

COMMUNITY OUTREACH VOLUNTEERS THEMATIC REPORT 2023

ACCESS TO THE LABOR MARKET AMONG REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN ITALY

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE OF THE REPORT

Integrating refugees and asylum seekers into the Italian labor market is a complex and multifaceted challenge that entails economic considerations and social, cultural, and legal factors that impact their livelihoods. This report is meant to provide a comprehensive overview of the critical aspects surrounding employment opportunities for refugees in Italy. It begins by examining the primary channels refugees use to access information regarding employment opportunities and explores the prevailing attitudes community members have toward employment agencies and support services. The report then analyzes the barriers that hinder refugees' entry into the labor market, including perceived discrimination and the knowledge and exercise of worker's rights. Additionally, the report explores the refugee and asylum-seeker communities' understanding of Italy's labor market, including its structure and opportunities. Lastly, the report provides several useful recommendations for tackling the most urgent issues reported by refugees and asylum seekers in Italy.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this report. A series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted throughout 2023 in Turin, Milan, Bologna, Rome, and Naples. The FGDs were facilitated with the assistance of refugees actively participating in UNHCR-INTERSONS' 'Community Outreach Volunteers' programme. Focus group discussions were chosen as the primary source of data collection due to their capacity to facilitate dynamic and interactive conversations among participants. These discussions were guided by a semi-structured questionnaire that covered topics such as the refugees' awareness of labor rights and available services, barriers faced when accessing the labor market, and experiences of discrimination or stigmatization they may have suffered or witnessed. The data gathered from the focus group discussions were transcribed and thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants who participated in the FGDs were selected to ensure diversity in terms of nationality, gender, age, disability status, and geographic location. Below you may find information regarding the various FGDs and profiles of the participants who contributed to this report:

#	Date	City	N. Participants	Nationalities	Gender
1	06/04/2023	Bologna	6	Ukraine	6 F
2	29/04/2023	Bologna	6	Afghanistan	4 M 2 F
3	13/04/2023	Milan	6	Ukraine	5 F 1 M
4	16/05/2023	Milan	7	Egypt, Niger, Tunisia, RDC, Morocco	6 F 1 M
5	11/05/2023	Turin	9	Ghana, Nigeria, Türkiye, Cameroon, Congo	8 M 1 F
6	20/04/2023	Turin	3	Ukraine	3 F
7	18/04/2023	Rome	6	Somalia, Mauritania, Afghanistan, Tunisia	2 M 4 F
8	06/04/2023	Naples	6	Ukraine	6 F
9	06/04/2023	Naples	5	Various nationalities	3 M 2 F

FINDINGS

A. Knowledge of services and key channels to access the labor market in Italy

In all the focus group discussions (FGDs), the following sources were mentioned by participants as being used to obtain information regarding employment opportunities in Italy:

- Social media was reported to be the primary source of information refugees use to obtain information regarding employment opportunities. Participants mentioned they primarily use Facebook, then consulted WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels.
- Word of mouth within the community was mentioned as another great source of information.
- Family and friends
- Case managers of the reception centers

There is widespread mistrust towards employment services, which are generally not considered to be useful. Some participants reported instances of discrimination or a lack of support from employment services. Most participants in the FGDs agreed with this statement. The Ukrainian community, in particular, noted that when approaching the service providers, they were principally offered opportunities in the care sector (cleaning, domestic work, caring for elders), regardless of the applicant's CV and skills. Additionally, it was generally noted that there was limited awareness of the various services offered by employment agencies.

Furthermore, there is a significant lack of knowledge about workers' rights, trial periods, types of severance pay, and notice contracts. Many participants reported experiencing severe labor exploitation, particularly in the care and agricultural sectors. They mentioned being forced to accept exhausting shifts with minimal pay, often without a regular contract. Generally, it is widely recognized that refugees encounter significant barriers when trying to access labor opportunities, and they are frequently offered illegal work through informal channels.

The types of contracts among FGD participants were varied and included traineeships, co.co.co, short-term, long-term, and self-employment contracts. The Afghan community reported that those who arrived through regular channels and were placed within the official Italian reception system found it easier to secure jobs, as they had access to training programs and schools that facilitated their access into the labor market.

Case managers and personnel in reception centers were often cited as support systems that aided refugees by conducting skill assessments, supporting with the drafting of CVs, and providing advice on the labor market. Nonetheless, there have been complaints from participants about a lack of individualized support from the personnel.

While training programs aimed at job placement were widely recognized as valuable opportunities and entry points, most participants reported difficulties participating in such activities due to time constraints, limitations regarding language skills, and a general lack of information regarding available training opportunities. Participants mentioned that these opportunities were not aligned with the 'urgency' refugees and asylum seekers face when finding employment to support themselves and their families often needing to secure a job before fully mastering the local language, which ultimately diminishes their chances of accessing better employment. Participants who attended training courses aimed at job placement did find jobs.

Several participants reported that, with the support of Team Leaders, they contacted UNHCR's "Welcome" Liaison Officer and initiated the profiling process to find a job. One participant even received a job offer through this channel. Many respondents mentioned that they had been profiled for the 'GOL' program, a national-level PNRR program aimed at supporting unemployed individuals, particularly those in vulnerable situations. However, they did not fully understand how the program operates and were not contacted by the employment service.

B. Barriers to access to the labor market

Refugees seeking employment in Italy encountered several obstacles, as highlighted by the findings of the FGDs. The first among these challenges is the **language barrier**, an issue acknowledged by all groups participating in the FGDs. While some participants argued that proficiency in Italian is not mandatory for all jobs, many employers prefer it, making it difficult to find a job for those still learning the language.

Moreover, **cultural differences** can be an obstacle, leading to misunderstandings and tensions in the workplace. **The feeling of being discriminated against** has also frequently been mentioned by participants. According to the participants, employers often favor Italian candidates over equally qualified foreigners. Additionally, obtaining essential **documents**, such as a bank account, can be tricky, particularly for asylum seekers, thus adding to the difficulties they face when accessing employment opportunities.

Another significant challenge faced by many refugees is the **recognition** of their **university degrees**. Participants reported that academic qualifications are often not recognized in Italy. This gap can lead to underemployment or the inability to access job opportunities aligned with the refugees' education and skills.

For **refugee women**, balancing family duties with working hours can be an additional challenge. Often, they have to turn down job offers due to logistical reasons, making it even more difficult for them to enter the workforce.

Finally, some refugees mentioned finding themselves constrained by **geographical factors**, as a lack of transportation options limited their ability to reach workplaces outside urban centers.

C. Understanding the Italian Labor Market

The FGDs reported that refugees have various levels of understanding of the Italian labor market. There was a general lack of awareness regarding the various types of Italian labor contracts among participants. Additionally, various participants perceived Italian contracts to be complex, and some refugees believe employers may not always adhere to their provisions.

Moreover, there is a pervasive lack of knowledge concerning the services designed to assist workers in Italy. Many refugees, when faced with workplace issues, including labor exploitation, struggle to identify the appropriate support mechanisms. Oftentimes, they resorted to seeking assistance from lawyers whose contacts they found on social media platforms like Whatsapp and Telegram. The roles of key entities such as INPS (Istituto Nazionale per la Previdenza Sociale) and trade unions remain largely unknown or are not clear to many. Understanding employment contracts and the associated rights and responsibilities is a challenge for many, and the lack of familiarity with INPS adds to the complexity.

This lack of knowledge of Italian labor laws and support systems contributes to a refugee's sense that employment and life in Italy are temporary. They may not envision settling in the country, due, among other factors, to their limited understanding of their rights and the resources available to them.

An important finding that stemmed from the FGDs is the minimal awareness of workers' rights among the refugee community. This limitation is due to the nature of their employment, which frequently involves informal or irregular contracts, moonlighting (having two or more jobs at the same time), or on-call contracts.

Even in cases of individuals who were aware of their rights, such as the right to maternity and sick leave, this information does not translate into meaningful benefits for most of them. For this reason, even when participants were aware of their rights, they preferred not enjoying them. For example, if they have a right to maternity leave, they may not be able to take it because they have irregular working hours or are not in a stable situation of

employment. In essence, various participants in FGDs felt that having knowledge about their rights doesn't necessarily translate into practical benefits for their work and circumstances of employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insight gained from the focus group discussions and analysis across various aspects of refugee employment in Italy, the following recommendations were made:

1. Awareness Sessions and Campaigns

Implement comprehensive and easily accessible information sessions to educate and inform refugees and asylum seekers about Italian labor laws, employment contracts, and available support systems. Through the Community Outreach Volunteers programme, awareness sessions covering various topics, such as the Italian labor market, types of employment contracts, workers' rights, employment services, and trade unions, have been conducted both online and in person, in the cities where the FGDs took place. These sessions were received with great interest by the refugees who attended, and for this reason, the sessions will continue to be delivered in the same locations.

2. Language Programs

Support Italian and refugee-led organizations to promote language courses that not only focus on linguistic competence but also promote cultural integration. These programs should be designed to improve refugees' Italian language skills, allowing refugees to find employment and integrate into Italian society more easily. One example is the Italian language course to obtain a driving license, promoted by the refugee-led organization Ghidey in Milan. Another example is the programme proposed by Assolavoro, where an Italian course is to be provided to refugees before engaging in professional courses and job orientation. This last idea was widely appreciated by refugees and asylum seekers during awareness sessions.

3. Professional Training Courses

Support Italian and refugee-led organizations to promote professional training courses that also promote cultural integration and the learning of the Italian language. These programs should be designed to improve refugees' professional skills, making them more employable and integrated into Italian society, building on previously acquired skills or new ones. One example is the baking and pastry course implemented this year by the RLO "Camerunesi di Roma e Lazio" through UNHCR-INTERSOS' Programme PartecipAzione. The course was held in Italian and aimed at providing professional skills for refugee and asylum seeker women.

4. Promoting Inclusivity

Encourage employers to value the diverse skills and experiences refugees bring to the workforce. Promote equal opportunities and fair treatment and fight discrimination through educational programs. One example of such an initiative is the Integration Programme promoted by UNHCR, 'Welcome,' which facilitates refugee employment by awarding companies for their efforts in hiring refugees. The project also provides resources and tools to companies interested in employing refugees, offering specialized training on international protection and diversity in the workplace, and fostering the exchange of information and best practices for refugee labor market inclusion.

5. Recognition of Academic Qualifications

Facilitate the process for refugees to validate and convert their academic and professional qualifications, including establishing dedicated services (such as CIMEA) that can be found in UNHCR's One-Stop-Shops programme.

6. Access to Financial Services

Support refugees in the administrative processes (e.g., opening a bank account) through dedicated services in the UNHCR One-Stop-Shops, ensuring that refugees can easily access financial services. Provide training to community outreach volunteers so they may more easily facilitate access to financial services or set up informative sessions on financial services and financial knowledge so they may inform community members allowing communities to become self-reliant.

7. Transportation

Address transportation challenges faced by refugees, especially those in rural areas or who find themselves outside urban centers. Advocate for easier driving license recognition and access to driving license tests in other languages, such as English or French, and explore initiatives such as affordable public transportation options to improve their mobility and access to job opportunities.

REFERRALS BY COMMUNITY OUTREACH VOLUNTEERS

From September 2022 to November 2023, community outreach volunteers (COV) facilitated access to services related to the labor market for **946** individuals within their community through referrals.

Referrals have been made using two different modalities:

- **Self-referrals:** when community outreach volunteers provide information regarding a specific service to a member of the community in need.
- **Referrals facilitated by community outreach volunteers:** when the volunteers directly facilitate access by supporting with booking visits, accompanying members of the community in need to the service provider, and providing linguistic and cultural mediation.

Regarding the Ukrainian community, **848** referrals have been conducted, 86% of which were self-referrals, and 14% were directly facilitated by volunteers. Among the people who were informed regarding services related to the labor market and job opportunities, 504 were women (59%) and 344 were men (41%).

Regarding other refugee communities, **94** referrals have been conducted, of which 79% self-referrals and 21% referrals directly facilitated by volunteers. Among them, 55 referrals interested women (56%) and 43 men (44%).

It is interesting to note that many referrals were combined with information regarding access to language classes, information on documents and postal and banking services, and key assets needed to access the labor market, as was shown through the focus group discussions.