

Student  
ThinkTank



# Rise & Shine

## Project Report

### SEEK Feminist Network

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# INTRODUCTION

This project, part of the broader Rise & Shine initiative of SEEK Feminist Research to Response Network (SEEK), presents a report on migrant and refugee women's current challenges, suggestions, and recommendations towards political participation as lived experiences in the European Union and the United Kingdom. It does so to inform the broader Rise & Shine project, which aims to inform public policy and public perception on how to better support and promote feminist leadership for inclusion in decisions concerning them and towards political participation.

SEEK is a feminist resource and response initiative dedicated to amplifying voices and perspectives of refugee and migrant communities, and especially of women, into public policies and programs in the host countries in which they reside. SEEK, a migrant-women-led organisation, is grounded in the principles of listening, collaborating, learning, and growing together with the communities to include our/their perspective in public policies. The network envisions the power of diversity of knowledges to promote epistemic, political, and social justice for diverse populations in European societies.

This report is the result of a collaboration between the SEEK Feminist Network and the Student Think Tank at Central European University (CEU-STT). The Student Think Tank connects CEU team members to work on projects resulting in policy papers for partner NGOs, governmental bodies, and international organisations. In collaboration with the partners, CEU-STT generates practice-oriented papers aimed at informing policies, organisations' work and producing greater positive impact.

## OVERVIEW OF THE RISE & SHINE PROJECT

Rise & Shine is a transformative endeavour dedicated to supporting migrant and refugee women across Europe and in the Netherlands in particular. It is a dynamic initiative aimed at supporting women to become influential leaders and active participants in shaping inclusive, cohesive, and humane politics. Rooted in the principles of equality, justice, and feminist leadership, this project seeks to address the systemic barriers that hinder the political participation and representation of migrant communities, particularly women, in European societies.

Through a multifaceted approach, Rise & Shine offers tailored support to feminist individuals and collectives, who are passionate about the inclusion of their voices, concerns and proposed solutions, into the decisions and policies concerning and affecting them. By providing access to information, resources, and spaces for organising and mobilising, we aim to amplify the voices and lived experiences of migrant and refugee women. By elevating the voices of migrants and refugees in political decision-making processes, Rise & Shine seeks to create a more inclusive and cohesive democracy, where every voice matters and every person has the opportunity to be heard to thrive.

# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

## FEMINIST LEADERSHIP & INTERSECTIONALITY

Rise & Shine is embedded in a broader feminist and inclusion & diversity initiatives that emphasise equality, equity and social justice for all. Of particular relevance is the term intersectionality that was introduced in 1989 by a feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the dynamics affecting Black women.[1] This notion is not limited to Black women; intersectionality highlights that every person has several identities and their individuality cannot be limited to just one identity whether colour of skin, gender or disability. Bell Hooks and Daphne Lamothe advocate to continue feminist movement, necessary to combat institutionalised oppression.[2]

for public office, and participate in policy formulation and implementation at all levels of government.

2. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) requires states to ensure the equal right of men and women to enjoy all civil and political rights set forth in the Covenant (Article 3). Article 25 guarantees every citizen's right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, to vote and be elected, and to have access to public service. Under both conventions treaty bodies are created, monitoring their implementation by the states and receiving individual communications from individuals complaining on actions and failure to act of the member-states.

## GENDER EQUALITY

International human rights law provides the legal framework for promoting gender equality and ensuring equal political participation for women. Below are some of the most significant sources:

1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. It describes discrimination against women and specifies states' obligations to end such discrimination. Article 7 specifically focuses on women's political and public life, ensuring that women have equal rights to vote, run

## BARRIERS TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

According to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: "The political and public life of a country is a broad concept. It refers to the exercise of political power, in particular the exercise of legislative, judicial, executive and administrative powers. The term covers all aspects of public administration and the formulation and implementation of policy at the international, national, regional and local levels. The concept also includes many aspects of civil society, including public boards and local councils and the activities of

organisations such as political parties, trade unions, professional or industry associations, women's organisations, community-based organisations and other organisations concerned with public and political life.”[3]

Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul explore citizenship, civic rights, challenges faced by migrants, and how their experiences influence the notion of citizenship.[4] Admitting that lack of knowledge of the local language is a barrier, they ask a question: do limited majority language skills necessarily mean failed integration and bad citizenship? Verloo criticises policies of the EU addressing inequalities as failing to embrace intersectionality and to address the representation and participation needs in an era of post-identity politics.[5] Verloo calls to stop focusing on similarities between discriminated persons and groups and develop new policies addressing differentiated inequalities and informed by intersectionality theory.[6]

## **MOBILISING COMMUNITIES FOR POLITICAL CHANGE**

The change in the life of the community and its members is impossible to achieve without its mobilisation and engagement in local politics. Pippa Norris emphasises the role of social capital and civic engagement in strengthening democratic institutions.[7] Sidney Tarrow explores the mechanism of mobilisation and engagement of communities in politics.[8]

Hege Skjeie and Mari Teigen discuss rights to equal participation and public policies for gender balance in Norway. Although gender balance is a central aim of official Norwegian gender equality politics, male hegemony is the dominant feature in most institutional settings.[9] They argue that this inconsistency is treated in official discourse through metaphors of gender equality and utility arguments about women's contributions to public life.

## **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE NETHERLANDS**

About 2.6 million people, or approximately 15% of the population of the Netherlands are migrants, meaning that they were born in a different country.[10] About two-thirds of this population originated in other European countries, with significant numbers from Turkey, Morocco, Suriname, Dutch islands in the Caribbean, and Indonesia. This project also targeted women with refugee backgrounds. In this study, the participants who live in the Netherlands originated from India, Lebanon, Venezuela, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Syria. Although under the Constitution, the Netherlands is a monarchy, the king has no real power, all executive power belongs to the ministers and state secretaries, who are accountable to the parliament, to whom legislative power belongs.[11] According to V-dem Democracy Report 2024 the Netherlands is a liberal democracy, scoring high in the liberal democracy index (LDI) with rank 15.[12]

However, in some respects of democracy the Netherlands are not leading. For instance, the participatory component index (PCI) counts active participation by citizens in all political processes, electoral and non-electoral, taking into account activity of civil society organisations, mechanisms of direct democracy, and participation and representation through local and regional governments. The Netherlands' PCI rank is 41, which is rather low. [13]

## **HUMAN RIGHTS OF REFUGEE AND MIGRANT WOMEN**

A migrant is “a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons.”[14] These reasons might be voluntary like studies in a university, or involuntary like fear of war or a state persecution. People fleeing from their home country might be qualified under international law as refugees, that is “owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”[15] A person can become a refugee “sur place,” on account of events which took place after she left the country of origin. [16] Those migrants who may not

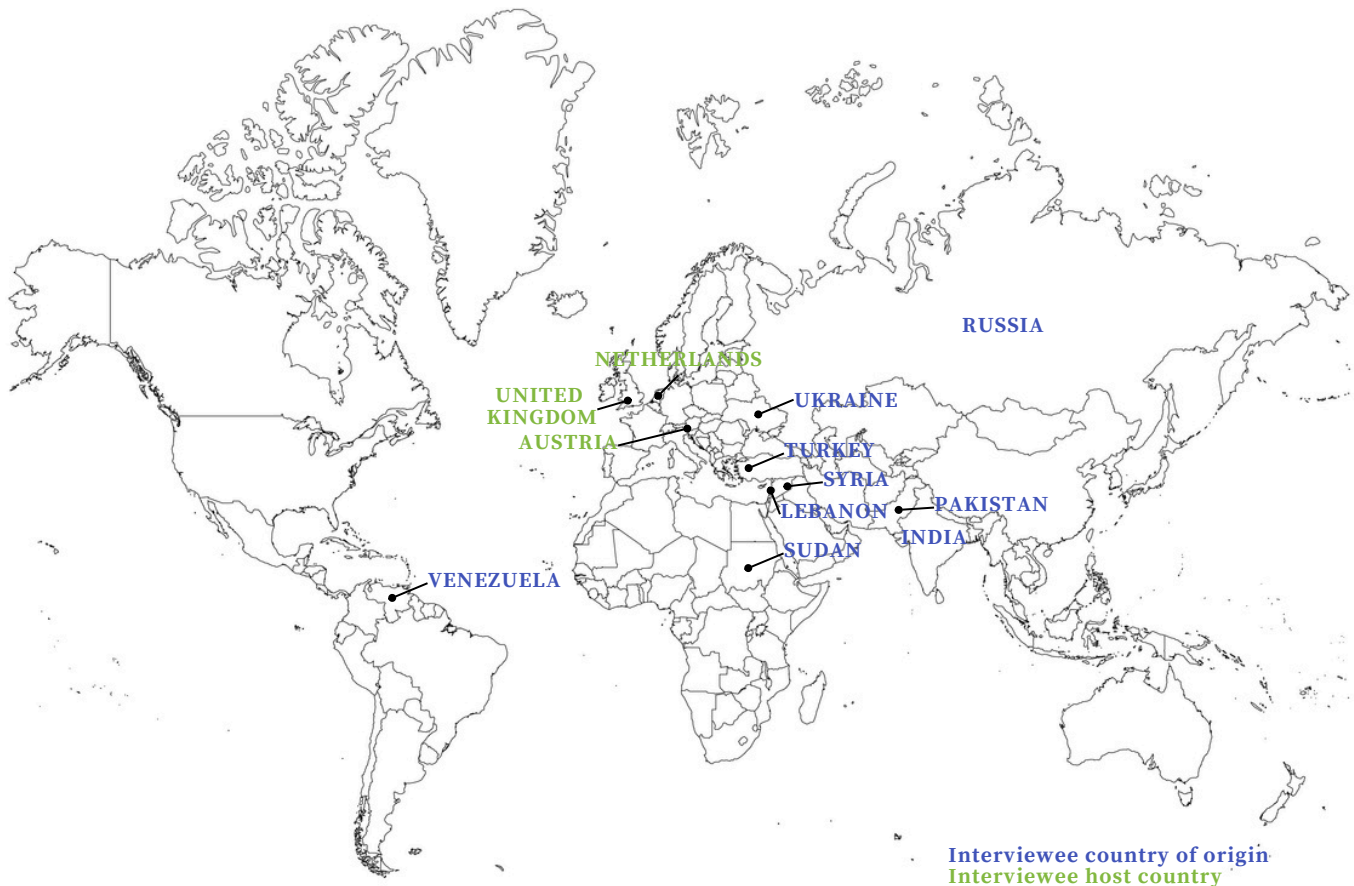
qualify as refugees under international and national law, still might find themselves in vulnerable situations and thus in need of protection.[17]

Human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible and interdependent. [18] Notwithstanding their legal status, migrants and refugees have human rights, which should be respected by the host countries. States are obliged to respect the rights of migrants and refugees within its territory and/or subject to its jurisdiction, without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.[19] To this end, states are recommended to adopt human rights-based, gender-responsive migration regulation, provide opportunities for the regularisation of undocumented migrants, ensuring meaningful participation in civic life. [20] These measures should include relocation and residence policies for human rights defenders and activists in vulnerable situations.[21] Otherwise, migrants and refugees can not meaningfully contribute culturally, socially and economically to local life. [22]

Representation of women, ethnic minorities, and other disadvantaged groups should be ensured.[23] Kymlicka emphasises the importance of inclusive representation in fostering a robust democracy.[24] They argue that the exclusion of specific groups, particularly women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, undermines the democratic process and perpetuates systemic inequalities.

# PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

For this report, SEEK collaborated with members of CEU-STT to organise sessions and collect perspectives of women with migrant and/or refugee backgrounds residing in The Netherlands, the European Union and the United Kingdom at the time of the interview. Women participants self-identified as feminist leaders in their communities or places of work and were engaged in local politics or activism at the time of the project or in the recent past. The CEU-STT conducted outreach via CEU networks and student groups, LinkedIn, and personal and professional networks to reach women for the interviews. Most of the women (70%) resided in the Netherlands at the time of interview; two resided in Austria, and one in the UK. The project acknowledges different national and local political structures in each of these countries but nevertheless can draw trends from the similar experiences of migrants and refugees engaging in these systems in a host country. The women interviewed represented 9 countries of origin including Turkey, India, Sudan, Lebanon, Venezuela, Russia, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Syria. 4 of the interviewees had resided in their host country for eighteen months or less at the time of the interview, while 6 interviewees had been in their host country for more than four years.



Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, guided by a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Women were asked about their experiences participating in politics or activism in their host country and local community including what barriers and spaces they have encountered, with specific questions about language and cultural aspects of engagement. They were also asked to speak to the needs and aspirations of their migrant or refugee community in their host country and recommendations to organisations and decision-makers on how to engage more effectively with communities like theirs. Time was provided at the end of the interview for any additional information or for the interviewee to ask questions to the interviewer. The CEU team members reviewed each interview transcript and recorded answers to each category of interview questions to highlight similarities, trends, and notable anecdotes from the interviews. These were then discussed in a group setting to formulate the main findings and main recommendations presented below. Because the majority of interviewees asked that their names not be used for safety or political reasons, we have decided not to use any interviewees' names in the report.

In addition to the interviews, the researchers received inputs from SEEK leaders on the same categories as the interview questions which have been analysed alongside the interview responses. A literature review (presented above) was conducted in parallel to ground the interview findings and inform the analysis and evaluation of responses.



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

All respondents in the study were active in politics or activism in their countries of origin, and many continue involvement with the politics of their countries of origin remotely or within their diaspora communities at the time of the interview. For example, a woman from India reported serving as a leader with a voluntary group providing support to women entrepreneurs from India while living in the Netherlands. A woman from Venezuela was continuing her activism on environmental issues in Venezuela from the safety of the Netherlands, while a woman from Sudan previously participated in protests in the UK calling for an end to the conflict and to the support for the warring parties in Sudan. A woman from Russia participated in protests and public actions against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The women expressed that they wanted to be more active in the politics of their host country but faced various barriers.

“*The right to freedom of expression, association, and movement along with other legal rights is significant to engage refugee or migrant women to participate in politics.*”

-Interviewee from Venezuela, living in the Netherlands [25]

### a) Language is a main barrier to political engagement

“*I only know English, and not German language. Therefore, I can't read local newspapers or websites, and I get all this information indirectly through someone.*”

-Interviewee from Russia, living in Austria [26]

All participants mentioned language as a challenge to political engagement in their host country, and a variety of different language-related difficulties were reported. Even participants who had resided in their host country for longer periods of time noted language barriers, and an interviewee who spoke English in both her country of origin and her host country also mentioned aspects of language, revealing the multiple ways that language contributes to integration or makes it more difficult.

Most participants affirmed, not speaking the language of the host country as a barrier. One interviewee residing in the Netherlands pointed out that Dutch language classes do exist but there are barriers to accessing them in terms of financial resources and registration processes which are not well understood. Another interviewee living in the

UK noted that "Of course there is a language barrier and also political education because it's very different system, even the ones who are keen to participate, they don't understand how the system works and they [aren't] familiar with their rights, entitlements and so on. But I also think that if there are specific English classes with terminologies that they need to know in order for them to express themselves [politically], that would also be quite helpful." Several other participants spoke about the primary language in their host country in terms of proficiency, describing being made to feel that their non-native language capacities are not good enough, including when it comes to seeking certain types of employment or engaging with local politicians and processes. Three respondents suggested ways to deepen connections with local host communities and overcome language barriers through community celebrations, art, dance, food, and other ways of cultural exchange.

## **b) Unfamiliarity of political and bureaucratic systems hinders political participation**

Several interviewees described differences between political systems in their countries of origin and host countries. They also reported lack of information or education about the system creating a lack of understanding of how the political system operated in the host country. As a result, many respondents reported not knowing how to engage or what their specific rights of participation are as migrants or refugees. Two interviewees living in the Netherlands spoke about lack of knowledge of the political systems in the host country. One spoke about having the right as an international student to vote at the local level, but she did not vote, because she did not have information on the political processes, and she did not know how to obtain the information. Another woman mentioned the inaccessibility and the lack of political will of representatives to engage with her community. Furthermore, a woman living in the United Kingdom reported that because she is not a citizen, it is not evident to her that she can contact her local representatives.

Additionally, for participants with refugee backgrounds and/or who work with refugees in their host country, the bureaucratic hurdles of obtaining and maintaining refugee status distract from political participation.

*"We need information on 'How things work here' to be able to participate in political decision making roles."*

*~Umbreen Salim. SEEK leader, from Pakistan, living in The Netherlands [27]*

### **c) Limited spaces, both physical and digital, a hindrance for women to learn, network and engage in politics**

“During this journey, we need support with information, finances and physical and digital spaces for organising and engagement.”

-Umbreen Salim. SEEK leader, from Pakistan, living in The Netherlands [28]

One of the major obstacles to political engagement for migrant and refugee women is the limitation of spaces for political activities. This includes both physical space and digital spaces, in particular social media, to network and engage in political activities. As claimed by 80% of the interviewees, they require space to engage and to participate in politics, but, unfortunately, they have very limited access to such opportunities due to their migrant or refugee status. For having limited physical space for political engagement, several interviewees identified a lack of funding for this purpose as one of the core grounds. On the other hand, they found their insufficient and inadequate social media skills as the main reason for minimal social engagement. As a result, they are struggling to arrange campaigning, create awareness, and share their political views and messages on social media. An interviewee currently residing in the Netherlands opined that to engage in political activities in the host country, it is essential to access online available information. However, the language barrier and limited research skills are creating a boundary between her and the political engagement of the host country. Another interviewee recognised the necessity for more networking with her community along with the local community of the host country. Nevertheless, her limited physical and social media presence has restrained her from doing so.

### **d) Women unable to return to their home country due to fear of persecution need more information about their rights as refugees**

Another important aspect of the political engagement of refugee or migrant women is that they require more information and awareness regarding their political rights and existing legal remedies as refugee migrants. An interviewee living in the United Kingdom states that the protection of the right to freedom of expression, association, and movement along with other legal rights is significant to engage refugee or migrant women to participate in politics. Moreover, another interviewee residing in the

Netherlands considered that there is a negative public perception concerning refugees and migrants in the host country that hampers the political activities of the refugee or migrant women. In addition, refugee or migrant women do not have adequate lobbying skills and knowledge of successful role models to motivate and assist them in achieving political goals in the host countries. Consequently, they do not trust their capabilities to become a political leader in the host country. Hence, they highlighted the need to attain more information about their rights as refugees or migrants to increase political participation and to become political leaders. A participant from Pakistan shared, "...to raise our voice, involve in decisions concerning and affecting us, engage in political leadership role, bring feminist perspectives to the fore, we must highlight refugee positive contributions and their role in strengthening local democracy and politics."

Having a lawful and authorised visa status for individuals outside of the host country is highly important. Without having proper visa status, individuals are subject to fines, limited access to welfare services, detention as well as deportation. Hence, if a refugee or migrant does not have a legally authorised visa appropriate for him or her, political engagement in the host country seems very problematic and unacceptable. For instance, an interviewee residing in the United Kingdom expressed that she feels insecure because her current visa status is employment-related and time-bound and does not reflect the current humanitarian crisis and civil war in her home country of Sudan. Fear of jeopardising her current visa bothers her from participating in political activities in the host country since it may consequently require her to apply for asylum. Similarly, an interviewee from Russia residing in Austria with an education-related and time-bound visa was involved in anti-war groups in her home country and fled potential persecution because of her views. She is still involved more with her home country politics than Austrian ones but wishes to advocate more within Austria.

*"I'm aware that, according to the refugee and asylum seeking regulations [the government] can exclude you from claiming asylum if they can say you are a threat to public order or the national security. And then, of course, we heard lots of stories about migrants being arrested in political action and they were threatened with deportation. And in my case I have no place to go."*

*~Interviewee from Sudan, living in the United Kingdom [29]*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

*“Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception.” ~ Ruth Bader Ginsburg*

Based on the key findings, this report makes a series of recommendations to decision-makers at the regional, national, and local levels of governments in European countries. The recommendations are designed to address the critical challenges faced by refugee and migrant populations while enhancing the knowledge and capacities that refugee and migrant women bring to their new communities. In this section, we recognize that local language is a key factor in each one of the recommendations. As such, we have incorporated suggestions on how to make political inclusion more accessible to diverse language groups, instead of limiting it to the recommendation directly related to language.

## **1) Provide local language learning facilities and respect the linguistic identity of migrant women**

1. States in the EU should ensure easy and free access to language learning facilities/schools for migrants in refugees upon arrival in the host country, and this must continue till migrants and refugees achieve the required language proficiency levels. EU States should make language instruction available through various methods of instruction, including self-study, take into account working schedules outside of the traditional workday and be subsidised or free of charge.

2. Governments of host countries in the EU should also do more to accommodate the languages that migrants speak. This includes providing materials, especially related to rights and civil services, in languages commonly spoken among refugees and migrants, and making interpretation available while accessing government and civil services. This also includes acknowledging that migrants learning the language of the host country may speak at a level of proficiency which is sufficient to perform a wide range of jobs or social interactions without achieving complete fluency. Host governments and societies should recognize and accept different levels of language proficiency and prevent discrimination against migrants and refugees based on non-fluency or accents in the workforce and other societal spheres.

## **2) Facilitate meaningful participation in decision-making**

3. States in the EU should make efforts by engaging civil society and undertake specific measures to overcome barriers to inclusion and support migrant and refugee women's participation in politics at local and national levels. States should support this by providing information to migrant or refugee women on opportunities to engage with state officials, highlighting that no retaliation would follow even for critics of the state's actions and policies. States should provide mandatory awareness-raising programmes concerning the rights of migrants and refugees (women) and cultural sensitivity training for relevant public and private officials of the host country, recruitment agencies and employers, and social service and healthcare providers.

4. States parties should adopt policies and programmes with the aim of enabling women migrant workers to integrate into the new society, including initiatives focusing on representation in social media and other digital and non-digital platforms important to the local community. Such efforts should be respectful of the cultural and linguistic identities of women migrant workers and respect their human-rights. The policies and measures should be based on disaggregated data and sociological research, and be based on intersectional approaches, thus excluding the "one size fits all" approach, particularly in case of local language proficiency.

## **3) Establish public spaces for communication and learning**

5. States of the EU should ensure that linguistically and culturally appropriate public spaces are available, offering free or low-cost advice on political aspects, political participation, political rights, and, legal and tax advice, as well as learning courses, other activities for socialisation and possibilities to organise events, and gatherings to discuss local politics and engagement. These spaces should be also accessible to the local community and serve as a platform for building communication and social ties between migrants and the local community.

#### **4) Implement human rights-based, gender-responsive migration rules**

6. States of the EU should adopt human rights-based, gender-responsive migration rules, and provide opportunities for the earliest possible regularisation of refugees and migrants, ensuring meaningful participation in civic life.

7. State parties of the EU should undertake measures to prevent migrant workers from falling into irregular status when their job situation changes, including revising the rules that tie the residence status of migrants to a single employer or sector.[30]

8. Governments of host countries should adopt effective regulations to implement the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as country-specific guidelines for enforcement officials. Practically, institute procedures that allow migrants to adjust temporary or time-bound legal statuses based on employment or education to a status of refugee or asylum when political or security circumstances warrant or when they deteriorate when the migrant already resides in the host country. For example, this should include, inter alia, clarification that draft evaders and deserters fleeing from Russia are in fear of mobilisation and participation in the armed conflict, which has been condemned by the international community of states as illegal and where the rules on the means and methods of warfare (jus in bello) are violated.[31] They and their families are thus entitled to protection status.

#### **5) Invest in capacity-building, especially of women**

9. States of the EU should invest in capacity-building programs to encourage diverse women to participate in local political and social life, supporting their confidence, leadership skills, and campaign strategies and celebrating their linguistic backgrounds.

10. Governments of host countries should recognize and support migrant and refugee women's networks and resource centres as partners in advancing women's political participation.

11. EU States must follow an inclusive approach and engage all stakeholders, in particular grassroots community groups and civil society organisations to support and ensure political participation of migrants and refugees at all levels.

## **6) Promote access to information and information sharing**

12. Awareness, migration related materials and services should be provided in women's native languages when needed, and especially when related to political participation, immigration and legal issues.

13. The host state should share information on political processes and participation with migrants and refugees in multiple languages, including making accessible digital platforms where such information is accessible in simple local language using clear, straightforward terms.

## **7) Build opportunities for networking**

14. The host state should provide migrants and refugees with information on political processes and participation in multiple languages, alongside offering digital spaces where information is presented in simple local language and terms. Additionally, organising physical workshops, seminars, and information sessions specifically for women, in collaboration with community groups and civil society, would further enhance their understanding and involvement.

15. The host state should encourage local communities to communicate and get involved with migrants and refugees, for instance create opportunities and incentives for community groups and civil society organisations to organise in-person workshops, seminars, and information sessions for women.



# CONCLUSION

This report summarises the main challenges to local political participation, which migrant and refugee women face in the Netherlands, the EU, and the United Kingdom and offers recommendations to tackle these problems. The report is based on targeted interviews with women of migrant and/or refugee backgrounds, who self-identified as feminist leaders. The interviewees represented nine countries of origin, including Turkey, India, Sudan, Lebanon, Venezuela, Russia, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Syria. They identified four main barriers to political participation in their host communities:

1. Language barriers,
2. Unfamiliarity with political and bureaucratic systems,
3. Limited access to physical and digital spaces for learning, networking, and engagement, and
4. A lack of information on their rights as refugees, particularly for those unable to return to their home countries due to fear of persecution.

Based on these findings, the report offers recommendations for decision-makers at the regional, national, and local levels of government in European countries. These include providing local language learning facilities, respecting the linguistic identity of migrant women, creating opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making, developing public spaces for communication and learning, adopting human rights-based and gender-responsive migration policies, envisioning capacity-building and networking opportunities, and ensuring access to information and information sharing. By supporting these efforts, the States will achieve a more inclusive society where migrant and refugee women experience fewer barriers and have more opportunities for political participation and leadership.

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## Disclaimer

**The views expressed in this policy brief are not necessarily those of SEEK Feminist Network's and solely reflect the views of the interviewees.**

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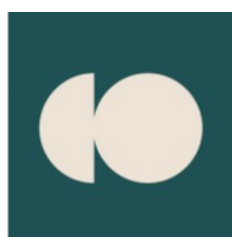
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