

POLICY BRIEF 10

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

THE CORNERSTONE OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

This policy brief is relevant for:

- Federal Immigration Office
- Minister for Asylum and Migration
- Flemish Ministries responsible for: Integration and Civic Integration; welfare, poverty reduction and equal opportunities; Live; Education and Work;
- Flemish Agencies for Integration and Civic Integration, Atlas, Amal and Huis van het Nederlands
- Flemish Agency for Domestic Administration
- Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities (VVSG)
- Dienst Voogdij

REFUFAM examines the **effects of government policies on the integration trajectories of refugee families**. These *Policy Briefs* are based on interviews and focus groups with 98 members of refugee families, and with 99 street-level practitioners and local experts. By *refugee families* we understand families in which at least one person has acquired international protection, either through refugee status or subsidiary protection.

SUMMARY

¹ For Belgium: see Debruyne, P. (2024) Gezinshereniging onder druk. Transnationaal social werk. Berchem: EPO/Mammoet. At the European level: see Desmet, E., Belloni, M., Vanheule, D., Verhellen, J., Güdük, A. (2024) Family Reunification in Europe. Exposing Inequalities. Routledge: London & New York.

The family reunification procedure for recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection is particularly complicated, long and expensive.¹ This raises several challenges for the divorced family members, both abroad and in Belgium. For the 'sponsor' (the recognised refugee or subsidiary protected person), postponed family reunification often leads to interrupted language courses, precarious work and heavy financial and psychosocial pressure. If the sponsor is an unaccompanied minor foreign national (UAM), family reunification often comes down to a great deal of pressure on the educational process, or even its discontinuation. Likewise, for family members who enter Belgium through family reunification, their postponed arrival is likely to increase their dependency upon their 'sponsoring' family members to gain access to basic social and economic resources.² In other words, the current family reunification procedures slow down the social inclusion of all the family members involved.³

After reunification, families face yet other challenges. This complicates the smooth social inclusion and psychosocial well-being of refugee families. In this policy brief we discuss two fundamental problems: (1) the lack of housing support, (2) the lack of family support during the procedure and after reunification, which leads to a dependent and vulnerable position of the family migrant. Finally, we highlight some innovative practices and formulate policy recommendations to, among other things, improve the support for families during and after the reunification procedure.

POLICY

Article 10 of the [Aliens Act](#) contains the rules on family reunification with recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. These are the same for both

² Orsini, G., & Merla, L. (2024). Domestic violence within the securitisation of (family and love) migration: The case of Belgium. In: Desmet et al. (eds.) *Family Reunification in Europe*. London: Routledge, pp. 330-347.

³ Poeschel, F. (2020). Out There on Your Own: Absence of the Spouse and Migrants' Integration Outcomes (February 5, 2020). Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. 2020/04.

categories today. If the family members are able to submit the application within one year of the sponsor's receipt of international protection, the sponsor does not have to meet the conditions of adequate housing, health insurance and stable, adequate and regular means of subsistence (reference amount: 120% of the integration income for 'dependent family', currently 2131.28 euros net per month).

However, applying for family reunification is complex and expensive. Family members must submit the application to a Belgian diplomatic or consular post, or to a private company to which the processing of visa applications has been outsourced. It often takes several months until they get an appointment, which means that valuable time is lost. Family members must also collect, have translated and legalised various documents, such as birth certificates and marriage certificates. In order to cover these and other costs of family reunification, sponsors in Belgium often interrupt their language courses to do precarious work.⁴

For all these reasons, the one-year period within which the family reunification application must be submitted is often too short. If this period is exceeded, the sponsor must meet strict conditions of housing, health insurance and income. As a result, it will usually take even longer before the family can be together again.

The Arizona coalition agreement announces a further sharpening of the conditions to start the procedure of family reunification. Recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are no longer treated equally. For recognised refugees, the exemption period will be shortened from one year to six months, with the possibility of completing their file within an undetermined period. People receiving subsidiary protection would no longer be eligible for the period of exemption from more stringent conditions to start the procedure of family reunification. In addition,

their family members would have to wait at least two years before applying for family reunification – a period that starts to run from the grant of subsidiary protection. Finally, a higher income condition of 110% of the GMMI would apply, with an additional 10% for each dependent child. Given the findings of REFUFAM and previous research, these proposed changes are most likely to have a negative impact on the social, economic and linguistic inclusion of sponsors and their family members.

Even after reunification, migration law continues to exert a strong influence on the social inclusion of refugee families. For example, Article 11, §2 of the Aliens Act stipulates that couples must maintain a real marital or family life for at least five years after family reunification. This makes the family migrant very dependent on the sponsor, in a context without holistic support to the whole family. This puts pressure on internal family dynamics, pushing those sponsored family members who join their partners in Belgium into a position of increased vulnerability and dependency vis-à-vis their sponsors.⁵

FINDINGS

1. No housing support

Reunited families often end up in unsuitable housing for months, if not years – see our Policy Brief 5 on Housing. This problem is exacerbated due to a lack of practical and/or financial support. After all, no government department is responsible for supporting the search for housing. Some voluntary organisations intervene with solidarity funds, for example for the rental guarantee. However, families often have to fall back on their own network or slum landlords, which entails the necessary risks:

⁴ Debruyne, P. (2024) Gezinshereniging onder druk. Transnationaal social werk. Berchem: EPO/Mammoet; Orsini, G., & Merla, L. (2024). Domestic violence within the securitisation of (family and love) migration: The case of Belgium. In: Desmet et al. (eds.) *Family Reunification in Europe*. London:

Routledge, pp. 330-347; Myria (2023) [Procedure gezinshereniging brengt aanzienlijke kosten met zich mee](#).

⁵ Orsini, G., & Merla, L. (2024). Domestic violence within the securitisation of (family and love) migration: The case of Belgium. In: Desmet et al. (eds.) *Family Reunification in Europe*. London: Routledge, pp. 330-347.

When my family came, there were ten of us in a studio. Such a small place for so many people. I then found a house for which I had paid the rental deposit of 1500 euros, but later we found out that the house was not allowed to be rented out. And the landlord never refunded my rental deposit. At one point we had to leave the studio, and then we were homeless for three months. (...).
(Somali UAM, 10.02.2023)

Sometimes the housing is so precarious that the family ends up on the street. As a result, family members are often forced to submit an asylum application, because they then (in principle) receive shelter and thus avoid homelessness.

Our research also shows how barriers to housing directly influence the possibilities for language acquisition, inclusion and psychosocial recovery (see our Policy Brief 5 on Housing):

Dad: When my wife and my son arrived, we lived in a small studio on the third floor. That was really difficult. When it rained, it rained inside and the water came into our bed.
Mom: And my son was really scared of the mice. ... And then I gave birth to my daughter, but when she was at daycare and I was busy at school, I couldn't concentrate. I only thought about my daughter, she was in poor health [when we lived there]. That was difficult, I missed a lot. I could only learn properly again when everything was quiet [after we moved]. Then I had three years to catch up.
(Eritrean family, 05.12.2022)

Housing support is therefore a crucial building block for a smooth inclusion of reunited families.

2. No support to families during or after reunification

While we know from earlier research that the reunification of families is a crucial precondition to start their social inclusion⁶, there is no policy framework for supporting families during nor after their family reunification.⁷ In fact, professionals from a wide variety of organisations, including government actors and (semi-)autonomous NGOs indicated that the demand for socio-legal support during the procedure far exceeds their resources. As a result, refugee families receive little to no support during this complex procedure, which tends to extend their separation.

Although sponsors are often in contact with a social worker, it is not officially part of this person's task to provide support after family reunification. There is also no extra social worker appointed for the newly arrived family members. This is in addition to a total absence of family support through psychosocial counselling of family members and pedagogical assistance between family members in the long time (often years) in which family members are separated from each other. The responsibility for 'family care' therefore lies largely with the sponsor itself. This often involves an unaccompanied minor, which at that time has to oversee the care for the transition and involvement of the entire family.

When my family came, I had to drop out of school. I had to, because I had no other choice, because I had to do a lot of things for them. Going to the store, or going to appointments and so on.
(UAMs from Afghanistan, 15.02.2023)

Because unaccompanied minor are reunited with a parent, their eligibility to a legal guardian usually ends. However, temporary further support by the guardian may be appropriate:

⁶ Phillimore, J., D'Avino, G., Strain-Fajth, V., Papoutsis, A., & Ziss, P. (2023). Family reunion policy for resettled refugees: Governance, challenges and impacts. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 5. ; Boado, H. C., & Ferrer, A. G. (2022). The impact of physical separation from parents on the mental

wellbeing of the children of migrants. *Journal of ethnic and migration studies*, 48(10), 2436-2454.

⁷ Debruyne, P. (2022) [Is het recht op gezinshereniging een Potemkindorp?](#) MO Magazine. ; Myria (2022) [Advies: aanvragen gezinshereniging van vluchtelingen faciliteren en ondersteunen.](#)

I was the only one who spoke the language. I had to arrange all the appointments, the hospitals, I had to arrange everything. I'm just one... I don't have 100 hands. Taking care of myself, but also taking care of my family. I had to know everything, but sometimes I really didn't. There was no one really to help us at the time, but luckily I could still call my guardian if needed, even though she was actually no longer my guardian.

(UAMs from Somalia, 10.02.2023)

Even when the sponsor is of age (e.g. partner), the responsibility and care for a reunited family are not obvious. Often the sponsor himself has had an interrupted process of language acquisition, because their priority was to find work to pay for family reunification, and/or to find a suitable home.

Due to the lack of adequate family support, family members are often completely on their own after a long period of separation. This increases the dependence of the family migrants on the sponsor. After all, the readaptation does not take place in an equal relationship: the family migrant is in many cases placed in a situation of total dependence on their sponsor.

When I came to Belgium in April, the Dutch lessons had already started and I could no longer join. So I had to wait until September and those first six months of just staying at home were the hardest part, because I didn't know anyone then. I couldn't even move around independently, because I didn't have a driver's license at the time. I had to travel by public transport, but I didn't know the language. How was I supposed to get somewhere? So that always had to be done together with my husband. That was also difficult for me, because I am someone who always does everything independently.

(Palestinian Family Migrant, 22/11/2022)

When this leads to problems, the legal obligation to maintain the relationship for five years makes family migrants feel stuck:

I got used to living without him, to deal with the children in my own way. When he left, they were still very young. Two or three years. And now, five years later, to accept this new situation of life... And he's cruel to me, and sometimes to the children, this is hard for them. It's really like a prison and you have to obey, and you're inferior. I have to ask everything, I have no money, the bank card is with him, he gets the salary from the OCMW and the child benefit. I feel like I don't have the freedom or the right to say that I don't want this marriage to continue. Where is the freedom then?

(Palestinian Family Migrant', 19/11/2022)

Adequate family support is therefore a second essential building block for a successful inclusion process of reunited families. In addition, the dependent right of residence must also be revised.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Supporting family reunification requires a proactive and holistic approach. This is already partly put into practice in the field today.

Numerous volunteer projects provide **housing support** (such as the residential café of Mondiale Werken in Lier, the residential café of the volunteer network Gent Samen Solidair, the housing guidance of Booms Welkom in the Antwerp periphery, and the Limburg platform for Refugees) or alternative social housing projects (such as Houses of Peace in Bruges and Thope vzw in Ghent). The latter non-profit organisations can form a bridge between the landlord and the refugee family by subletting. These volunteer initiatives play a crucial role in partnerships with formal social work, such as the CAWs and youth services. See also our Policy Brief 5. Housing.

Some social workers **support separated families** across borders: they do "transnational social work". For example, they mediate between an unaccompanied minor and the remote parenting, each of whom may have completely

different expectations and needs. Their work deserves further institutional support.

We have also witnessed some good practices in the area of **family support during and after family reunification**. In the Netherlands, for instance, the relatively shorter period of exemption from more stringent is coupled to professional socio-legal support provided by Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland.⁸ In Flanders, initiatives such as the CAW's Mindspring programmes, in particular 'the Parent Power' component, and the services offered by Solentra to migrants and practitioners. And in the City of Leuven, the OCMW collaborates with family counselors from Caritas VZW after family reunification.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Federal Ministry Responsible for Asylum and Migration:

- **Simplify the family reunification procedure** by making the application possible in Belgium, so that the processing time is shortened and the integration of all family members involved is not delayed.
- **Together with the Flemish government, ensure sufficient socio-legal support** during and after the procedure of family reunification by funding social organisations such as the CAWs, Caritas VZW, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen and others. The Dutch practices of Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland can offer a useful starting point.
- **Review the obligation to maintain a genuine family and married life five years after family reunification**, in order to reduce socio-economic dependency on family migrants

For the **Flemish Ministry responsible for Housing**:

- Invest in **housing support** during and after the family reunification procedure.
- Encourage OCMWs/CPAS to provide the rental guarantee in advance by means of a circular letter, and raise awareness among newcomers about the rental guarantee loan from the Flemish Housing Fund. Support organizations that work on this.
- Support **organizations and grassroots initiatives** that have experience with housing guidance

For the Flemish Ministry responsible for Welfare, Poverty Reduction and Equal Opportunities:

- Focus on **proactive family support during and after family reunification**, as in the Netherlands. This is a crucial step to protect and support the family in practice.
- Organise **welcome interviews of family members** with a social worker upon arrival in Belgium. Considering a family as a unit in the guidance of a social worker is important for the inclusion of all individual family members.
- Support **organizations and grassroots initiatives** that have experience in family counseling

For the **Guardianship Service**:

- Allow guardians to provide support to the reunited families for up to six months after family reunification

⁸ See: [Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland \(2025\)](#)

FURTHER READINGS

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