

Policy brief – Deliverable 3.5

Overcoming Hiring Discrimination in Europe

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PATHS2INCLUDE



PATHS 2 INCLUDE

**European Labour Markets Under Pressure –
New knowledge on pathways to include persons
in vulnerable situations**

Title: Overcoming Hiring Discrimination in Europe

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PATHS2INCLUDE is a 3-years research project funded by Horizon Europe that investigates the multi-dimensional aspects of discrimination, policies that could reduce inequalities and promote social inclusion in European labour markets and risk factors of vulnerability that may arise in the future of work. The research focuses on three key labour-market processes: recruitment; career paths; and early exit from working life, giving particular attention to labour-market participation at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, age, health, disability and care responsibilities.

1. Introduction

1.1. Key questions

In our study, we wanted to understand **which company characteristics make recruiters more or less likely to discriminate based on nationality or caregiving responsibilities for young children when hiring**. In particular, we asked the following questions:

- Is discrimination in hiring influenced by the way the recruitment and selection process are organized and formalized?
- Does the size and composition of the recruitment panel matter?
- Does the incidence of discrimination depend on how job positions are structured within firms and how candidates fit these positions?
- What role do diversity-oriented policies including flexible working arrangements play in shaping hiring outcomes?

1.2. Evidence gap

Discrimination in hiring is most often studied through correspondence tests. In these experiments, researchers send nearly identical CVs that differ only in one characteristic — such as gender or an ethnic-sounding name — to real job postings. Differences in call-back rates reveal the extent of hiring discrimination. Findings show that:

- Ethnic-/Nationality-based discrimination is well documented, though its intensity varies by the region of origin (Lippens et al., 2023).
- Gender-based discrimination exists, particularly in gender-segregated occupations: women face disadvantages in male-dominated fields, men in female-dominated ones (Galos & Coppock, 2023).
- Caregiving-related discrimination has been observed, but remains less studied (El Haj et al., 2024).

However, correspondence tests have limits. In these tests, employers do not know they are part of a study. That makes the method powerful, but it also means researchers can not ask follow-up questions about things like workplace structure or hiring practices — doing so would reveal the study and spoil the design. As a result, correspondence tests only give us part of the picture. Other research suggests that bigger companies, government employers, and some industries are less likely to discriminate (Kübler et al., 2018), but this evidence is indirect. To get deeper insights, researchers often use surveys or qualitative interviews, which can show more detail but rely on less rigorous, non-experimental methods (Dobbin & Kaley, 2022; Midtbøen, 2015).

1.3. Methodological Innovation

In our survey, we adopted a different approach by using a factorial survey experiment (FSE). In this method, experienced recruiters are presented with profiles of hypothetical job candidates and asked to assess the likelihood that these candidates would be hired in their organizations. While this design has limitations — participants are aware they are evaluating a hypothetical scenario — the results often align with findings from field experiments (Petzold & Wolbring, 2019). A key strength of the FSE is that it can be combined with a questionnaire. This approach not only captures detailed information about organizational characteristics but also preserves the rigor of an experimental design. It helps pinpoint causal effects that are often blurred in observational studies and gives researchers full control over the information presented, reducing the risk of bias.

In our study, we surveyed more than 2,000 recruiters in Germany, Norway, Poland, and Romania. They were asked to assess the hiring likelihood of candidates for five common positions (such as secretary, accounting clerk, and IT staff). Candidate profiles were randomly varied by characteristics including gender, education, work experience, language skills, national origin, and family status. Alongside this, we gathered detailed information about the companies in which the surveyed recruiters were employed. This allowed us to identify not only which candidate characteristics triggered discrimination, but also which organizational features made recruiters more or less likely to engage in discriminatory behaviour.

We complemented the experimental and survey data with qualitative interviews with employers to better understand how organizational context impacts discrimination. These interviews focused on:

- The conditions under which barriers to inclusive hiring emerge at different stages of recruitment process and how strategies can be developed to promote fairer practices.
- The role of organizational characteristics — such as resources and policies — in shaping hiring decisions that may disadvantage workers in vulnerable situations.
- Employers' reasoning, attitudes, and narratives about the recruitment process as a whole.

2. Main findings

2.1. General Patterns

Our study confirms several well-documented patterns of discrimination in hiring found in the literature, while also highlighting important nuances:

- **Parenthood and partnership status matter:** Consistent with earlier studies, we find clear evidence of discrimination based on care obligations, especially against women. However, the effect we have measured is not very strong.

- **Mothers face the strongest penalty:** Mothers — particularly single mothers — are significantly disadvantaged in hiring compared to other groups.
- **Nationality influences hiring chances:** Immigrant candidates are less likely to be hired than native candidates. More culturally distant groups (Syrians in Germany and Norway, Nepalis in Romania) face stronger disadvantages than culturally closer groups (Ukrainians).
- **Nationality is a powerful predictor:** National background remains one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of hiring outcomes, even if we exclude the impact of native language proficiency, host-country labour market experience, and educational qualifications. Evidence also suggests that ethnic discrimination is more likely to affect male candidates.
- **Patterns are consistent across countries:** Discrimination in hiring based on nationality or caregiving responsibilities was present in every country examined.

However, the most important insights concern how organizational features shape this behaviour — in other words, which company characteristics encourage recruiters to adopt more inclusive hiring practices. In this respect, our findings are highlighted in the next section.

2.2. Organisational Features: Care-based Discrimination in Hiring

- **Diversity measures:** Discrimination based on care responsibilities, particularly against mothers, is less likely in organizations that implement diversity measures such as training on diversity management, inclusive hiring practices, diversity task forces (formal groups dealing with diversity-related tasks in the organisation), or mentoring programs.
- **Work flexibility:** Organizations that provide flexible work arrangements (offering remote work opportunities or flexible working hours) show lower levels of discrimination based on care responsibilities. This particularly benefits single mothers, and to a lesser extent, single fathers, as flexible structures reduce perceptions of incompatibility between work and parenthood.
- **Greedy jobs:** Mothers applying for high-demand “greedy jobs” (requiring overtime, business trips, weekend work, and availability on a short notice) face poorer hiring prospects, regardless of their partnership status. This suggests that employer-driven exclusion, not only women’s choices, contributes to their underrepresentation in such roles.

2.3. Organisational Features: Ethnic-/ Nationality-based Discrimination in Hiring

- **Recruitment panels:** Discrimination is more common in organizations where hiring decisions are made by a single recruiter than in those using collective panels. Collective decision-making fosters accountability and reduces the likelihood of biased outcomes.
- **Diversity goals and measures:** Setting ethnic diversity goals linked to monitoring (e.g., reporting requirements or the presence of diversity managers) is associated with lower levels of discrimination. However, what truly matters are the concrete policy measures companies adopt.
 - **Effective practices:** The most effective measures include inclusive hiring procedures, mentoring or buddy programs, and support schemes for foreign employees — such as help with administrative, legal, or housing issues — even when these are organized informally. Language-matched buddies (mentors who share the same native language as new employees) are particularly valuable for integrating migrant workers, especially those with refugee backgrounds. Mentoring schemes are widely seen as effective tools for social integration and for transmitting company values, even in smaller firms.
 - **Mediation effects:** The positive effect of diversity goals, as well as the lower discrimination levels observed in larger and public-sector organizations, is largely explained by whether concrete diversity measures are implemented. Goals, company size, or sector alone have little impact unless they translate into tangible practices.
- **Training opportunities:** Organizations that offer extensive training opportunities, particularly to new employees, show less discrimination in hiring against non-native groups. Training may reduce employer concerns about immigrant–native skill or productivity gaps. While training programs are widespread and often included in onboarding, their content and focus vary. Larger firms sometimes use them to raise diversity awareness among recruiters, while smaller firms tend to focus on technical or task-related skills.
- **Customer-facing jobs:** Discrimination is stronger in positions requiring frequent interaction with external stakeholders, such as customers or suppliers. This may reflect taste-based discrimination or employer concerns about communication skills and cultural knowledge.
- **Soft skills as barriers:** Employers often prioritize “fit” or social compatibility over formal qualifications, legitimizing subjective judgments that reinforce inequalities of class, gender, and ethnicity. This emphasis extends even to jobs where soft skills are less relevant, thereby widening the scope for exclusion.

3. Policy recommendations

Based on our findings, we propose the following recommendations. They highlight how employers, policymakers, and social partners can translate evidence into concrete action to reduce hiring discrimination and foster more inclusive workplaces.

- **Flexible work arrangements:** Expand inclusive and flexible work options for all employees, including — but not limited to — flexible working hours, remote work, and the possibility of taking short-notice leave. Policymakers can support this shift with incentives or regulatory frameworks, particularly in sectors where care-related discrimination is most pronounced. Even in “greedy jobs” — high-demand roles often biased against mothers — tailored flexible arrangements can help employees balance family responsibilities with organizational goals.
- **Recruitment processes:** Promote collective recruitment panels over single-person decision-making to strengthen accountability and reduce bias. Encourage formalized recruitment procedures — clear criteria, structured evaluations, and transparent guidelines — to reduce reliance on informal and inconsistent practices.
- **Fair assessment of soft skills:** Employers should clearly define which social skills are relevant for each role, specify their weight relative to formal qualifications, and avoid vague justifications (e.g., “gut feeling”). Transparent and structured tools — such as scoring systems or checklists — should be used to assess soft skills consistently across candidates.
- **Customer-facing jobs:** Develop targeted strategies to reduce discrimination in roles requiring frequent external interaction. Structured evaluation criteria for communication skills can ensure fair and consistent candidate assessments.
- **Diversity goals and concrete measures:** Encourage organizations to set diversity goals backed by tangible actions. Effective measures include inclusive hiring practices, mentoring and buddy programs, and targeted support for foreign employees. Policymakers should ensure these efforts go beyond symbolic commitments.
- **Mentoring and migrant support:** Promote cost-effective mentoring and buddy schemes across firms of all sizes. Governments, regional authorities, specialised NGOs or employer associations can provide templates and guidance, while also offering incentives or subsidies to help SMEs adopt migrant support measures. Matching mentors and mentees by shared language or cultural background can be especially effective for migrant integration.
- **Training opportunities:** Support companies in expanding professional development programs that address both technical skills and soft skills, particularly for new employees. Such trainings help them build confidence, bridge potential skills gaps, and adapt to the workplace. Tailored approaches — such as multilingual options or individualized learning plans — can improve productivity while also reducing the risk of discrimination, including at the recruitment and hiring stage.

- **Soft skills:** The assessment of social skills should be included within the scope of anti-discrimination legislation. Employers could be required to explicitly identify the forms of social competence they seek in candidates and to define the relative importance of such competence in relation to other skills. Additionally, employers should provide transparent and well-founded justifications for the selection criteria they prioritize. Vague references to “chemistry” or reliance on „gut feeling” during interviews should not be considered acceptable grounds for hiring decisions.

4. Further Reading

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