

# **Migrant mothers: triple vulnerability and the right to a dignified life**

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**Policy Brief**

# Policy brief

In Barcelona, a group of migrant mothers came together in 2025 to transform their experiences into political action. With the support of Platoniq and through Legislative Theatre, they staged moments that weighed heavily on them every day: the closed door of a real estate agency upon seeing a hijab, the humiliation in an interview for being a single mother, the coldness of a health centre that questioned her right to be treated. Each scene was a mirror of exclusion, but also a starting point.

## A project lead by:

Fundación Platoniq

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Un proyecto liderado por:

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En colaboracion con:



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# OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

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We are not migrants, we are people

Young people must be at the forefront of developing public policies that affect them

# Migrant mothers: triple vulnerability and the right to a dignified life

## Context

In Catalonia, thousands of migrant mothers sustain their families' daily lives while bearing a triple vulnerability that leaves them on the brink of exclusion.

Institutionally, they face a bureaucratic maze: impossible-to-complete digital procedures, appointments that never arrive, officials who treat them with mistrust. The Immigration Law turns every administrative procedure into an obstacle course, where time is measured in months of waiting and anxiety about whether they will be able to renew a permit or access assistance. What should be a support system becomes a space for institutional abuse.

In the workplace, administrative irregularity pushes them into the underground economy. Without a contract, without rights, with wages that are barely enough to pay for a shared room. Motherhood, far from being protected, becomes an argument against them: "How are you going to work if you are alone with your children?" they are asked in interviews where their abilities are systematically devalued.

In residential and community settings, exclusion is even more tangible. Estate agents who say the flat has already been rented when they see a hijab. Neighbours who walk away in the park when they try to strike up a conversation. Impossible requirements to meet – stable income, guarantees – that close the door to decent housing. The result is insecurity and a feeling of not belonging to any community.

The figures confirm this: in Catalonia, some 160,000 people live without papers, 57,000 of them in Barcelona. A significant proportion are women with dependent children. In Barcelona, almost 18% of homeless people are migrants, many of them mothers who have exhausted all their support networks.

This document brings together their voices and proposes public policies that respond to a basic truth: Catalan society cannot afford to continue to ignore those who already provide a large part of its care and community life. Recognising the rights of migrant mothers is a matter of justice and democratic cohesion.



## About the process

In 2025, a group of migrant mothers in Barcelona participated in a Legislative Theatre workshop facilitated by Platoniq, with the aim of rethinking the right to the city from their daily experience of discrimination and exclusion. We used the dramatisation of real scenes and participatory research to transform their experiences into concrete policy proposals.

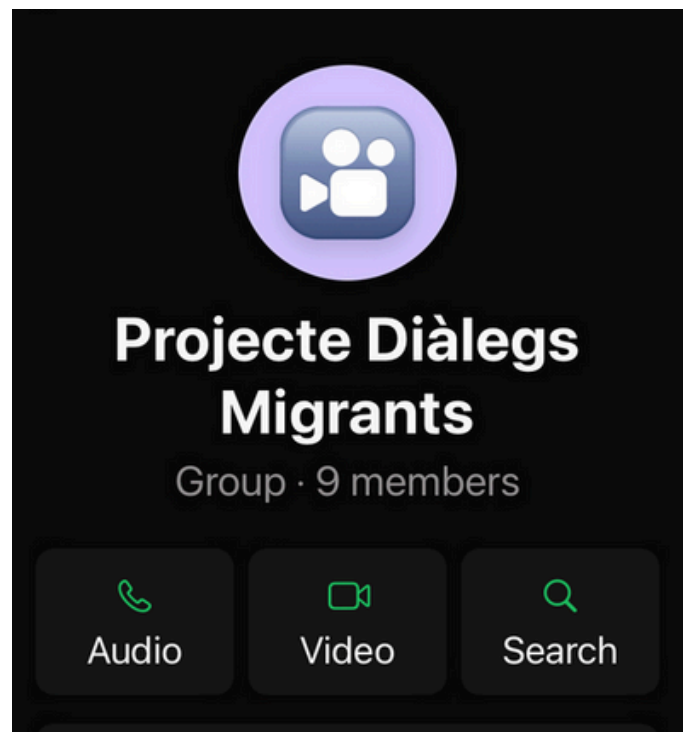
Legislative Theatre consists of representing real oppressions to open up a space for deliberation where those affected and the audience—who become spect-actors—rehearse alternative responses, question norms, and co-create solutions. In this case, the migrant mothers shared scenes related to access to housing, employment, and social and health services.

The first scene, about housing, narrated by Fatima, reflected the rejection of a real estate agency when they saw her wearing a hijab. Her testimony revealed the habitual discrimination in the rental market. In the performance, the audience rehearsed responses and proposed mandatory diversity training for real estate agents and strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.

The second scene, about work, performed by Sofía, exposed the humiliation she suffered in an interview when she was questioned about being a single mother and having a foreign degree. The collective reaction transformed indignation into proposals: sanctions against workplace discrimination, diversity programmes in companies and work-life balance measures adapted to migrant mothers.

The third scene, about social services and healthcare, dramatised by Amina, showed how a Muslim mother was mistreated at a health centre: long waits, contemptuous treatment and accusations of negligence towards her daughter. The performance highlighted institutional mistreatment and led to a clear proposal: cultural competence training for health and social services personnel, equal care protocols, and community mediators in health centres.

This process recognises that migrant mothers are not passive recipients of policies, but active builders of city and citizenship. By putting their voices and experiences at the centre, Legislative Theatre shifts the focus from individual deficits to the structures that produce exclusion, and opens up the possibility of collectively imagining a more just and inclusive society.



# Recommendations on public policy

As a conclusion to the three scenes worked on, the participants co-produced a series of policy recommendations aimed at public administrations:

## 1 Decent access to housing

The scene on housing revealed how racial and religious discrimination in the property market drives migrant mothers into overcrowding or residential exclusion. Based on this diagnosis, the following is proposed:

1. Establish mandatory training in diversity and inclusion for estate agents.
2. Implement a system of real sanctions against discrimination in the rental market.
3. Allow access to public and social housing programmes for people with proven roots (registration, community participation), even if they lack administrative documentation.

In Barcelona, the commitment to guarantee access to housing and combat discrimination is articulated from different municipal fronts. The Department of Social Rights, Global Justice, Feminism and LGTBI promotes programmes to foster inclusion and protect the most vulnerable groups. The Municipal Institute of Housing and Rehabilitation (IMHAB) is responsible for managing public and social housing in the city, while the Office for Non-Discrimination (OND) is the place where people can report rejection or unequal treatment in accessing housing, ensuring follow-up and redress.

At the regional level, the Government of Catalonia complements these powers with more far-reaching policies. The Department of Social Rights leads social inclusion and housing strategies, while the Catalan Housing Agency implements public housing programmes throughout the region. Finally, the Directorate-General for Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination establishes the regulatory framework that guarantees that no one is excluded on the grounds of origin, gender or religion, including in the right to decent housing.

The proposals translate into concrete measures to transform access to housing. The first is compulsory training in diversity, with courses accredited by the Official Association of Real Estate Agents and the creation of an "Inclusive Housing" seal that recognises agencies that comply with non-discrimination standards. Added to this is the need for effective sanctions against discrimination, with a dedicated inspection unit and a streamlined complaints system capable of responding quickly and firmly to detected cases. Finally, it is proposed to guarantee access to housing based on roots, reforming public housing scales so that registration and community participation can be recognised as sufficient proof, while creating specific emergency housing quotas for migrant mothers with dependent children.

## 2 Fair employment free from abuse

The scene on employment showed how motherhood and administrative irregularities are used as excuses to deny job opportunities, perpetuating exploitation in feminised sectors. The collective proposals were:

1. Promote an exceptional administrative regularisation mechanism for migrant women with more than two years of residence and social roots.
2. Create job placement programmes with a gender and work-life balance perspective, linked to local companies and cooperatives.
3. Strengthen labour inspection in the care and cleaning sectors, where exploitation and abuse are concentrated.

***“Without decent contracts or proper inspections, migrant mothers remain trapped in precarious situations.”***

At Barcelona City Council, the commitment to fairer employment is implemented through the Department of Social Rights, Global Justice, Feminism and LGTBI, which promotes equality policies and support for vulnerable groups, with the capacity to promote job placement programmes with a gender perspective. Added to this is the role of Barcelona Activa, the municipal agency for economic development and employment, which offers training, integration pathways and support for entrepreneurship, and which is a key space for integrating programmes aimed at migrant women seeking access to decent and stable jobs.

In the Generalitat de Catalunya, these powers are extended and coordinated at the regional level. The Department of Business and Labour designs labour policies, manages employment authorisations and coordinates integration programmes throughout the territory. The Catalan Labour Inspectorate, for its part, plays a crucial role in monitoring compliance with regulations and strengthening controls in highly feminised sectors such as care and cleaning, where labour exploitation is more frequent. Finally, the Department of Social Rights complements these functions with social inclusion programmes that can be linked to specific employment pathways for migrant women in vulnerable situations, thus integrating social justice and real access to the labour market.

The proposed actions aim to transform the employment situation of migrant mothers on several fronts. Firstly, it proposes promoting an administrative regularisation mechanism that recognises the labour and social roots of migrant women, with the support of social entities that can accredit their contribution and assist with their paperwork. At the same time, it is essential to expand the labour integration programmes already developed by Barcelona Activa and various local cooperatives, incorporating pathways that guarantee decent contracts and working hours compatible with childcare responsibilities. Finally, it is essential to strengthen labour inspections in sectors where exploitation is most prevalent, such as care, cleaning and hospitality, prioritising flexible mechanisms for anonymous reporting and applying effective sanctions against abusive practices.



# 3 Social services and healthcare without discrimination

The scene on health and social services exposed the institutional mistreatment suffered by poor Muslim migrant mothers, questioning their right to care. The recommendations derived were:

1. Incorporate training in cultural competence and non-discrimination for all social and health service staff.
2. Create protocols for priority care for migrant single-parent families, recognising their specific vulnerability.
3. Expand the coverage of interpreters and cultural mediators in hospitals and citizen service offices.
4. Establish protocols for equal care with external supervision that sanctions institutional abuse.
5. Incorporate migrant community leaders as permanent mediators in health centres and social services.



At the municipal level, Barcelona City Council focuses its efforts across several areas. The Department of Social Rights, Global Justice, Feminism and LGBTBI manages social services and inclusion programmes, with the capacity to implement protocols for priority care for migrant families. The Municipal Institute of Social Services (IMSS), which is responsible for community centres, is a key space for incorporating training in cultural competence and community mediators. In turn, the Barcelona Public Health Agency (ASPB) designs and implements the city's public health policies, with scope to establish protocols for equal care and plans against discrimination in local healthcare.

At the regional level, the Generalitat de Catalunya also distributes responsibilities. The Department of Health manages the hospital network and primary care, where training in cultural competence and inclusive protocols must be integrated. CatSalut (Servei Català de la Salut) administers healthcare provision and is responsible for expanding the coverage of interpreters and mediators in health centres. For its part, the Department of Social Rights coordinates social services policies and can promote the incorporation of community mediators for vulnerable migrant families. Finally, the Directorate-General for Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination establishes the regulatory framework that ensures that all public services—including health and social care—are provided without discrimination.

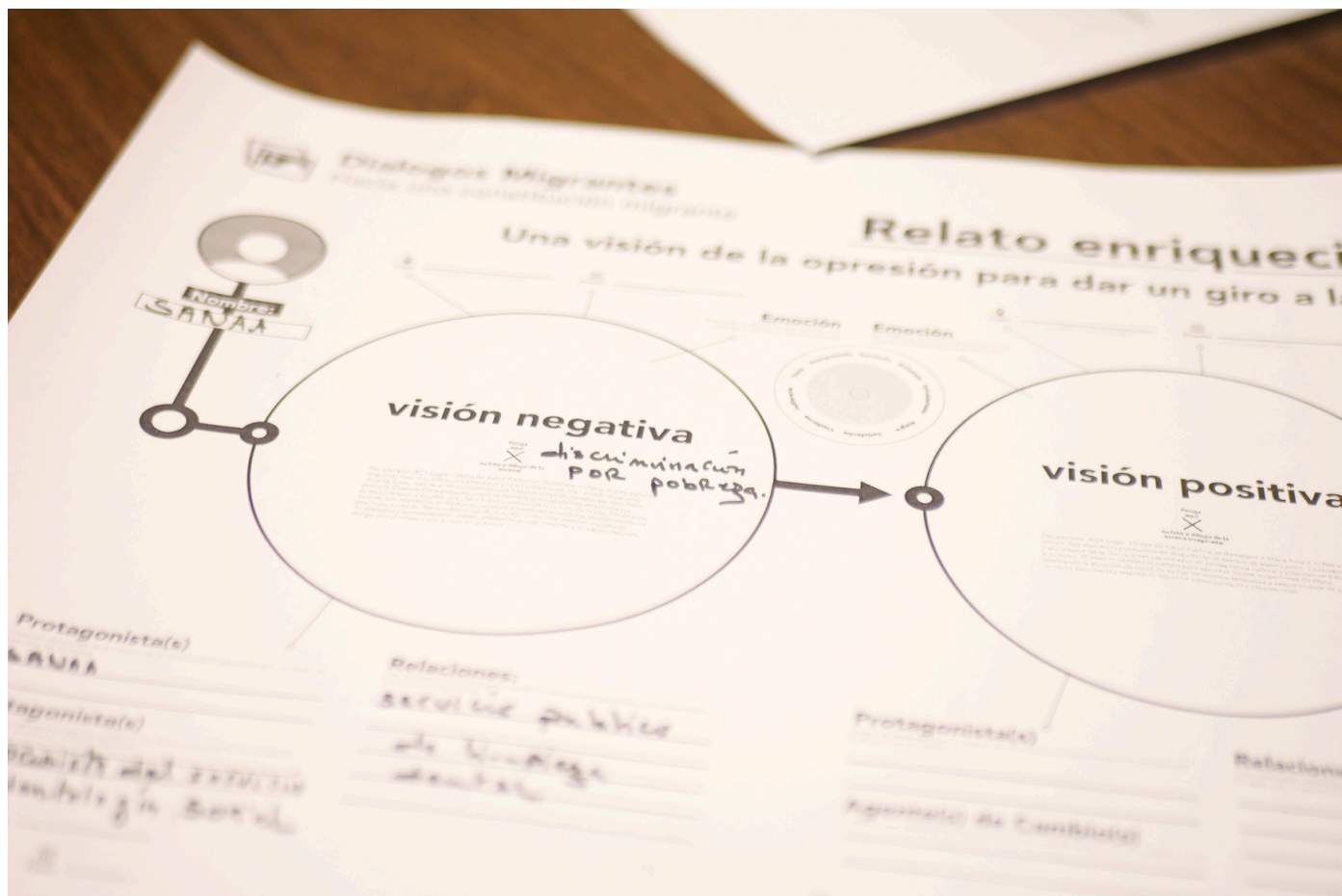


# Conclusions

The Legislative Theatre with migrant mothers has demonstrated that their experiences, so often invisible, are key to rethinking the right to a dignified life in the city. Through the representation of scenes of discrimination in housing, work, health and social inclusion, these women not only shared their pain, but also transformed those experiences into collective proposals for change.

By shifting the focus from individual shortcomings to the structures that generate exclusion, the Legislative Theatre made it possible to question discriminatory institutional practices and open the way to more inclusive policies. Migrant mothers, seeing the legitimacy of their experience recognised, regained confidence and self-esteem, and recognised themselves as subjects of rights capable of driving democratic change.

Ultimately, placing migrant mothers at the centre of the right to the city is not only a matter of social justice, but also an indispensable condition for building more cohesive, resilient and egalitarian communities.



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