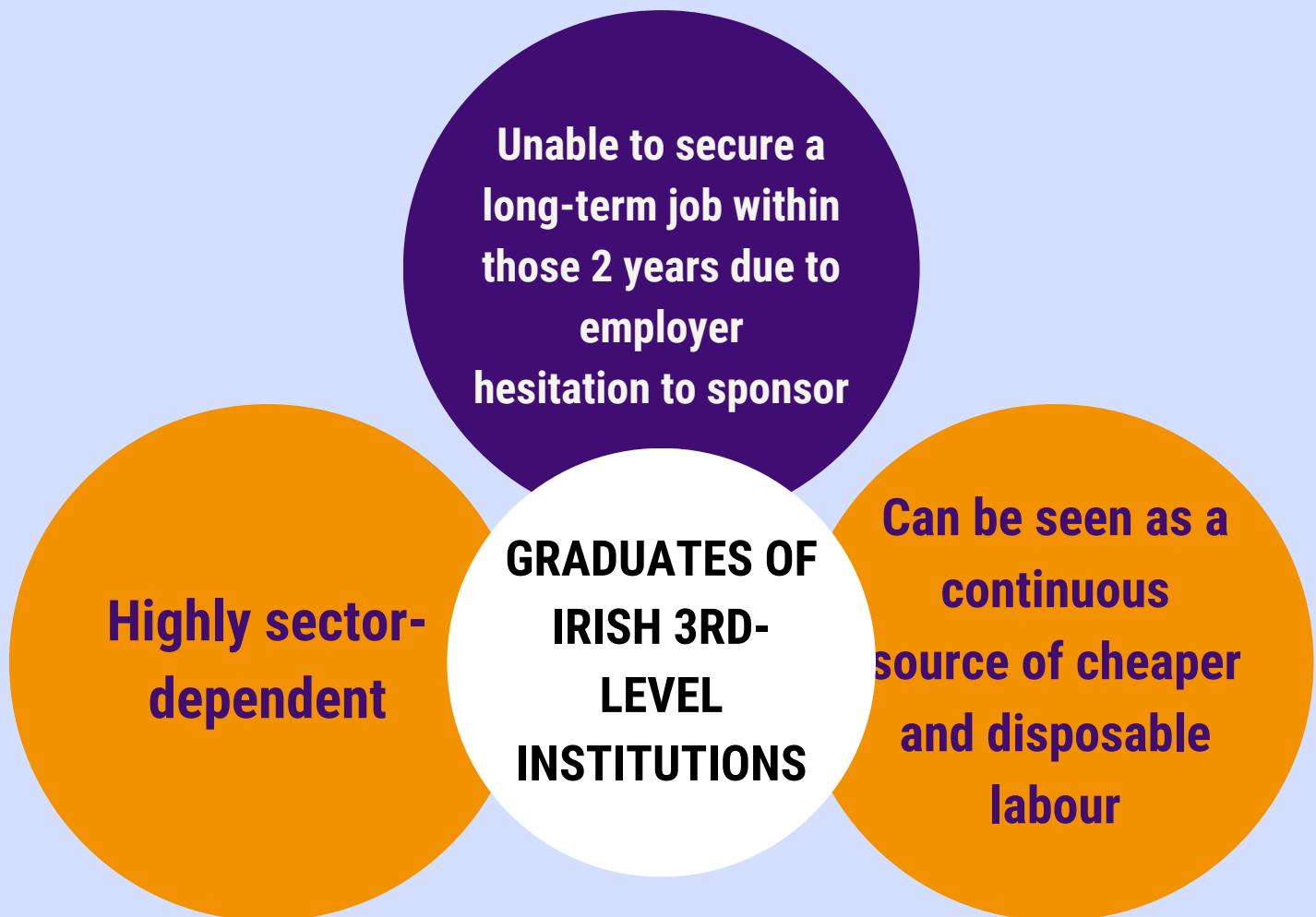
Tied movers, i.e.
spouses/partners
find Stamp 1G
limiting

**WORK PERMIT-
RELATED**

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

STUDENTS, POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHERS, AND ACADEMICS

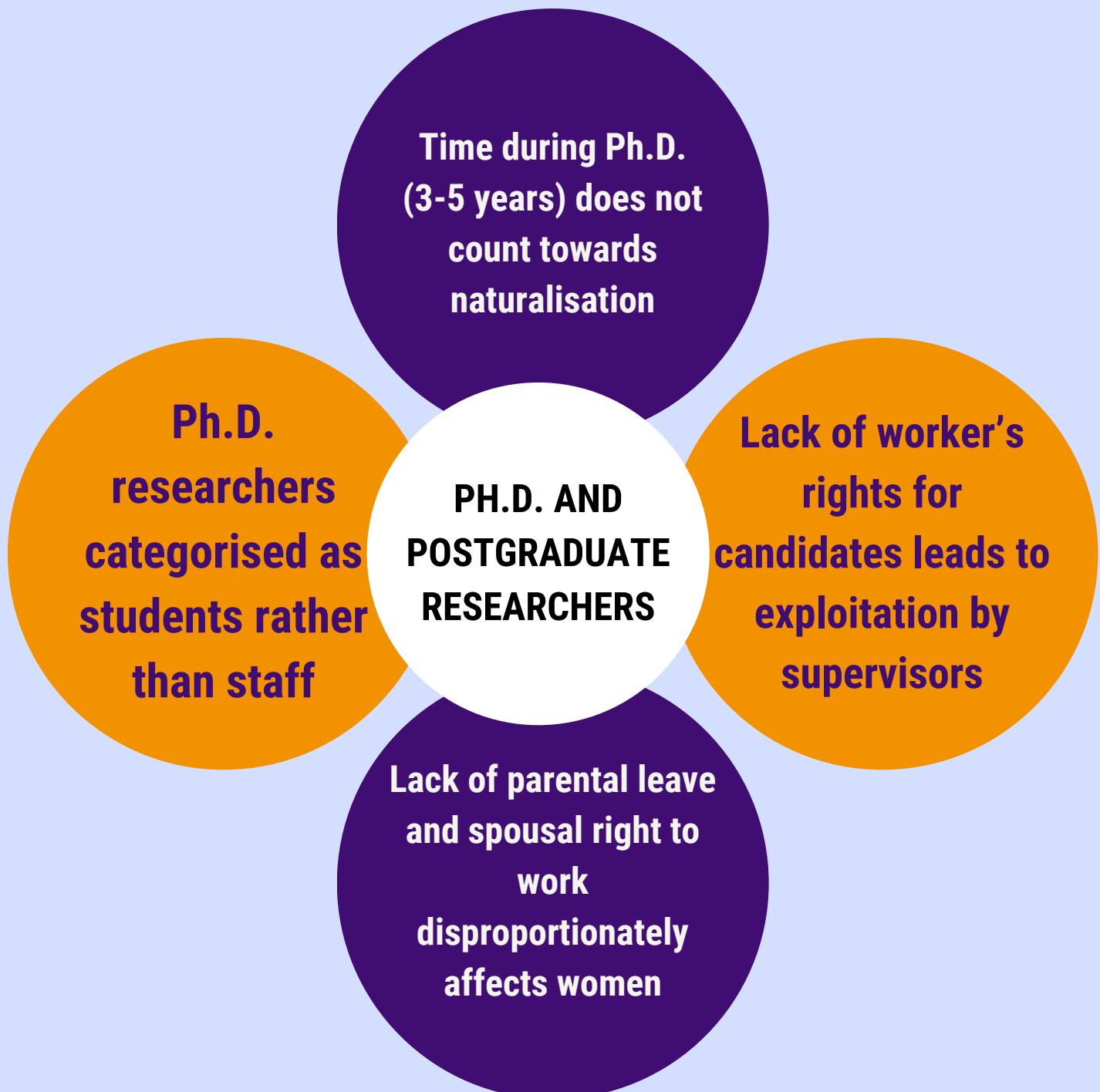
MOST COMMON BARRIERS



QUALITATIVE RESULTS

STUDENTS, POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHERS, AND ACADEMICS

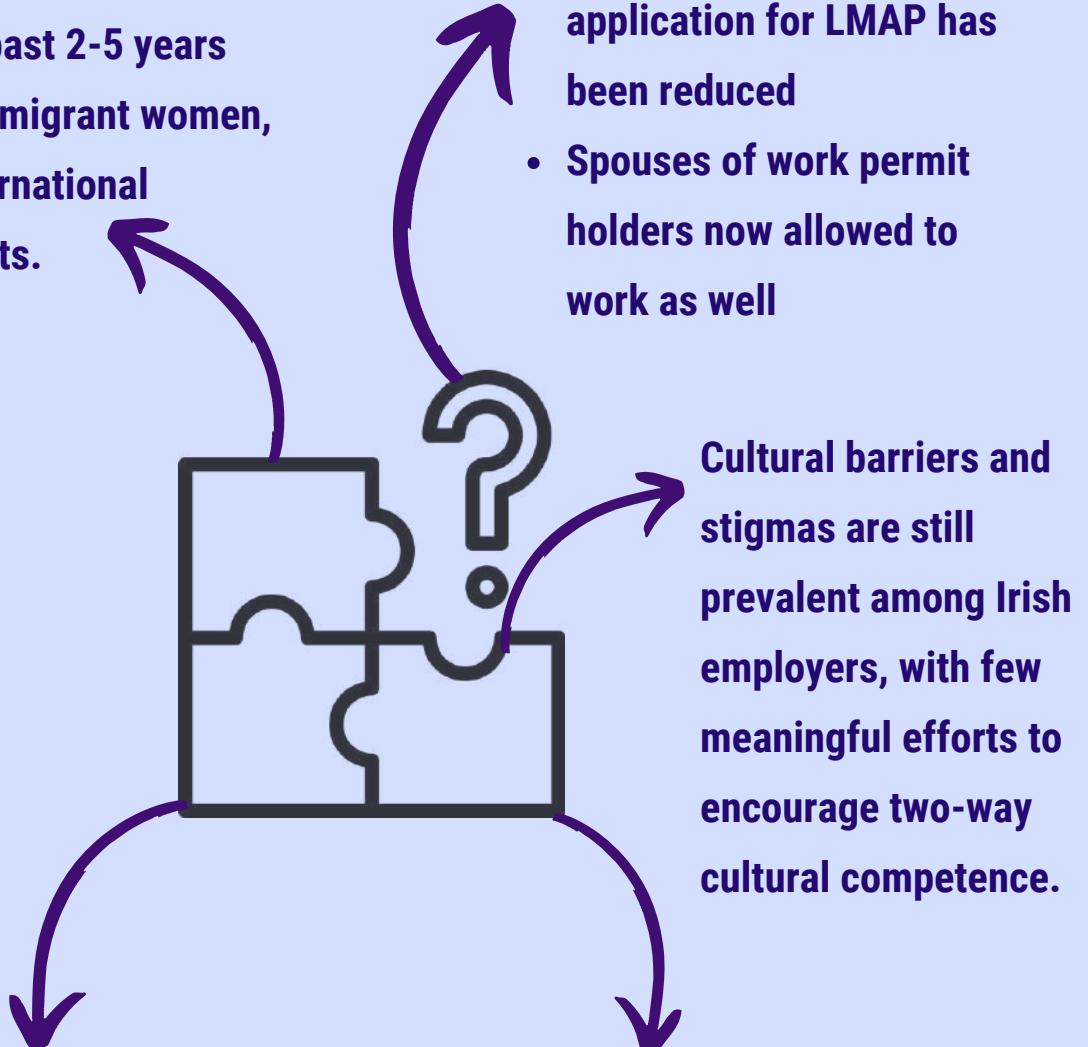
MOST COMMON BARRIERS



RESULTS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Many barriers cited in previous research from the past 2-5 years remain in place for migrant women, particularly for international protection applicants.



Employer knowledge gaps and a lack of intercultural awareness training are major barriers. These are not easily addressed through policy changes unless measures to increase employer engagement and knowledge are also enforced.

There has been some slow progress on certain barriers, such as spousal working rights and wait times for the LMAP:

- Wait time till first application for LMAP has been reduced
- Spouses of work permit holders now allowed to work as well

Cultural barriers and stigmas are still prevalent among Irish employers, with few meaningful efforts to encourage two-way cultural competence.

There is desire in local communities/local authority areas to improve labour market access for migrant women, however there is a need for local political animus to achieve this.

REFORMS STATE-LEVEL

Changing the appearance of the Labour Market Access

Permission to something more durable and 'official' looking, like the residence permit

Increased transparency from/ options for contacting immigration service

Encouraging employers to receive training on the immigration/work permit process from DETE

Expanding access to CE schemes to those in the asylum process

Amending work permit conditions to be more amenable to part-time work combinations to reflect the changing nature of employment

Adding more transportation routes/increased frequency of transport to and from remote accommodation centres

Reducing the wait time for asylum seekers to receive right to work to 3 months

**POLICY CHANGES CAN BE
MADE TO REMOVE SOME
BARRIERS TO LABOUR
MARKET ACCESS**

Separating postgraduate research pathways from the 3rd-level student pathway

Creating a standardized framework to compare and determine degree equivalency for a range of countries and areas of study

Setting up childcare/creche services in Direct Provision accommodation centres

REFORMS EMPLOYER-LEVEL

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Employers can avail of services from companies like Fragomen (a professional immigration consultancy) to learn more about the immigration process

Employers would benefit from reaching out to people and organisations conducting cultural humility/awareness training, require all staff to attend

SUGGESTED CHANGES THAT EMPLOYERS CAN IMPLEMENT

Engaging with migrant-centered and employment-centered organisations like AkiDwA, Open Doors, Talent Beyond Boundaries, Nasc, ICI, IRC, MRCI shows active interest in engaging diverse talent, and allows employers to directly tap into migrant women's professional networks.

Create more diverse screening and interview panels, make the hiring process as blind as possible

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study aimed to understand and investigate the challenges migrant women face in accessing the Irish labour market. While immigration from non-EU countries to Ireland is a more recent phenomenon when compared to other Western nations, it is important for the Irish government as well as civic organisations to address issues of inaccessibility of quality employment as early as possible.

Given that migrant women make up around half of the migrants in Ireland, their involvement in and integration into the economy is vital for moving toward an equal society. The will to integrate and give back to the society is remarkably high in migrant women--unfortunately, this trait also makes them vulnerable to labour exploitation, as outlined by this and previous research.

Black women and women living in the Direct Provision system are most affected by governmental policy oversight and negative cultural attitudes towards migrant women.

There is much room for improvement when it comes to Irish labour policy and the management of the International Protection process. One of the most important aspects to consider in addressing labour shortages in certain sectors, is further facilitating the labour market entry of existing talent pools of migrant women, particularly non-EU migrants and postgraduates already living in Ireland, before recruiting from overseas.

As it stands, a significant amount of migrant women with legitimate and in-demand qualifications remain un- or under-employed--something that ideally would prompt policymakers and other stakeholders to not only acknowledge this unused talent, but to act to bring these women into the fold of the labour market. Implementing policies such as standardised pathways to recognise foreign qualifications, more efficient engagement of local authorities and employers with migrant women are important steps forward in minimizing the state of current discrimination against migrant women.

In future, further research is needed to understand the perspectives of employers and local authorities in relation to the recruitment of migrant women. Working closer with stakeholders such as these will provide a better picture of the potential disconnect between migrant women jobseekers and parties that may be interested in recruiting from this pool of candidates, but are perhaps hesitant to do so or are logically prevented from doing so. As a first step, AkiDwA has planned to develop and conduct trainings for interested employers on the intricacies of the immigration and visa process, particularly pertaining to employment permits and hiring International Protection Applicants; the training will also involve cultural competence development.

Finally, it is our hope that in a few years' time, reports on the labour market outcomes of migrant women will show much more positive results, and fewer of the persistent barriers that we see today.

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